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Lessons in Liminal Spaces: Borders as Pedagogical Tools in *No Country for Old Men*

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ABSTRACT

As scholars continue to explore the territories created by burgeoning interdisciplinarity and ever-growing global networks, the concept of borders become a topic of increased theoretical and pedagogical discussion. Cormac McCarthy's novel *No Country for Old Men*, set at the Texas-Mexico border, provides an opportunity to explore the liminal nature of borders and their role in identity formation. The novel allows us to embrace the fluidity of borders and see, as Gayatri Spivak argues, that "we are made by the forces moving about the world" (3), rather than divided by them. Throughout *No Country for Old Men*, McCarthy posits that borders are not only movable, but that they change as rapidly as individuals make decisions. In this case, border creation is tied to the progress of a life, a series of decisions made in time. These borders serve as paths that are constantly altered and that intersect with other borders being created and destroyed around them. While these paths may shift in relation to the time in which they are being crossed or the character moving across them, the novel encourages us to examine the way in which borders create possibilities for characters to defy preconceived cultural stereotypes and embark on an individual journey. As readers, the novel asks us to consider the unlimited possibility for transformation at the border and acknowledge that the complexity of identity formation in border regions (and beyond, for borders are everywhere) is more nuanced than may once have been assumed.

Globalization remains much discussed, but there has been no universally accepted definition of the term or its effect on comparative literature. As scholars continue to explore the uncharted territories created by burgeoning interdisciplinarity and ever-growing global networks, the concept of the border becomes a topic of increased theoretical and pedagogical discussion. The border often signifies differences, alerting a reader to a separation between one thing – physical, conceptual, or otherwise -- and another. The development of a border poetics allows scholars to both differentiate and draw parallels between texts from different languages, cultures, geographies, and politics. Yet the notion that borders only serve to separate appears to be losing traction. In “Death of a Discipline,” Gayatri Spivak quotes Toby Volkman to address ideas of interdisciplinarity in an age of globalization, saying that “the notion, for example, that the world can be divided into knowable, self-contained ‘areas’ has come into question as more attention has been paid to movements between areas” (2). Volkman goes on to call for a more permeable reading of borders and border crossings as comparative literature and area studies progresses. Cormac McCarthy’s 2005 novel *No Country for Old Men*, set at the U.S.-Mexico border, provides a prime opportunity to explore the liminality of borders and their function in the formation of a character’s identity or the direction of his or her interactions. The novel allows us to embrace the fluidity of borders and see, as Spivak argues, that “we are made by the forces moving about the world” (3), rather than imposing something to divide us. These borders, at once spatial, psychological, and historical, become temporary and ever changing, providing infinite possibilities for lines to be crossed and re-crossed, removed, and placed elsewhere. As the stories of protagonists Llewelyn Moss, Anton Chigurh, and Sheriff Bell weave back and forth throughout the Texas-Mexico borderland with a backdrop of an ever-present drug war, their movement across and between the border, as well as the border they create as individuals, enacts

a didactic experience that provides fodder for better understanding the roles and disputed definitions of borders in a globalizing world.

Throughout *No Country for Old Men*, McCarthy posits that borders are not only movable, but that they change as rapidly as individuals make decisions. In this case, border creation is tied to the journey of life, a series of decisions made in time. These borders serve as paths that are constantly intersecting with one another. The novel encourages us to examine the way in which borders of all kinds function as liminal spaces that create possibilities for characters to conform to or defy preconceived cultural stereotypes and imagine an individual identity. Borders, then, are tied to the movement of the characters in the novel and reflect tensions and interactions that make up the narrative's geographic and cultural framework. By examining the borders as infinite and ever changing as Spivak suggests, readers are able to open themselves up to a new kind of comparison that focuses on how borders shape our thinking as we read a text. By tying geographical and physical borders to the individuals who create them in a liminal space, *No Country for Old Men* asks readers to question the role of borders as agents of identity formation. A better understanding of these borders might bring readers to a new ideation of an individual border identity.

The U.S.-Mexico border in the late 1980s, which provides the setting for *No Country for Old Men*, sat on the verge of monumental shifts as the forces of globalization created a new economy for both countries in the form of the drug trade. Violence began to erupt as dueling cartels on both sides of the border transported illegal substances back and forth, trying to avoid the law while establishing a unique code that determined how business was to be done. In this liminal space, a new set of rules mixed with, and in some cases replaced, the notion of traditional law. This allowed for an interaction of both North American and Mexican cultures in a single

space, a middle ground on the border where it's unclear where the United States ends and Mexico begins, and vice versa. Shifting notions of responsibility for the growing drug trade began to blur cultural stereotypes at the border as well. Many Americans with the money to buy drugs did so, leading to heightened demand in the United States and a larger number of Mexicans who transported them. The identity of those involved in the drug deal Llewelyn Moss encounters at the beginning of the novel become racially unknown, nothing more than "dried blood black on the ground" (12) and a mix of Spanish and English that nearly everyone on the border had the capacity to understand. The line that separates the two countries and cultures becomes blurrier, changing constantly as individuals move in and across it. As we'll see with Moss' journey throughout the novel, this space where identity is ambiguous serves to challenge a reader's preconceived stereotypes and pave the way for individual exploration and transformation.

Intense violence in the novel is indicative of the struggle to conceptualize both physical and psychological borders. McCarthy scholar Vince Brewton sees violence in the author's novels "as the site where divergent interests converge for dramatic effect" (122). There, characters are confronted with choice, tied up in individual worldviews and global political currents. Their options and divergent interests -- like tectonic plates, which crash into one another to create new landforms -- spark violence that marks a significant turning point in the story. As individual characters create their own borders, some are able to co-exist while others are unable to be reconciled, resulting in violent action. It is among this drug-filled, violent landscape that Moss encounters his first psychological border: a choice. As he hunts antelope, the Vietnam veteran and minimum-wage earner stumbles upon a heroin deal gone bad, the remains of a gunfight that left a cohort of bodies scattered in the desert. Rummaging among the dead men, Moss finds a

satchel holding millions of dollars, the bounty that likely began the gunfight in the first place. With the cash staring him in the face, Moss finds himself straddling his own psychological border as he decides whether to take the money or leave it. He knows the consequences of both actions — a likely death if he takes it, the poor but relatively normal life he's known if he leaves it. With his young wife at home waiting, Moss decides to embark on the journey that could very well end his life, “scared in a way that he didn’t even understand” (17). In the deserted borderland with no one to answer to but the distant mountains and the quiet surrounding him, he takes the money. With this choice, Moss begins to create a new border as he tries to escape from the traditions that used to define him as “a law abidin citizen workin a nine to five job” and resigns himself to the idea that when “things happen to you they happen” (220). By taking the money he embraces the lawlessness of the borderlands, becoming rich overnight and transforming his typical life into one in which fear and death lurks behind every corner. Because of this psychological shift, Moss’ identity mimics the liminal geographical space he inhabits. The laws governing his life aren’t clearly defined like they used to be. Uncertainty and instability becomes the norm.

The fluidity and ambiguity of these borders is further illustrated when an injured Moss crosses into Mexico as he runs from Anton Chigurh, the psychopathic hit man hunting him down. With a gunshot wound in his leg and seeking a hospital, Moss sees a change window and turnstile at the border and, with minimal effort, “put(s) a dime in the slot and push(es) through and stagger(s) out onto the span” (115) into Mexico. This is notable for a number of reasons, not the least of which that it doesn’t conform to stereotypical notions of border patrol. The turnstile implies the ability to cross back and forth between countries with relative ease, effectively opening the border to anyone from either side. While the border draws a political line between

the new nations, the use of a turnstile -- which presumably allows for easy passage from one side to another and vice versa -- embraces the border as a liminal space, opening it up for infinite crossings and re-crossings. The dime he paid, along with his leg injury, does imply that there are some barriers to that crossing, but if we keep in mind the millions of dollars Moss is carrying, the dime may as well be nothing. The notion of “self-contained areas” that Spivak mentions are no more; borders become something that are as easy to cross as pushing through a turnstile. These spaces now provide possibilities for physical safety and personal transformation, good or bad. Stereotypes, too, become fluid. The United States, where Moss is a citizen, is painted as a dangerous place as Chigurh waits for Moss, repairing his own wounds in a nearby hotel. Yet in Mexico, with a dime and flip of the turnstile, Moss finds respite.

Moss’ time in Mexico reinforces how he embraces this new fluidity as he transforms from a Vietnam vet to a fugitive overnight. When he tries to get the attention of three partially intoxicated American teenagers (he thinks there are four of them), “they stepped off the curb into the roadway to go around him” (115). Exhausted and seeking a hospital to fix his leg, even the drunk teenagers want nothing to do with him. As they cross the border back into the United States, they treat Moss as nothing more than a passerby. After finally stopping them, Moss offers five hundred dollars for one of their jackets. It is here that he begins to reach the zenith of his transformation. He wouldn’t have had five hundred dollars to get him through a week in the United States, but now has millions to buy a jacket not worth what he paid. Additionally, his interaction shows not an amiable interaction between his fellow countrymen but an alienating one. In the borderlands, although surrounded by people, he is alone, driven the thought that his next step may be his last. And still he perseveres, “puttin one foot in front of the other” (117) as he searches for the Mexican hospital. His decision to take the drugs has shaped the journey that

brings him face to face with cultural differences he would not have encountered otherwise.

While isolated from the world he knew, Moss discovers a new part of himself.

Borders created by language, too, begin to break down throughout the novel, reaffirming the borderland's tendency to promote cross-cultural interaction. As Moss continues to wander through a deserted Mexico searching for a hospital, he finds an old man sweeping the street and refers to him as "Señor" (118). This is markedly different from the beginning of the novel, when he finds a Mexican man begging him for water at the scene of the heroin deal. The man begs Moss for "agua, cuate. Agua, por dios" (14), to which Moss plainly replies "I told you ... I ain't got no water." Feeling guilty later that night, he returns to the scene of the deal to provide the man with water, but he finds the man is dead. His remorse comes too late. His willingness and ability to communicate with the street sweeper in Spanish, even if only the single honorific, shows a level of tenderness in Moss that he was less wont to act on earlier in the novel. Further, Moss' decision not to help the dying man at the drug deal, regardless of the language shared between them, indicates a human separation that Moss begins to embrace as the novel moves forward. He is better able to understand those around him, even the Spanish speakers he would normally ignore. Although he speaks to the street sweeper primarily to help him locate a doctor, Moss' willingness to speak Spanish shows respect that he is no longer in his own country. The two create a new kind of dialogue -- a mix of English, Spanish, hand motions and a one hundred dollar bill -- that allow Moss, with a "sí" to the man, to be on his way (119).

For all of Moss' potential for transformation in the borderlands, McCarthy contrasts the luminal nature of the border through Chigurh, the hit man contracted to find Moss and reclaim the drug money. His views are one-sided, resistant to the transformational notion of the border. A psychopath, Chigurh allows his victims to flip a coin, giving the illusion that they have the

ability to choose their fate. When one soon-to-be victim, not knowing his life is on the line, asks why calling heads or tails matters, Chigurh sticks to his moral code and asks “How would that change anything” (56)? This code goes against the ambiguity Moss encounters throughout the novel. Chigurh is a businessman who sees those drug dealers who capitalize on the possibility of outsized profits doing nothing more than “pretending to themselves that they are in control of events when perhaps they are not” (253). Although he is just as wrapped up in the drug trade as the people he attempts to kill, his inability to feel compassion or spare a life based on anything more than the flip of a coin make him the primary villain in the novel and a foil to the transformational aspects of the borderlands.

I do not mean to over-simplify Chigurh, as he does at least address the possibility of borderlands as liminal spaces. Immediately before murdering Moss’ wife, Carla Jean, Chigurh explains his philosophy of the borderland as one governed by fate but ultimately shaped by human decisions (After all, it’s up to the individual to choose heads or tails). He appears to endorse the notion that borders can be shaped and crossed through these decisions, and he adds to this notion a strong sense of permanence: “Every moment your life is a turning and every one a choosing. Somewhere you made a choice. All followed to this. The accounting is scrupulous. The shape is drawn. No line can be erased” (259). Chigurh posits borders as paths, lines formed by personal choices that change shape as a life progresses. It is perhaps restrictive to think that no line can be erased, but his statement acknowledges the important idea that lives are more complex than the flip of a coin. The infinite number of choices individuals can make show that no life will be identical to another, no matter how scrupulous the accounting may be. As long as decisions continue to be made, borders continue to be formed and crossed, all linked to the choices that preceded them. Moss indeed sees the consequences of the choices at the end of the

novel, when he is killed by a band of Mexicans also searching for the money he stole.

Nevertheless, his journey through the borderlands creates an opportunity for him to become someone completely new and, in some ways, more sympathetic to the complex nature of those he meets on either side. Reading his journey from a pedagogical standpoint, the borderlands then become a primary space for identity formation, shaped by choices whose consequences can be seen in either country and on either side of the turnstile.

The borders created and crossed by the characters in *No Country for Old Men*, whether physical, psychological, or otherwise, have shown to be linked to individuals' experience at a given time and in a given place. Speaking to all of McCarthy's writing, Brewton says "The correspondence between McCarthy's work and his times are part of a larger cultural equation whereby contemporary historical events influenced prevailing cultural attitudes on one hand, and cultural production on the other" (122). Not only does the plot of *No Country for Old Men* reflect those cultural attitudes developing drug war along the U.S.-Mexico border -- attitudes of violence, fear, and uncertainty -- but it also helps readers understand the broader historical moment in which the drama is situated. This mutual understanding has the potential to provide a common ground for readers and has the potential to increase mutual understanding. By seeing the mutability of borders in the novel, perhaps readers' own borders, no matter what they are, will also become more permeable. McCarthy's narrative helps us re-examine the way in which the characters and readers interact with different cultures and geographies. As Spivak says, borders are no longer fixed, limiting devices, but rather spaces that provide characters with more agency and readers with a new perspective on a culture or people.

These new attempts to see borders outside the sociological or anthropological frameworks that often define them may serve as a springboard for the next decades of

comparative literature. As scholars begin to reach within and across disciplines to better understand and critique aspects of a given cultural production, new borders will be crossed, others will be broken down, and yet others will be formed anew. Spivak argues that scholars move forward unafraid, arguing that comparative literature "remains imprisoned within the borders it will not cross" (7). She argues for a wider viewpoint, asking researchers to more boldly reach across disciplines and find new ways to define and examine borders. "Sustained and focused discussion is all the more necessary as the boundaries of disciplinary knowledge are being redrawn" (19). As the characters in *No Country for Old Men* cross and re-draw borders of all kinds with relative ease, so may we be able to step across disciplinary boundaries to find new ways to examine literature. As globalization continues to re-shape the world and challenge antiquated views, *Geopolitics* journal editor David Newman contends that "There is no reason why some of the more abstract ideas and concepts posited by the non-geographic and planning disciplines should not be used to infuse a deeper meaning and understanding into the 'hard core' boundaries which have become far more porous and permeable than in the past" (27). As this permeability becomes more apparent, it will be exciting to see the ways in which comparative literature continues to show the possibilities that the analysis of borders in various texts can create. While studying borders may appear arbitrary because they are so numerous and complex, McCarthy's novel shows that this area of study stands to illuminate the truly diverse relationships both characters and readers have to the border and the interactions that occur there.

When Sheriff Bell questions the two teenagers Chigurh has bribed to stay quiet as he skips town, we see that while analysis of the borderlands will likely emphasize the individual, it is ultimately beneficial. Sheriff Bell asks one boy "You don't know where things will take you, do you" (292). The boy says "No sir, you don't. I think I learned something from it. If that's any

use to you” (292). Whatever that lesson is should be of use. *No Country for Old Men* allows readers to find and explore not just those aspects that serve to help divide and categorize, but also those things that blur clear divisions. In those liminal spaces where borders are drawn, crossed, and re-drawn, it is the movement of individuals, not just their geography or politics, which perhaps has the most insightful lessons to teach. Individuals will cross paths and create new ones, but that is where the opportunity lies for reflection. As the teenager being questioned says to the sheriff when asked about his friend: “I don’t know. I can’t speak for David” (292).

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