

## ‘Deep Maps’: William Least Heat-Moon’s Psychogeographic Cartographies

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### Introduction

Maps and mapping strategies play a decisive role in the works of the contemporary American author, William Least Heat-Moon. Born William Lewis Trogdon in 1939, Heat-Moon was named after the iconic European explorers of America—William Clark and Meriwether Lewis. A similar desire for exploration and discovery motivated Heat-Moon’s purchase of a Rand McNally road atlas of the United States, a pivotal moment that marked his birth as an author: Heat-Moon later revealed that it was his enraptured study of this atlas that inspired all three of his works: *Blue Highways: A Journey Into America* (1983), *PrairyErth: (A Deep Map)* (1991), and *River-Horse: A Voyage Across America* (1999).<sup>1</sup> In the same interview, he declares:

I read maps the way some people read holy writ: I read it again and again, the same map, looking for new discoveries, and I’m always surprised every time I look there’s something there I hadn’t noticed before or I see it in a different way.<sup>2</sup>

This paper examines this loaded statement by exploring some of the mapping techniques employed throughout the author’s works, focusing primarily on *PrairyErth: (A Deep Map)*, a text that chronicles Heat-Moon’s perambulations through Chase County, Kansas. I am particularly interested in the way in which Heat-Moon combines highly structured, mathematically precise cartographic exercises with more subjective and discursive mapping

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<sup>1</sup>William Least Heat-Moon, *Blue Highways: A Journey into America* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1999); *PrairyErth: (A Deep Map)* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999); *River-Horse: A Voyage Across America* (London: Pimlico, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Dave Weich, ‘William Least Heat-Moon: Participatory Armchair Rivering’, <Powells.com> (author interview), November 1999 [accessed 25 August 2004].

methods. I argue that the alternation between these two distinct techniques effectively defamiliarizes the seemingly mundane surface of Chase County, Kansas, revealing a multi-layered network of connections between people and places, past and present. Additionally, I draw attention to the way in which some of Heat-Moon's mapping strategies adapt the methodological practices of the so-called psychogeography movement for the purpose of memorializing Chase County and the lives of some of its past and present inhabitants. I conclude with a consideration of Heat-Moon's construction of 'mental maps' of Chase County based on the narrated experiences of the countians whom he interviews.

### **Psychogeography**

Heat-Moon's emphasis on memorialization distinguishes the *raison d'être* of *PrairyErth* from the more politically-based goals of the psychogeographers, although, as intimated in the introduction, there is an intriguing overlap with regard to methodology, particularly with respect to their mutual employment of unconventional cartographical strategies. Psychogeography first developed in the 1950s as a reaction against urbanism by the Lettrist International and later by the Situationist International at the First World Congress of Liberated Artists.<sup>3</sup> Guy Debord, the chief theorist of Situationism and most well-known early articulator of the aims of psychogeography, defined the movement as 'the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals'.<sup>4</sup> Debord rallied his followers to resist the increasingly dominant power structures of twentieth-century consumer capitalism. The Situationists were acutely aware of the

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<sup>3</sup> See the Nottingham Psychogeographical Unit's 'Mental Map Project', <<http://art.ntu.ac.uk/mental/whatisps.htm>> [accessed 05 March 2003]. Other key figures in the articulation of the (often divergent) aims of psychogeography include William G. Niederland, Ebel, Vamik D. Volkan, Simos, Binion, and Stierlin, Richard Königsberg, Seymour Fisher. See Howard F. Stein, *Developmental Time, Cultural Space: Studies in Psychogeography* (London: Oklahoma University Press, 1987), p. 36, and *Maps from the Mind: Readings in Psychogeography*, ed. by Howard F. Stein and William G. Niederland (London: Oklahoma University Press, 1989), p. xxxi.

<sup>4</sup> Nottingham P.U. <<http://art.ntu.ac.uk/mental/whatisps.htm>>, [accessed 05 March 2003].

way in which the capitalist organization of space manipulates the movements of pedestrians to maximize their likelihood of spending. Adopting a Marxist angle, the Situationists perceived the physical divisions of the modern metropolis to be part of a ruthless plan to perpetuate class injustice. Drifting aimlessly through the city (as the Surrealists had done) was redefined as a subversive, political act that undermined ‘the machinic functioning of the spectacle-city’.<sup>5</sup> The principle aim of the *dérive* (the term with which the Situationists referred to this brand of walking) was to ‘walk up the street without thinking, letting your mind drift, letting your legs, with their internal memory, carry you up and down and around turns, attending to a map of your own thoughts, the physical town replaced by an imaginary city’.<sup>6</sup> The ‘homogeneity of the city is [thus] critically fissured, opening up the possibility of alternative narratives—fleeting, contingent, subversive and heterogeneous’.<sup>7</sup> Psychogeographers critique the unimaginative way in which we traverse city and countryside, arguing that our unthinking adherence to the capitalist reorganisation of space has domesticated place’s inherent energies and interpretive possibilities. In order to mobilize these potentials, psychogeographers take to the street in order to protest consumer capitalism by remapping and reimagining the city and countryside according to their idiosyncratic itineraries.

Heat-Moon shares psychogeography’s concern with reimagining place, translating this movement’s primarily urban-based strategies of movement and mapping to the rural environs of Chase County, Kansas. He also combines psychogeography’s emphasis on haphazard wandering with more scientific cartographic practices intended to structure his imaginative and dream-driven journeys through the region’s cultural and geological

<sup>5</sup>Liz Wilkinson, ‘Situating Cyborgs: Technology and Psychogeography’, *Materiali Resistenti*, 23 August 2003, <<http://materialiresistenti.clarence.com/archive/023046.html>> [accessed 05 May 2005].

<sup>6</sup>Greil Marcus quoted in Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust* (London: Verso, 2001), pp. 212-3. Debord defines the *dérive* as ‘a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances. . . In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there’ (quoted in Solnit, p. 212).

<sup>7</sup>Wilkinson, <<http://materialiresistenti.clarence.com/archive/023046.html>> [accessed 05 May 2005].

history. However, as previously intimated, Heat-Moon is much less concerned with producing a critique of capitalism than with memorializing the lives of past and present inhabitants of Chase County, as well as the place itself. Heat-Moon's works also reflect their status as additions to the tradition of American travel-writing, with its abiding preoccupation with charting new frontiers and charting the *genus loci* of the country. The success of Heat-Moon's *Blue Highways* (1983)—which has been in continuous print since its first publication and has sold well over 1.25 million copies<sup>8</sup>—qualifies it as the quintessential post-Kerouac road novel, in which the author travels more than 13,000 miles around the perimeter of the contiguous United States. *PrairyErth* exchanges breadth for depth, concentrating entirely on a single relatively obscure county in Kansas. This shift from horizontal to vertical journeying is discernible in a subgenre of American travel-writing that seeks to discover the new directly beneath the feet rather than somewhere over the horizon. Extending back at least to Thoreau, these works value the local as the preferred point of access to the infinite. As Thoreau writes in his essay, 'Walking', 'two or three hours' walking will carry me to as strange a country as I expect ever to see. A single farmhouse which I had not seen before is sometimes as good as the dominions of the king of Dahomey'.<sup>9</sup> Responding to the sentiment expressed in this description of Thoreau's native Concord, Rockwell Gray writes that 'the entire world was implicit in the little patch right under his nose'.<sup>10</sup> The demands on the imagination required to transmute the local into a sight of awe and discovery lead the authors of such works quite naturally to some of the methods and strategies used by psychogeographers, and Heat-Moon's *PrairyErth* might well be regarded as one of the more eloquent contemporary examples of this marriage between the very different

<sup>8</sup>Melissa Moore Willby, 'Destination U.S.A.: William Least Heat-Moon and American Travel Writing' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sussex, 2001), p. 160.

<sup>9</sup>Quoted in Solnit, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Rockwell Gray, 'Travel', in *Temperamental Journeys: Essays on the Modern Literature of Travel*, ed. by Michael Kowalewski (London: University Press of Georgia, 1992), p. 39; other more recent works that belong to this subgenre of vertical, or 'deep travelling,' include John Hanson Mitchell, *Ceremonial Time: Fifteen Thousand Years on One Square Mile* (New York: Merloyd Lawrence Books, 1997), and John McPhee, *The Pine Barrens* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978).

traditions of American travel-writing and psychogeography. Rather than elaborating the connection between Heat-Moon's methods and those of the psychogeographers, I use the already demonstrated mutual preoccupation with unconventional mapping strategies with the aim of revealing the heterogeneity of place as my point of departure; the focus of the subsequent discussion is to examine Heat-Moon's impressive marriage of scientific, mathematically precise methods of mapping with more discursive and imaginative cartographic practices. The resultant 'deep map' of Chase County, Kansas manages to pay tribute to this region's infinite variety while simultaneously integrating immensely moving memorials to the lives of selected individuals.

### **Linear Cartographies**

As already intimated, travel is envisioned as a plumbing of place's depths in *PrairyErth*, a descent into the intricate weave of stories that lie just beneath its deceptively homogeneous surface. Heat-Moon's choice to devote 622 pages to a non-descript county in America's largely undifferentiated Midwest is a self-conscious attempt to bear witness to the region's infinite variety and mystery. Heat-Moon's narratives reveal that this is best achieved by alternating between rigorously exact cartographic practices and spontaneous, haphazard wandering. The former practice ensures that the unique geographic and social-cultural aspects of the region are sketched in stark relief, while the latter endeavour underscores and maintains place's essential otherness. The geographic crosshairing of Chase County's location within the United States with which *PrairyErth* opens is demonstrative of the methodical, fact-based impulse behind many of the author's mapping strategies, serving also to centralize an area of America that many would regard as a cultural periphery:

If you draw two lines from the metropolitan corners of America, one from New York City southwest to San Diego and another from Miami northwest to Seattle, the intersection would fall a few miles from my position. I am on a flat-

topped ridge 155 miles southeast of the geographic center of the contiguous states, 130 miles from the geodetic datum, and about three miles from the precise middle of Chase County, Kansas. Were you to fold in half a three-foot-long map of the forty-eight states north to south then east to west, the creases would cross within an inch of where I stand.<sup>11</sup>

The preoccupation with geographic symmetry and lines of connection obvious in the above quote constitutes another point of contact between Heat-Moon's perception of place and that of the psychogeographers, many of whom attribute great significance to the geometry formed by certain configurations of buildings, streets, and natural formations. Heat-Moon extends the cartographic precision evident in the quoted excerpt to his subsequent perambulations throughout the county. Spreading out twenty-five US Geological Survey maps of the region, he chooses the twelve central maps to serve as grids to guide his wanderings. This symmetrical exactitude characterizes the structure of the narrative: each of its chapters is devoted to the narration of the author's travels within one of the twelve quadrants that comprises his cartographic grid. These twelve sections are named according to the distinguishing topographic feature of the quadrant (e.g. Fox Creek, Elmdale, Gladstone), and each opens with a map that indicates the location of the train tracks, road- and waterways, and selected sites of interest. Also included is a small diagram with a black dot in the quadrant to which the opposing map refers. As the book unfolds, the black dot shifts methodically from north to south, and from east to west to indicate the progression and direction of the author's perambulations. The final subsection of each chapter (always entitled 'On the Town') returns to the heart of the county—Cottonwood Falls—before moving on to the next quadrant. Were we to plot these movements on the twelve-quadrant grid, the resulting image is of lines radiating outward from a centre, simulating the spokes of a wheel.

As prefigured by the wheel-like structure generated when his itineraries are plotted, Heat-Moon balances the extreme linearity that characterizes his topographic maps with more subjective, discursive

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<sup>11</sup> *PrairyErth*, p. 10.

movements. He begins by pointing out that the grid-like lines traced by his wanderings acquire curvature if they are imagined as forming a cross-section of the spherical surface of the planet. About this phenomenon, Heat-Moon writes,

The two-dimensional Rand McNally travelers who see a region as having borders will likely move in only one locality at a time, but travelers who perceive a place as part of a deep landscape in slow rotation at the center of a sphere and radiating infinite lines in an indefinite number of directions will move in several regions at once.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, landscapes, like texts, have multiple dimensions and depths, palimpsestically overlapping regions whose richness and variety produce an inexhaustible number of readings and experiences. This departure from the well-ordered linearity of the conventional cartographer can also be seen in the circular, arc-like itinerary followed by the author and plotted in the epigraphic map that opens the thirteenth chapter, the very number of which signifies a departure from the otherwise perfect symmetry of the preceding chapter structure. This conflation of the disciplined with the discursive is emblematic of Heat-Moon's cartographic strategy.

### **Psychogeographic Cartographies**

While Heat-Moon's broader movements from quadrant to quadrant are, for the most part, anything but haphazard, his movements within each quadrant recall the purposefully unstructured ramblings of the psychogeographers. Numerous strategies are employed in order to induce a free associative, disoriented state in which hitherto unseen relationships and histories are allowed to emerge. For example, the author decides on several occasions to walk through the night, letting his 'dimmed vision turn a graph-paper land into a blank sheet that might open to dreamtime'.<sup>13</sup> The alien sounds and shadows of the night permit him to lose the coordinates that he has

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<sup>12</sup> *PrairyErth*, p. 246.

<sup>13</sup> *PrairyErth*, p. 365.

elsewhere laboured so diligently to establish. In such moments, he is able to appreciate his path

not as a flat line of two dimensions but a thing running in three—or four—dimensions, a cartographer's mark encircling the planet: the due-west course I'm on could be the first leg of a journey to Yosemite and on across the sea, to Yangyang, South Korea; over the Great Wall, into the Chinese interior, across the Caspian Sea, down the length of Turkey, past the Parthenon, into Palermo, Sicily; along the southern edge of Don Quixote's La Mancha, the Atlantic, the Azores, Baltimore. This road is not an isolated parallel but a piece of the conflux of the greater grid, a planetary circumscription to read.<sup>14</sup>

Amidst this geographic disorientation, the author sometimes believes himself to commune with the Native American tribes that once occupied the region, slipping into a dreamtime state in which the boundaries between geographic coordinates and temporalities dissolve, an experience that has parallels to the Surrealist *dérive*. In this state, Heat-Moon appreciates more keenly these groups' symbiotic relationship with the environment, a relationship that lacks the impulse to dominate and subdue that underlies so much of Western cartographic practice. His ascription of mystery and infinite depth to the landscapes of Chase County is part of the author's ongoing attempt 'to construct a type of "sacred" secular map over a desacrilised landscape which has been theorised for the most part in terms of its value as use'.<sup>15</sup> The Western obsession with pin-point accuracy and functional utilitarianism (to the exclusion of other qualities) has arguably deprived maps of the talismanic ability to evoke the hidden mysteries of place. Elaborating on this point, Peter Steinhart asserts that

Our maps have indeed grown less speculative, less interested in the elemental possibilities of the earth's skin. They are drawn by computers from satellite photos, and that suggests that the earth has lost its capacity to keep secrets. The natural

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<sup>14</sup>*PrairyErth*, p. 366.

<sup>15</sup>Willby, p. 70.



features are buried under the gridwork of roads and the blur of names. Maps become a means of getting past things, of threading the ganglia and writ of modern life. We tend to look at them for what we want to avoid, rather than what, in good fortune, we might discover.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the validity of this point, I think Heat-Moon resists this dichotomization between pre-modern and/or non-Western maps as ‘good’ and contemporary, Western maps as ‘bad’. While the political motivations underlying the production of extremely accurate and detailed topographic maps may be questionable, it is largely how such maps are used that determines whether they allow us to experience the genius of place. Heat-Moon’s protracted study of such maps—combined with his physical perambulations—allows him to become intimately acquainted with every slight undulation of Chase County’s surface. And yet, it is precisely this intimacy that can gradually lead to the imposition of an ontological framework (epitomized by the conventional topographical map) that can give the false impression of having exposed all the secrets of a land- or cityscape.

### **Mapping and Performing Place**

In an attempt to preserve and bear witness to the ineffable essence of place, Heat-Moon incorporates numerous unconventional maps that foreground their representational limits, as well as maps that evoke his encounters with others. An example of the former is the inclusion of a map of the 140 ways of spelling Kansas that the author learns over the course of researching the book. His arrangement of these words into four columns suggests a kind of crude verbal map of the state, whose ultimate essence is intimated but not quite captured by the linguistic signifiers.<sup>17</sup> One might say that the spirit of the place bleeds into the white spaces and columns that separate the words and letters. In a similar vein, Heat-Moon elsewhere includes a completely inked page meant to gesture towards the ultimate unrepresentability of place.

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<sup>16</sup>Quoted in *PrairyErth*, p. 354.

<sup>17</sup>*PrairyErth*, p. 122.

Describing the page, Heat-Moon writes:

Maybe it's an emblem of all the Chase material I haven't found or that hasn't found me. Or maybe it's a darkness waiting for a future light, material to come later. [...] On other days, I see it as nothing more than a small exit, a dark at the top—or bottom—of the stairs, or, perhaps, the kind of opening a Native American weaver leaves in a blanket for the spirit in the design to find release and travel on beyond.<sup>18</sup>

This purposeful incorporation of an element of incompleteness—the inked page and the discursive thirteenth chapter—might be read as a veiled polemic against the assumption that underlies conventional cartographic inscriptions: that a place can be fully known, catalogued, and reproduced.

Another indication that Heat-Moon wishes to counterbalance his use of conventional mapping strategies is his frequent homage-paying to those elements that resist cartographic inscription: meteorological events, subjective impressions, and encounters with people and wildlife. For example, in *River-Horse*, the work that chronicles Heat-Moon's crossing of the North American continent via its rivers, the author includes a verbal map that is meant to convey the tedium of looking at the surface of the water for hours at a time. In a review of the work, Patrick Smith compares the prose itself to 'water, the eddies and currents defin[ing] the river of words, and the chapters' meanings chang[ing] with each successive glimpse'.<sup>19</sup> These forays into experimental Modernist prose occur throughout *PrairyErth* as well. On several occasions, the author replaces descriptions of animals he encounters with stream-of-consciousness evocations of their essential qualities. Two particularly effective examples are his odes to the Kansas coyote and the prairie chicken, an excerpt from the first of which reads:

Now, coyote: yipping, ululating, singing, freely, freely, night-flute coyote, long leggedness through blackness, (moonless), silent, pausing, yipping, far responding, quick legs, freely, padded feet,

<sup>18</sup> *PrairyErth*, p. 599.

<sup>19</sup> Patrick Smith, 'River-Horse: Across America by Boat', <Bookreporter.com> (book review), 2003 [accessed 15 June 2004].

coyote feet, pausing, silent padding, pissing, running, swinging head, pausing, back-looking, (tallgrasses frozen, frosted), cold fur erected, coyote singing, sings-long-dog, coyote, coyote, golden-eyes-coyote, canine, climbing, singing, sweetness, song dog, breathing darkness, (hiding darkness), yip-yipping, nose-to-sky-coyote, singing, sweet-throat-beast, coyote jaw, coyote teeth, looking-always-coyote, running, singing the darkness.<sup>20</sup>

Here, the unorthodox punctuation, incomplete sentences, repetition, and lack of a sense of temporal progression—coupled with a sense of language striving to enact that which it describes—combine to convey the flavour of the coyote’s uniqueness rather than neutralizing its otherness through mere objective description. The proliferation of adjectives sketches a detailed portrait, while simultaneously emphasizing the essential uncapturability of the animal, and, by extension, of the place that it calls its home.

### **Traversing the Topographies of the Text**

This type of representation encourages us to reflect on the process whereby the experience of place is transcribed into text. Heat-Moon’s works argue for the mutually-constitutive relationship between place and its textual inscription, a relationship epitomized by the term ‘topography’, which means both the physical features of a place and their graphic representation. Heat-Moon emphasizes this relationship of near equivalency by walking the title of his work—*PrairyErth*—into the charred ground left by a prairie fire. This striking image reminds us of the common carbon base of topos and text. Writing orders the infinite stimuli and ephemera of our experience of place into patterns, that, together, accrete to form a landscape whose pathways we tread with the pen, eye, and mind. Several instances in *PrairyErth* seek to make explicit this reciprocity between graph and geography. In one of these, Heat-Moon compares the act of writing to his peripatetic explorations of Chase County, stating, ‘when I write, I usually try to follow the directions in the images and let details point the way so that my pencil is a vehicle across the map of paper, a smudged course down

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<sup>20</sup>*PrairyErth*, p. 153.

parallel lines, little roads.<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere, Heat-Moon suggests that the resultant text is, itself, a kind of topography, whose charcoal, soil-black words can be navigated in just as many ways as the paths of the physical landscapes that inspired them. In a continuation of this metaphor, the author asks us to

imagine on the floor a thick book, like an encyclopedia, and atop it seven slender books; push the books to your left so they slide down to overlap like shingles on a roof: the encyclopedia is the Precambrian crystalline core, here thrust up into a mountainous fold, and the books atop it are the seven periods of the Palaeozoic era that describe Chase County.<sup>22</sup>

The implicit solicitation of bodily interaction (‘push the books...’) is articulated more strongly when Heat-Moon asks us to

let this book page, appropriate as it is in shape and proportion, be Chase County. Lay your right hand across the page from right edge to left; tuck middle finger under palm and splay your other fingers wide so that your thumb points down, your little finger nearly upward: you have a configuration of the county watercourses, a manual topography of place.<sup>23</sup>

The body and its movements thus become the means whereby we enact the spatial gestures that mediate between the geophysical features of landscape and their textual transcription. Hence the sustained focus on the peripatetic act in *PrairyErth*: the many perambulations through Chase County embody the spatial practices that define the reality of living in the region. The many maps included in the text are less concerned with establishing the county’s coordinates and points of orientation than with participating in the unique spatial relationships that constitute its true essence. Heat-Moon thus provocatively demonstrates that our bodily movements—when taken together as a kind of perambulatory script—are perhaps the truest maps of

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<sup>21</sup>*PrairyErth*, p. 440.

<sup>22</sup>*PrairyErth*, p. 157.

<sup>23</sup>*PrairyErth*, p. 13.

the places that we have known.

### **Personal Cartographies**

One of the more compelling ways in which Heat-Moon explores this interrelationship between perambulation and place is through his inclusion of various individuals' 'mental maps' of the county. These mental maps are depictions of the highly individualized pathways and points of meaning traced by countians in their daily traversals of the region. Here, space is reorganized to correspond to individual habits, values, and subjective states. A collection of similar maps is displayed on the website of the Nottingham Psychogeographic Unit, which asked random residents of Nottingham, England to commit to paper their mental image of the city.<sup>24</sup> Each map is a snapshot of the unique subjectivity that constructed it: some represent commonly walked pathways through the city, while others use the location of pubs to derive their neighbourhood's spatial parameters. Still others utilize colours to indicate different emotional attachments (or aversions) to various regions of the city, while several participants include their signature on the maps they draw, an act that further underscores viewing such documents as oblique portraits of identity.

Heat-Moon collages numerous individuals' mental maps in *PrairyErth* to provide a rich, multidimensional portrait of Chase County, Kansas. This use of subjective maps drawn from particular individuals' experience serves as a counterpoint to his incorporation of more scientific cartographies. The former practice especially emphasizes the infinite ways in which the spatial practices of Chase countians construct and continually modify their environment. A moving example is the section devoted to the elderly countian, Fidel G. Ybarra. A former railway worker, Ybarra sketches an elaborate map of the various places in the county that have significance to him. The map is drawn from the perspective of the railways that criss-cross the county, lines of connection that literalise, or rehearse, the threads of memory and recollection that extend from the present to the past. Heat-

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<sup>24</sup>Nottingham P.U., <<http://art.ntu.ac.uk/mental/>>, [accessed 05 March 2003].

Moon writes that Ybarra ‘draws and loses himself in the map’, referring to the way in which the countian inscribes himself into cartography.<sup>25</sup> Ybarra transposes his identity onto the map by privileging certain regions in accordance with how they fit into his experience and the perceptions they elicited:

The houses at Gladstone he labels with arrows pointing to each other:

*Dad lived here →*

*I lived in Middle one →*

*We didn't have no Electricity till 1945*

*Went to Miller School there Grade 1-8*

As he limns in Gladstone, he X's the house where a younger brother, during some horseplay, threw a toy hatchet into his right eye. Each time he tells of an incident about a *chanty*, he touches his pen to the building and leaves a mark, and soon they are full of inky points like little residents.<sup>26</sup>

The map Ybarra draws thus becomes ‘a portrait of sixty years spent along the skinny rail corridors of the county’, ‘a picture, chart, chronicle, handbook’.<sup>27</sup> The many ‘inky points’ and railway lines express not simply the physical topography of place, but the usually invisible lines of connection that link person to place, person to person, and present to past. Elaborating on this significance of Ybarra’s map, Heat-Moon observes:

He is telling all of this while he keeps fixed to his map, and as he speaks, he draws in the ties of his tracks, a couple hundred little hash marks. At first I see them as tallies of wrongs, but when he keeps marking them even after the topic changes, keeps laying down those little sleepers, I think: of course, the most important elements in a trackman’s work is the crosstie—that piece holding the railroad together, the predicate between subject and object, the linking between soil and rail. A trackman’s days go to battling ties; as feet are to a walker, so ties are to a train.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup>*PrairyErth*, p. 233.

<sup>26</sup>*PrairyErth*, p. 233.

<sup>27</sup>*PrairyErth*, p. 234.

<sup>28</sup>*PrairyErth*, pp. 235-6.

Heat-Moon's work also seeks to lay its own crossties connecting the multiple human, animal, and geologic strands that, together, comprise his 'deep map' of Chase County, Kansas, in which we can catch glimpses of the 'fibrous darkness below us where most prairie living goes on'.<sup>29</sup> A combination of conventional and imaginative mapping techniques are employed throughout Heat-Moon's works to give a sense of the rich variety and otherness that inform and constitute any place if examined closely and with devotion. The remarkable achievement of the innumerable maps contained within *PrairyErth* is a conviction that this narrative contains the same inexhaustible interpretive complexities and potential discoveries that it ascribes to Chase County.

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<sup>29</sup>*PrairyErth*, p. 237.

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