



Mapping History; Surveying the Unfathomable in Pynchon's Mason & Dix

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Abstract

This article examines Thomas Pynchon's *Mason and Dixon*, as a leading example of historiographical metafiction which seamlessly blends fictional narratives with factual elements. This novel explores the relationship between geography and parageography, and emphasizes the relationship between cartography and storytelling. By exploring the power dynamics which are inherent in mapmaking and storytelling, the paper examines how mapmaking and the inscription of history assist imperial authorities to impose and perpetuate their dominance over others. Through a close examination of Pynchon's non-linear and complex narrative structure, this article highlights the manners in which *Mason & Dixon* counters the conventional notions of truth, hence inviting the reader to question any constructed nature either, maps or historical representation. Ultimately, this metafictional narrative prompts deeper investigation of the intricate intersections between fiction, historiography, geography, and the manipulation of knowledge.



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Pynchon's Parageographical fiction

Mapping and geographical demarcations are prominent and overarching motifs in Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*. This novel which is concerned with representation relates mapping to fiction in different ways. As a work of historical metafiction, a great bulk of the events in the novel center around the mapping of the boundary line between Pennsylvania and Maryland. Hence, one of the central concerns of the novel is the relationship between the storytelling and mapping. Pynchon uses geography and mapping of the borderlines as a metaphor for the process of construction of meaning. That is to say, in this work geography and mapping are concerned with representing and inscribing the world (through signs and words), a process which is similarly implemented in fiction.

Geography, as Pohlmann argues, is a framework which denotes "writing the Earth, not only in the sense of representing it in a chosen medium text, map, etc. but also in the sense of constructing the Earth in writing, inscribing it as much as describing it" (2019, 67). In this light, mapping is a selective process which involves choices- what to include or what to exclude. In the same manner storytelling is also a selective process which involves arrangement of events in a coherent narrative. This feature makes both mapping and storytelling inherently biased, as they are filtered through the representor's subjective perspective. This characteristic feature makes these presentational mediums "an act of abstraction, a fictive construction that can nevertheless impose its order on real bodies" (Piekarski et al. 2006, 47).

This analogy between the very act of composition and mapping which reverberates through the novel is highlighted in a pivotal scene, where Mason and Dixon decide to record their findings in the form of a map, i.e., a "Pen-and-Paper Representation," which marks the north with an "eight-pointed Star, surmounted by a Fleur-de-Lis" (Pynchon, 1997, 687). At this stage of their mission, they not only interpret the words of the colonies in conflict based on their self-interested standpoints but also represent it through a map which is a way of transcribing the story of their survey, i.e., they interpret the line which they marked through America and provide its textual presentation which is a map. Here, Dixon, who has years of experience, takes on the role of someone whose job is textual transcription, but his usage of Fleur-de-Lis sparks an argument about the fact that the sign could be interpreted as "Politickal" or a show of allegiance to France. Whereas Dixon regards the mark "[his] 'Flower-de-Luce'" as a sign which is known universally "among Brother and Sister Needle-folk in ev'ry Land" for Mason it is a sign that could be interpreted as a "reassertion of French claims to Ohio" (Pynchon, 1997, 688).

Although Mason here comes to accept that their "Map of the Boundaries" is complete, their disagreement about the sign which is represented in different ways (Fleur-de-Lis and Flower-de-Luce), suggests that their map is not a neutral representation of the world, and the readers know well that their very inscription of the line has more political implications. Despite the fact that Mason and Dixon use signs to represent their story of the line to portray the world, but their signs, as Robert L. McLaughlin contends, are ideologically charged (as their debate on the north arrow illustrates) and "infinitely interpretable, ... far beyond the control of their author" (2003, 174). Accordingly, as Seed argues maps manifest the desire for control and they exist to "empower its makers" not to offer an allegedly objective representation of a territory on a paper (2000, 84). In this light, Mason and Dixon's cartographic demarcations and their Visto could be interpreted in different terms by the slaves, whites, colonists, our era, as their perspectives are impacted by their social status, political beliefs or cultural backgrounds. Moreover, once a map is designed, it will no longer remain under the control of its author just as a work of fiction, as people or agencies might employ it for their own agendas such as territorial claims or imperial expansions.

The novel which follows the journey of these men of science through South Africa and the New World, primarily draws upon cartography and mapping as its end result, but as the protagonists proceed through their 'epical' journey, in multiple stages the narrative diverges from the central historical sequence of their survey, and results in encounters and discoveries that make up a great deal of the narrative's meaning. In one of the prominent events which describes the protagonists'

experience in St. Helena and Cape of Good Hope, at the very outset of their journey, the narrative establishes a connection between narration (epic), geography and imperialism:

Vroom [House-Hold] is a bottomless archive of epic adventures out in the unmapped wilds of Hottentot Land, some of which may even hold a gleam of truth, in among the narrative rubbish-tip of this Arm-chair Commando, wherein the mad Rhino forever rolls his eye, the killer Trunk stands erect and a-bellow, and the cowardly Kaffirs turn and flee, whilst the Dutchman lights his Pipe, and stands his Ground (1997, 60).

This quote incorporates several ideas in a colorful miniature which implicitly defines the narrative's approach in the succeeding chapters. In this meticulously painted portrait, the stories about Cornelius Vroom's (the Dutch Colonist) epic adventures are set in a specific geographical location in south Africa, the "Hottentot Land" which was the habitat of some Nomadic indigenous tribes. The quote implicitly draws attention to some derogatory imperialistic stereotypes, such as a "cowardly Kaffirs" and the "mad Rhino" (representing the enslaved Africans and the exploited nature) getting dominated by the Dutch colonizers who stand their ground. Through such a divergence, the novel not only integrates other thematic aspects but also opens a space for the marginalized and the underrepresented. This strategy makes *Mason & Dixon* a polyphonic novel in which their monolithic view of history as well as these characters' very act of surveying and the notion of Map is destabilized and deconstructed, and redefined as concepts that are subject to infinite reinterpretation.

The connection between narratology (fictional or historical) and geography which reverberates through the narrative is also evident when Mason, who struggles to determine the longitude at sea, finds the "suggestions, schemes [and] philosophick confessions" found in the letters he has received from the public unhelpful (Pynchon, 1997, 141). However, it is in a moment of thoughtful considerations, when "Insanity" occasionally rolls "a sly Eye-ball into the picture" that "Treatises on 'Para- geography' arriv[e], with alternative Maps of the World superimpos'd upon the more familiar ones" (Pynchon, 1997, 141). Here, Mason who is not able to get help from 'documents of history', attempts to speculate about the whereabouts of a 'perfect' meridian line to determine the longitude at sea. The arrival of the "Treatises on 'Para- geography'", suggests an imaginative or speculative kind of geography which explores alternative or unconventional vantage points about representing the world through mapping. In addition to this the very notion of superimposing alternative maps upon the "more familiar ones" suggests the possibility of multiple interpretations, and alternative viewpoints. This suggests that maps (histories) are not a definite and clear-cut representations of the earth (world) rather they are a familiar version which could be challenged and revised by 'alternative maps' (alternative histories) that are added to from other perspectives.

In this light Pynchon's novel as a historiographic metafiction employs Parageography to blur the boundary between abstractions (unseen designs) and realities (worldly maps) in cartography and fiction. In so doing as Pohlmann argues this novel does not try to replace one map with another one or to substitute "one historical truth with another, but rather challenges the very notion of a singular historical truth by multiplying it into different truths that compete with each other while laying bare their respective subjective basis" (2019, 69). This novel instead of providing a definitive and straightforward account of history, embraces a multi layered, and complex approach that offers a more subjective and fragmented understanding of the past, a knowledge that challenges the conventional notions of objective truth. And it is in this way that various perspectives and interpretations can coexist, and in doing so it highlights the inherent multiplicity and complexity of the historical truths.

The Fault Lines of Order

In *Mason & Dixon* cartography and mapping is a metaphor for human's desire for imposing meaning and order on the world. Characters such as Nevil Maskelyne, and James Bradley who represent the Royal Society, embody those controlling agencies which seek to dominate the rest

of the human race. As a rationalist, Maskelyne is portrayed as the pure type of scientist who seeks all answers in “his realm of pure Mathesis” (Pynchon 134), which Foucault defines as “the universal science of measurement and order” (1970, 62). He is committed to the science of mathematics (scientific inquiry), and its employment as the precondition for unraveling and understanding the universe. James Bradley, the president of the Royal Society, is another character who embodies the spirit of intellectual growth of the Enlightenment era. He regards the stars as “pure Mathesis” (Pynchon, 1997, 134) and defines Moons or Planets, as dimensionless Points, as “a simple pair of Numbers, Right Ascension and Declination... Numbers that Men of Science are actually paid, out of the Purses of Kings, to find” (Pynchon, 1997, 194). This is an implication for these characters’ engagement in a web of schemes and conspiracies, governed by controlling agencies such as the Jesuits and the Royal Society which worked along with the imperial interests.

Similarly, Mason and Dixon who are hired by the Royal Society, are unknowingly involved in a network of power struggle. Despite the fact that at the beginning they start their mission, in an idealistic manner, but gradually as they move Westward and cut their line through the inhabited lands, they come to notice the impact of their visto upon the communities along their path. The price family's house, for instance, it cut by Mason and Dixon's visto and "invaded by the Surveyors" to the extent of even “Separating husband and wife”. The line's new defined territories in fact causes controversies regarding, the family's position in the new emerging system of order (Pynchon, 1997, 446-447). As the story develops Mason & Dixon come to the realization that their “map- making is another imperialistic transgression” and that they “are commissioned to guarantee stateliness among the colonies, as presided over ... by a governable republic of stars” (Saltzman,2000, 65). When they become aware of the violence, and segregation that is produced by the colonial enterprise that they are helping, it prompts Dixon to ask his partner, “Whom are we working for, Mason?” (Pynchon, 1997, 347). In this stage in fact they gradually come to the realization that geography and their very action of cartography and mapping is a means of imposition of power. As Mason and Dixon proceed further through their journey, in several epiphanic moments they come to realize that through their act of "clearing and marking a Right Line of a Hundred Leagues, into the Lands of Others”, indeed, they are marking “the earth with geometrick scars" and help the British Empire, to impose its map (its power and it's order) over the American colonies (Pynchon, 1997, 573).

This fact is not hidden those institutions such as Royal Society, and the Jesuits, and those scientists who were employed by them served the colonial interests such as commerce and control. The novel makes it apparent that the colonial interests are indeed served by the Mason and Dixon's line. “Drawing the Line” as *McLaughlin* argues "is part of a process of taking land, creating boundaries, naming; in short, creating the conditions under which power – the power to tax, to control land, to enforce laws, to privilege specific religious, social, and cultural codes, to enslave or kill those who are different – can be established and maintained” (2003, 183). Fr Zarpazo, “Wolf of Jesus” who represents another controlling agency, the Jesuits, another unofficial and hidden powers of eighteenth-century Enlightenment, highlights this in a statement, that the lines which are set by the scientists and the surveyors, though invisible and abstract boundaries, are going to perpetuate their presence and dominance throughout history:

Walls are to be the Future. Unlike those of the Antichrist Chinese, these will follow right Lines. The World grows restless, – Faith is no longer willingly bestow'd upon Authority, either religious or secular. What Pity. If we may not have Love, we will accept Consent, – if we may not obtain Consent, we will build Walls. As a Wall, projected upon the Earth's Surface, becomes a right Line, so shall we find that we may shape, with arrangements of such Lines, all we may need, be it in a Crofter's hut or a great Mother-City, – Rules of Precedence, Routes of Approach, Lines of Sight, Flows of Power, – (Pynchon, 1997, 522).

Pedre Zarpazo's, Zhang's opposing double, unveils the agendas behind their presence in the New World. His words imply that through establishing their own boundaries, they intend to impose their own Jesuitic agendas, and to shape the world in the way they desire, i.e., through imposing their own 'Rules', 'Routes' 'Lines of Sight' on the map of the world they attempt to change even the course of the history of the nations.

Aligned with the aforementioned argument, Piekarski et al. contends, "Maps can serve the brutal games of power and desire that take place on all scales, from the global to the interpersonal, at every vantage point from which a "They" enjoys the privilege of subjugating another. (2006, 47). Then the Mason and Dixon line becomes the very embodiment of imperialistic transgression and colonialist's violent conquest, as it destroys nature and segregates the communities and changes systems of order that existed previously. Their line which has "a will to proceed Westward" even beyond the "Great Warrior Path", is seen as a marker of territory and how far into the Indians' lands the colonialists may strike and what they "claim to westward" (Pynchon, 1997, 678-679). By moving westward, in fact the line becomes a significant symbol for control and commerce. As they overstep the sacred boundaries of the Indians which mark the territories of their motherland, the Calverts' and the Penns' lines of control and perpetual presence come to threaten the already exiting border the "Warrior Path" belonging to the Indians. In this process the precolonial Edenic paradise which originally belonged to Native Americans is taken from the indigenous communities, and is labeled as new property of the colonizers.

Mason and Dixon's line which is a metaphor for an unleashed beast ravaging its path through the consecrated nature, is described to also have a profound impact on the settlers. In the novel the settlers who are described to be the earliest victims of such division and imposition "want to know how to stop this great invisible Thing that comes crawling Straight on over their Lands, devouring all in its Path" causing "Distinction betwixt 'em," (615, 678). Although the Mason and Dixon line leads to the rise of the new United States, and formation of the American identity, it is quite evident that the settlers see it as, interposition of nations into a newly established national order. They see the newly emerged order of the United States as something that can, "separate" them and "name [them] anew ... Indian White, American" (Pynchon, 1997, 710). Pohlmann sees the creation of this new "national territory" i.e., "inscriptions of politics onto the land and onto the identities of those who live there" as the "most important geographical act in modern history" which Pynchon's Mason & Dixon explicitly attempts to challenge and subvert (2019, 71). In other words, if there is a single national map, (designs and systems of order) imposed by the Royal Society to exert the imperialists' power on the newly emerged territory, then in Pynchon's view, there are always other alternative maps that could challenge and even to be superimposed over these more familiar versions which have been perpetuated by the ruling systems.

Mason & Dixon is the very embodiment of Pynchon's project in challenging the grand narratives of history (monolithic maps and designs) through a narrative of multiplicity and possibility. The novel is based on the notion that once geometry as a scientific enterprise is "applied to the material world, [it] might be an imperialist gesture, an administrative onslaught by the numbered on the unimagined" (Wood, 2003, 258). In the same manner, as Friedrich Reiner argues the 'grand narratives' of history create unifying threads and traditions in writing to impose a "totalizing metanarrative", "overarching discourse" or, "all-encompassing theory" to provide a unified view about nations' past which is an imposition of a kind (Rainer,2012, 32). This point in the novel is raised by Zheng, the anti-Jesuit Feng-shui master, who draws attention to the fact that some certain classes who have tried to perpetuate their dominance and "To rule forever" have always tried to draw "a Line, in particular a Right Line, the very shape of Contempt, through the midst of a People" to create what he calls "Bad History" (Pynchon, 1997, 615). In this way, in fact, Pynchon provides his critique of any metanarratives of history which attempt to put boundaries of separation between the center and the margin and to prioritize 'us' over the ex-centric 'others'. It is this bad history which Pynchon is attempting to contempt, while instead valorizing a history characterized by contingency and discontinuity which provides space for the

marginal and the peripheral. Henceforth, Pynchon's projection of history in *Mason & Dixon* discards any unifying universal schema that is operative in the grand narratives and instead advocates the diversity of disparate and diffuse "little narratives," which remain "the quintessential form of imaginative invention" (Lytard, 1985, 60).

For Pynchon, mapping is an act of colonization and imposition of power, that "takes things out of the realm of life and ongoing present tense" and reduces them to the "taxidermy world of repetition and death" (Piekarski et al. 2006, 48). This point becomes very obvious, when Cherrycoke touches upon the idea that the unexplored Western territories which are not yet mapped or seen by the majority of people, are in fact repository for imaginations and unfulfilled dreams:

Does Britannia, when she sleeps, dream? Is America her dream?— in which all that cannot pass in the metropolitan Wakefulness is allow'd Expression away in the restless Slumber of these Provinces, and on West-ward, wherever 'tis not yet mapp'd, nor written down, nor ever, by the majority of Mankind, seen,— serving as a very Rubbish-Tip for subjunctive Hopes, for all that *may yet be true*,— Earthly Paradise, Fountain of Youth, Realms of Prester John, Christ's Kingdom, ever behind the sunset, safe till the next Territory to the West be seen and recorded, measur'd and tied in, back into the Net-Work of Points already known, that slowly triangulates its Way into the Continent, changing all from subjunctive to declarative, reducing Possibilities to Simplicities that serve the ends of Governments,— winning away from the realm of the Sacred, its Borderlands one by one, and assuming them unto the bare mortal World that is our home, and our Despair. (Pynchon, 1997, 345).

In this quote, the intact territories are described as a place ("Rubbish-Tip for subjunctive Hopes") where various utopian and mythical concepts can reside in and persist safely, until they are discovered, mapped and incorporated into the "more familiar" world (Pynchon, 1997, 141). It is this process of colonization and mapping that transforms the subjunctive realm of possibilities and to the declarative realm of certainties. Pynchon criticizes the very process of imposing reason over unreason, factuality over imagination, and finally reducing little narratives of possibilities to grand narratives of simplicity.

Moreover, the mapping of spaces and demarcation of nature as lines and points for Pynchon in fact creates named territories. Once territories are mapped and named it is followed by imperial expansion, which annihilate differences between human beings and bringing them under a system in which they are to be measured and tied into a "Net-Work of Points". In terms of language and narratology (historical or fictional), this underscores the fact that, when language and other modes of representation are over dominated by the traditional literary canons, they are taken away from the realm of subjunctive (sacred) and moved into the realm of the declarative (mortal world) they lose their capacity for representing knowledge. In this relationship, in a sense, "the narrative forms of possibility embodied by the subjunctive" are colonized by the declarative, a process which "reduc[es] life and language to the imperial certainty of the British government and its quest for world universalization" (Narkunas, 2019, 47-48). In other words, the ideology of control, i.e., subjugating nations to a new nation-state system which limits other irrational and alternative modes of knowledge and perceiving the world, in a sense, results in no more than "Bad History" and a state predestined into War and Devastation.

Conclusion

Thomas Pynchon's novel, *Mason & Dixon*, stands as a notable example of historiographical metafiction which pushes beyond the boundaries of novelistic art and challenges the conventional modes of representation of reality. Through the seamless fusion of factual and fictional, geography and parageography, this writer highlights the power dynamics that are inherent in mapmaking and historiography. By exploring such themes, the narrative prompts the reader to

question the manners in which individuals or other systems of power in communities, impose their control over others through manipulating the narratives and generating structures of spatial representations. This narrative serves as a reminder of the intricate relationship between storytelling, and our perception of reality. Through blurring the seam lines between fact and fiction, in a sense, this novel encourages the readers to critically scrutinize any textual presentation, and to consider possible ideologies or power dynamics that might be embedded within those representations. *Mason & Dixon* invites us to challenge the conventional manners of representation in both history and fiction, urging us to question and challenge the dominant narratives that shape our understanding of the world. Being bestowed upon with such a sensibility, then the reader can view history in a broader sense of connection between the wrongdoings of the past, their perpetuation in present and their impact on the future of the world. In the light of such a view then Mason and Dixon's line turns into a universal phenomenon which has been repeating itself and being resonated through other historical lines of segregation and separation such as, the Sykes-Picot line, which have generated 'Wedges' populated by marginalized nations. Such comparisons underline the long-lasting impact of imposed boundaries on marginalized nations and emphasize the need to challenge and reassess any system that perpetuates such a marginalization.

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رسم خرائط التاريخ; مسح ما لا يسبر غوره في بينشون ميسون وديكسون

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الملخص

يبحث هذا المقال رواية ماسون وديكسون للكاتب توماس بينشون، كمثل رائد على ما وراء القص التاريخي الذي يمزج بسلاسة المسارد الخيالية مع العناصر الواقعية. تستكشف هذه الرواية العلاقة بين الجغرافيا والباراجوغرافيا، وتؤكد على العلاقة بين رسم الخرائط وسرد القصص. ومن خلال استكشاف ديناميكيات القوة المتأصلة في رسم الخرائط وسرد القصص، تبحث الورقة كيفية مساعدة رسم الخرائط وكتابة تاريخ السلطات الإمبراطورية على فرض وإدماة هيمنتها على الآخرين. من خلال الفحص الدقيق للبنية السردية غير الخطية والمعقدة لبينشون، يسلط هذا المقال الضوء على اساليب المفاهيم التقليدية للحقيقة التي يواجهها ماسون وديكسون، وبالتالي يدعو القارئ إلى التشكيك في أي طبيعة مبنية أيضاً، الخرائط والتمثيل التاريخي. في النهاية، بحث هذا السرد ما وراء القصي إلى تحقيق أعمق في التقاطعات المعقدة بين الخيال والتأريخ والجغرافيا، والتلاعب بالمعرفة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ما وراء القص التاريخي، رسم الخرائط، باراجوغرافيا، التمثيل، ديناميات السلطة

نه خشه كردنى ميژوو؛ روو پيو بكردى نه و شتانهى كه تينه گه يشتون له مه ميسون و ديكسونى پينچون

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نهم تويزينه وهيه شيكردنه وهيه مه ميسون و ديكسونى توماس پينچون دهكات، وهك نمونه بهكى پيشهنگى ميتافيكشنى ميژوونوسى كه به شيويه بهكى بهردهوام گيرانه وهيه خيالى له گه ل توخمه راستيه كان تيكه ل دهكات. نهم رومانه بهدواداچوون بو پهيوه ندى تيوان جوگرافيا و پاراجوگرافيا دهكات، ههروهها جهخت له پهيوه ندى تيوان نه خشه سازى و چيروكگيرانه وه دهكات وه. به خسته پرووى دايناميكى دهسالات كه له نه خشه سازى و چيروكگيرانه وه دهكات دهكرت، تويزينه وهكه ليكولينه وه له وه دهكات كه چون نه خشه سازى و نووسينه وهيه ميژوو يارمهت دهسالاتدارانى ئيمپراتورى دهدهن بو سه پاندن و درژه پندانى حوكمرانى خويان بهسهر نه وانتردا. نهم تويزينه وهيه له ريگه ل ليكولينه وهيه كه ورد له پيكهاته ل گيرانه وهيه ناھيلى و ئالوزى پينچون، تيشك دهخاته سهر نهو شيوانانه ل كه مه ميسون و ديكسون بهرپه رچى چه مكه ئاسايه كانى راستى ده داته وه، ليره وه بانگهيشتى خوينه ردهكات بو نه وهيه هه سروشتيكى بنياتراوئيش بخاته ژير پرسياره وه، چ له پرووى نه خشه وه ياخود خسته پرووى ميژوويه وه بيت. له كوتاييدا نهم گيرانه وهيه ميتافيكشنالييه هانى ليكولينه وهيه قوولتردهدات له به كتر پرينه ئالوزه كانى تيوان خيالى و ميژوونوسين و جوگرافيا و هه لقوزتنه وهيه زانبارى

وشه سه ره كيبه كان: ميتافيكشنى ميژوونوسى، نه خشه سازى، پاراجوگرافيا، خسته پرووى، دايناميكى هيز