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Framing The Spaces Unseen In Mason & Dixon

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FRAMING THE SPACE UNSEEN IN *MASON & DIXON*

by

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ABSTRACT

The treatment of the Conestoga Massacre and the (dis)placement of the subaltern in *Mason & Dixon* are of utmost importance to the novel's narrative arc. The relative paucity of indigenous voices in *Mason & Dixon* is important in at least two seemingly contradictory ways: the author simultaneously avoids appropriation, and performs, as it were, the erasure at the heart of the colonial paradigm. *Mason & Dixon*'s multiple allusions to native peoples never quite amount to an indigenous presence; indeed, they seem only to rehearse a particular ideological outlook in which colonial racial aggression cannot be acknowledged, or perhaps even seen. With *Mason & Dixon*, Pynchon indeed explores the power of narratives at once to conceal and reveal certain bodies, realities, and histories.

I do not, in this reading, intend to disparage *Mason & Dixon*; rather I argue that its narrative framing, drawing attention to itself, invites the reader to ask questions concerning any culture's ability to see its past clearly. The concept of "spaces unseen" as "pockets of safety" in postmodern fiction may be one viable solution to the challenges Gayatri Spivak brings to light in her "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Ventriloquizing the voice of the subaltern in storytelling would be nothing more than a continuation of imperial oppression and neocolonial appropriation. The silent spaces in such fictions as *Mason & Dixon* provides room for other voices, creating a communal visualization of history in which all are encouraged to speak.

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CHAPTER 1

“...how had it happened here, with the chances once so good for diversity?”
The Crying of Lot 49

Thomas Pynchon’s fictional representations of Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon are not in America long before they encounter their “first mortal acts of Savagery.” Mason finds it peculiar that violence “should have been committed by whites against Indians” (306), rather than by those perceived “savages” from the “wilderness” (248) against the European settlers. The event to which Mason alludes is the Conestoga Massacre, in which twenty-one local Native Americans (members of a Susquehannock sub-tribe) were gruesomely murdered by a vigilante group of predominantly Presbyterian Scotch-Irish frontiersmen known as the Paxton Boys (*Paxton Papers* 3-4). This actual historical event was not the first act of racial violence in the Americas (nor would it be the last), but its position and treatment within *Mason & Dixon* deserve note.

In the novel, when Mason steps out onto the street that fateful morning in December, he asks a passerby after the commotion and is told “the Indians that were taking refuge in the Gaol there, were massacr’d ev’ry one, by local Irregulars” (304). Importantly, none of the settlers dwell on the horrific details of the massacre, and this reticence strikes me as significant. To begin to comprehend the violence that escapes narration here and elsewhere in *Mason & Dixon*, one turns to the historical record.

William Henry of Lancaster gives perhaps the most graphic description:

Near the back door of the prison lay an old Indian and his squaw[...]across him and squaw lay two children, of about the age of three years, whose

heads were split with the tomahawk, and their scalps taken off. Towards the middle of the jail yard, along the west side of the wall, lay a stout Indian, whom I particularly noticed to have been shot in the breast; his legs were chopped with the tomahawk, his hands cut off, and finally a rifle ball discharged in his mouth, so that his head was blown to atoms[...]In this manner lay the whole of them, men, women and children spread about the prison yard; shot, scalped, hacked and cut to pieces. (qtd. in *Paxton Papers* 29)

I quote this horrifying account to convey the heinous destruction of the Conestoga Massacre. Though not exhaustively described, this event sets the tone for the title characters' journey across America, and the echoes of this and other acts of colonial violence undergird the entirety of the novel.

The treatment of the Conestoga Massacre and the (dis)placement of the subaltern in *Mason & Dixon* are of utmost importance to the novel's narrative arc. The relative paucity of indigenous voices in *Mason & Dixon* is important in at least two seemingly contradictory ways: the author simultaneously avoids appropriation, and performs, as it were, the erasure at the heart of the colonial paradigm. *Mason & Dixon*'s multiple allusions to native peoples never quite amount to an indigenous presence; indeed, they seem only to rehearse a particular ideological outlook in which colonial racial aggression cannot be acknowledged, or perhaps even seen. Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke, the storytelling "far-travel'd Uncle" who narrates, avoids emphasis on the subaltern or acts of colonial violence as he recounts Mason and Dixon's adventures in his sister's parlor to family and friends (6). Cherrycoke does not, or perhaps cannot, explain in detail the

actions of the Paxton Boys. Some of this avoidance can be understood by the fact that Cherrycoke is telling this story to his two young nephews, but the failure to impress upon the boys the scope of the atrocity is striking. Other aspects of the story feature graphic detail, so it seems unlikely that Cherrycoke is simply sparing the boys' sensibilities. Rather, Cherrycoke's narrative demonstrates the colonial attitude toward the subaltern: the native voice is scarcely heard, and the deaths (in Lancaster and elsewhere) go unmourned.

I do not, in this reading, intend to disparage *Mason & Dixon*; rather I argue that its narrative framing, drawing attention to itself, invites the reader to ask questions concerning any culture's ability to see its past clearly. Adam Lifshey, in his *Specters of Conquest* sees *Mason & Dixon* as a "work of mourning," a "search for justice" (136). I would add that Mason and Dixon both enact a form of repentance, for they become aware that the imperial narratives in which they are complicit are potentially as violent as the imposition of their line. Reading the novel as "caught up in the absencing it mourns by primarily envisioning the Atlantic through Mason and Dixon, cartographers of the Conquest, rather than through the indigenes who become absent before them" (136), Lifshey misses the generative potential of *Mason & Dixon*. One must, that is, keep in mind that the narrative is filtered not only through the perspective of Mason and Dixon, but also that of Reverend Cherrycoke. The perspectival overlay shifts the novel from strictly investigating the actions of Mason and Dixon towards an interrogation of the narratives of the New World and the power such narratives have in distributing presence and absence. Though not directly discussing *Mason & Dixon*, Jacqueline Smetak rightly asserts that "the central theme" of the author's work is "the process of reading or

interpreting a text” (66), but like Lifshy, she overstates a negative; Pynchon’s stories, she suggest, only reveal that the “search for meaning uncovers no meaning” (66).

With *Mason & Dixon*, Pynchon indeed explores the power of narratives at once to conceal and reveal certain bodies, realities, and histories. The trope of the failed quest for meaning, however, takes on a different light in *Mason & Dixon*. Stefan Mattessich describes the novel as “characterized by acontextual desire and the technological drive to master the processes of life” (233). Mattessich here underrepresents how many characters’ quests for mastery in *Mason & Dixon* are exposed as bankrupt by the end of the novel. This bankruptcy, contrary to what Smetak implies, is not without value; indeed, the inability to craft master narratives allows for the infinitesimal variance of human existence. Objective “meaning,” especially in a narrativized form, can never fully account for the multiplicitous complexities of the past, and the undermining of such narratives actually enlarges one’s conception of the world. In this sense, with *Mason & Dixon*, Pynchon explores the cost to human rights of any monolithic narrative of the past. When one acknowledges that no narrative can encompass all of reality, a host of hitherto obscured lives and histories come into view. Making Cherrycoke the narrator of *Mason & Dixon* allows Pynchon to explore a particular perspective of history, as he pursues the possibility of crafting stories that do not strive for monolithic status. By this I mean that in *Mason & Dixon* Pynchon attempts to avoid doing violence to America’s primal subalterns by appropriating their voice or voices. This circumspection allows Pynchon to present a differing perspective on the conquest of the New World. Rather, Pynchon assumes, through Cherrycoke, the guise of colonial impercipience. But this narrative perspective does not trap *Mason & Dixon* into a position of perpetuating the traditional

power dynamics of either history or the historical novel. Rather, *Mason & Dixon* explores the possibility of a novel that does not purport to be *the* story of America, but rather only *a* story: one story out of many in the cacophonous past that we as readers must combine together into our own pastiche. The creation of such pastiche requires acknowledgement on the part of the reader that such narratives can never end in “meaning,” but rather, at its best, respect.

Here, like the “sinister and wonderful Card Table” in the parlor at the beginning, *Mason & Dixon* is replete with “hinges, sliding Mortises, hidden catches, and secret compartments” (5-6). Like this card table, the narrative of *Mason & Dixon* hints at such hidden catches and secret compartments, areas and places implied but never seen. “If I know that there are ‘secret compartments,’” Irving Malin wonders, “can I even think of them as secret? When does a secret *reveal* itself?” (39). Acknowledging the existence of secret compartments primes the reader for a particular narrative experience. On the lookout for areas unexplored, depths unplumbed, or voices unheard, narrative gaps can no longer be overlooked, rationalized as postmodern play or authorial lack. Rather, these gaps must be interrogated, as one may have stumbled upon yet another secret compartment, the contents of which may prove integral to the story. The Conestoga Massacre may well be one such secret compartment, intentionally introduced as a story that will not be told, perhaps cannot be told, at least by this narrator. This type of intentional narrative silence pays due reverence to the tragedy unspoken within its bounds. To take the story of colonial violence away from those who have suffered under it would be egregiously patronizing, yet to avoid acknowledgment of such past sins would be the ultimate disrespect. *Mason & Dixon* walks a tightrope between these two

shortcomings, skillfully exposing the presence of such secret compartments but leaving them closed, observing that the story within their bounds is not this novel's to tell.

Constructing the Space Unseen

“...and not particularly aware of destruction mainly because he was unable to give it a name or a face”
“Mortality and Mercy”

When Dixon informs his mentor, William Emerson, that his perpetual motion watch has been swallowed by a member of his surveying team, Emerson ends his reply with “Time is the Space that may not be seen” (326). This watch, as Emerson explains, runs on a power that “may be borrow'd, as needed against the repayment dates deferrable indefinitely” (317). This phrasing connotes obvious semiotic references yet also implies a sense in which actions in 18th-century America may ring up a debt to be paid only by future generations. This intertwined relation between contemporary event and future time permeates the novel. Of course, the narrative playfully references Mason and Dixon's influence on future historical occurrences, such as Dixon's toast “To the pursuit of Happiness,” which a young Thomas Jefferson enjoys so much it compels him to ask “You don't mind if I use the Phrase sometime?” (395). Or the humorous references to Benjamin Franklin's “success in London” for which “Colonial Agents will be much in demand, as hard put to meet the Standards he has set” (613). The novel also plays with anachronism, such as George Washington's Kabbalistic slaves and his penchant for “the new-cur'd Hemp” (278-9), or Benjamin Franklin sporting the first sunglasses (266), and his stint as perhaps the first American magic act, “Poor Richard” (293-5).

Entertainment value aside, these passages reveal a compelling awareness, on the part of the author, of the fluidity of time in narrative. No historical tale can be told without the occasional anachronism or light falsification. Yet these historical allusions do

more than forward a particular historiographic outlook: they often contribute valuable information as well. While cast in a humorous light, Benjamin Franklin's electrical magic act is mentioned later in the story, when he turns back the Paxton Boys from invading Philadelphia: "--for they esteem Franklin a Magician. A Figure of Power. *We* know what he is,--but to the Mobility, he is the Ancestor of Miracle" (488). George Washington, for all his idiosyncrasies, correctly discerns the growing colonial tension between the Quakers and the Presbyterians, a tension which in many ways contributed to the violence of the Conestoga Massacre: "Ulster-Scots were dispossess'd once,--shamefully,--herded, transported,--Hostages to the demands of Religious Geography...Think thee there will be any third Coercion?" (277). Injecting differing perspectives on the formation of the ethnic violence into the novel, Washington reveals the difficult history of the Presbyterian Scotch-Irish in the Old World. Pushed by religious conflict and cultural antagonism, many of these future Paxton Boys fled to America in the hopes of avoiding the very persecution they would later visit on others. During his conversation at George Washington's plantation, Dixon casually remarks to Washington: "Why else refrain from expanding West...but out of regard for the Humanity of those whose Homes they invade?". Surprisingly, this realization seems to have little effect on Dixon himself. Consumed more by the intellectual pursuit of inscribing the line, and perhaps deflected by Washington's observation that "Americans will fight Indians whenever they please, which is whenever they can" (277), Dixon fails to empathize with those decimated. More concerned with the intellectual abstracts of lines and maps, Dixon's and Washington's uncritical embrace of Enlightened rationality darkens their vision to the atrocities enacted directly before them.

Of course to argue that Mason and Dixon are completely untouched by the plight of the Native American would be inaccurate. The two surveyors' emotional reactions, however, still fail to register the Other as fully human. When Mason and Dixon return to the scene of the Conestoga Massacre they are horrified by the evidence of death and destruction they encounter: "Acts have consequences, Dixon, they must. These Louts believe all's right now,--that they are free to get on with Lives that to them are no doubt important". Mason, obviously horrified by the actions for the Paxton boys, comments that "In America, as I apprehend, Time is the true River that runs 'round Hell" (346). This phrasing, put in conversation with Emerson's earlier description of time, yields intriguing results: the space which cannot be seen circles the Hell at the heart of America. Dixon discusses this violence with similar language, remarking "Is it something in this Wilderness, something ancient, that waited for them, and infected their Souls when they came?" (347). Mason and Dixon, while appalled by the crime scene (still redolent with this racialized violence), seem unprepared to register the terrifying event as the Susquehanna may have suffered it, and both speculate that some "darkness" in the land itself may have instigated such violence. Less percipient than Conrad's Marlowe, Mason and Dixon both fail to acknowledge that the darkness may not be tied to the continent, but may indeed stem from the colonial project itself. Perhaps something at the heart of Enlightenment rationalism (and its justifications for colonial expansion) led to the growing friction ultimately culminating in such an ethnic cleansing.

The inability to assume larger blame for the Paxton Boys' actions or to empathize with the suffering of the Susquehanna is not a failing that ought to incriminate Mason and Dixon personally; rather, they demonstrate a particular lack in the structures of thought

with which British colonialism interpreted existence. In her *Frames of War* Judith Butler defines such structures of thought as “Efforts to control the visual and narrative dimensions of [...] what can be seen and what can be heard” (xi). Butler characterizes as “ontological paradigms” the intellectual practices that frame certain bodies as human and leave others invisible (xi). While Butler refers specifically to contemporary war photography, her conceptualization of how societies frame who qualifies as a human, what constitutes violence, and whose death is grievable is useful in describing *Mason & Dixon*’s presentation of the subaltern and the Conestoga Massacre. As Butler explains, “[t]he frame does not simply exhibit reality, but actively participates in a strategy of containment, selectively producing and enforcing what will count as reality” (xiii).

This impoverishing colonial “ontological paradigm” can perhaps most clearly be seen in the broad resistance by Mason and Dixon to any phenomena that cannot be explained rationally. The recurrent appeal to “the age of reason” when confronted with anomalous or heteroclitic characters, actions, or phenomena reveals a philosophical aversion to anything remotely reminiscent of uncertainty. When he encounters something seemingly extra-rational--a magical talking dog, for example--Dixon cannot hide his discomfort. He labels as drunkards or lunatics any who accept the “Learn’d English Dog” as anything more than a hoax (18-19). When Mason expresses his interest in meeting this talking canine, Dixon’s initial reply is only “What...are you saying?” to which Mason replies: “Why mayn’t there be Oracles, for us, in our time? Gate-ways to Futurity? That can’t all have died with the ancient Peoples” (19). Here and elsewhere, Mason’s greater receptiveness to magical possibility rests upon the recent loss of his wife, which Dixon compares to the loss of his own father at a time in which he was “pitching ever into the

Hour, heedless” to the dictates of reason (20). This rationalization on Dixon’s part allows him to distance himself from the possibility that a talking dog could ever actually be real, as opposed to some bait for the credulous Mason, who wishes to know if perhaps the talking dog is “a human Spirit, re-incarnate as a Dog” (22). Indeed, Mason constantly looks for hope that perhaps his recently deceased wife Rebekah may be yet alive in some other form.

Upon speaking with the Learn’d English Dog, even Mason becomes uncomfortable. “This dog” he observes, “is causing me ap-pre-hen-sion,--surely creatures of miracle ought not to, I mean,...Flying horses? None of them ever--” (20). Even the Learn’d English Dog himself appeals to reason, and in the process undermines the validity of his own existence: “‘Tis the Age of Reason, rrrf? There is ever an Explanation at hand, and no such thing as a Talking Dog,-- Talking Dogs belong with Dragons, and Unicorns” (22). Here, the Learn’d English Dog’s appeal to reason forces Mason and Dixon to question the possibility of such a speaking dog’s existence. Undermining the logic of his own possibility provides the LED with “Provisions for Survival in a World less fantastick” (22). As the LED explains, “among Men no crime was quite so abhorr’d as eating the flesh of another human,” which dogs learned to use to their advantage, as “Dog quickly learn’d to act as human as possible” to avoid being eaten (22). One of the primary ways in which dogs could learn to act like humans was through developing the ability to speak, therefore “nightly delaying the Blades of our Masters by telling back to them tales of their humanity” (22). Multiple points of interest stand out in this passage, foremost the constant striving on the part of dogs to be seen as human (or as human as possible), so as to stave off their own destruction. And secondly, the appeal to humans

through language--specifically English, for as the LED makes perfectly clear "I am a British Dog, Sir. No one owns me"--allows for dogs to remind their human counterparts of the benevolence of "humanity" (23). The LED's strategies, then, reveal a specifically colonial paradox at the heart of the Enlightenment's ontological paradigm: the "universal rights of man" are contingent upon the scope of who is labeled "human" in the first place. Thus, such purported universality is never actually universal, and enacting violence upon an Other is predicated on "its" exclusion from the category "human".

Beyond this passage early in the novel, characters appeal to "Reason" at multiple other crucial moments. Only a few pages later, Dixon reminds Mason that "'tis the Age of Reason" when Mason expresses uneasiness over setting sail on Good Friday (27), an uneasiness that may have been justified, for their tumultuous journey will include being inexplicably attacked by the French warship *l'Grand* (37-41). Later, when discussing the possibility of a mystical island paradise found by Saint Brendan, Maskelyne informs Mason that "Philosophers of our own Day say they have prov'd it but a Mirage. So will the Reign of Reason cheerily dispose of any allegations of Paradise" (134). "These times are unfriendly toward Worlds alternative to this one," Cherrycoke notes later in the novel, for "Royal Society members" and "French Encyclopaedists" propagate "the Gospels of Reason, denouncing all that once was Magic" (359). Of course, the primary threat with such a structure of "Reason" is the possibility that, perhaps, realities deemed "alternative to this one" may actually exist. Dixon at least does seem to recognize that the "Age of Reason" has certain problems in its codifications of different types of humans, as he expresses dissatisfaction with "the Company's own Chain of Being," stating "there's a Class problem" in "this Reign of Reason" (438). Of course, Dixon merely laments this

chain's preventing Mason, "a Miller's Son," from progressing farther up the ranks of the organization that employs them (438). While registering class difference within English society, Dixon still does not recognize the coercive episteme that Blake called "mind forg'd manacles" and Butler "ontological paradigms." While Dixon abhors the practice of slavery (695), he still fails to acknowledge fully the disenfranchisement of those not white, male, and English: "tho' Slaves passed before his Sight, he saw none" (398).

In his *Silencing the Past: Power and the Construction of History*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot explicates the stakes of the type of imperial ontological framing Mason and Dixon unwittingly embrace. Trouillot argues that through much of history certain realities have remained "unthinkable" (70), especially in the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Looking at the relationship between white slave owners in Santa Domingue and their African slaves, Trouillot argues that "an ontology, an implicit organization of the world and its inhabitants" led these Haitian slave owners to reject out of hand the notion that "enslaved Africans and their descendants" could "envision freedom" (73). In this sense, Trouillot argues, the Haitian revolution was for white slave owners entirely "unthinkable even as it happened" (73). The ontological framework of the white dominant class defined who counted as human, Othering slaves to the extent that their masters could not even fathom the impetus behind the insurrection. The ability to see Haitian slaves as definitively human, desirous of freedom, and intelligent enough to grasp that freedom for themselves was outside the frame of the ontological organization of the Western colonial outlook. As David Cowart observes, Enlightenment thinking, though "efficacious at first," eventually "effects a different kind of repression" (346). For Mason and Dixon, in other words, embracing the paradigm of the

Enlightenment blinds their vision to certain aspects of reality, and leaves certain bodies unseeable as truly human.

Only after the conclusion of their surveying journey does Mason begin to understand that the assumptions presented by the “Age of Reason” may indeed be false. Upon hearing of the discovery of a new planet, Mason realizes that “[t]here may be found, within the malodorous Grotto of the Selves, a conscious denial of all that Reason holds true” (769). Mason imagines “[b]eings from the new planet” as he envisages a physical entity previously unknown. Contemplating the possible celestial dwellers of this distant planet destabilizes Mason’s ontological paradigm of Reason even further, as he begins to realize that there may be lives, and even entire planets, that previously did not exist within his conception of the universe. In this sense, Mason realizes that Reason does not provide a definitive heuristic for reality; Mason realizes such paradigms are like the mystical well he finds in Ireland, “only *a Representation*” (725 italics in original) of reality that may be open to contestation or revision.

In the opening pages of the novel Pitt asks Cherrycoke for “a Tale about America,” with Pliny chiming that it ought to have “Indians in it, and Frenchmen” (7). Cherrycoke complies with a story about America, but indigenes do not figure prominently in the story that ensues. From the outset, the novel acknowledges the presence of a separate native voice, yet we rarely are given insight into what that voice has to say. Even the Mohawk’s ominous “Why are you doing this?” (641) is a postulated question put forth by Megan. When Mason witnesses a Mohawk emerge from the “meaningless Darkness” amongst the trees, he discerns “at length [...] a Face, and a Face, moreover, that Mason *remembers*” (647 italics in original). Even for Mason the Mohawks

are almost magical, seemingly appearing out of nowhere, and yet upon discerning their features, Mason realizes he has seen this face before—or one like it—but has never taken notice. In fact, Mason and Dixon’s surveying journey in America is bookended by a submerged Native American presence, as the Conestoga Massacre occurs a mere day before they set off on their journey (304), and the mystical Warrior Path ultimately forces the conclusion of their progress (646).

As with the opening of the novel, the final lines of *Mason & Dixon* articulate a fascination with the foundational myths of the New World, as William and Doc discuss America with a tone of reverence and awe:

‘The Fish jump into your Arms. The Indians know Magick.’

‘We’ll go there. We’ll live there.’

‘We’ll fish there. And you too.’ (773)

This interchange presents a youthful and lighthearted image of the Native Americans similar to Pitt and Pliny’s fascination but also exhibits the troubling persistence of colonial ideology. The ‘Indians’, if not feared, are seen as magical (i.e. spared Enlightenment) and distinctly other. Like Pitt and Pliny, Mason’s sons construct the Native American out of their own bittersweet desire. Open fear or hatred does not reveal itself in their tone, but rather an assumption that such ‘Indians’ contribute to the mystical greatness of a land so beautiful that the wildlife—and doubtless the indigene—cheerfully yields itself to the “civilizing” grasp of the colonist.

While their surveying journey in the New World may start and end with a Native American presence, the novel begins significantly before Mason and Dixon’s arrival in America, with their escapades at the Cape of Good Hope on the coast of South Africa, the

port in which “every detail, including the Invisible” is set precisely in place (58). While attempting to impress upon their hosts that they have come to “observe the Sky,” Mason and Dixon are accosted with questions: “...this isn’t a pretext? To ‘observe’ anything more Worldly, --our Fortifications, Our Slaves,--nothing like that, eh?” (59). Ironically, Mason and Dixon’s dutiful observing of the heavens leaves them less capable of noticing certain sublunary injustices. While staying at the Cornelius home in Capetown, both Mason and Dixon are sexually teased by Cornelius’ wife and daughters (62-5). This flirtation appears designed to entice Mason or Dixon to impregnate one of their slaves, for as Austra explains, “All the Mistress prizes of you is your Whiteness” (65). This highly racialized, eugenics-tinged thinking permeates Mason and Dixon’s time in the Capetown. Cornelius, though unable to speak the native tongue, stays up at night and “tries to pay close Attention to the nuances of their speech” as he is convinced “the coming Armageddon of the races” approaches (63). But the murmurings and laughter of Cornelius’ slaves are not the only noises in the night. While ruminating on Johanna’s intent to thrust one of her slaves onto Mason, Dixon begins to hear the buried voice of injustice in the colony--the voice, indeed, of “ a Collective Ghost of more than household Scale, --the Wrongs committed Daily against the Slaves, petty and grave ones alike, going unrecorded, charm’d invisible to history” (68). While at the Cape, Dixon is momentarily privy to the long history of suffering by which he is surrounded. As one who attempts to “keep to the Margins,” Dixon stumbles upon the historical outcry of those repeatedly pushed off the edge of the margins of society. Unfortunately, this enlightenment is fleeting, and melts deep into Dixon’s subconscious upon departure from the Cape.

Framing the Zone of Colonial Violence

“...wounds bodily and ghostly, great and small, go aching on, not ev’ry one commemorated,--nor, too often, even recounted.”

Mason & Dixon

The interlocking structure of narrative voices and perspectives throughout *Mason & Dixon* creates what Brian McHale describes as “a set of Chinese boxes or Russian *matrushka* dolls” (50). This nested narrative, much like the card table, contains zones explicitly avoided, yet outlined so clearly one cannot fail to acknowledge their existence. In this sense, the presence of such a hidden compartment is known, but its contents remain buried. Whether these indiscernible zones concern time, or the capability of narrative memory, or the seeming inability to come to terms with racialized violence, either now or in the past, *Mason & Dixon* strives to outline, yet not reveal, that which history may conceal. The structure of the novel actively hides specific narrative perspectives, admitting that to appropriate the story of such disenfranchised voices would only continue the oppression of previous generations, and do violence to the particularities of any Other’s historical experience. Though Mason and Dixon set out to dissolve the unknown with maps and lines, certain spaces resist decipherment. The “Delaware Triangle” (323-24) or “Unseen World” (469-70) are both enclaves of the unknowable, spaces similar to the modern day Bermuda Triangle from whence one can only assume the “Delaware Triangle” receives its name. The lost eleven days when England adopts the Gregorian calendar, the “Theft of the People’s Time” (193), a stretch of days Captain Zhang forever questions “Where’d that Slice of Azimuth go? How will it be redeem’d?” demonstrates a “lost” or hidden portion of time that remains forever unseen (629). Even the Warrior Path constitutes a boundary which the narrative will not cross: “Distance is not the same here, nor is Time” (646-7). Cherrycoke imagines,

however, Mason and Dixon venturing beyond the Warrior Path to encounter certain undiscovered zones, mythical areas where subgroups coexist in peaceful harmony: “Cathedrals, Spanish Musick in the Streets, Chinese Acrobats and Russian Mysticks...” (708). Cherrycoke even foreshadows the Mason & Dixon line’s relation to slavery: “Thanks, Gentlemen! Slaves yesterday, free Men and Women today! You survey’d the Chains right off ‘em with your own!” (708). Spaces also abound which seem to conceal a depth or volume greater than their external size—the Jesuit coach for example, described as “a Conveyance, wherein the inside is quite noticeably larger than the outside” (354), or the Lepton Castle where “the Surveyors find more room inside than could possibly be contained in the sorrowing ruin they believ’d they were entering” (412). Such interiors are, as it were, hidden compartments within the fabric of this narrative universe, filled with people and things elsewhere undetectable. These areas indicate a fascination on the part of the novel with the unseen, the unknowable, or the impossible, all questions equally applicable to the structural capabilities of historical narrative as a whole.

Such historiographic ruminations permeate the entire novel. Mr. LeSpark, Tenebrae, Cherrycoke, and Lomax even have an explicit scene in which they discuss the narrativization of history. LeSpark takes Dr. Johnson’s view, arguing that “all History unsupported by contemporary Evidence is Romance” (351). Of course, all of *Mason & Dixon* seems bent on disproving this claim, or at the very least undermining any modicum of certainty one may have in such historiographic empiricism. Further argument intent on undermining the validity of such evidence can be seen in “Mr. Higgs,” the boatswain Mason and Dixon travel with to the Cape of Good Hope. In charge of the “[t]housand details, each nearly invisible, all working together” in the knot-tying of

the ship, Mr. Higgs grows an “Obsessedness as to Loose Ends” (55). Mr. Higgs the boatswain (pronounced “bo’s’n”), an obvious play on the Higgs-Boson, brings to light the interwoven and infinitely complex nature of reality and history. Strangely, at the time of *Mason & Dixon*’s publication, 1997, the Higgs-Boson, colloquially referred to as “the God particle,” was still only a hypothetical necessity in the standard model of subnuclear physics, and had not yet been found. The actual discovery a decade and a half later hammers home Pynchon’s intent even more firmly than at the time of his publication: perhaps things that one cannot see, things that “contemporary Evidence” fails to validate, are more than “Romance,” they are realities only waiting to be seen. Sometimes, the theoretical can contain more truth than the concrete. To return to LeSpark and Cherrycoke’s conversation, sometimes “Those *Henry* plays” or “the *Richard* ones” are more than “make-believe History” or “theatrical rubbish” (351). Sometimes the necessary fictions we create point towards a larger truth as yet unseen.

The decision to frame *Mason & Dixon* as a story recounted by Reverend Cherrycoke provides more historiographic potential than this single episode—it positions the entirety of the narrative both as a historical story and as a story about the crafting of history. As Cherrycoke explains in his *Christ and History*, “History can as little pretend to the Veracity of the one, as claim the Power of the other,--her Practitioners, to survive, must soon learn the arts of the quidnunc, spy, and Taproom Wit, --that there may ever continue more than one life-line back into a Past” (349). Embedded within a separate fictional text appended as an epigraph to a chapter, *Christ and History* embodies one of these multiple lifelines into the past. The addition of such paratexts throughout the novel, compounded with the framing narrative, allows *Mason & Dixon* not only to enact certain

historiographic shortcomings, but also to expose the generative potential such inadequate historiographies of “a great disorderly Tangle of Lines” may hold (349). Like other Pynchon novels, *Mason & Dixon* partially concerns itself with the narrative of the paranoiac, seeing all things as interwoven in some giant conspiracy. The rumored Sino-Jesuit alliance provides one such paranoiac example: with their “Marvel of instant Communication,” the Jesuits are able to avoid the strictures of “our greatest problem,” namely, “Time” (287). Such “commands of Time,” as Tenebrae explains to Ethelmer in a hushed tone, are made possible by the Jesuits’ “Wonderful Telegraph,” which “gives them [...] an Edge over the rest of Christendom” (528). This ability seemingly to circumvent the dictates of time places the Jesuits and their putative Chinese allies fully within the realm of conspiracy, or as Tenebrae says, “Somewhere, as some would say ineluctably, in this wealth-spangl’d Web, is a fateful Strand leading to the Society of Jesus” (528). This fear of a Jesuit plot to overthrow the Reformation reveals not only the growing anti-Catholic sentiments of the age, but also the desire within much of Western logic to be able to reduce any sequence of events to one interconnected weave of intentional causal progression.

As Cherrycoke’s argument in *Christ and History* reveals, however, the paranoiac vision provided by a historiography of a “Chain of single Links” (349) proves both too precarious, as “one broken Link could lose us All,” and too monolithic, as a single, fascistic link may declare itself indispensable and arrogate to itself all legitimacy and power. When Mason succumbs to certain paranoiac assumptions of the Dutch Trading Company “which is ev’rywhere, and Ev’rything,” Dixon argues against this perception, for “Mathematical Necessity” dictates that “routes of Escape, pockets of Safety,--

Markets that never answer to the Company, gatherings that remain forever unknown” must exist somewhere outside its reach (69). More clearly than in Pynchon’s previous novels, *Mason & Dixon* creates a world in which, while such conspiracies may seem to have concrete evidence on their side, “logick” would dictate that such webs of interrelation cannot be truly all-encompassing; always there are lives that slip through the cracks, certain voices that are pushed to the margins. A solution to this monolithic explanation lies in the “Tangle of Lines,” as any singular connective paradigm (such as Enlightenment colonialism), dissolves under the multitudinous pressures of reality.

Conceiving of history as a “tangle of lines” rather than a “chain of single links” need not be seen as merely surrendering to a postmodern resistance against totalizing structures, or a fraying into entropic chaos or vacuous relativism. More than the logical necessity of resisting a reading of history as a single strand, *Mason & Dixon* affirms the tangible value of conceptualizing history as a web, however tangled. Namely, these “pockets of safety” which compel Dixon to argue for a non-linear reading of history also have the positive power to shelter the voices, concepts, and ideas that combat the totalizing ontological structures of modernity. When Dixon “remembers” his descent into a separate world hidden in the hollow core of the earth, he recounts how the dwellers of this ethereal realm cautioned against the dissolution of such pockets of safety: “‘Once the solar parallax is known,’ they told me, ‘once the necessary Degrees are measur’d, and the size and weight and shape of the Earth are calculated inescapably at last, all this will vanish. We will have to seek out another Space’” (741).

Mason & Dixon can be seen, then, as illustrating the failure of totalizing narratives. Cherrycoke himself appears unwilling to fabricate the voice of another, as

such an act would rob agency. Cherrycoke admits “I’ve not found any of Mason’s Letters, tho’ there are said to be many about” (720). Ives encourages Cherrycoke to “Make something up then,” but Cherrycoke refuses, replying “Not when there exists, somewhere, a body of letters Mason really did write. I must honor that, mustn’t I, Brother Ives?” (720). Cherrycoke then continues, “Just because I can’t find them doesn’t mean they’re not out there” (720). Mason’s letters may have been lost to the history that he sets out to tell, but still Cherrycoke refuses to fill that unknowable gap with a voice that is not Mason’s own. Similarly, the “secret compartments” in which the Native American voice may dwell in certain ways constitute “pockets of Safety,” for Cherrycoke refuses to steal indigene voices through fully narrating the native presence. Such a narration would threaten to violate the autonomy of the Other.

This discussion of silencing or voicing the Other has become one of the continuously foundational challenges to Postcolonial thinkers, particularly to those interested in narrative. In her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Gayatri Spivak famously sets out the problems that plague speaking for the subaltern, arguing that “the intellectual is complicit in the persistent constitution of the Other as the Self’s shadow” (275). In this sense, narrating the Other does what Spivak terms “epistemic violence” to the subject of the Other. By epistemic violence I mean a violence based upon discourse, in which the descriptions and voices provided to the Other are not their own, but rather appropriations inevitably contaminated by the dominant ideology. To represent the indigene presence in *Mason & Dixon* would compress the subject of the Native American into the homogenized role of *the* Subject, while also painting the Other in the shades of “the Self’s shadow.” Most simply put, if Pynchon were to ventriloquize the subaltern in

Mason & Dixon more explicitly, such a discourse would do violence to her autonomy, as it would ascribe to her traits predicated on or dictated by the episteme that marginalized them in the first place. Pynchon then, avoids the primary problem that Spivak identifies in intellectual production: that it refuses to “abstain from representation” (285). *Mason & Dixon* does abstain from appropriating representation, but it also avoids resting upon such abstinence in a defeatist manner that implicitly fails to interrogate or resist hegemonic complacency. The presence of the subaltern in many ways undergirds the narrative structure of *Mason & Dixon*, drawing attention to her position in this society while avoiding appropriation of her story.

In his *Provincializing Europe*, Dipesh Chakrabarty, a colleague of Spivak’s from the *Subaltern Studies Group*, builds upon her idea of the role of the intellectual in creating the Other to argue that there must always be “two histories,” one which springs from the dominant ideology known as “History 1” and one which breaks through with the specific voice of the unique Other, known as “History 2.” This method of interrogating the narrativization of history is useful when looking at the absent presence of the Native American in *Mason & Dixon*. In the chapter entitled “The Two Histories of Capital” Chakrabarty combats the historicist modes of thought that predominate in theorizations of the economic development of the world: these narratives “all share a tendency to think of capital in the image of a unity that arises in one part of the world at a particular period and then develops globally over historical time” (45). While I am less interested in Chakrabarty’s focus on the histories of capital exclusively, his contestation of the capability of unified narratives to express the homologous development of any event over

historical time proves useful for considering the narration of history, even fictitiously, in a novel such as *Mason & Dixon*.

Chakrabarty's reading of Marx leads him to acknowledge how the history of capital "is not simply the calendrical or chronological past that precedes capital but the past that the category retrospectively posits" (62). Chakrabarty continues, "Marx gave this history a name: he called it capital's antecedent 'posited by itself'" (63). This reading of history, as inescapably informed by the positioning of the present, destabilizes what it is one may envision when discussing an "objective" history. In this sense, while *Mason & Dixon* may combat traditional monolithic narratives through an intentional absent presence, one must also be aware of the historical positioning of *Mason & Dixon* itself, which inevitably impacts its retelling of the past. This "past posited by capital itself as its precondition" is Chakrabarty's "History 1," opposed to which are other histories, "History 2s" that are, importantly, not antecedents established by History 1 (63).

Chakrabarty's History 1 can in many ways be seen as analogous to Cherrycoke's "chain of single links" (a continuous chain of causal progression from the past into the future) that leaves no room for a multiplicity of histories. The "tangle of lines," however, does not represent a History 2, for as Chakrabarty notes, "History 2s are [...] not pasts separate from capital; they inhere in capital and yet interrupt and punctuate the run of capital's own logic" (64). In this sense, then, History 2s in the context of the world of *Mason & Dixon* would be the heterogeneous counternarratives that would conceivably be voiced by the subaltern if it were possible to create an environment that would circumvent the problem Spivak notes with "giving" a voice. Rather, this "tangle of lines" is analogous to the narrative of *Mason & Dixon* itself, a narrative that need not be

“punctuated” by the History 2s so as to alert the reader to their presence, but one that instead provides certain “secret compartments” that function as “pockets of safety” for the multiplicity of histories the narrative acknowledges it cannot ethically tell.

As I have attempted to argue earlier, however, Mason and Dixon’s own “ontological paradigm” in the Butlerian sense, could be seen as developing out of a “History 1.” Keeping Cherrycoke’s “chain of history” in mind, Mason’s listening to the “collective ghost” of slavery and imperial injustice “charm’d and invisible to history” reveals an even more fruitful reading, for this ghost is described as “able not only to rattle Chains but to break them as well” (68). In this sense, the chorus of the “collective ghost” contains the heterogeneous multitudes of History 2s that can permeate and perhaps one day shatter the justifications for bondage whereby the colonizers oppress not only their slaves, but those who drive them as well:

The precariousness to Life here, the need to keep the Ghost propitiated, Day to Day, via the Company’s merciless Priesthood and many-Volum’d Codes, brings all but the hardiest souls sooner or later to consider the Primary Question more or less undiluted. Slaves here commit suicide at a frightening Rate,-- but so do the Whites, for no reason, or for a Reason ubiquitous and unaddress’d, which may bear Acquaintance but a Moment at a Time. (69)

The governing colonial structure at the Cape Town colony creates a “merciless priesthood” and “many-Volum’d Codes” to attempt to repress or ignore the constantly punctuating ghost of the imperial legacy. The myriad cacophonous voices of the victims

of injustice and hatred rise as a History 2 to rattle and even break the chains of the ontological paradigm—the History 1 of Western colonialism.

Starting with their time in South Africa, Mason and Dixon's own ontological paradigms begin to rattle. Throughout the rest of their journeys Mason and Dixon's reliance upon "logick" and "Reason" begins to crumble as they encounter "Indians" and discuss the legacy of British imperial expansion, when "the killing started,--some of you, some of us" (663). Cherrycoke's ability to tell this exchange only fictitiously betrays a deeper guilt underlying the myth of British colonial expansion. The Native Americans acknowledge that "Long before any of you came here, we dream'd of you" (663), but eventually it is the colonialist whose dreams are to be haunted by the violence of their expansion: "Now you begin to believe that we have come from elsewhere, possessing Powers you do not...Those of us who knew how, have fled into Refuge in your Dreams, at last. Tho' we now pursue real lives no different at their Hearts from yours, we are also your Dreams" (663). These statements emphasize the vast similarities between the Native American and British colonialist "at their Hearts," yet the only defense mechanism the colonial consciousness may fall back upon is a superstitious assumption that the natives must have "come from elsewhere," ideologically othering the native even more violently by assuming they must originate from an exotic plane of being. In this sense, any being that does not conform to the current ontological paradigm must be further exoticised into the realm of the otherworldly, robbed, as it were, of even their own humanity.

To a certain extent, *Mason & Dixon* would appear to be exploring a type of trauma affecting the perpetrators of violence rather than its victims. Cathy Caruth argues trauma constitutes "the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world" (4).

Seeing trauma as a breach in the experience of the self may help to elucidate the relative lack of discussion surrounding the violence against Native Americans in *Mason & Dixon*. The particular mode of framing with which the American colonies construct their ontological paradigm functions as more than a conscious denial of certain unsavory actions Western society has performed; these particular framings dialectically develop as unconscious reactions against traumatic events. The performance of such physical violence as the massacre by the Paxton Boys, in other words, does traumatic harm to the imperial enlightened identity. The colonial perspectives of the self, time, and the world are destabilized by acts of colonial violence, and the perpetration of such violence has forced the colonial cultural psyche into a constant reframing of their reality which renders not only the loss of Native American lives ungrieveable, but the entire actions of colonial violence unrecognizable in their terrible actuality--and unnarratable. Of course, this intellectual betrayal of the liberating concepts latent in much Enlightenment thought requires a further violence against the ontological paradigms of the West, twisting these philosophies intent on liberating humanity into perpetuating slavery.

When *Mason & Dixon* move forward ahead of their party to inspect a local native burial mound directly in the projected path of their line, they realize they are being followed by “the Third Surveyor” (604). This “Supernumerary Figure,” an “old Gentleman” described as a “Surveyor of Surveyors” who is “still resentful about his exile from the Infinite,” follows the party barely out of sight. “The best time for a Sighting seems to be at around Sunset...the Wind changing, here in Pennsylvania, as between this World and the Next” (605). To identify this “third surveyor” as a literal embodiment of Death may be jumping to a conclusion, but one must acknowledge that a certain spectre

appears to cast its shadow over the project of the Mason & Dixon line. As Professor Henry Voam realizes moments before the appearance of Death, the form of the line itself is “the same structure as a Leyden Battery,-- and, need I add, of a Torpedo” (600). Further description of the line as “the Cascade reversible, --the emitted Blast, being as easily directed Westward as East” and “a Pip of a Weapon” (601) emphasizes its violent nature, but also questions the direction this violence is headed--this weapon could be pointed eastward towards the realm of the colonist, as easily as it could towards the West and the Other. In this sense, Death does indeed follow along the path of the line, for, as a perfect metaphorical embodiment of the imperial agenda, Mason & Dixon’s artificial inscription of the line does violence to the land, its peoples, and its pasts.

Whether or not this apparition is a product of the surveyors’ imagination, a narrative embellishment inserted by Cherrycoke, or a literal ghost is indeterminable. The ambiguous nature of this haunting lends *Mason & Dixon* strength, as here the native voices inhabit both a register of psychological guilt and a literal haunting as the land resists the physical and ideological violence enacted through inscription of the Mason & Dixon line. Exploring the ambiguity of this haunting opens up questions concerning the relationship of Cherrycoke to this segment: did this haunting actually occur during Mason and Dixon’s journeys, or is it perhaps a narrative flourish by Cherrycoke intended to help illustrate for young Pliny and Pitt the growing guilt Mason and Dixon have begun to feel over the violence they have performed on the American land? Dixon’s violent reaction towards a slave owner after the conclusion of their journey (695) implies the process of inscribing the line has had an effect on his psychology, and Mason’s end in the narrative does seem to support a reading that the project of the line took a psychological toll,

especially his rash and nonsensical demand “We must go to America,” leaving behind his family and belongings (761). One must remember that upon hearing the “Collective Ghost” in South Africa, Mason “grows morose” while “Dixon makes a point of treating Slaves with the Courtesy he is never quite able to summon for their Masters” (69). Both Mason and Dixon, in a manner not fully known to them, have been visibly altered by their vague realization of the oppression and mistreatment of the New World by the colonial project. After the passing of Dixon at the end of the novel, Mason feels he must return to America, and finds that, much like Cherrycoke, “he cannot refrain from telling his Son bedtime stories about Dixon” (763). Only through reflexively narrating his past can Mason pay due reverence to history, and begin to come to terms with his own inaction. In this sense, the act of storytelling is therapeutic while it also attempts in some small way to pay penance for the wrongs of the past and one’s complicity with racialized oppression.

Cherrycoke visits his sister “only to pay his Respects” to the departed Mason yet “finds he cannot detach. Each day among his Devoirs is a visit, however brief, to Mason’s grave” (8). The act of narrating the past becomes “a way for him to be true to the sorrows of his own history..., a way of keeping them safe, and never betraying them” (316). In fact, Cherrycoke finds himself “convinc’d that ‘twas he who had been haunting Mason, --that like a shade with a grievance, he expected Mason, but newly arriv’d at Death, to help him with something” (8). It appears clear that Cherrycoke is not literally haunting Mason, but nevertheless Cherrycoke needs help in coming to terms with a story of the past that haunts him.

When one contemplates haunting in *Mason & Dixon*, Mason's dead wife Rebekah looms large in the mind as the most frequent apparition returning from the afterlife. Building from a reading of ghosts in *Mason & Dixon*, Daniel Punday argues that "Rebekah is not a figure that appears to make amends for her own life or to demand recompense from others, but instead a figure that appears so that Mason can speak and express guilt" (Punday 255). Indeed when Mason first encounters Rebekah, she does not ask for apologies or regret, but merely asks "What are you up to here, Charlie? What is this place?" (164). Afterwards, Mason asks Dixon what one's next course of action ought to be after conversing with one's deceased wife, to which Dixon simply replies, "Then thou must break thy Silence, and tell me somewhat of her" (166). Rebekah here serves as a crucial instigator of Mason's own story of guilt, one that helps him begin to come to terms with his past, and brings him closer to his new partner. In a similar manner, *Mason & Dixon*'s many storytellers seem to do so mostly for their own benefit, as a way to come to terms with their lived pasts, and less as a method to right some greater wrongs that haunt a specific place or person.

Upon realizing he needs the aid of Mason to "help him with something," Cherrycoke laments his "years wasted," labeling himself now "imbecile with age,--an untrustworthy Remembrancer for whom the few events yet rattling within a broken memory must provide the only comfort now remaining to him" (8). Why Cherrycoke needs the help of Mason is not explicitly resolved, but the scene's position directly preceding Cherrycoke's discussion of both his wasted years, and his self-indictment as "untrustworthy Remembrancer" cannot be entirely ignored. While many critics point to Cherrycoke's undermining of his own narrative validity as evidence of *Mason & Dixon*'s

metahistorical play—and this aspect is undoubtedly present—Cherrycoke’s guilt positioned directly before such ruminations also implies that he pursues Mason in an attempt to come to terms with his “broken memory” and its scattered stories. The undercurrent of sincerity in Cherrycoke’s preoccupation with haunting and being haunted betrays the assumption that the story he has to tell has more at stake than merely allowing him to stay and live off of his relatives for a few nights more. One must remember that Cherrycoke first visits his sister in order to attend Mason’s funeral, though he was “too late for the Burial,” and “has linger’d as a Guest” telling stories ever since (6). Ultimately, who haunts whom fails to resolve, and like Dixon’s watch that never needs winding, the end point of the narrative’s haunting is infinitely deferred to some other future, with telling the story to the best of one’s ability as the only brief salve available.

Inscribing the Line

Now everybody--
Gravity’s Rainbow

Mason & Dixon’s opening line reads “Snow-Balls have flown their Arcs, starr’d the Sides of Outbuilding...” (5). Of course the image of an arc is familiar to Pynchon readers, as the eponymous rainbow in *Gravity’s Rainbow* permeates his most famous novel. Many scholars see *Mason & Dixon* as a transition away from such metaphorical “arc” thinking and towards a fascination with the possibilities and restrictions imposed by a line. As Arthur Saltzman argues, “Whereas the primary shape of *Gravity’s Rainbow* is the arch [...] in *Mason & Dixon* it is the line. The line validates the surveyors’ unconflicted vision for the landscape” (64). One must grant the fascination with lines in *Mason & Dixon*, but perhaps a reevaluation of the arches throughout the narrative are in order. Tracing the movement of the celestial bodies casts arcs across the night sky (297),

as the latitudinal line which Mason and Dixon inscribe follows this movement similarly must arc around the curvature of the Earth. The Lepton Castle displays “a grand Archway, above which, carv’d in glowing pink Marble, naked Men, Women, and Animals writhe together in a single knotted Curve of Lustfulness” (413). Inside the castle a mysterious tub on “nearly Earth’s third Pole” attracts all objects to it “in a curious, as it seems *directed*, Arc” (425 italics in original). In episode 54 when Cherrycoke’s story is hijacked by Ethelmer and “the Captive’s Tale,” we are given an image-laden dream sequence with a bridge that holds “at the highest point of its Arch [...] a Troll-House” ruling over the right to traverse the bridge (529). And perhaps most importantly, when Dixon is transported down into the center of the “inner surface” hollow earth he crests “the great Curve of its Rim” (739).

These sequences mentioning arcs all transgress Enlightenment rationality on some level, whether through the flaunting of carnal human sexuality, or the blatant disregard for accepted scientific fact. Lines throughout *Mason & Dixon* are abstractions, constructions, and barriers. The abstraction of the Mason & Dixon line erases or perhaps ignores the unique qualities of the land itself, reducing all to artificiality, however “scientifick.” Emerson, when teaching Dixon how to survey, even goes so far as to teach his students how to fly, by which “one gains exactitude of Length and Breadth, only to lose much of the land’s Relievo, or Dimension of Height” (505). Dixon seems to have taken these lessons to heart, as his obsession with mathematical precision throughout the novel reveals a penchant to avoid the “bodily realities of up and down” when crafting the line (505). This insertion of altitude into the line’s conceptualization draws connections with the European notion of a deity. When discussing God with the Mohawks, “The

Indians all gesture, straight out the Line, West,” whereas Mason in reply “rather uncertainly indicates Up” (651). In Mason’s European conceptualization of the divine, God is elevated, looking down as one would on a map, seeing only lines and borders, devoid of dimension or height. In contrast, the Mohawk’s deity is always only over the horizon, living on the same land they are, perhaps even embodying the land itself.

The symmetry of the story also creates a type of narratological arc, as both Mason and Dixon’s journey to draw the line begins and ends with their encountering the echoes of a native presence. Like the trajectory of an arc, Mason and Dixon return to what they left from, yet they have changed, developed, and are in a different position physically and metaphorically. This recurrence of arcs couples with the discourse concerned with the project of inscribing a geometric abstraction onto the complexities of the earth in the first place. As Cherrycoke explains, in many ways the inscription of lines and borders is unsuccessful: Mason and Dixon assumed “that somehow the Arc, the Tangent, the Meridian, and the West Line should all come together at the same perfect Point,—where, in fact, all is Failure” (337).

I draw attention to the importance of the arc, however unemphasized it may be in the novel, to explore the interaction of differing assumptions, cultures, and worldviews. Those of the Native Americans, be they Susquehanna, Mohawk, or Iroquois, are obviously less privileged in Pynchon’s narrative. This lack of voice, however, functions on multiple registers to expose the sins of America’s forbears, while also attempting to remedy the ontological (and literal) violence of the past. In a counter-intuitive manner, Pynchon’s refusal to appropriate the voices of those disenfranchised by fledgling America actually provides a more generative narratology than if he had foregrounded

them. The Conestoga Massacre is powerfully resonant imagery for Pynchon in *Mason & Dixon*. Conestoga, synonymous with western migration, in many ways embodies the expansionist ideologies of manifest destiny and colonial America. Occurring in Lancaster County, the home of the Lancaster rifle described as “precise at long range, because of microscopick refinements in the Finish, the Rifling, the ease with which it may be held and aim’d” (663), the Conestoga Massacre assumes further resonance. The Mohawks see this rifle as a source of European powers that arise from the tiniest of minutiae, for those “who control the Microscopick, control the World” (663). The violence of the Paxton Boys sits at the intersection of all of these multiple forces incubating the infant America. While “microscopick” in its explicit historical impact (for it was neither the largest act of colonial violence, nor the most hotly protested), the Conestoga Massacre inhabits an outlined “secret compartment” in the narrative, one of the many tangled lines reaching through history, “arcing” over the artificially inscribed story of America’s past.

I have tried in this thesis to codify two types of silence that saturate *Mason & Dixon*. The first, and most common, is that of ignorance. Certain ontological frameworks throughout history have left many individuals unseeable as subjects in a sense comparable to that of the dominant class. Broadly speaking, and to varying degrees, these subjects can be considered subalterns. The second type of silence within *Mason & Dixon* I have argued acts more positively, creating certain narrative framings that leave “pockets of safety” for the heterogenous voice of the Other, refusing to impinge on her autonomy.

I have sought to avoid allowing this reading to appear as any kind of apologia for ideological paradigms that render the voice of the Other “unthinkable.” What I do wish to suggest, however, is that Mason and Dixon’s silence in relation to the subaltern can be a

productive silence. Remembering a time teaching as a graduate student, Trouillot questions “why would a black woman born and raised in the richest country of the late twentieth century be more afraid to talk about slavery than a white planter in colonial Saint-Domingue just days before rebellious slaves knocked on his door?” (72). Caribbean slave owners were not shy in discussing their slaves or the practice of slavery: rather, they were epistemically blind to the humanity of their slaves. In contrast, Mason and Dixon seem to be strangers in a strange land at times, resonating more with the contemporary perspective, as they rarely engage in direct discussion of subalterns themselves. Rather, Mason and Dixon spend more time listening to what their compatriots have to say about their slaves or the Native Americans, allowing the reader to codify the myriad viewpoints of the age. In this sense, rather than perpetuating a style of storytelling ignorant of the existence and importance of the subaltern, *Mason & Dixon* seems to go out of its way to demonstrate to the reader the different ways in which the subaltern was silenced during this particular historical moment.

Beyond the demonstrative aspect of this silence, the relative silence of the subaltern in *Mason & Dixon* also presents a certain narratological strategy for the contemporary global novel and its relation to alterity. The concept of “spaces unseen” as “pockets of safety” in postmodern fiction may be one viable solution to the challenges Gayatri Spivak brings to light in her “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Ventriloquizing the voice of the subaltern in storytelling would be nothing more than a continuation of imperial oppression and neocolonial appropriation. To avoid such epistemic violence, Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon* inaugurates the subaltern as the hidden foundation supporting the plot of the novel at every turn. In this sense, perhaps, *Mason & Dixon* provides a

“History 1” that intentionally leaves spaces for subaltern “History 2s” to arise and provide their own perspectives. The silent spaces in such fictions as *Mason & Dixon* provide room for other voices, creating a communal visualization of history in which all are encouraged to speak.

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