

**In my End is my Beginning**

Dialectical Images in Times of Crisis

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# **Los Alamos and its Contemporary 'Remains': Cormac McCarthy and William Eggleston**

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**Abstract** Los Alamos, New Mexico – a largely uninhabited desert area – became the site of the Manhattan Project, the federal programme launched during the Second World War to develop the atomic bomb. As a secret city and the ultimate symbol of US scientific, military and economic 'progress', Los Alamos also evokes the image of 'ultimate things'. This paper focuses on two great American authors who, through different media, have considered Los Alamos as a key to offering their own image of the contemporary landscape and its 'remains'; the writer Cormac McCarthy and the photographer William Eggleston.

**Keywords** Photography. Literature. Eggleston. McCarthy. Landscape. West. Remains. Image. Novel.

**Summary** 1 Vestiges of the Western World. – 2 The Faults of the Fathers. – 3 The Ultimate Things.

To all archaeologists, guardians of all ends.  
(Alice Rohrwacher, *La Chimera*, 2023)

One of the photographs included in one of William Eggleston's most important works, *Los Alamos* (2003), is called *Las Vegas*. The picture shows a horizontal white neon light, almost blinding and annoying to the eye. It illuminates part of the wall of a dark room, revealing part of a dark bed, a small white table, and a light-colored chair. On



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the coffee table are an old telephone, an ashtray and a napkin holder. The atmosphere is somber, and the piercing power of the cold neon light makes the room seem both sinister and austere. One can hardly imagine what the space is like and what lies beyond the bed and the lights. It could be a hotel or a hospital. There are no characters, no narrative, just the neon bar consisting of two lights that stare and question the viewer like barred eyes.<sup>1</sup>

The photograph reveals a deep sense of loneliness and restlessness. The same feeling is felt and visualized in the opening lines of Cormac McCarthy's latest novel, *Stella Maris* (McCarthy 2022b). The room Eggleston photographed could be one of the rooms in the Stella Maris psychiatric hospital where Alicia Western, the novel's protagonist, is being treated for schizophrenia. The entire development of the narrative revolves around the dialogue between Alicia and the psychiatrist, Dr. Wegner, in the clinic room where the patient will spend the last days of her life. The sister of Bobby Western, himself the protagonist of the previous novel, *The Passenger* (McCarthy 2022a), published a few months before *Stella Maris*, Alicia alludes several times to the figure of her father in her conversations with the psychiatrist. He participated as a scientist in the Manhattan Project, a federal program established during World War II to build the atomic bomb. The family lived for years in Los Alamos, a desert location in the state of New Mexico chosen by the government to house secret nuclear test laboratories.

Both William Eggleston and Cormac McCarthy, among the most influential contemporary American 'voices', have looked at Los Alamos in different ways to offer their personal narratives of the present: hallucinations, restlessness, shadows, and dreams populate their worlds and draw their plot lines. What dually emerges is a peculiar and disturbing sense of the end, of the 'ultimate'. Los Alamos, a symbol of U.S. military, economic, and political progress in the years since World War II, is taken up here in a metaphysical sense as a force of destruction, and art becomes a glimpse of the end. Through the analysis and a careful observation of their works, one wonders what is left of this world. The threat of nuclear power, the prevalence of individualism and consumerism leave traces in the

<sup>1</sup> William Eggleston (Memphis, 1939) is one of the best-known living American photographers. The first color photographer to have his work exhibited in a major museum (*Photographs by William Eggleston*, curated by J. Szarkowski, New York: MoMA, 1976), Eggleston became famous for choosing to print his photographs using the dye-transfer process, then used exclusively for advertising, in order to make the colors more vivid and the contrasts stronger. Apart from *Los Alamos*, some of his publications are: *William Eggleston's Guide*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1976; *Election Eve*. Washington: The Gallery, 1977; *The Democratic Forest*. Doubleday: New York, 1989; *William Eggleston, for Now*. Santa Fe: Twin Palms, 2010. See <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/757104>.

landscape and in the community. Literature and photography influence each other to make these traces visible and to build new narratives and archives of images, of contemporary 'remains'.

This essay aims to present the work of the two authors, their narratives of the contemporary world, and their unique ways of looking at Los Alamos as a symbol. In doing so, it proposes to suggest how these forms of expression – photography and literature – can be the starting point for a new 'visual and narrative alphabet'.

## 1 Vestiges of the Western World

– What is it? What is it?  
 Jack put the little toy on the table. – It is, – he  
 replied, – a magnifying glass.  
 Robby looked at it. – It's not very big.  
 – Well, you have to start somewhere.  
 – Start what?  
 – Looking for clues. Here. I think I have a stain on  
 the cuff of my shirt. What does it look like?  
 Robby looked at it with the little lens. – It just looks  
 like a stain to me.  
 Jack shrugged. – Well, there you go. Case closed.  
 (Robinson 2008, 244)

A stain on the cuff of a shirt. It could be an indication of something that happened, a reminder of a certain situation. Or it could be 'just a stain'. The child Robert's eye sees nothing more than a spot of color where Jack's sly adult eye could, in all likelihood, build a narrative from that detail. Now, imagine that instead of a magnifying glass, Jack gives the son of the Presbyterian minister of Gilead a camera. Would he, Robert, photograph the spot on his cuff, even if he thought it was 'just a spot'? Or would he have to think of it in relation to a story to photograph it?

Stains on asphalt, telephone wires, coke bottles, mannequins, paint cans are just some of the objects photographed by William Eggleston and collected in the masterpiece *Los Alamos*. Anonymous, banal things about which we know nothing except where they were 'found' and portrayed.

This work originated from a series of travels through the southern United States from 1964 to 1968 and then from 1972 to 1974. In 1973, Eggleston and his curator friend Walter Hopps were driving through New Mexico. They stopped in Los Alamos, a village near Santa Fe, where Eggleston decided to name his near-completed project after the secret town. Three years later, John Szarkowski organized the groundbreaking exhibition *Photographs by William Eggleston*

at the MoMA in New York. The publication of the exhibition's catalog, *William Eggleston's Guide* (1976), marked the beginning of the photographer's publishing career. Other important works followed, but it took almost thirty years before *Los Alamos* was published.<sup>2</sup>

If we think of other important photographic projects whose titles bear the name of a place - from William Klein's *New York* (1995) to Lewis Baltz's *San Quentin Point* (1986) - they consist entirely of photographs taken there. They thus become 'documents' of a particular place, city, or neighborhood. The case of Eggleston is different: none of the photographs that make up the project were taken in Los Alamos. There are images made in New Mexico, but the purpose is not to document the place chosen as the title. If Los Alamos is not a place to be documented or shown, why choose as a title the name of a place that so immediately evokes one of the darkest chapters of twentieth-century history?

That day in New Mexico, passing through the pinon woods of the Jemez Mountains, past the guard gates of the National Laboratory, Eggleston turned with a small smile and said, "You know, I'd like to have a secret lab like that myself". It seems clear from the investigations collected in *Los Alamos* that he already had found the key to his proper place of research. (Hopps in Eggleston 2003)

For Eggleston, Los Alamos was a place of transit, a part of a journey throughout the southern United States, but more importantly, it was the 'key' to his personal and artistic quest. His secret laboratory. His way of thinking and looking at the world, at reality. The enigmatic images are often presented in the book without titles, precisely to avoid a too direct reference to physical places. They take us on a journey through anonymous subjects and unidentified landscapes: whether it is a motel near Albuquerque or a grocery store in Memphis, what matters is not the reference to a geographical location,

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Weski, the editor of the first edition of the volume, had seen an excerpt of five or six images in a magazine called *Grand Street*. Hopps, who was the editor of the magazine, had written a brief introduction, which would later be included as the preface in the 2003 edition. After seeing these radically new and revolutionary images - even compared to the *Guide* (Eggleston 1976) - Weski began visiting Eggleston at his home in Memphis to learn more about this still-unknown work. He discovered that Eggleston had made a large number of photographs from the color negatives. He had left the negatives with Hopps to be processed later. However, Hopps died of a sudden heart attack shortly thereafter, and no one knew about the project or the whereabouts of the negatives. Weski reports that some of the negatives were eventually found, and a selection was made for dye transfer printing. They were divided into groups by Eggleston himself and his gallerist Howard Read to be sold separately as portfolios. Taken together, they would make up the entire Los Alamos project. The entire series was first shown to the public at the Ludwig Museum in Cologne - where the volume was produced - and the work was exhibited in several European and American institutions.

but rather the desire to make visible a given reality through a story, a narrative in images.<sup>3</sup> As the artist claims:

the series of photographs is like a novel. If a person went slowly through that body of work, it would be roughly like reading a novel. (Ferris 2013, 249)

In this sense, as will become clearer later on, this work constitutes an interesting parallel with McCarthy's novels: both move from the epistemological need to understand reality and the desire to represent it adequately. Through their works, they both represent one of the most vivid 'geographical imaginaries' of the United States of America: a concatenation of non-places, fragmented spaces that do not allow the establishment of an identity. How does one represent a fragmented reality to which the author's point of view will always remain partial? Photography and literature use real facts and places and return them as 'artificial' realities through an always singular point of view: the goal is to reveal some truth about the world. In photography, light becomes the creator of 'fictions', color associations produce 'abstractions', and often the truth lies in the shadow, in what is hidden or outside the frame of the image. The shadow plays a central role in Eggleston's photographs. Consider, for example, his first color photograph, titled *Memphis*, which shows a grocery store clerk pushing shopping carts to collect them outside the store.<sup>4</sup> He is wearing a white short-sleeved shirt and a light gray apron covering his legs. He is portrayed in profile, with his left arm extended over the carts. White skin, short hair in a top knot, very reminiscent of the iconic figures of the time, from Elvis to James Dean. Formally, the shot is slightly tilted from top to bottom: in the background, the blurred image of a woman wearing black sunglasses and, above all, the boy's shadow on the white wooden wall of the shop. Next to it, the shadow of the photographer. If we were to isolate the upper left part of the photograph, we would have a kind of negative of the whole image. The photographer's shadow, which recalls one of the characteristic stylistic elements of his friend Lee Friedlander,<sup>5</sup> rep-

<sup>3</sup> We know only from the curator's note that the proposed journey in Los Alamos includes the center of his world - the city of Memphis and the mysterious Mississippi Delta - but it also traces his westward movement from New Orleans to Las Vegas and Southern California, ending at the Santa Monica Pier in Los Angeles.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://tinyurl.com/9hufcv24>.

<sup>5</sup> Lee Friedlander (Aberdeen, 1934) is an American photographer among the most important of his generation in the field of street photography. His work was exhibited in 1963 at the George Eastman House in Rochester and in 1967 in the major exhibition *New Documents* curated by John Szarkowski at MoMA in New York. In his photography, the shadow plays a fundamental role as it interrogates the photographer's 'presence' in

resents, as Ugo Mulas masterfully states in *Verifica 2*, “the obsession to be present, to see myself as I see myself, to participate, to include myself” (Mulas 1973).

Every photograph is the result of this ‘being in the world’, of being present, of seeing and being seen: the camera is the point of contact between what is in front of us and the photographer, between reality and the observer.

But in Eggleston’s case, the shadow goes beyond this desire for ‘authorship’: it is an extension of the subject, its appendage and ‘spirit’. The shadow becomes a ‘character’,

it has as much presence as the body. But the shadow acquires this presence only because it escapes from the body, it is itself a body that has escaped through a precise point. (Deleuze 2004, 41)

The shadow pushes, forcing the subject out of itself and out of the representable. Take, for example, another photograph in Los Alamos, *Mississippi*:<sup>6</sup> it shows a faucet attached to a brick wall in an outdoor setting. It is not so much the banal object that attracts attention, but rather its shadow. Or better said, the faucet is inseparable from its shadow, it is ‘made visible’ by the presence of the shadow, just as Francis Bacon’s figures, according to Deleuze’s reading, become optical thanks to the *malerisch* shadow.<sup>7</sup> A shadow that escapes from the body, leading the viewer’s gaze elsewhere.

Eggleston’s photography works on ‘decentering’, constructing compositions that move the *punctum* to ever different and ‘unstable’ places in the image. The mystery that his photographs conceal lies in this instability, which is absolutely desired, which disorients and attracts the viewer, challenging his imagination. The photographer constructs a narrative through small clues, hidden details and athletic shadows. The people portrayed are always anonymous, there is never a trace of empathy or knowledge of the subjects, even when they are friends. The objects are absolutely ordinary and banal; clear blue skies alternate with rainy, gray, almost post-apocalyptic landscapes.

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the image. His publications include: *The American Monument*. New York: Eakins Press, 1976; *Letters from the People*. New York: DEP, 1993; *Lee Friedlander*. San Francisco: Fraenkel Gallery, 2000; *The Little Screens*. San Francisco: Fraenkel Gallery, 2001; *New Mexico*. Santa Fe: Radius Books, 2008; *America by Car*. San Francisco: Fraenkel Gallery, 2010; *Signs*. San Francisco: Fraenkel Gallery, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://tinyurl.com/3vpevhbj>.

<sup>7</sup> “And here, at the very moment when the form loses its tactile character, a purely optical world tends to break out. Now it is the light that gives the form a purely optical and airy, disaggregating clarity; now, conversely, it is the *malerisch* shadow, the darkening of the color, that overwhelms and dissolves the form, severing all its tactile connections” (Deleuze 2004, 204).

As if everything, every bottle, every landscape, every sign, is waiting for the end, for an explosion. The photographs create a distance from reality and refer to it with greater force, evoking both violence and mystery.<sup>8</sup> They transcend a specific place and time to open up to an idea of a fading West, of which perhaps only a 'story' remains. The gaze is not nostalgic: it searches for some truth in the objects of consumption, in the detritus of a broken Western civilization. Like the landscape of *The Road* (McCarthy 2006), littered with the material remains of an archaeology of consumer society, the sites of *Los Alamos* are filled with 'consumer waste'. Now part of the landscape itself, they constitute contemporary fossils, the ultimate things of our civilization. Eggleston's narrative framework, like McCarthy's, takes the form of a kind of salvage mission,

an archaeological - and epistemological - quest [capable of] unearthing the submerged wreckage of Western civilization - the removed corpses, the horrors that the mind and history have tried to forget. (Simonetti 2023, n.p.)

In this sense, the photographer, like an archaeologist, has made visible in the landscapes of the South the signs of the imminent disappearance of our civilization. The gaze becomes a means of reading the world and revealing its common hidden traces, unseen and often denied by recent history. The sense of the end imbued in these landscapes cannot help but challenge the idea of History, which sees in Los Alamos one of its darkest chapters. "All recent history is about death" (McCarthy 2022b, 72); in McCarthy's latest novels, the collective history blurs with the individual history and opens up new, disarming questions.

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<sup>8</sup> The artist's last exhibition, organized at C/O in Berlin between 2022 and 2023, was accurately titled *The Mystery of the Ordinary* (cf. Eggleston 2023).

## 2 The Faults of the Fathers

You grew up in Los Alamos.  
 Yes, we lived there until my mother died. Well. She  
 actually died in Tennessee.  
 Do you remember Los Alamos?  
 Yes. Of course.  
 How old were you when you left?  
 Eleven.  
 Eleven.  
 Yes.  
 What was it like?  
 Los Alamos.  
 Yes.  
 During the war I think it was pretty primitive.  
 Supposedly there were eight thousand fire  
 extinguishers and five bathtubs. And endless mud.  
 (McCarthy 2022b, 63)

Born in Los Alamos on what is known as Boxing Day, the day after Christmas, Alicia Western is the protagonist of McCarthy's latest novel, *Stella Maris*. The mother, originally from Tennessee, gave birth to her daughter in that endless mud and remains a secondary character throughout the story. The character of the father, on the other hand, appears several times in both Alicia's stories at the Stella Maris mental hospital and in those of Robert - known as Bobby, Alicia's brother and the protagonist of the first novel in the diptych, *The Passenger*. Both Alicia and Bobby were strongly influenced by the figure of the father. He worked with Oppenheimer and several important scientists on the experiments for the atomic bomb and he continued studying and experimenting, even after Hiroshima and the end of the Manhattan Project. Perhaps this is why Alicia is a mathematical genius, and why Bobby also tried to make his way in the hard sciences. But the burdens of their past are too heavy: Alicia ends up with schizophrenia, and Bobby decides to take up motor racing in Europe and then diving in New Orleans.

I suppose you want to know if he [the father] felt guilty about building the bomb. He didn't. But he's dead. And my brother is brain-dead and I'm in the nuthouse. (McCarthy 2022b, 61)

Wracked with guilt and secretly in love, Alicia commits suicide in the clinic on Christmas Day - the opening image of *The Passenger* - and Bobby, recovering from the car accident that left him in a coma, can only run away. Escape the memories, the guilt, the places and the past.

As stated by Sheddan, Bobby's close and 'criminal' friend:



Today I met a man named Robert Western whose father attempted to destroy the universe and whose supposed sister proved to be an extraterrestrial who died by her own hand and as I pondered his story, I realized that all which I took to be true regarding the soul of man might well stand at naught. (McCarthy 2022a, 156)

Since childhood, Alicia has been visited by groups of characters, as she calls them, headed by the Thalidomide Kid: in an absolutely brilliant way, McCarthy builds the rhythm of *The Passenger* by alternating descriptions of Alicia's hallucinations with accounts of Bobby's mysterious affairs. The brother hangs out with characters on the fringes of society who are not hallucinations but have something in common with his sister's hallucinations: they are rejects, oddballs, drunks, outcasts criminals. They are only 'seen' by Bobby, and only dialogued with Bobby. As in all McCarthy's novels, the narrative unfolds visually: each character, object, or setting is described 'from the outside'. We can easily imagine Bobby walking through the streets of New Orleans toward Galatoire's, the historic restaurant where he will meet his transgender friend Debussy for one of the novel's most passionate dialogues, but it is difficult, if not impossible, for us to understand what he is thinking. It is a 'petrified' humanity, as Baricco writes in the introduction to *Trilogy of the Frontier* (McCarthy 2015), that has much in common with Eggleston's humanity, both visually and socially: the friend portrayed naked in a red-walled motel room a few days before his death from an overdose could be one of the protagonists of McCarthy's novels.

Alicia and Bobby are also characters on the margins: their controversial incestuous love fuels their image of madness and misunderstanding. Where does Alicia's madness come from? And Bobby's loneliness? The two brothers in love are the 'children of the bomb', of nuclear experiments. They carry on their shoulders the faults of their father, who, like Nazi hierarchs or doctors, put his intelligence at the service of the political and military power of the United States.

You don't think your father lost any sleep over the bomb.

My father didn't sleep before the bomb and he didn't sleep after. I think most of the scientists didn't give that much thought to what was going to happen. They were just having a good time. They all said the same thing about the Manhattan Project. That they'd never had so much fun in their lifes. (McCarthy 2022b, 62)

The amused scientists in Los Alamos offered their experience and know-how in the service of the bomb and destruction. The end of the world. Hiroshima and Nagasaki, together with Auschwitz, are the events that marked the beginning of the end of the West, from which the West has never recovered.

Alicia claims that the Manhattan Project was a major historical event and that the making of the atomic bomb “compete with the discovery of fire and language” (McCarthy 2022b, 62).

The question, then, is: what is History for McCarthy? And, consequently, what does Los Alamos – and the entire West – represent in this conception of history?

History is not a thing.

Well said. If problematic. History is a collection of paper. A few fading recollections. After a while what is not written never happened. (McCarthy 2022a, 371)

As in other novels, most notably *The Road* (2006), which won him the 2008 Pulitzer Prize, History is what the world is made of, the paper on which the past has deposited his images. Only in the present, in the time ‘filled with now’, we can judge and choose what to remember and how to remember it. History is storytelling, non-linear narrative, interweaving discursiveness: we read in *The Crossing*,

There is never an end to telling. [Storytelling] is not itself a category, but rather the category of all categories, for there is nothing outside its boundaries. Everything is a story. (McCarthy 2015, 234)

But every story, as Giorgio Agamben argues, is “the memory of the loss of fire” (2023, 206). What the narrative tells, the story, is loss and forgetting. “We carry the fire” (McCarthy 2008, 87), the father argues to reassure his son in the scenario of *The Road*, where everything seems lost forever and where the only prevailing law is that of violence and survival.

The question is, then, what will be the legacy of these collections of papers for future generations, and whether there is any possibility of a re-writing of history.

Where do you imagine all this is going?

I’ve no idea.

I think I have some idea. I know that you think we’re very different, me and thee. My father was a country storekeeper and yours a fabricator of expensive devices that make a load noise and vaporize people. But our common history transcends much. I know you. I know certain days of your childhood. All but weeping with loneliness. Coming upon a certain book in the library and clutching it to you. Carrying it home. Some perfect place to read it. Under a tree perhaps. Beside a stream. Flawed youths of course. To prefer a world of paper. Rejects. But we know another truth, don’t we Squire? And, of course, it’s true that any number of these books were penned in lieu of burning down the world – which was the

author's true desire. But the real question is: are we few the last of lineage? Will children yet to come harbor a longing for a thing they cannot even name? The legacy of the world is a fragile thing for all its power, but I know where you stand, Squire. I know that there are words spoken by men ages dead that will never leave your heart. (McCarthy 2022a, 154-5)

The words that will never leave Bobby's heart are the story that Bobby will hold. "The fire that can only be told, the mystery that has been integrally deliberated in a story, now takes our word, has locked itself forever in an image" (Agamben 2023, 211). What remains is an *image*. "She knew that in the end you really can't know. You can get hold of the world. You can only draw a picture" (McCarthy 2022a, 318). It is in the image that literature and photography combine to offer access to new alphabets of seeing, maps that allow for a new orientation in the contemporary darkness.

### 3 The Ultimate Things

Eggleston's *Los Alamos* closes with a photograph that has become iconic: part of a dark car in the foreground, behind which are two African American women and a child, suggesting three different generations of the same family. Taken in profile, the three figures look toward the horizon. Behind them, the ocean.<sup>9</sup>

We certainly cannot reduce this photograph to a trivial thought that is both nostalgic and hopeful about the future of the United States and the West. What at first glance appears to be a reference to Pictorial Romanticism and American photographic pictorialism is muted and negated by the presence of the dark car and shiny wheel, which impose themselves on the eye and push the human figures into the background. Eggleston's cars, wires, neon signs, and cokes have become part of the symbolism of the recent American past. The same thing happened to the previous generation with the photographs of Walker Evans, not coincidentally one of Eggleston's main references. As John Szarkowski points out in the afterword to Evans' volume *Message from the Interior*,

the hand-lettered promises on empty shopfronts, the stoic, non-committal faces, the tattered movie posters, the anonymous facades of forgotten builders - these things all shown with perfect clarity, with nothing hidden except their ultimate meaning - have helped define the American's sense of his past and his problem. (Szarkowski in Evans 1966, 36)

<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/757119>.

The sense of the American past, constantly questioned, sometimes deliberately constructed because of the 'lack' of a solid national memory,<sup>10</sup> approaches the sense of the future, the legacy left to children, to future generations.

The West is the land of sunset, of self-destruction. Of consumerism and capitalism. It is no coincidence that Bobby and Alicia's surnames are Western. The two siblings carry on their shoulders the weight of the United States and the whole West, of previous generations that tried to burn, to destroy, to consume the planet. They carry the racism, the social divisions, the violence and the abuse of their parents. As writer Nicola Lagioia writes, "if you want to hear an era, listen to the voices in the rooms where mental distress is treated" (Lagioia 2022, n.p.).

In Alicia's voice we hear the weight of guilt, the living horror of the world, the astonishing clarity about the events of the last century:

Because I knew what my brother did not. That there was an ill-contained horror beneath the surface of the world and there always had been. That at the core of reality lies a deep and eternal demonium. All religions understand this. [...] And that to imagine that the grim eruptions of this century were in any way either singular or exhaustive was simply a folly. (McCarthy 2022b, 152)

Just as in the other novel that deals directly with the idea of the end, *The Road*, it was instead the voice of the child who "carries the fire" (McCarthy 2006, 87) that represented hope, the possibility of a life 'to the south', beyond the horror of this incinerated world.

The world's a deceptive place. A lot of things that you see are not really there anymore. Just the after-image in the eye. So to speak. (McCarthy 2022a, 318)

What is an *after-image*? A remnant image? The image that 'remains'?

Everything we see in Eggleston's photographs and through McCarthy's novels is an 'after-image'. The landscapes and objects that dot their worlds are both 'still' and 'no longer': they are fading scenarios. The tension of McCarthy's narrative to 'show', to make characters and environments visible, intersects with Eggleston's

<sup>10</sup> Consider, for example, Edward Curtis's masterful photographic work *The North American Indian Project*, produced in the early twentieth century and published in five volumes. The project aimed to document the ceremonies, beliefs, customs, daily life, and leaders of Native Americans before they 'vanished'. It was funded, in addition to Theodore Roosevelt, by Pierpont Morgan, an American financier and investment banker who controlled most of the railroad system. He who had first invested in 'civilizing' and 'removing' the Indians from American territory, thereafter funded the photographic expedition to 'save the Indians from oblivion' and build a peaceful national image. See Goetzmann 1996, 83-91.

desire to 'narrate', to make photography a new language. On the one hand, the story that is 'reduced' to an image, on the other hand, the image that becomes a story. An ultimate image and at the same time an image of ultimate things, in which the past converges with the present. Photography and narrative become a method of deduction for discovering things, capable of bringing back to life - as an archeology - something one would like to have lost, invisible, abandoned. In this sense, the subjects of Eggleston's photographs, everyday, mundane, never really observed, only consumed, do not refer to the mythical and nostalgic past of the South, but are the cipher of contemporary contingency. They transcend the merely 'descriptive' and documentary, revealing instead the universality hidden in the detail, waste, and detritus of contemporary consumer culture. Eggleston's world, like McCarthy's - both from Tennessee - is one of alienated people, where relationships are increasingly complex and unbridled consumption dominates everyday life. What he calls "democratic photography" (Eggleston 1989, 171) goes beyond treating an everyday subject as a capital event: the 'democratic gaze' is another way of looking at things. It is the decision to 'duck down' and take the perspective of a child, a dog, a homeless person.<sup>11</sup> To show the scenes, the objects, as they might appear to another gaze - while belonging to the eye of a white American male raised in a family of landowners originally from Mississippi, with African American servants at home and an unbridled passion for guns. "Losing face", in Deleuze's words, acquiring a clandestinity (Deleuze, Parnet 1998, 52).

"Reconstructing worlds from their remains: this program is literary before it is scientific" (Rancière 2016, 47): through the residual images, the remnants and traces of disappearing landscapes, art can think about reconstructing worlds. 'Still' natures are what remains, what is still, what lasts. Whether it is a glass, a tube of barbecue sauce, or a snot leaning against the railing. Or the shadow of an ordinary faucet.

And the ultimate image that becomes the first of the 'reconstructed' world is the image of love. The only way to rewrite history, to revise it, without overcoming it. In Alicia's cosmic pessimism, with seemingly no way out, the only movement still possible is that of 'escape'. "On the lines of escape there can be only one thing: experimentation-life" (Deleuze, Parnet 1998, 43). It is never an escape in art - if anything, it is an escape from art. "To escape, on the contrary, is to produce the real, to create life, to find a weapon" (Deleuze, Parnet 1998, 44). In a world riddled with violence, horror, and disease, the

<sup>11</sup> "The title refers to my method of photographing - the idea that one could treat the Lincoln memorial and an anonymous street corner with the same amount of care, and the resulting two pictures would be equal, even though one place is a great monument and the other might be a place you'd like to forget" (Eggleston 1989, 171).

ultimate weapon for McCarthy is love: this, his testament, his ultimate 'escape', the shadow that potentially accompanies every human being and reveals his presence, his being-here.

I wanted him to see the truth of his situation.

That he was in love with you.

Yes. Bone of his bone. Too bad. We were like the last on earth. We could choose to join the beliefs and practices of the millions of dead beneath our feet or we could begin again. Did he really have to think about it? Why should I have no one? Why should he? I told him that I'd no way even to know if there was justice in my heart if truth that has no resonance. Where is the reflection of your worth? And who will speak for you when you are dead? (McCarthy 2022b, 163)

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