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Department of American Culture and Literature

"WHERE'S THE ALL-AMERICAN COWBOY?": THE DEMYTHOLOGIZATION OF AMERICAN MASCULINITY IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S WESTERN NOVELS

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Ph.D. Dissertation

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ABSTRACT

Yaşayan, Vahit. *"Where's the All-American Cowboy?": The Demythologization of American Masculinity in Cormac McCarthy's Western Novels,* Ph.D. Dissertation, Ankara, 2020.

This dissertation analyzes Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West* (1985), *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994), and *Cities of the Plain* (1998), and scrutinizes his portraits of cowboy masculinity. In these Westerns, McCarthy engages with the implicit realities of the American West, a legacy that is still exalted and eulogized by American men. He exposes the deep crisis at the heart of frontier myths, and uses the failing cowboy figure as a critique of mainstream American culture that still positions white men in relation to cowboy masculinity. His cowboys are threatened by industrialization and exploitive schemes that cut them off from freedom and the individualism they need to survive. However, above all, they are paralyzed by the conflict between the masculine space of the frontier and the feminine responsibilities of civilization. McCarthy's western novels address this ordeal, unraveling the struggles of a certain class of American men—mostly white, middle-class, Christian and heterosexual—to exemplify the trappings of increasingly anachronistic masculine signifiers, and to explore the degree to which their perception of manhood has legitimized and, at the same time, confined them, while dehumanizing and objectifying others. By drawing on insights from Masculinity Studies, this dissertation examines how McCarthy's western novels explore male subjectivity, and destabilize and demythologize American masculinity. McCarthy stresses that American men, who are already caught between their own values and their homosocial performances, have to abandon their toxic, misogynistic, homophobic, racist, anti-environmentalist, and violent ideas of cowboy masculinity, and embrace a more inclusive one. The key to survival in this vexed post-West world turns out not to be adherence to the old regional myths and conventions—no matter how attractive that might seem—but instead, a turn towards healthier masculinities.

Keywords: Cormac McCarthy, Masculinity Studies, Western, Post-Western, Cowboy, Toxic Masculinity, Ecomasculinity.

ÖZET

Yaşayan, Vahit. *"Nerede O Eski Amerikan Kovboyları?": Cormac McCarthy'nin Western Romanlarında Amerikan Erkekliğinin Mitsellikten Arındırılması,* Doktora Tezi, Ankara, 2020.

Bu tez, Cormac McCarthy'nin *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West* (1985), *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994) ve *Cities of the Plain* (1998) romanlarını inceleyerek yazarın kovboy erkekliği betimlemelerini çözümlemeyi amaçlamaktadır. McCarthy, yazdığı western romanlarında ABD'deki erkeklik kültürünün/yapısının/zümresinin bir kültürel miras olarak gördüğü ve günümüzde de yücelterek övmeye devam ettiği Amerikan Batısı'nın örtülü gerçeklikleri ile ilgilenir. McCarthy sınır mitlerinin temelindeki derin krizi açığa çıkarır ve beyaz erkekliği kavramını hala kovboy erkekliği ile özdeşleştiren egemen Amerikan kültürünü eleştirmek için başarısız (ve kaybolmakta) olan kovboy figürünü kullanır. Romanlarındaki karakterler var olmaları için ihtiyaç duydukları bireycilikten ve özgürlüklerinden kendilerini uzaklaştıran sanayileşme ve sömürücü düzenlerden dolayı köşeye sıkışmıştır. Bundan da öte, sınır mekanının erkeksi doğası ve uygarlığın kadınsal sorumlulukları arasındaki çatışmadan dolayı deyim yerindeyse felç olmuşlardır. McCarthy'nin western romanları bu sınanmayı irdelerken, belirli bir sınıftaki—çoğunlukla beyaz, orta sınıf, Hristiyan ve heteroseksüel—erkeklerin mücadelesini ortaya koyup, bu erkeklerin artık zamanı geçmiş/unutulmaya yüz tutmuş erkeklik tanımlamalarını örneklendirir. Erkeklik Çalışmaları Alanı, Cormac McCarthy'nin western romanlarının erkeklik öznelliğini nasıl incelediğini ve Amerikan erkekliğini nasıl mitsellikten arındırıp, istikrarsızlaştırdığını anlamayı mümkün kılar. McCarthy kendi değerleri ve homososyal performansları arasında kalmış Amerikalı erkeklerin zehirli, kadın düşmanı, homofobik, ırkçı, çevre karşıtı ve şiddet yanlısı kovboy erkekliklerinden vazgeçip daha sağlıklı bir erkeklik benimsemek zorunda olduklarını vurgular. Batı uygarlığı sonrası olarak tanımlanan dünyanın sorunsallarında hayatta kalmanın koşulu köhneleşmiş bölgesel mitler ve geleneklere bağlanmayıp, sağlıklı erkekliklere yönelmektir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Cormac McCarthy, Erkeklik Çalışmaları, Western, Post-Western Kovboy, Zehirli Erkeklik, Ekoerkeklik.

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Where is my lonely ranger?
Where have all the cowboys gone?"

Paula Cole, "Where Have All the Cowboys Gone?" (1996)

The Western, in both literature and film, has been a key genre through which authors, scholars, artists, and filmmakers have established standards of American masculinity and male identity. The issues that Westerns have addressed—nationalism, honor, family, politics, and capitalism—all intersect with masculinity. Westerns have appeared in American literature since the late nineteenth century, and in all of the variations of this genre, manliness remains a focus. The image remains unchanged in all of these numerous versions: a lonesome cowboy packing a revolver, riding a horse, hat pulled down, close around the eyes, emerging out of a landscape from which he seems inseparable. Many Americans have celebrated this stark simplicity of the genre. In fact, it has easily become one of American culture's most adored myths, formulated and consolidated for generations of Americans by popular dime novels and Western movies. It has formed the very backbone of national identity in the United States, with a persistent obsession with masculinity that marks the whole genre.

Numerous cultural and historical figures have emerged from this genre, including lawmen (Wyatt Earp and Pat Garrett), outlaws (Billy the Kid and Jesse James), and Native American leaders (Black Hawk, Cochise and Tecumseh). Nevertheless, the most indispensable element of Westerns is the cowboy. Promoted and mythologized during the late nineteenth century, the cowboy became an enduring icon in the twentieth century through fiction, film, television, and advertising. The mythic cowboy has come to symbolize a whole range of masculine values, including honor, physical prowess, and

rugged individualism.[1] As Bret Carroll argues in *American Masculinities* (2003), in novels such as Owen Wister's *The Virginian: Horseman of the Plains* (1902), Zane Gray's *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912), Harold Bell Wright's *When a Man's a Man* (1916), Louis L'Amour's *Hondo* (1953), and Larry McMurtry's *Horseman, Pass By!* (1962), as well as through the silent film star William S. Hart, the actor John Wayne, and the Marlboro Man, the cowboy has come to embody the image of a rugged and authentic "all-American" masculinity (114).

Indeed, the roots of the Western genre trace back to James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo as a mythic hero whose voice is the principal representative of frontier ideology and heroic masculinity in *The Leatherstocking Tales* (1823–1841). Natty Bumppo is a rugged man who is bound to nobody and owns nothing to his community. Yet, Cooper's heroes must adapt their masculinity to the harsh conditions of the wilderness. The other white settlers, on the other hand, often fail to accommodate to the wilderness, and are wiped out. In *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), for example, the English and French armies are "swallowed up by nature to emerge as scattered remnants" because of the extreme environmental conditions (234). Such early frontier heroes achieved their status and performed masculinity through a mastery of hunting, the acquisition of survival abilities, and application of these skills to the conquest of the frontier. These characteristics reappear in nineteenth- and twentieth-century western novels and films.

In Owen Wister's *The Virginian: Horseman of the Plains* (1902), the first full-length western novel, the mythic cowboy continues the westward movement in literature that originated with Bumppo. Wister idealizes a man that through his skill with and connection to horses, blends the horseman's image with the American cowboy's physical strength, toughness, and aggressiveness. As Wister describes him in his introduction, "his wild kind has been among us always" (xix). In Wister's novel, the protagonist naturally and providentially finds himself in the West. He belongs in the

[1] Even though the term "cowboy" means a man whose job is to look after cows on a ranch in the United States, the cow's female sex suggests a paradox within the name "cowboy." We do not attribute masculine values such as honor, physical prowess, courage, and assertiveness to cows, but we do to cowboys, who are also, incidentally, called boys and not men.

West partly because the East has been civilized, and this kind of man needs not only space, but also a conflict to realize his masculine identity. He belongs in the West because it needs men strong enough to enforce justice in a lawless environment. Like Natty Bumppo, he too promotes the civilizing process by using his "wildness" as a means to an end. The Virginian is a "survivor," having wandered since the age of fourteen (45), and he is in control of himself, a stoic who knows his place, his role and his abilities in the wilderness. His masculine status is always his norm and of those he represents. "You have got to be the man all through this mess" (284), he tells Molly as they struggle to recover from an antagonist's blow, for their marriage is possible only after he defeats the forces of evil. Similar to Bumppo, the Virginian's redeeming action requires violence. The marriage act itself symbolizes the union of the frontier and the civilized East, but the union would be pointless were it not for the accomplishments, pleasant or otherwise, of the cowboy. His success at the end of the novel validates his role as a cultural icon, becoming an enduring part of the American cowboy mythology.

Like *The Virginian*, Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912) also established the prototype for the western novels of the twentieth century. The novel conforms to the classic pattern of a violent redeemer comparable to Cooper's Natty Bumppo. Jim Lassiter, the protagonist, has "been enfeebled by the doctrines of a feminized Christianity" (46). In the beginning of the novel, the proud young heroine, Jane Withersteen, who adamantly defends her father's hard-won ranch in Utah against the Mormon church, stands alone against the villains. When Venter and Lassiter arrive in the territory, they assist the heroine and reclaim American manhood from Christian women and defeat the enemy. Jane tries to convince Lassiter to lay down his gun as she attempts to civilize him; yet, she ultimately recognizes the inadequacy of her way of survival for the cowboy. *Riders of the Purple Sage* pays homage to the western landscape, charging it with immense emotional and spiritual power, which is naturally imparted to the cowboys who draw on its strength. At the end, Lassiter fulfills his cowboy quest and brings good out of evil. The end is justified by his courage, self-reliance, confidence, honor, and romantic chivalry.

As Michael Kimmel and Amy Aronson convey in *Men and Masculinities* (2004), "as a mythic creation, the cowboy was fierce and brave, willing to venture into unknown

territory, a 'negligent, irrepressible wilderness,' and tame it for women, children, and emasculated civilized men" (44). As soon as the wilderness had been adjusted, "it was time to move on, unconstrained by the demands of civilized life, unhampered by clinging women, whining children and uncaring bosses and managers" (189). Harold Bell Wright notes in *When a Man's a Man* (1916) that his was a freedom that "could not be bounded by the fences of a too weak and timid conventionalism" (77). Set in the frontier state of Arizona, the novel plays a constitutive role in the cowboy's identity, especially in terms of American manhood. The novel suggests that the daring cowboy has to develop qualities similar to that of the environment: "A man's mental grace must be as the grace of the untamed trees," and "a man's soul must be as the unstained skies" (9). In his western novel, Wright reinvents nature and masculinity as a symbolic counterpart to hypercivilization. More significantly, he infuses the concept with rugged cowboy masculinity: "In this land where a man, to live, must be a man, a woman, if she be not woman, must surely perish" (9). The cowboy's masculinity is not one of "tinseled bravery" and "confetti spirit," but grounded in the harsh reality of the American frontier (12).

Western nation-building ideologies, such as "Manifest Destiny" and the Frontier Myth, also catalyzed the cowboy's ascendance as the chief embodiment of American masculinity. As Kimmel suggests "the great outdoors, the tonic freshness of the open sky, the open plains and untamed wilderness" have been among the strongest values and codes of the cowboy since the 1850s (*Men,* 327). In 1893, historian Frederick Jackson Turner introduced his "Frontier Thesis," which advanced the concept of divinely-sanctioned westward expansion (Manifest Destiny) by positing the West "as an untamed region of free land stretching out endlessly," replete with "masculine individualism, heroic action, and national progress through adventurous exploration and the arduous work of settlement" (50). Even though western scholars such as Patricia Limerick, Gerald Nash, Richard White and Frederick Nolan have opposed or complicated Turner's "nostalgic idealization" of the frontier, it is possible to say that Turner's discussion of the frontier is ideologically useful in that "it clearly articulates a mythology of westward expansion predicated on the inherent right of white men to civilize the wilderness" (Tompkins 25).

According to Frederick Jackson Turner, "the frontier is the outer edge of the wave—the meeting point between savagery and civilization, where the underlying assumption is that savagery, which he locates in both landscape and peoples, is inevitably tamed by civilization" (58). As he suggests,

> The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and the Iroquois and runs an Indian palisade around him. Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick; he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion. In short, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the condition which it furnishes, or perish, and so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails. (39)

It is important to note that the American wilderness is not empty but populated by various indigenous peoples, and it is through interactions with these tribes that European settlers are overwhelmed into a more savage state. The frontier, yet, "cannot overwhelm the settler forever, and eventually the always-male settler transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe. The fact is, that here is a new product that is American" (39). Turner's frontier thesis as a crucible for the development of white American manhood establishes an equation where white male Europeans, plus nearly any kind of Native American, plus an 'uncivilized' landscape eventually equals an ideal American man. Turner's frontier, however, is fixed; Native Americans and "the landscape are constants" when compared to the "variables of whiteness" (25).

Richard Slotkin also evaluates this "wilderness/white-American-manhood equation" within the context of Manifest Destiny. In *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (2002), he points out that conflicts "with the Native Americans defined one boundary of American identity; though we were a people of 'the wilderness,' we were not savages" (9). He continues to draw a connection between this key component of the myth of western expansion and the cowboy myth, expressing that the 'American' of the Myth was one who had defeated and freed himself from both the 'savage' of the western wilderness and the metropolitan regime of authoritarian politics and class privilege (12). In the frontier, the white settler's "successful navigation of the wilderness depended on a 'regression' to a more primitive and natural condition of life

so that the false values of the 'metropolis' can be purged and a new, purified social contract enacted" (14). In the western mythology, Turner stresses that "the progression from former city dweller to ideal Americanness" is only possible in the wilderness. Turner's Frontier Thesis and Slotkin's account of American West indicate that by the turn of the twentieth century, "the conceptual and physical wildernesses were functionally intertwined as a litmus test for a distinct version" of cowboy masculinity (Savage 14).

Therefore, the frontier construes and characterizes American identity—both in reality and in fantasy—and, according to Turner and Slotkin, shapes American masculinity. It exercises a powerful influence on American self-conception, particularly in constituting and defining ideals of American masculinity. As the American author and newspaper editor Horace Greeley wrote in 1837 "Go West young man, and grow up with the country," as the frontier held promise for American men (3). According to Turner, Manifest Destiny "offered an exit into a free life and greater well-being among the bounties of nature, in the midst of resources that demanded manly exertion and that gave in return the chance for indefinite ascent on the scale of social advance" (92). Yet, metaphors of western male sexuality—whether in the form of exploration of/union with a virgin wilderness, or in the more troubling form of the invasion and "rape" of the land and its natural resources—have always simultaneously equated westward movement with domination and violence, especially towards unchartered territory, its people (Native Americans), and its flora and fauna (e.g., bison). Thus, as a male WASP project, westward expansion implicitly excluded women and people of color from meaningful participation. While white men expanded its borders by taming the wilderness through the erasure of indigenous peoples, frontier women cultivated the domestic havens that sustained their efforts.

The Frontier Myth has historically been coupled with Manifest Destiny to disclose and rationalize the link between westward expansion and cowboy masculinity. As Mary Norton discusses in *A People and a Nation* (2014), even though it "derived from the missionary impulses first expressed in Puritan Massachusetts," and was later linked with the Social Darwinism of the Gilded Age (1870s–1890s), "Manifest Destiny is most

closely associated with the annexation of Texas and the Mexican–American War (1840s)" (345). As she suggests,

> for Americans of that period, Manifest Destiny encapsulated the nation's masculine vigor and purpose, and promised the incorporation of new land through the erasure of yet another group of people [indigenous Mexicans], which would provide the economic independence and masculinity associated with a republican/agrarian society. (345)

As discussed in *Manhood in America*: *A Cultural History*, "as both a symptom and a cause of larger historical forces—including gender inequalities, civil turmoil and sectional strains," Manifest Destiny prompted and altered how white Anglo-Saxon Protestant men perceived themselves, their community, and their country (Kimmel 108).

Unlike his longevity as a cultural icon, the cowboy's appearance on the historical stage was fleeting. As James L. Roark discusses in *The American Promise: A History of United States* (2012)*,* actual cowboys, who were mostly men of color, rode the trail for less than a generation following the Civil War, from 1865 until the late 1880s (557). They were the product of the open-range cattle industry, which required the services of hired hands to round up and drive Texas cattle to northern railheads for transport to markets in the East (560). According to Roark, "as wage workers laboring in the isolation of the West, cowboys were often economically unable to enter the American capitalist enterprise system" (561). Blake Allmendinger also notes that "cowboys who worked on ranches were excluded from the middle-class lifestyle that would have allowed them the luxury of domesticity" (34). Those cowboys did not have access to women, and many visited sex workers once a month when they cashed their checks (35). According to him, they were allegedly "temporarily celibate men who dammed their sex drives and unleashed them infrequently" (51). On the other hand, the cowboy's economic displacement took the form of sexual disempowerment not only in the quarrels engaged in by men and women, but also in communities lived in by members of the same male sex. Hence cattlemen economically subordinated cowboys by making them, in effect, sexually nonfunctional (52). As he puts, "it would be nearly impossible, then, for a cowboy to ground his identity in family and economic success" (54). Thus, he was forever banished to a life on the range. As Allmendinger explains, "ranchers hired more single men than married men because they would send these men away on

trail drives, cattle roundups, and extended explorations of range land" (53). Consequently, they preferred men who could leave the ranch without disrupting family relationships. Ranchers provided accommodations for cowboys—single sex bunkhouses and line camps—but "made no provisions for married men, who left ranches, moved to town, and tried to commute to work, therein donating to cattlemen only part of their time" (53).

However, Owen Wister and his acquaintances, including the artist Frederic Remington and future president Theodore Roosevelt, worried that overcivilization and growing immigration were threatening the vigor of WASP men and their hegemonic dominance. Subsequently, through the ideology of the strenuous life, they recast the cowboy as an exemplar of the natural integrity and racial superiority of the rugged WASP American male. As Michael Kimmel conveys in *Manhood in America,* Roosevelt, in particular, "celebrated the cowboy's reinvigorating primitive pursuits as a model of the 'strenuous life'—a life of outdoor physical adventure that would cure men of the softness and nervous exhaustion brought on by modern commercial society" (132).

In spite of the cowboy's historical and cultural status as a poorly-paid laborer in the American capitalist system, the figure of the cowboy represented the fantasy of masculine independence and mobility—a life unrestrained by urban concerns, the domestic sphere, and emotional bonds. Many American writers maintained a sense of imaginary wilderness in the form of nostalgic Westerns. Thus, in American culture and literature, the cowboy has always been a contradictory figure. While he has embodied concerns over the fate of traditional masculinity in modern, capitalist society, the cowboy image itself has become a mass commodity. By the mid-twentieth century, parodies and critiques of the cowboy as a stoic, tough figure became more frequent, especially as hegemonic white masculinity came under pressure from the Civil Rights and Liberation Movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and later from American Masculinity Studies. As Bryce Traister conveys in "Academic Viagra: The Rise of American Masculinity Studies," even though cowboy masculinity, "has for so long stood as the guarantor of cultural authority, transcendental anchor and truth" (281), with the rise of Masculinity Studies, it has become the target of criticism from academia, the media, and popular fiction. Thus, Michael Kimmel opens *Manhood in America* by

making the seemingly absurd claim that "American men have no history" (1). However, what he means here is that as scholars, we must return to canonical texts to tease out ideas concerning gender, masculinity and femininity that scholars missed the first time around.

As Joseph Armengol points out in *Masculinities and Literary Studies: Intersections and New Directions* (2017), Masculinity Studies has enriched and enlightened the analysis of literary masculinities:

> the theoretical and literary discussions feed on each other. Not only is "the theory" of Masculinity Studies helpful—indeed, central—to the "practice" of literary criticism; literary texts themselves are shown to shed new light on some of the most pressing questions within current masculinity scholarship, revealing the deeper connections between social and literary models of men and masculinities. (3)

Likewise, as Angel Carabí and Josep Armengol explain in *Alternative Masculinities for a Changing World* (2014), in contemporary Masculinity Studies, literary texts "become privileged spaces and sources of inspiration from which to imagine alternative ways for men to experience their manhood and their gender relations" (5). Thus, today there is a tremendous amount of interest in localizing different versions of masculinity through ethnographies and close readings of literary and historic texts.

In *A Man's Place: Masculinity in Transition* (2009), which focuses on the history of masculinity in the United States, Joe Dubbert argues that there is a strong link between America's concept of the frontier and its conception of masculinity (45). Borrowing from Turner's Frontier Thesis, Dubbert elucidates that cowboy masculinity became "intricately connected with the freedom of the wilderness" and the "open, untamed frontier" (45). As William Savage discusses, throughout its history, the cowboy has reflected concerns over the social and economic status of white Anglo-American Protestant men and the emasculating effects of urbanization, industrialization, and bureaucratization (76). As a result, American manhood faced a crisis as the frontier gave way to urbanization, industrialization, and civilization. When the masculine space of the frontier was crowded out, American men experienced "a sense of loss" (47). The spheres separated and "women's world of the home" became "in part responsible for the need that American men felt, and still perhaps feel, to assert their masculine self in business and sports, outside of home" (48). This is why the frontier became more than a

physical reality. For American men, it came to mean a psychological space in which they could assert a gendered identity as men.

Annette Kolodny also analyzes the strong connection between the frontier and masculinity from a Masculinity Studies perspective. She highlights "the colonial essence of overcoming landscape, and the shaping effect that mindset had on the lands beyond the hundredth meridian. The human, and decidedly feminine, impact of the landscape became a staple in the early promotional tracts, inviting prospective settlers to inhabit," and to experience, "the New World landscape, not merely as an object of domination and exploitation, but as a maternal 'garden,' receiving and nurturing human children" (6-7). In her analysis of frontier literature written by men, she concludes that the majority of men see the land as something that must be tamed, plowed, or fenced in by male hands. The taming of the frontier not only allows them to perform masculinity, but it also limits women to domestic work and reinscribes them as objects in need of taming. Within this mythology, masculinity is assigned the fleeting space between nature and civilization, both of which are assumed to be female (64). Frontier men are threatened by the feminine responsibilities of the civilization and the feminine presence, which is why there is no room for fully-articulated female characters in classical westerns. While this might explain why Cormac McCarthy's protagonists are mostly male, it has certainly not spared him from severe criticism, as he has failed to create convincing female characters. The women in his Westerns—nearly all of them Mexican—are either silent, maternal, and goodhearted wives, most of whom happen to be dead or otherwise existing only as objects of memory, or miserable servants and sex workers, elusive girls joined to the protagonists in tragic passion.

Thus, Nell Sullivan claims that McCarthy's fiction has misogynistic leanings that "contain feminine power and obviate women" (170). She argues that McCarthy rarely focuses on female characters in his fiction and when they do exist, they are not as fleshed-out or fully articulated as his cowboy characters. In other words, they are representational rather than realistic. McCarthy seems to be unable to portray a world where men and women live together in principle, or to envisage the independent women who might inhabit it. The whole sphere of domestic life—which is to say of social life in any sense beyond the camaraderie of cowboys—exists completely outside the frame

of his broad canvas. Another criticism of McCarthy's western novels is their focus on heterosexual characters. While certainly some of McCarthy's characters seek homosocial environments, these homosocial relations do not necessarily suggest homoerotic undertones. Thus, in the context of this dissertation, masculinity will refer to hegemonic (heterosexual/heteronormative) masculinity.

In *Manliness and Civilization* (1995), Gail Bederman focuses on how between the Gilded Age and World War I, American middle-class WASP masculinity was defined in terms of hegemonic power, its opposition to femininity, and its difference from the masculinity of immigrants and other (non-white) races. In the United States, hegemonic masculinity became that masculinity which American society prioritized and favored above all others—one that "subliminally" defined what was "normal" for American males (e.g., heterosexual, gender normative, rugged, aggressive)—with society imposing that definition of normality on other kinds of masculinities (76). Its fundamental function was to authorize not only the dominant position of men, but also the dominance of particular kinds of men (white, middle-class, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, native born), and their power, values, and wealth, over other groups of men. Since each generation in any given nation produces its own definition(s) of hegemonic masculinity, it is perpetually changing across time and space.

Manliness and Civilization examines the links between masculinity, hegemony, and civilization during one specific historical era in the United States and argues that American men developed the idea of "civilization" to justify their "continued social and political pre-eminence" (5). "During these years," Bederman writes, "a variety of social and cultural factors encouraged white middle-class men to develop new explanations of why they, as men, ought to wield power and authority" (6). "Civilization," she continues, "as turn of the century Americans understood it, simultaneously denoted attributes of race and gender . . . middle and upper class men effectively mobilized 'civilization' in order to maintain their class, gender, and racial authority" (6). Bederman considers what "manliness" and "masculinity" meant during these decades, concluding that the terms referred to constructions of hegemonic masculinity. Manliness, Bederman argues, was essentially a Victorian list of traits and qualities that a manly white middle-class man ought to possess. Masculinity, on the other hand, was a

response to the desire for men to be more virile. Masculinity therefore suggests elements of sexuality, virility, and even primitivism—a construct that, on the surface, seems antithetical to ideas of racial superiority and manly self-restraint, but one that was nevertheless accepted as part of the turn of the twentieth-century American worldview because it complemented the rugged individualism and strenuous frontier life espoused by public figures such as Theodore Roosevelt, Owen Wister, and Frederic Remington.

In general, Westerns deal with an abiding nostalgia for a romanticized past; a burgeoning and suspicious revisionist sensibility or deep-seated anxieties regarding a place to call home that allow writers to interrogate the American West. As Leslie Fiedler explicates in *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960), the frontier wilderness is a driving force behind the heroes of such American novels:

> The typical male protagonist of our fiction has been a man on the run, harried into the forest and out to sea, down the river or into combat—anywhere to avoid "civilization," which is to say, the confrontation of a man and woman which leads to the fall, to sex, marriage and responsibility. One of the factors that determines theme and form in our great books is the strategy of evasion, this retreat to nature and childhood which makes our literature so charmingly and infuriatingly "boyish." (xx-xxi)

According to Fiedler, these male protagonists search for male bonding in the wilderness in order to flee the responsibilities of civilization. This argument has also been made by other scholars of American masculinity, such as Robert Bly who, in *Iron John*: *A Book About Men* (1993), argues that men yearn to reconnect with their spiritual, masculine, inner-selves, which has been damaged by industrialization, civilization, and in short, women. By invoking mythopoetic concepts, he pleads the case for the restoration of a lost, traditional masculinity and the urgency to find one's inner wild/hairy frontier man. Similarly, Michael Kimmel also realizes the existence of American novels that "often include a search for father—for legitimacy, perhaps, but also for the warmth and tenderness that readers felt lacking, since their real fathers were preoccupied with their careers" (*Manhood,* 105). In such works, and McCarthy's novels are no exception, America and American men are in a perpetual state of growing up, of heading out—a culture on a continuous march. More often than not, the mythic destination that drives American self-discovery is the West.

Western novels have appeared in numerous literary forms, ranging from the historical novels of Alfred Bertram Guthrie, to the frontier stories of Louis L'Amour. Contemporary treatments of the western genre include novels by major American authors such as Jack Schaefer, Charles Portis, Larry McMurtry, Steven Peck, Elmer Kelton and Cormac McCarthy. Writing in the latter half of the twentieth century, Cormac McCarthy shares many of the same concerns regarding American masculinity as his contemporaries—authors such as Sam Shepard, E.L. Doctorow, Thomas Pynchon, Ishmael Reed, and Gerald Vizenor. Starting his career in the mid-1960s, McCarthy published his gothic fiction—*The Orchard Keeper* (1965), *Outer Dark* (1968), *Child of God* (1973), and *Suttree* (1979)—in ambiguity. He was quite reclusive and was not interested in his publisher's promotional campaigns. He rejected interviews, personal appearances, media coverage, as well as academic gatherings that could have made him a more popular writer much sooner. In "Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction," Richard Woodward relays the sum total of what was then known by the general public about McCarthy's "mysterious" life:

> McCarthy's silence about himself has spawned a host of legends about his background and whereabouts. *Esquire* magazine recently printed a list of rumors, including one that had him living under an oil derrick. For many years the sum of hard-core information about his early life could be found in an author's note to his first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, published in 1965. It stated that he was born in Rhode Island in 1933; grew up outside Knoxville; attended parochial schools; entered the University of Tennessee, which he dropped out of; joined the Air Force in 1953 for four years; returned to the university, which he dropped out of again, and began to write novels in 1959. Add the publication dates of his books and awards, the marriages and divorces, a son born in 1962 and the move to the Southwest in 1974, and the relevant facts of his biography are complete.

For years, McCarthy's audience was limited to a group of gothic enthusiasts, mainly from the South. Indeed, McCarthy's southern gothic novels have been compared and contrasted with those of William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor for their rhetoric and plots, in reviews and in book-length studies (by Guinn, Folks, Perkins and many others). Despite similarities, McCarthy's treatment of masculinity is different than Faulkner's and O'Connor's. McCarthy's men yearn to re-unite the body and the mind, despite psychic confusion deriving from childhood. Faulkner's and O'Connor's texts lament the loss of the comforting illusions of both honor and gentility from a bygone age. On the other hand, McCarthy's novels demonstrate the unraveling of old myths in relation

to American manhood. Like Faulkner, McCarthy places a higher value upon masculine performance. Yet, McCarthy contributes nothing to the illusion of human progress. What makes McCarthy's gothic fiction different than its predecessors is his combination of the features of southern literature with border stories and Mexican folk culture.

Turning away from the American South of his earlier novels and towards the West, McCarthy spent fifteen years writing *The Border Trilogy*. If one also includes his first Western, *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West* (1985), which can rightfully be seen as a prologue to the trilogy, then almost half of his writing career has been devoted to western novels. Indeed, he appears, like critic Robert L. Jarrett points out, to have made "a sudden break with the past" and his "career in Southern fiction" (*Cormac*, 8)—a break that many critics note by dividing his fiction, as Wade Hall and Rick Wallach do, into "Southern" fiction and "Western" fiction (43). McCarthy comments on his interest in western novels in response to a question posed by *The Wall Street Journal:* "How [did] a man who was born in Rhode Island and grew up in Tennessee end up writing in and about the Southwest?" As McCarthy expresses,

> I ended up in the Southwest because I knew that nobody had ever written about it. Besides Coca-Cola, the other thing that is universally known is cowboys and Indians. You can go to a mountain village in Mongolia and they'll know about cowboys. But nobody had taken it seriously, not in 200 years. I thought, here's a good subject. And it was. (Jurgensen)

As McCarthy explains, the Western and the cowboy have become a universal and international phenomenon, and have earned a place in American culture and iconography abroad "because they have provided a reliable vehicle for filmmakers and writers to explore thorny issues of American history and character" (Agresta 14). McCarthy deploys his Southwestern setting to explore southern literature's complicated transition from modernity to postmodernity, as he extends many of the tropes of southern literature (e.g. the gothic, graphic violence, and dialect) into his western novels, rendering his Southwest in every way an extension of his South.

Funded by a $250,000 MacArthur Fellowship, McCarthy lived in El Paso, Texas, for almost five years, where he learned and practiced Spanish, wrote about men, wandered into the places he writes about, and interacted with the people he brought to life in his works. His western novels are based on the formula of the typical Western, but his

treatment goes beyond the familiar to offer a revision of the cowboy myth. Unlike Larry McMurtry's western novels such as *Horseman, Pass By* (1962), *The Last Picture Show* (1966), and *Lonesome Dove* (1985), McCarthy uses the fading Old West as his setting and is concerned more with "what was" than with "what next." While McMurtry's cowboys ride off in clouds of eventful folklore, McCarthy's distressed and agitated cowboys slowly vanish into the intensely authenticated past. His novels are stoic laments for the disappearing cowboy and nostalgic repositories of wilderness, food, clothes, guns, horses, and idioms. As Mark Busby notes, "If McMurtry set out to explode the cowboy myth completely, he did not succeed" (183). McMurtry blamed "the power of the original myth rather than . . . his ambivalent presentation" for the fact that many readers "did not realize his anti-mythic purpose" (184). Instead, the power of the original myth and its subconscious effect shaped McMurtry's "ambivalent presentation" (Busby 184).

The passing way of life on the ranch continues to be a motif of the nineteenth century "golden age" of cowboys, which McCarthy's cowboys, in particular, yearn to maintain. As A. O. Scott explicates in *The New York Times*, McCarthy's "intent is not to demystify the literature of the past, but to recapture something of its mystery and power—to breathe new life into a rather shopworn mythology" (26). McCarthy's characters cling to chivalric codes and manners while reluctantly facing the dawning of a new age. Thus, McCarthy not only brought something original to American literature—especially to the western novel—but he has also created an introspective vehicle of self-discovery for American men through his literary depiction of a country and its cowboy mythology.

McCarthy finally found a large audience with the publication of the first installment of *The Border Trilogy* in 1992: *All the Pretty Horses* was a literary bestseller, and garnered McCarthy a National Book Award. *The Crossing* followed in 1994, and *Cities of the Plain* completed the trilogy in 1998. At around this time, McCarthy relocated to Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he, through his friendship with the prominent American physicist Murray Gell-Mann, became a research fellow at The Santa Fe Institute. In 2005, he published *No Country for Old Men*, later adapted into an Oscar winning film by the Cohen brothers. In 2006, he published *The Road*, which won the Pulitzer Prize,

and became a pick for Oprah Winfrey's book club. As of 2020, he still lives in Santa Fe as a writer-in-residence at The Santa Fe Institute. He is currently working on a novel on deep sea divers working on offshore oil rigs in New Orleans.

In 2007, the Wittliff Collection of the Alkek Library at Texas State University, in San Marcos, Texas, purchased Cormac McCarthy's papers, which became available to scholars in the spring of 2012. The archive provides scholars with information about McCarthy's reading habits, and what books and writers were on his mind during the composition of his texts. Thus, the archive fills the vacuum surrounding his writing process, and has also contributed to the critical debate in the field of inquiry known as Cormac McCarthy Studies. The archive also offers an in-depth exploration of the evolution of Cormac McCarthy's authorial techniques, as well as his correspondence with editors, writers, translators and researchers. Although there are gaps in the record—there is no evidence, for instance, of his negotiations when shifting from Random House to Alfred A. Knopf, nor any paper record of his endeavors to have his version of *No Country for Old Men* filmed—as Dianne Luce claims, the future of Cormac McCarthy Studies resides in the archive ("Landscapes").

McCarthy's western novels suggest that he is somewhat enchanted by the patriarchal legacy of the American frontier mythology. His cowboys are still unwilling to discard the myth of the masculine frontier. They belong to the West, and are creatures of "open spaces, plains, and deserts and their concomitant images of freedom, isolation and independence" (*All the Pretty Horses,* 4). In his works, a cowboy's inability to relinquish the cowboy mythology, as rooted in his patriarchal ancestors, indicates not only how profoundly such concerns are part of the American male self-image, but also how they contribute to American ideas of masculinity. His characters are threatened by industrialization and exploitive schemes that cut them off from freedom and the individualism they need to survive. However, above all, they are paralyzed by the conflict between the masculine space of the frontier and the feminine responsibilities of civilization. McCarthy's western novels address this ordeal, capturing and complicating the struggles of a certain class of American men—mostly white, middle-class, Christian and heterosexual—to exemplify the trappings of increasingly anachronistic masculine signifiers; to scrutinize the degree to which their perception of manhood has legitimized

and, at the same time, confined them, while dehumanizing and objectifying others; and to discover, perhaps, a way forward towards a construction of a healthier masculinity that no longer threatens to make them men without a country.

Critics such as George Guillemin and Barcley Owens, among others, have associated McCarthy's western novels with Western myths concerning the American pastoral, as they tend to focus on themes such as "dispossessed yeoman and Jeffersonian agrarianism, the last cowboy and the frontier, the New Adam and rugged individualism" (Guillemin, *The Pastoral* 107). On the other hand, scholars such as Dana Phillips, and Vince Brewton have claimed that "McCarthy's works actually attempt to demystify 'Manifest Destiny'—a theme often associated with the American West—by portraying the borderland frontier with brutal violence and injustice, without any sense of redemption" (Brewton 123). Taken as a whole, however, McCarthy's western novels offer a revisionary study of contemporary American masculinity, "which simultaneously interrogate[s] the narrative myths that provide the novels with their popular appeal and cultural resonance" (Dudley 175). They also demonstrate the surprising plasticity of the western genre, examining issues at the heart of contemporary American culture; specifically, issues related to a perceived crisis (or series of crises) in American masculinity and the simultaneous emergence of Masculinity Studies. As Sally Robinson states,

> from the late sixties to the present, dominant masculinity appears to have suffered one crisis after another, from the urgent complaints of the "silent majority" following the 1968 presidential election, to the men's liberationists call for rethinking masculinity in the wake of the women's movement of the 1970s, to the battles over the cultural authority of "dead white males" in academia, to the rise of a new men's movement in the late 1980s. Each of these movements comes clothed in the language of crisis, and the texts produced out of that crisis use a vocabulary of pain and urgency to dwell on, manage, and/or heal the threats to a normativity continuously under siege. (5)

McCarthy's male protagonists exemplify such crises of masculinity, usually by experiencing the loss of a stable identity based on a mythicized past in which gender roles were very clearly defined. This rebellion against "civilization" becomes, in McCarthy's fiction, the story of the western hero's flight from the rules of "civilized" cities to the openness, and even oblivion, of western forests, rivers, and deserts. His

protagonists are unable to cope with the worlds they create and try to blame their failures on women or society. Their desire to escape or deny reality often results in violent and abusive behavior. When McCarthy's men cannot reconcile the various parts of their identities, they seek escape, which fails to free them from the problems of gender as created by mainstream society. They flee across the border, to mountains, or to their cowboy fantasies of the past in Mexico. However, their masculinity crisis does not disappear.

By writing about the lives of displaced cowboys, and then following them through the rejection of a previously celebrated myth and a national embrace of mechanized and nuclear progress, McCarthy makes a serious attempt at exposing the cultural complexities comprising the western myth and the role of cowboys as necessary symbols of western masculine identity. Unlike Owen Wister, Zane Grey, and Louis L'Amour, all of whom celebrate the cowboy myth, McCarthy uses cowboy masculinity to expose the myth. While these writers contributed to the creation of a myth that defined a generation, McCarthy undoes this work by exposing and demythologizing the cowboy. Through the deaths of his cowboy characters and the much-compromised lives of others, McCarthy mocks the myth and presents for readers the national tragedy it left behind.

Using these ideas as a theoretical framework, the first chapter of this dissertation analyzes *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West* (1985)—the first product of Cormac McCarthy's borderlands immersion—by deploying the concept of "toxic masculinity," an exaggerated masculinity related mythically to the role of the cowboy/warrior/pioneer, which creates recklessness and eventually perpetuates violence. In other words, Chapter One explores how perfunctorily embracing, or endeavoring to fulfill, hegemonic masculine ideals brings about self-destructive behaviors in McCarthy's monolithically male characters on the Texas-Mexico border in the 1850s.

Even though the term "toxic masculinity" was not used in the 1980s when McCarthy wrote this novel, he clearly anticipates and historicizes the evolution of American masculinity as embodied by the cowboy/warrior/pioneer into a form of toxic masculinity. By doing so, he presages the gradual cultural recognition that such

masculinity is not the generic standard against which all versions of gendered identity should be measured but is in fact toxic, pathological, political, and problematic. Historically, toxic masculinity first originated in the American frontier as "rugged individualism," and was embodied by American cowboys. Eventually, it turned into the image of authentic "all-American" masculinity, which is a target of criticism within Masculinity Studies. Thus, McCarthy's *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West* anticipates current discussions of "toxic masculinity" by indicating the overall influence of rigid patriarchal constructions on American manhood and the ways in which toxic masculinity transfers violence across generations of American men. These toxic behaviors do not bring the kid, McCarthy's protagonist, the sense of manhood he is looking for. As a matter of fact, just the opposite happens. As a cowboy, he heroically fails since he cannot perpetuate the judge's toxic expectations. Even though his toxic activities of thrill seeking and fighting seemingly provide initial satisfaction, the kid fails and turns into an outcast.

By exposing toxic cowboy mythology and deploying it to construct healthier masculinities, McCarthy questions the Frontier Thesis and Manifest Destiny while disrupting the toxic assumptions about manhood and masculine identities they were intended to uphold. *Blood Meridian* self-consciously enters the Western genre's violent narrative tradition in order to undermine readers' expectations by deploying violence in untraditional ways. The new vision McCarthy presents in *Blood Meridian* challenges the development of American national identity based on the hysterical and vicious conquest of impoverished, discriminated, oppressed, and racialized Others and exploited, feminized nature. In other words, McCarthy discourages those cowboy traits that are toxic or deadly to women, children, animals, and all other living things, and reinforces healthy masculinities. McCarthy stresses that American men, who are already caught between their own values and their homosocial performances, have to abandon their toxic, misogynistic, homophobic, racist, anti-environmentalist, and violent ideas of cowboy masculinity, and embrace a healthier one.

Chapter Two focuses on the first installment of *The Border Trilogy, All the Pretty Horses* (1992), which takes places in the same borderland setting, but a hundred years after *Blood Meridian*. It explores how sixteen-year-old John Grady Cole's displacement

and emasculation emanate from social, cultural and economic developments such as post-Fordist reconfigurations of masculinity and the Second Wave of Feminism that would appear more closely associated with the second half of the twentieth century. A life that adheres to the cowboy code seems vain and futile in Texas in the middle of the twentieth century, despite the protagonist's attempts to save the Cole family's ranch and stay in his homeland. On the contrary, he finds himself encircled by the increasing presence of American modernization. In other words, he initially associates the reason of his deracination with a changing economy. However, it becomes explicit that women's liberation—which was still a concern of the 1990s when the novel was published—exacerbate his masculinity crisis. Here, McCarthy exposes the profound disorder at the heart of frontier myths and uses the failing cowboy figure as a critique of an American culture that still positions white men as the torchbearers of cowboy masculinity, even though it is impossible to be the mythic cowboy in the twentieth century.

Chapter Three analyzes *The Crossing* (1994), the second volume of *The Border Trilogy*, from an ecomasculinist perspective. It explores the dynamics between nature and cowboy masculinity that begin to emerge as the protagonist is led to live a nomadic life back and forth across the border, which plays a significant role in demythologizing American western myths and cowboy masculinity. In *The Crossing*, McCarthy adds variations to the themes of *All the Pretty Horses*, in which John Grady Cole, a quiet, and stoic boy standing at the edge of cowboy manhood, watches everything he cares for evaporate. Like John Grady Cole, Billy Parham, the protagonist of *The Crossing*, begins his quest at age sixteen, but it continues for an indefinitely longer period of time. He is chasing the dream of the cowboy life, a lifestyle which has eluded him in the modern world, as well as the dream of the frontier, manifested in his pursuit of a she-wolf that does not belong in this frontier-less world. By exposing parallels between Billy and the she-wolf, McCarthy upsets the trope of cowboy versus nature, indicating that they are not diametrically opposing figures, but equal agents and victims of patriarchy, and shaped by the same mythology in which these characters participate.

The last chapter first addresses McCarthy's engagement with his screenplay "Cities of the Plain" (1984), which formed the basis of the novel *Cities of the Plain* (1988), the

final volume of *The Border Trilogy*, and is primarily an exploration of his correspondence, manuscript materials, and interviews, all of which unveil the relatively unrevealed story of his screenplay and his struggles to turn it into a Hollywood movie. It explores how "Cities of the Plain" represents the writer's venture to challenge and interrogate cultural myths—such as that of the cowboy—and narrative structures associated with the Frontier, while adapting the same myths and structures in different mediums. In the novel, McCarthy brings together the two characters of John Grady Cole and Billy Parham, who are now mature and independent young cowboys, aged nineteen and twenty-eight, respectively, while continuing to examine their struggles in the "real world" (67). John Grady and Billy, marked by the adolescent adventures of the first two installments of the trilogy, now stand together at the juncture between their dramatic and radiant pasts and ambiguous and insecure futures, coming to terms with a country changing, or already changed, beyond realization. The border crossings and ordeals experienced in the first two installments of the trilogy eventually leave them consumed by a vast, cosmic sadness, and in the midst of a grim and inevitable shift that was bound to consume everything, including their cowboy way of life. This chapter also explores the way McCarthy deals with the concept of wounded masculinity and the Western genre in the last installment of the trilogy, and discusses how John Grady and Billy end their illusions, as each comes to terms with the fact that the cowboy lifestyle is based on a myth, and that there are no more frontiers in the world for would-be cowboys to ride. The final scene of *Cities of the Plain* strongly suggests that the chivalric roles promised by the cowboy mythology, if they ever even existed, are dead, and thus impossible to fulfill in the millennium.

McCarthy spent almost half of his career writing about men who are lost, in search of themselves, and wandering in the vast landscapes of America's West. Like countless Westerns, in *Blood Meridian* and *The Border Trilogy*, McCarthy presents journey stories in the tried-and-true tradition of innocence to experience. Nonetheless, there is a constant, active layer to the narrative that also questions and even sometimes undermines the artifice of familiar tropes of cowboy masculinity. His texts enter into a dialogue with frontier stories and myths by following their weird logic to grim resolutions to the point where the myths expose themselves, shatter, and are swept aside. He delves deep into the contemporary American masculinity crisis, or what

Kimmel calls "that aggrieved entitlement that lies underneath the anger of American white men," exploring its mythic roots, analyzing modern manifestations, and destabilizing many of the basic assumptions upon which American men have developed an account of themselves in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (*Angry*, 203). His cowboy protagonists must negotiate a West that is no longer the province of the cowboy, but rather the site of twentieth-century military installations, large corporate ranches, and frightening modern-day bureaucracies. The key to survival in this vexed post-West world turns out to be not adherence to the old regional myths and conventions—no matter how attractive that might seem—but instead, a turn towards healthier masculinity. While the cowboys' epic journeys may evoke a noble and masculine western tradition, as McCarthy illustrates, they are doomed to fail because of the loss of the community and culture in which such masculinities thrived.

CHAPTER 1

MANIFESTATIONS OF TOXIC MASCULINITY IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *BLOOD MERIDIAN OR THE EVENING REDNESS IN THE WEST*

"It's time to see the frontiers as they are. Fiction, but a fiction meaning blood . . ."

John Berryman, "The Dangerous Year" (1989)

"To go West, as far as West you can go, west of everything, is to die."

Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (2002)

"War is god."

Judge Holden, *Blood Meridian* (1985)

This chapter explores Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West* (1985)—the first product of Cormac McCarthy's borderlands immersion—within the framework of "toxic masculinity," an extreme hegemonic masculinity related mythically to the role of the cowboy/warrior/pioneer, which creates recklessness and eventually perpetuates violence. In other words, Chapter One explores how perfunctorily embracing, or endeavoring to fulfill, hegemonic masculine ideals brings about self-destructive behaviors in McCarthy's monolithically male characters on the Texas-Mexico border in the 1850s.

Even though the term toxic masculinity was not used in the 1980s when McCarthy wrote this novel, he clearly anticipates and historicizes the evolution of American masculinity as embodied by the cowboy/warrior/pioneer into a form of toxic masculinity. By doing so, he presages the gradual cultural recognition that such masculinity is not the generic standard against which all versions of gendered identity should be measured but is, in fact toxic, pathological, political, and problematic. As a concept, toxic masculinity first originated on the American frontier as "rugged

individualism," and was embodied by American cowboys. Eventually, it turned into the image of authentic "all-American" masculinity, which is a target of criticism within Masculinity Studies. Thus, McCarthy's *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West* anticipates current discussions of "toxic masculinity" by indicating the overall influence of rigid patriarchal constructions on American manhood and the ways in which toxic masculinity transfers violence across generations of American men. These toxic behaviors do not bring the kid, McCarthy's protagonist, the sense of manhood he is looking for. As a matter of fact, just the opposite happens. As a cowboy, he heroically fails since he cannot perpetuate the judge's toxic expectations. Even though his toxic activities of thrill seeking and fighting seemingly provide initial satisfaction, the kid fails and turns into an outcast.

By exposing toxic cowboy mythology and deploying it to construct healthier masculinities, McCarthy questions the Frontier Thesis and Manifest Destiny while disrupting the toxic assumptions about manhood and masculine identities they were intended to uphold. *Blood Meridian* self-consciously enters the Western genre's violent narrative tradition in order to undermine readers' expectations by deploying violence in untraditional ways. The new vision McCarthy presents in *Blood Meridian* challenges the development of American national identity based on the hysterical and vicious conquest of impoverished, discriminated, oppressed, and racialized Others and exploited, feminized nature. In other words, McCarthy discourages those cowboy traits that are toxic or deadly to women, children, animals, and all other living things, and reinforces healthy masculinities. McCarthy stresses that American men, who are already caught between their own values and their homosocial performances, have to abandon their toxic, misogynistic, homophobic, racist, anti-environmentalist, and violent ideas of cowboy masculinity, and embrace a healthier one.

1.1. What is Toxic Masculinity?

Though there are many masculinities—that is, there are many ways to identify as a male in society—a prominent construction of masculinity in the United States involves the "projection of toughness and aggression and the rejection of traits and behaviors associated with femininity, such as expressing feelings" (Humphris 1). In other words, what has come to be called "toxic masculinity."

A general misconception is that masculinity is perceived as equivalent to toxicity, but this is not true. As Luke Humphris points out, it is how "a patriarchal society becomes harmful to men by denying unmasculine traits and rewarding anger, violence," sexual promiscuity, playboy behaviors, and destructive habits (2). As a form of American masculinity, it does not demonize manliness or male attributes. Instead, it highlights the dreadful impact of adjusting to traditional (in this case cowboy) traits such as competition, self-reliance, dominance and violent rapaciousness. Riki Wilchins correlates it with "emotional toughness and sexual virility" (114). Accordingly, toxic masculinity derives from American culture's perfunctory and phony definitions of manhood and masculinities, culminating in a lack of respect, tolerance, or an acceptance of difference (114). The consequences of the performance of toxic masculinity are misogyny, sexual aggression, homophobia, transphobia, pedophobia and hypermasculinity. As Sarah Kaplan asserts in her article in *The Washington Post*, men who conform to definitions of toxic masculinity have the inclination to "experience psychological problems such as depression, stress, body image problems, substance abuse, and poor social functioning."

Toxic masculinity is quite a new concept in Masculinity Studies; as a result, there are different definitions. In "Toxic Masculinity as a Barrier to Mental Health Treatment," Terry A. Kupers uses toxic masculinity to mean "the constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence" (714). These characteristics contribute to a myriad of public health issues such as assaults perpetrated by men, alcoholism, depression, suicide, and resistance to mental health interventions. Another definition of toxic masculinity comes from James Messerschmidt's *Hegemonic Masculinities and Camouflaged Politics* (2010). In this work, he explores R.W. Connell's hegemonic masculinity as a theoretical concept and its consequences in American culture and society. In *Masculinities* (2005), Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as a kind of masculinity that a culture favors above all others, one that "subliminally" defines "what is normal for males in that culture, and imposes that definition of normality upon" other kinds of masculinities (76). Its fundamental function is to authorize not only the dominant position of men, but also the dominance of particular social groups of men, along with their power, values, wealth and beliefs. Messerschmidt reformulates hegemonic masculinity and develops a

novel conceptualization of various masculinities. Specifically, Messerschmidt differentiates global, local, regional as well as transnational masculinities. Furthermore, he articulates a "dynamic of domination and subordination between hegemonic masculinity and toxic masculinities" (Messerschmidt 79).

The difference between hegemonic masculinity and toxic masculinity is also voiced by Terry A. Kupers. As he states,

> the term *toxic masculinity* is useful in discussions about gender and forms of masculinity because it delineates those aspects of hegemonic masculinity that are socially destructive, such as misogyny, homophobia, greed, and violent domination; and those that are culturally accepted and valued. After all, there is nothing especially toxic in a man's pride in his ability to win at sports, to maintain solidarity with a friend, to succeed at work, or to provide for his family. These positive pursuits are aspects of hegemonic masculinity, too, but they are hardly toxic. The *subordinated masculinities* that Connell contrasts with the hegemonic, and the profeminist alternative masculinities celebrated in the profeminist and antihomophobic men's movement, are examples of nontoxic aspects of expressed masculinities. (716)

According to Kupers, "toxic masculinity has four major components: suppression of anything stereotypically feminine; suppression of emotions related to vulnerability, like fear, sadness, or helplessness; male domination over women and other men; and aggression" (717). As he explicates, while all masculinities are not completely toxic,

> there are many which contain toxic ideologies and traits. A structure is defined as toxic when it promotes negative outcomes, and toxic masculinity certainly achieves this; in particular, it displays its toxicity in the attitudes it promotes about what it means to perform masculinity and in the ways it objectifies and depersonalizes women. (718)

Thus, an objective of Masculinity Studies is to decode how toxic masculinity is indoctrinated as a "performative mask rather than a biological imperative" (O. Campbell). In other words, the field aims to address its roots, i.e., cowboy/warrior/pioneer masculinity.

According to Hugh Campbell, toxic masculinity originated with white frontiersmen: it is "in considerable measure; constructed out of rural masculinity. The 'real man' of many currently hegemonic forms of masculinity is . . . rural man" (20). In the United States, to many white, middle-class, Christian and heterosexual men, the cowboy figure has become "the image of a quintessential man" (19). As Donald Meisenheimer points

out, “static both personally and racially, cowboy masculinity thus embodies impulses that are, at base, anti-revolutionary. Obviously, a deep-seated contradiction exists in genre—or gender—which promises ‘new consciousness’ and universal transformation through a totalizing stasis” (446). Thus, toxic masculinity derives from the myth of Manifest Destiny, which has vested within it an almighty responsibility to confiscate all of the frontier. It nostalgically celebrates and rationalizes Manifest Destiny and the so-called “winning of the west” in terms that are similar to those expressed in Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 Frontier Thesis. According to Turner’s seminal work *The Frontier in American History* (1921), the frontier “signified advancing waves of conflict across a wide and ever moving geographic plain where the social Darwinist contest between Euro-American and Indigenous cultures took place, at the same time demarcating the boundaries for the symbolic meeting place between savagery and civilization” (78). As Kupers argues, in the same way, Manifest Destiny promotes an

> androcentric code of violence and racial purity on the erstwhile palimpsest of the West. For men interested in capitalizing on their white patriarchal privilege, a willingness to wage violence on anyone not white and male has developed in the West as the definition of toxic masculinity the cowboy oversees as a self-proclaimed suzerain. (713)

Thus, cowboy masculinity is a toxic, monolithic power structure held by men that dominates the lives of all who do not have access to privilege and protection. In many ways, “being a man” i.e., subscribing to social rules associated with toxic masculinity—has consequences for individual men and for society as a whole. As Howard Cunnell explicates in his article in *The Guardian*, many American men are raised to believe in toxic masculinity; yet, they cannot access the rewards it seemingly promotes. Therefore, they are “angry, depressed, violent and destructive.” They are doomed to fail since they live “without encountering alternative narratives.” Likewise, Jordan Stephens argues that “this toxic notion of masculinity is being championed by men who are so terrified of confronting any trauma experienced as children that they choose to project that torture on to the lives of others rather than themselves.” Instead, they should be aware of how constructions of toxic masculinity produce harmful effects for themselves and for their environment, and strive to construct healthier masculinities. McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* raises this awareness by critiquing the official, mythologized history of American manhood and its toxic narrative of the frontier past.

1.2. The Western Genre and its Transgression in *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West*

In the 1970s and 1980s, flustered by an era of social and political turmoil, western writers such as Elmer Kelton, G. Clifton Wisler, and Cormac McCarthy started to examine the "well-known" cowboy myth and frontier masculinity. These revisionist novelists broke "with the easy heroism of the traditional western novel" and "divulge[d] previously ignored realities while rejecting illusions previously cherished" (Haslam 1167). They shaped a new western trend, "trying to rub their eyes clear of mythic and legendary cobwebs, [to] see straight to the actual" (Kittredge 177). As Stephen McVeigh elucidates, the texts of these contemporary western novelists went "further than simply questioning the values of and techniques of the genre" (152), as the title of Sara Spurgeon's *Exploding the Western: Myths of Empire on the Postmodern Frontier* (2005) suggests.

McCarthy, who is also one of these contemporary revisionist western authors, made his mark on the genre with the publication of *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West* in 1985. In an interview given at the time, McCarthy reveals that he has always been interested in the West. In the same interview, McCarthy also discloses "the ugly fact is that books are made out of books. The novel depends for its life on the novels that have been written" (Woodward 31). Here, he also highlights the intertextuality between his novels and the other Westerns and conventional narratives such as Mark Twain's *The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), which chronicles the protagonist's "lighting out for the territories," and his heroic attempts to find a freedom "where his sound heart can beat without compromise" (32). Like Mark Twain, Cormac McCarthy dramatizes the flaws and failures of American manhood and illustrates how traditional expressions of honor associated in particular with cowboy masculinity fail in the frontier.

As archival evidence suggests, while composing *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy conducted comprehensive research, and used numerous confessions, memoirs and legal documents in his work. In a handwritten letter to Howard Woolmer dated June 26, 1977, McCarthy writes, "I'm in Tucson working on my 'western,' long book supposed to be out this year, but maybe not." In February of the same year, in a previous letter to Woolmer, he

had written, “I’m working on a western—based loosely on historical events, Mexico in 1849—illustrated with about 2 dozen period prints—woodcuts mostly. The book is essentially finished (300 pp.)—but needs to be completely rewritten” (Cormac McCarthy Papers, Box 19, Folder 6). McCarthy reveals the fact that he wrote *Blood Meridian* after his research on Mexican and American records on the Mexican-American War (1846-1848) and his education in Spanish. He also borrowed elements from books based on historical figures such as Captain Glanton and his scalp-hunters, and Samuel Chamberlain’s *My Confession* (1860), an autobiographical work penned by a man who fought in the war with Mexico, and then enlisted in the Glanton gang as a mercenary. James O. Pattie’s *The Personal Narrative* (1859), which glorifies cowboy masculinity and cowboy adventure and camaraderie in the Mexican-American war, was also a source. Moreover, McCarthy was inspired by other Westerns, such as George MacDonald Fraser’s *Flashman and the Redskins* (1982) and Thomas Berger’s *Little Big Man* (1964), which are historical pastiches of Glanton and his band of scalp-hunters, in this case described as comic figures. Similarly, *Blood Meridian* exemplifies the bloody activities of the gang; yet, “it is not an elaborate jape, nor is it a tour de force. And it is not a pastiche of its sources; it does not, in the postmodern manner, hollow out a space in other texts in order to comment ironically on the cultural fabric they form” (Dorson, *Cormac* 3). Rather, in *Blood Meridian,* the story of the cowboys “is not well enough known to qualify as an insider’s joke for Western history buffs. McCarthy can neither ‘allude’ to it, as a modernist might, nor can he incorporate it into the fabric of a fictional pastiche in order to riff on it in the postmodern manner” (Dorson, *Cormac* 4).

Blood Meridian—a story based on true events—is a bloody, extraordinarily violent manifestation of toxic masculinity in the American West. The novel builds what plot it has out of a relatively unsung, but still decisive period, in American history—the aftermath of the US war against Mexico and the American drive to become an imperial power during the middle of the nineteenth century through Manifest Destiny. It fictionalizes a group of male scalp-hunters—a group of “vicious looking humans” who travel across the recently acquired “American” territory, and across territory still belonging to Mexico—on their way to San Diego (17). They are hired by Governor Trias of Chihuahua to kill the Native American population—largely Apache and Comanche—of any age or sex and bring back their scalps. As the cowboys move from

Texas to California, they slaughter everyone, regardless of national origin, color, race, gender, disability, or other characteristics. When they reach San Diego, they disguise themselves as "Indians" and kill gold seeking American "pilgrims" as they killed Indians and Mexicans before.

The novel focuses on the life of a fourteen-year-old boy named "the kid." The narrative trajectory of the novel concerns the wanderings of this nameless child from the hills of Tennessee into the "immense and bloodslaked waste" of the American frontier—an experience that marks his initiation into manhood (McCarthy, *Blood* 177). Its opening pages present an account of the protagonist's early life in Tennessee, his quest to Texas, and "his recruitment by a troop of filibusters most of whom are murdered by a force of Comanches as the quest makes its way to Mexico" (12). In order to reassert his masculinity, the protagonist decides to accompany Captain Glanton's band of scalp-hunters, "who have a contract to provide the Mexicans with the hair of Apache raiders preying on isolated borderland villages and towns" (78).

This is how the gang starts its gory campaign of devastation and toxicity, which lasts almost a year and several hundred pages of the novel. The final chapter of *Blood Meridian* presents a summary of the twenty-eight years of the kid's quest and his death in a toilet "at the hands of his old comrade-in-arms, the seven-foot tall three-hundred-pound hairless albino Judge Holden," who is "a man of incredible savagery, and great intellectual facility" (234). At one point in the novel, he evokes the malevolent whiteness and sprawling enormity of Moby Dick, and is depicted as "pale and bloated manatee" (167)—a direct reference to Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*.[2] At the very end of the novel, he becomes the only survivor of the gang, and a one-page epilogue, which is essentially a parable of the frontier, concludes the work.

Blood Meridian is terrifying on many levels. As some critics maintain, it is the most violent western novel ever written in American literary history (Sansom 6; Sepich, "What Kind" 125). The intensity and amount of violence and toxicity in the novel

[2] The judge, with his enormous size, whiteness, and ultimate eeriness resembles Melville's whale. The presence of the quote in both his personal papers and in the novel itself confirms the sense of so many readers that McCarthy had *Moby Dick* in mind when writing *Blood Meridian* (Cormac McCarthy Papers, Box 19, Folder 13).

shocks the reader. Yet, as Dana Phillips elucidates, the early reviews of the novel concentrate on its "outlandish aesthetic and moral territories resorted to striking but desperate oppositions" (433). As she maintains, *Blood Meridian* is a mixture of "Hieronymus Bosch and Sam Peckinpah; of Salvador Dali, Shakespeare, and the Bible; of Faulkner and Fellini; of Gustave Dore, Louis L'Amour, Dante, and Goya; of cowboys and nothingness; of Texas and Vietnam" (434).

Critics who are interested in Southern fiction are inclined to accept McCarthy as the successor of William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor. Considering his gothic fiction, with its Faulknerian language and diction and O'Connorian humor, interpreting McCarthy as a southern writer is not unreasonable. After all, his gothic fiction presents "something redemptive or regenerative, something affirming mysteries," similar to William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor (Phillips 435). In terms of its treatment of violence, McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* resembles O'Connor's and Faulkner's fiction—e.g., "A Good Man is Hard to Find," "The Dry September." However, in McCarthy's fiction, violence is not a stand-in for something else. As Dana Phillips points out, Cormac McCarthy "lacks O'Connor's penchant for theology and the jury-rigged symbolic plot resolutions that make theology seem plausible" (435).

On the other hand, those who consider McCarthy a western writer, such as Hall and Wallach, tend to analyze *Blood Meridian* as a critique of the Wild West and American exceptionalism. As such, *Blood Meridian* is simultaneously a Western and an anti-Western. McCarthy disrupts traditional western narratives in his treatment of these emblematic mythico-historical themes. His writing presents a revisionist and contradictory narrative that both reinscribes the histories of white settler colonialism and upsets numerous western archetypes. There are elements of his novels that fall in line with boilerplate Westerns and classic romance, yet he questions and undermines such tropes as they are being presented. As Vince Brewton conveys, McCarthy writes "authentic westerns using the basic formulas of the genre while avoiding the false sentimentality, uncritical nostalgia, and unearned happy endings that often characterize the genre" (133). Similarly, Neil Campbell asserts that McCarthy's novel "peers into the abyss of western American history and bears fictional witness to its terrifying and spectacular events" ("Liberty" 218). Additionally, Sara Spurgeon points out that *Blood*

Meridian "presents a perverted . . . mythic structure few besides McCarthy has dared to gaze at unflinchingly" ("The Sacred," 97). "Here is the bloody tie," she adds, "binding the West's mythic past to its troubled present, here in this mythic dance is the violent birth of national symbolic that has made cowboys out of scalphunters and Indian killers" (98). Moreover, in *Violent Adventure* (2003), Marilyn C. Wesley maintains that McCarthy's novel "exposes . . . violence as a ruinous basis for both personal manhood and communal integrity" (70). Thus, it can be argued that *Blood Meridian* resists categorization, which enables McCarthy to criticize the formation of toxic masculinity on the frontier. As a matter of fact, as the analysis in the chapter will illustrate, *Blood Meridian* stimulates alternative readings of traditional western culture and frontier/toxic masculinity.

In the classic Western, a self-reliant, heroic American cowboy typically takes center stage. He is seemingly unswayed by the influences of modernization and industrialization that were changing America during the nineteenth century. In *The Strenuous Life* (1901), Theodore Roosevelt shared the fear of many of his contemporaries that "declining birth rates among white upper class women would eventually lead to race suicide if something was not done to reverse the trend" (14). Thus, he advocated "the virtues of the strenuous life on the Western frontier" (15). In order to encourage the trend, Roosevelt wrote *The Winning of the West* (1889-1896), in which he asserts that "western conquest was the crowning and greatest achievement of a series of mighty movements" (22). He argues that "in the struggle for existence that prevailed on the frontier, victory would go to the stronger race," of course with the help of the white cowboys (24). Thus, the West was won by American men who were "rugged, tough, adventurous, resourceful and exceptional" (22). As Richard Slotkin states in *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, "in Roosevelt's fanciful 'race-history' of the nation, a heterogeneous mix of Anglo, German, Dutch, Scots-Irish, and other so-called Teutonic races were fused into one people and this hybrid super race was winning the west" (44). Yet, as Slotkin points out, Roosevelt's range of races was extremely discriminatory; it disregarded other masculinities, such as those of black, Native American, Mexican and Chinese cowboys in the formation of the frontier. As a matter of fact, Roosevelt's frontier myth was

entirely connected to Frederick Jackson Turner's white, exclusory and totalizing frontier thesis, "a story whose power," as Bill Brown comments,

> is precisely that of epic containment—the production of a history of national consolidation so monumental that it diminishes other events and obscures other realities of the West. The narration of the West aestheticizes the genocidal foundation of the nation, turning conquest into a literary enterprise that screens out other violent episodes in the nation's history. (31)

Turner's frontier thesis, which supposedly links westward expansion to progress, fails since, among other things, it does not represent women and minorities, and promotes the exploitation of the land and its resources. The reality is that with the closing of the West came defeat, failure, death, destruction, and frustration.

In his *Remapping Southern Literature: Contemporary Southern Writers and the West*, Robert Brinkmeyer analyzes the trend among southern writers to use the West as a landscape in their fiction. This trend, he claims, "fundamentally challenges the generally accepted parameters of what we designate as 'southern' or 'western' and more generally as 'regional' fiction" (3). Analyzing a wide range of southern authors such as Cormac McCarthy, James Dickey, Dorothy Allison, Richard Ford and Barbara Kingsolver, Brinkmeyer states that these authors redefine the West in the national imaginary. In their fiction, they question the western genre and its deceitful ideals and unfulfilled commitments as promoted by Theodore Roosevelt, Frederick Jackson Turner, and other westward expansionists. In other words, the West becomes a "geography of terror," rather than a "geography of hope" (Kollin, "The Genre" 586). Hence, these writers demythologize American masculinity and the history behind it and highlight the toxicity of frontier masculinity.

As a "counter narrative to the overly sanitized rhetoric of Manifest Destiny" (Eaton 160), *Blood Meridian* poses the question: what is American masculinity? Its depiction of toxic masculinity and enormous brutality act as a counter myth that challenges patriarchy, cowboy masculinity, and the pernicious lies they propagate. The novel interrogates cowboy masculinity so thoroughly that even its western spaces degenerate; the landscape inherently threatens to consume the cowboys and transform them into something less than human, rather than encourage their masculinity as so many earlier Westerns do. In fact, in the novel the landscape and the cowboy intermingle: "as they

rode [they] turned black in the sun from the blood on their clothes and their faces then paled slowly in the rising dust until they assumed once more the color of the land through which they passed" (McCarthy, *Blood* 161). In the course of the novel, the cowboys are described as "beings provoked out of the absolute rock and set nameless and at no remove from their own loomings to wander ravenous and doomed and mute as gorgons shambling the brutal wastes of Gondwanaland" (172). It is clear how the landscape and the cowboys who wander through it are deprived of identity and language, becoming little more than embodiments of "loomings." Here, McCarthy fashions a vision of America, of cowboy masculinity, and by extension a vision of the world from which there is no exit.

As an anti-Western, *Blood Meridian* is a violent treatment of frontier themes in American culture and literature. In an attempt to unravel the cowboy myths of the West, the novel questions the formation of national and regional masculinities and reveals the underside of frontier life. As Susan Kollin points out, unlike classical western narratives,

> *Blood Meridian* does not offer a region whose promise and possibility were somehow lost at a certain point in history, but a West fully corrupted from the moment Anglos arrived. The western landscape that is supposed to be a test of character, bringing out the best in the hero and the worst in the villain, is emptied of its sacred qualities, becoming instead a fully defiled, profaned space. And unlike Westerns that depict the region as a prelapsarian garden and space of retreat for the American hero, McCarthy's text features an anti-Edenic landscape whose ownership is violently contested and overturned by the group of mercenaries. ("The Genre" 562)

As Kollin discusses, *Blood Meridian* has abundant depictions of the frontier as a "desecrated and violent terrain, with death serving as the most prevalent feature of this land-scape" (563). McCarthy's frontier is a "terra damnata" (62), a "purgatorial waste" (64), a place illuminated by "a urinecolored sun" (McCarthy, *Blood* 43). At one point in the novel, McCarthy portrays this sun elaborately: it "rose out of nothing like the head of a great red phallus until it cleared the unseen rim and sat squat and pulsing and malevolent behind them" (44). Thus, this violent description of the landscape and even the book's title indicate that the creation of a western identity is a bloody act. In other words, violence governs *Blood Meridian*.

In one of his interviews, McCarthy clarifies his own philosophy of violence:

> There's no such thing as life without bloodshed, . . . I think the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea. Those who are afflicted with this notion are the first ones to give up their souls, their freedom. Your desire that it be that way will enslave you and make your life vacuous. (Woodward 36)

In accordance with his philosophy, McCarthy does not advocate bloodless coexistence and fraternal bonding among his male characters. Instead, in his novel, he fictionalizes toxicity, which is embodied by the antagonist wholeheartedly. In the fourth chapter, for example, "a legion of horribles, hundreds in number, half naked or clad in costumes attacks the filibusters":

> The murdered lay in a great pool of their communal blood. It had set up into a sort of pudding crossed everywhere with the tracks of wolves or dogs and along the edges it had dried and cracked into a burgundy ceramic. Blood lay in dark tongues on the floor and blood grouted the flagstones and ran in the vestibule where the stones were cupped from the feet of the faithful and their fathers before them and it had threaded its way down the steps and dripped from the stones among the dark red tracks of the scavengers. (60)

The Comanches' violent, grisly aggression is portrayed in over four pages. At the end of this episode in the novel, the narrator points out that some of the Native Americans "fell upon the dying and sodomized them with loud cries to their fellows" (55). Passages like these—with the words such as "genitals" and "heads" abound in the novel. The unobtrusive allusion to the Native Americans' unbridled sexuality exemplifies the toxicity in the formation of frontier culture in *Blood Meridian*. Cormac McCarthy highlights the fact that this toxic masculinity was not only an attitude, but also a demographic and geopolitical reality of frontier culture and American masculinity.

McCarthy also critiques the myths of American national identity in his first western. According to Barcley Owens, *Blood Meridian* "should be read against a background of revisionist histories of the American West" and Manifest Destiny. The novel illustrates how Manifest Destiny is built upon violence and death. According to Robert L. Jarrett, "the ideology of Manifest Destiny held that one race, the Anglo-Saxon, combined with the political form of republican government, comprised an elect nation that held the true title to the American landscape" (*Cormac*, 71). Hence, the grand narrative built a frontier devoid of law in which toxic masculinity and violence manifested itself in different ways.

For example, in San Antonio, the kid encounters Captain White, an embodiment of Manifest Destiny and white male privilege, as his name suggests, who "has taken it upon himself to revive the Mexican War" with his companions (33). He says that they fight for Mexico: "Lost friends and brothers down there. And then by God if we didn't give it back. Back to a bunch of barbarians that even the most biased in their favor will admit have no least notion in God's earth of honor or justice or the meaning of republican government" (33). He legitimizes the mass slaughter of Native Americans and Mexican Americans by stating that they were "dealing with a people manifestly incapable of governing themselves. And do you know what happens to people who cannot govern themselves? That's right. Others come in to govern for them" (35). Captain White speaks in the language of Manifest Destiny and claims that the huge territory belongs to WASPs because Native Americans and Mexicans are not capable of controlling it. He reasons that given that there is neither God nor government in Mexico, what choice do white Americans have as Christians but to help them? As "whiteness" is not a trait that can be acquired, Captain White brings whiteness to them, thereby justifying a kind of genocide (or at best slavery) in the name of Christian democratic rule. Considering himself and his gang "to be instruments of liberation in a dark and troubled land," he represents the incarnation of Manifest Destiny and builds his toxic masculinity on violence and theft and uses it to suppress other masculinities. As Linda Townley Woodson elucidates, the cowboys in *Blood Meridian* establish their masculine identity through "the misguided logic of Manifest Destiny" (272). The lawless land that has "the blind ethics of an essentially false, imperfectly formed excessively masculine society" breeds toxic masculinity, which posits the deeply misguided fact that "only masculinity predicated on violence and racial purity has the power to control" (272). Thus, the kid agrees to ride with Captain White because without White's supplies, he would not be able to survive.

At the very beginning of the novel, when the narrator portrays the protagonist as coming to Texas on the boat "a pilgrim among others," McCarthy he begins the process of defiling American values. He continues the process when he portrays African Americans on the plantations as

> blacks in the fields, lank and stooped, their fingers spiderlike among the bolls of cotton. A shadowed agony in the garden. Against the sun's

> declining figures moving in the slower dusk across a paper skyline. A lone dark husbandman pursuing mule and harrow down the rainblown bottomland toward night. (4)

Here, McCarthy parodies and renders grotesque America's romantic antebellum imagery and exceptionalist values. Moreover, by unraveling the "myth of the virtuous American cowboy and his frontier quest," *Blood Meridian* "becomes a meditation on the brutal past of American frontier history, laying bare the acts of conquest requiring in advancing US claims throughout the region" (D. Phillips 434). However, it is important to highlight that *Blood Meridian* appears to re-envision other minorities "not directly back into the dominant tropes of the western cultural imaginary based on white, masculine monadic mastery, but also disturbingly similar versions" (Mayne 6). Analyzing the history of western expansion and slavery in *Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (1987), Patricia Limerick points out that in this context, the frontier myth has conventionally performed significant cultural work "producing a kind of western exceptionalism which depicts the region as somehow standing apart from the rest of the United States as a unique development" (18). Accordingly, whereas the legacy of slavery still resonates for many Americans, the legacy of western expansion remains at best underestimated, or at worst forgotten by most Americans, with the exception of Native Americans:

> Southern historians successfully fought through the aura of moonlight and magnolias, and established slavery, emancipation, and black/white relations as major issues in American history. . . . Conquest took another route into national memory. In the imagination, the reality of conquest dissolved into stereotypes of noble savages and noble pioneers struggling quaintly in the wilderness. . . . In Western paintings, novels, movies, and television shows, these stereotypes were valued precisely because they offered an escape from modern troubles. . . . An element of regret for "what we did to the Indians" had entered the picture, but the dominant feature of conquest remained "adventure." Children happily played "cowboys and Indians" but stopped short of "masters and slaves." (Limerick 19)

As this excerpt indicates, westward expansion operates as a complicated rhetorical method, "a trope that produces exceptionalist ideologies" while excluding crucial discussions, especially on the practice of toxic masculinity and the turbulent consequences for women and minorities.

In his reevaluation of the genre, McCarthy does not include fully articulated female characters in his narrative, an absence that runs through his gothic fiction as well. In the novel, there are no fleshed-out female characters. Those who do appear are usually silent; they are dead or otherwise exist only as objects of memory, much like women in grand masculinist narratives of the American frontier. As McCarthy describes one of these stereotypical female characters, who died in childbirth: "The mother dead these fourteen years did incubate in her own bosom the creature who would carry her off. The father never speaks her name; the child does not know it. He has a sister in this world that he will not see again" (3). Women in McCarthy's novels are also often Mexican sex workers, or "authentic" Native American women, who are likewise quiet and passive. Here, *Blood Meridian* depicts Native American women as lazy, dimwitted and slow:

> When the first dogs barked Glanton roweled his horse forward and they came out of the trees and across the dry scrub with the long necks of the horses leaning out of the dust avid as hounds and the riders quirting them on into the sun where the shapes of the women rising up from their tasks stood flat and rigid in silhouette for a moment before they could quite believe in the reality of that dusty pandemoniac pounding down upon them. They stood dumb, barefoot, clad in the unbleached cotton of the country. They clutched cooking ladles, naked children. At the first fire a dozen of them crumpled and fell. (174)

Despite the general revisionist tendencies in *Blood Meridian*, Native Americans remain passive "creatures," erected as "objects in a shooting gallery" like "crumpled like pieces of paper" (174). In this context, McCarthy reaffirms a prevailing western American hierarchy of power. However, the lack of fully-articulated female characters in *Blood Meridian* ironically makes the writer well suited to the Western's broader concerns—its indissoluble bond with hegemonic masculinity—thus suggesting that it might be an intentional device used by McCarthy to underscore this connection. In *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (2002), Jane Tompkins argues that as "a masculinist form," the Western genre "defines itself against the feminized narratives of the East" (201). Thus, it can be argued that McCarthy has eliminated the presence of women in his westerns in order to focus entirely on toxic masculinity on the frontier and especially Judge Holden, the antagonist of the Western, who is the archetypal articulation of toxic masculinity in *Blood Meridian.*

1.3. The Judge and His Toxic Philosophies

Within the lawless state of toxicity, Judge Holden functions as the anchor of toxic masculinity. He only appears in the last twenty-six pages of Samuel Chamberlain's *My Confessions* (1860), but plays a much larger role in *Blood Meridian*. According to Chamberlain's memoir, there

> was a man of gigantic size called 'Judge' Holden of Texas. . . . He stood six feet six in his moccasins, had a large fleshy frame, a dull tallow face destitute of hair and all expression. His desire was blood and women. . . . Holden was by far the best-educated man in northern Mexico; he conversed with all in their own language, spoke in several Indian lingos, at a fandango would take the Harp or Guitar from the hands of the musicians and charm all with his wonderful performance, and out-waltz any poblano of the ball. He was "plum centre" with rifle or revolver, a daring horseman, acquainted with the nature of all the strange plants and their botanical names, great in Geology and Mineralogy, in short another Admirable Crichton, and with all an arrant coward. (271–272)

McCarthy's antagonist possesses all these traits, except fearfulness. He is a dancer, politician, lawyer, musician, scientist, magician, naturalist and he gives commands in five languages. McCarthy also attributes him with more violent characteristics. Echoing *My Confessions*, the ex-priest Tobin portrays Holden in the novel as

> That great hairless thing. You wouldnt think to look at him that he could outdance the devil himself now would ye? . . . And fiddle. He's the greatest fiddler I ever heard and that's an end on it. The greatest. He can cut a trail, shoot a rifle, ride a horse, track a deer. He's been all over the world. Him and the governor [Trias of Chihuahua] they sat up till breakfast and it was Paris this and London that in five Languages, you'd have give something to of heard them. (McCarthy 123)

McCarthy takes the judge out of the self-aggrandizing stories of Chamberlain's memoir and embodies him with toxic masculinity. As some critics assert, McCarthy's Judge Holden "is a huge messianic figure, a kind of Ahab crossed with Conrad's Kurtz crossed with Charleston Heston's Moses" (Aldridge 94). Rick Wallach adds that "[a]long with Charles Brockden Brown's Carwin, Melville's Ahab, Flannery O'Connor's Tarwater and Nabokov's Kinbote, Holden ranks among those great literary scoundrels who combine cunning and malignity with scene-stealing charisma and masculinity, and defy our efforts to explain their currency by reference to their origins" ("Judge" 125). James Dorson advances a reading of the judge as a figure of the law, positing him as a concealment of the "emptiness and despair that haunts the living

world" (*Counternarrative* 117). However, his existence in the novel serves as a powerful agent through which other cowboys are subjected to toxic authority. The reader witnesses this act when the cowboys willingly accept his toxic philosophies, and thereby symbolically submit to his ideological framework of power, and control:

> In the afternoon [the judge] sat in the compound breaking ore samples with a hammer, . . . holding an extemporary lecture in geology to a small gathering who nodded and spat. A few would quote him scripture to confound his ordering up of eons out of the ancient chaos and other apostate supposings. The judge smiled.
> Books lie, he said.
> God dont lie.
> No, said the judge. He does not. And these are his words.
> He held up a chunk of rock.
> He speaks in stones and trees, the bones of things.
> The squatters in their rags nodded among themselves and were soon reckoning him correct, this man of learning, in all his speculations, and this the judge encouraged until they were right proselytes of the new order whereupon he laughed at them for fools. (McCarthy 122–123)

The judge holds the power to sanction and validate the ideas they already possess, or to set different rules of obedience for the cowboys. This is mainly because the judge has mastered the art of marking and representation. As a doctor of philosophy, he travels with other cowboys, and gathers, catalogs and draws numerous natural and historical phenomena. He collects rare butterflies, kills and stuffs animals; he can instruct on geology, ancient Greece and the exodus of the Anasazi. His education on geology separates him intellectually and spiritually from the other cowboys. As Dan Moos states, he "allows only his vision of the things into his notebooks. If the object is inanimate, he must destroy it. If it is alive, he must destroy its animate qualities, its life" (28). As the judge claims, "the freedom of birds is an insult to me. I'd have them all in zoos" (199). According to this understanding, "the representation of object validates its existence; only through representation can some object be comprehended and thus contained" (Moos 29). He sketches "potsherds, bone tools and a sixteenth-century footpiece from a suit of armor" that he has detected in the desert. After evaluating and drawing, he puts them into the fire, declaring his intention to expunge them from the memory of men: Much satisfied with the world, as if his counsel had been sought at its creation" (McCarthy 140). In the Hueco Tanks, he wanders among the petroglyphs, copying out those certain ones into his book to take away with him, and before he

departs, he annihilates “one particular design” (173). He retains control over everything through distortion of the original sources. His representations are almost perpetually accompanied by acts of violence and toxicity, and he destroys anything that challenges his authority and toxic philosophies.

Throughout the novel, the judge celebrates his toxic masculinity. Indeed, this toxicity is even inscribed upon the land itself, where the judge and the cowboys find “graven on the rocks above them pictographs of horse and cougar and turtle and the mounted Spaniards helmeted and bucklered and contemptuous of stone and silence and time itself” (145). As Ken Hanssen puts it,

> cumulatively, all these cultural artifacts and traces not only ground the narrative in a specific historical moment, but also establish it within the larger progression of Western imperialism, a position that challenges the reader to consider the depredations of the Glanton gang not merely as isolated instances of barbarous excess but the inevitable expression of a Western culture predicated on genocidal violence. (185)

In the novel, the judge appears to legitimize westward expansion when he claims that “all progression from a higher to lower order are marked by ruins and mystery and a residue of nameless rage” (147). His philosophy in demonstrating the origins of warfare is terrifying. He claims that “before man was, war waited for him” (240). He believes that “war is the testing of one’s will and the ultimate game” (250). By reasoning that “war is god” (250), he considers war to be unavoidable and eternal—a natural drive that advocates hegemony and superiority and destroys all other masculinities. As he claims, “even in this world more things exist without your knowledge than with it and the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way” (206).

With these words, the judge instructs his marauding followers—those cowboys who have aligned themselves with the judge’s toxic pursuits—about the nature of the world. The world, the judge argues, is chaotic and inherently without order; whatever order it appears to have is an order American men bring to it, which is narrated as a mythology of their own creation. The stories they tell—the manhood myths they develop and pass down to succeeding generations—are complicated, yet fragile, inventions because mythmaking is an act of imposing temporary order on a permanently disorganized world.

Since the kid is illiterate, he is astounded by the judge at the beginning of the novel. As George Guillemin argues, “the kid remains mostly silent and talks only in random, monosyllabic utterances hardly enough to sustain a dialogue. It is the narrator who speaks for, but not though the kid, while the judge monopolizes the novel’s monologues” (255). Since the narrator is not assertive in the text, the judge and his toxicity dominate the narrative. He appreciates textuality, masculine verbosity and language as much as he appreciates violence. Thus, like the protagonist, the reader is also exposed to the toxic philosophies of the judge and can either choose to internalize or reject them.

In the novel, language plays a crucial role in that the antagonist utilizes it like a weapon to advocate, manipulate, and penalize those who do not absorb his toxicity. As Joshua J. Masters points out, “as suzerain, as an overlord or hegemonic force who command all other forms of power, the judge has complete textual control, and thus the power to strip things naked in the act of naming” (32). Thus, the reader can “find only the judge’s voice, for he provides the coherence, the order, the meaning that defines the cowboy’s pilgrimage west” (26). The absence of narrative authority in the novel gives the judge absolute power. As Barcley Owens argues, “in the second half of the novel, the judge patiently explains the philosophy behind what we are witnessing. As the judge’s rhetoric increasingly intrudes upon the primary narrative, he takes on the metafictional quality of an author-figure” (50). By using language, he manipulates social structures. For instance, when he disarms the Mexican officers after the gang’s extreme barbarism, he uses ambiguous classical and judicial language—“he adduced for their consideration references to the children of Ham, the lost tribes of Israelites, certain passages from Greek poets”—and through his linguistic mastery—“he began a laborious introduction in Spanish—to ramble the situation away” (88–89). Thus, the judge uses his seemingly erudite language to move seamlessly through narrative and heteronormative toxic spaces.

The judge is particularly toxic when he performs masculinity that only values himself and his ability to do harm to others. The harm of toxic masculinity is amplified when he is in a position of dominance. His standards of toxic masculinity are impossible to comply with, and the inability to meet his lofty standards, to become a “true man,” only

enhances the toxicity. The cowboys who are desperate to attain these standards and the judge's approval act out violently in the novel. As the captain of the gang, mentor and judge of toxicity on the frontier, he explains and presents ethical justifications for the toxic activities the cowboys commit, which initially makes him irresistible to the kid. As Joshua J. Masters explains,

> the kid finally lacks the Adamic capacity to name and create, and his illiteracy . . . functions as a defining feature; he lacks the judge's textual capabilities. The judge claims that language and the knowledge necessary to apply it are the keys to creating and preserving power; thus, the kid's lack of that text-making ability engenders his failure and leads to his death. (35)

The illiterate kid becomes a symbol of the failed cowboy since he cannot live up to the judge's toxic language and philosophies. Even though he is associated with the gang and presumably takes part in scalping and other violent acts they perpetuate, he is condemned by the judge who claims; "there's a flawed place in the fabric of your heart. Do you think I could know? You alone were mutinous. You alone reserved in your soul some corner of clemency for the heathen" (312).

For the judge, the kid's resistance to toxic masculinity indicates the treachery of a father by a son. Since he rejects the judge's toxic philosophies, he deserves to die. According to Jay Ellis, "the judge's verbal virtuosity overwhelms the indifferent narrator who never morally comments on the events of the novel. The narrator seems to invite the reader to make his or her judgements and to assign meaning to the text, thus situating her or him as a culpable participant in the carnage" (25). Similarly, George Guillemin states that "nowhere in the novel does the narrative voice devote itself to the question of ethics, not even by pointing out the conspicuous absence of moral positions" ("See," 241). The lack of "moral positions" also encourages the reader's to resist the judge's toxic philosophies, which will become meaningful in the epilogue of the novel.

1.4. The Kid as a Failed Cowboy

Cormac McCarthy's description of the cowboys' satyromania as an embodiment of toxic masculinity has, over the years, received a great deal of criticism. For instance, Robert L. Jarrett claims that *Blood Meridian* is "pornographically violent" (*Cormac,* 32). Steve Shaviro states that the Western "sings hymns of violence, its gorgeous language commemorating slaughter in all its sumptuousness and splendor" (143). Caryn

James points out that this sexual, masculine toxicity "comes at the reader like a slap in the face." Denis Donoghue calls the novel's violence "excruciating," while Leo Daugherty asserts that there is no sense in reading "such an excessive, doom-obsessed, bone-chilling novel of blood" (169). However, McCarthy utilizes violence and toxicity to tarnish the cowboy narrative and to illustrate the futility of this kind of masculinity. In his analysis of anti-heroes in Westerns, Jesse Matz points out that

> characters in modern Western novels are not heroes: they are rarely singled out for their superior traits, and they rarely achieve much. If anything, they are worse than normal. . . . In the larger scheme of things, there is a long and steep descent from the epic heroes of myth and legend to the *anti-heroes* of modern fiction. The former were far better than average, superior to their environments, and destined for triumph; the latter are weak, disaffected, and passive, undone by circumstance, and lucky to make it through at all. (45)

Instead of allowing his protagonist to claim redemption though acts of conquering triumph, McCarthy portrays a cowboy who does nothing but pursue a cowboy identity in the name of heroism. The protagonist does not perform the toxic masculinity the judge expects of a cowboy. Thus, he emerges as an apathetic anti-hero in the context of toxic masculinity.

As Jenni Calder argues in *There Must Be a Lone Ranger: The American West in Film and in Reality* (2016), more than any other genre, the Western is based on creating "a certain kind of cultural hero. The code is a strict one: decency, courage, patience, loyalty, not just for their own sake but because they are the things that make life bearable" (177). Calder adds that traditionally, the cowboy figure "has a certain boyishness and charm; any elements that might be considered unwholesome have to be purged from his character in order to allow him to remain sympathetic with audiences" (198). One would expect this from the kid, but McCarthy subverts this archetype with his protagonist, much like he subverts the entire Western genre with *Blood Meridian*. By doing so, the novel becomes what Richard Slotkin calls "a serious object of inquiry" (380). As he conveys in *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century* (2002), "only at the moment when it develops 'adult' topics, when it begins to mediate on subjects such as the problems of frontier violence or the hero's ambivalence toward the codes" (380), is the Western unmooring itself from the frivolousness of the

genre—something that *Blood Meridian* accomplishes through its examination of the senseless violence and brutal sexuality that characterize toxic masculinity.

McCarthy continues his critique of the genre by questioning the figure of the child through the kid. The protagonist evokes the image of the "man with no name," a loner and outlaw on the American frontier. By alluding to romanticized historical outlaws such as Billy the Kid and Jesse James, McCarthy once again questions the masculine characteristics attributed to these Wild West rebels.[3] Interestingly, he does not capitalize his protagonist's name. He is no more, has little if any significance, and the cowboy hero is dissolving into forgotten chapters of American history. Depicted as a character known only as "the kid," whose lack of a surname indicates his rootlessness, the protagonist begins his quest out of concern for his masculinity. As Robert L. Jarrett argues, like Huckleberry Finn, the kid "undertakes the American masculine romance of lighting out for the territory" (64). The characterization of the protagonist as a cultural descendant of Huckleberry Finn is central to this construction of American masculinity. Huckleberry Finn's literary doppelganger, the kid, sets off for the frontier in order to test "whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay" (McCarthy, *Blood* 5). His father "has been a schoolmaster," "lies in drink," and "quotes from poets whose names are now lost" (4). In sharp contrast, the protagonist "can neither read nor write," but "in him broods already a taste of mindless violence" (4). Consequently, he heads out alone to discover himself and his masculinity by escaping from his sozzled father at age thirteen, and "will not see again the freezing kitchenhouse in the predawn dark" (4).

The kid's coming of age begins when he finds a job on a ship. At the gateway to the West in St. Louis, he boards a "flatboat" that much like Huck, takes him on a journey down the Mississippi River, leading him to the city of New Orleans (4). Here, at the intersection of three empires (French, Spanish and American), he is "finally divested of all that he has been," and starts to wander the streets and "hears tongues he has not

[3] In his correspondence with Howard Woolmer, McCarthy reveals that while writing the novel, he read Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left Handed Poems* (1970), a revisionist Western that resonates in McCarthy's text. A narrative of the life of Billy the Kid through poetry, prose, and historical photographs, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left Handed Poems* foregrounds the violence of the West in ways that call to mind McCarthy's forays into the Western genre (Cormac McCarthy Papers, Box 35, Folder 1).

heard before" (4). He "lives in a room above a courtyard behind a tavern and he comes down at night like some fairybook beast to fight with the sailors. He is not big but he has big wrists, big hands" (McCarthy 3-4). Initially in the narrative, the protagonist tries to prove his masculinity by enacting and sustaining violence. He fights with a group of sailors, and his manhood is affirmed. During his quest, he encounters "parricide in a crossroads hamlet" (4). It is as if the protagonist's correlation with parricide has disconnected him from his family, permanently cutting his metaphorical umbilical cord. "Only now" the narrator scrutinizes, "is the child finally divested of all that he has been. His origins are become as remote as his destiny" (5).

Suddenly cut off from all the conventional markers of identity, the kid enters into the business of westward expansion. He leaves Mississippi and goes to Texas, where he becomes a member of a gang of scalp-hunters who intend to slaughter everyone in their path. The opportunity to travel with the cowboys seems like a gift from heaven for it allows the protagonist to exert fully his manliness. That is why he engages in homicidal acts early in the novel, just like the rest of the gang. For example, without any reason, the kid whips a man, just to earn favor with the gang:

> Kick his mouth in, called Toadnive [one of the gang members]. Kick it.
> The kid stepped past them into the room and turned and kicked the man in the face. Toadvine held his head back by the hair.
> Kick him, he called. Aw, kick him, honey.
> He kicked.
> Toadvine pulled the bloody head around and looked at it and let it flop to the floor and he rose and kicked the man himself. Two spectators were standing in the hallway. The door was completely afire and part of the wall and ceiling. They went out and down the hall. The clerk was coming up the steps two at a time.
> Toadvine you son of a bitch, he said.
> Toadvine was four steps above him and when he kicked him he caught him in the throat. The clerk sat down on the stairs. When the kid came past he hit him in the side of the head and the clerk slumped over and began to slide toward the landing. The kid stepped over him and went down to the lobby and crossed to the front door and out. (13)

Later in the narrative, the protagonist is sentenced for wearing White's clothes and the children make fun of him. Feeling emasculated, his reaction is a violent one: "He picked one [a rock] from the dust the size of an egg and with it dropped a small child cleanly

from the wall with no sound other than the muted thud of its own landing on the far side" (72).

Unlike the righteous cowboys of the Old West, the kid is unvirtuous and dishonest as he combats the other members of the scruffy gang. He is certainly not a symbol of western promise and its future. Instead, he is an "allegorical figure for a depraved America—the youthful nation—which is portrayed here as fallen and corrupted from its very inception" (Kollin, "Genre" 566). While presenting the young protagonist in this brutal manner, the novel also undermines a pivotal theme in American literary history. In *The Reign of Wonder: Naivety and Reality in American Literature* (2010), Tony Tanner claims that in the nineteenth century, American literature relied on a fascination with the state of youth. As he describes,

> the naïve vision of the child has been put to far-ranging uses in American literary history. A major problem facing [white] American writers was simply, overwhelmingly, the need to recognize and contain a new continent. The wondering vision was adopted as a prime method of inclusion and assimilation and still functions as the preferred way of dealing with experience and confronting existence. (10)

Thus, in American literature, "the reign of wonder" is used to explain the social and cultural demands of hegemonic society while promoting westward expansion.

Even though McCarthy uses the figure of youth in his Gothic and Western fiction, *Blood Meridian* begins with a parody of the "childlike wonder" often found in American literature:

> See the child. He is pale and thin, he wears a thin and ragged linen shirt. He stokes the scullery fire. . . .
> At fourteen he runs away. He will not see again the freezing kitchen house in the predawn dark. . . .
> A year later, he is in Saint Louis. He is taken on for New Orleans abroad a flatboat. Forty-two days on the river. At night the steamboats hoot trudge past through the black waters all alight like cities adrift. They break up the float and sell the lumber and he walks in the streets and hears tongues he has not heard before. He lives in a room above a courtyard behind a tavern and he comes down at night like some fairybook beast to fight with the sailors. (3-4)

Here, the narrator uses the singsong voice of children's literature in order to evoke an image of archetypal innocence through simple storybook language. Images of children or childishness recur throughout the novel so that this imagery constitutes a central

allegorical theme in the novel. By deploying sententious language and keeping descriptions of the protagonist to a minimum, the novel seems to lack sophistication. However, in this context, this writing style actually presents a parody of the innocent wonder tradition, which is enforced when the protagonist wanders further and further away from this simplicity to toxicity.

Comparing and contrasting the protagonist with Huckleberry Finn—the most well-known boy narrator in American literature—as an immoral and unprincipled reversal of this character, some critics argue that "McCarthy unsettles the comfort and solace that the youthful point of view typically provides Anglo audiences" (Phillips 439). In his description of the protagonist, he describes him as someone who "can neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence. All history presents in that visage, the child the father of the man" (4). Depicting the West and its history as corrupt, and the toxicity in the protagonist's development a result of this, McCarthy's kid requires "no fall from grace" and demands no affection from readers. In the rest of the novel, the kid embodies toxic behavior and executes carnage, becoming as violent and as toxic as the adult men. Unlike classic Western narratives, *Blood Meridian* considers youth as dangerous and as dispensable as any of the older men in the novel. The protagonist, for example, is described as "threatening from his birth," since his mother becomes his first sacrifice, a mother "who did incubate in her own bosom the creature who would carry her off" (4).

Likewise, McCarthy also revisions the patience of the cowboy, which is so admired in the Western genre. The following passage exemplifies the desperation, melancholy, and hopelessness of McCarthy's cowboy:

> He [the kid] cited the terrain before him in periodic flare of the lightning. . . . In the distance before him a fire burned on the prairie. . . . He sat and watched it. He could not judge how far it was. He lay on his stomach to skylight the terrain to see what men were there but there was no sky and no light. He lay for a long time watching but he saw nothing move. (215)

Thus, it can be inferred that the "patience" of the classic cowboy is futile in *Blood Meridian*, which is dominated by a mood of restlessness.

McCarthy also problematizes the cowboy's sexuality and gender performance. Even though the kid does his best, he cannot experience masculinity at the exaggerated level

of the judge and thus cannot become a "real man." According to the judge, the only cowboy who can dance is one "who has seen horror in the round and learned at last that it speaks to his inmost heart" (331). Even though the judge asks him to dance naked in front of him, the kid refuses to engage in this queer moment. However, according to the judge's toxic philosophy, dancing naked in front of other men is not queer, but rather a sign of confidence in one's masculinity and heterosexuality; although, as I will discuss at the end of this chapter, some critics also interpret this as signaling the judge's sexual crimes (pedophilia and rape, followed by murder), which further toxifies the masculinity he represents. Nevertheless, the protagonist is doubtful about his own sexuality, which may be one reason why he refuses. At one point in the narrative, like Holden Caufiled in *The Catcher in Rye,* the kid cannot perform sexually with a sex worker. As Jay Ellis states, "McCarthy shows us the kid's failure sexually. The kid's inability to perform with the prostitute . . . makes it clear that in place of the judge's dance, the kid has no alternative procreative power. In this sense, he is still 'the kid' in relation to the judge as authority" (165). He becomes a foil for the judge's toxic masculinity and fails to live up to his masculine standard. Even though the protagonist attempts to construct a masculine identity, his attempts remain insufficient and misguided outside the toxic philosophies of the judge. His inability to construct an alternative definition of masculinity situates him as an abortive cowboy who has failed in his quest.

1.5. A Voice of Dissent against Toxic Masculinity

Although he takes part in the violence of the Glanton gang, the kid ultimately abandons them, trying to develop a healthier masculine identity beyond the judge. He starts to believe that the idea that "war is God" contributes to toxic masculinity, wickedness and depravity. He also realizes that one does not need to be a "demigod" to be a cowboy (333). Even though his illiteracy prevents him from standing up to the judge, he is able to escape his toxic doctrines. According to Joshua Masters, "because the kid has preserved a capacity for judgement, mercy, and morality, he has preserved some portion of himself outside of the judge's textual domain" (35). As opposed to the rest of the gang "who accept the judge as their de facto leader" (McCarthy 306), the kid rebuffs him. The judge realizes the kid's intention in the following passage:

> You came forward . . . to take part in a work. But you were a witness against yourself. You sat in judgement on your own deeds. You put your own allowances before the judgements of history and you broke with the body of which you were pledged a part and poisoned it in all its enterprise. (307)

He assumes that the kid expresses his distaste because he is weak. On the contrary; the kid realizes that he must repudiate the toxic doctrines of the judge, despite the fact that with this repudiation comes an admission of weakness.

As Jay Ellis states, the kid "represents the hope that in every man there does not live an instinct for violence, racism, and destruction, that in some there exists an instinct for salvation and compassion and healing. Even though that person might not recognize it as such" (128). Thus, the protagonist's repudiation of the judge's toxic masculinity suggests hope for an alternative masculinity that does not subjugate women and other masculinities though oppression and violence. In the narrative, even though he has the opportunity to murder the judge, he does not. Yet the judge does not see this as a show of strength, but as another sign of weakness: "no assassin, called the judge. And no partisan either. There's a flawed place in the fabric of your heart. Do you think I could not know? You alone were mutinous. You alone reserved in your soul some corner of clemency for the heathen" (300). By resisting the judge's toxic masculinity, which is based on barbarism, racism and homophobia, and preferring to escape to the wilderness, the kid "becomes a guide for each traveler passing through the wilderness" (Spurgeon 96). Through his escape, he establishes a definition of masculinity that includes benevolence, empathy and tenderness. The kid explores this alternative masculinity when he tries to admit his violation of the land to a dead Native American woman:

> He saw alone and upright in a small niche in the rocks an old woman kneeling in a faded rebozo with her eyes cast down. . . . She was very old and her face was gray and leathery and sand had collected in the folds of her clothing. . . . He spoke to her in a low voice. He told her that he was an American and that he was a long way from the country of his birth and that he had no family and that he had traveled much and seen many things and at war and endured hardships. He told her that he would convey her to a safe place . . . or she would surely die. (315)

He unburdens himself as an "American," comes to terms with the toxic philosophies of the judge, and even apologizes to Mexicans and Native Americans for his country's violation of their territories. Although he initially takes part in the carnage the judge espouses, he ultimately provides a voice of dissent, tries to find alternatives to toxic

masculinity, and creates a possible life outside the toxic philosophies that at one point he had embraced.

In the final part of the novel, McCarthy depicts the last twenty-eight years of the kid's traumatic and agonizing life in prison. After evading the judge, the kid is sentenced in California, and goes through a serious breakdown as a result of his dreadful involvement in the gang. As the narrator notes, "in his cell he began to speak with a strange urgency of things few men have seen in a lifetime and his jailers said that his mind had come uncottered by the acts of blood in which he had participated" (317). He escaped the judge to find an alternative masculinity, but saw more of the same world into which he had been initiated. In 1878, the kid returns to Texas and encounters the judge in a bar, who comments:

> The last of the true. The last of the true. I'd say they are all gone under now saving me and thee. Would you not?
> He tried to see past him. That great corpus enshadowed him from all beyond. He could hear the woman announcing the commencement of dancing in the hall to the rear.
> And some are not yet born who shall have cause to curse the Dauphin's soul, said the judge. He turned slightly. Plenty of time for the dance.
> I aint studyin no dance.
> The judge smiled.
> You're here for the dance, he said.
> I got to go.
> The judge looked aggrieved. Go? Drink up, he said. Drink up. This night thy soul may be required of thee. (334)

Once again, the judge enunciates his toxic doctrines through a comprehensive lecture on the act of "dancing." Nevertheless, the protagonist is not affected by this annoying and bloody "celebration," which also involves the killing of a dancing bear (334). Because of his toxic nature, he abuses and exploits animals. In order to make himself look brave and overbearing on this occasion, he psychically torments the harmless bear.

Blood Meridian closes in Judge Holden's outhouse toilet in Griffin, Texas, with this enigmatic scene:

> Then he [the kid] opened the rough board door of the jakes and stepped in.

> The judge was seated upon the closet. He was naked and he rose up smiling and gathered him in his arms against his immense and terrible flesh and shot the wooden barlatch home behind him.
> In the saloon two men who wanted to buy the hide were looking for the owner of the bear. The bear lay on the stage in an immense pool of blood. All the candles had gone out save one and it guttered uneasily in its grease like a votive lamp. In the dance hall a young man had joined the fiddler and he kept the measure of the music with a pair of spoons which he clapped between his knees. The whores sashayed half-naked, some with their breasts exposed. In the mudded dogyard behind the premises two men went down the boards toward the jakes. A third man was standing there urinating into the mud.
> Is someone in there?
> I wouldn't go in.
> He hitched himself up and buttoned his trousers and stepped past them and went up the walk toward the lights. The first man watched him go and then opened the door of the jakes.
> Good God almighty, he said.
> What is it?
> He didn't answer. He stepped past the other and went back up the walk. The other man stood looking after him. Then he opened the door and looked in. (333-334)

At the very end of the novel, the narrative shifts from the outhouse toilet to the judge who "dances in light and in shadow and he is a great favorite. He never sleeps, the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die" (335). As his dance illustrates, the kid cannot heroically construct a toxic masculinity in the eye of the Judge, a suzerain of toxicity of the western frontier. He rejects the judge's doctrine that a cowboy must internalize war as "his god" in order to dance "the dance of masculinity" (330). "Only that man who has offered up himself entire to the blood of war," the narrator comments, "who has been to the floor of the pit and seen horror on the round and learned at last that it speaks to his inmost heart, only that man can dance" (331). Here, it seems as if the judge rapes and kills him.

In their analysis of the ending of the novel, critics surprisingly deal very little with the kid and the humiliation he feels because of his desire for an alternative masculinity. In *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*, Vereen M. Bell states that the antagonist is a "murderer of innocents—of a Mexican boy, of an Indian girl, of a mere puppy, and of the kid" (135). Tom Pilkington claims that the protagonist's end "is presided over by Judge Holden, a bloated angel of war and death" (318). Likewise, in "The Dance of

History in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian,*" John Emil Sepich argues that the protagonist "meets death in an outhouse in Griffin, Texas in 1878, at the hands of a former compatriot named Judge Holden" and attributes an argument on the "motive behind the murder" (16). They are inclined to see that at the end of the novel, the judge rapes and slaughters the protagonist in the jakes in Griffin, Texas.

In the novel, the narrator does not explicitly suggest these interpretations; yet, he hints that the final confrontation between the protagonist and the antagonist is an act of sexual violence (rape). The most significant hint is the antagonist's correlation with another sexual crime, pedophilia, which along with rape and murder, renders his toxic masculinity even more toxic. In his article "'If God Meant to Interfere': Evolution and Theodicy in *Blood Meridian*," Christopher Douglas argues that the excessive sexual accusations the judge brings against himself was a relevant issue for readers in the 1980s. Accordingly, "although pedophilia and bestiality were not among the usual catalogue of sexual sins, the 1980s were known for regular scandals featuring fundamentalist and evangelical preachers, often situated in the South in what had been known as the Bible belt" (84). Even though the novel is set in the 1850s, McCarthy might have reflected these ideas through the judge's sexual crimes (rape and pedophilia).

The judge's pedophilia is alluded to when the cowboys discover a "half-breed boy in the ruined presidio at Santa Rita del Cobre" (McCarthy 116). As described in the novel, "he is maybe twelve years old. He was naked save for a pair of old calzones and makeshift sandals of uncured hide" (116). From the very first moment, the boy attracts the judge's attention. When he asks, "who is this child?" the rest of the gang shrug. When the boy appears during the bloody "nocturnal rainstorm," he "watched them [the gang] with his dark eyes" (117). Later in the novel, a member of the gang "reported the judge naked atop the walls, immense and pale in the revelations of lighting, striding the perimeter up there and declaiming in the old epic mode" (119). The next morning the cowboys find the boy slaughtered: "His neck had been broken and his head hung straight down and it flopped over strongly when they let him onto the ground" (119). The narrator thus provides some evidence that the antagonist may have sexually molested and killed the boy.

In another scene in Nacori, a Mexican man tries to kill the judge,

> But the judge was like a cat and he sidestepped the man and seized his arm and broke it and picked the man up by his head. He put him against the wall and smiled at him but the man had begun to bleed from the ears and blood was running down between the judge's fingers and over his hands and when the judge turned him loose there was something wrong with his head and he slid to the floor and did not get up. (179)

The way the judge breaks the victim's skull, just like cracking a walnut, indicates his enormous power and his attitude towards murder by "inflicting a head injury" (180). Later on in Blood *Meridian*, he narrates a story about an Apache boy—a replica of the above-mentioned story concerning the "dark-eyed boy"—whom the judge "dandles on his knees, then scalps" (224). The last example of his sexual crimes is given during the Yuma revolt. As the narrator points out, "when the Indians break into the judge's quarters, where they find the idiot [a disabled child named James Robert] cowering naked in the floor. Behind them also naked stood the judge" (275). Here, the judge targets a helpless and voiceless disabled child whom he abuses, rapes, and discards.

Samuel Chamberlain's *My Confession*—the unique account of the historic character Judge Holden—provides a similar account of the Judge. Chamberlain points out that the judge's "desire was blood and women," which included raping and murdering female children. He illustrates his point with an episode in which the Judge was "suspected of having foully violated and murdered a girl of ten" (271). However, in *Blood Meridian* McCarthy changes the victimized children's sex. In other words, his victims, who suffer the fallout of the judge's toxic masculinity, are all male. McCarthy's alteration of the historic account of Judge Holden contributes to his intention of highlighting the kid's alternative, nontoxic, masculine sensibilities, as well as his rejection of the androcentric, hypermasculine, hyperheterosexual nature of the frontier experience.

From the very beginning of the novel, the kid is obsessed with following the cowboy code. Thus, he is always on guard for any threat to his masculinity. After the cowboys return to Texas territory, they are taken to the jail due to their "depredations south of the border" (305). While the protagonist awaits his execution, the judge mocks the kid and intimidates him. Even though he is still young and naive, he "makes no concessions and vows again that 'I ain't afraid of you'" (307). Since he believes that he will be executed very soon, "quick death by gunfire is not an especially frightening alternative" (307).

The judge attempts to take advantage of the situation by forcing himself on the kid, asking him to "Let me touch you" (307). This attempted sexual assault terrifies him, and the kid reacts by recoiling, even though he knows that acquiescing might help him escape execution. He remains faithful to the cowboy's heterosexual code and "had rather hang than submit to what the judge was suggesting" (308). He displays a similar commitment to the cowboy's code a couple of pages later, after he manages to escape from jail. A male tavern patron tries to sexually assault the kid since he thinks he is "a male whore" (310). Yet, the kid "summarily knocks him senseless in a mudroom there where there was no light" (311). Another character in the novel, Elrod, a young man who collects bones on the plains of Texas, calls the protagonist a "whoremonger" (322). According to Patrick Shaw,

> while his [the kid's] contact with women of any station has been infrequent, he has experienced whores. In the Texas coastal town when he is only fifteen the "whores call to him from the dark like souls in want" (5). Thereafter whores frequent the narrative, as in the closing episode at the Griffin brothel. Such heterosexual contact is common to the frontier life the kid has led and is explicitly approved by the male culture, which directs that life. (114)

The kid thinks Elrod is referring to male/male sexuality, which is something the kid rejects, and he threatens to kill Elrod. He warns his friends: "I see him back here I'll kill him" (322). When he sees Elrod at night in his camp, true to his word, the protagonist murders him. Committed to the cowboy ethos and its strict heterosexual masculinity, the kid identifies with "the intense androcentric codes that [it] dictates" and what Justin Evans has described as "the whole blind ethics of an essentially false, imperfectly formed excessively masculine society" (61). That is why the final episode in the jake in Griffin is so devastating for the kid.

As a cowboy, the kid has lived in the mountains, on ranches, as well as on prairies for over thirty years. Thus, the judge's toxic masculinity can also be considered as a violation of the landscape that epitomizes his freedom. As Vince Brewton argues, the kid embodies the physical and spiritual sustenance of the West (129). When he is in open spaces, he has a chance to defend his masculine honor as he does a few times in the narrative. Yet, the jake episode at the end of the novel indicates his inability to move beyond these open spaces, and represents the immensity of the antagonist's threat to the

kid's alternative masculine identity.

Moreover, it can be claimed that McCarthy is also highlighting the end of frontier masculinity with the death of the kid. As Dianne C. Luce states in "Landscapes as Narrative Commentary in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West*," between 1861 and 1878, "institutions East of the Mississippi produced the Civil War, the assassination of Lincoln, Reconstruction, the venality of Grant's administration and numerous other atrocities emanating from Manifest Destiny" (3). The conquest of trans-Mississippi America became heroic, as did the grand narrative of the triumph of civilization over savagery and wilderness. In 1861, at the beginning of the Civil War, the kid disappears in the narrative and he returns as a "man" in 1878, at the end of Reconstruction, when he confronts the judge at the end of the novel. When he disappears in 1861, "millions of buffalo herds still roamed, the plains Indians still thrived, and the encroachment of the industrial east was still minimal" (3). Like the kid, "the trans-Mississippi frontier was yet youthful, tough, and essentially natural" (3). However, when he returns to Texas, the settlement of the West has already been completed; nature and the wilderness have been tamed by the industrial violence of the cowboys. They are no longer "bleeding westward like some heliotropic plaque" (78) as they are depicted at the beginning of the novel, but have returned home as "dusty and travelworn" (313). In 1878, when the kid diverges from "the last pale light in the west" (324), he threads his way through "ghostly piles of bones," or the remains of the thousands of slaughtered buffalo in. As Diane Luce further explains,

> the great buffalo herds had been eliminated to feed the Eastern hide trade, the tribes had been starved into submission, and piles of bleached bones were the sole legacy of both. These bones in turn were collected by the bone pickers, converted to fertilizer, and soon followed the hides across the Mississippi to nourish capitalist greed and Eastern gardens. (3)

Thus, the end of the trade can be considered as the end of the protagonist's cowboy codes and his inevitable death. As the sex worker who dances with the bear in Griffin utters twice, "it's all over." (330). The reader has an obvious feeling that something has come to an end. When the judge rapes the protagonist in the jake, it can also be suggested that he betrays the kid's sexual, psychological and historical values and offends his alternative masculine sensibilities. By the end of the novel, the western spaciousness, which is represented by the kid's obsession with his freedom and

masculinity, has been exhausted and dies along with the protagonist.

After killing the kid, the judge dances naked "saying that he will never die," claiming immortal power through his body:

> And they are dancing, the board floor slamming under the jackboots and the fiddlers grinning hideously over their canted pieces. Towering over them all is the judge and he is naked dancing, his small feet lively and quick and now in doubletime and bowing to the ladies, huge and pale and hairless, like an enormous infant. He never sleeps, he says. He says he'll never die. He bows to the fiddlers and sashays backwards and throws back his head and laughs deep in his throat and he is a great favorite, the judge. He wafts his hat and the lunar dome of his skull passes palely under the lamps and he swings about and takes possession of one of the fiddles and he pirouettes and makes a pass, two passes, dancing and fiddling at once. His feet are light and nimble. He never sleeps. He says that he will never die. He dances in light and in shadow and he is a great favorite. He never sleeps, the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die. (335)

According to Patrick Shaw, "this triumph over the kid is what the exhibitionistic and homoerotic judge celebrates by dancing naked atop the wall," just as he had done after raping the other boys ("The Kid's" 118). Even though the protagonist is aware of the judge's toxic masculinity, he is ultimately powerless against it. The judge knows that the protagonist never thoroughly succumbed to his will and because "he cannot allow autonomous life to exist save by his dispensation" (McCarthy 199), he must ravage the protagonist as he ravages the little birds whose freedom "is such an insult to him" (199). His dance of immortality gives the message that the patriarchal system, which is reinforced by toxic masculinity, will dominate American society indefinitely.

1.6. Conclusion

Even though *Blood Meridian* ends with the death of the protagonist and the judge engaging in a celebratory dance, McCarthy also includes an epilogue:

> In the dawn there is a man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground. He uses an implement with two handles and he chucks it into the hole and he enkindles the stone in the hole with his steel hole by hole striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there. On the plain behind him are the wanderers in search of bones and those who do not search and they move haltingly in the light like mechanisms whose movements are monitored with escapement and pallet so that they appear restrained by a prudence or reflectiveness which has no inner reality and they cross in their progress one by one that track of holes that runs to the

> rim of the visible ground and which seems less the pursuit of some continuance than the verification of a principle, a validation of sequence and causality as if each round and perfect hole owed its existence to the one before it there on that prairie upon which are the bones and the gatherers of bones and those who do not gather. He strikes fire in the hole and draws out his steel. Then they all move on again. (337)

As the epilogue suggests, there is one man and two groups of people who dissent. The man is a firebringer, or a hell raiser, and is not like the rest. The two groups pursue the firebringer like clockwork. The narrator also describes an "escapement and pallet"—instruments that are used to regulate and adjust ratchets that work at different speeds, as in a watch. It can be inferred that one group recalls the past, while the other has misremembered or disregarded the bones. In his interpretation of the epilogue, Harold Bloom claims that "the man striking fire" is "the new Prometheus rising up against hegemonic society" (26). Apparently, in the novel, the judge embodies textual autonomy, through which he pursues complete mastery. Thus, the kid's existence represents a threat, or counter autonomy though which the judge may be measured or destroyed. The kid is associated with fire from the very beginning of the narrative; he was born in 1833, "the year it rained fire." Moreover, his identification with the fire represents the "perpetual creative potential of human beings" (Bloom 27). As Jordan Carson suggests, "the judge's rhetoric finally holds the key to its own demise: he must have an audience who is convinced for his verdict to abide" (21). The kid rejects the judge's toxicity by refusing to dance his dance of death at the end of the narrative. The fire which the protagonist represents is transferred to the reader who is now expected to resist the judge's toxic masculinity. Just as Prometheus took fire away from the gods and transferred it to human beings, the kid passes fire onto the reader. He situates the reader in a significant position and provides hope for American masculinity.

In conclusion, *Blood Meridian* exemplifies the demythologization process of the American West and cowboy masculinity. As a revisionist Western, it protests and exposes the once popular view of the frontier as a place of honor and romance. It depicts the ambiguity and anxiety surrounding frontier masculinity and criticizes the dominant toxic tropes of the western American imaginary as regressive. As opposed to the honor found in classical Westerns, failure and anti-romance are the key components of *Blood Meridian*. McCarthy exemplifies the contours and consequences of simplified,

toxic forms of cowboy masculinity in the novel. Thus, McCarthy not only challenges the mythic codes and notions on which the genre usually relies, but also debunks frontier cowboy masculinity. As McCarthy illustrates, the cowboy is no longer the chivalric hero of the frontier. Rather, he is a peripatetic wanderer who gets caught in the mindless cycle of violence he encounters in the borderlands.

Blood Meridian is a dark novel, and depicts a malignant form of toxic masculinity born out of the violence of the American West, where women were few and toxic masculinity manifested itself in different ways. McCarthy illustrates the widespread and relentless physical and sexual violence that characterized the West through toxic masculinity. He articulates that toxic masculinity is multi-faceted, involving power and dominance, particularly over other masculinities, aggression and violence, and emotional suppression. The novel's engagement with toxic masculinity differentiates it from traditional cowboy narratives. Thus, it functions as a satire of frontier myths—specifically of the toxic masculine codes and those white men who slaughtered Native Americans and Mexican Americans, animals and plants, even ancient petroglyphs, in its pursuit. As Lauren Brown elucidates, the kid represents one means by "which Judge Holden and thereby (symbolically) the US sociopolitical narrative cannot fully forestall accounts that challenge and undermine its exceptionalist discourse. The kid's remains traumatize those who see them; his remains spectrally signify as a counter-testament to that record from which the judge would have him expunged" (88). Through such depictions, McCarthy recalls both the traumatic violence of the American West and its place within American narratives of manhood and collective memory.

Because of its engagement with the implicit realities of the West, a legacy that is still exalted and eulogized by American men, *Blood Meridian* is a perfect example of how work in the field of Masculinity Studies is unraveling the official, mythologized history of American manhood and its reliance on toxicity. Through his novel, McCarthy "gives voice to its anonymous victims producing an encounter that, by breaking with traditional modes of understanding, creates new ways of gaining access to a historical catastrophe for those who attempt to witness it from afar" (Caruth 156). Such projects are imperative in Masculinity Studies since as the judge reminds the reader, "men's memories are uncertain and the past that was differs little from the past that was not"

(McCarthy 330). By subverting the predominant mythico-historical narratives of the Frontier, the novel questions the consequences of American men's acceptance of archetypal cowboy myths and highlights the gap between the mythologized history of American manhood and its modern realities.

Blood Meridian begins in 1849; Cormac McCarthy's next western novel, *All the Pretty Horses* in 1949, precisely 100 years later. Perhaps it is not a coincidence, since the most significant purpose of McCarthy's western novels is to convey the idea that time cannot erase the consequences of the cowboy myth. Hence, it lays the foundation for *The Border Trilogy,* both thematically and chronologically, by situating frontier masculinity within a circuit of relentless toxicity and violence that he attempts to relocate and redefine.

CHAPTER 2

"PLEDGED IN BLOOD":

UNATTAINIBLE COWBOY MASCULINITY IN

CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *ALL THE PRETTY HORSES*

> "What is most interesting about Westerns at the moment in history is their relation to gender, and especially the way they created a model for men who came of age in the twentieth century."
>
> Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (2002)

> "The masculinizing process . . . [is] one of American culture's most powerful and powerfully confused imaginative constructions. For it is the Western hero—unlike the leading men in any other genre—who is placed before us precisely to be looked at. And in that long oscillating look, we watch men still at work in the unfinished process of making themselves, even as we are encouraged that manhood doesn't need."
>
> Lee Clark Mitchell, *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film* (2016)

> "Most of them marry, and love their wives sincerely, but since their sociology idealizes women and their mythology excludes her, the impasse which results is often little short of tragic. Now, as then, the cowboy escapes to the horse, the range, the work, and the company of comrades, most of whom are in the same unacknowledged fix."
>
> Larry McMurtry, *In a Narrow Grave: Essays on Texas* (2010)

> "I don't know what happens to country."
>
> John Grady Cole, *All the Pretty Horses* (1992)

The Appalachian South and the American Southwest function as Cormac McCarthy's fictional territory for his Southern gothic novels, and his first Western novel, *Blood Meridian* (1985). His second western novel, *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), the first volume of *The Border Trilogy*, takes up the same borderlands locale a hundred years after the beginning of *Blood Meridian*. It is no accident that the chronological gap is

precisely one hundred years. Cormac McCarthy's mid-career turn to the Western genre indicates not a retreat from—but a headlong engagement with a range of contemporary issues related to American manhood. Thus, his concern in making the one-hundred-year difference so exact implies that with the border novels, he wants to illustrate the futility of trying to perform or "play cowboy" in a world without such figures and without a place, or a frontier, for them to roam. In other words, he demonstrates the continuity of the crisis in American masculinity.

Indeed, *All the Pretty Horses* is the offspring of its predecessor, a requiem for an already vanished cowboy way of life, a code of cowboy honor, a mythical world birthed and ferociously murdered in *Blood Meridian*—world of the cowboy. As a matter of fact, in *All the Pretty Horses*, Cormac McCarthy and his cowboys cross the border into Mexico—a previously uncharted territory. The novel depicts a young American man crossing the border from a modern American present that cannot provide the satisfactions he desires, into a Mexico of an imagined past in which he hopes to fulfill the mythic roles that have structured his sense of identity. *All the Pretty Horses* represents this literal and figurative borderland, which is why this novel in particular is saturated with the histories, landscapes, and languages of this liminal area. [4]

While writing the novel, Cormac McCarthy composed two letters to American nature writer John Graves, focusing on his trips to Mexico to work on the novel. The first undated letter, likely written in late 1987 or January 1988, informs Graves that he had "made dozens of . . . scouting forays to Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and across the Rio Grande into Chihuahua, Sonora and Coahuila" (Cormac McCarthy Papers, Correspondence, Box 46, Folder 1). McCarthy describes one of his trips in the letter to

[4] His narrative practice in *The Border Trilogy* is often considered multicultural and bilingual, particularly for its abundant use of untranslated Spanish. The Wittliff Collections at Texas State University reveal this process in detail. While writing *All the Pretty Horses*, Cormac McCarthy penned several letters to his translator, Richard Estrada, to seek his advice on the Spanish language. In their correspondence, the translator suggests in his letter that McCarthy's "Spanish is pretty good, and "he didn't see much need for revising" (Cormac McCarthy Papers, Correspondence, Box 46, Folder 2). Richard Estrada makes his style less rigidly accurate, yet more vernacularly correct. For example, he advises that "while 'el' and 'yo' are pretty fundamental in the language, those words can be superfluous at times, especially in conversation" (Cormac McCarthy Papers, Correspondence, Box 46, Folder 2). It seems that in the published novel McCarthy took his advice seriously, and eliminated unessential articles and pronouns.

John Graves:

> I enjoyed your letter and your description of canoeing on the Pecos. What I want to do this spring is get down to Sonora and check out the Bavispe river. There is a lot of country down there that is just indescribably remote. I've been back to some of those villages in the Sierras and it is really like going back *a hundred years*. Wonderful people too. (Cormac McCarthy Papers, Correspondence, Box 46, Folder 1) (emphasis added)

McCarthy probably had such villages in mind when John Grady Cole, the protagonist of *All the Pretty Horses*, sees "small villages distant on the plain that glowed a faint yellow in that incoordinate dark and he knew that the life there was unimaginable to him" (257). The national iconography of Mexico, as well as its language, landscape and people, create an effectual setting for the novel, which is concerned with cowboys and border conditions in the 1950s. As McCarthy explains in another letter, "in general, Americans have not looked for Mexico in Mexico: they have looked for their obsessions, enthusiasms, phobias, interests—and these are what they have found" (Cormac McCarthy Papers, Correspondence, Box 46, Folder 1). The domestication of wilderness was an aspect of the nineteenth-century version of America's exceptionalist mythology and the cowboy, its romantic hero. Setting most of the novel in Mexico destabilizes the American national mythologies of manhood and cowboy identity.

In *The Border Trilogy*, Mexico becomes a space for his cowboys to try to reclaim dreams of the Frontier West. His cowboys travel not just west, but also south across the Mexican border, pursuing something that has disappeared in the modern Texas of automobiles and oil rigs. Their quest across the border turns into a requiem to the Old West, an effort to resurrect the cowboy codes of the frontier. In the trilogy, McCarthy continues to chronicle how his cowboys—embodiments of white frontier masculinity who participated in the masculinizing fantasies of the West, are poignantly undercut by failure and loss. As the first book of the trilogy, *All the Pretty Horses* deals with conventional heroism and determines the agenda of *The Border Trilogy*: an examination of their feasibility of the cowboy code in the twentieth century.

This chapter will analyze how John Grady Cole's, he sixteen-year-old protagonist in the novel, displacement and emasculation emanated from social, cultural and economic developments such as post-Fordist reconfigurations of masculinity and the Second Wave Feminism that would become associated with the second half of the twentieth

century. A life that adheres to the cowboy code seems vain and futile in Texas in the middle of the twentieth century, despite the protagonist's attempts to save the Cole family's ranch to stay in his homeland. On the contrary, he finds himself encircled by the increasing presence of American modernization. In other words, he initially associates the reason of his deracination with an altering economy. However, it becomes explicit that women's liberation—which was a concern of the 1990s when the novel was published—exacerbates his masculinity crisis. Cormac McCarthy exposes the deep crisis at the heart of frontier myths and uses the failing cowboy figure as a critique of an American culture that still positions white men in relation to cowboy masculinity, even though it is impossible to be the mythic cowboy in the twentieth century.

2.1. The Reemergence of Westerns in the 1990s

There exists a discernible and clear correlation between *The Border Trilogy* and the social and political discourse of the late 1980s and early 1990s. *All the Pretty Horses* also coincided with the emergence of the Mythopoetic Men's Movement, which was manifested by Robert Bly's *Iron John: A Book about Men* (1990). The book addresses the problems of white male identity at the turn of the century within the framework of Jungian psychology. Robert Bly concentrates on the deficiencies of the "soft male" in American society, which was caused by newly empowered feminism and an "alienation from deep masculinity" (31). He proposes connections with ancient myths and rituals, coming to terms with "fathers" in order to alleviate the masculinity crisis in the "feminized" American culture of the 1990s (32). Novels, such as Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996), which were written in the 1990s, exhibit such mythic male archetypes and praise the revival of masculinity as espoused by Bly's movement.

In the early 1990s, Hollywood also released a number of Western movies, such as *Unforgiven* (1992), *Tombstone* (1993), *Geronimo: An American Legend* (1993), *Wyatt Earp* (1994), *Bad Girls* (1994), *Wild Bill* (1995) and *The Quick and the Dead* (1995). Through this new generation of Westerns, Hollywood provided an escape from the difficulties that American men were encountering in the 1990s, such as the Persian Gulf War, and their shifting role in society as more and more women entered the workforce. Unlike the regressive Mythopoetic Men's Movement and these Hollywood films, *All the Pretty Horses* problematizes the laconic Western hero, cowboy masculinity, and the

mythic quest for masculine identity. McCarthy's cowboys are committed to a mythic cowboy story, an articulated story about a man and horse on the frontier, into which they can assimilate themselves. However, despite the efforts his cowboys make to achieve this "deep masculine" essence, they constantly fail at their purpose.

Numerous critics of Cormac McCarthy's oeuvre, such as Michael Evans, John Emil Sepich, Michael Herr, Kevin Cole and Vince Brewton, have read *Blood Meridian* and *The Border Trilogy* according to the political and cultural landscape of America at the time, which is best represented by President Ronald Reagan in the 1980s and the Gulf War with Iraq in the early 1990s. As Vince Brewton highlights,

> the correspondences between McCarthy's work and his times are part of a larger cultural equation whereby contemporary historical events influenced prevailing cultural attitudes on the one hand, and cultural production on the other, a form of influence manifested in film and literature generally, but felt with equal force in the arena of national media culture, in the campaigns for president in 1980 and 1984, and in the political discourse of the 1990s. . . . The influence of the popular mood in some form is visible in McCarthy's *Border Trilogy* that, though spanning the 90s in terms of publication, shows significant traces of both popular cultural discourse in the 1980s as well as imaginative legacy of the 1991 Gulf War. (132)

Similarly, scholars such as Daniel Cooper Alarcón and Josh Crain draw parallels between McCarthy's novels and the US involvement with Mexico, arguing that *The Border Trilogy* attempts to critique the United States' Mexican policies (Alarcón 143). Likewise, Josh Crain points out that the border novels "provide a fascinating gloss on this political and social issue by enacting illegal immigration in reverse. The heroes cross into Mexico, often illegally, and, finding themselves at odds with Mexican culture, struggle and ultimately fail to assimilate" (60). While it is true that all cultural artifacts must be considered a product of their times, ironically *The Border Trilogy* has never been analyzed from the vantage point of its historical context. Thus, John Grady's masculinity crisis also requires situating *All the Pretty Horses* in its historical context.

All the Pretty Horses begins in the fall of 1949 in Texas. The Cole ranch has already been sold because it was no longer profitable. Reluctant to let go of the cowboy legacy, the protagonist and his cousin, Lacey Rawlins, depart for a new frontier "in search of paradise" (McCarthy 59), or "a beautiful ranch surrounded on all sides by desert" (97). Despite being momentarily fortunate as cowboys, they lose the promised land because

of their involvement in a criminal event, and the protagonist's love affair with the landowner's daughter, Alejandra. The deceived landowner files a complaint with the authorities, and the protagonist and his cowboy buddy are sentenced to serve time "in a godless, violent prison" (110). They are released from prison with the help of Dueña Alfonsa, Alejandra's grand-aunt, who purchases their freedom by making an agreement with her niece to terminate her affair with the protagonist. After a last date, Alejandra chooses her family over the protagonist, and John Grady "returns home convinced that irremediable evil has entered him" (194). On his way back to his hometown, he reclaims "all the pretty horses" they have lost in Mexico and narrowly escapes killing a Mexican policeman whom the protagonist puts the blame for his misfortunes. Back in his American hometown, he turns into an outcast, "a ghost from the past" (301). After delivering his cousin's horse to him, the protagonist "can only pass on into the darkening world to come" (302).

2.2. Lighting Out for the Territory in the Post-Fordist Era

Fordism, as Andrea Wigfield defines in *Post-Fordism, Gender and Work* (2011), is a term used for the economic system of mass production and consumption in the United States between the 1920s and 1940s (11). Henry Ford was a figure who catalyzed the transformation of the US economy from an agricultural to an industrialized one. As a prominent symbol, his achievement was characterized by the largely popular Model T, which dominated the automobile industry during the 1920s. As Linda McDowell points out in "Life without Father and Ford: The New Gender Order of Post-Fordism," Post-Fordism was "a response to the crisis of mass production and consumption in the Fordist era in American society" (402). With the post-Fordist reorganization of workplaces and hierarchies in the 1950s, American men went through a relative loss in their social prestige and economic status. Apparently, "defined jobs and careers with which men were once identified were being transformed into contingent flexible roles loosely defined" (402). With their constant loss of power in the social hierarchy, American men could not keep up with the booming demands of "the ethic of success," and came to believe that they could no longer achieve the masculine social expectations of hard work, self-reliance, strength and material success (404).

Traditionally, those who sought refuge and an agrarian way of life in America set out West to pursue a frontier life on their own terms. Yet, as America developed in population and technology in the 1950s, the distinction between the East and West disappeared. As Richard White argues in *A New History of the American West* (2013),

> as sections of the West became powerful and populous, they became powerful and populous in ways that made them seem quite similar to older centers of power and population. The freeways and suburbs of Los Angeles, Texas and Phoenix, after all, seemed generic freeways and suburbs, differing only in their shrubbery from the turnpikes and suburbs of the East, South, or Midwest. (538)

The opening passage of the novel illustrates the changing nature of cowboy masculinity in the middle of the twentieth century. The protagonist's quest for cowboy manhood is stimulated by a flurry of disillusionments and frustrations. The novel begins with "a sense of loss, alienation, deracination and fragmentation" of cowboy identity (Morrison 175). At the very beginning of the novel, the protagonist attends the funeral of his grandfather, the last ancestral vestige of the family ranching tradition. As the narrator expresses, the Cole family has owned the ranch since 1866, a time when the westward movement was being completed following the 1862 Homestead Act and the Civil War:

> In that same year [1866] the first cattle were driven through what was still Bexar County and across the north end of the ranch and on to Fort Sumner and Denver. . . . In eighteen-eighty-three, they ran the first barbed wire. By eighty-six the buffalo were gone. The same winter a bad die-up. In eighty-nine Fort Concho was disbanded. (7)

As Jacqueline M. Moore points out in *Cow Boys and Cattle Men: Class and Masculinities on the Nineteenth-Century Texas Frontier* (2015), in 1889, oil was discovered in Texas. In the late nineteenth century, Pennsylvania was considered the leading oil producer in the United States. But in 1889, Texans struck oil in Spindletop and everything began to change. Over the next forty years, Texas became the center of oil exploration and production in America. As large investments poured into the state, Texans flocked to the oilfields, drawn by the potential of enormous wealth. In the process, the state's population began to shift from farms to cities (23). Fencing, of course, heralded settlement and thus the end of ranch culture. The Comanche, like the buffalo, were also gone, having been placed on reservations and allotments in the 1850s (42). As the narrator conveys in the novel, all that remains is "the faint trace of the old Comanche road" (McCarthy 5). Dianne C. Luce, who notes that "vanishing" is "a word

repeated over and over throughout the trilogy," also deduces that the protagonist's hometown is primarily marked by evanescence:

> [It] is a vanishing world, beginning with the death of John Grady Cole's grandfather and ending with the death of John Grady Cole himself [in *Cities of the Plain*] . . . From the title of *All the Pretty Horses* to the dedication of *Cities of the Plain,* the trilogy is a lullaby singing to sleep the vanishing cowboy. ("The Vanishing" 164)

However, the territory and its inhabitants have not yet thoroughly disappeared; they still exist as retrospective objects and hauntings that psychologically captivate and possess John Grady. Out on an evening ride in the West, the protagonist:

> could hear [the Comanche], the horses and the breath of the horses and the horses' hooves that were shod in rawhide and the rattle of lances and the constant drag of travois poles . . . and above all the low chant of their traveling song which the riders sang as they rose, nation and ghost of nation passing in a soft chorale across that mineral waste to darkness bearing lost to all history and all remembrance like a grail. . . . He turned south along the old war trail and dismounted . . . and stood like a man come to the end of something. (5)

The allusion refers to the already calcified narrative of Native American resistance and foreshadows the impending impossibility of constructing new frontiers and cowboy masculinities. The Native Americans can only exist on their own terms outside the circumference of "civilization," which has now come to hegemonically surround them. The progress of the frontier has disenfranchised the Native Americans, and the possibility for the production of new cowboy narratives has ended.

The disinherited family ranch becomes a haunted place that no longer exists, the ideal mythical territory for fulfilling cowboyism. As Mr. Cole tells the protagonist, "the country would never be the same. We're like the Comanches was two hundred years ago" (25). He mourns the loss of country as a cultural, figurative and physical space that cannot be revitalized. His father's "we" is utterly masculine, though it may also incorporate the entire American cultural landscape after World War II. In terms of their own familial and regional "we," Cormac McCarthy highlights the crisis that the protagonist and his father encounter as one of modernity and manhood. Like the Native Americans, the cowboys witness their control and dominance over the wilderness slipping away. The nature of cowboy masculinity and the frontier is conflict and chaos; "the war which was their life has never ended" (26), and it comprises the basis for the

changing frontier on the Texas border.

Cormac McCarthy references the end of the frontier myth in his portrayal of the fences, wires, automobiles in the West. Simultaneously, he also introduces the crisis of modern masculinity, particularly the dissipation of cowboy masculinity. By the middle of the twentieth century, cowboys no longer belonged to the American cultural landscape. According to Jacqueline Moore, "the postwar cowboy—a nonconformist of the Truman and Eisenhower years, but one whose countercultural identity was being usurped by a new generation of peripatetic nonconformists, the type of men immortalized in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957)—was becoming isolated and entirely idiosyncratic" (186). "How the hell do they expect a man to ride a horse in this country?" grumbles Rawlins, the protagonist's childhood friend, upon coming across another barbed wire fence on their way into the border. "They dont," is John Grady's short but accurate response (31). As John Blair elucidates, on the one hand, "Texas has become the United States in its larger, undifferentiated sense, a place where history is no more than the moment, where everything is new and everything is relative" (302). On the other hand, as the barbs on the fence signify, cowboys are not welcome in their own space anymore. Thus, McCarthy depicts Mexico as a masculine alternative that attracts cowboys such as John Grady and Rawlins.

In *The Last American Man* (2002), Elizabeth Gilbert discusses a "crisis" wherein Americans, people of an "impotent nation," are in conflict with the social and cultural repercussions of the post-Fordist era (225). She elucidates that the credit system and the relative abundance of labor in the 1950s led to a limited quality of life, causing widespread depression and anxiety among working class and minority American men:

> The basic needs of humanity—food, clothing, shelter, entertainment, transportation, and even sexual pleasure—no longer need to be personally labored for or ritualized or even understood. All these things are available to us now for mere cash. Or credit. Which means that nobody needs to know how to *do* anything anymore, except the one narrow skill that will earn enough money to pay for the conveniences and services of modern living. But in replacing every challenge with a shortcut we seem to have lost something. (14)

Her reference to "credit" and the "conveniences and services of modern living" demonstrate that she is interested in the social and cultural consequences of the post-

Fordist economy. She imagines that the ability to purchase "the basic needs of humanity" triggers a masculinity crisis. As such, she attributes America's impotence to an increase in consumption and a declining commitment to "*do[ing]* anything." Similarly, in his analysis of the economic change and "doing nothing" of the 1950s, Michael Kimmel also chronicles the problematic nature of white middle-class masculinity. As he argues,

> the structural foundations of traditional manhood—economic independence, geographic mobility, domestic dominance—have all eroded. The transformation of the workplace—the decline of the skilled worker, global corporate relocations, the malaise of the middle-class manager, the entry of women into the assembly line and the corporate office—pressed men to confront their continued reliance on the marketplace as a way to demonstrate and prove their manhood. (*Manhood* 197)

According to Kimmel, all of these social, economic, and political changes influenced American men, regardless of race, ethnicity, and class. However, middle-class, straight white men were most influenced. As he explains, "for these were not only the men who inherited a prescription for manhood that included economic autonomy, public patriarchy, and the frontier safety valve but also the men who believed themselves entitled to the power that attended on the successful demonstration of masculinity" (262). Perhaps, for the first time, they were doomed to fail. For women, on the contrary, the social and cultural repercussions of the post-Fordist economy increased their participation in the workforce, which enabled Second Wave Feminists to gain social and economic independence and thereby the power to resist male authority. They questioned the scripts imposed on women, struggled to eliminate the wage gap, and fought for equal protection under the law. They wrote about their experiences and tried to change the cultural meanings of gender. In a sense, women rediscovered their lives and found a way to express themselves. Their attempts to claim economic and sexual agency, thus, threatened traditional masculinity.

All the Pretty Horses exemplifies the masculinity crisis of white men in the middle of the twentieth century who are caught in a double-bind by the social and cultural upheaval associated with the post-Fordist economy as well as the gains of Second Wave Feminism. In the novel, there is a dramatic anachronism; John Grady inhabits postwar era Texas, which is evolving from a primarily agricultural to an industry-based society.

After his grandfather's death, Mrs. Cole takes over the ranch and, like many others did in the Southwest at the time, she trades it to big oil companies, indicating the death of the old way of life, and cowboy masculinity, on the ranch. John Grady is separated from his cowboy past, which is devastating for a young boy who thinks "that life on the cattle ranch in west Texas is the second best thing to dyin and goin to heaven" (18). Mrs. Cole pressurizes him to go to college, and wants her son to identify as a student, and not as a cowboy. She foresees that the postwar world will necessitate this shift: "You cant run a ranch," she insists, "you're sixteen years old" (15). Rather than going to college as his mother expects, the protagonist sets out on an adventurous nomadic journey in Mexico in order to reclaim his cowboy masculinity. He puts faith in the plausibility of what Richard Slotkin calls "a further frontier, a mythic space beyond the frontier, a mythic space beyond the Western landscape and American history—whose possibilities have been thoroughly used up" (280). That is why he imagines Mexico as a place where one could transcend the commodification of the cowboy (Holloway, "A False" 186). In other words, he sees Mexico as a paradise where he can actuate his cowboy dreams of living with horses and on vast expanses of land.

After his grandfather's funeral, the protagonist sets off, and sees a train symbolizing change and modernization "boring out of the east like some ribald satellite of the coming sun howling and bellowing in the distance" (McCarthy 3). The cowboys and their horses were replaced by this iron horse, which will, in turn, be replaced by the automobile. John Grady could "palpably feel the riders of that lost generation in the night, all of them pledged in blood and redeemable in blood only" (5). Thus, he comes to believe that the only way to be a cowboy in modern society is to be a part of a generational cycle "redeemable in blood only." In *The Gender of Desire: Essays on Male Sexuality* (2005), Michael Kimmel argues that this form of generational masculinity relies substantially on the outlook of patriarchal figures:

> The father is the first man who evaluates the boy's masculine performance, the first pair of male eyes before whom he tries to prove himself. Those eyes will follow him for the rest of his life. That nightmare from which we never seem to awaken is that those other men will see that sense of inadequacy, they will see that in our own eyes we are not who we are pretending to be. What we call masculinity is often a hedge against being revealed as a fraud, an exaggerated set of activities that keep others from seeing through us, and a frenzied effort to keep at bay those fears within ourselves. (188)

In the novel, the protagonist has "generations of fathers' eyes" on him, staring at him with their cowboy ethos forged out of westward movement, violence and toxic masculinity. Here, McCarthy implies that the protagonist's quest for manhood, much like those of the cowboys of previous generations (as exemplified in *Blood Meridian*), must run the gauntlet of toxicity.

With Mr. Cole's death, the Cole family tree vanishes. The protagonist's grandfather, as the narrator explains, had seven brothers, yet, they all had short lives: "They were drowned, shot, kicked by horses on the frontier. They perished in fires. . . . The last two were killed in Puerto Rico in eighteen ninety-eight," in the Spanish-American War (7). The cowboy line has dissipated on the toxic frontier, leaving the protagonist on his own. Thus, he must pledge in blood if he is to join the ranks of his ancestors, suggesting that not much has changed for the remaining cowboys of the 1950s. Violence and toxic masculinity will become a rite of passage for the protagonist, much like it was for his great-uncles, father, and grandfather.

2.3. A Response to Second Wave Feminism

While *All the Pretty Horses* shares themes with pulp Westerns from the first half of the twentieth century such as Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912) and Frank Dobie's *The Longhorns* (1941), it also resembles works of American literature that tackle the problematic bonding in father-son relationships. As Michael Kimmel points out in *Manhood in America*, "American novels often include a search for father—for legitimacy, perhaps, but also for the warmth and tenderness that readers felt lacking, since their real fathers were absent, preoccupied with their careers" (105). Like Huck Finn in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), Joe Christmas in William Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932), Quentin Compson in *The Sound and The Fury* (1929), Nick Adams in Ernest Hemingway's short stories, and J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), McCarthy's protagonist struggles against the specter of his father. Basically, the father figure in the novel is emotionally detached, absent, and somehow emasculated, and this is something that the protagonist must overcome.

The domestic environment in Cormac McCarthy's fiction is also problematic: it is mainly composed of men without women. His female characters are either tragic sex

workers or they assume silent domestic roles as passive wives and mothers who nurse the sick and prepare food for the men and the boys. His male characters are frontiersmen and, unlike traditional cowboys, they are unable to build long lasting dwellings. As Robert Blair claims in *Material Life in America, 1600-1860* (1997), "homesteading was traditionally a stable pattern of the same three steps performed over and over: one, two, three—hovel, house, home" (72). However, in Cormac McCarthy's novels, this process is mostly absent. His cowboys are unable to build structures, and thus meaningful relationships and families. In *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (1999), Susan Faludi elucidates that in the 1950s, "the loved one whom the man imagined himself supporting and protecting was often doing just fine on her own, and she didn't much appreciate his efforts to assert his authority" (29). Consequently, the 1950s male is doomed to failure since he can no longer tether himself to traditional male gender roles. As Faludi continues; "the frontier, the enemy, the institutions of brotherhood, the women in need of protection—all the elements of the old formula for attaining manhood had vanished in short order. The boy who had been told he was going to be master of the universe and all that was in it found himself master of nothing" (30).

In *All the Pretty Horses*, the family, including Mrs. Cole, has lost hope that the protagonist's father will return from the war; thus, they want to sell his belongings. He eventually returns to Texas in the late 1940s, five years after the end of World War II. The after-effects of the war are felt throughout the novel, as well as through the emotional, economic, and physical dilemmas that Mr. Cole endures. His dreadful experiences as a Japanese prisoner of war have left him a dysfunctional member of society; he is weakened, ineffectual, and emasculated in several ways. First of all, the narrator does not even reveal Mr. Cole's first name—he is not a patriarch deserving of a name, and in fact, elides his responsibilities as a father. He is a drifter who relies on café humor, reading the newspaper for entertainment, dwelling on trivial news about Shirley Temple's divorce (12). He admits, "I aint no freethinker, but I'll tell you what. I'm a long way from bein convinced that [life's] all that good a thing" (13). He leaves his wife when the protagonist is five years old and never reconciles with her, or establishes a relationship with his son. He has no property to bequeath, or any material signifiers of patriarchal authority: the ranch belongs to Mrs. Cole.

Even though Mr. Cole is egged on by John Grady and a lawyer, he does not try to claim ownership or control of the property during the divorce proceedings. Loneliness sets in, and the protagonist goes to town at night to look up at the hotel room where "[his] father's shadow would pass behind the gauzy window curtains" (15). Eventually, Mr. Cole's health deteriorates and he refuses to see a physician as his sorrow overcomes his will to live. John Grady has nothing to learn from his father, and during the last time they ride out together, he portends the father's death:

> So thin and frail, lost in his clothes. Looking over the country with those sunken eyes as if the world out there had been altered or made suspect by what he'd seen of it elsewhere. As if he might never see it right again. Or worse did see it right at last. See it as it had always been, would forever be. (23)

Mr. Cole passes away early on in the novel, before the protagonist's quest to Mexico. After his death, the male world of experience and the female world of language collide, resulting in a threat to John Grady's cowboy masculinity. Not only does he see his mother as the cause of his lost inheritance, but her values are antithetical to the western code he admires. While John Grady's conversations with his father are clipped, his mother's language is excessive, which the protagonist dismisses by saying that she thinks "she's in a play or somethin over in San Antonio" (13). Interestingly, in an earlier draft of the novel, McCarthy provides a more detailed conversation between father and son about his mother:

> Was she really in a movie once?
> Yeah, she was in a movie.
> She must of been young.
> She was. She was eighteen.
> (Cormac McCarthy Papers. 1st Draft. Page 15. Box 46. Folder 9)

However, he omitted this part in the published novel, which speaks volumes about the role of women in his novels. She, too, does not have a name in the novel, for in Westerns, mothers and wives are supposed to be an invisible part of the backdrop. As Michael Wainwright argues in "Too Far Gone: The Psychological Games of Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses,*"

> that neither Cole nor his father ever uses the Christian name of Cole's mother implies the psychological blanking that accompanies the compromised development of the boy's subjectivity. Ordinarily, cowboy culture operates according to a sexual division of labor, which expects women to superintend the space of domesticity, providing the physical and

> emotional background that not only supports men's economic labors outside the home, but also supplies and nurtures the laborers (both male and female) of the future. For the nascent subject, these social relations foreground the maternal while obscuring the paternal presence, a gendered asymmetry that the father's demands on the mother slowly begin to rebalance. (3)

However, in the novel, the protagonist's mother refuses to conform to these standards. In fact, it is implied that her actions as an independent, non-traditional woman bring about the loss of John Grady's inheritance and her son's troubled cowboy identity. John Grady believes this, and the conflict is played out in the subsequent scene, in which he unsuccessfully tries to convince Mrs. Cole to keep the ranch:

> I'd give you all the money. You could do whatever you wanted.
> All the money. You dont know what you're talking about. There's not any money. This place has barely paid expenses for twenty years. There hasnt been a white person worked here since before the war. Anyway you're sixteen years old, you cant run a ranch. (15)

Growing up in a patriarchal society, the protagonist believes that he has the right to tell his mother what to do. However, he is not aware of the ways in which women's roles were evolving in the middle of the twentieth century. His father explains how even he did not understand her: "your mother and me never agreed on a whole lot. She liked horses. I thought that was enough. That's how dumb I was" (12). His wife did not represent traditional nineteenth-century womanhood, but the New Womanhood of the twentieth century, which had an outstanding influence on feminism. As Maria Luisa Rame notes, "although the New Woman was becoming a more active participant in life as a member of society and the workforce, she was most often depicted exerting her autonomy in the domestic and private spheres in literature, theatre, and other artistic representations" (620). Moreover, men were no longer necessary by the middle of the twentieth century, especially after the Great Depression and World War II when women had learned to take care of themselves and their families in the absence of men. Consequently, cowboys such as Mr. Cole and the protagonist are confused and "left to negotiate the increasingly untenable terrain of traditional white manhood" by themselves (Reimer 433). Like his father, the protagonist is incapable of comprehending the changing role of women in society. He simply has no name for it, just as in the novel, there is no name for his mother.

At the very beginning of the novel, John Grady also breaks up with his girlfriend, who

rejects his romanticized cowboy ethos. She is not interested in a cowboy as long-term partner because their limited earning capacity indicates future familial economic instability. The narrator indicates that she is now dating a boy two years older than John Grady, "a boy who has got his own car and everything" (10). Before his quest into Mexico, the protagonist sees "her one last time in town. He'd been to Cullen Cole's shop on North Chadbourne to get a broken bridlebit welded" (27). The juxtaposition of his ex-girlfriend with the bridle bit is significant, and symbolizes John Grady's need to tame and control both women and horses as a patriarchal rancher. Just before leaving, "she held out her hand. At first he didnt know what she was doing. . . . He'd never shaken hands with a woman before" (29). Like his mother, his ex-girlfriend presents herself as an equal, someone capable of making her own decisions and exerting control over her relationships. However, because he had never experienced this before, he did not know how to process the handshake. As he walked away, up the street, "he didnt look back but he could see her in the windows of the Federal Building across the street standing there and she was still standing there when he reached the corner and stepped out of the glass forever" (29). Thus, she only makes sense to the protagonist when outlined like a picture in a conventional frame. As Nell Sullivan adds, the narrative "encloses her within a 'frame' so that she may never again exceed her proper limits" (169). Nevertheless, she breaks free from the frame in which John Grady contained her, just like his mother breaks free from the ranch where his father wished to confine her.

John Grady's experiences with his mother and his girlfriend shape his interpretation of a portrait of a group of horses in the dining room, a painting made by a female artist, that ironically only reinforces the Western's misogyny:

> The horses had been copied out of a book. They had the long Andalusian nose and the bones of their faces showed Barb blood. You could see the hindquarters of the foremost few, good hindquarters and heavy enough to make a cuttinghorse. . . . But nothing else matched and no such horse ever was that he had seen and he'd once asked his grandfather what kind of horses they were and his grandfather looked up from his plate at the painting . . . and he said those are picturebook horses and went on eating. (15-17)

The picturebook horses—juxtaposed with the protagonist's frustration with his mother and his girlfriend—are easily dismissed because they are not true to the male, cowboy experience, which is to say they are a product of the untrustworthy female imagination.

In *West of Everything* (2002), Jane Tompkins argues that the Western genre "owes its inception to late nineteenth century women's encroachment on conventionally masculine territory" (43). She claims that the genre

> created a womanless milieu, a set of rituals featuring physical combat and endurance, and a social setting that branded most features of civilized existence as feminine and corrupt, banishing them in favor of the three main targets of women's reform: whiskey, gambling, and prostitution. (44)

However, *All the Pretty Horses* also engages with the rise of Second Wave Feminism in the United States as it attempts to find space for women in an overtly patriarchal world, which remains dominated by increasingly anachronistic conceptions of masculinity. In other words, with *All the Pretty Horses*, McCarthy responds to Second Wave Feminism, which sought social, economic, political, educational, sexual and reproductive equality for (mostly white, middle-class) women. In the middle of the twentieth century, as Linda Kerber discusses in *Women's America: Refocusing the Past* (2016), American women "sought liberation from ways of thinking and behaving that they believed stunted or distorted their growth and kept them subordinate to men. Through the extension of their own personal liberation, they hoped to remake the male world, changing it as they changed themselves" (606). In the novel, McCarthy illustrates how the movement represented a seemingly revolutionary break with the tranquil rural life depicted in western novels.

John Grady's mother epitomizes this revolutionary role. As the attorney explains in the novel, "not everybody thinks that life on the cattle ranch in west Texas is the second best thing to dyin and goin to heaven. She dont want to live out there, that's all. If it was a payin proposition that'd be one thing. But it ain't" (17). He also assumes that she wants adventure and freedom of her own, beyond the ranch: "she's a young woman and my guess is she'd like to have a little more social life than what she's had to get used to" (18). Ultimately, she decides to sell the ranch and pursue her career as an actress, which mirrors her rejection of the protagonist when he was an infant. "We were married ten years before the war come along," Mr. Cole later explains to his son, "she was gone from the time you were six months old till you were about three. I know you know somethin about that and it was a mistake not to of told you. We separated. She was in California" (25). Immediately after he was born, she left him in the care of Mexican

maids, moving to California in order to pursue a career as an actress, thereby rejecting the traditional gender roles of wife and mother. Moreover, by terminating her marriage and selling the ranch, she deprives both men of any means of making money, rendering them emasculated. She does not "want the restrictions of married motherhood, which her own mother's position in the paternal homestead has prefigured" (26). Instead of conforming to the social expectations of the 1950s, she desires the freedom of single womanhood and pursues a career as an actress. In other words, she becomes a New Woman whose values are not aligned with those of the protagonist or his father.

John Grady makes a choice and decides to repeat and seek refuge in the past. He is a dreamer, an idealist, and he is willing to risk everything to realize the cowboy ethos. Before the protagonist leaves for Mexico, he sets off to see his mother's play at the Majestic Theatre in San Antonio in an attempt to learn why she has forfeited his inheritance and destroyed his "promised land" in America (McCarthy 21). Even though both of them have made their own personal choices, as Robert Jarrett points out, "[the gulf between mother and son is historical, between two versions of the contemporary Texan: the modern (the mother) who repudiates her ranching past for *art,* and the historicist (John Grady as son) who seeks to revive and repeat the past" (101). As John Grady watches her play, McCarthy seems to reinforce the Western's distrust of Mrs. Cole's decidedly female motives as an actress:

> John Grady Cole sat leaning forward in the seat with his elbows on the empty seatback in front of him and his chin on his forearms and he watched the play with great intensity. He'd the notion that there would be something in the story itself to tell him about the way the world was or was becoming but there was not. There was nothing at all. (21)

Nonetheless, McCarthy complicates the protagonist's decision by suggesting that as a cowboy, he himself is part of a performative world. Not only does a waitress in San Antonio accuse John Grady of being an actor of sorts—she asks him if he is in town "for the rodeo" (20)—but he also becomes part of his mother's performance. In *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* published just a year after *All the Pretty Horses*, Judith Butler speaks of "the tendency to think that sexuality is either constructed or determined; to think that if it is constructed, it is in some sense free, and if it is determined, it is in some sense fixed" (94). She then posits a third, more nuanced option, which she calls performativity. Performativity, especially of gender, is "not a

singular ‘act’ or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death compelling the shape of the production” (95). In *Taking It Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture* (2008), David Savran expands Judith Butler’s idea of gender performance one step further to “develop a corresponding theory of masculinity as masquerade,” in which masculinity is regarded as “a sequence of postures” (16).

John Grady embodies not only “authentic cowboyisms,” but also the performative qualities of cowboy masculinity. During the play’s intermission, he smokes what becomes an extraordinarily meaningful cigarette:

> [He] stood in a gilded alcove and rolled a cigarette and stood smoking it with one boot jacked back against the wall behind him. He was not unaware of the glances that drifted his way from the theatre goers. He’d turned up one leg of his jeans into a small cuff and from time to time he leaned and tipped into this receptacle the soft white ash of his cigarette. He saw a few men in boots and hats and he nodded gravely to them, they to him. After a while the lights in the lobby dimmed again. (21)

Through this performance within a performance, McCarthy questions the genre’s authenticity. In doing so, he indicates that to be a cowboy in the 1950s was to be part of an elaborate costumed act, and to reside in Texas was to reside in what Richard Slotkin calls a “mythologized place,” a “landscape which evokes authentic places and times [and] becomes . . . completely identified with the fiction created about it” (233). The day after her performance, his mother “came through the [hotel] lobby about nine o’clock. She was on the arm of a man in a suit and a topcoat and they went out the door and got into a cab” (22). The new world his mother chooses for herself contains no cowboy boots, no horses, no housework, and “no Cole” (she does not use her married name on the hotel’s register) (22). By rejecting the traditional gender roles associated with cowboys and their women, the protagonist’s mother is able to escape the imprisoning, oppressive ranch and pursue her own future without the baggage of the past—something that John Grady will unfortunately be unable to do.

In *Westerns: A Women’s History* (2016), Victoria Lamont analyzes the strong connection between the frontier and masculinity from a Masculinity Studies perspective. In her analysis of frontier literature written by men, she concludes that the

majority of men see the land as something that, like women, must be tamed, plowed, and fenced in by male hands. The taming of the frontier not only allows them to perform masculinity, but it also limits women to domestic work and positions them as objects in need of taming. Within this mythology, masculinity is ascribed the fleeting space between nature and civilization, both of which are assumed to be female (21). Frontier men are threatened by the feminine presence, which is why there is no room for women in Westerns. While this might explain why McCarthy's protagonists are mostly male, it has certainly not spared him from severe criticism. Jenifer Reimer, for instance, claims that Cormac McCarthy's "West is still a man's world where women are fickle, absent, or dead" (424). Similarly, Nell Sullivan points out that McCarthy's fiction has misogynistic leanings that "contain feminine power and obviate women" (252). She argues that women are not the focus of his narrative, and when they do exist, they are not as fully developed as his male characters but are rather ghosts who hover in the background just long enough to catalyze the plot. Likewise, in "The Sanguinary Sublime of Cormac McCarthy," James Wood notes that because of his "claustrophobically male-locked" point of view, McCarthy "has a tendency to omit half the human race from serious scrutiny" (3).

In an interview with Cormac McCarthy, Oprah Winfrey asked: "People call you a man's man writer. Is there a reason why women are not a big part of the plots?" His response is "women are tough. You know. They're tough. I don't pretend to understand women. I think men don't know much about women. They find them very mysterious" (Winfrey). Nevertheless, *All the Pretty Horses* demonstrates at least an attempt on McCarthy's part to engage with this toughness. After all, Mrs. Cole and the protagonist's girlfriend do represent greater freedom and autonomy for American women in Westerns. However, their resilience in the face of sexism is lost on his male characters, who do not see them as powerful matriarchs but rather as roadblocks. His solution, then, is to write them out of the story.

Nell Sullivan comes to a similar conclusion and argues that Cormac McCarthy reacts to women's "increasing independence and interventions in conventionally masculine realms through the systematic expulsion of women . . . confirming that the Western, even its twilight incarnation in *Cities of the Plain*, remains what Jane Tompkins calls a

'womanless milieu'" (180). The dissolution of the nuclear family and the feminist movement severely complicate the protagonist's masculine identity, which is now out of time and place. Therefore, it is understandable why the protagonist travels to Mexico, a country that, as Cormac McCarthy notes in his study papers, was "overtly patriarchal wherein women are subordinate and incapable of freely selecting a husband or a career" (Cormac McCarthy Papers, "Notes on *All the Pretty Horses*," Box 46, Folder 5).

2.4. Recapturing the Cowboy World in Mexico

John Grady sets out for Mexico because he has lost everything that might have kept him in Texas. In order to "recapture the world of [his] grandfather" (29), the protagonist decides he must flee this industrialized and feminized space to the final frontier—Mexico—where he and Rawlins hope to rediscover the more authentic "old days" of their cowboy ancestors (57). McCarthy uses various archetypal signifiers to underscore this masculine homosocial world. For example, before their journey to the South, the protagonist and Rawlins contemplate Eldorado or "the golden one," the promised land:

> What's them lights? Said Rawlins
> I'd make it Eldorado.
> How far is that do you reckon?
> Ten, fifteen miles. (11)

After they cross the border to Eldorado through the darkness of night, John Grady and Rawlins search for a "spectral promised land" that is integral to their cowboy identity. As David Dary writes in *Cowboy Culture: A Saga of Five Centuries* (1981):

> The golden age of the real cowboy in the American West was gone as the twentieth century dawned. Yet a cowboy culture was still glowing brightly on the minds of Americans. While this culture still permeates our society, it is not the culture of the real nineteenth-century cowboy. Rather it is a blend of fact and imagination. (332)

Clearly, Eldorado is "a promised land" that is no more than an illusion—"a promised land" that will be always inaccessible, at a distance of some "ten, fifteen miles" for the cowboys (McCarthy 11).

As John Grady Cole and Rawlins travel throughout Mexico motivated by romantic cowboy ideals, they use horse power rather than automotive, which symbolizes their rejection of the cultural, economic, and social shifts of the mid-twentieth century. As

John Blair asserts, “these horses stand out against a background of American modernization” and “as an anachronistic means of transport, but supposedly help their riders merge into the apparently natural and authentic context provided by Mexico” (303). The protagonist wants to go back in time, and Mexico becomes this “place outside of time” (McCarthy 211). He looks for a world that has withstood the influences of modernization and industrialization, and believes Mexico is where he will be able to recuperate his dying cowboy masculinity. Instead of staying in his hometown, which has been divided by “barbed wire, fences, highways, and blacktop,” (6) he seeks “a terrain void of man-made separations” (6), an environment where he can bathe in the blood and heat of strong stallions and manly men: “What he loved in horses was what he loved in men,” the narrator notes, “the blood and the heat of the blood that ran them. All his reverence and all his fondness and all the leanings of his life were for the ardenthearted and they would always be so and never otherwise” (7). Mexico makes this cowboy quest a possibility.

On their way, John Grady and Rawlins encounter Jimmy Blevins, a strange kid riding a big horse, who has been following them from a distance. As the narrator describes, he is a “remarkable shooter, yet a tenacious troublemaker” (69). Like Quentin Compson who is haunted by “Little Sister Death” in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), Jimmy becomes “Little Brother Death” for the protagonist and his cousin. As Diana Luce claims, “many of the trials John Grady endures derive from Jimmy Blevins” (“When” 62). His company becomes dangerous when he misplaces his horse during a flood. After an effort to reclaim the horse from a Mexican village, the protagonist and Rawlins part ways with Jimmy Blevins to secure their own safety. His departure frees them of “responsibility for their younger charge,” but their relief will be short-lived.

In Mexico, McCarthy emphasizes the protagonist’s and Rawlins’ fleeting youth and their belief in a true West that somehow can be recaptured. However, as they discover, just like youth, the cowboy past—if it ever even existed—can never be relived. As Lonn Taylor suggests in *Texas, My Texas: Musings of the Rambling Boy* (2012), the legacy of the nineteenth-century cowboy, is at best imitated in the twentieth century, and in Hollywood more than anywhere else: The “flesh-and-blood men who manage cattle all over the West . . . consider themselves the cowboy’s legitimate descendants. They dress

as they think he dressed, with certain contemporary modifications. They talk as the films they see and the novels they read say he talked" (17). As they make their way further and further into Mexico, John Grady and Rawlins perform cowboyness—the rugged, manly virility of the characters in the stories they read. When they are on the plains, the narrator describes them as follows:

> They rode not under but among [the stars] and they rode at once jaunty and circumspect, like thieves newly loosed in that dark electric, like young thieves in a glowing orchard, loosely jacketed against the cold and ten thousand worlds for the choosing. (30)

Yet, they are somewhat "fugitives" and "thieves," not all-American cowboys (Bourne 116). Likewise, the boys convince themselves that they look like "desperadoes," only to have a shopkeeper call them "boys" and sell them Kool-Aid (36). In addition, they constantly use trite phrases like "Smoke em if you got em" (39), and are accused of being comic book characters by a Mexican girl who "was reading a comicbook by the light from the door way and she looked up at them and looked at the comicbook and then looked up again" (49). While novels like *The Virginian* and *The Oregon Trail* take pleasure in the authenticity of horse and gun play, *All the Pretty Horses* takes pleasure in mocking and satirizing the boys' slow discovery that their heritage is based on fiction and not lived experience.

They attempt to find their destination on a map obtained from a restaurant in San Antonio, but realize that what lies beyond the US border is blank: "There were roads and rivers and towns on the American side of the map as far south as the Rio Grande and beyond that was white" (34). Rawlins mistakenly thinks that it "aint ever been mapped" (34), to which the protagonist replies, "there's maps," but after looking at another one Rawlins concludes, "There aint shit down there" (35). The map is American-made and does not include any geographical detail on Mexico, suggesting that it is whatever one makes of it, that Mexico is a blank canvas to be explored, conquered, and mapped. It becomes a symbol for the cowboys' fantasy that Mexico is a new frontier, that it is theirs to take. In *Mapping Men and Empire* (2007), Richard Phillips argues that it is "unknown terrain in which colonial desires are accommodated" and that when the cowboys "find themselves off the map," they encounter a new frontier on which they can engrave their cowboy ethos (77). Thus, Mexico becomes "a

blank space" on the map, a space where they can project their notions of a romantic cowboy past. It is also an Edenic place where lost masculinity can be found, and where a man and his horse is all that matter.

Whereas the Texas landscape is infertile and barren, Mexico is abundant and fertile. In San Angelo, Texas, the protagonist is a disenfranchised young man with a dysfunctional family, whose girlfriend has abandoned him—a Texan boy in a town being seized by oil corporations, trapped by American industrialization and feminization. In Mexico, however, he is in the undisturbed wilderness and among welcoming cowboys, and figures out his cowboy ambition: to be a prominent trainer of wild horses "outside the constraints of corporate and urban culture," so he can experience "the bloody realities of the cowboy existence" (McCarthy 24). In Mexico, the labor associated with cattle ranching is still venerated. As Jane Tompkins describes in *West of Everything*,

> most historians explain the fact that Westerns take place in the West as a result of the culture's desire to escape the problems of civilization. . . . My answer to the question of why the Western takes place in the West is that the West was a place where technology was primitive, physical conditions harsh, the social infrastructure nonexistent, and the power and presence of women proportionately reduced. The Western doesn't have anything to do with the West as such. It isn't about the encounter between civilization and the frontier. It is about men's fear of losing their mastery, and hence their identity, both of which the Western tirelessly reinvents. (44-45)

The protagonist and Rawlins find employment at the "Hacienda de Nuestra Senora de la Purisima Concepcion," "a ranch of eleven thousand hectares" that "runs upwards of a thousand head of cattle" (McCarthy 96). The ranch's mythic name, which evokes the fertility of the Virgin Mary, represents the fertility of Mexico for cowboys and ranchers. As Alan Cheuse discusses, for a cowboy "the land is the promise, the promise is the land; alive, a symbol, a voice, a character" (142). In his description, the narrator emphasizes the ranch's liveliness and fecundity:

> The western sections ran into the Sierra de Anteojo to elevations of nine thousand feet but south and east the ranch occupied part of the broad barrial or basin floor of the bolson and was well watered with natural springs and clear streams and dotted with marshes and shallow lakes or lagunas. In the lakes and in the streams were species of fish not known elsewhere on earth and birds and lizards and other forms of life as well all long relict here for the desert stretched away on every side. (97)

On the night of their arrival, Rawlins, mesmerized by its promise, asks the protagonist,

"How long do you think you'd like to stay here?" "About a hundred years," he responds (98). When they hear the howl of a lone wolf, they believe they have accomplished their mission and have arrived in the primitive-pastoral wilderness. The ranch will provide John Grady with the chance to learn more about horses and, as a result, "the chance to integrate himself into the naturalism of an adopted country's present condition" (Herlihy-Mera 471). He rides up into mountains, forages and hunts, and lives off the land.

In *Cowboys of the Americas* (2010), Richard W. Slatta describes the cowboys of the frontier West as ambiguous figures whose essential features depended heavily on observation—mostly of play or work: "Writers who saw cowboys in town, letting off steam after months on the trail or range, saw only the lawlessness and debauchery of the cowboy's life. The few observers who actually spent time on the range with working cowhands formed an entirely different and positive view" (47-48). Western writer John Baumann's assessment, for instance, dwells completely on the cowboy at work: "He is in the main a loyal, long-enduring, hard-working fellow, grit to the backbone, and tough as whip cord; performing his arduous and often dangerous duties, and living his comfortless life, without a word of complaint about the many privations he has to undergo" (qtd in Slatta 47). Therefore, the cowboy myth he depicted was based on the performance of the cowboy vocation. In the novel, John Grady and Rawlins perform this outdated role, rather than questioning cowboy "authenticity." As Rawlins states while discursively role-playing the cowboy:

> A goodlookin horse is like a goodlookin woman, he said. They're always more trouble than what they're worth. What a man needs is just one that will get the job done.
>
> Where'd you hear that at? I don't know. (89)

Through the imitation of a copy for which there is no original (the cowboy simulacrum), John Grady establishes a local reputation as a skilled ranch hand, "breaking a remuda of sixteen wild horses in two days" (89). Like his mother, he also ironically becomes a participant in a fictional narrative. Not only is this bronc busting show a self-conscious performance—as the boys do their work, "fifty or more people were watching. Folks were picnicking on the ground. Fathers held up babies" (106)—but it is also at this point that the boys themselves absurdly begin to critique each other's acting abilities as

cowboys, suggesting a show within a show. As Rawlins asks the protagonist: "What the hell kind of a bronc is that? You think that's what these people paid good money to see?" (107).

Because of his skill at roping and housebreaking, the protagonist is invited up to the ranch house, where the *hacendado* (ranch owner), Don Hector, offers to share his dream of breeding mares with a great stallion (126). Don Hector quizzes the protagonist about Three Bars, Sam Jones, and Crawford Sykes—all famous horses in the picturebook that hung in his family home in Texas. When he supplies the proper answers, Don Hector quickly warms up to him. On the ranch, he also shares his cowboy sensibilities with Don Hector: "There were two things they agreed upon wholly and that were never spoken and that was God had put horses on earth to work cattle and that other than cattle there was no wealth proper to a man" (127). As a horse breaker, he claims mastery over everything on the ranch; after all, he believes that he has successfully ridden from Texas to Mexico and has proven his masculinity.

Mexico is an entire social and economic world where cowboys who are skillful can still make money. In Mexico, the protagonist believes that he can claim a masculinity that is already anachronistic in the US, where men have already become corporate slaves. In Mexico, he can alleviate the erosion of white men's authority that came about during the social and economic developments of the 1950s (the changing role of women and the emerging Civil Rights Movement). This inconsistent position, in which privileged members of a shrinking once-hegemonic society picture themselves surrounded by a mainstream culture of their own making, exemplifies "white minority discourse" as coined by Mark McGurl in *The Program Era: Pluralism of Postwar American Fiction* (2009). Accordingly, in the late twentieth century, "high pluralist enterprise allowed novelists such as Wallace Stegner and William Kennedy to imagine a white cultural entity understood to be significantly different from American culture and, as such, portray it as under assault by the assimilating, normalizing forces of dominant society" (119). Since the 1950s, WASP men have increasingly felt under threat by the gains of women and minorities, and have begun to consider themselves as now belonging to a minority culture, which "must protect its integrity against mainstream culture's appropriation and thereby retain status as an outsider, nobly adhering to a beleaguered

identity" (119). Thus, McCarthy also presents a white male culture that functions "as a white minority discourse that resists assimilation into the American mainstream" (120). This is obvious when McCarthy positions the protagonist as the heir of frontier masculinity, which inevitably must be embraced:

> The boy who . . . sat a horse not only as if he'd been born to it which he was but as if were he begot by malice or mischance into some queer land where horses never were he would have found them anyway. Would have known that there was something missing for the world to be right or he right in it and would have set forth to wander wherever it was needed for as long as it took until he came upon one and he would have known that that was what he sought and it would have been. (23)

As the excerpt suggests, John Grady was born with the "natural" attributes of the cowboy and has developed his skills to become an exceptional cowboy. However, he is unable to thrive in America due to its cultural, social and economic changes. As Meg King explains, he "cannot escape or abandon this lifestyle—even when social and economic changes no longer warrant its existence" (73). That is why the protagonist feels obliged to fight against these changes, which are eroding his source of income and masculinity. However, he is also caught in a double-bind. As the narrative progresses, he starts to see himself as limited, confused, and victimized by the cowboy ethos; as deserving authority, but remaining powerless. Thus, the ranch is not the location of a recovered cowboy paradise, but becomes an alien world that the protagonist's culture, couched in terms of American mythology, renders him unable to comprehend.

On Don Hector's ranch, John Grady truly begins to question the Western's veneration of the masculine world of experience. To illustrate this point, the Mexican cowboys at the ranch are introduced through their traditional cowboy reserve: "[T]hey were careful of their demeanor that they not be thought to have opinions on what they heard for like most men skilled at their work they were scornful of any least suggestion of knowing anything not learned at first hand" (96). While McCarthy obviously admires the skills and reticence of these men, and the cowboy may be admirable for his traditional attributes, he is also limited by these same traits. In crafting his world small, the cowboy denies himself access to meaningful other worlds. He cannot build an alternative ground on which to establish a healthy self-esteem, or to experience an alternative manhood.

2.5. The Cowboy Gaze and the Objectification of Mexican Women

John Grady falls for Don Hector's daughter, Alejandra, and starts fantasizing about a life together, on this "magnificent ranch, a miraculous replacement for the family and land he has lost back in Texas" (129). She inspires the protagonist to seek the manhood he had lost in Texas. His cowboy buddy asks, "You got eyes for the spread?" (138), insinuating that the protagonist's ultimate motive is acquisition of the ranch through Alejandra, Don Hector's only heir. John Grady's response to Rawlins' pointed question is: "I don't know," "I aint thought about it" (138). Even though he says that he has not thought about it, his motivation in pursuing Alejandra is as mercenary as it is sexual. "Such harborage," as Terrell L. Tebbetts states, "would make him no longer a wanderer over the surface of the earth but a man rooted in it" (52). His desire for Alejandra, however, is quite problematic in the novel. His cowboy gaze reifies stereotypes about Mexican women in the process of constructing and stabilizing cowboy masculinity. She becomes, for the protagonist, like the exotic Mexican landscape. He considers her body as a territory that must be vigorously conquered. His attitude reaffirms assumptions about Mexican women in the same way that conventional cowboy narratives demonized, abused, and exploited women's bodies for the sake of building and legitimating hegemonic masculinity.

As Gloria Anzaldúa discusses in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1989), along the US-Mexico border, the ongoing penetration is "mapped on the bodies of Chicanas and Mexican women in violent ways," all of which reinforces white masculinity and supremacy (25). Thus the border is "a wound that split" Chicanas and Mexican women. Ever since the arrival of Spanish colonizers, the border has always marginalized or hypersexualized "brown women" (27). Similarly, in *MeXicana Encounters: The Making of Social Identities on the Borderlands* (2003), Rosa Linda Fregoso argues that "the bodies of brown women and the roles they play in culture have long been a part of establishing the boundaries of the nation-state and the boundaries of white male and female sexuality" (120). In western novels, the female body is always associated with land to be conquered or a nation to be built by white men; the "mother country," or "virgin territory."

Alejandra is portrayed through the cowboy gaze which perceives Mexican or Native

American women as either "sexually deviant and promiscuous" or "innocent and chaste" (123). She is always described from John Grady's perspective—the object and never the subject—and makes her first appearance while riding a black horse on the ranch. Alejandra turns "her fine-boned face to look full at Cole," who studies "her blue eyes . . . beneath her black hat and her long black hair" (110). The narrator depicts how Alejandra "sat the horse more than well, riding erect with her broad shoulders" (110). Instead of directly expressing his desire, John Grady uses his horse to signal his feelings. As Diane Luce explicates, "their courtship is a mutual seduction and a not altogether loving contest of wills marked by their riding in turns the lathered stallion hot from his covering the mares. John Grady rides the horse because it gives him the illusion of potency both in the sense of control and in the sexual sense" ("When" 59). He accentuates his mastery with the Spanish language. "Soy comandante de las yeguas," he tells the horse, "yo y yo sólo" (McCarthy 128). By controlling his horse's potency in the local tongue, stating "I am the commander of mares, I and I alone," he impresses Alejandra, who is enthralled by the potent scene.

When she appears in the narrative, Alejandra is mostly depicted in terms of her physical attributes—what she wears, the way she acts, and how she rides horses. In every scene in which she appears, the narrator also emphasizes her "black hair:" When they dance in a saloon in town, she "wore a blue dress and her mouth was red. . . . Her black hair done up in a blue ribbon and the nape of her neck pale as porcelain" (123). She is always portrayed as "the racial other," whose sexuality is associated with animals and, in general, the land the protagonist is trying to tame. She is deliberately narrated as part of the natural landscape of the ranch and as such, becomes the object of the protagonist's male gaze:

> The last time [John Grady] saw [Alejandra] before she returned to Mexico, she was coming down out of the mountains riding very stately and erect out of a rainsquall building to the north and the dark clouds towering above her. She rode with her hat pulled down in the front and fastened under her chin with a drawtie and as she rode her black hair twisted and blew about her shoulders and the lightning fell silently through the black clouds behind her and she rode all seeming unaware . . . riding erect and stately until the rain caught her up and shrouded her figure away in that wild summer landscape: real horse, real rider, real land and sky and yet a dream withal. (131-132)

Again, Alejandra is seen through his cowboy gaze, which constantly highlights her hair,

horse, and hat. She becomes "the wild summer landscape" that has to be conquered, and never a whole person. Objectified by the protagonist, she is easily written out of the story like other female characters, and leaves the narrative as quickly as she enters it. After the protagonist proposes marriage, his cowboy fantasy of her becomes "starkly cruel." In the hotel room in Zacatecas, the protagonist is once again rejected:

> He saw very clearly how all his life led only to this moment and all after led nowhere at all. He felt something cold and soulless enter like another being and he imagined that it smiled malignly and he had no reason to believe it would ever leave. (254)

What he experiences at the hacienda is an adolescent cowboy fantasy. When he eventually figures out that he has lost Alejandra and the Mexican territory she represents, his romantic dreams are shattered, and he is "left without cultural and emotional sustenance" (255). Indeed, the title of the novel comes from a traditional American lullaby which was recorded in the 1950s by African American folk singer Odetta. The lullaby is about the fulfilment of a dream:

> Hush-a-bye, don't you cry
> Go to sleep-y, little baby.
> When you wake you shall have
> All the pretty little horses.
> Blacks and bays, dapples and grays,
> Coach and six-a-little horses.
> Hush-a-bye, don't you cry,
> Go to sleep-y, little baby. (Odetta)

In the context of the novel and given the violence associated with it, the title assumes an ironic cast. John Grady's youth and his initial appearance in the novel as a young cowboy, who laments the dissolution of the family inheritance, links him with the child in the first lines of the lullaby. Diane Luce claims that the pretty horses of the title "come to represent any fantasy, dream, wish, or object of desire to which one might aspire or feel entitled" ("When" 59). However, it has a toothless, childlike ring to it that ironically cuts against the grain of the brutal realities that the protagonist will encounter across the border in Mexico (Arnold, "Go to Sleep" 52). He is abruptly thrown into the harsh world in Mexico, and he is unfit to fulfill the dream to which he aspires.

Interestingly, it is another female figure that reminds him of his shortcomings as a cowboy. Even though McCarthy is criticized for doing "nothing radical or revisionary" in his representations of Mexican characters (Reimer 438), he introduces another female

character, Alejandra's aunt, who demonstrates the dual failure of the mythology of cowboy masculinity. A woman of social standing, personal wealth, and a formal education, the Dueña Alfonsa holds a matriarchal position of power that the protagonist—despite the privilege he carries with him as a white American man—will never possess, no matter how successful his endeavors are on the frontier. Recognizing the protagonist's romantic feelings towards her niece, she asks him if he believes in fate. When he says he does, she continues, "my father had a great sense of the connectedness of things. I'm not sure I share it" (230). She then proceeds to tell John Grady of her relationship with Francisco and Gustavo Madero and to tell a short and, for her at least, tragic history of the Mexican revolution. The story ends as Francisco and Gustavo are murdered, and Alfonsa implies that they were killed, at least in part, because of their romantic idealism and their failure to comprehend the reality of their situation. "In the end," she explains, "we all come to be cured of our sentiments. Those whom life does not cure death will" (238). Her suggestion, of course, is that as a cowboy, the protagonist himself is doomed by his own romantic cowboy notions. She believes that he should return to Texas and forget her niece. However, he fails to listen to Dueña Alfonsa's advice, just like he failed to listen to his mother's advice to pursue an education and leave the ranch behind. Even though he thinks he has proven himself as a cowboy, and that he has been seasoned by his experiences on the frontier, he remains a defiant, lonesome and rootless drifter.

For John Grady, belonging to a white minority culture justifies a definition of manhood associated with toxicity. As the narrator suggests at the very beginning of the novel, the protagonist believes that his archaic role requires "pledging" in blood. Here, McCarthy exemplifies the cowboy's dilemma: in the 1950s, the cowboy had to vigorously withstand that which would eliminate him and his cowboy codes. As Richard Slotkin points out in *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (2002), "the invocation of violence as a means of asserting masculinity occurs each time the frontier becomes the myth through which Americans imagine their current condition" (11). Accordingly, he highlights the brutality typically depicted in the Western:

> T]he myth represented the redemption of American spirit or fortune as something to be achieved by playing through a scenario of separation,

> temporary regression to a more primitive or "natural" state, and regeneration through violence. At the core of that scenario is the symbol of "savage war." . . . The premise of "savage war" is that ineluctable political and social differences—rooted in some combination of blood and culture—make co-existence between primitive natives and civilized Europeans impossible on any basis other than that of subjugation. (12)

Since there are no Native Americans left to solemnly fight for their territory in the middle of the twentieth century, McCarthy positions his protagonist in a battle with Mexicans whose values, like those of Native Americans, oppose cowboy ethics. Indeed, Mexico at first seems to provide shelter for his cowboy dreams, but it also surprisingly fosters a culture which dissolves the cowboy ethics John Grady considers as the natural counterpoint to his service in the ranch as a horse breaker. Mexicans ignore what the protagonist considers as moral and ethical, which threatens his cowboy masculinity as effectively as post-Fordism and Second Wave Feminism do in the middle of the twentieth century. When the protagonist is taken into custody on suspicion of horse theft, he advocates his innocence with a factual account of his role in the affair, thinking that the honorable cowboy code will save him. However, he cannot persuade the corrupt Mexican captain of his innocence: "You have the opportunity to tell the truth here. Here. In three days you will go to Saltillo, and then you will not have this opportunity. It will be gone. Then the truth will be in other hands. . . . Who can say what the truth will be then? At that time?" (168). The captain provides him with the opportunity to shape the truth into what the authorities wish to hear, but the protagonist stubbornly rejects it by stating "there aint but one truth. . . . The truth is what happened. It aint what come out of somebody's mouth" (169). He abides by the cowboy code and refuses to make up a fake story.

The Mexican dream turns into a nightmare when Jimmy Blevins is raped and killed by a Mexican policeman and John Grady and Rawlins are crossed-examined in custody. The protagonist's relationship with Don Hector deteriorates because he is convinced that John Grady has lied to him about his involvement with Jimmy Blevins. Moreover, when Alejandra admits to having slept with the protagonist, Don Hector regrets befriending the boy and even thinks about killing him. In the end, however, he reports John Grady and Rawlins to the federal authorities and washes his hands of the matter. John Grady and Rawlins are found guilty of stealing horses, and are sentenced to time in a Mexican

prison.

Once John Grady and Rawlins are imprisoned in Mexico, their cowboy identity also comes into question. After all, what kind of cowboy steals horses? Both the police and Perez, the prison kingpin, make it clear that the boys' self-identification as American cowboys can easily be destroyed, and they can be broken down both physically and mentally (rape, an act of power and violence, was also a possibility). The protagonist's desire to "pledge in blood" in the prison once again conforms to Slotkin's description of the cowboy myth. The violence in which he engages allows him to assume a position within the masculine hierarchy before he is broken down. As Jacqueline M. Moore points out, "masculinity freed of national boundaries at first glance appears a purely corporeal identity materialized through the immersion in primal violence. The subject position of cowboys, however, lies at the conjunction of violent demonstrations of brute strength and a chivalric dedication to women" (141). In order to prove their manliness in prison, John Grady and Rawlins believe they "must engage in daily battles with fellow inmates" (McCarthy 168). In a violent fight, the protagonist kills the *cuchillero* who has been sent to assassinate him, not through some courageous act or forthright show of bravery, but through a highly dramatic piece of guile:

> John Grady backed away. He sat slowly on the floor. His legs were bent crookedly under him and he slumped against the wall with his arms at either side of him. The cuchillero lowered the tray. He set it quietly on the table. He leaned and took hold of John Grady by the hair and forced his head back to cut his throat. As he did so John Grady brought his knife up from the floor and sank it into the cuchillero's heart. (200-201)

Having barely escaped death, the protagonist is pretty beat up: "He ran his tongue into the corner of his mouth and tasted blood. He knew his face had been cut but he didnt know how bad. . . . It occurred to him that he was going to die in this place" (200). At the very beginning of the novel, the protagonist walks out into the night and remembers "a dream of the past" in which a band of Native American warriors rode down from the north, "all of them pledged in blood and redeemable in blood only" (5). He believes that his archaic role requires a "pledging" in blood. By the end of the novel, John Grady has killed and has thus "pledged in blood." In doing so, he departs from Slotkin's schema "at the point of regeneration," and must face the consequences of "pledging" in blood. Thus by playing dead, both the protagonist as the Western hero, and the Western novel

itself, are reborn: they are less pure and triumphant than before, but they perhaps become more worldly as survivors in the bargain.

After their release from prison, Rawlins decides "he's had enough of Mexico" (Donoghue 9) and returns to Texas. Since he was attacked by a Mexican in prison, he is hospitalized in town, where he receives a blood transfusion. Before departing, he shares his concerns over this event:

> They put Mexican blood in me, he said.
> So.
> So what does that mean? said Rawlins.
> Mean about what?
> Well does it mean I'm part Mexican?
> John Grady drew on the cigarette and leaned back and blew the smoke into the air. Part Mexican? he said.
> Yeah.
> How much did they put?
> They said it was over a litre.
> How much over a litre?
> I dont know.
> Well a litre would make you almost a halfbreed.
> Rawlins looked at him. It dont, does it? he said. (210–11)

Rawlins fears being "almost a halfbreed," and thinks that the "purity" of his racial, national, masculine, and cowboy identities has been tainted by Mexican blood. Ironically, he has a new mestizo consciousness that was born in the borderlands. As Gloria Anzaldua argues, the mestizo consciousness is a survival strategy: "Indigenous like corn, the mestizo is a product of crossbreeding, designed for preservation under a variety of conditions" (103). His new consciousness is a "consciousness of duality, embracing ambiguity and contradiction" (59). His new consciousness might prompt the invention of a new masculinity without the burden of cowboy machismo. However, as a "halfbreed," he also thinks that he has failed as a white American man. For him, the frontier is a failure; he leaves his cowboy dreams of horses and ranches behind and returns to modernized and industrialized Texas on a bus. On the other hand, the protagonist decides to go back to the Mexican town in order to reclaim three detained horses. Retrieving "all the pretty horses" that had been taken away from them by the Mexicans, who are seemingly "pledged to uphold the law" (220), is his vengeance for Jimmy Blevins' tragic end and his redemption for his inability to prevent it. Like a vigilante from a Western movie, John Grady captures his friend's killer and threatens

him with a gun. The protagonist then "spurs his horses over the plains, with the dangerous captive still lagging behind" (246).

At the end, his cowboy codes are exposed and distorted. Eldorado turns out to be a land of false enchantment and the protagonist abandons his antiquated cowboy myths. "Through the all-American character of John Grady with his innocence and romanticism coupled with stubborn, self-serving blindness," as Sara Spurgeon explains, "McCarthy lovingly evokes that myth [the sacred cowboy] and at the same time strips away the layers of fantasy that make belief in it possible" ("Truth" 42). He must come to terms with the fallacy of his cowboy myths and masculinity, and finds little solace in the prospect of returning to Texas. After his quest in Mexico, his unfair treatment in prison, and his brief attempt at revenge against the Mexicans, the protagonist finds "himself a man without a country" (298). As the narrator notes, "he drifted north again, trailing the horses in the bar ditches along the edge of the black top roads. The big semi's blowing them up against the fences" (298). Amy Kaplan has argued that "only in the release from geographic bounds can the US secure the borders of its identity. And this escape to a distant frontier is nostalgic in that it allows the American man to return home by becoming more fully himself" (671).

McCarthy's protagonist leaves home as a young man, but he ends up right back where he started, weathered, but still lacking a clear sense of manhood. In a landscape where violence is a fact of life and where boundaries—both cultural and temporal—are often obscured, the "cowboy figure" is cast adrift; there is no saving day, no resolution and no gallant ride over the final horizon. As Erik Hage argues,

> There's a stirring anachronistic effect to Cole awkwardly leading his horses along the narrow shoulder of a bustling modern highway while large tractor trailers blow by, a portrait that runs counter to the numerous previous passages of him heroically thundering across the plains on his horse, often bloodied and with bullets whipping through the air, in what seems a much more old-fashioned, mythical universe. (23)

At the end of the narrative, the protagonist becomes a baptismal figure, crossing the border naked, and on horseback, having fully emerged from his ordeal in Mexico. When he arrives in his hometown, McCarthy describes a miserable and frustrated figure that contradicts the heroic cowboy ideal: "He thought about his father who was dead in that

country and he sat the horse naked in the falling rain and wept" (286). After being turned down by a potential bride and shot by a jailor, he crosses the river, and going north, "he felt a loneliness he'd not known since he was a child" (282). Furthermore, he arrives in Texas on Thanksgiving Day, a holiday that harkens back to America's Puritan roots and the roots of Manifest Destiny. He tells his story to an American judge, describing his "innocent" love and his moment of self-defense that ended up with a stranger's death. "It keeps botherin me," he says. When the judge comments, "You must have had some provocation," he responds, "I did. But it dont help. He tried to kill me with a knife. I just happened to get the best of him" (291). When the judge asks, "Why does it bother you?" he can only respond, "I dont know. I dont know nothin about him. I never even knew his name. He could of been a pretty good old boy. I dont know. I dont know that he's supposed to be dead" (291). The judge asks John Grady whether he had bad intentions, could have avoided the knife fight, and would he do any of it again, to which the protagonist remorsefully answers no. The judge responds that the matter is not as serious as the protagonist thinks, to which John Grady replies, "But that dont make it right" (293). The judge—the antithesis of *Blood Meridian*'s judge—decides that John Grady is not guilty of killing the Mexican officer because he acted in self-defense (290). Even though the judge restores his honor, that is too little too late for John Grady.

When John Grady finally visits his old buddy Rawlins, their conversation turns to the question of (national) belonging after losing their innocence and failing in Mexico. Rawlins declares that "this is still good country." Yet, the protagonist is unconvinced: "Yeah. I know it is. But it ain't my country." Rawlins then asks, "Where is your country?" to which the protagonist responds, "I don't know what happens to country" (299), suggesting that either he is unaware of the changes in American society or unwilling to accept them. He also indicates a sense of isolation. Even though the American judge confirms that his cowboy ethics are still part of American culture, the protagonist feels like he is not a member of American society anymore. Linda Townley Woodson reads the protagonist's isolation as follows:

> At the beginning of *All the Pretty Horses*, the physical and metaphorical country which John Grady Cole has known comes to an end with the death of his grandfather and the selling of the ranch. This marks the end of the world of discourse whose rituals, traditions, and values mirrored his being . . . his quests for a "country," a discourse community where his values can

still be truth. (52)

This isolation indicates a "masculine emergency," a term coined by David Jarraway in "'Becoming Woman': Masculine 'Emergency' After 9/11 in Cormac McCarthy." Although he uses the term to analyze McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* (2005) and *The Road* (2006), it is also applicable to his *Border Trilogy*. McCarthy's protagonists epitomize "the precariousness of masculine identity, an identity even more vulnerably imperiled by the very porosity of his cross-border setting" (52). As he explains in his article, these characters represent "a kind of masculine identity that is determined to lose no ground despite its essentialist imperilment. . . . By essentialism here, I mean the axiomatic mindset concerning masculinity that views it as inevitably fixed, entirely self-contained, and totally impervious to alteration vis-à-vis the outside world" (53). In other words, John Grady's "masculine emergency" directs him to cross the Mexican border, yet in return he becomes a homeless figure between two cultures, "a borderline figure with one foot in each traditional gender role" (61). Even though the protagonist in *All the Pretty Horses* is pre-9/11, he is situated in a "cross border" position very much like the characters in *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*. Considering the protagonist's assertion that he "has no country," it is possible to argue that "homelessness" does not necessary indicate a "borderline figure." Indeed, John Grady is homeless because he refuses to change his cowboy code; he cannot find a home in which to construct his "fixed entirely self-contained" manhood in the wake of a changing economy and Second Wave Feminism. Thus, the "delineation of masculine essentialism and emergent manhood" can also be applied to John Grady's stance in *All the Pretty Horses*.

2.6. Conclusion

As the protagonist rides off at the very end of the novel, the nation-building, violence, and machismo of the cowboy code also fade into the sunset in this new postwar world. At the end of the novel, John Grady sees "a group of Indians camped on the western plain," who plainly look at him: "They stood and watched him pass and watched him vanish upon that landscape solely because he was passing. Solely because he would vanish" (301). In this role reversal, he exemplifies the "vanishing" white American male. This time, the Native Americans observe his "passing." John Grady enacts his own disappearance once more, as he did at the very beginning of his odyssey to Mexico

(5). Yet on this occasion, before "the tamed defeated descendants of the tribe he revered" (301), the protagonist rides and disappears into the West, a failed hero who is now aligned with conquered Native American warriors.

In "'When You Wake': John Grady's Heroism in *All the Pretty Horses*," Dianne C. Luce claims that at the end of the novel, the protagonist is disenchanted, incapable of finding "a discourse community where his values can still be truth" (65). Accordingly, she points out that John Grady realizes that no such community exists, which becomes apparent through he changed opinions about the Comanches at the end of the novel:

> The living Indians camped on the plains near Iraan, Texas, obviously not themselves lost to all history yet, stolidly watch John Grady pass from sight. . . . These descendants of the old western Indians know—and now John Grady knows—that those who vanish from sight pass the way of all flesh, and that romantic dreams of the past or future have little enough to do with real human experience. (66)

Here, Eric Hage notes that the word "vanish" is loaded (27). Like the vanishing Indian, the protagonist, and the cowboy codes he admires, are vanishing as well. Moreover, the transformation of the Native Americans from a cohesive, if violent, group of nations to a "scattered group" of transients also presages the trajectory of cowboys in the United States.

By positioning the protagonist in this way, McCarthy also highlights the idea that American culture is essentially bound to a particular masculinity anchored in "the laboring bodies of the white men" (Sugg 120), and that when labor disappears, so too does this particular kind of masculinity. In her analysis of the novel, Katherine Sugg argues that in *All the Pretty Horses*, McCarthy questions the nostalgic invocation of cowboy identity through John Grady:

> If one reads John Grady Cole's "integrity" and the violence that it wreaks as a Western tragedy, then the Anglo violence of both the past and the present emerges as sanctioned, sacrificial, and somehow worth it. But if McCarthy is pushing *The Border Trilogy* beyond generic repetition into an ironic melodrama that undercuts that tragedy of white masculinities on the border, then his poetics becomes more critical—a critique that plays on readerly desires and cultural expectations for that nostalgic "return" to the Anglo cowboy's borderlands. (129-130)

She points out that McCarthy can "be credited with deceptively subversive narrative

tactics, going so far as to recuperate the romantic plots of nationalized and racialized differences that in their exaggerations expose the fallacies of Anglo masculinity" (143-144). Like *Blood Meridian*, *All the Pretty Horses* is also "an extreme depiction of the shared brutality and violence of Anglo, Mexican, and Indian male characters in the borderlands . . . a critical commentary on the bloody history of border communities, as well as a very pessimistic view of Anglo frontier nostalgia" (129). Interestingly, the final page of the novel, which is reminiscent of the Comanche trail ride at the beginning of the novel, is soaked in the colors of bloody past, recalling the title image in *Blood Meridian*, the prequel to *The Border Trilogy*: "The desert he rode was red and red the dust he raised. . . . A Wind came up and reddened all sky before him" (McCarthy, *Blood* 3). McCarthy prefers to end *All the Pretty Horses* with a similar scene: "He came at evening upon a solitary bull rolling in the dust against the bloodred sunset like an animal in sacrificial torment. The bloodred dust blew down out of the sun" (302). This scene is followed by the vanishing shadows of the protagonist and his horse "melding into one another and seeping into the darkening land, the world to come" (302), which will tragically reemerge in the final novel of the trilogy, *Cities of the Plain* (1998). The world to come is barren for the protagonist, and his romantic cowboy quest leads only to darkness.

Clearly, *All the Pretty Horses* focuses on the crisis of masculinity in post-World War II America. As such, the novel can be read as McCarthy's rejection of the classic, regressively sexist, and racist representations of cowboy masculinity and his nostalgic response to a changing economy and alterations in women's roles in American society. Even though *All the Pretty Horses* is set in the 1950s, the portrayal of female characters draws attention to issues promoted by Second Wave Feminism, especially women's reaction to the renewed domesticity that came after the war, or what Betty Friedan would call "The Feminine Mystique." Judged by the cultural standards of 1992, when the novel was published, McCarthy's female characters seem hopelessly out of touch with contemporary feminism. However, their actions and attitudes foreshadow Second Wave Feminism, which, in the 1950s, was just on the horizon. Through this lens, McCarthy—notoriously associated with men and masculinity—emerges as a writer who uses a traditionally male-centered genre to investigate the challenges and opportunities women faced as American life transitioned in the postwar era.

While *All the Pretty Horses* looks backwards at *Blood Meridian,* it also shares with this, and other McCarthy novels, a reliance on the central structuring principle of the journey as part of masculine identity. Unlike the kid in *Blood Meridian*, however, John Grady accepts cowboy codes such as honesty, loyalty and courage without question, which turns into contradiction and disillusionment. Since San Angelo, Texas is no longer a hospitable location for this cowboy ethos, John Grady seeks a new territory where he can "quench his thirst for the wild west" (McCarthy 60). He looks for "such a land where he can realize the wilderness about him and the wilderness within him" (61). However, bearing in mind that John Grady is in a large mid-twentieth century city undergoing massive postwar expansion, it seems that McCarthy affectionately mocks John Grady's, as well as the whole Western genre's, "built-in nostalgia for a life that, while long gone, still plays out in popular imagination" (Spurgeon 33). In other words, he exposes and demythologizes American society's love of cowboy codes. McCarthy describes him at the very beginning of the novel as "a man come to the end of something"; yet, at the very end of the novel, he has "come to the end of himself" and any hope of attaining a future cowboy masculinity (5). As Philip Snyder argues, the cowboy codes, as they are exemplified by John Grady, "embody ideals which signify well beyond their western borders, reflecting national notions of a fundamental American identity and revealing an essentially American anxiety over the apparent instability of that identity" (149). By creating young cowboys experiencing a masculinity crisis, McCarthy in essence, places American notions of cowboy masculinity on trial against American industrialization and Second Wave Feminism in the middle of the twentieth century.

CHAPTER 3

ENFORCING MASCULINITIES AT THE BORDER:

AN ECOMASCULINIST READING OF

CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *THE CROSSING*

> "In the nineteenth century when the Indians of the plains were telling us that the wolf was a brother, we were preaching another gospel, Manifest Destiny."
>
> Barry Lopez*, Of Wolves and Men* (1979)
>
> "The wolf is a being of great order and that it knows what men do not."
>
> Don Arnulfo, *The Crossing* (1994)
>
> "All masculinities have infinite capacities to care, which can be expressed towards the Earth, human others and ourselves—simultaneously."
>
> Martin Hultman, *Ecological Masculinities* (2019)

Like *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994), the second volume of Cormac McCarthy's *The Border Trilogy,* is set in the southwestern United States and Mexico in the 1930s, featuring, as does the first novel, the adventures of young cowboys riding horses in Mexico and realizing the meaning of cowboy life. Through these crossings and their calamitous aftermaths, especially through the protagonist's struggle with his cowboy identity, Cormac McCarthy uses a "vocabulary of pain and urgency" to untangle foundational assumptions about cowboy masculinity and American manhood (Jillett x).

In *The Crossing*, McCarthy adds variations to the themes of *All the Pretty Horses*, in which John Grady Cole, the sixteen-year-old, quiet, stoic boy standing at the edge of cowboy manhood, watches everything he cares for evaporate. Like John Grady Cole, Billy Parham, the protagonist of *The Crossing*, is chasing a dream, both literally and figuratively. He is chasing the dream of the cowboy life, a lifestyle which has eluded

him in the modern world, and he is also chasing the dream of the frontier, manifested in his pursuit of a she-wolf that does not belong in this frontier-less world. Like John Grady Cole, Billy Parham starts out at age sixteen, but his quest lasts for an indefinitely longer period of time. Even though an exact year is not given for *The Crossing*, the novel does reveal that it is set before, and during, World War II, which makes the second volume of the trilogy the earliest chronologically.

The novel begins in the 1930s—a time in which America, along with most of the world, attempted to harness elements in nature for the service of humanity. From 1930 to 1939, the severe droughts of the Dust Bowl led to mass migration from the American Midwest, the construction of the Hoover Dam, and the creation of the Manhattan Project. There were also numerous New Deal Programs that involved the harnessing of nature including the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Rural Electrification Administration, all of which point to the scramble to overcome and control nature. The second novel continues McCarthy's philosophical exploration of cowboy masculinity, and it focuses more on the environment and the concept of borders, while *All the Pretty Horses* and *Cities of the Plain* echo the destruction that results from the cowboy's manipulation of the American wilderness.[5] While cultural anxiety is still a driving force for much of the violence that is observed in the novel, much of the anxiety which causes this violence is due to the cowboy's attempt to manipulate the wilderness—and its subsequent backlash.

The Crossing begins in New Mexico during the winter of 1939—ten years before the beginning of *All the Pretty Horses*—and ends there in 1945. In the novel, the sixteen-year-old protagonist makes three trips to Mexico, where the untamed territory was settled and inhabited by the poor families who have nowhere else to go and who struggle to make it their own. First, he goes to return a she-wolf to a mountain setting where she can survive, but figures out that he can neither protect the animal nor his own feelings when Mexicans seize the she-wolf to fight against dogs as entertainment. When he returns to New Mexico, he learns that in his absence, his parents have been killed and

[5] McCarthy published *The Crossing* when ecocriticism as a field of study became popular in the literature departments. In 1996, for example, Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm published *The Ecocriticism Reader*—the very first collection of cutting-edge accounts of literary ecology, which was included in the syllabus of the numerous schools in the US.

his horses have been detained. The protagonist starts his second quest to reclaim the stolen horses, but for fourteen-year-old Boyd, the quest is to obtain heroic cowboy justice. The protagonist's third quest across the border is to try to find his brother, who ran off with a young Mexican girl. The characters he encounters in his journeys say almost the same things about cowboy life and its place in the United States. His pursuit ends in the cemetery, where he digs up his brother's remains to return them to his homeland to bury. At the end of the novel, Billy suffers a breakdown on an empty desert road, "looking for something he finds impossible to name" (424).

By all appearances, the protagonist lives a comfortable life in the pastoral surroundings of his family ranch, with a patriarchal father, a pious mother, and an admiring younger brother. However, his longing is not for the pastoral, like John Grady Cole's cowboy dreams, but for the wilderness, which in the Southwest of the mid-twentieth century is quickly vanishing: "Most of the game was slaughtered out of the country. Most of the forest cut to feed the boilers of stampmills at the mines" (*The Crossing* 25). Thus, Billy pursues what almost all cowboys pursue: to script his own masculine identity in an untrodden wilderness. However, each destination is part of his larger mission for justice—returning the she-wolf to Mexico, retrieving his father's stolen horses, and fetching his brother's remnants—and they all bring unexpected ramifications and calamitous loss. As Robert Hass points out in his *New York Times* article, "all three quests seem impossible, and they are undertaken as if Billy had no choice, and in this they are like fate, like all the things that people have done in their lives that they could not have done, and it is in its meditation on this circumstance that some of the deepest energies of the book reside." However, all three of his quests across the border are doomed enterprises.

In this novel, McCarthy does not merely highlight the geographic division between two countries. Rather, he ventures into a tenuous area where connections or transitions are established: boy/man, animal/human, wilderness/civilization, innocence/experience, even English/Spanish (the cowboys are bilingual and the Spanish is never translated). Cowboy experience, geography and nature join at the border: Mexico is within sight of the Parhams' home, a home which nevertheless is still the United States. However, Mexico is portrayed in the novel as a place of opportunities, danger, and the frontier.

While cowboy life in the US is bleak and foreseeable, the events that unfold in Mexico are mysterious, gripping and timeless.

The novel continues to chronicle McCarthy's exploration of cowboy myths and their relationship to American culture and society. *The Crossing* pointedly calls upon the iconography and mythic basis of classical western narratives in order to demythologize them. It interrogates "the power of borders, the pollution of those who cross them and their roles in the formation of masculine identity on the levels of personal and national" (Dorson 123). At the same time, McCarthy demonstrates how the politically created borderlands of the modern world—the sites at which nations and cultures are mingled in an ill-fitting and uncomfortable intimacy as a result of Manifest Destiny and Frontier Thesis—have turned the historic frontier into a dead space.

This chapter analyzes *The Crossing* from the standpoint of ecomasculinity, and explores the dynamics between nature and cowboy masculinity that begin to emerge as the protagonist lives a nomadic life back and forth across the border, which plays a primary role in dispelling the American Western myth and cowboy masculinity. Unlike a conventional heroic cowboy of the West, Billy does not control the Southwestern wilderness through his cowboyism or moral superiority, and does not evince an agenda that opposes the progress of civilization. Rather, he develops an ecomasculinist consciousness towards the environment of the Southwest borderland. In its capacity as a Western, *The Crossing* is not so much a critique of imperial agency as it is of imperial rhetoric—political, literary and historical—which portrays conquest as "progress" and posits the savagery of the empire as a noble endeavor. Billy's cowboy existence indeed invokes the mythology of the Old West and replays a drama that has come to represent the classic struggle between civilization and wilderness. By exposing parallels between Billy and the she-wolf, McCarthy upsets the trope of cowboy versus nature, indicating that they are not completely adverse figures, but equal agents and victims of patriarchy, and are shaped by the very mythology in which these characters participate.

3.1. Ecomasculinism: Exploring the Relationship between Billy Parham and the She-Wolf

Theoretical discussions about gender and ecology have mostly come from ecofeminists, who have contributed enormously to the strong connections between feminism and the environment. Ecofeminists such as Ynestra King, Susan Griffin, Karen J. Warren, Greta Gaard and Carolyn Merchant have pointed out how women and nature suffer from the same oppressive patriarchal beliefs and attitudes. In their discussions, ecofeminists also focus on how traditional and honored ways of breadwinning—mining, logging, ranching, farming, and fishing—are framed as testosterone-driven needs to exploit nature and animals. They argue that hegemonic masculinity has been socially constructed and extensively endorsed, presenting performances that damage the Earth, shatter families and oppress women, non-binary/genderqueer people and people of color. For example, in *Ecofeminist Philosophy* (2000) Karen Warren highlights that "there are important connections between the unjustified domination of women, people of color, children and the poor and the unjustified domination of nature" (1). Similarly, in *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* (1993) and *Critical Ecofeminism* (2017), Greta Gaard elucidates how "ecofeminism calls for an end to all oppressions, arguing that no attempt to liberate women can be successful without equal efforts to liberate" the environment (*Critical*, 3). Building on their perspectives in *Eco-Man: New Perspectives on Masculinity and Nature* (2014), Mark Allister intertwines Masculinity Studies and Ecocriticism. He investigates the socially and environmentally challenging implications of traditional industrial notions of manhood and masculinities. What distinguishes "ecomasculine" perspectives from ecofeminism is their response to the question of "whether the patriarchy in the United States serves as a stand-in for all or even most men and oppresses all or even most women" (8). As Allister continues,

> Ecofeminists are certainly justified in pointing out that it is nearly always men who bulldoze land and build houses, but the frequently made assertion that Judith Plant puts in this way in *Healing the Wounds*—"the rape of the earth, and all its forms, becomes a metaphor for the rape of woman, in all its many guises" (5)—does not take into consideration that women are implicated in buying the house in subdivision, are implicated in our entire system of buying and selling, developing and using, and therefore implicated in the "rape of the earth." (8)

Similarly, Scott Slovic points out that "men," "male," "masculine" have become "otherized" by prevailing discourses of feminism and environmentalism (70). Even though ecofeminists have helped sensitize people to environmental abuses and speciesism, he claims that they tend to favor essentialist castigations of all men and all masculine attitudes, thereby perpetrating the same reductionism that they have accused men of perpetrating. According to Slovic, ecofeminists do not rehabilitate the role of men in nature or encourage men to live carefully, gently, and nondestructively. Creating "ecomasculinist literary criticism," he advocates the need to reexamine literary texts "in an effort to identify the special male virtues of these texts that make them exemplary in their transcendence of problematic traditional tendencies of male behavior and male discourse vis-à-vis society and the planet" (70). Likewise, in *Ecomasculinities* (2019), Ruben Cenamor and Stefan Brandt elucidate that "ecomasculinist literary criticism" has the potential to lead men into changing their relationship with other human beings, hence encouraging men to develop "more caring and nurturing relations with other men and women" and adopt more gender-equal attitudes in employment, income, education, and the division of housework (x).

The social construction of masculinity not only exploits women and men, but also the land and animals. As Martin Hultman and Paul M Pule interrogate in *Ecological Masculinities* (2019), "studies of how hegemonic masculinities are connected with—and drivers of—varied forms of ecological destruction are sorely lacking" (150). They focus on why this lack exists and how it should be restored. As they point out,

> We need ecological masculinities that are proactive, productive and reach across the widest possible gendered and political spectrum, just as has emerged throughout ecological feminism over time. To achieve this, we must be willing to look for other options for men and masculinities than the industrial/breadwinner and/or ecomodern offerings of hegemonization that have accompanied male domination. . . . It is our belief that some ecofeminists have understandably expressed great anger, frustration and indeed hurt for the wounds that men and masculinities have inflicted on Earth and human others, but have conflated structural and personal accountability and in doing so have constructed some interpretations of ecological feminism as a discourse that many men find difficult to relate to and embrace. (155)

By bringing together Masculinity Studies and Ecocriticism, they challenge ecologically destructive masculinities and answer these and many other significant inquiries about

men/masculinities and their intricate relationship to nature. In his analysis, Mark Allister also targets Masculinity Studies and comes to the conclusion that it has been blind in examining nature. Pioneering figures in the field such as Michael Kimmel, Michael Messner and R.W. Connell do not discuss men in relation to land and animals. As Allister contends,

> nothing suggests that planting vegetables or flowers, observing wildlife, wandering in woods, camping, learning to be self-sufficient outside one's house, or earning a living out of doors have anything to do with masculinity. For [those] scholars it is as if males today have spent their lives in houses, schools, and cities, exclusively, and men's "relationships" are only with humans, not the nonhuman world. (9)

Thus, he believes that nature is socially constructed in relation to masculinity and that there are many examples of constructive male voices and male narratives that relate to ecomasculinism.

In classical western narratives, nature is mythologized as a background for masculine adventures. Cowboys are in awe of the wilderness and have a strong impulse to tame it, like women. Western writers thus look at unclaimed territories as proving grounds for masculinity. However, as Mark Allister points out, "nature is just as often subjected to his most violent display of mastery" (10). In *The Crossing*, McCarthy engages in ecomasculinity and anthropomorphism; he narrates through the she-wolf's point of view, which is an important intervention in the classical Western genre, where animals are expendable and inanimate. By doing so, McCarthy explores Billy's cowboy masculinity in relation to the natural world by challenging the speciesism often seen in Westerns. Moreover, he deploys an ecomasculinist approach that identifies socially and ecologically responsible behavior and linguistic models for his cowboy character in *The Crossing*. He defies conventional western narratives by depicting an engagement between men and nature that transcends tropes concerning cowboy masculinity.

3.2. "He closed his eyes and tried to see her": Female Absence and the Presence of the She-Wolf

In *The Crossing*'s opening scene, the protagonist is depicted as "a child perhaps four or five years old," "riding into the new Hidalgo County with his younger brother," carrying him on his saddle (3). Boyd is "not much more than a baby and the county

they'd named Hidalgo was itself little older than the child. In the country they'd quit lay the bones of a sister and the bones of his maternal grandmother. The new country was rich and wild" (3). The very beginning of *The Crossing* is a thematic hallmark for its reader; women, of any kind, are substantially absent in the novel. As Patrick Shaw argues, the girls and women of *The Border Trilogy* "do not emerge from the androcentric narratives with attributes enough to define them as distinct personae. . . . Often the females are not granted names, thus losing conventional and convenient nominal tags and travelling through the text with pronominal anonymity" ("Female" 13). As the opening passage indicates, the protagonist's quest into "rich and wild" country will be womanless and will remain haunted by the memory of his sister and grandmother who died before the novel began. From the very beginning of the novel, McCarthy establishes grief and mourning as the dominant mood, portraying the protagonist's early life as "hovering between the losses of the past" and a new beginning at the border (4). In the rest of the novel, he reconciles with this female absence through the gendered ghosts of the past, which allows him to come to an understanding of himself as an American cowboy.

The novel depicts the protagonist as a mother figure who cares for and exerts control over his brother. As they ride, Billy cradles Boyd in his arms, carrying him "before him in the bow of the saddle" and naming "features of the landscape and birds and animals in both spanish and english" (3). McCarthy enhances his parental tenderness and responsibility in the next sentence: "In the new house, they slept in the room off the kitchen and he would lie awake at night and listen to his brother's breathing in the dark and he would whisper half aloud to him as he slept his plans for them and the life they would have together" (3). Here, the protagonist's desires are gendered. He performs the gender role of the opposite sex, disrupting hegemonic definitions of masculinity. As Jamie Brummer states, Billy plays a domestic role and "is associated with child rearing even as he assumes authority to create a world and determine his younger brother's place in it" (173). The protagonist is confident that the life they pursue on the border will prevail forever: "he is perfectly attuned with and capable in this life," and he believes that he is a gifted cowboy, and as such, he should be in charge of the ranch and his brother (4).

Billy's involvement in the female sphere effectively marginalizes his mother who remains a secondary and obscure presence until her death. In the words of Barcley Owens:

> The women who populate McCarthy's westerns remain in domestic roles as thoroughly stolid mothers and wives who fix meals for the ravenous boys and help nurse them back to health. As heroines, McCarthy's females are underdeveloped, two-dimensional figures kept off to the side. They do not take center stage; we do not hear much about their inner-most fears and desires. We are not really given much about them beyond their immediate function in relation to the boys. (65)

The Crossing stresses the displacement of women from the cowboy's world, and much of the rest of the novel can be analyzed as the protagonist's attempt to permeate the gap created by this female absence—not by coming into contact with new females, but by embracing femininity within his own cowboy masculinity. While *All the Pretty Horses* heralds the possibility of a future where American women will look for autonomy and personal agency, *The Crossing* comes to grips with the patriarchal heritage of the American frontier mythology.

Even though women are conspicuously absent in the narrative, McCarthy presents a female agent: the wolf. Arguably, the most intricate and affectionate female character in the whole trilogy may be the she-wolf. Like some of the characters from McCarthy's Tennessee period, in *The Crossing*, Billy is very intimate with the realm of animals; at the beginning of the narrative, his main companion is not a horse, but a she-wolf for whom he develops a deep affection—a plotline that is reminiscent of Jack London's seminal naturalist novels *The Call of the Wild* (1903) and *White Fang* (1906). McCarthy devotes two hundred pages to the meticulous formation of Billy's and the she-wolf's uneasy alliance. Even though he does not use gendered pronouns for the horses in *The Border Trilogy*, he repeatedly highlights the wolf's femaleness. Almost every sentence devoted to the animal deliberately ascribes her gender. Over the course of the novel, Billy develops an ecomasculine consciousness through her feminine presence. She also affects Billy's cowboy masculinity, leading him to destabilizing encounters with the internal world of his cowboy identity.

The protagonist sees wolves for the first time when he is six years old, and it is a vision that is so astonishing that "he never told anybody what he had seen" (5). The wolves are

absent from the American setting of the novel, but in a pre-scene set in 1931, the protagonist watches the last of the New Mexican gray wolves depart in the winter moonlight. After hearing their howls, Billy takes the next communicative step: he tracks the wolves through the snow. He crawls stealthily to the edge of a juniper forest and witnesses seven wolves hunting an antelope. The antelope looks at Billy "like phantoms in the snow," and as McCarthy writes, "the wolves twisted and turned and leapt in a silence such that they seemed of another world entire" (4). The wolves walk down toward the valley "until they were the smallest of figures in that dim whiteness and then they disappeared" (4). Just before they vanish, and as Billy is about to head home, the wolves stop and stare at him, an invocation of another common wolf-story image—the wolf 's gaze. Through the accurately depicted physical features and movements of the wolves in Hidalgo County, McCarthy indicates that both Billy and the wolves become aware of each other's presence. Billy's affinity with the wolves is established by the mutual acceptance and silent acknowledgement of each other's presence.

Billy will never see the wolves again, for the wolves are gone from New Mexico by his sixteenth year. The primary memory of the wolves in Hidalgo County prepares Billy for his upcoming encounter with the she-wolf. McCarthy does not elaborate on what it was that he witnessed as a kid that led him across the border to liberate her. Instead, the novel implies that Billy discovers the wilderness for the first time at sixteen, "looping and running and rising by twos in a standing dance and running on again" (5). It is not until the wolves approach him that the protagonist feels an intimate bond:

> There were seven of them and they passed within twenty feet of where he lay. He could see their almond eyes in the moonlight. He could hear their breath. He could feel the presence of their knowing that was electric in the air. They bunched and nuzzled and licked one another. Then they stopped. They stood with their ears cocked. Some with one forefoot raised to their chest. They were looking at him. He did not breathe. They did not breathe. They stood. Then they turned and quietly trotted on. (4–5)

As a child, the protagonist's communion with the wolves makes a lasting impression. His encounter becomes a grandiose and influential vision, a transcendent truth conveying a broad experience that shapes his later life. He glances another realm whose borders are thoroughly distinct from life on the ranch. His early enchantment with them lies in the assumption that they comprehend and accept the world precisely. He tries to

imitate this ability, especially their direct perception and awareness of nature, as an experience unmediated by cowboy myths and codes. It is an ecomasculinist vision complete with its own truth, and it is this philosophy that the protagonist adopts in *The Crossing*.

A cursory glance at the novel reveals that Billy is the ultimate repository of all of America's cowboy myths. Closer inspection, however, shows that his quest is far more than a youthful search for self, far more than a simple *bildungsroman* in which the protagonist indulges in some minor experimentation before returning to the psychological, economic and cultural safe harbor of cowboy masculinity. He struggles to create an ecomasculine identity that not only contradicts the toxic and hypermasculine framework of larger American culture, but also the generic framework of the story itself. Throughout the novel, the protagonist seeks rituals whose purpose is to initiate him into a more complex understanding of cowboy conventions and codes than American tradition and culture allow. Through his ecomasculine consciousness, he desperately looks for a new and different role, rejecting the conventional masculine traits he has acquired.

3.3. "I aint heard one in years": Historicizing the She-wolf

In the first sentences of the novel, the reader is suffused with a keen sense of what is about to be lost in the 1930s. Just before World War II, the protagonist and his family have moved to a new county in the boot heel of New Mexico where "you could ride clear to Mexico and not strike a crossfence" (3). The border's ambivalence or doubleness is likewise established in these opening words as "a site of demarcation yet also a point of entry or transcendence" (Monk 45). Similar to John Grady Cole, Billy has a disregard for borders which is symbolized by his antithetical relationship to fences. As the narrator describes, "the country is crowdin up" and wolves have disappeared along with any idea of how to catch them (3). While the quest to recover Billy's father's stolen horses drives much of the novel's plot, it is the she-wolf who generates *The Crossing*'s complex imagery, for she is the prominent performer of transgression, and ultimately, the repository of doubleness and hybridity. The she-wolf and her mate had wandered up from Mexico where wolves still survived, to a Texas/New Mexico border area where wolves had become essentially extinct (4).

Removal of the Indian and buffalo, and the fencing off of the land for the raising of cattle, created an artificial world where there was no room for wolves. Wolves, as part of the old natural system, became a threat to the survival of the newly established order; therefore, they had to be controlled or eliminated.

The historical and ecological relationship that the United States has with wild wolves is cruel and destructive.[6] In *The Wolf of the Southwest: The Making of an Endangered Species* (2010) David Brown points out that

> wolves had been essentially eliminated in New Mexico by the mid 1920s. Only in Hidalgo County's Animas, Peloncillo and San Luis mountains did wolves persist into the 1930s—their constantly depleting ranks continually refurbished by new recruits crossing the Mexican border along long-established runways. (25)

By the 1930s, the decade in which *The Crossing* is set, the US government had been successful in all but erasing the wolf from the Southwestern landscape. In order for such an erasure to take place, officials had to hire wolf trappers to patrol the border. President Theodore Roosevelt, who showcased cowboy masculinity by subjecting nature to his will and exploring, penetrating and conquering the American "virgin land" to show his sense of manhood, even implored cowboy hunters to help eradicate wild wolves as reflected in *Hunting the Grisly and Other Sketches* (1902): "The wolf is the archetype of ravin, the beast of waste and desolation. It is still found scattered thinly throughout all the wilder portions of the United States, but has everywhere retreated from the advance of civilization" (213). According to Barry Lopez, wolf-trappers were regarded as legendary figures by cowboys. As he expresses,

> the wolfer came to regard himself after the turn of the century as a folk hero, as a man of deliverance. Without him the nation, hungry for beef and in need of wool, could not carry on. As his services became less and less required, he billed the wolf more and more as a sagacious and vicious enemy that only he could track down and kill. To this end he supported the

[6] Interestingly, upon Aldo Leopold's suggestion, the gray wolves were reintroduced to nature in the 1980s in the southwestern US, specifically in the Blue Range Wilderness Area in New Mexico and the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest in Arizona, where native Mexican wolves had been slaughtered in the 1930s. The aim of the wolf-introduction was to control the overgrown elk population, which was disrupting the local ecosystem. It is unclear whether or not McCarthy had this in mind when he introduced Mexican wolves into the setting of his novel, but he definitely prompts readers to consider "the ecological question of the gray wolf" (El-Osta).

> outrageous claims of the stockmen who employed him, even when he knew it was all nonsense. (186)

Both government and the popular press glorified cowboy wolfers as "crusaders against demonic cattle killers" (186). According to David Brown, a cowboy named W.C. Echols was considered "the border patrol" (86) when it came to wolfing. As archival evidence shows, this is the figure to whom McCarthy alludes when Billy and his father discuss the legend surrounding the hunter Echols (Cormac McCarthy Papers, Notes on *The Crossing*, Box 54, Folder 3). McCarthy's Echols was said to have been an expert trapper who could "set the traps from horseback" (23).

However, in a letter from the real Echols to J Stokely Ligon, first district inspector for the US Biological Survey's Predatory Animal and Rodent Control (PARC) Service, Echols writes: "These traps I covered early in the morning carrying with me a small light pole, spiked at the end for this purpose, and never dismounted from my horse unless the trap was sprung" (Brown 73). In his report on the wolves in New Mexico, E. L. Pineau documented that in 1923, "Hunter Echols took 13 wolves on the Mexico and New Mexico border. This accomplishment rates Mr. Echols high man on wolves" (67). W.C. Echols remained "high man on wolves" for twenty years, until his retirement in the fall of 1943 (Cormac McCarthy Papers, Notes on *The Crossing*, Box 54, Folder 4). When a wolf is discovered in Echols' former territory in the novel, there is no Echols to get rid of her and Mr. Parham writes him a letter asking his advice on how to catch a wolf. With his help, Mr. Parham teaches Billy an important male skill: how to dig and set a trap for the she-wolf.

Like the Native Americans, the wolves were adversely affected by Manifest Destiny, westward expansion, and its impact on the environment. The cowboy's desire to rid southern New Mexico of the wolves made the wolves lucrative. Thus, the wolves had already been nearly exterminated from the Mexico-United States border prior to the start of the novel. The cowboys succeed in their quest, and the loss of the wolves is a motif in all three volumes of *The Border Trilogy.* It is during this period of the wolves' annihilation that McCarthy situates the novel and the wolves' absence from the border is why the she-wolf's presence is so astonishing to the protagonist. In the novel, W.C. Echols is juxtaposed with his successor, the protagonist, who initially strives for the

same ends as Echols—to eradicate the wolf. Similar to John Grady Cole, Billy has a relationship with animals which is empathetic to the point of telepathic. As discussed in Chapter Two, John Grady Cole's horse sense is evident in his ability to break sixteen horses in four days using neither violence nor cruelty. His empathy, like Billy's, reveals a basic humanity and his capacity as a caretaker. The difference between the two cowboys, however, is that John Grady's empathy for horses seems innate, whereas Billy's ecomasculinist approach to the she-wolf must be learned.

The she-wolf in Cormac McCarthy's text must prey on cattle because the cattle are grazing on land once occupied by wild game. What it really comes down to for the she-wolf is competition for natural resources: a power struggle over hunting territory. The wolf hunts but cannot find game: "Her ancestors had hunted camels and primitive toy horses on these grounds. She found little to eat. Most of the game was slaughtered out of country. Most of the forest cut to feed the boilers of the stampmills at the mines" (25). Barcley Owen argues that Cormac McCarthy's female characters are flattened and static and the reader is informed about their "innermost fears and desires" (63), However, McCarthy provides detailed introspection on the she-wolf. The reader learns about her origins, even the exact location at which she crossed the borders, "the point where it intersected the thirtieth minute of the one hundred and eighth meridian" (24).

As S.K. Robisch argues, wolves were nearly gone from the Southwest by 1939 and because their prey had been killed or driven out of the country, they had to depend on cowboys for survival by killing their cattle (56). As McCarthy explains, "the wolves in that country had been killing cattle for a long time but the ignorance of the animals was a puzzle to them. . . . the cows evoked in them some anger. As if they were offended by some violation of an old order. Old ceremonies. Old protocols" (25). "The political border does not matter so much to the she-wolf as does finding her biotic community." The opening episode of the novel suggests that" the biotic community of the Southwest borderlands" preexists the political border drawn by men who have deployed dubious and often deceitful methods to disrupt the larger flora and fauna of the region.

Domestication, like industrialization, as Wallis Sanborn discusses, is yet another form of taming the wilderness. This taming in turn, disrupts all who are a part of the wilderness and creates a new order (43). The primary landmarks of this new order in the

novel include the fence, the highway, and the railroad track: “She would not cross a road or a rail line in daylight. She would not cross under a wire fence twice in the same place. These were the new protocols. Strictures that had not existed before. Now they did” (25). Here, the narrator describes the she-wolf’s hunger, loneliness and shattering sense of loss in detail. To make matters worse for the she-wolf in the 1930s, she became a target for eradication by those with a vested interest in the domesticated food sources she had resorted to tapping. Patricia Limerick explains that the government, working together with the cowboys, all but wiped out the wolves because they were competing with humans for resources:

> The animal kingdom had been sorted out and classified according to merit. The good animals—the fishable, huntable trophy animals—had a bureau devoted to their protection; the bad ones did not. In fact, the bad animals were attacked by the government. If the goal was preservation of game animals, the predators—wolves, coyotes, mountain lions were enemies and competitors. Not only that, predators had also adapted to the new opportunities for getting protein in the form of domesticated livestock. . . . ranchers joined hunters in condemning the nonhuman carnivores, and government rallied to the cause—trapping, poisoning and shooting. (310)

In the novel, she is separated from her pack, and the narrator elucidates, her backstory and her motivation for escaping Mexico and the dreadful event that made her so wary of traps: “She carried a scabbedover wound on her hip where her mate had bitten her two weeks before somewhere in the mountains of Sonora. He’d bitten her because she would not leave him. Standing with the one forefoot in the jaws of a steeltrap and snarling at her to drive her off where she lay just beyond reach of the chain” (24). She is alone, and later it becomes obvious that she is also pregnant. When she finds a kill but “no traces of wolves,” the reader is left with her as the only lupine character for the novel’s duration, with no explanation except for the reader’s knowledge concerning the disappearance of the rest of her kind (25). Thus, as Chris Powici argues, the she-wolf “has not emerged from some impenetrable recess, either of the primeval forest or the primeval mind. This is a wolf with a history, a wolf that is in and of the world, that very same world over which Americans cast an invisible net of lines—whether of text or of longitude and latitude—through which she passes” (15). Likewise, Susan Kollin states:

> the wolf knows better than to devote herself to old pathways and, in that sense, differs from the novel’s other western characters, who are caught up in nostalgic efforts to stop their world from changing. Cormac McCarthy restructures the codes so that here the sense of loss is experienced by a

> nonhuman character in the form of a wolf who is also a fully developed character. It is the she-wolf, in other words, who is structured by elegy, rather than the Anglo character. (576–577)

Thus, the she-wolf functions as a melancholic figure who symbolizes the loss of natural habitat, the destruction of the flora and fauna that came with westward expansion, and the closing of the frontier which was grounded on America's deprivation of the wilderness. As a distinctly gendered character, her femininity, overtly stressed by the novels' diction, is also threatened.

As Michael Kimmel argues in *Manhood in America* (2018), "untamed femininity—more than the Native Americans, brutal landscapes, or the unchecked violence of other males, all seen in the classic Western—poses the real threat to American cowboy masculinity" (262). When she-wolf enters the US from Mexico, hopelessly looking for her kin with which to breed her pups, the protagonist is confronted with a dilemma between his mission for his family and his community, and the Mexican she-wolf. Interestingly, he learns about the presence of the she-wolf in Hidalgo County at the dinner table, when the Parham family is dining on steak:

> You all set down, their mother said. She set a platter of fried steaks on the table. A bowl of beans. When they'd said grace she handed the platter to their father and he forked one of the steaks onto his plate and passed it on to Billy.
> Pap says there's a wolf on the range, she said.
> Billy sat holding the platter, his knife aloft.
> A wolf? Boyd said.
> His father nodded. She pulled down a pretty good sized veal calf up at the head of Foster Draw.
> When? Said Billy.
> Been a week or more. . . . She come up out of Mexico. (15)

The ironic scene identifies the significant role of beef in the life of the Parham family; beef means sustenance and life. While dining on fried steak, they discuss the damage caused by the she-wolf. The lone she-wolf has killed a calf, and not merely a calf, but a source of veal—an important part of the Parham family diet and a lucrative part of the cattle trade.[7] She is encroaching upon the cowboy world, a world where cattle are both

[7] In her seminal work *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (1990) Carol Adams joins the ideas of Feminism and Vegetarianism and argues that there is a strong relationship between eating/butchering animals and the maintenance of patriarchal dominance. She claims that "the treatment of animals as objects is parallel to and associated

highly valued commercial property and a primary source of sustenance. Thus, she must be eradicated:

> What do you aim to do? Said Billy.
> Well, I reckon we better catch her. Don't you?
> Yessir.
> . . .
> If Mr Echols was here he'd catch her.
> Yes he would. But he aint. (16)

Billy knows that his father or another cowboy would kill the she-wolf without hesitation. Thus in his efforts to catch the she-wolf, he asserts the image of the heroic cowboy constructed by society, especially by Mr. Parham. He knows that cowboy masculinity has been historically rewarded for pursuing exploitive codes and practices, "despite far-reaching social and environmental costs" (Hultman 49). Cowboy codes and practices are predicated upon a set of conventions that are imperfectly distilled in mythic cowboy figures, such as Billy the Kid. Therefore, Billy Parham initially embraces a familiar juvenile cowboy identity that replicates his mythological heroes. He imagines cowboy masculinity according to traditional cowboy narratives, partly because he lacks precise guidance, and partly because as a cowboy, he can relate to other cowboy Billys, and not much beyond that. He struggles to perform a masculinity that he defines as "not-feminine," because anything associated with traditional female gender roles, according to the cowboy code, is inferior.

The she-wolf also prompts the protagonist to explore his own desire to transgress or cross. Billy manages to ensnare the she-wolf, initially in full compliance with the unwritten law of cowboyism (wolves must be trapped and destroyed), and Mr. Parham's explicit injunction. Trapping the she-wolf provides the protagonist with the ultimate symbolic opportunity to eliminate one of the greatest menaces to cowboy masculinity according to the American patriarchy. Yet, as Barcley Owens points out, Billy's "whole

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with" hegemonic society's "objectification of women, and other minorities in order to systematically exploit them" (7). Thus, it's possible to link the Parhams' meat-eating habit to the oppression of animals, in particular the she-wolf. "The way gender politics is structured into the cowboy world is related to how cowboys" view calf that they consume. As Adams points out being a man in American culture "is tied to identities that they either claim or disown—what 'real' man do and don't do. 'Real' men don't eat quiche. It's not only an issue of privilege, it's an issue of symbolism" (16). McCarthy ironically details the interrelationships between meat eating and cowboy dominance and how cowboy masculinity is "constructed in American culture, in part, by access to meat eating and control of other bodies" (10).

future is compressed into this immediate action, and once he makes his decision, whichever way, the moment will forever split into what is and what could have been" (79). He can kill the feminine presence, honorably fulfill his father's expectations, and position himself in the trajectory of his cowboy ancestors. However, he does not do so.

Billy tries to catch the she-wolf a couple of times, but his father's suggestions are ineffective. Mr. Parham encourages Billy to discover the wilderness though the technology of the wolf trap itself:

> Holding the trap at eyelevel against the morning sky he looked to be truing some older, some subtler instrument. Astrolabe or sextant. Like a man bent at fixing himself someway in the world. Bent on trying by arc or chord the space between his being and the world that was. (22)

He helps his father set the trap lines, and it becomes his job to check and reset the traps. After several unsuccessful attempts, Billy realizes that conventional trapping methods are useless. In the end, he disregards his father's advice and visits Don Arnulfo, the old bedridden Mexican, in search of assistance in trapping the she-wolf. He believes that "each hunter must have his own formula," (45) which demands an alternative perspective of the animal and the wolfer. Don Arnulfo believes that Billy should see "the she-wolf on its own ground," "to put aside the ceremonies and namings of man and to truly see the world directly" (45). He inspires Billy to undertake a mission that contradicts his cowboy ethics. Steven Frye emphasizes the importance of Billy's encounter with Don Arnulfo, arguing that the old man "initiates Billy's epistemic quest, a journey during which Billy makes or discovers meaning in the events that he witnesses and receives insight into a divine order by means of the stories he hears from other witnesses" (52).

Don Arnulfo provides Billy with a comparison that appears to be about the she-wolf's nature, but implicitly is about the nature of the world. He tells Billy that cowboys cannot figure out what wolves know because only wolves can comprehend: "The hunter was a different thing that cowboy supposed. . . . Cowboys believe the blood of slain to be of no consequence but that the wolf knows better. . . . The wolf is a being of great order and that it knows what cowboys do not: that there is no order in the world save that which death has put there" (46). According to Don Arnulfo, cowboys try to superimpose their own order on the land, indulging in fantasies of control and personal

agency, forgetting that nature always has the final say. He adds that "men drink the blood of God yet they do not understand the seriousness of what they do" (45). Accordingly, the reason cowboys cannot figure out their environment or the power of the hunter and the blood they shed is because the world lies unseen, lies between their acts and their manhood rituals. "They see the acts of their own hands or they see that which they name and call out to one another," Don Arnulfo explains to the protagonist, "but the world between is invisible to them" (47). In other words, masculinity is constructed by the myths men tell themselves and they mediate men's "perceptions and the reality of the physical world." They assume that "they can grasp the world through the trapped body of the wolf, but they cannot. All that is left in the trap is teeth and fur" (46).

Don Arnulfo questions Billy's motivations behind hunting the she-wolf and accuses him of acting out of greed: "You want to catch this wolf, the old man said. Maybe you want the skin so you can get some money. Maybe you can buy some boots or something like that" (46). He continues, "the wolf is like the snowflake. You catch the snowflake but when you look in your hand you dont have it no more. . . . If you want to see it you have to see it on its own ground. If you catch it you lose it" (46). Don Arnulfo highlights the impossibility to control the wilderness as he likens it to the snowflake. This characterization of the wilderness, as alluring yet attainable and unreachable, as a fragile testing site of manhood, foreshadows the challenge that the protagonist will encounter throughout his quest.

In his influential work, *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (2015), William Cronon argues that "nature is not very natural, if by nature we mean that which is untouched by humans; instead nature is a profoundly human construction" (25). He claims that there is no "nature" that is stable or foundational. Don Arnulfo tries to help Billy see that nature has numerous and shifting roles—sometimes existing as an idea, or as a commodity, or as a pure entity for those who want to attack what is more obviously human–made. Don Arnulfo also claims that Billy cannot catch the she-wolf because "as a creature wholly other than human," it must be "caught on its own ground" and with its own unique language. He talks about the impermanent and illusory nature of the world and all things in it:

> "Listen to me, young one", the old man wheezed. If you could breathe a breath so strong you could blow out the wolf. Like you blow out the copo. Like you blow out the fire from the candela. The wolf is made the way the world is made. You cannot touch the world. You cannot hold it in your hand for it is made of breath only. (46)

On a literal level, Don Arnulfo is saying that the she-wolf can only be truly observed in its natural environment, because capturing the she-wolf robs it of the essential quality of its wild freedom. On a more esoteric level, however, Don Arnulfo is talking about the impossibility of truly knowing something through a study of its outward form, because the very essence of the thing—its spirit—cannot be studied, or comprehended empirically. Trying to detain the wild she-wolf, "like trying to systematize meaning," leads only to its loss.

Billy meets the she-wolf as a trapper, not a savior, long before the pit fighting scene in the novel. After his encounter with Don Arnulfo, Billy discovers that the she-wolf has been scavenging the campsite of a band of vaqueros, and decides to set a trap in the cooling ashes of their latest fire, a place where the fire is literally still blazing. However, he realizes that "his heart was not in it" and he sits on his horse for "a long time" (49). Billy's silent hesitation reveals that he has some concerns about trapping the she-wolf. The obvious reason for Billy's sitting on the horse is that they have been working hard and he is resting the horse, but the reader can easily infer another reason: after talking to Don Arnulfo, he has not yet decided whether or not he will catch the she-wolf. His heart has to be in it, and right now, he is sitting on the fence. He looks "back toward the pass" then "out over the valley again" before finally riding away (50). The next day, after preparing the trap, he awaits the results with heightened anticipation: That night "he lay awake a long time thinking about the wolf. . . . He wondered had the living blood with which it slaked its throat a different taste to the thick iron tincture of his own" (52). Apparently, his mind is full of questions that his quest will eventually help him answer.

Billy's disobedience to his father is foreshadowed in the paragraph immediately preceding his first encounter with the she-wolf: "In the morning he was out before daylight saddling the horse in cold dark of the barn. He rode out the gate before his father was even up and he never saw him again" (52). Perhaps he believes that it will be easy for him to act without his father's authoritative gaze. When he rides back to check

the trap the next day, the she-wolf is standing, waiting. His father has given him instructions on what he should do if he traps the she-wolf, but in the excitement of the moment, he cannot quite remember the rules and debates, and whether or not to ride back home for help. Meanwhile, the she-wolf "was watching him before. He sat the horse a long time. The sun warm on his back. The world waiting. Then he rode back to the wolf" (53). His decision not to ride back home for help seems to be motivated directly by his awareness of "the world waiting," an idea that is introduced by Don Arnulfo:

> between [cowboys'] acts and their ceremonies lies the world and in this world the storms blow and the trees twist in the wind and all the animals that God has made go to and fro yet this world cowboys do not see. They see the acts of their own hands or they see that which they name and call out to one another but the world between is invisible to them. (46)

His desire to retrace the she-wolf to its mountain home evokes John Grady's admiration for Alejandra. Before catching the she-wolf, like young lovers, the protagonist and the she-wolf respectively gaze at one another and avoid each other's glances. Only after tying her up and almost strangling her can the protagonist bring himself to look straight at the female creature. As the narrator puts it, "she looked up at him, the eye delicately aslant, the knowledge of the world it held sufficient to the day if not the day's evils" (55). His true quest is to gain his own knowledge of the world, to come to a profound understanding of his place in the social order where the conventional cowboy codes he has inherited are increasingly anachronistic. Trapping the she-wolf and selecting not to kill her is the catalyst of his ecomasculinist quest and his direct confrontation with the feminine.

Passing through remote parts of northern Mexico, the protagonist exercises his authority over the she-wolf. If he is to save her, he must first subdue her. He fits her with a muzzle, binds her, ties her with a rope, and leads her behind the horse until their encounter at the first ranch, where he holds the she-wolf's tether himself (63–64). When dogs come out and his horse bolts, Billy stands by the she-wolf and holds off the dogs, actually pulling the she-wolf "hard up against his leg" until the dogs are called back by the owner (64). He finds a helpful family at the border and stays there to heal the trap wound on the wolf's leg (70). Gradually, the she-wolf submits to Billy's authority, for she depends upon him for food and water. He offers her food, which she

refuses until she is too hungry to refuse and is convinced that he will not harm her. They drink from the same canteen several times. Interestingly. Billy is being transformed as well. He is the protector of the she-wolf, and she is becoming his tame and submissive companion:

> He and the she-wolf between them ate the whole bird then they sat by the fire side by side. . . . The she-wolf snubbed up close on the rope and starting and quivering at every small eruption among the coals. When he touched her skin ran and quivered under his hand like a horse's. He talked to her about his life but it didnt seem to rest her fears. After a while he sang to her. (89)

Billy's ecomasculinist vision is coupled with the cowboy ethos, creating a hybrid and alternative cowboy masculinity. Billy has already inherited the codes of traditional cowboyism and he combines it with a new code of ecomasculinism. However, his new vision contradicts the existing behavioral code of the cowboy culture in his community. According to Ashley Bourne, Billy is compelled to cross the border "perhaps because of an unconscious recognition on the part of the central character of the impossibility of self-development through physical stasis" (113). However, he decides to leave his family because he thinks she will help restore his identity. He believes that he is supposed to relocate the she-wolf to its habitat, because the wolves in his country are already extinct. Yet, his preoccupation with the she-wolf demonstrates that his concerns for his new ecomasculine cowboy identity contradicts his cowboy culture. "Why not shoot the thing in the head" as Billy is instructed by his father? (30) His inability to find an answer to this question in a traditional and practical manner suggests that he has already begun diverging from his father's cowboy code, which rejects both the feminine and the animal as "inferior" and therefore unworthy of consideration. When Billy and the she-wolf are camping in the Mexican desert, he cannot sleep properly because of the coldness during the night. When he rises and heads towards the fire, he realizes that the she-wolf is watching him:

> When the flames came up her eyes burned out there like gatelamps to another world. A world burning on the shore of an unknowable void. A world construed out of blood. . . . He wrapped himself in the blanket and watched her. When those eyes and the nation to which they stood witness were gone at last with their dignity back into their origins there would perhaps be other fires and other witnesses and other worlds otherwise beheld. (73–74)

This excerpt is also reminiscent of when Billy watches the wolves on the wintry plains of New Mexico. When he witnesses the she-wolf's world, or "the world as the she-wolf sees it," Billy realizes that one cannot return from that world. As Sara Spurgeon argues, cowboy culture

> has become for Billy transparent, or, put another way, culture has suddenly made itself visible to him, and now that he knows it is there, he no longer trusts it, can no longer abandon himself to the visions and interpretations it presents to him. Nature, however, is equally strange and trustworthy. (*Exploding* 66)

As the narrative unfolds, Billy's ecomasculinism grows stronger, pulling him towards the arid landscape of the Southwest borderlands and its biotic community. He develops an ethical commitment and responsibility, and his extraordinary dedication to the she-wolf attests to this.

During his "custody" of the she-wolf, Billy guesses what is going on in her mind: "I know you think I'm tryin to kill you, he said. . . . He thought she'd be terrified of [the fire] but she was not. . . . He already knew that she was smarter than any dog but he didn't know how much smarter. . . . He thought she would very likely bite the spatula but she didn't" (81). Billy's adventures with the she-wolf further complement Don Arnulfo's comparison of the she-wolf to a constantly elusive reality. After he captures and ties her up, he "squatted there watching her with the rope in both hands. Like a man entrusted with the keeping of something which he hardly knew the use of" (79). Billy realizes that they were heading into a new world, whose rules and laws were completely unknown and radically different from the cowboy ethos.

Before the protagonist speaks with Don Arnulfo, he plans on trading the she-wolf's hide for bounty. After he captures the she-wolf, however, he encounters numerous people who offer to buy her or ask if he plans to collect a bounty for her. In each case, Billy says that he will not. The first is an American rancher to whom Billy says the she-wolf is not for sale. When Mexicans offer to buy her, he responds, "No es mia" (87). One of the Mexican ranchers asks him whose wolf she is and "he said that the she-wolf had been entrusted to his care but that it was not his wolf and he could not sell it" (88). Billy seems to imply that he has been assigned as a custodian by a divine natural power: "He said that the wolf was the property of a great *hacendado* and that it had been put in his

care that no harm come to it." When the man asks him if this *hacendado* lives in the colony of Morales, he responds, "that he did indeed live there and in other places as well" (90).

3.4. The Impossibility of a Counternarrative

Billy cares for the she-wolf until he meets a group of men with "US government 45 automatic pistols in black leather holsters hanging from their belts" (95). She is taken from Billy and imprisoned in a small building:

> By now the mozo had come from the house with a key and they dragged the wolf across the street and unlocked and unchained the doors to an adobe shed and put the wolf inside and locked the doors again. . . . When he came out again he said that the wolf was seized as contraband but that he was free to go thanks to the clemency of the alquacil who had considered his youth. (98)

The government officials end up confiscating the she-wolf as contraband and selling her to a travelling circus. As self-proclaimed custodian of the she-wolf, the protagonist fails to protect her. In the end, the she-wolf becomes nothing more than a sideshow for human amusement. She is sold yet again to a cowboy who pits her against hunting dogs for sport. She is given little chance to defend herself, as she is tethered to a pole and dogs are set upon her: "The cowboy in the pit chained the wolf to the pipe and then dragged her to the end of the chain and stretched her out while they removed the homemade muzzle. Then they stepped back and slipped the noose of the rope they'd stretched her with" (113). She is being systematically destroyed by cowboys with their trained fighting dogs, and she has no chance of winning.

Towards the end of the first part of the novel, McCarthy presents a very significant scene that epitomizes Billy's rhetorical defeat of the patriarchy in his final endeavor to save the she-wolf from death in the fighting pit. He steps into the pit, interrupts the fight and asks the spectators, who will decide the fate of the she-wolf and her unborn pups, to listen to him. The *hacendado*'s son also does the same. From then on, the scene unfolds like a debate between two speakers asking for the spectators' favor. Billy "pleads his case" and explains that he meant to return the she-wolf to the Pilares mountains, and was not bringing her to the United States to trade (119). However, it is the eloquent other party, "a young gentryman" speaking "in a high clear voice like one declaiming to

the crowd" who has the upper hand. (119). Not only is he part of the establishment with the Mexican law on his side, the *hacendado*'s son also reinforces what the spectators already believe. In order to win their support, the protagonist must plead his case through a persuasive narrative. However, such a narrative is not available to him. His ecomasculine consciousness, which requires him to return the she-wolf to her natural habitat, is not yet conceivable to the established patriarchy. He has neither the language to explain why he brought her back to Mexico, nor the narrative to make it convincing. In the end, he has no other choice but to kill her himself to end her suffering: "He stepped over the parapet and walked toward the wolf and levered a shell into the chamber of rifle and halted ten feet from her and raised the rifle to his shoulder and took aim at bloodied head and fired" (122). Billy realizes that like the she-wolf, he is also endangered by his ecomasculine consciousness in a patriarchal society.

Earlier in the novel, just after he has seen the she-wolf pack hunting antelope, Billy wonders about the taste and smell of the prey's blood. When Billy looks into her eyes, he sees "a world burning on the shore of an unknowable void. A world construed out of blood and blood's alkahest and blood in its core and in its integument because it was that nothing save blood had power to resonate against that void which threatened hourly to devour it" (73). Watching the wolf feed, Billy wonders whether "the living blood with which it slaked its throat" had "a different taste to the thick iron tincture of his own." (52). Billy's observation of the she-wolf suggests that she does, indeed, embody something made of a distinctly different reality than his own. Looking into her eyes, he sees "no despair but only that same reckonless deep of loneliness that cored the world to its heart" (105). Later, while riding out to bury the she-wolf, he learns the answer: "He could feel the blood of the wolf against his thigh . . . and he put his hand to his leg and tasted the blood which tasted no different than his own" (125), a gesture of communion, and a suggestion that his own position in the world is analogous to the she-wolf's. At the burial site, Billy places "his hand on her head and closes her eyes," and in so doing he moves from merely a responsive and thoughtful position to what he thinks the she-wolf might imagine the world to be. In other words, his imagination and grief are galvanized and he becomes the she-wolf. To the accompaniment of coyotes howling along the Pilares, he touches her fur, and her teeth. This is the end of both the last wolf

and the last wolfer cowboy, both of whom have been chased into oblivion by the border law they learned in the fighting pit.

Taking the carcass of the she-wolf into the wild high country of the Pilares, Billy is seeking both redemption and resolution for the act of trapping the she-wolf and for all the cowboys who ever trapped wolves. His dream to catch her, while demonstrating his mastery as a cowboy, will not allow him to assume the romantic role of the cowboy hero. By reaching the mountains, the protagonist achieves personal victory, repudiates the role of rancher and wolf-trapper, and thus refuses to participate in the myth of the frontier. He exchanges his former identity for that of the she-wolf, and protects her as a vital part of nature by returning her to the mountains of her birth.

Unlike the cowboys criticized by Don Arnulfo, Billy now is able to understand the "seriousness" of a connection with nature. His realization is reminiscent of Ralph Waldo Emerson's proclamation that "one blood rolls uninterruptedly an endless circulation through all men, as the water of the globe is all one sea, and truly seen, its tide is one" (74). Holding the she-wolf's head allows Billy to imagine her alive again, and in his mind he indicts the she-wolf 's tormentors, and forces the reader to confront the act cowboys commit when they imagine in a profane fashion, rather than in a sacred one. Billy recognizes the power of the real world to teach, to render the present in greater detail rather than in a foggier abstraction of self-concern.

In *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), Aldo Leopold recalls a youthful experience in which he and his party opened fire on a wolf pack in New Mexico. His description of a dying wolf echoes one of the key scenes in *The Crossing*:[8]

> We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters'

[8] Cormac McCarthy refers to Aldo Leopold in a note in an early draft of *The Crossing*. The note appears on page 51H, which features the scene in which Billy encounters the mysterious wolf trapper and mystic Don Arnulfo. Most likely while writing this section, he was influenced by Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* and his ecological philosophy (The Cormac McCarthy Archive, Box 55, Folder 6).

> paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view. (138–139)

As with the famous epiphany Aldo Leopold had while watching a wolf die, here the reader witnesses not only grief, but also to the griever's ability to generate a story, and to influence his own capacity for both grief and action. Billy is able to see the she-wolf in the same light as Don Arnulfo, and like Leopold, sees spiritual depth within the she-wolf's eyes. This revelation is conveyed through a poignant and lyrical passage in the novel:

> He squatted over the wolf and touched her fur. He touched the cold and perfect teeth. The eye turned to the fire gave back no light and he closed it with his thumb and sat by her and put his hand upon her bloodied forehead and closed his own eyes that he could see her running in the mountains, running in the starlight where the grass was wet and the sun's coming as yet had not undone the rich matrix of creatures passed in the night before her. Deer and hare and dove and groundvole all richly empaneled on the air for her delight, all nations of the possible world ordained by God of which she was one among and not separate from. Where she ran the cries of the coyotes clapped shut as if a door had been closed upon them and all was fear and marvel. He took up her stiff head out of the leaves and held it or he reached to hold what cannot be held, what already ran among the mountains at once terrible and of a great beauty, like flowers that feed on flesh. What blood and bone are made of but can themselves not make on any altar nor by any wound of war. What we may well believe has power to cut and shape and hollow out the dark form of the world surely if wind can, if rain can. But which cannot be held never be held and is no flower but is swift and a huntress and the wind itself is in terror of it and the world cannot lose it. (127)

Billy, like Aldo Leopold, notices the absence of light in her eyes. The wolves are an indispensable part of the flora and fauna in New Mexico and their absence indicates the cowboy's ignorance, greediness, and short-sightedness for the natural world. However, because of their rapaciousness, the cowboys eradicate the wolves for they only see them as livestock predators.

In her influential essay "The Vanishing World of Cormac McCarthy's *The Border Trilogy*," Dianne C. Luce examines the natural implications of the border novels with their exploration of "the predatory nature of man and his drive for civilization" (170). She argues that Billy Parham becomes externally and internally hardened by death and brutality, "because he has learned not to feel so deeply his pain at the extermination of the Mexican wolf in the Southwest, the incursion of technology and government into

the terrain of his youth, the vanishing of the cowboy and his way of life—or to acknowledge it consciously" (171). Cormac McCarthy's ecomasculinist vision in *The Border Trilogy* is most explicit in *The Crossing* and is situated upon the ecological and masculine concerns of Billy Parham, whose totem is the she-wolf, the predator who must remain wild if she is to exist at all. She not only represents the material world of nature that has been eradicated by cowboys, but also "the very spirit of wildness and of the external world itself, a swift huntress that the world cannot lose . . . an indispensable manifestation of the world itself" (McCarthy 130). The burial of the she-wolf with her puppies still alive in her belly signals Billy's decaying manhood, the turning point in a life that has forever been changed by the loss of a mother and her offspring. This is the first of many losses the protagonist will face over the years, for he is destined to be the only survivor to bear witness to the deeds of others.

After he buries the she-wolf in the mountains from which she originally came, Billy begins his return journey to New Mexico. Like John Grady Cole, he becomes an alien in his own land:

> When he walked out into the sun and untied the horse from the parking meter people passing in the street turned to look at him. Something in off the wild mesas, something in out of the post. Ragged, dirty, hungry in eye and belly. Totally unspoken for. In that outlandish figure they beheld what they envied most and what they most reviled. If their hearts went out to him it was yet true that for very small cause they might also have killed him. (170)

His transgressions render him a threat to the social order in his community. A walking anachronism with his horse tied to a parking meter, he becomes the ultimate outcast. When one of the occupants in the town inquiries about his profession, he tells her that he is a "vaquero," or a "cowboy," and she asks where he is going. Billy does not speak to her, but McCarthy offers the reader a sense of what he is feeling: "He didnt know. He looked vaguely around the room. Pinned to the bare mud wall with a wooden peg was a calendar with a color print of a 1927 Buick. A woman in a fur coat and a turban stood beside it. He said that he did not know where he was going" (171).

Billy does not know where he is going because, like John Grady, he has no specific destination. His ecomasculinity makes it difficult for him to fit into existing patriarchal codes and structures, especially urban ones. However, he knows that with his new sense

of masculinity, he cannot go back in time, and therein lies the unknown aspect of his final destination. As he states, "I quit this country once before . . . It wasn't the future that brought me back here" (212). Here, Billy appears to be revealing how his thoughts and actions are determined by an urge to rehabilitate the past. What he utters discloses this dilemma: "he has quit the country" only to be "brought back by something that" did not work out in the past. A young cowboy quitting his hometown signals agency, but "being brought back" indicates something beyond his control, something akin to failure. Because he cannot go back in time to a place where there was a frontier and where cowboys live the life he seeks, the protagonist is stuck searching for an unknown destination. [9]

Billy's apprehension regarding cowboy life is only fleeting, fading with the she-wolf's departing spirit, leaving him with "a heavy burden of sorrow, loss, and guilt over her death" (177). "Afterwards," writes Edwin Arnold, "as is often the case after such a shattering revelation, Billy finds his common existence repugnant, cold, and all too hard" ("McCarthy" 225). After burying her, Billy wanders through a wasteland in which "there was nothing about but the wind and the silence" (134). Barcley Owens describes this as "an ascetic period of atonement" during which Billy becomes "gaunt like a supplicant monk who has taken a vow of primitivism" (89). Like a Neolithic hunter, Billy whittles "a bow from a holly limb" and "arrows from cane." Shooting down a hawk, he goes in search of the body but finds only "a single drop of blood that had dried on the rocks and darkened in the wind and nothing more" (129). Making "a cut in the heel of his hand with his knife," Billy watches "the slow blood dropping on the stone, over the blood of the hawk" (130). Dianne Luce interprets this as "a gesture that affirms his brotherhood with the predator on the altar of the world itself" ("The Road" 199). Barcley Owens also sees the ritual nature of Billy's action, which he

[9] In "Genre and the Geographies of Violence: Cormac McCarthy and the Contemporary Western," Susan Kollin interprets Billy's condition as a conflict between "his affinity for wilderness spaces" and his need to become "an integrated social being" (570). John Dudley situates his dilemma within a discussion of abjectivity. Borrowing from Julia Kristeva's abjection theory, he points out that "it is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (182). Like John Grady Cole, he remains a provisional cowboy, "left to enact the primitive rites of manhood in a world emptied of meaning" (182).

describes as “a redemptive revitalization, a divine state of madness, mutilating his body in a ritual shedding of blood, cutting his hand with a knife, re-enacting Christ’s stigmata” (89). Clearly, Billy has not forgotten the wisdom imparted by Don Arnulfo and the insight gathered from his own experiences. Unlike those who “do not understand the seriousness of what they do” (45), Billy has developed an ecological consciousness and has learned to regard the blood of all creatures with due reverence, knowing that every drop he spills might just as well be his own.

The Crossing is devoid of wolves after the first part of the novel, but Billy still dreams of the wolves:

> He’d trudged in his dream through a deep snow along a ridge toward a darkened house and the wolves had followed him as far as the fence. They ran their lean mouths against each other’s flanks and they flowed about his knees and furrowed the snow with their noses and tossed their heads and in the cold their pooled breath made a cauldron about him and the snow lay so blue in the moonlight and those eyes were palest topaz where they crouched and whined and tucked their tales and they fawned and shuddered as they drew close to the house and their teeth shone that were so white and their red tongues lolled. At the gate they would go no further. They looked back toward the dark shapes of the mountains. (295)

The dreamscape is similar in tone and mood to the opening hunting passage of the novel; however, this time, Billy is haunted by the wolves. They let Billy enter the gated area, while they also look and run towards the wilderness, a possible avenue to freedom from the cowboys.

The death of the she-wolf hangs over the protagonist like a curse; something appears to have gone awry with the very rhythms of nature and Billy is paying the price. Sitting on his “horse on a promontory overlooking the Bavispe River,” Billy is baffled to discover that “the river was running backwards. That or the sun was setting in the east behind him” (130). The loss of the she-wolf leaves a permanent scar on Billy’s cowboy identity, and throughout his wanderings, he moves ever closer to an anticosmic view of existence:

> In that wild high country, he’d lie in the cold and the dark and listen to the wind and watch the last embers of his fire at their dying and the red crazings in the woodcoals where they broke along their unguessed gridlines. As if in the trying of the wood were elicited hidden geometries and their orders which could only stand fully revealed, such is the way of the world, in darkness and ashes. (180)

His experience forces him to partake in a darker view of the world, escalating his loss and suffering.

While the she-wolf section of the novel, which serves as an introduction to the next two border crossings, is quintessentially environmental, the structure of the rest of the novel resembles the classic western narrative. In the second part of the novel, McCarthy takes the reader directly into the Western genre. Billy discovers that his parents have been killed and just like in Western movies such as *Nevada Smith* (1966) and *The Outlaw Josey* (1976), the protagonist believes that he must avenge their deaths. Joined by his brother Boyd, Billy decides to retrieve the family's stolen horses.[10] McCarthy portrays Boyd as a product of popular culture, which becomes apparent as he and Billy ride side by side in search of their stolen horses. Boyd tells Billy where he thinks Billy might have been:

> I thought one time maybe you'd gone to California, Boyd said.
> What would I do in California?
> I dont know.
> They got cowboys in California. California cowboys.
> I wouldn't want to go to California.
> I wouldn't either.
> I might go to Texas.
> What for?
> I dont know. I aint never been. (176)

Even though the reader does not know why Boyd might think his brother went to California, during the 1930s, Hollywood was producing hundreds of Westerns and real cowboys were hired to portray cowboys on film. Because of the decline of ranching during the Great Depression, there were potentially more cowboys making movies in California than there were working on cattle ranches. Boyd seems to be making an unconscious correlation between his brother's disappearance and the Hollywood movie

[10] In the classical western narratives, alongside their human partners, horses participate in the labor and also share a soul. At the turn of the twentieth century, however, only horses can provide the cowboys with the community they seek; they respect their labor and values, and in consequence, allow them to achieve mastery over them. Since horses are an integral part of cowboy identity and play an enormous role in the development of the frontier, it becomes a repetitive theme for McCarthy in *The Border Trilogy*. Thus, by taking the horses away from the cowboys, McCarthy stresses that his characters' epic journeys do not evoke a noble and masculine western tradition. They grapple with the ramifications of idealizing something that is vanished—or will not exist in the near future.

industry. Ironically, in the last novel of the trilogy, the protagonist will eventually end up in Hollywood, portraying on film the man he once was in real life.

In *The Crossing*, Billy attempts to recover an accurate telling of his past, and therefore his cowboy identity, through heroic quests and the stories others tell about the cowboy world. His failure embodies the rejection of a unified, accessible history and provides, as Robert Jarrett claims, a "postmodern critique of the romantic quest" (102). Like Jarrett, David Holloway argues in *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy* (2002) that the figure of Billy Parham is pastiched, "because the kind of world and the kind of selfhood that he pursues—a self that has 'depth' beyond a superficial exchange value—are no longer available to him," (74). McCarthy highlights the inaccessibility of an authentic cowboy masculinity in this new world, which is exemplified by the protagonist's useless attempts to rectify the loss of his parents by enacting a justice-seeking quest that seems to be more romantic than vengeful in nature. The additional personal and spiritual loss that follows indicates that his actions are reminiscent of dated, non-functional cowboy codes. "The absurdity of Billy Parham's attempt," Robert Jarrett states, "to deal with the loss of his father by recovering his horses reveals to him the innocence and inadequacy of his own code" (102). In this case, reclaiming his father's stolen horses is no substitute for Mr. Parham, and his journey not only is doomed to fail but also becomes futile.

By this point in the novel, the protagonist and his brother have already experienced a great deal—Billy's anguish after the death of the she-wolf and his brother's grief after the death of their parents. Apparently, they have lost their "families": Billy's companion in the wilderness and Boyd's parents. As Alan Noble states, "for both of them, the experience has solidified them as cowboy/warriors" (250). From now on, Billy and Boyd can rely on nothing and nobody but each other. This distrust of "the outside" exemplifies another essential Western trope, and one that applies to the cowboy/warrior code in *The Crossing*. In *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (2002), Jane Tompkins argues that

> the very process that brings the hero and his reader to moments of exquisite excitement and superhuman concentration has, ultimately, a deadening effect. The hero who is pushed beyond his limits again and again eventually

> loses the capacity to feel. The result is gradual etiolation of the nerves. (214)

Although what she argues is totally relevant for most western narratives, it is not applicable to *The Crossing*. Both cowboys "manage to retain their hearts" (Bourassa 445). This fact is most clearly exemplified by the protagonist's aggrieved state of endurance and his brother's tenderness. Thus, McCarthy shows that the cowboy is emotionally vulnerable and his heart is breakable. As Tompkins states, what McCarthy problematizes is the stoic and unemotional American cowboy. The protagonist "is a cowboy in a morality of blood" and regardless of "the repeated failure of that morality" (Kiefer 30), Billy is still confident that "his actions are correct" and believes that "it is the world of man which is filled with chaos and terror" (30).

This does not mean that the protagonist and his brother do not act out chivalrously in the most conventional sense. While heading across the border to reclaim their horses, they come across a young girl who they rescue from rape. This sequence is quite engrossing because McCarthy introduces it through an almost pulp-like action scene:

> Boyd rode the horses almost through the fire and pulled Keno up stamping and wild-eyed. He caught the reins in his teeth again and pitched the shotgun to Billy. Billy caught it and took the girl by the elbow and swung her toward the horse. The other two horses had vanished out on the darkened plain to the south of the camp and the man who'd pitched him the bottle of mescal was coming back out of the darkness carrying in his left hand a long thin knife. Other than the sound of the horses blowing and stamping all was silence. No one spoke. The dog circled nervously behind the horses. Vamonos, said Billy. When he looked the girl was already seated on the horse's crupper behind saddle and blanket roll. He grabbed the reins from Boyd and swung them over the horse's head and cocked the shotgun in one hand like a pistol. He didnt know whether it was loaded or not. (210–211)

As Christian Kiefer argues in "The Morality of Blood: Examining the Moral Code of *The Crossing*," like Shane, Lassiter, Hondo and John Wayne, the Parham brothers perform heroic acts. The act is noteworthy because it is the only triumphant event in the entire novel. The Parham brothers share at least this one quality with these mythic cowboys: they voluntarily save "the damsel in distress" (210). This is an act whose outcome conforms to Don Arnulfo's view that "every act soon eluded the grasp of its propagator to be swept away in a clamorous tide of unforeseen consequence" (147).

However, the protagonist is not so triumphant at all. While the act of setting the damsel free is a victory for Billy, it does not bring him a promising reward. Her role in the novel is reduced to that of a virgin/whore and in the end, she does not become a leading female character. Instead, she is presented as a "troublemaker," and her presence eventually causes the brothers to split, bringing about the last crossing to bury Boyd's bones. Billy realizes this and says that "this is my third trip. It's the only time I was ever down here that I got what I come after. But it sure as hell wasn't what I wanted" (417). His statement explains how the cowboy quest cannot be fulfilled in the modern world, and how it is futile to "get what you really come after," because, as David Holloway points out, "the underlying goal of the cowboy quest is the recovery of the irresolvable absence of a mythic country or cowboy way of life associated with the Old West, a world that never existed except as myth, and therefore can never be brought back" ("Modernism" 194).

During Billy's third quest to Mexico, Cormac McCarthy includes a brief section which takes place in the United States. In it, the protagonist repeatedly tries to enlist in World War II after he loses his brother. When Boyd's shirt is "belled out behind him redly and he fell down on the ground" (269), Billy sadly bursts out: "Why couldnt the sons of bitches have shot me?" (273). His outburst reveals his remorse and psychological torment. After he loses the she-wolf, Billy devotes himself completely to reclaiming the family's horses across the border, which brings about Boyd's death as Billy pushes him into the wilderness in search of what he believes is legitimately and morally theirs.

After the failures with the she-wolf, his parents, their horses, and his brother, Billy once again experiences a crisis in masculinity. The protagonist begins to interrogate the efficacy of his "heroic actions": "If he consistently does what he feels is right, then why do the consequences always come out wrong?" (348) Apparently, Billy's desire to fight in the army is a kind of suicide mission since he will essentially have to renounce his cowboy ethos for a militaristic code designated by the state. He will turn into an anonymous soldier without a past or future. Furthermore, enlisting in the army can also be read as his desire to reunite with the society he deserted years ago when he crossed the border with his she-wolf companion.

At the army recruiting station, Billy falls asleep while waiting for the doctor, and when

he is awakened by the nurse, he "looked around and he didnt know where he was" (338). He is clearly out of place in the United States, and believes that he is better suited to the mythic life of the frontier cowboy. He is rejected by the military because of a heart defect, because his heart is not in it. He returns despondent to the only place that he can call home, the Animas Valley, and the event finally catches up with him. As he rides down the road,

> The few cars that passed gave him all the berth that narrow road afforded and the people looked back at him through the rolling dust as if he were a thing wholly alien in that landscape. Something from an older time of which they'd only heard. Something of which they'd read. (334)

Like the ending of *All the Pretty Horses* in which John Grady Cole appears as "some apparition out of the vanished past" (287), Billy is also a representative of the same vanished past. They represent the lost cowboy figure, and the people who see them can only stare at them, because they look like something out of a dime novel about the American West. Billy is described as "a person with no prior life. As if he had died in some way years ago and was ever after some other being who had no history, who had no ponderable life to come" (382). Here, McCarthy once again illustrates the idea that the protagonist is something of a fantasy, as he represents a figure that is long dead, and who has no real place in the modern world. Like John Grady Cole, Billy embodies loss in *The Border Trilogy* because his trials on the border and in the wilderness are endlessly challenging what he anticipates. "Part of his loss" as James O'Sullivan states, "lies in the fact that the border does cross his own identity, leaving him in between. It is not the space of New Mexico and its conception of him that keep him at the margins, but his own heart and desires," and the "discrepancy of the two forms" dictates the protagonist's restless and homeless identity (163).

During the journey back to his hometown, with Boyd's bones in tow, the protagonist comes across four horsemen, who prevent Billy from continuing down the road. The four horsemen—like the four horsemen of the apocalypse—foreshadow death and destruction, and accost him after he informs them that he is carrying the bones of his brother. One of the riders pulls out a knife and cuts the bag loose, spilling Boyd's corpse out onto the dirty street:

> The man bent above the shrouded form on the ground and unseamed with a single long pass of the knife ropes and soogan all from end to end and

> kicked aside the coverings to reveal in the graying light Boyd's poor form in the loosely fitting coat with his hands crossed at his chest, the withered hands with the bonds imprinted in the leather skin, lying there with his caven face turned up and clutching himself like some fragile being fraught with cold in that indifferent dawn.
> You son of a bitch, said Billy. You son of a bitch. Es un engaño? Said the man. Es un engaño? (395)

After the man asks if his brother's corpse is a hoax, a deception, the same rider kicks around Boyd's bones and immediately pulls the knife on Billy and demands all of his money. The other three horsemen watch from a distance and laugh at Billy's unsuccessful attempt to retrieve his pistol from the inside of his saddlebag. During the chaos, the rider trots up to his horse and stabs his knife into the animal, without any sort of warning or explanation. The bandits give up and continue, leaving Billy's belongings scattered on the dirt road and Billy alone and weeping at the senselessness of his situation.

The protagonist's quest to return his brother's remains to his hometown again proves difficult when he encounters the local sheriff:

> That's your brother layin yonder I take it, the sheriff said.
> Yessir.
> The sheriff shook his head. He looked off out over the country. As if there was something about it that you just couldnt quite lay your hand on. He looked down at Billy.
> There ain't much to say, is there?
> No sir. Not much.
> Well, You cant just travel around the country buryin people. Let me go see the judge and see if I can get him to issue a death certificate. I aint even sure whose property that is that you're diggin in.
> Yessir.
> You come see me in Lordsburg tomorrow.
> All right. (421–422)

As Lydia R. Cooper states, in losing the objects of his salvation (the she-wolf, the horses, Boyd), Billy loses his own masculine identity and becomes a displaced relic in the modern world (106). Even though he tries to save them, Billy loses everything he has cared for in his life. In "The Western Hero Unmasked in *The Crossing*," William Spencer equates the heroism of the protagonist to Albert Camus' myth of Sisyphus, "for certainly if the reader can understand Billy to be a hero at all, then he is a hero of the absurd" (337). As he articulates, the protagonist's cowboyism is ridiculous because "his

traditionally moral actions do not match the revisionist universe in which he dwells" (337). In a conventional western narrative, the hero is rewarded because of his heroic actions. In the novel, Billy is doomed to fail, and rather than becoming a "hero," he ends up a crying boy.

In the last part of the novel, Billy holds a strange conversation with a band of gypsies transporting a disintegrating airplane, converses with a fortune-teller, has a devastating encounter with a hideously crippled dog, and experiences a chillingly epiphanic double sunrise, which concludes the novel. After he buries his brother's remains, Billy sees what resembles a scene from a Federico Fellini film: with a team of six yoked oxen, gypsies are pulling the remnants of an airplane through the wilderness. The gypsies stop to help, telling Billy that the plane crashed in the mountains almost thirty years ago, killing the pilot. However, there was a sister plane that also crashed. Do they even have the right plane? One of the men tells Billy that this is a question of consequence—and that is part of the problem:

> He said that men assume the truth of a thing to reside in that thing without regard to the opinions of those beholding it while that which is fraudulent is held to be so no matter how closely it might duplicate the required appearance. . . . The reverence attached to the artifacts of history is a thing men feel. One could even say that what endows anything with significance is solely the history in which it has participated. (405)

McCarthy once again illustrates the futility of seeking the cowboy myth through this encounter. The gypsy claims that American men assume that the romanticized image of the American cowboy is true. However, that assumption, as the gypsy says, is a by-product of the historical placement of the cowboy. As Kelly Wisecup points out, "he was the frontier riding loner, and it was this status that relegated him to his status as legend and cultural icon in the minds of so many" (21). Billy knows, though, that the world is in constant change, and modem technological advances have killed the frontier, and the cowboy figure with it. The gypsy adds, "for the world was made new each day and it was only men's clinging to its vanished husks that could make of that world one husk more" (411). His encounter with the gypsies reveals the fact that he, as a cowboy hero, is defined by loss. While Billy tries to adhere to the cowboy code in the true Western tradition, and attempts to liberate that which is wild and endangered, and wreak vengeance for his little brother, in the end, he remains a lonely wanderer and an outcast.

Billy also encounters a fortune teller. The idea that all events have been preordained and that the paths of human beings have also been "chosen for them" is emphasized throughout Billy's conversation with the fortune-teller who reads his palm. When Billy asks her what she sees, she only shakes her head sadly and, at first, refuses to reveal what the future holds. Her reluctance to reveal the truth is later explained by Quijada, the Yaqui Indian, who asks a rhetorical question: "If people knew the story of their lives how many would then elect to live them?" (387). Billy, rightly suspecting that the fortune-teller has foreseen something inauspicious, asks her "if there were no good news at all" (368). She replies only "that he would live a long life," but "con mucha tristeza" (with much sorrow) (386).

The notion that everything has been preordained and that one cannot avoid one's destiny is further emphasized by the fact that the fortune-teller foresees the events of the final volume of *The Border Trilogy*, *Cities of the Plain* (1998). When Billy asks for news of his brother, Boyd, the fortune-teller replies, "Veo dos hermanos. Uno ha muerto" (I see two brothers. One has died). When Billy tries to tell her that she is mistaken, "that he had a sister who had died," the fortune-teller shakes her head and insists that she is referring to a "hermano" (brother), "uno que vie, uno que ha muerto" (one is living, one has died) (369). At first glance, it may appear that the fortune-teller is suggesting that there was another Parham boy who died before Billy and Boyd were born. This is not the case, however, because as the narrative later reveals, Boyd is already dead. Here, the fortune-teller is actually referring to Boyd as the dead brother and to John Grady Cole, the protagonist of *All the Pretty Horses*, as the living one.

It is impossible to make sense of the fortune-teller's words until McCarthy reveals Billy's fate in *Cities of the Plain*. In the final volume of *The Border Trilogy*, Billy and John Grady will become as close as brothers, until they are separated by death. Billy will indeed lead a long life, dying in 2002, but one filled with calamity. It seems that Billy is already subconsciously aware of his fate, catching a glimpse of John Grady's death in a dream in which he "knelt in the rain in a darkened city and he held his dying brother in his arms but he could not see his face and he could not say his name" (325). When Billy awakes early in the morning and looks out on a lake spread out before him, he experiences an epiphanic moment:

> He crouched in the sedge by the lake and he knew he feared the world to come for in it were already written certainties no man would wish for. He saw pass in a slow tapestry unrolled images of things seen and unseen. He saw the she-wolf dead in the mountains and the hawk's blood on the stone and he saw a glass hearse with black drapes pass in a street carried on poles by mozos. . . . Lastly he saw his brother standing in a place where he could reach him, windowed away in some world where he could never go. (326)

The reference to the "world to come" subtly links the dream with the ending of *All the Pretty Horses*, in which the protagonist rides out "into the darkening land, the world to come" (302), with both passages emphasizing the inevitability of future events. The image of the dead she-wolf represents the dead American frontier, highlighted by the blood of the hawk and the glass hearse draped in black. John Grady Cole is somewhere Billy cannot reach. Thus, in one brief moment, both the cowboy image and the frontier image—which includes the she-wolf—are destroyed. The future is uncertain for Billy, but he knows that it is something to be feared, as the destruction of these two icons will inevitably result in an irreversible change in his life.

3.5. The Day the Sun Rose Twice: The Trinity Test and the End of the Cowboy Quest

After his encounter with the gypsies and the fortune teller, Billy drifts aimlessly for months, homeless and utterly alone, occasionally settling down to work "for the Carrizozo's and for the GS's" and then leaving for "no reason he could name" (422). The narrative voice covers this period of lonely wandering in a few sentences, slowing down the pace as Billy approaches the final, darkly epiphanic revelation that concludes the novel.

The novel ends with Billy back at home during the first atomic bomb test: the 1945 Trinity Test in Alamogordo, New Mexico. To reinforce this idea, there are references to unnatural light and earth tremors which make even the scorpions fly (425). The world is darkened, as if the apocalypse were approaching:

> He looked out down the road and he looked toward the fading light. It had ceased raining in the night and a broken rainbow of watergall stood out on the desert in a dim neon bow and he looked again at the road which lay as before yet more dark and darkening still where it ran on to the east and where there was no sun and there was no dawn and when he looked again toward the north the light was drawing away fastening and that noon in

> which he'd woke was now become an alien dusk and now an alien dark. (425)

The sun, the symbol of illumination and enlightenment, is false and fleeting, fading away to be replaced by hopeless darkness. Alex Hunt writes that no event "can be considered more significant in human history, more arrogantly anthropocentric, more threatening to all life than the advent of the atomic age" and that *The Crossing* should be examined in the "eerie light of its ending" (31). The "white light" wakes Billy, and he mistakes the explosion for the sunrise, but its light fades and he is left in "inexplicable darkness." For Billy, there is no dawn, no redemption, no salvation, and no hope.

After the explosion, Billy is approached by a wretched dog, both heart-wrenching and nauseating in its suffering:

> It was an old dog gone gray about the muzzle and it was horribly crippled in its hindquarters and its head was askew someway on its body and it moved grotesquely. An arthritic and illjoined thing that crabbed sideways . . . and it was wet and wretched and so scared and broken that it might have been patched up out of parts of dogs by demented vivisectionists. (423)

The narrative voice refers to the dog as an "illjoined thing," immediately evoking the presence of an entity responsible for the joining. This concept is further developed by a description of the dog as "something not of this earth. As if some awful composite of grief had broken through from the preterite world" (424). It is implied that the crippled dog suffers from radiation poisoning, and that the protagonist is witnessing one of the very first victims of the earliest atomic test. The dog's situation also correlates with the she-wolf's demise. The dog and the she-wolf both suffer and die as a result of human intervention in the environment. If humans had not intervened, both may have lived longer, healthier lives. Thus, through these examples, McCarthy is illustrating the destruction that humans inflict on the flora and fauna of the world.

Perhaps recognizing a fellow downtrodden spirit, the animal is reluctant to leave the abandoned barn where Billy is sheltering. Billy, broken-hearted over his brother's death and embittered by his Mexican experience, chases the animal out of the barn:

> He bent and clawed up a handful of small rocks from the gravel apron and slung them. He ran after it and threw more rocks and shouted at it and he slung the length of pipe . . . hobbling brokenly on its twisted legs with the

> strange head agoggle on its neck. As it went it raised its mouth sideways and howled again with a terrible sound. Something not of this earth. As if some awful composite of grief had broken through the preterite world. (424)

The dog vanishes into the night "on its stricken legs and as it went it howled again and again in its heart's despair until it was gone from all sight and all sound in the night's onset" (424–425). With the dog, Billy also loses his chance to mitigate the sense of guilt he feels over his failed enterprises, especially the senseless death of the she-wolf, through one simple act of compassion. However, he realizes the significance of this missed opportunity only when it is too late. He walks out into "the eerie white light of the desert noon," finding himself bewildered and disoriented by the fact that what he has assumed to be the light of the midday sun is actually the sunset, rapidly "drawing away along the edges of the world" and changing back into night (424). The confusion, despair, and hopelessness of this scene are emphasized, metaphorically, by the repeated descriptions of the "fading light" and the "darkening shapes of cloud" (424).

The novel's ending acts as a structural counterpoint to the buoyantly optimistic beginning: "When they came south out of Grant County Boyd was not much more than a baby and the newly formed county they named Hidalgo was itself little older than the child" (3). It is also worth mentioning here that besides the consecutive cognates of fading light—"dim," "dark," "darkening," "no dawn," and "alien dusk"—there are references to the compass points "south" and "west." Yet, at the end of the novel, there is no mention of south or west. It is as if these points have somehow vanished. Revealed through an apocalyptic vision of the false atomic sunrise and the calamitous darkness that follows, *The Crossing* results in "an inverse apprehension of a profound alienation" that seems to underlie Billy's cowboy existence (Mundik, *A Bloody* 134).

Billy breaks down weeping, and the novel concludes with a natural sun that "did rise, once again, for all and without distinction":

> He walked out. A cold wind was coming down off the mountains. It was shearing off the western slopes of the continent where the summer snow lay above the timberline and it was crossing through the high fir forests and among the poles of the aspens and it was sweeping over the desert plain below. It had ceased raining in the night and he walked out on the road and called for the dog. He called and called. Standing in that inexplicable darkness. Where there was no sound anywhere save only the wind. After a while he sat in the road. He took off his hat and placed it on the tarmac

> before him and he bowed his head and held his face in his hands and wept. (425)

Billy's experience with the wretched dog is a darkly distorted reflection of his encounter with the she-wolf at the beginning of *The Crossing*. The image of the decrepit dog, hobbling hideously toward the abandoned building, is in stark contrast with the image of the swift she-wolf "running in the mountains, running in the starlight," where all was "fear and marvel" (127). This is a metaphor for what Billy's life has become, and what the West has become. Both have transformed from young and powerful to pitifully destroyed through human intervention. The unsettling disparity between these two images that frame the novel serves as a reminder that "nature is as incomprehensibly appalling as it is lovely and bountiful" (Greve 190). Perhaps that is why the sight of the dog is so painful for the protagonist to bear and the reason he chases her away. Just as the protagonist in *All the Pretty Horses* must trade his romanticized illusion of the Comanche Indian for destitute reality, Billy exchanges the beauty and grace of the she-wolf for the domesticated hunting dog—a being both bred and abused by human beings. While the she-wolf inspired admiration, appreciation, and benevolence in Billy, the crippled dog inspires only terror, nausea, and outrage.

At the end of the novel, Cormac McCarthy does not offer the reader a coherent picture that exemplifies American society's preconceived notions of the cowboy. Unlike classic cowboy narratives, the protagonist in *The Crossing* does not ride triumphantly into the sunset. On the contrary; at the end of the novel, Billy is alone, weeping and calling out for the mutilated dog. Thus, the discarded, dying dog is a symbol of the end of Billy's cowboy journey. The closure of the novel seems "both devastating and strangely hopeful," in Julius Greve's words—an assessment that holds for a whole array of passages that show the protagonist struggling with his life and the hegemonic masculinity of the American patriarchy (187).

3.6. Conclusion

Cormac McCarthy's cowboys are forthright, capable young men, embodying the traditional cowboy virtues of competence, reticence and honor. However, he takes a young cowboy's initiatory experience and inverts the experience so that the initiation is frustrating and futile. As the title of the novel suggests, *The Crossing* "is about three

border crossings between the Southwestern US and Mexico made by the protagonist, who, during the process of the three journeys, realizes the existential truth" of vanishing, not only through the Mexican she-wolf and the Native American, but also through the cowboy himself. As Mark Busby points out, "ironically, it is through the denied experience that a young man is initiated onto a more profound understanding than the expected initiation could have offered" (231). Billy undergoes a series of quests, cyclical "crossings" into new territories, where everything and everyone he encounters leads him to rethink masculinity.

Billy embodies one of the major questions at the heart of Masculinity Studies: What does it mean to be a man? As Anthony Rotundo states at the beginning of *American Manhood* (2014), "manliness is a human invention. Starting with a handful of biological differences, people in all places and times have invented elaborate stories about what it means to be male and female . . . each culture constructs its own version of what men and women are—and ought to be" (1). With Don Arnulfo's help, Billy decides to free the she-wolf rather than kill her, which reveals that he has become aware of his own ecomasculine consciousness, and is willing to follow a new and distinctive code of honor and masculinity that differs from American society's and his father's definitions. His cowboy masculinity is in need of transformation, from hegemony to ecology. He attempts to liberate himself from the strictures of his community, asserting his new identity, mesmerized by the energy of the natural world, rather than as one who desires to tame or dominate it. As a sixteen-year-old cowboy, he resists powerful inventions, constructions, and narratives of masculinity that simultaneously enable and confine him. His desire for an ecomasculinist identity that is broader and more inclusive than the hegemonic one that he has inherited compels him to thwart his father's expectations, to leave his family, and to transgress geographic, gendered, and cultural borders. In short, his ecological masculinity stands as a critical alternative to industrial hegemonies.

Whether physical, spiritual or psychological, the three crossings create a catalyst for vehemence, disorder, change and confusion in the novel. McCarthy delves into the process of forming the cowboy self, and of situating masculinity within nature. His rendition of ecological masculinities facilitates transition: the cowboy self becomes the Self in the deep ecological sense, radiating out into relational exchanges that are not

only integral to cowboys' lives, but that are also instrumental in redefining cowboys' interactions with other (non)humans as well. He defines masculine relational exchanges and underscores men's capacities to care for the environment. However, in the end, the she-wolf dies, as does the protagonist's innocence; as she wears away and perishes, so does Billy. After losing her, Billy crosses into Mexico two more times in a futile attempt to regain control over his life. Instead, Billy is confronted with a profound displacement, which illustrates how far removed the promise of the West is from reality. All three crossings merge into one sacrificial experience, initiating Billy into a world of suffering akin to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The novel begins with Billy's journey to map himself onto the wilderness. It concludes with his powerlessness, crying in a seemingly post-apocalyptic world "devoid of any semblance of life or sublimity" (Bannon 208).

As the ending of the novel implies, the United States will enter the atomic age, and become a nuclear power and the epitome of progress and modernity, which disrupts the cowboy world. Billy, the idealized cowboy of the western landscape, does not belong to this modern world, with its technological weapons of mass destruction. As for John Grady Cole and Billy Parham, there is "the world to come," (302) the phrase that ends *All the Pretty Horses* and is repeated several times in *The Crossing*, leading the reader to believe that John Grady Cole and Billy Parham will cross paths in the trilogy's final volume, *Cities of the Plain.* In this case, the she-wolf's eradication from the region anticipates Billy's microcosmic condition in the last volume of the trilogy. While he lives to the age of seventy-eight, he becomes extinct: an out-of-work actor, who used to play a cowboy in movies, but now sleeps in a section of highway pipe.

CHAPTER 4

CITIES OF THE PLAIN:

THE END OF THE ALL-AMERICAN COWBOY

"If I think about what I wanted as a kid and what I wanted now they aint the same thing. I guess what I wanted wasnt what I wanted."

Billy Parham, *Cities of the Plain* (1998)

"Your [Billy's] life vanishes at its own appearance. Moment by moment. Until it vanishes to appear no more."

The Storyteller, *Cities of the Plain* (1998)

In 1992, Cormac McCarthy began his *Border Trilogy* with *All the Pretty Horses*, which introduced readers to John Grady Cole—the sixteen-year-old son of a disbanding family in Texas—who crossed the Mexican border to fill the void left by his disintegrating family and to retrieve a couple of pretty horses. In 1994, *The Crossing,* the second volume of *The Border Trilogy*, was published. Set in the Southwestern United States and Mexico in the 1930s, the novel features Billy and Boyd Parham's engagement with a she-wolf. In *Cities of the Plain* (1998), the final volume of the trilogy, McCarthy brings together the two characters of John Grady Cole and Billy Parham, who are now mature and independent young cowboys of nineteen and twenty-eight, respectively, while continuing to examine their struggles in the "real world" (67). John Grady and Billy, marked by the adolescent adventures of the first two installments of the trilogy, now stand together, at the juncture between their dramatic and radiant pasts and their ambiguous and insecure futures, coming to terms with a country changing, or already changed, beyond realization. Their border crossings and ordeals in the first two novels eventually leave them consumed by a vast, cosmic sadness, and in the midst of a grim and inevitable shift that was bound to consume everything, including their cowboy way of life.

Chronologically, the story opens about four years after the end of *All the Pretty Horses* and roughly thirteen years after *The Crossing*, and ends with a short epilogue which

details the next several decades of Billy's life as an adult cowboy. In 1952, John Grady and Billy Parham—nine years apart in age, yet with an affinity that is perhaps more than they can imagine—are cowboys in New Mexico. As the narrator describes, "from the ridges and caprock of the ranch, the lights and smoke of El Paso and Juarez, the cities of the plain, are visible" (4). They still enjoy the life of the cowboy, but by 1952, each realizes that their cowboy lifestyle is rapidly vanishing. Their ranch, which will eventually be seized by the government for use by the military as part of the White Sands Missile Range, is headed towards extinction like so many before it, to be subsumed into the titular "cities of the plain" (156).

It also seems that the title of the novel is like a culmination of the dismal vision anticipated in *Blood Meridian*. As if to confirm Judge Holden's claim that war is the end of history, the world of *Cities of the Plain*, which is comprised of "the scrublands around the depopulated mining town of Orogrande in the once fertile Tularosa Basin," is in the last phase of being transformed into nuclear test sites and military bases (4). It is ten years since the end of the Second World War, and as the cowboys repeatedly remind the reader, "war and war's machinery" (204) have altered the country for the worse. In one lifetime, as Mr. Johnson—the elderly owner of the Cross Fours—puts it, the country has gone "from the oil lamp and the horse and buggy to jet planes and the atomic bomb" (106). In this era of technological hubris and the military-industrial complex, the environment has been completely reshaped and the ranches of the Old West, which are now an anachronism, have fallen on hard times.

As a matter of fact, not even the cowboyism of the ranching world, illustrated throughout the novel in the form of descriptions of everyday life, is able to withstand this inevitable fate. In both *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing*, "another world entire" is projected south of the border in Mexico (*The Crossing* 6). However, in *Cities of the Plain*, even Mexico has lost its authenticity and aura of mystery, which in the first two novels had qualified it as a dreamscape. Now, Mexico has become an overcommodified space of bars, brothels, cafes, and curio shops, with people selling everything from cigarettes and women to "stuffed armadillos" and Madonna figures "made of painted celluloid" (37). This commodification indicates the production and dissemination of simulacra, where nature is stuffed, people are forced to engage in sex

work for survival, tradition is celluloid, and cowboys are obsolete.

While working as ranch laborers, the cowboys often take in a sweeping, panoptic view of the neighboring cities in the distance, contemplating the opposite side of the border at night: “Far out on the plain below the lights of the cities lay shimmering in their grids with the dark serpentine of the river dividing them” (156). This underscores the significance of the title of the novel, which is an unsettling biblical reference to Sodom and Gomorrah. In the Bible, the patriarchal God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah because of “the sin of sodomy,” a sterile form of sexual expression (New King James Version, Gen. 19.5). Susan Kollin argues that the title refers “readers to the lamentable fate of Lot’s wife, who looked back with longing on ‘the cities of the plain’ in the nineteenth chapter of Genesis,” and adds that the “trilogy itself features characters who are likewise brought down by a similar desire, the yearning for experiences that are no longer available” (583). The serpentine image of the boundary line of the cities is likewise deeply and indelibly imbued with mysterious and alarming meaning in terms of vanishing cowboy masculinity. There is a great sense of regret and loss in the novel and “a realization that nothing lasts except loneliness and pain” (Mundik, “Beauty” 206). The *vaquero*—the cowboy, once a prominent figure in the plains—was pushed out of the American Southwest by white settlers, and sentenced to obsolescence. As Sara Mosle states in “Don’t Let Your Babies Grow up to be Cowboys,” that McCarthy is interested in not “just the history of the American Southwest, but also with all the cities of the plain that once flourished and were destroyed. That brief moment between a culture’s existence, and extinction—this is the border that McCarthy’s cowboys keep crossing and recrossing, and the one story, as he is forever writing, that contains all others.” Thus, McCarthy’s engagement with cities of the plains and their relation to the American cowboy indicates not a retreat from—but a headlong engagement with—a range of contemporary issues related to American manhood.

The plot of the last installment of the trilogy is simple and straightforward. The first part of *Cities of the Plain* is about the romance of John Grady’s story, but is tempered with Billy Parham’s sadder, fatalistic view of the world. On a quest across the border, John Grady encounters a sex worker in a brothel and develops a crush on her. Magdalena has been held captive “since she was barely in her teens and suffers from epileptic seizures”

(250). The rest of the narrative is about the protagonist's struggles to emancipate her and take her back to the United States. However, his ventures are in vain because her tenacious pimp, Eduardo, will not allow her to leave, and two hundred and sixty-one pages later, the narrative ends in tragedy. McCarthy adds an epilogue and draws his narrative to a close in 2002. Billy, now a cowboy in his seventies, is "almost all that is left of that way of life that even in his youth was fading" (265). He recaptured the cowboy way of life in his early life, but even at that point it was beginning to disappear. The romantic and chauvinist cowboy has transformed into an old and miserable Billy, who abandoned the range and the cattle trail in order to be deposited unceremoniously under a freeway bridge, offering crackers to the ghosts of his past (269). At the end of the novel, he seems to possess both a negative capability and a negative capacity, in that he is virtually defined by all that he has lost: "I aint nothing," he insists on the final page of the trilogy (292). His losses have been profound and many; the she-wolf, his family, his brother Boyd, and John Grady, with whom he had formed a fraternal bond. He is the last survivor, an extra in a Western movie, and a chronicler of a dead way of life—one who tells children "about horses, and cattle, and old days. Sometimes he'd tell them about Mexico" (290).

This chapter will first analyze McCarthy's engagement with his screenplay "Cities of the Plain" (1984), which formed the basis of the novel, and will primarily be an exploration of his correspondence, manuscript materials, and interviews that will unveil the unrevealed story of his screenplay and its relation to Hollywood. It will explore how "Cities of the Plain" represents the writer's venture to challenge and interrogate frontier myths—such as that of the cowboy—and narrative structures associated with the West, while adapting the same myths and structures in different mediums. The chapter will also consider the way McCarthy deals with wounded masculinity and the adult Western genre in the last installment of the trilogy, and will discuss how John Grady and Billy end their illusions concerning their cowboy masculinity, as each comes to terms with the fact that the cowboy lifestyle is based on a myth, and that there are no more frontiers in the world for would-be cowboys to ride. The final scene of *Cities of the Plain* strongly suggests that the chivalric roles promised by the cowboy mythology are ultimately impossible to fulfill in the millennium.

4.1. The Unproduced Screenplay and Published Novel

Throughout his career, as Stacey Peebles states, McCarthy has been invested in writing for film and theatre and, as a novelist, has been more "interested in media and performance than previously assumed" (5). His work has been adapted to film and television, beginning in 2000 with Billy Bob Thornton's *All the Pretty Horses*, and continuing with Joel and Ethan Coen's *No Country for Old Men* (2007), John Hillcoat's *The Road* (2009), Tommy Lee Jones' *Sunset Limited* (2011) and James Franco's *Child of God* (2013). In addition to his southern gothic and western novels, McCarthy also wrote three screenplays in the 1970s and 1980s that were never produced or published in their original form, yet provided the foundation for later novels: "El Paso/Juarez" was eventually retitled "Cities of the Plain," "No Country for Old Men," was turned into a novel with the same title, and "Whales and Men," which reads like a workshop paper on Western ecology, morality, and language, is reflected throughout *The Border Trilogy*.

The archive at Texas State University offers an in-depth exploration of the evolution of Cormac McCarthy's lengthy processes of researching, reading and revising that goes into the production of each of his texts. In the late 1980s, after McCarthy completed *Blood Meridian* (1985), writing screenplays for western films seemed a reasonable follow-up to his extensive exploration of the Western genre in his first western novel.[11] With each screenplay, McCarthy worked on extensive revisions and numerous drafts, until he formed a complete, polished final version (Peebles 6). Despite later interest from production companies, none of the screenplays were produced, since he could not find support in Hollywood (Cormac McCarthy Papers, Box 70, Folder 1-3).

As archival evidence reveals, McCarthy prepared the screenplay for "Cities of the Plain" and sent it to studios in Hollywood. As opposed to previous novel drafts such as *The Orchard Keeper* (1965) and *Suttree* (1979), the screenplay looks like a professional film pitch, including a full synopsis (Cormac McCarthy Papers, Box 70, Folder 1-3). It opens with the statement that "the events in 'Cities of the Plain' took place in El Paso

[11] In a handwritten letter to Howard Woolmer dated June 28, 1985, McCarthy writes: "Mostly these days I'm trying to get a film script produced into a film. The McArthur largess expires in a little over a year and I've gotten used to eating regularly and don't know what will happen when the money stops" (Cormac McCarthy Papers, Correspondence, Box 71, Folder 1).

Texas and Juarez Mexico in 1952 and were related to the author by Jack Sanderson, a rancher of El Paso and Carlsbad, New Mexico" (Cormac McCarthy Papers, Box 69, Folder 1). The synopsis is clearly written with marketing it to Hollywood obviously in mind. In short, it is "a story of doomed lovers and betrayal and the meaning and limits of friendship set in two cultures radically different and inextricably joined" (Cormac McCarthy Papers, Box 69, Folder 1). The conclusion of the one-page synopsis states that "in the end it is John Grady's romanticism and stubborn pride as emissary of the clearly defined values of the old west—values already well under siege—that bring him to a confrontation which can neither be avoided or survived" (Cormac McCarthy Papers, Box 69, Folder 1). The screenplay, in general, deals with the protagonist's "romanticism and stubborn pride," which eventually end with his death. However, it is not a narrative about "doomed lovers and betrayal," after all. Rather, it reveals the uncertain relationship between the Old West and its codes and myths.

McCarthy first sent his screenplay to the Sundance Film Festival in 1984. For Bill Wittliff, who was serving on the selection committee, the screenplay was quite interesting. As the archival evidence reveals, Wittliff expresses his inclination as "I was just knocked out by it." He enjoyed what he went through, particularly "the brilliance of the dialogue" (Cormac McCarthy Papers, Correspondence, Box 71, Folder 1). However, the rest of the committee was indifferent. The long conversation scenes that interested the screenwriter were a sticking point with the rest of the committee and as Wittliff suggests, "it did not go anywhere" (Cormac McCarthy Papers, Correspondence, Box 71, Folder 1). Likewise, as Richard Woodward states in his *New York Times* article, Richard Pearce tried to make something happen with the screenplay, and Sean Penn was reportedly interested in it; however—perhaps not surprisingly—"producers shied away from the dark material," stressing the inapplicable nature of the work. Producers were always uneasy with the story because it depicted what McCarthy called John Grady's "love affair" with a ten-year-old Mexican sex worker. Later, as Michael Hall explains, McCarthy dismissed the screenplay as a "silly love story, a pulp western Romeo and Juliet" (76), and focused on other novel drafts.

In the screenplay, McCarthy does not give John Grady and Billy last names, but both are obvious prototypes for the characters in his novels. The cowboy stories in the

screenplay correspond with John Grady's and Billy's episodes in *Cities of the Plain*. When McCarthy adapted the "Cities of the Plain" into the third novel of the trilogy, he allowed the plotline and characters to remain essentially the same.[12] However, while still as dense and meta-literary as all of McCarthy's other novels, *Cities of the Plain* is the most cinematic and dialogue-heavy of the trilogy, most likely because it originated as a screenplay.

Cities of the Plain never received the critical acclaim that the first two installments of the trilogy did. Compared to *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing,* which set the critical bar rather high with their lyric, romantic, adventurous and philosophic nature, *Cities of the Plain* has a narrower scope. Thus, the finale of *The Border Trilogy* was met with mixed criticism, perhaps because *Cities of the Plain,* even more so than *The Crossing*, did not have the immediacy of *All the Pretty Horses*. As Michael Dirda points out in *The Washington Post*, in contrast to the previous two novels, *Cities of the Plain* was "more contemporary and urban, narrower in focus and at times over-emphatic." *The Boston Globe* noted that "in several ways this is a smaller novel" than the previous two books of the trilogy, declaring that *Cities of the Plain* "lacks the breathtaking inner dimensions of the first two volumes and the wrenching deliverance of *The Crossing* . . . at times its trademark prophecies and oratory seem less illuminative than tacked on as rhetorical dressing" (Caldwell). Similarly, Edwin Arnold suggests that it is possible to see the novel "as a lesser work, and certainly it is more constricted than either of the first two volumes" ("The Last" 222). Peter Josyph also comments that he "was saddened by *Cities of the Plain*. Same character doing much the same things, making much the same mistakes, but McCarthy had run out of energy; he had nowhere to go" (79). Likewise, J. Douglas Canfield states that *Cities of the Plain* is a revision of the first two installments of the trilogy, but in this novel, the cowboy representations deemphasize the ideals and actions highlighted in *All the Pretty Horses* and *The*

[12] Many of the narrative elements in the screenplay survived in the novel in one form or another. For instance, the dog the protagonist takes from the ranch in the screenplay is described as one taken from "the den underneath the huge rock" (Cormac McCarthy Papers, Box 70, Folder 3). In the novel, it morphs from a purchased and domestically bred animal to one that the protagonist claims and tames from the wilderness. Likewise, in the screenplay, Billy is something of a comic misanthrope who accuses the Mexican sex worker, not Eduardo, of John Grady's death. (Cormac McCarthy Papers, Box 70, Folder 3).

Crossing:

> Then *Cities of the Plain* replays John Grady's and Billy's tragedies as farce, wherein the capturing and taming of wild horses or the trapping of a wolf degenerates into the capturing and violent decapitating of wild dogs. The aristocratic Alejandra has degenerated into the epileptic whore "with a golden heart." Crossing into the exotic has become a trip to a Juárez whorehouse. Great schemes have dwindled into a hut, a dog, a woman, and a day's wages. Tragedy has dwindled into country music. (263)

Even though *Cities of the Plain* can easily be read without prior knowledge of the previous novels in the trilogy, a familiarity with *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing* exposes McCarthy's use of cowboy themes, and how they—especially in terms of masculinity—vary, in *Cities of the Plain*. Just as John Grady's affair with Magdalena reminds the reader of the ill-fated romance he had with Alejandra in *All the Pretty Horses*, other events in *Cities of the Plain* likewise echo incidents in the previous novels.[13] Similarly, the group of dogs that has been slaying cattle conjures up Billy's captive she-wolf in *The Crossing*. Nevertheless, it can be argued that McCarthy did not repeat these tropes in *Cities of the Plain*, but rather refined them as literary devices.

Ironically, McCarthy deploys repetition as a form of self-parody, critiquing directly or implicitly the histories of the cowboys in the previous novels. In other words, the novel in a very conscious way obliterates its "tradition" as expressed in the first two works of the trilogy. McCarthy revisits *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing* by reiterating and distorting their plots in order to demythologize the conventional narratives of the West and American masculinity. In a sense, he fills in the dark, undeveloped gaps in Frederick Jackson Turner's negative observations of the frontier and its consequences for American masculinity. Thus, the repetition and recapitulation of events do not emerge out of an inadequacy of artistry and inspiration on the writer's part. On the contrary, they highlight the idea that certain experiences concerning American masculinity are mythic in nature, and as a result, they are (re)animated over and over again, even in the millennium. As the unnamed traveler who Billy encounters in the epilogue in 2002 expresses, "the world of our fathers resides within us. Ten thousand

[13] This name of course is a reference to Mary Magdalene, who is believed to be a repentant sex worker or "promiscuous woman," saved by Jesus in the New Testament. She travelled with Jesus and became one of his followers, witnessing his crucifixion, burial, and resurrection.

generations and more. A form without a history has no power to perpetuate itself. What has no past can have no future" (281). This is the last lesson that Billy, at the end of *Cities of the Plain,* learns from him, "solitary and alone" (266).

4.2. Wounded Cowboys and Objectified Women

Like its predecessors, *Cities of the Plain* begins by immersing the reader in the generic codes of the Western: "They stood in the doorway and stomped the rain from their boots and swung their hats and wiped the water from their faces" (3). The narrator, however, immediately introduces new ground—the brothel—to the narrative:

> Out in the street the rain slashed through the standing water driving the gaudy red and green colors of the neon signs to wander and seethe and rain danced on the steel tops of the cars parked along the curb.
> Damned if I aint half drowned, Billy said. He swung his dripping hat.
> Where's the all-american cowboy?
> He's gone inside.
> Let's go. He'll have all them good fat ones picked out for hisself. (3)

When Billy inquires to the whereabouts of "the all-american cowboy," it is obvious that he is referring to John Grady, which carries a double significance. It reminds the reader of the protagonist's mythic stature as the successor of the American cowboy convention in its mostly romanticized, internalized, and idealized form, and it clarifies the extent to which Billy admires him, seeing in him his lost brother, Boyd. McCarthy also makes a statement by writing "American" in lower-case letters, suggesting that the "all-american cowboy" has lost his potency and greatness by the end of the twentieth century, and that his primary goal in life has become picking out the most desirable sex workers.

Billy, last seen as a lonesome wanderer at the end of *The Crossing*, reemerges in *Cities of the Plain* as a ranch-hand in a brothel looking for "all them good fat ones" (3). From the very beginning of the novel, the reader realizes that McCarthy's cowboys are no longer in their ranching environment. Instead, they are in a Juarez brothel in El Paso, Mexico, a completely new setting for the novel. In the first two installments of the trilogy, cities were "intrusions on the vast western landscape" (4); the reverse is the case in this novel. In the third installment of the trilogy, McCarthy portrays a vanishing cowboy culture with wounded cowboys, based on previous failures and desolation relieved only during alienated journeys to bars and brothels in Juarez, Mexico. Ironically,

they do not ride on horseback on the plains, but in taxis in a seedy city. The protagonist's effort to find Magdalena's new workplace barely resembles the traditional cowboy's quest to conquer the West:

> They drove through the flooded and potholed streets. The driver was slightly drunk and commented freely on pedestrians that crossed before them or that stood in the doorways. He commented on aspects of their character deducible from their appearance. He commented on crossing dogs. He talked about what the dogs thought and where they might be going and why. (55-56)

Likewise, Billy and his buddy encounter an owl while returning from town, which also illustrates the displacement of urban cowboys:

> They drove on. Rounding a curve with a steep bank to the right of the road there was a sudden white flare and a solid whump of a sound. The truck veered, the tires squealing. When they got stopped they were halfway off the road into the bar ditch.
> What in the hell, said Troy. What in the hell. A large owl lay cruciform across the driver's windshield of the truck. The laminate of the glass was belled in softly to hold him and his wings were spread wide and he lay in the concentric rings and rays of the wrecked glass like an enormous moth in a web. (34)

The statement "they rode on" used to construe the wanderings of the scalp-hunters in *Blood Meridian* has been transformed into "they drove on" to depict the wandering of the cowboys in *Cities of the Plain*. Here, they drive in modern steel horses (cars) that destroy one of the iconic symbols of the wilderness, the owl, which is crucified and sacrificed as roadkill. It is a culture of wounded nature and wounded masculinity, as indicated in *All the Pretty Horses* by John Grady's father, who mourns the loss of the frontier as a figurative and physical space that cannot be revitalized. Here, emotionally detached, absent, and emasculated cowboys identify with loss, especially with respect to their vanishing lifestyle.

Thus, the ranch on which they live is a last sanctuary for this vanishing way of life. This monolithically male and homosocial world is the last stronghold of the American cowboy. As Robert Jarrett expresses in "Cormac McCarthy's Sense of an Ending: Serialized Narrative and Revision in *Cities of the Plain,*"

> Texas cattle will give way to Texas oil. Agriculture will be superseded by industry and corporate capitalism. The text is set in the 1950s during which . . . Eisenhower was to warn of the growing power of "the military industrial complex." McCarthy was writing in the 1990s when the power of

> that complex seemed unchallengeable and dominated not just in America but the world. (315)

Clearly, cowboys have no place in this new world, with its nuclear arms, space race, and military technologies. Billy, however, is aware of the inevitability of change and of the necessity to accommodate it:

> When you're a kid you have these notions about how things are going to be, Billy said. You get a little older and you pull back some on that. I think you wind up just trying to minimize the pain. Anyway this country aint the same. Nor anything in it. The war [World War II] changed everything. I don't think people even know it yet. (77)

When John Grady asks "how," Billy replies: "It just did. It aint the same no more. It never will be" (78). Like John Grady's father in *All the Pretty Horses*, who witnesses the cowboys' control and dominance over ranching slipping away, and the racial and ethnic composition of the border changing, Billy has to reconcile with the trauma of his past to figure out how "to minimize the pain." His cryptic answer to John Grady can thus be read as his realization that like the "vanishing Indian" of the Southwest, they too are vanishing. If the American frontier mythology ever even existed, it was now almost lost forever.

For McCarthy, the horse, and the cowboy's growing inability to tame it, is also a symbol of this disappearing lifestyle and its associated masculinity. As the reader learns in *All the Pretty Horses*, John Grady is a natural with horses, even spotting a lame filly that escapes notice. Oren, the ranch overseer, however, tells the cowboys that the horse must be trained:

> There's a man sendin a two-year-old filly out here that he aims to give to his wife. I kept my own counsel on that. He dont know nothing about the horse other than its blood. Or any other horse I reckon probably you could say.
> Is she broke?
> The wife or the horse?
> I'll lay eight to five they aint either one, said JC. Sight unseen. (43)

When John Grady rejects the training due to the filly's condition, he earns the admiration of his boss, Mac, and his fellow cowboys. As Mac states, "I wish I had six more just like him," which positions John Grady's mastery of the horses as part of the ideal cowboy ethos. Billy reinforces this by praising John Grady: "he's just got his own notions about things," and "he's as good a boy as I ever knew. He's the best" (20). In the novel, Billy

still likes horses, but recognizes that what he feels for them is not the same as what John Grady feels, and that this in some way makes them different than one another. In a private conversation, he asks John Grady:

> What do you tell them?
> Who?
> Horses.
> I dont know. The truth . . . I think it's just what's in your heart. (84)

Even though he cares deeply for horses and what they represent, Billy realizes the futile logic behind performing outmoded cowboy codes that base relationships with horses on "telling them the truth, telling them what is in your heart, on trusting them to have justice in their hearts" (84). However, the way in which John Grady is praised for his ability with horses illustrates how the men on the ranch still subscribe to the idea of the mythic cowboy. The same romanticized affection John Grady has for horses can be applied to other areas of the cowboys' lives and is at the core of what will eventually kill John Grady and preserve Billy.

In the novel, cowboys find their personal satisfaction and identity in their work and in their camaraderie with each other. Cowboyism and machismo are abundant in this novel as well: they swear, work hard, and exhibit extraordinary manliness. Women are represented through similar stereotypes such as the cook, and the Mexican sex workers the cowboys visit across the border. In this context, John Grady's mastery with horses becomes an example of the "homosocial relations of power that exist between men." In *Between Men* (2016), Eve Sedgwick analyzes this homosocial world among men, the world controlled "by the bonding between males, as one whose shape is not that of brotherhood, but of extreme, compulsory, and intensely volatile mastery and subordination" (66). In the novel, McCarthy examines the desires of cowboys to be with other cowboys through his cross-examination of cowboy mastery and masculinity in the ranch environment, which allows the reader to demythologize the tools used by cowboys to reaffirm hegemonic masculinity. The cowboys on Mac's ranch exemplify a homosocial perspective, appreciating the protagonist for his mastery of the horses. On the other hand, their desire to dominate horses is, much like "taming" women, a difficult and unattainable enterprise. Therefore, John Grady, with his superior equine skills and desire to marry and settle down, stands out in this homosocial environment where it is

much safer to experience women in brothels and horses from afar.

In "Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity," Michael Kimmel elaborates on how "women become a kind of currency that men use to improve their ranking on the masculine social scale" (186). This objectification of women also exists among the cowboys. Billy, seeking information about Magdalena, asks John Grady "to bring her around some time where we can get a look at her" (85). Billy's request suggests that the she is like a horse that "can be brought around" (180), restrained, to be gazed at by his fellow friends. Another scene, which involves horse breeding, also reflects the objectification of women. Here, the cowboys in attendance, including the protagonist, literally take part in the coupling in order to ensure successful breeding. In this context, the stallion represents John Grady, the mare is Magdalena, and their intercourse is being facilitated by the other cowboys:

> The stallion stood, his great phallus swinging.
> Hold her, said Ward.
> I got her.
> He knows where it's at.
> The mare bucked and kicked one leg. On the third try the stallion mounted her, clambering, stamping his hindlegs, the great thighs quivering and the veins standing. John Grady stood holding all of this before him on a twisted tether like a child holding by a string some struggling and gasping chimera invoked by sorcery out of the void into the astonished day world. He held the twitchrope in one hand and laid his face against the sweating neck. He could hear the slow bellows of her lungs and feel the blood pumping. He could hear the slow dull beating of the heart within her like an engine deep in a ship. He and JC loaded the mare in the trailer. She look knocked up to you? JC said.
> I dont know.
> He bowed her back, didnt he? (75)

Like Alejandra in *All the Pretty Horses*, Magdalena is always described as having "long black hair" (69). As a typical female character in a traditional Western, she thus must be, like a horse, conquered, tamed, and ridden. This metaphor is reinforced when McCarthy juxtaposes the episode depicting the breeding of the mare with John Grady's sexual intercourse with Magdalena:

> She took the money and opened the door and held it out and whispered to a man on the other side. He was tall and thin and he smoked a cigarette in a silver holder and he wore a black silk shirt. He looked at the client for just a moment through the partly opened door and he counted the money and nodded and turned away and she shut the door. Her bare back was pale in the candlelight where the dress was open. Her black hair glistened. She

> turned and withdrew her arms from the sleeves of the dress and caught the front of it before her. She stepped from the pooled cloth and laid the dress across a chair and stepped behind the gauzy curtains and turned back the covers and then she pulled the straps of her chemise from her shoulders and let it fall and stepped naked into the bed and pulled the stained quilt to her chin and turned on her side and put her arm beneath her head and lay watching him. (69)

Like Alejandra, Magdalena is reduced to stereotypes that racialize, demean, silence and ultimately eliminate Mexican woman. Here, McCarthy exposes the ways in which even discomfited cowboys in homosocial environments still coerce and dehumanize women in order to maintain their bogus cowboy dominance and bolster their notion of the quintessential "all-american cowboy" as hunter, controller, and possessor of women and horses. The objectification of Mexican women also illustrates the desolation and misery of these cowboys, greedy for vicarious amusement and the satisfaction of fantasizing about themselves in the real world, yet incapable of entering it themselves. The other cowboys, in their devotion to the protagonist as the "all-american cowboy," reveal how fixed and inherent representations of the frontier are in this homosocial environment. Their dreams of the Wild West have now been reduced to the pathetic activities of emotionally detached, emasculated, and wounded cowboys.

4.3. The Domestication of the All-American Cowboy

In *All the Pretty Horses*, John Grady realizes that his American cowboy ethos cannot sustain him after the loss of Alejandra and the killing of the *cuchillero*. "Something cold and soulless that entered his heart" perverts his "ardent heartedness," and directs him to seek love and death in true romantic fashion in *Cities of the Plain* (75). There is a turning point in the novel when John Grady begins a more rapid departure from his all-American cowboyism. Up to this point, he has held onto his dreams of living according to the cowboy ethos, but with the introduction of Magdalena, with whom he falls in love, John Grady abandons his dreams of a cowboy life so he can live a life with her, settle down, and operate a ranch. However, his desire to marry her ends up constituting a parody of the conventional themes and characteristics associated with cowboyism.

His first glimpse of Magdalena is a reflection, rather than a direct encounter. In a scene so cinematic that it seems almost cliché, John Grady notices "a pretty young thing" in

the mirror behind the bar: "He was studying something in the backbar glass. Troy turned and followed his gaze. A young girl of no more than seventeen and perhaps younger was sitting on the arm of the sofa with her hands cupped and her eyes cast down" (20). When he later finds her at the White Lake (the brothel), he sees her, once again, in the mirror: "When he looked in the glass again she was sitting by herself on a dark velvet couch" (66). The first conversation he has with her circles around whether or not Magdalena recognizes John Grady from their first encounter at La Venada, and if he has acquired a place in her thoughts, which, as John Grady learns, he has:

> He watched her. He told her that he had seen her at La Venada but she only nodded and did not seem surprised. . . .
> She asked why he had not spoken to her at La Venada. He said that it was because he was with friends. . . .
> No me recuerda? He said.
> She shook her head. She looked up. They sat in silence. . . .
> She smiled wistfully. She touched his sleeve. Fue mentira, she said. Lo que decia.
> Cómo?
> She said that it was a lie that she did not remember him. She said that he was
> standing at the bar and she thought that he would come to talk to her but that he had not and when she looked again he was gone. (68-69)

Before leaving the brothel, John Grady asks Magdalena to call him by his name—as if they are a couple—another affirmation that she cares for, and means something to, him. In both scenes, John Grady notices her vulnerability. Unlike the other sex workers at La Venada, who are large and mature, Magdalena is a petite "young girl of no more than seventeen and . . . she fussed with the hem of her gaudy dress like a schoolgirl" (67). When he sees her again at White Lake, "she looked small and lost" (67), and, later, "like a debutante" (85). John Grady believes she is "a good person" and she appeals to his deepest manly desires, for "all his early dreams were the same. Something was afraid and he had come to comfort it. He dreamed it yet" (204).

Adding to her vulnerability is the fact that John Grady later learns that she suffers from epilepsy, that she is being held against her will, that she is devoutly Catholic, and that she wants desperately to escape the life of a sex worker in which she is forced to participate. Her epilepsy, the source of great superstition for the other sex workers, somehow endears her to her pimp, Eduardo, even more:

> He spoke without turning. He said that she had been spoiled in this house. Because of her youth. He said that her illness was illness only and that she was a fool to believe in the superstitions of the women of the house. He said that she was twice a fool to trust them for they would eat her flesh if they thought it would protect them from disease or secure for them the affections of the lover of whom they dreamt or cleanse their souls in the sight of the bloody and barbarous god to whom they prayed. He said that her illness was illness only and that it would so prove itself when at last it killed her as it soon would do.
> He turned to study her. The slope of her shoulders and their movement with the rise and fall of her breath. The bloodbeat in the artery of her neck. When she looked up and saw his face she knew that he had seen into her heart. What was so and what was false. He smiled his hardlipped smile. Your lover does not know, he said. You have not told him.
> Mande?
> Tu amado no lo sabe.
> No, she whispered. Él no lo sabe. (212-13)

Eduardo's cruelty manifests itself most clearly in his treatment of Magdalena, for his actions and words diminish, objectify, and rob her of her dignity. Magdalena's dream of another life in which she will escape the world of sex trafficking and marry John Grady for love is offensive and degrading to Eduardo. In his eyes, Magdalena is merely a "whore"—property to be bought and sold and of no value except for the money she makes for him. Eduardo exercises godlike power over the women who work for him at White Lake. As a result, Magdalena's belief in a higher power other than Eduardo offends him. For Eduardo, there is no greater power than the power he exercises in his self-created world. His nefarious nature, which is yet another stereotype, proves a greater force than John Grady's generosity and pure heart. Nevertheless, both men crassly objectify Magdalena as the pitiable focus of their masculine competition.

In spite of his good intentions, John Grady has apparently learned nothing from his former experiences in *All the Pretty Horses*. When Billy asks, "Are you done bein a Samaritan?" John Grady answers, "I'm done" (33). However, he is not done. Apart from his reluctance to recognize that his vision of a romantic and mythical farm can never be fulfilled, John Grady also does not accept the risk associated with retrieving a sex worker from the "clutches of her pimp" (96). His trips to see her in Juarez, Mexico, are always filled with foreboding and yearning.[14] He believes that he can bring her back

[14] The rescue of women in danger, or "damsels in distress," is a persistent theme in traditional cowboy narratives such as Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912), Walter van Tilburg

to the United States and marry her. Yet, John Grady acknowledges his weakness, asking Billy, "You think I'll outgrow whatever it is I got?" to which Billy says, "No. I don't" (146). It seems that Billy evidently has the same weakness, because he agrees to help buy Magdalena from Eduardo. It is a foolish plan and fails miserably. John Grady goes after Magdalena with the same recklessness he displayed while acquiring the stolen horses in *All the Pretty Horses* because in both cases, he feels as if he has been wronged.

Indeed, both Alejandra and Magdalena are well out of John Grady's reach. According to Jay Ellis, with Alejandra, John Grady chooses a woman "so highborn and virtuous that his relationship degraded her" (211). With Magdalena, the protagonist chooses a woman "so low and degraded that it is impossible to rescue her from the depths to which she so innocently and pitifully has sunk" (212). Similarly, Edward Arnold points out that John Grady's relationship with Magdalena is, to some extent, "a determined attempt to reenact and make right his failed romance with Alejandra," while "Billy's reluctant assistance is also an effort to redeem the past, specifically his inability, as he maintains, to care properly for his brother" (236–237). Hence, in *Cities of the Plain,* the actions of John Grady and Billy are motivated by a desire to reclaim what they lost in the first two volumes of *The Border Trilogy*. They think that they are iconic figures; truly gracious cowboys who have taken to heart the cowboy ethos. However, the cowboy code is structured around the illusion of American exceptionalism and the myth of the frontier, which no longer exists, if it ever did. The loss of the paradise John Grady found in *All the Pretty Horses* has left him with a dilemma that brings about his self-destruction.

In the novel, McCarthy continues his reliance on death as an antagonist capable of evoking the futility of cowboy of existence. Its effect on Mr. Johnson, the owner of the ranch, serves as a good example. Over the course of his life, Mr. Johnson has

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Clark's *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1940), Jack Schaefer's *Shane* (1949), Louis L'Amour's *Hondo* (1953), and Elmer Kelton's *The Time it Never Rained* (1973) and *The Good Old Boys* (1979) (Lamont 15). The rescue fantasy also received significant cinematic expression in John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), one of the most famous Westerns. It deals with the epic journey to reclaim a female taken captive by Native Americans in post-Civil War Texas. The same theme can also be observed in Wim Wenders's *Paris Texas* (1984), which features the quest of a father and son who recover their wife/mother. Even though these literary and cinematic quests end with the rescue of these women (who then accept the cowboy as a lover/husband), McCarthy's textual anti-myth terminates in death and defeat for male and female alike.

experienced many changes. However, as the narrator reveals, these changes are not what disorients and confuses him. Even though he has witnessed how America has stepped into the atomic age, and has become a nuclear power and the epitome of progress and modernity, and he figured out that he has no place in the next generation, it is the fact that his daughter has passed away that he cannot "get the hang of" (4). As Mr. Johnson succinctly explains to the protagonist, the hardest lesson in life is finitude. He warns John Grady about his desire to repeat the past: "There's hard lessons in this world." When John Grady asks, "What's the hardest?" Mr. Johnson replies, "I don't know. Maybe it's just that when things are gone they're gone. They aint comin back" (126). This can apply to Alejandra as well as the world of the cowboy. It is obvious that even at the end of his long life, Mr. Johnson still has not come to terms with what he considers to be the hardest of life's lessons, his daughter's death, and the fact that one cannot return to the past.

John Grady also cannot deal with the fact that the past is lost forever. As John Scaggs explains, "John Grady's desire to recover what has been lost . . . is clear throughout the novel" (75). At one point in the novel, John Grady spins the coffee grounds at the bottom of his cup and then swirls "them the other way as if he'd put them back the way they'd been" (*Cities of the Plain* 138)—in essence, trying to reverse time. It is obvious that the protagonist has not learned, and never will, what Mr. Johnson considers to be the "hardest lesson in this world." The message in the coffee cup scene is that one has as much chance of reliving the past as one has of spinning coffee grounds back to their original position. John Grady does not appear to have gained any wisdom, and makes the same mistakes in *Cities of the Plain.*

Billy is never as romantic and hopeful as John Grady, yet he too once believed in the superiority of the cowboy way of life. As James Barcus explains, "for Billy, the cowboy world is to be endured, not embraced" (44). After weeping at the end of *The Crossing*, which follows his unanswered call for the dog and his witnessing of the first detonation of the atomic bomb, he is confused about the cowboy lifestyle, yet continues to work as a rancher in *Cities of the Plain*. Unlike Billy, John Grady still has an idyllic ideal and reckons that perhaps "he has found a kindred spirit in Billy" (76). When John Grady asks him, "you think you'd of liked to of lived back in the old days?" without hesitation

Billy responds: “No. I did when I was a kid. I used to think rawhidin a bunch of bony cattle in some outland country would be just as close to heaven as a man was likely to get. I wouldnt give you much for it now” (77). Billy adds: “If I think about what I wanted as a kid and what I want now they aint the same thing. I guess what I wanted wasnt what I wanted” (78).

Clearly, Billy accepts the idea that “you need to find you a hole at some point” (19), a phrase that suggests the trilogy’s equation of domestication with the death of cowboyism. Throughout the novel, Billy halfheartedly looks for a place to fit in, and doubts that he will ever “have a little spread up in the hills somewhere” (77). Billy, more mature, sensitive and realistic than John Grady, has become tired of holding onto their vanishing world. As Jay Ellis illustrates, “McCarthy’s would-be cowboys live with only a dim awareness of roles outside those clustered around chivalry. What domestic roles might be available to them they turn out to be ill-equipped for, living as they have most of their lives in exile from domestic” (221). In other words, Billy’s cowboy practices make him incompatible and unsuitable to domesticity; yet, he still dreams of settling down and starting a new life.

At some point in the novel, John Grady wonders about domestic life and other vocational possibilities, and asks Billy:

> What would you do if you couldnt be a cowboy?
> I dont know. I reckon I’d think of somethin. You?
> I dont know what it would be I’d think of.
> . . .
> You think you could live in Mexico?
> Yeah probably.
> You’d go to veterinary school if you had the money I reckon. (217)

Even though John Grady foresees other possibilities for Billy, he cannot visualize himself living up to his full potential, becoming exactly what he wants to become as a cowboy. However, despite his willingness to pursue a cowboy lifestyle, John Grady gradually relinquishes the props of his cowboy identity and masculinity—“his grandfather’s pistol and holster, his money, and his horse”—which forges a link between the protagonist and his ancestors on the frontier, and foreshadows their impending and inevitable doom (218). These are indispensable elements of his cowboy identity; family heirlooms that connect him to his past, placing him in a long genealogy

of Coles who worked as ranchers: "The boy's name was Cole. John Grady Cole" (*All the Pretty Horses* 8). Cowboyism is a generational rite of passage for John Grady, much like it was for his great-uncles and his own father. Nevertheless, he selflessly sacrifices his belongings to assist Magdalena's liberation from the brothel. When he proclaims that he wants to marry, he simultaneously reveals that he is no longer an "all-american cowboy" (3). His desire for domestic life, which will begin by retrieving Magdalena from the brothel, overrides all concern for his cowboy identity (259).

In order to accomplish his dream, John Grady repairs an abandoned cabin on the ranch where he plans to live with Magdalena after they marry. However, the empty cabin symbolizes the idea that peace and domestication will elude McCarthy's cowboys. John Grady begins the task of renovating the cabin by first clearing away the obstacles that block the roadway. He does a great deal of building, and then turns his attention to the smaller details. At one point in the novel, Billy comes to the cabin to check on his progress, and asks John Grady what he is doing: "Paintin windowsash," John Grady tells him (179). Billy enters the cabin, and realizes that the

> adobe brick walls had been white-washed and the inside of the little house was bright and monastically austere. The clay floors were swept and slaked and he'd beaten them down with a homemade maul contrived from a fencepost with a section of board nailed to the bottom. (179)

The deserted cabin at Bell Springs Draw represents his domestication and inclination to repeat the past—to master and control its deficiency through the traditional masculine tasks of taming nature and building a home.

John Grady dreams of a traditional rural homestead that is completely isolated from urbanization. However, his dream is deeply flawed. The little cabin proves to be a false vision, a false utopia centered on a dream of conquest rooted in a linear narrative, for neither John Grady nor Magdalena will live to call the old cabin "home." As Barcley Owens notes, the protagonist's "simple dream of fixing up the shack for his Mexican bride replays the pioneer's dream of forging a garden-paradise in the wilderness" (116). In short, John Grady has lost the image of tough cowboy and gained the image of a homemaker. Even though Billy does not say anything about this transformation, the adult John Grady has clearly left behind the life of the "all-american cowboy," a life he yearned for in his youth.

John Grady pays the ultimate price for betraying the cowboy code by seeking a life beyond it: the death of Magdalena. She is killed by her pimp, Eduardo, and when he buries her, John Grady confronts Eduardo on his home turf. He coolly announces: "I come to kill you" (247). Interestingly, John Grady does not take his revolver out of hock before he visits Eduardo; "he had pawned it to finance his forthcoming marriage" (94). They fight with knives, which stresses the primitive hostility these two possess. In this scene, McCarthy takes the reader beyond the material trappings of modern society, detaches them from advanced technology, and forces them to confront the raw brutality of John Grady and Eduardo, and broadly speaking, the cultures they represent. Fighting with knives plays into Eduardo's hand; he is a *cuchillero* while John Grady is nothing but a hardworking cowboy.

During this confrontation, Eduardo asserts despotic power through language. He uses language in a way that he engages his rival, and establishes a bond that is rooted in violence. McCarthy describes the eruption of the fight "like a first kiss" (248), reinforcing the physical and sexual nature of the event. His role during the confrontation is one of complete supremacy, an intriguing "lord of the dance or master of ceremonies," unceasingly "circling" and swinging his knife vigorously "like some dark conductor raising his baton to commence" (248). As they circle one another in this bloody dance, Eduardo expresses the futility and tragedy of cowboy masculinity:

> He is deaf to reason. To his friends. The blind maestro. All. He wishes nothing so fondly as to throw himself into the grave of a dead whore. . . . This is quite a farmboy, he said. This is some farmboy. He feinted to the left and cut John Grady a third time across the thigh. . . . You are like the whores from the campo, farmboy. To believe that craziness is sacred. A special grace. A special touch. A partaking of the godhead. . . . Your kind cannot bear that the world be ordinary. That it contain nothing save what stands before one. But the Mexican world is a world of adornment only and underneath it is very plain indeed. While your world—he passed the blade back and forth like a shuttle through a loom—your world totters upon an unspoken labyrinth of questions. And we will devour you, my friend. You and all your pale empire. (248-253)

Eduardo belittles both the protagonist's economic and social status as a "farmboy" (250) and his nationality as an American citizen. In his thoughts and actions, he elevates the dominant Latino model of masculinity—machismo—that controls and oppresses women in order to reinforce its superior mastery. According to Eduardo, cowboys view

Mexico as a place of sacred mystery, where they hope to find what has vanished from their own largely profane lives in the United States (247). Thus, he mercilessly plays with the protagonist: "Change your mind, he said. Go back. Choose life. You are young" (248), but there is no returning for John Grady. He survived the knife fight in the Mexican prison in *All the Pretty Horses*. However, he is not so lucky this time. In the final scene of McCarthy's "all-american cowboy" novel, the words of Dueña Alfonsa come back to haunt the readers of the trilogy, because death does indeed cure John Grady of his mythic Western sentiments as it ends his mythic journey (*All the Pretty Horses*, 238).

As Russell M. Hillier points out, "a manipulative, darkly eloquent, and speciously reasonable bully and sadist," Eduardo belongs in McCarthy's "gallery of malevolent characters, along with Judge Holden, and Anton Chigurh" (24). He is definitely not the best representative of Mexican culture, but his commentary illustrates the fate of the American cowboy, rendered even more tragic because it is expressed by a murderous pimp.[15] Eduardo, who represents a closed society, mocks the representative of the "democratic" "pale empire." He castigates the escapist dreams of American cowboys when he states: "They drift down out of your leprous paradise seeking a thing now extinct among them. A thing for which perhaps they no longer even have a name" (249). According to Robert Sickels and Marc Oxoby,

> Eduardo consciously situates himself in the new world, practicing the new protocols. In conversation with Billy, who Cole sent to gauge the possibility of buying Magdalena's freedom, Eduardo not only embraces these "new protocols," but disparages John Grady for his inability to see the world realistically. (357)

[15] In *MeXicana Encounters: The Making of Social Identities on The Borderlands* (2003) Rosa Linda Fregoso focuses on representations of Mexican stereotypes, both in film and literature. She states that when cross-racial relationships are depicted, plots in movies or literary texts flow in either one of two ways: (1) "rescue fantasy, where the white male protagonist saves the Mexican female from the excesses of her culture (embodied in either a possessive father or degenerate lover); and (2) romantic conquest of a Mexicana, involving a white male triumphant over one or more Mexican males" (140). Apparently, John Grady and Magdalena's affair in the novel fits both categories. It is also possible to claim that Eduardo fits the stereotype of "the degenerate Mexican lover." First of all, he is a violent, criminal pimp and lothario. He is also characterized as "a flashy dresser, who smokes cigars," speaks charmingly, and knows how to wield a knife. However, unlike in the traditional Western, the protagonist is not able to defeat him and ride off into the sunset.

Eduardo lays bare the cowboy's struggle for Magdalena, and in doing so, illustrates the way the cowboy's yearning for her are connected to his fantasy for a mythic Mexico. Regardless of his cowboy charm, John Grady is an intruder. The cultural divide, first observed in his affair with Alejandra in *All the Pretty Horses*, remains, and the protagonist is not capable of outwitting or overpowering it. Instead of the protagonist acting like the traditional cowboy hero seeking social justice, as in the case of Ben Venters in Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912), Shane in Jack Schaefer's *Shane* (1949), or Hondo in Louis L'Amour's *Hondo* (1953), John Grady wants the despicable pimp to kill him so he can avenge Magdalena's murder. His charisma, charm, and volition, all of which make him a prototype for the American cowboy, in the end, are inadequate to guarantee his success, leading him to the ultimate crisis. Magdalena is killed, and in response, John Grady kills her pimp Eduardo, but he loses his life in the process. Following the knife-fight, John Grady—mortally wounded—wanders through the backstreets of Ciudad Juarez: "The wash of the lights from the city by which he steered his course hung over the desert like a dawn eternally to come" (254). He passes a tortilla factory, dark houses, empty lots, "a clubhouse made of packing crates" (254), "while he hears the distant toll of bells from the cathedral in the city." He eventually dies, like the cowboy myth itself, as foreshadowed in Alejandra's dream in *All the Pretty Horses*:

> I saw you in a dream.
> Last night?
> No. Long ago. Before any of this. Hice una manda.
> A promise.
> Yes.
> For my life.
> Yes. They carried you through the street of a city I'd never seen. It was dawn. The children were praying. Lloraba tu madre. Con mas razon tu puta. (252)

Throughout the novel, there is a brotherly relationship between Billy and John Grady and the final, crushing image of Billy carrying John Grady's body through the streets of Juarez reminds the reader of *The Crossing*. Billy could save John Grady no more than he could have saved his own brother Boyd. When Billy picks up John Grady's mutilated corpse from the ground, "he was crying and the tears ran on his angry face and he called out to the broken day against them all, and he called out to God to see what was before his eyes" (261). A group of schoolchildren witness this:

> They could not take their eyes from him. The dead boy in his arms hung with his head back and those partly opened eyes beheld nothing at all out of that passing landscape of street or wall or paling sky or the figures of the children who stood blessing themselves in the gray light. This man and his burden passed on forever out of that nameless crossroads and the woman stepped once more into the street and the children followed and all continued on to their appointed places which as some believe were chosen long ago even to the beginning of the world. (261)

As Eric Hage argues, "it is relationships, both current and past, that ground the more esoteric elements of *Cities of the Plain*. And at a whole other level—separate from yet parallel to the great philosophical stirrings—this is a story about kindness between people and the loneliness of old cowboys" (63). At the end of the novel, Eduardo desecrates the mythic values the protagonist desperately wants to keep alive. Thus, Cormac McCarthy demythologizes cowboy masculinity and highlights that the prowess and privilege assumed in the character of the American cowboy has its limits. Eduardo's knife mortally wounds the myth of American power and arrogance as celebrated on horseback.

Given that all three novels conclude with the protagonists failing in their respective quests, it is hard to deny that, despite the heroism, the ethos of *The Border Trilogy* is bleak. The final scene of the novel profoundly highlights that the chivalric codes of the cowboy mythology are fundamentally impossible to fulfill. The question, "Where's the all-american cowboy?" summarizes the major issue around which all three novels of the trilogy revolve: the changing nature of American cowboy identity, particularly the erosion of cowboy masculinity. McCarthy's cowboys finally achieve some closure in the final novel, but it is not what readers might expect. John Grady dies trying to avenge the death of an underage sex worker, and Billy ages into his seventies, but becomes a hapless drifter who sleeps under freeway overpasses and relies on charity. Unlike Western heroes such as the Virginian, McCarthy's cowboys struggle their whole lives, however long or short they may be, and in the end have nothing to show for their efforts. The characters of *The Border Trilogy* are caught between the time they thought existed and the time they know is coming, and are thus rootless and routeless. As such, they cannot prosper or survive.

4.4. The Codes of the "Adult Western"

Cities of the Plain revisits John Grady's moral dilemma but adds the character of Billy, who is not caught up in John Grady's epistemological and ontological crises. In *Cities of the Plain,* Billy's simpler quest is to keep John Grady, who plays the elusive role of the younger brother, alive. In the end, both cowboys fail. John Grady fails to save Magdalena and dies in a revenge fight, forcing Billy to bury his younger-brother substitute, just as he buried his actual younger brother in *The Crossing.* After burying the failed hero, Billy continues to grapple with the significance of death. Throughout the novel, the chief protagonist is John Grady and the narrative is focused on his unfortunate love affair with Magdalena; the epilogue, however, is set almost fifty years after John Grady's death, with the aged Billy as the protagonist. While the first two installments of the trilogy take place before and during World War II, the last novel begins in the 1950s and ends in the 2000s. By using a contemporary setting, McCarthy interrogates the pertinence of cowboy myths in modern American society.

Joyce Carol Oates's assertion that *Cities of the Plain* is "a sobering vision as of an aged Huckleberry Finn in his later years, now a homeless drifter broken in body and spirit, for whom the romantic adventure of 'setting off for the territory' is long past" exemplifies how McCarthy portrays his adult cowboy's precarious personal position, and the social and cultural threats to his cowboy lifestyle, in the 2000s (41). Billy leaves the ranch after John Grady's death, riding off into the sunset like other frontier cowboys before him: "He rode out in the dark long before daylight and he rode the sun up and he rode it down again" (264). As Oates states, Billy is a sad picture of Huckleberry Finn's future in the 2000s because the novel ends with an image of an aged Billy sleeping in a small room, cared for by a young woman and her family. The epilogue fast forwards in time to him as a seventy-eight-year-old displaced vagabond in 2002, working as an extra in a Western—a role for which he was selected because of his old fashioned cowboy image:

> He was living in the Gardner Hotel in El Paso Texas and working as an extra in a movie. . . . His money ran out. Three weeks later he was evicted. He'd long since sold his saddle and he set forth into the street with just AWOL bag and his blanketroll. . . . He was seventy-eight years old. The heart that should have killed him long ago by what the army's recruiting doctors had said still rattled on in his chest, no will of his. (264)

However, the narrative suggests that something is off—the "homeland" in which Billy finds himself is one where he is homeless, wandering in the Southwest. Even though it seems like Billy wants to make "the transition from a rural to an urban dweller," he cannot do it (264). Instead, he travels for many years, from one ranch to the other, ending up as "an extra in a Western," which is, ironically, perhaps the only safe place where cowboys can still exist. Billy had tried to adapt unsuccessfully to the normative model of masculinity by enlisting in the army decades earlier in *The Crossing*; even as an aged man he is still striving to find the right role to perform, now reduced to making money as an extra in a low-budget Western. Everywhere he turns, Billy is forced to remember the old world that no longer exists—if it ever did—and the new world that has no place for him.

At the very end of his trilogy, McCarthy returns to his original screenplay—the world of the cinematic Western, a domain that has been generally exemplified by elderly, aged cowboys, and their struggle with distortions of the West and a dead or dying cowboy code of masculinity. Billy's life as an exhausted wanderer and a movie extra, who now plays a background cowboy on screen and no longer a leading cowboy in real life, is how McCarthy adapts the "adult Western" narrative method found in the Western tradition. Here, McCarthy bends the codes of cowboy masculinity with a specific focus on adult cowboys who are overpowered, depressed, and defeated. In the closing scenes of the novel, it becomes clear that the construction of new Western narratives is no longer possible. Nostalgia for the Western myth is all that is left. As Lee Clark Mitchell argues in *Late Westerns: The Persistence of a Genre* (2018), in the historical West, idle and broken adult cowboys usually worked as extras in Western shows and movies. After they were released from prison, notorious lawmen and desperadoes often maintained their "celebrity status" by acting in historical Wild West shows, "just as bandits such as Frank James and Cole Younger had done" (179). The most prominent and rewarding "entertainment enterprise" in America between the 1880s and 1910s, Wild West shows eventually gave way to "motion pictures, which then took the lead in featuring participants who were integral in the making of history in the West" (Slotkin 66). Billy's "bit-part" in a Western movie suggests that his role in the western mythology of the cowboy was also minor, and that the heroic narratives of John Grady and his brother, Boyd, who both lived and died as young "all-american cowboys," are

more significant. Yet, as McCarthy expresses at the end of *Cities of the Plain*, cowboy masculinity only ever really existed in the images created by Hollywood. In the movie, Billy performs a diminished version of cowboy masculinity and only then in a caricatured, depreciated, and commercial form. As Nell Campbell argues in *Post-Westerns* (2013),

> the ultimate insult for the down-and-out hero was to end up in Hollywood movies as a cowboy extra, playing out on scene the myth that helped create his misery in the first place; the account of the ex-real cowboy who comes to Hollywood to play his own mythicized self-on-screen has become, in turn, a staple of revisionist Westerns since Nathanael West's *Day of the Locust* (330).

The iconic cowboy, perhaps the most enduring iteration of America's frontier hero, is already an anachronism by the time Billy comes to terms with the role he is expected to act out. Billy becomes an anachronistic cowboy, like a museum relic or ethnographic specimen, which is pertinent "for a genre that has itself often been considered a charming anachronism" (French 48). Ironically, *Cities of the Plain* itself is a western novel based on a screenplay that 1980s Hollywood thought was already anachronistic.

In the epilogue, McCarthy situates an aged, broke Billy under a freeway somewhere in Arizona, with trucks, bound both east and west, zipping over his head, headed towards the next century. Billy wanders the highways of the American Southwest, with the open road reinforcing his status as an outcast and nomad. However, rather than horses, lifeless construction trucks—trucks for making more highways—surround him. In this foreign environment, he has nightmares about his deceased sister and brother:

> In the night he dreamt of his sister dead seventy years and buried near Fort Sumner. He saw her so clearly. Nothing has changed, nothing faded. She was walking slowly along the dirt road past the house. . . . When she passed the house he knew that she would never enter there again not would he see her ever again and in his sleep he called out to her but she did not turn or answer him but only passed on down that empty road in infinite sadness and infinite loss.
> He woke and lay in the dark and the cold and he thought of her he thought of his brother dead in Mexico. In everything that he'd ever thought about the world and about his life in it he'd been wrong. (265-266)

Everyone he knows has passed away. In the epilogue, he tries to reconcile with their absence through the ghosts of the past, which allows him to come to an understanding of himself as an American cowboy. "The dream ghosts do not turn" or respond to him, but

only travel ahead, towards the "infinite sadness and infinite road" (266). He admits that he has "been wrong about everything" he has "ever thought about the cowboy world" and his own life (266). Billy has thus been an inhabitant—a prisoner perhaps—of his own cowboy mythology. Decades before, at the beginning of the book, when he had tried to negotiate with Eduardo on John Grady's behalf, the pimp pointed out to Billy that John Grady had in his mind a portrait of a life in which he freed Magdalena and settled into domestic life with her. "What is wrong with this story is that it is not a true story," Eduardo says to Billy (134). "Cowboys have in their minds a picture of how the world will be. How they will be in that world. The world may be many different ways for them but there is one world that will never be and that is the world they dream of" (134). Myths tend to be collective and cultural; however, *Cities of the Plain* also deals with a different, more personal kind of myth, which overlaps with ideologies such as Manifest Destiny and the Frontier Thesis: the myths cowboys tell themselves about how the cowboy life is, or will be. Thus, the epilogue features Billy continuing to struggle to come to terms with the role failed dreams play in his life.

In the epilogue, Billy also believes for a moment that he sees to the west a Spanish Mission. However, he has inaccurately substituted this image for what is in fact a radar tracking station. Having spent the night sleeping

> in a concrete tile by the highwayside where a roadcrew had been working . . . he got up and sat in the round mouth of the tile like a man in a bell and looked out upon the darkness. Out on the desert to the west stood what he took for one of the ancient spanish missions of that country but when he studied it again he saw that it was the round white dome of a radar tracking station. (289)

Now, aged and lost, Billy is incompetent when it comes to reading the signs of the modern world. McCarthy begins his story with an active, alive Billy setting out on the road towards the frontier. However, he ends the trilogy with a passive, defeated Billy at the end of the road. In 2002, he is caught in a double-bind, having been born too late to play the role of cowboy and too early to engage in the "democratic manhood" of the millennium.[16]

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[16] In *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, Michael Kimmel uses the term "democratic manhood" to mean "a manhood of responsibility, tested, and finally proved, in the daily acts that give our lives meaning. It is an expansive manhood, capable of embracing different groups

As Robert Jarrett points out, McCarthy reveals in his narratives that "Americans' national myths of historic progression from nature to civilized domination of nature . . . is an interpretive projection and illusion" (139). For the civilizing efforts of cowboys—through missionary work, western expansion, the growth of border economies and the development of space exploration and defense systems—are depicted as inevitable processes with increasingly calamitous outcomes. Billy also believes that he sees, in the overcast moonlight

> a row of figures struggling and clamoring silently in the wind. They appeared to be dressed in robes and some among them fell down in their struggling and rose to flair again. He thought they must be laboring toward him across the darkened desert yet they made no progress at all. They had the look of inmates in a madhouse palely gowned and pounding mutely at the glass of their keeping. (289)

In the morning, Billy recognizes that the figures are "rags of plastic wrapping hanging from a fence" (289), but the vision of the tracking station and the lunatics beyond serve as McCarthy's closing commentary on nature, technology, and vanished cowboy masculinity in the millennium. In the following paragraph, McCarthy depicts Billy at a spring,

> leaning to bow his mouth and suck from the cold silk top of the water and watch the minnows drift and recover in the current beneath him. There was a tin cup on a stob and he took it down and sat holding it. He'd not seen a cup at a spring in years and he held it in both hands as had thousands before him unknown to him yet joined in sacrament. (290)

The juxtaposition of the tracking station and the tin cup is related to the stranger's narrative at the end of Billy's dream. In the rest of the epilogue, McCarthy presents a dream-within-a-dream sequence. In his dream, Billy has a conversation with a stranger. He is one of the most two-dimensional characters in the entire book, a seer/prophet who floods Billy with seemingly endless and deeply philosophical visions. The mysterious, unnamed stranger takes seventy-eight-year-old Billy on a wild narrative journey through time, perception and history in what Susan Kollin has memorably called "the dream of a story of a dream within a dream" (21). It is an ambiguous, rambling, stream of consciousness scene composed of questions concerning blood, guilt, mortality, and

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of men, whether by race, class, ethnicity, or sexuality. . . . It is an egalitarian manhood, accepting and even embracing the equality of women in our lives, and preparing our children for the lives they will surely live of greater gender and sexual equality" (297).

worlds to come. The images in the dream are rhetorically related to the photographs, both whole and fragmentary, in *The Border Trilogy*:

> The immappable world of our journey. A pass in the mountains. A bloodstained stone. The marks of steel upon it. Names carved in the corrosible lime among stone fishes and ancient shells. Things dim and dimming. The dry sea floor. The tools of migrant hunters. The dreams enchased upon the blades of them. The peregrine bones of a prophet. The silence. The gradual extinction of rain. The coming of night. (288)

The stranger's words deal with the cowboy's presence in the world; the history of journeys and explorations both in *Blood Meridian* and *The Border Trilogy*. He explains to Billy that "this story like all stories has its beginnings in a question" (277).

This frame story "in what we must imagine to be some unknown infinitude of alternate being and likeness," reveals the map of his life (275). This account of a dreamer and a dozen cowboys participating in "a blood ceremony that was then and is now an affront to God" questions the difference between reality and dreams, and explains that there exists a toxic history that unites all cowboys, hence a common history among American men (280). According to John Wegner, the narrator's discussion of "common histories" and the dreamt dreamer's dream, "with all of its inherent philosophical complexities, seem to deconstruct boundaries that separate men and generations: Two worlds touch here within the traveler's story" (77). Here, "history is a shared experience and boundaries do little to separate the effects of events where these two worlds touch" (78). Thus, myth and history are not two separate objects or subjects; both become "twisted and righted when the wind blows" (McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses* 3). In that sense, the epilogue ends where the novel began. It completes the circle, highlighting the manifestations of toxic masculinity in *Blood Meridian* and the first two installments of the trilogy.

As Leslie Fiedler states in *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Americans "have always been inhabitants of myths rather than history," and the most potent landscape for that myth has been the American West (105). Whether history or myth, *The Border Trilogy* contends that "the past that was differs little from the past that was not" (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 330). In *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing*, McCarthy continues to demythologize the borderlands, even as he presents new interrogating myths. As an old man, Billy has a very different perspective on life, a different vantage point, much like when, on the range, the cowboys observed the glittering cities of the

plain from an objective distance: "There's a lot of things that look better at a distance," to which John Grady nods, adding "the life you've lived, for one" (156). His life might not look "better" as an old man of seventy-eight, yet he can see it better and the view is uncomfortable.

As the storyteller that Billy encounters in the epilogue claims, the cowboy life "vanishes at its own appearance. Moment by moment. Until it vanishes to appear no more" (273). However, he quickly differentiates vanishing and disappearing: "Lo que se desvaece es simplemente fuera de la vista. Pero deseparecido? [What vanishes is simply out of sight. But disappeared?] He shrugged. Where do things go?" (278). His words make a distinction between the solely unseen and the permanently eradicated, highlighting the idea scrutinized in the previous novels that "the world itself persists outside of time and outside our time-bound sensory perception of it" (McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses* 203). One of the clearest examples of this in *The Crossing* is the narrator's vision of the dead she-wolf which "already ran among the mountains at once terrible and of a great beauty" and "which cannot be held never be held and is no flower but is swift and a huntress and the wind itself is in it" (127). This sentiment is disclosed through the trilogy's narrators, and the storytellers who talk to Billy. However, it remains elusive to John Grady, Billy and the other cowboys whose world gradually disappears with each passing moment. Mr. Johnson, an older cowboy, expresses this despair and uneasiness with this when he admits to John Grady:

> I aint heard a wolf in this country since [1917]. I suppose that's a good thing. They can be hell on stock. But I guess I was always what you might call superstitious. I know I damn sure wasnt religious. And it had always seemed to me that somethin can live and die but that the kind of thing that they were was always there. I didnt know you could poison that. (*Cities of the Plain* 126)

Therefore, the whole trilogy, especially the last novel, is a requiem for the vanished world of the Southwest: the wolves, the Natives Americans, and the cowboy.

4.5. "I'm not what you think I am. I aint nothing": A Non-Chivalrous Cowboy

At the trilogy's conclusion, Billy eventually realizes that he needs some company, seeing "a row of figures struggling and clamoring silently in the wind. . . . He called to them but his shout was carried away on the wind and in any case they were too far to

hear him." Yet when Billy wakes up, he grasps that "in the new day's light were only rags of plastic wrapping hanging from a fence" (289). Moreover, Billy still grieves and weeps for his long-dead brother Boyd, whom he would "give about anything to see. . . one more time" (291). At the end, like a helpless child, Billy is adopted by a family. In their house, his bed is "in a shed room off the kitchen that was much like the room he'd slept in as a boy" (290). When Betty—the mother of the family—checks on Billy, she asks if he still misses his brother. "Yes I do. All the time," answers Billy (291) and he tells her Boyd's tale:

> He was the best. We run off to Mexico together. When we was kids. When our folks died. We went down there to see about getting back some horses they'd stole. We was just kids. He was awful good with horses. I always liked to watch him ride. Liked to watch him around horses. (291)

Clearly Billy's desire to return to the past is only fulfilled in his (day)dreams. As Betty pats his hand in reassurance, the reader receives a physical description of Billy, if only his hand: "Gnarled, ropescarred, specked from the sun and years of it" (291). She perceives "the ropy veins that bound them to his heart. There was map enough for men to read" (291). His hands reveal his cowboy world and personal history. As Trenton Hickman points out, "instead of relying on a nostalgic spatial story to frame her understanding of the emerging New West, then, Betty provides a different model by mapping the land through the holding of one hand to pass into the land of the shadowfolk" (161). His hand reveals "the map of his life"—who Billy is and who he was—while at the same time illustrating his struggle to transcend cowboy masculinity, its damage, and its dangers.

The novel ends with Billy being a grandfather figure for his adopted family. He is the embodiment of the final remnants of the romantic American West, which has all but vanished. His wanderings have come to an end; he stands at the final portal of his life. Now, he can create his own cowboy narratives:

> In the evening after supper sometimes the woman would invite him to play cards with them and sometimes he and the children would sit at the kitchen table and he'd tell them about horses and cattle and the old days. Sometimes he'd tell them about Mexico. (290)

One night he awakens from a dream to find Betty staring at him with devotion. Within this family context, the cowboy mythology is unraveled; the lost infantile male is saved

by the adult maternal female. McCarthy asserts the trilogy's "humanistic undercurrent" (Wallach, "Theatre" 25) through Betty's response:

> I'm not what you think I am. I aint nothing. I dont know why you put up with me.
> Well, Mr Parham, I know who you are. And I do know why. You go to sleep now. I will see you in the morning.
> Yes mam. (292)

From her perspective, Billy is a lonely man who has lost his home and his brother, with no one but a stranger and no place but a stranger's home to comfort him. Billy is an old cowboy, an anachronistic archetype of an old way of life; that means something to her and it means something to the reader. Nevertheless, Billy insists that whatever she sees in him is inaccurate and rests on the assumption that Betty sees in him something praiseworthy and heroic. However, his laconic stoicism, indeed his emphasis that in reality, he "aint nothin," could simply reinforce the chivalrous, self-deprecating cowboy identity he has adopted. Yet, it is also possible to read this as a cynical dismissal of Billy, a phony cowboy who ropes dogs instead of steers, and is reduced to acting as an extra in a Western movie because he can no longer be a cowboy in real life.

Cities of the Plain ends with a dedication, seemingly to the trilogy's readers, asking them to honor those who populate the pages of the novels, while admonishing them to "dedicate" themselves to "holding," being, telling, and turning the pages of these cowboys' stories:

> I will be your child to hold
> And you be me when I am old
> The world grows cold
> The heathen rage
> The story's told
> Turn the page. (293)

McCarthy prefers to situate the dedication at the end of the novel, which shows that the end of the narrative is not a "closing off," but rather a "turning to," or a new beginning. The positioning of the dedication on the recto page is a significant act since the reader customarily closes a book after reading the last line and reaching the final phase. However, this is not the case here. Instead, McCarthy establishes a link between the pages of the text and the texture of readers' lives. He blurs the boundaries of fiction and reality, old age and childhood, the narrator and the narrated. By the end of the novel,

American men have become the story, only to find themselves looking back through a mirror at the people they once were. The epilogue and dedication thus serve as a lullaby of a vanished way of life, the ultimate finale of the "all-american cowboy" myth that motivated John Grady and Billy to leave the United States at the beginning of *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing.* The triumph in the dedication is in the telling of their story, an idea which foreshadows what McCarthy says at the end of *Cities of the Plain*: that the world of cowboys resides within American men, and that each man is the storyteller of his own identity and existence.

4.6. Conclusion

The last story of the trilogy evolves from the narratives that constituted the first two novels. In fact, many narrative episodes and characters that appear in *Cities of the Plain* can be found in the previous novels. Instead of the high romance of the previous two works, a serious melancholy hovers over the narrative in *Cities of the Plain*. As the title illustrates, the cowboys' romantic dream of an idyllic life is completely overtaken by cities on the plain, or urbanization and industrialization, particularly in the border towns of Juarez and El Paso. Literally, "cities of the plain" signifies that the open prairies of the protagonists' youth are now dotted with towns, transforming John Grady's idyllic dream into an illusion and sentencing Billy to live his last days with the memories of all he has cared for and lost. Moreover, the Mexico portrayed in *Cities of the Plain* is not an idyllic, yet exotic, pastoral wilderness, but a barbarous, ruthless and corrupt urban reality: Juarez in the modern age. John Grady and Billy try to recuperate the notion of "the all-american cowboy" after the heyday of the cowboy and the cattle industry, but both meet tragic ends.

Hence, the world of *The Border Trilogy* is not a thriving one but a disappearing one, initiated by the death of Mr. Cole and completed by the death of John Grady himself, and the insinuated death of Billy in the final pages of the epilogue, in which he reverts to a child-like state, traveling back to the beginning of his life. From the title of *All the Pretty Horses* to the dedication of *Cities of the Plain*, *The Border Trilogy* "is a lullaby singing to sleep the vanishing cowboy" (Luce 163). It represents how the closing of the western frontier eventually leads to the final alienation and estrangement of its surviving cowboys.

CONCLUSION

During the last century, the Western has become one of the most prominent—and perhaps the most influential—genres in American literature and the image of its iconic hero—the cowboy—and his masculinity are deeply embedded in the American popular imagination. The Western has become American *national* literature, as it epitomizes many of the "traditional" masculine ideals such as rugged individualism, assertiveness, courage, justice, leadership, stoicism, hard work, and self-sufficiency, that American men claim they possess. In many ways, the Western novel and its hero have become an icon not only for America, but also for the rest of the world. The Western has been popular almost since it first acquired the characteristics that identify it as a distinct genre, and critics often overlook its far-reaching influence in literature, film, and the television industry. The genre has literally made American men, and has become a key juncture in the formation of American masculinity.

Although a majority of Cormac McCarthy scholars place his fiction in the context of regionalism as it shifts from the southern United States to western American literary traditions, gender issues in his works are worth examining more thoroughly. Ever since the publication of his novels, critics have mostly concentrated on the absence of female characters. In their discussions of gender issues, however, critics have surprisingly overlooked the relationship between McCarthy's male protagonists and American hegemonic masculinity. For decades, McCarthy has been fictionalizing the struggle of American men in order to expose their increasingly anachronistic masculine signifiers; to figure out the degree to which their sense of manhood has empowered and imprisoned them, while often brutalizing and dehumanizing others; and to find out, perhaps, a way forward to a healthier masculinity that no longer threatens to make them men without a country. After five Southern Gothic novels, McCarthy turned to the Western genre, the dominant cultural narrative of American masculinity, to explore the people and places that have contributed to the social construction of what it means to be a man in the United States.

As Leslie Fiedler argues in *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960), like the typical hero of American literature who escapes the feminine in his life, McCarthy's protagonists run away from civilization. This tradition, which avoids courtship,

marriage, and parenting renders the female as a presence that cowboys must exorcise from their lives in order to assert their own identities. McCarthy's cycle of western fiction invariably involves men who are alienated from their families, trying to establish a sense of self in a hostile environment, engaged in a struggle with masculinity. However, unlike traditional western narratives, McCarthy's protagonists fail to create new lives because they place their faith in flawed ideals of western masculinity and manhood. Instead, at the end of his western novels, his male characters suffer confusion and doubt because they are unable to attain or maintain the codes of masculinity inherited from their fathers. Thus, his narratives offer an ideal opportunity to study the masculine ideal because they focus on a young male's quest for self, trying, with minimal help from others, to forge a masculine persona in a chaotic environment.

Drawing on the contributions of Masculinity Studies theorists such as Terry Kupers, Joe Dubbert, Jacqueline Moore, Michael Kimmel, Richard Slotkin, Annette Kolodny, Susan Kollin, R.W. Connell, and Leslie Fiedler, this dissertation exposed how McCarthy's western novels deploy the Western genre as a vehicle to critique the mythologization of American masculinity and to comment on the negative consequences of this mythologization. In *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West*, *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, and *Cities of the Plain*, McCarthy questions the viability of the genre and challenges the genre's narrative structures and myths while addressing the issues and conflicts at the core of cowboy masculinity. As C.L. Sonnichsen states, there is a new trend among writers and critics to "define the Western novel in terms of the frontier, the formula and the legendary Wild West, but it is much, much bigger than that, and it needs to be plumbed and measured" (179). While novels like *The Virginian*, and *Riders of the Purple Sage* take pleasure in the authenticity of horse and gun play, McCarthy's western novels take pleasure in mocking and satirizing the cowboys' slow discovery that their heritage is based on fiction and not lived experience. As Paula Cole's song "Where Have all the Cowboys Gone?" indicates, the cowboy has already vanished in the modern American world. In the song, she is desperately willing to do laundry, wash the dishes, and raise the children, but the cowboy does not even notice her. Indeed, the cowboy she is after never actually existed so there is no "happy ending" since all the cowboys have long gone. Their presence only exists in the American national imagination.

The first chapter of this dissertation analyzed *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West* through the framework of toxic masculinity. In the novel, McCarthy elaborately portrays the formation of toxic masculinity on the frontier in the 1850s. As Richard Slotkin notes, "the Frontier—that appealingly and frighteningly vulnerable border between savagery and civilization—was the central process in the development of the American men, American democracy, and American exceptionalism" (24). The novel criticizes the once-admired view of the frontier as a place of honor, rugged individualism, vigor and romance. It stimulates alternative readings of traditional western culture and frontier/toxic masculinity. Unlike conventional western narratives, the kid does not become a symbol of western promise and its future; he turns into an allegorical figure. The novel also functions as a satire of Manifest Destiny, westward expansion and the cowboy myth—especially of the toxic masculine codes espoused by white men, like the judge and his followers, who murdered indigenous people and devastated the Earth's flora and fauna. Through the implicit realities of the frontier, McCarthy reminds readers of the traumatic violence in American history and its place within American narratives of manhood and collective memory. In other words, by challenging the prevailing mythico-historical narratives of the West, McCarthy examines the consequences of American men's embodiment of the archetypal cowboy ethos and exposes the gap between the mythologized history of American manhood and its modern manifestations. At the end of the novel, he conveys his hope for American masculinity by highlighting the kid's alternative, nontoxic masculine sensibilities.

The second chapter of this dissertation analyzed *All the Pretty Horses* in the light of post-Fordist masculinity and Second Wave Feminism. In his second western novel, McCarthy demonstrates the continuity of the crisis of American masculinity in the 1950s. In the post-Fordist era, the environment has been completely reshaped and the ranches of the Old West, which are now an anachronism, have vanished. Through John Grady Cole, he shows the futility of trying to perform cowboy masculinity in an era of technological hubris, where a frontier for him to roam no longer exists. The domestication of the wilderness was part of the nineteenth century American cowboy mythology. Thus, setting the novel in Mexico, where a frontier allegedly still exists, enables McCarthy to destabilize American national mythologies of manhood and cowboy masculinity. At first, John Grady and Lacey Rawlins consider Mexico as a

place where romantic cowboy masculinity can be found. Yet, it becomes clear that to be a cowboy in Mexico in the 1950s is to be part of an elaborate costumed performance. While McCarthy chronicles John Grady's masculinizing fantasies of the West, and examines thoroughly the feasibility of cowboy codes in the post-Fordist era, through Mrs. Cole and John Grady's ex-girlfriend, he also engages with the rise of Second Wave Feminism, which sought social, economic, sexual, and reproductive equality for women. In the novel, McCarthy gives voice to women in an overtly patriarchal world, which remains subjugated by progressively anachronistic conceptions of masculinity. At the end of the novel, the protagonist cannot find a home in which to construct his manhood in the wake of a changing economy and Second Wave Feminism. As he rides off into the sunset and disappears, the nation-building, violence and machismo of the cowboy ethos also fade into the sunset in this new postwar world. Therefore, in *All the Pretty Horses*, McCarthy indicates how John Grady fails to create a new narrative, and denies himself access to other masculinities.

The third chapter of this dissertation examined *The Crossing*, the second volume of *The Border Trilogy*, from an ecomasculinist perspective. It focused on the environment and border crossings, which totally change the protagonist's foundational assumptions about cowboy masculinity. In these physical, spiritual, and psychological quests, Billy undergoes numerous transformations, leading him to develop an ecomasculine consciousness through the presence of a she-wolf. In this work, McCarthy defies traditional western narratives by deploying an ecomasculinist approach that leads his protagonist to be ecologically conscientious. Over the course of his trips into Mexico, Billy comes to terms with the existential truth of vanishing, not only through the indigenous people and the arid landscape of the Southwest borderlands and its biotic community, but also through the cowboy himself. He manages to develop an ethical commitment and responsibility towards the flora and fauna of the borderlands, and follows a new and unique code of masculinity that collides with his father's and American society's definitions. However, when the she-wolf dies, Billy is confronted with a crisis and profound deracination, which shows how different the promise of the West is from reality. Like John Grady, Billy embodies loss because his trials on the border are perpetually challenging what he anticipates. Therefore, his cowboy experience in Mexico becomes frustrating and futile. At the end of the novel, McCarthy

depicts a lonesome cowboy who weeps and calls out for the she-wolf, and the plight of a tragically mutilated dog, another animal decimated by human intervention. McCarthy once again illustrates the idea that the cowboy is a fantasy. He performs a role that has already vanished, and like these unwanted animals, has no place in the modern world.

The last chapter of this dissertation explored *Cities of the Plain*, the final installment of *The Border Trilogy*. The first part of the chapter analyzed the screenplay "Cities of the Plain" using archival evidence, and exposed McCarthy's struggle to make a Hollywood film out of his screenplay. The archival material reveals McCarthy's experimentation with conventional cowboy heroism, and his examination of the validity of the cowboy code in a different medium. By bringing together John Grady and Billy, and revisiting the first two installments of the trilogy, McCarthy consolidates and twists their storyline in *The Cities of Plain.* He uses repetition as a form of self-parody, and unravels the histories of John Grady and Billy presented in the previous novels. Unlike the high romance of *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing*, *Cities of the Plain* portrays how John Grady and Billy suffer from melancholic depression. In the novel, Mexico, a once mysterious, idyllic, and colorful place turns into a corrupt, barbarous, and immoral territory. McCarthy constantly discloses the fact that John Grady and Billy are no longer "all-american cowboys," since they lost their potency and greatness by the end of the twentieth century. The novel also exposes the consequences of westward expansion and Frederick Jackson Turner's problematic observations of the frontier and American masculinity, and how they resulted in the permanent alienation and estrangement of the men who built the West. Thus, McCarthy's engagement with cities of the plain indicates his endeavor to demonstrate that the prowess and privilege assumed by the cowboy had its limits. By using a contemporary setting, he interrogates the relevance of the cowboy ethos in modern American society. At the end of the novel, McCarthy exposes how American cowboys have become a story, replaced by a myth that never really existed.

Taken together, McCarthy's western novels demonstrate the degree to which American masculinity has been defined by a specific set of cultural myths and codes. They explore the enduring mythology of the American frontier as it developed from pioneering figures such as Daniel Boone, Billy the Kid, and Huck Finn, demonstrating the ways it has failed to achieve the promises of social and political advancement that were

supposed to be the result of masculine efforts to conquer the savage frontier by taming the wild landscape and the "hostile" peoples who inhabited it. Through his cowboy characters, McCarthy posits a masculine dilemma that begins in early childhood and travels towards a recurring, unresolvable crisis, which ends in death. He also depicts the flux in gender expectations over the course of a generation and the crucial impact of modernization and industrialization upon American men. By laying bare the fallacies of the cowboy mythology, McCarthy questions the viability of the basic ideals that modern American men embrace. He self-consciously appropriates the conventions of the iconic story of American manhood, the Western, to detonate these casual assumptions, complicate their antecedents, and gesture a way forward.

Like the cowboy characters in his novels, McCarthy looked to the West to redefine American masculinity. Staring for too long, and directly into the sun, can cause blindness, which is exactly what occurred to most of his male cowboy characters. Or, as Jane Tompkins states in *West of Everything*, "to go west, as far as you can go, west of everything, is to die" (24). For generations, American men have wandered westward, first literally and then fictively, chasing an idol, searching for a geography that was always more mythic than material. As this dissertation has illustrated, the masculine space of the frontier is a psychological space, described within a particular geographic landscape, that allows McCarthy to explore contemporary American identity as a fusion of idealist, mythic and realist selves. Within this framework, Mexico operates as a distinctive contrast to the developed, modernized and industrialized cities that the protagonists try to escape. While Mexico represents independence and solitary—a place to disappear into—the United States stands for "the death of the soul" (McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses* 23).

This portrait of the western frontier—as a place for men to escape the responsibilities of civilization—is certainly a familiar one in the western tradition. However, McCarthy positions this escape as part of the male American dream. The myth of the frontier is, after all, a fantasy, and as his characters discover, unambiguously destructive. If hegemonic masculinity is located on that frontier, then it is an ever-receding fantasy. Nevertheless, McCarthy's protagonists isolate themselves from society and its inner workings by disappearing into the frontier/border. Yet, they fail to realize the masculine

identity they originally sought through this quest. They avoid and escape, which does not free them from the problems of hegemonic masculinity created by the patriarchal system. They flee to the West, to the past, or to their fantasies of the past, but their identity problems do not disappear, for the oppressive patriarchal system, which obliterates alternative, nonconformist masculinities, does not disappear, especially in the "promised land" of Mexico. As a result, they are forever displaced—they cannot claim a cowboy masculinity that does not exist, and they are too old to adapt to the modern world, where other possibilities elude them. Thus, they are relics trapped in time.

Interestingly, McCarthy ends *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West* with an epilogue, in which he situates the reader in a significant position and provides hope for American masculinity. In other words, he removes the comfortable distance between the reader and the witness, and transposes responsibility from historical characters to contemporary readers. Similarly, he concludes *The Border Trilogy* with a dedication, in which he directly addresses contemporary American readers. In the dedication, he reminds them to respect those who exist in his novels. Yet, he also suggests that "the story's told, turn the page" (*Cities of the Plain* 293). Here, he focuses on passive readers of conventional western narratives and turns them into much more complicit and active witnesses as he creates and explores a fictional frontier where American masculinity is in a state of chaos. By doing so, he creates a connection between his cowboy characters and his readers. Since American men have always looked to the West to discover or (re)invent the central pillars of their masculine identity, McCarthy deliberately scrutinizes failed cowboyism and how it has undermined American manhood. By responding to the masculinity crisis explored by scholars such as Harry Brod, Michael Messner, and Michael Kimmel, McCarthy asks readers to rethink gender roles, especially cowboy manhood. He demands that American men stop mythologizing and instead assume responsibility for nature, women and children. As his novels illustrate, the adventurous, independent, courageous, stoic and strong cowboy of the past must yield to a more cautious and empathetic model. McCarthy makes it clear that a non-toxic masculinity is not only possible, but the only one that is sustainable.

Cormac McCarthy has continued to explore male subjectivity in the United States since writing *The Border Trilogy*. In 2005, he published *No Country for Old Men* which, once again, deals with masculinity along the US-Mexico border, this time through a drug deal gone wrong in southwestern Texas. Moreover, in 2006, McCarthy also published *The Road,* which is a return to the Appalachian South, territory he first began to explore in his fiction over a half-century earlier. As John Beck notes,

> taken together, *Blood Meridian* and *The Road* represent an uncanny doubling of before and after history, the mysterious traces of dead civilization in *The Road*, like the discovery of an unopened can of Coca Cola, recalling the strewn potsherds and hieroglyphs that pockmark the landscape of the 1840's. *The Border Trilogy* and *No Country for Old Men* stand inside this pre- and post-historic continuum as the fulcrum of the post-World War II present, as the historical moment that embodies both the legacy of conquest . . . and, with the testing of the atom bomb at the end of *The Crossing*, the ground zero beyond which the catastrophe of *The Road* becomes inevitable. (294-295)

Like his cowboy characters in *Blood Meridian* and *The Border Trilogy*, the central male characters in *The Road* are essentially without a country; the father and son duo are unable to make sense of their masculinity in contemporary America. In this novel, McCarthy also envisions a future without a history, a future where American masculinity can be invented anew: "Sometimes the child would ask him questions about the world that for him was not even a memory. He thought hard how to answer. There is no past. What would you like?" (46). By setting this work in post-apocalyptic America, McCarthy is able to experiment with an American masculinity that is unmoored from its cultural roots, grafting a new version in its place. While *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road* are not Westerns in the strictest sense, they clearly share common elements with the works analyzed in this dissertation, and would therefore lend themselves very well to comparative examinations within the framework of Masculinity Studies. For example, the toxic masculinity in *No Country for Old Men,* or the love, suffering, and small joys the father and son share in *The Road*, present stimulating opportunities for scholars who wish to continue analyzing McCarthy's career-long fascination with American masculinity.

As so many headlines indicate, in contemporary American society, there is an urgent need for healthier masculinities that make sense in men's lives. Even a casual look at

masculinity in today's America reveals that the masculinity crisis continues to exist in numerous forms. In *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West* and *The Border Trilogy*, McCarthy addresses this issue critically and comprehensively, analyzing its mythic roots, dealing with its modern manifestations, and demythologizing many of the bedrock assumptions upon which American men have built an understanding of themselves. McCarthy offers deep and disturbing insights into cowboyism that continues to hold such sway over masculinities in the United States. Nevertheless, American men still feel the need to perform and posture. Living up to the expectations of social and ideological norms has not disappeared, which makes McCarthy's observations and interpretations all the more relevant and urgent.

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