

CORMAC MCCARTHY'S BORDERLANDS: A CHALLENGE TO A MYTHIC CONSTRUCT OF THE AMERICAN WEST¹

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The present article explores Cormac McCarthy's revision of traditional frontier mythology in his western novels. In fact, in his western fiction McCarthy examines the powerful role played by the mythology and the romance of the Old West, providing insight into the reality behind the myth. McCarthy focuses on the interaction between history and myth in a continuous dialogical process of exchange and overlapping. Particular attention will be paid to the way in which McCarthy debunks stereotypical optimistic misrepresentations of the conquest of the West in *Blood Meridian* (1985). Furthermore, this article will analyze McCarthy's portrait of the problematic transition from Old West mythology to New West realities in his Border Trilogy, composed of the novels *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994), and *Cities of the Plain* (1998). In these three novels McCarthy employs the idealized and mythologized figure of the cowboy to dramatize the failure of Old West attitudes and values in the modern West.

Cormac McCarthy, born in Rhode Island (1933) and raised in Knoxville (Tennessee), was usually identified as a southern writer before he published his fifth novel, *Blood Meridian or the Evening Red of the West* (1985). His previous novels, *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), *Outer Dark* (1968), *Child of God* (1974), and *Suttree* (1979), set in Appalachia and full of gothic elements and Faulknerian language, had been critically acclaimed but little read. His literary journey to the Southwest, an event that closely followed his decision to move from Knoxville to El Paso (Texas), brought him not only notorious critical and academic recognition, but also widespread readership, mainly due to his Border Trilogy, consisting of the novels *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994), and *Cities of the Plain* (1998). McCarthy's literary attraction towards the West parallels that of other outstanding Southern writers (Barry Hannah, Richard Ford, Rick Bass, Barbara Kingsolver...) who in the last two decades have focused on western themes and settings. Actually, as Robert H. Brinkmeyer Jr has noted,

... one of the most intriguing developments in contemporary Southern fiction is that a number of Southern writers have in a sense become New Westers imaginatively forsaking Dixie for the West, writing fiction both of the

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contemporary West, particularly Montana, and of the bygone era of cowboys, Indians, and gunfights. (2000: 2)

However, McCarthy has achieved a unique status in contemporary fiction about the West due both to his revisionist approach to the darker underside of frontier mythology in *Blood Meridian* and to his powerful insight into the interaction between myth and reality in his Border Trilogy, set in a postmodern, chaotic, and liminal space, the frontier between Mexico and the United States in the mid-twentieth century.

McCarthy's western fiction revises the powerful role still played by the mythology and the romance of the Old West, providing insight into the reality behind the myth and examining the borderlands between the real West and the mythic West. Traditionally, western literature has concentrated on the West as a process, as an endless frontier, as a story of mobility, freedom, and individual heroes, serving the West both "as popular myth and national symbol" (Milner II 1994: 1). The West has too often become an idea, a mental projection, rather than a definite geographical region. In fact, until the late 1960s the mythic West, perpetuated by the dime novels and the western movies, has relegated the real West to a secondary role. However, since then the mythic dimension of the West has undergone extensive revision and western writers have exposed the tragic and genocidal dimensions of the westward movement. They have also departed from mythic images related to a model of single-handed masculine conquest to underscore instead the relevance of communal elements and the rich ethnic and cultural complexity of the region. The truth is that the West has been often reduced to a simplistic opposition between myth and reality, disregarding the multiple points of contact and intersections between both concepts when applied to the West. As Neil Campbell has explained,

... for so long there has been a binary thinking defining the region as myth and reality, true and false, utopia and dystopia, when, in fact, it has always existed as both a region and more than a region, as imagined, dream-space as well as real, material space. (2000: 21)

The confluence of both spaces, a hybrid and dialogical realm, is precisely Cormac McCarthy's fictional territory. He wants to rewrite both history and myth, exploring their interdependence and showing the power of fiction to reinvent a region.

McCarthy's first western novel, *Blood Meridian*, is closely linked to the rise of revisionist interpretations of American western mythology, questioning in particular Frederick Turner's popular "frontier thesis" and other archetypal views of the Wild West. The novel, mostly set in the late 1840s, recreates the actual expedition of a band of scalp hunters commissioned both by Mexican and Texan authorities to murder as many Indians as possible in the borderlands of the Southwest. The book

may be viewed as realistic approach towards the violent origins of westward expansion, where McCarthy departs from popular culture's limited vision of the American West. In fact, in *Blood Meridian* McCarthy debunks traditional western mythology, exposing its inner contradictions, its ethnocentric dimensions, and its glorification of violence. In particular, McCarthy focuses on the extreme violence and genocidal traits of nineteenth-century expansion, providing insight into the reality behind the myth and questioning oversimplistic representations of the western experience. As Patricia Nelson Limerick, one of the leading scholars of the so-called "New Western History", has suggested, the popular myth of the West "carries a persistently happy affect, a tone of adventure, heroism, and even fun very much in contrast with the tough, complicated, and sometimes bloody and brutal realities of the conquest" (1994: 75). Actually, McCarthy and revisionist historians of the West from the post-Vietnam era share a common interest in challenging long-established, optimistic views of the frontier, reassessing archetypal myths based on American exceptionalism and on stereotyped ideas about progress and pioneering expansion in a vacant land.

In *Blood Meridian* McCarthy contradicts Turner's classical description of the frontier in dualistic, ethnocentric terms, "the meeting point between savagery and civilization" (1894: 200), offering instead a vivid portrait of the frontier as a chaotic space, full of hatred, terror, and extreme brutality. In fact, in this novel the line between the barbaric and the civilized, between the law and the outlaw, is almost non-existent. McCarthy's overwhelming emphasis on violence and conflict, as the dominant traits of a western past mythicized almost beyond recognition, debunks limited and partial views of the western expansion as a victory of progress and civilization over savagery. As Barclay Owens has written, "in *Blood Meridian* there is no progressive myth of good overcoming evil, no courageous men taming the West for civilization" (2000: 7).

Blood Meridian does not only put into question Turner's frontier thesis, but it also departs from well-known mythological views of the frontier as the ultimate place for personal and national catharses through violence. Richard Slotkin, for example, has demonstrated in his landmark essay *Regeneration Through Violence* (1973) how the experience of life and warfare in the frontier was often transformed by historians and fiction writers into a mythic struggle to achieve redemption through violence. Thus, the hero of McCarthy's novel (or rather an anti-hero), a boy from Tennessee called "the kid", is unable to obtain spiritual regeneration through his immersion into the violent and chaotic world of the borderland territory between Texas and Mexico. His initiation into manhood becomes basically an initiation into evil through different rites of passage, often dominated by the overwhelming presence of violence. He certainly loses his innocence, but the extreme brutality that surrounds him turns to be an insurmountable obstacle for his spiritual rebirth. In fact, the kid's murder by Judge Holden at the end of the novel epitomizes the uselessness of violence to achieve redemption in the frontier, in "the bloodlands of

the West” (McCarthy 1985: 138), a world where there is no place for renewal or hope, just for death and destruction.

McCarthy’s emphasis on violence and hatred throughout *Blood Meridian* cannot be regarded simply as an attempt to demythologize conventional optimistic visions of western expansion, exposing its brutality and its genocidal traits through a postmodernist, often grotesque aesthetics. Actually, the novel, defined by Harold Bloom as “the authentic American apocalyptic novel” (2000: 340), may be also viewed as an exploration into the reality of evil and, in particular, into man’s innate capacity for extreme violence in a world whose peculiar order he is unable to grasp. The novel approaches the tragic nature of experience and the ephemeral condition of human life from a naturalistic perspective, stressing the everyday fight for survival as the basic ingredient of life on earth. This bleak, Darwinian portrait of existence is epitomized in the novel by Judge Holden’s glorification of war as the “truest form of divination”:

... it is the testing of one’s will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last forcing of the unity of existence. War is god. (McCarthy 1985: 249)

McCarthy’s next novel, 1992 National Book Award winner *All the Pretty Horses*, is also set in the Texan-Mexican border and again it focuses on the interrelatedness between reality and mythology in the West, though this time he does not explore the origins of westward expansion, but the transition from Old West stereotypes to the New West realities. In *All the Pretty Horses*, historically set one hundred years later than *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy also revises the resilience of frontier mythology in modern times. In fact, despite the impressive rise of realistic reinterpretations of western history in the last few decades, western mythology still has a hold on the public imagination. Thus, the classical view of the West as a wild and open country, inhabited by dangerous Indians and heroic cowboys who adhere to a particular code of honor, still keeps engaging the imagination both of an important number of Americans and of an international audience. McCarthy himself has explained his attraction towards western mythic themes and images partly due to the widespread influence of western mythology: “there isn’t a place in the world you can go where they don’t know about cowboys and Indians and the myth of the West” (Woodward 1992: 36).

All the Pretty Horses focuses on the cowboy myth, epitomized by an idealistic sixteen-year old Texan John Grady Cole, the dispossessed son of a rancher, who seeks in Mexico a way of life quickly vanishing in an increasingly industrialized American West. Actually, this coming-of-age novel deconstructs the archetypal mythic view of the West as an idyllic territory, as a promised land, where an individual may find adventure, a new identity, or a least a traditional way of life in full communion with nature. McCarthy stresses the impact on industrialization and

technology on postwar western society, particularly on those westerners who, like John Grady Cole, try to remain loyal to an ancient lifestyle based on ranch work. They feel alienated in the New West, an impersonal territory, full of uncertainties, and where they no longer feel at home. As John's father claims in the novel, "... people dont feel safe no more. [...] We're like the Comanches was two hundred years ago. We dont know what's goin to show up here come daylight. We dont even know what color they'll be" (McCarthy 1992: 25-26).

In *All the Pretty Horses* Mexico is romanticized as the last frontier, as the only alternative for those who, like John Grady and his friend Lacey Rawlins, struggle to return to the mythic innocence of the cowboy on the open range. The idealization of Mexico as an ancient territory exempt from the overwhelming effects of the modernizing process in the United States turns the search for the frontier into a southward movement, instead of the archetypal westward movement. Mexico is identified with fantasy images from the frontier past, with the mythic freedom and individualism of the Old West. Even the name of the Mexican hacienda where Grady and Rawlins are initially hired as ranch hands, "Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción", seems to suggest a return to a more pure world, to an idyllic and innocent lifestyle. This hacienda, however, only works in the novel as a temporary and unrealistic Eden that does not reflect faithfully the complexity of Mexican culture and society. Actually, McCarthy illustrates further in the novel that there is no place for the mythic cowboy dream in Mexico, a territory where John Grady, after facing several tests of endurance, can only aspire to mere survival. The Mexican frontier does not put an end to Grady's alienation because it fails to provide him with his idyllic view of man's relationship to the land, a relationship based on a special connection to the natural landscape, and in particular to horses. His return to Texas symbolizes his frustrated attempt to live out the mythic past as a means of self-definition and the need to face a discouraging, uncertain future, "the darkening land, the world to come" (1985: 302).

In his description of John Grady's quest McCarthy dramatizes the problematic transition from Old West stereotypes to the New West realities. Thus, *All the Pretty Horses* illustrates not only the resilience of the cowboy myth, but also its hollowness and its unrealistic basis. "The figure of the cowboy", Sara L. Spurgeon has written, "personifies America's most cherished myths- combining ideas of American exceptionalism, Manifest Destiny, rugged individualism, frontier democracy, communion with and conquest of the natural world, and the righteous triumph of the white race" (1999: 25). In McCarthy's novel Grady's failure to relive his romanticized view of cowboy lifestyle both in modern Texas and in traditional Mexico exposes the deceptive nature of the cowboy myth and of its code of conduct (a code that includes such values as loyalty, freedom, honesty, courage or communion with nature). In fact, *All the Pretty Horses* may be seen as a challenge to a mythic construct of the American past, to the very existence of this idyllic cowboy world in the Old West. After all, as Wallace Stegner has noted,

... the cowboy in practice was and is an overworked, underpaid hireling, almost as homeless and dispossessed as a modern crop worker, and his fabled independence was and is chiefly the privilege of quitting his job in order to go looking for another just as bad. (Rebein 2001: 114)

In the second volume of the Border Trilogy, *The Crossing*, McCarthy revisits a familiar setting, the borderlands between the United States and Mexico, though now its American setting is New Mexico and Arizona rather than Texas. The time frame of this novel is also very similar to the one of *All the Pretty Horses*. Actually, *The Crossing* begins in 1939, just a decade before the events described in the previous novel. Besides, McCarthy resorts again to a teenage boy entrapped in a multi-dimensional borderland space as the protagonist of his novel. Thus, Billy Parham lives physically on the frontier between Mexico and the United States, and metaphorically on the borderline between childhood and maturity. He is also caught in a liminal space between myth and reality. Again, in this novel Mexico, due to its power to suggest the mythic conditions of the Wild West, becomes emblematic of a lost time and serves as escape-valve for those who feel displaced in America and search for an identity according to archetypal frontier values. Thus, for Billy, Mexico represents first the call of the wilderness and later a place where he struggles to recover both the remnants of his familiar past (symbolized by the stolen horses who belonged to his father, murdered in New Mexico) and of the mythic frontier, remaining always loyal to his self-definition as “americano” and “vaquero” (McCarthy 1995: 38). However, once again McCarthy demythologizes Mexico as the last frontier, as the lost cowboy paradise, exposing the artificiality of a series of romantic preconceptions about particular places, or “false geographies”, to use Barry Lopez’s terminology (Kowalewski 1996: 6). In fact, although the novel illustrates several cultural differences between Mexico and the United States, it also debunks popular visions of Mexico as a wild, unsettled territory with unlimited opportunity, emphasizing instead its borderland condition and the interaction of cultures and languages in a basically hybrid context. In fact, violence and evil exists on both sides of the frontier and the dividing line between both territories often becomes a blurring boundary. McCarthy’s novel even puts into question the very nature of mapping due to its intrinsic artificiality. As one of the Mexican characters tells Billy in the novel:

...the world has no name. [...] The names of the cerros and the sierras and the deserts exist only on maps. We name them that we do not lose our way. Yet it was because the way was lost to us already that we have made those names. The world cannot be lost. We are the ones. We are the ones. And it is because these names and these coordinates are our own naming that they cannot save us. (1995: 387)

The Crossing centers once again on the overlapping between myth and reality in the West, emphasizing not only the destructive power of the cowboy myth, but also the threat of progress and technology to a traditional way of life. Thus, Billy, who tries to place himself in the mythical tradition of the legendary western hero, is forced to abandon his original idealism and he only manages to obtain a certain degree of knowledge about human nature, though the price that he pays for it is too high (the death of his brother Boyd). Billy's utter disorientation is reinforced by the New West's inability to offer him a valid model that may replace the stereotypical mythological order. Actually, the New West becomes identified with military power and the threat of nuclear destruction, as symbolized by one of the last images of the novel, an atomic blast that turns out to be the Trinity nuclear test explosion of 16 July 1945.

McCarthy puts an end to his Border Trilogy with *Cities of the Plain*, a novel that brings together the separate stories of John Grady Cole and Billy Parham. McCarthy resorts to a familiar setting, the borderlands between the United States and Mexico, and a time frame, the early fifties, that is very similar to the one used in his previous novels. This time he locates John Grady and Billy in a ranch in southeastern New Mexico, where both of them are employed as cowboys. The ranch symbolizes a small paradise for both of them, who after much wandering seem to have found a place to live out their cowboy dreams. However, McCarthy reveals that the ranch is just a temporary refuge, threatened by the imminent expansion of the nearby air force base in Alamogordo. The ranch represents the vestige of a dying era, of a traditional western way of life that will perish due to the rise of industrial and military powers in the New West. Actually, the yearning for a pure, simple cowboy lifestyle in a modern West engulfed by technology and progress illustrates one of the main inner contradictions of frontier mythology. As Barclay Owens has stated, "the dream of progress [...] fulfills the promise of the American frontier. [...] But, paradoxically, after the dream of progress is attained, Americans may [...] yearn for the mythic freedom and individualism of the Old West, the pristine beauty of the Old West" (2000: 68-69).

In *Cities of the Plain* McCarthy sets Billy's increasing realism against John Grady's eternal idealism and adherence to the mythic cowboy code. Although both men retain a common attraction towards the mythic western dream of freedom and a traditional lifestyle in close connection with nature, Billy's past painful experiences in Mexico have mitigated his idealism, whereas John Grady still remains loyal to his self-imposed identity as "the all-American cowboy" (McCarthy 1998: 3). The differences between both characters extend to their views of Mexico, a place where traditional ways are also gradually being relegated by the pressure of modernization of technology. Thus, whereas Billy has lost his youthful vision of Mexico as a land of mystery and adventure, John Grady still believes in Mexico's romantic possibilities and is ready to sacrifice everything for the love of Magdalena, a Mexican prostitute. His frustrated attempt to rescue Magdalena from Eduardo,

her Mexican pimp, exemplifies once again his loyalty to the manly code of the Old West. Besides, his dream of turning a little shack in the American side of the border into a homestead for him and Magdalena also contains clear mythic connotations because it resembles closely that of the frontier pioneers, the “dream of forging a garden-paradise in the wilderness” (Owens 2000: 116).

McCarthy closes his Border Trilogy insisting on the destructive power of the cowboy myth, particularly symbolized by John Grady’s tragic death, after having behaved according to the rules of the cowboy’s code of honor. His blind faith in a mythic construct has condemned him to self-destruction, a metaphor of the disintegration of the old cowboy lifestyle in an increasingly urban West. Actually, the epilogue of the novel, set in the second year of the new millenium, makes clear that there is no place for traditional cowboys like Billy in the New West, a world without cattle and where water is scarce. In this postmodern West the only job Billy can find is as a movie extra, a situation that may be regarded as an ironic comment by McCarthy on the power of the Hollywood film industry, largely responsible for the survival of the western myth in mainstream contemporary culture.

Generally speaking, McCarthy’s western novels provide the reader with a powerful examination of the frontier myth and of its resilience in America, above all, in the New West. Certainly, he departs from classical images related to a model of single-handed masculine conquest bringing civilization into the wilderness, stressing instead the stark brutality of the westward expansion. Thus, *Blood Meridian*, in particular, may be defined as McCarthy’s most successful deconstruction of archetypal notions of the frontier days. It is a novel that illustrates McCarthy’s interest in cutting through stereotypical optimistic misrepresentations of the conquest of the West and debunking widespread frontier myths because, as Barclay Owens has written, “myths can only mask the brutal nature of reality, cloak them cultural meanings” (2000: 118). In fact, McCarthy’s novel exposes the reality behind some of the old western myths that still continue to shape contemporary behavior in the United States. For example, frontier mythology, as Richard Slotkin has demonstrated in *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (1992), has been often used to legitimize violence in modern America. Anyway, the interaction between myth and reality in the West is so complex that both elements cannot be easily separated within the American cultural Imaginary. As Frank Bergon and Zeese Papanikolas have suggested,

...because the West has become so overcome with legend, it is popularly assumed that a stripping of its mythic veneer would reveal the “real” West. Nothing could be less true. The American West was an intricate combination of both myth and reality. The West surely created myths, but myths themselves just as surely created the West, [...] and it is for this reason that the real West can be seen as what Archibald MacLeish called “a country of the mind”. (1978: 2)

Overall, McCarthy's concern with the complicated interdependencies between the mythic West and the real West plays a greater role in the Border Trilogy than in *Blood Meridian*. In fact, the Border Trilogy shows that Cormac McCarthy is not only interested in revising the violent origins of western expansion, but also in exploring the New West's peculiar relationship to myth. In these three novels he resorts to the idealized and mythologized figure of the cowboy to dramatize the failure of Old West attitudes and values in the modern West. Thus, McCarthy's alined heroes, deprived of a frontier to conquer, struggle to remain loyal, either in the United States or in Mexico, to the mythic cowboy code, based on "manly" virtues and on an idyllic communion with nature. However, they will be condemned to self-destruction, as in John Grady's case, or to mere survival in an urban and technologized West, as it is Billy's fate.

McCarthy's border heroes live physically and metaphorically on the frontier, on a liminal territory between the United States and Mexico, and also on an unstable space between myth and history. McCarthy certainly rejects traditional binary oppositions to build a fictional territory that, to borrow Edward Soja's terminology (1996: 4), may be defined as a "third space", full of intersections, negotiations, and exchanges. The borderland in McCarthy's work as a whole also resembles to a certain extent Annette Kolodny's concept of frontier as "that liminal landscape of changing meanings on which distinct cultures first encounter one another's 'otherness' and appropriate, accommodate or domesticate it through language" (1992: 2). In the end, McCarthy's frontier turns to be a multicultural, chaotic, and hybrid space, where the Old and the New West are involved in a continuous dialogical process of exchange and overlapping.

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