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# *Cities of the Plain*: The End of the All-American Cowboys

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**Abstract**

This article analyzes Cormac McCarthy's *Cities of the Plain* (1998), the last installment of *The Border Trilogy*, and scrutinizes his portraits of cowboy masculinity. Not only does the article consider the way McCarthy deals with wounded masculinity and the adult Western genre in the novel, but it also discusses how the protagonists, 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. McCarthy's cowboy protagonists must negotiate a West that is no longer the province of the cowboy in the millennium, 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 masculinities. While the cowboys' epic journeys may evoke a noble and masculine western tradition, as McCarthy illustrates, they are doomed to fail because of the upheaval and displacement of the community and culture in which such masculinities thrived.

**Keywords:** Western, Cowboy Masculinity, Cormac McCarthy, *Cities of the Plain*, Myth of the West

## *Cities of the Plain*: Gerçek Amerikan Kovboylarının Sonu

**Öz:**

Bu makale Cormac McCarthy'nin *Sınır Üçlemesi'*nin son romanı olan *Cities of the Plain'i* (1998) inceleyerek, yazarın kovboy erkekliği betimlemelerini çözümlemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Makale McCarthy'nin romanında yaralı erkekliği ve yetişkin kovboyları konu eden Western türünü inceleyişini ele alırken, ana karakterler John Grady ve Billy'nin kovboy erkekliğine dair yanılgılarıyla ve kovboy yaşam biçiminin aslında bir mite dayandığı; kovboyların atlarıyla sınırlarını aşacakları bir dünyanın artık var olmadığı gerçeklikleriyle yüzleşmelerini çözümleyecektir. Yazarın kovboy karakterleri, 2000'li yıllarda, artık kovboyların yurdu olmayan, yirminci yüzyıl askeri tesislerini, kurumsallaşmış büyük çiftlikleri ve korkutucu modern zaman bürokrasisini barındıran bir Batı'da hayatta kalmaya çalışır. Batı uygarlığı sonrası olarak tanımlanan dünyada hayatta kalmanın koşulu—her ne kadar çekici görünseler de—köhneleşmiş bölgesel mitler ve geleneklere bağlanmayıp, sağlıklı erkekliklere yönelmektir. Romandaki kovboyların destansı maceraları övgüye değer, asil ve erkeksi görünse de, McCarthy bu tür maceraların yaşanabileceği bir toplum ve kültürün artık var olmamasından dolayı kovboyların başarısız olmaya mahkum olmalarını örneklendirir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Western, Kovboy Erkekliği, Cormac McCarthy, *Cities of the Plain,* Batı Efsaneleri

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. 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* (1985). 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 faded into oblivion.

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" ("Genre" 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 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. 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 article first analyzes 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 explores 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 article also considers the way McCarthy deals with wounded masculinity and the adult Western genre in the last installment of the trilogy, and discusses 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. McCarthy's cowboy protagonists must negotiate a West that is no longer the province of the cowboy in the millennium,

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 masculinities. While the cowboys' epic journeys may evoke a noble and masculine western tradition, as McCarthy illustrates, they are doomed to fail because of the upheaval and displacement of the community and culture in which such masculinities thrived.

**The Connection between the Unproduced Screenplay and the Published Novel**

Cormac 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" throughout his career (Peebles 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 was also engaged in writing screenplays for Hollywood, but he was not able to manage to produce or publish them. However, they 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.[1] 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 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.[2] 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" (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 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.[3] 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 his 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 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).

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)

Here, they drive in modern steel horses (cars) that destroy one of the iconic symbols of the wilderness. 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. 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,

> 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. ("Cormac" 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.

## 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).

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.[4] He believes that he can bring her back 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.

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.[5] 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)

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)

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.

## 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 opinion 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" (McCarthy 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" (180). 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. 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.[6]

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" (*Cormac* 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" (*Postwestern* 21). It is an ambiguous, rambling, stream of consciousness scene composed of questions concerning blood, guilt, mortality, and 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). 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 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 discomforting.

## "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*.

## 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.

## Notes

[1] 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 70, Folder 1).

[2] 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).

[3] 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.

[4] 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 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.

[5] 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.

[6] 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 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).

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