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# Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy and the Modern American Identity Crisis

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Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy and the Modern American Identity Crisis

Michael G. Cox

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

In

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## Preface

Ever since reading *The Brothers Karamazov* in college, I've been interested in the concept of persons in isolation. There is a moment in Dostoevsky's masterwork when a man estranges himself from his community after committing a murder. In his isolation, he is tormented by guilt and struggles to self-identify. It is a struggle that I've since found to be an operative conflict in the works of other authors as well. Jack London's Alaskan explorers, Tim O'Brien's Vietnam survivors, Annie Proulx's reclusive Newfoundlanders all cope with the problem of isolation in different ways, but it seems to be a dilemma that permeates the human experience. As I began to interrogate my favorite works about the relationship between individuals and communities, I found Marxist and post-colonial theory particularly helpful in their critique of social formations and the mechanisms by which establishments subjugate persons. Naturally, I am drawn to McCarthy's Border Trilogy since it deals so intimately with the paradoxical tensions between isolation and community. It is that tension which first compelled me to write my thesis on McCarthy's westerns, and considering the current state of American social life, I think his novels offer an important commentary on the relationship between citizens and the dominant ideological order.

The isolated person inevitably confronts the meaning of his or her separation from a communal establishment, so my first goal with the Border Trilogy was to determine how Billy Parham and John Grady Cole are shaped by their home communities, then, observe how they change after leaving those communities. Both protagonists make their separate journeys into Mexico, leaving behind the communities in which they have been interpellated as subjects. They try to abandon their homes in the hope of becoming independent, but in the end they both return to the land they left behind. Their return home suggests a dependency on social structures to self-

identify; however, their discontentment with the American status quo indicates the boys feel underrepresented by America's ideological institutions. Because the boys' self-knowledge is so closely tied to ideological apparatuses (specifically familial, cultural, and economic apparatuses), I found Althusser's theory of recognition to be an appropriate place to begin my analysis. From there, I relied heavily upon the work of Homi K. Bhabha to analyze the *unhomely* and *hybridized* status of the boys when they re-enter the United States. Simply put, Althusser helps explain why the boys leave America; Bhabha helps explain what happens to them when they return.

I did not set out to write a strictly Marxist argument, nor did I set out to write a strictly post-colonial argument. Instead, I wanted to use the tools of these different disciplines to better understand McCarthy's difficult, idiosyncratic texts. I think these two schools of thought work well in tandem with one another because they illumine both the cultural and economic consequences of ideological hegemony. The boys leave America due to an economic paradigm shift. They hope to inherit the traditional economy of their parents and grandparents, where production and quality of life are directly connected to the land and customs of their regional social environments. When this economic standard abruptly shifts to a market-based system centered around oil—a product unfamiliar to most farmers and ranchers in the rural postwar border towns—it makes sense, at least from a Marxist perspective, that the boys waste no time striking out for Mexico. Like their fathers before them, they seek self-actualization in the work they do, not in the wages they might earn. As Althusser argues, wage labor helps ensure “subjection to the ruling ideology” because wage earners must accept the conditions of their work if they are to maintain a steady job (7). The boys refuse to give up the cowboy lifestyle if it means their identities will be reduced to a set of numbers in a ledger book. Since they measure self-worth by their knowledge of horses, cattle, and land, they become outliers in a region which

is trending toward wage labor as the new standard of wealth. Because they are unwilling to subject themselves to the new conditions of labor, they attempt to find the traditional way of life in a foreign land.

For Althusser, the boys' departures from home would likely signify the failure of the capitalist model to create a sense of existential purpose among its subjects. This would be a classic Marxist interpretation, but I think there is more at work in the trilogy than merely an economic review. What is most intriguing to me about Althusser is his analysis of the foundations of subjectivity. He sees economic subjugation as a byproduct of a larger problem—the problem of repressive ideological apparatuses. He argues that people are naturally shaped by the societal institutions into which they are born. The problem, however, arises when such institutions use their positions of power to manipulate the lives of individuals. In the context of the trilogy, this explains why the boys attempt to abandon their home. They feel manipulated by the cultural transitions taking place, and they essentially become cultural refugees in their homeland.

In her memoir, *Bird Cloud*, Annie Proulx puts forth an explanation of American identity that is applicable to my reading of McCarthy. She writes,

The American experience, the focus on individual achievement, the acquisition of goods and money to prove one's social value, is built on this sense of loss, this alienation from the warmth of the home culture, isolation from genetic bonds. This separation from one's tribe creates an inner loneliness that increases as one ages. There is in many people, especially immigrants, a burning need to complete the puzzle, to find the missing pieces.

(20)

The loneliness that Proulx attributes to the American experience is something both boys must contend with throughout their lives. Like Dostoevsky's stranger in isolation, they willingly alienate themselves, but their loneliness drives them to return home and mend their fractured identities.

Having failed in their quests to find the idyllic lifestyle of a bygone era, the boys re-enter a country much different than the one they knew as children. They have learned from their travels abroad that the cultural myths of American sovereignty fail to reproduce a realistic image of the world. They come to see their nation with a kind of double vision. They see it as both insiders and outsiders simultaneously. Their time in Mexico has, to borrow a phrase from W.E.B. Du Bois, lifted the "veil" of ideology and has permitted them to see the fallibility of the dominant American order (8). This is where Bhabha's insight is so useful. Both boys experience an uncanny homecoming. They no longer see America as an exceptional nation state. What Bhabha calls *unhomeliness* is all at once a privileged and burdensome state of being. The boys are burdened by their outsider status when they cannot fully re-acclimate to life in America; yet, they are privileged in the sense that they can better intuit the limitations of ideology. The literary effect of their double vision is that the narratives allow for a revisionist historical account of American progress. The novels portray the American government as a detached, overbearing entity that is out of touch with the people it is supposed to serve. This, of course, is a much different perspective than what is commonly offered in stories of the west.

In the latter half of my thesis, I reference the works of Timothy Brennan, Benedict Anderson, and Frantz Fanon because they all offer unique, yet complimentary critiques of nationalism. Fanon outlines the shortcomings of national consciousness, which allows me to show why John Grady's delusional quest to marry Magdalena fittingly ends with his death in a

foreign country. For their part, Brennan and Anderson use the term “imaginary” in regard to the illusory nature of national sovereignty, which works well in concert with Althusser’s concept of subjectivity. Together, these theorists help show that American nationalism only serves to benefit the bourgeois ruling class at the expense of people like Billy and John Grady. The monocular vision of the American government ironically endangers the livelihood of the American people. In a time period marked by war, the greatest threat to American heritage is not a foreign regime, but the American government itself.

Since border controversy has become such a divisive part of mainstream political discourse, it is pertinent to study McCarthy’s works because they are perhaps more relevant now than ever before. As the narrative of the American mythos continues to evolve in the twenty-first century, I believe it is a very serious matter to understand the ways in which national identity informs and shapes American life. Though the novels only offer the perspective of one writer, McCarthy’s contributions to the canon of American literature make him an authoritative voice in the realm of American aesthetics. His artistic vision is worth paying attention to, given the contemporary colloquial usage of the terms “border” and “nation.” While some McCarthy critics have already dealt with issues of national identity in the border novels, much of the scholarship does not address the current border controversy. Though it is not my intent to write an exposé on the climate of American politics, I think it is critical to place the trilogy within the context of present cultural trends because the novels provide useful commentary on current events like the ongoing identity crises that many are facing in the border towns of the United States.

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## Introduction

The narrative trope of the American western is a long-standing literary convention rooted in a convoluted history of conquest, exploration, settlement, and exploitation. At the heart of the western genre is the idyllic vision of self-reliance. From its inception, the United States developed westward, pushing the limits of self-governance into the farthest reaches of empty terrain. As a result, the frontier has long been a symbol of personal liberty, a place where travelers and homesteaders have the freedom to achieve private independence in its purest form. Hollywood has done much to nurture this nostalgic image of prairie life. Iconic silver screen portraits of a bow-legged John Wayne or a cigarillo-chewing Clint Eastwood have endured in the eye of the American imagination for decades, and have perpetuated the classic vision of self-sufficiency in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Yet, while the genre has propagated the beliefs and values of an American monoculture, the cliché of the virtuous cowboy who tames the savagery of his natural surroundings is an image that comes under great scrutiny in Cormac McCarthy's southwestern spaces.

McCarthy's border novels foreground the problem of cultural identity in the postwar American mythos. In the years following the Second World War, McCarthy's characters find themselves alone along the high plains of the Mexican-American border. Although the two countries did not fight one another during the war, the border is representative of the cultural barrier that exists between them. At different moments in each of the three novels, protagonists John Grady Cole and Billy Parham come of age in a time period marked by cultural ambiguity. As each of the boys explores the sparse, empty spaces of the mountain terrain, he is faced with existential dilemmas that challenge his sense of self. In their quests, both boys find that their national heritage is obscured by the lifestyles of the indigenous men and women they encounter

along the way. As they travel between two countries that seem diametrically opposed to one another in terms of political and cultural ideology, the boys struggle to reconcile a sense of personhood. Since the boys do not feel at home in either country, the problem of *unhomeliness* forces them to live as cultural refugees in a land of similarly displaced persons. They become, in effect, men without countries. In the lonesome wastes of the desert, where geographical parameters of nations become abstract, the boys inhabit a liminal space outside any national boundary. Having grown up in culturally homogeneous environments, their cultural identity is challenged when they cross the border. It is in this space that they grapple with questions of ethnic heritage, ancestral worldviews, absolute morality, and the notion of a national epistemology.

Historically speaking, nation states with the strongest global influence have been those that produce a homogeneous image of success among their subjects; however, in propagating a homogeneous view of the world, the success of these global powers has come at the expense of an astronomical number of human lives that did not fit the mold of cultural homogeneity. In the events leading up to the world wars, the phenomenon of cultural homogeneity was more pronounced than at any other time in history. Nations grappling with the consequences of globalization, the spread of imperialist territories, and the decentralization of dynastic empires, struggled to secure their place in the world. For many, this meant they needed to bolster their sense of national identity by purging the lands of their ethnic and national minorities. According to historian Niall Ferguson, the perspective of political nationalists was that ethnically heterogeneous empires “deserved to be consigned to the past; the future should belong to homogeneous nation states” (75). If empires were to give way to nation states, there needed to be a systematic restructuring of cultural ideals: “It no longer sufficed, in the eyes of nationalists, to

acquire foreign territory. Now it was peoples as well as borders that had to move” (Ferguson 76). In the peace negotiations following the First World War, President Woodrow Wilson “envisaged the reordering of the European map on the basis of national ‘self-determination’” (Ferguson 160). Wilson’s intent was that all people have the basic human right to “choose the sovereignty under which they live” (Ferguson 160). The problem with the concept of self-determination, however, was that the redrawn borders did not represent the will of minority groups living within the borders of autonomous nation states:

[T]he single most important reason for the fragility of peace in Europe was the fundamental contradiction between self-determination and the existence of these minorities. It was, of course, theoretically possible that all the different ethnic groups in a new state would agree to sublimate their differences in a new collective identity. But more often than not what happened was a majority group claimed to be the sole proprietor of the nation state and its assets. In theory, there was supposed to be protection of the rights of minorities. But in practice the new governments could not resist discriminating against them. (Ferguson 166).

The most vulnerable minority groups were almost always concentrated in the border regions of these redrawn national boundaries. And as inter-war reconstruction began, the new nation states often built up their national hubris by condemning the minority groups to either forced assimilation or forced deportation. If the minorities refused to comply, they were often subjected to violence, rape, hard labor, or death. Such was the case for Armenians under Turkish rule, as well as Jewish populations in anti-Semitic regions throughout Eastern Europe. Then, of course, there was the Soviet Union under Stalin, whose collectivization of agriculture and industrial

agenda resulted in the deaths of millions of ethnic minorities who were sent to work in Siberian Gulags during the time of *dekulakization*.

I take the time to quote Ferguson here because he offers a concise, well-researched review of postwar nationalism that provides my reading of McCarthy with the necessary historical context to analyze the border dilemmas of the American southwest. *The Crossing* takes place during this inter-war period, at a time when all the major world powers are frantically trying to mend their fractured borders and redefine the tenets of their national creeds, and the problem only seems to worsen in the postwar years in which *All the Pretty Horses* and *Cities of the Plain* are set. It is in this era of geographical and ideological mapmaking that nations attempt to make sense of the world, and the novels reveal the personal dilemmas that occur when individuals no longer feel represented by the ideologies that govern their lives.

Over the course of the trilogy, there are a number of scenes that seem to disrupt the societal status quo of postwar North America by giving voice to the transgressive behaviors and mysticisms of social outcasts. The text sympathizes with the marginalized characters by making John Grady and Billy quiet witnesses to their philosophical musings. McCarthy places these mystical contemplations within the context of the social ambiguities following WWII. Although the “novels of the Border Trilogy are not overtly political...they are often rooted in the historical concerns of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries” (Frye 9). Using the impending threat of nuclear apocalypse as his backdrop, he poses some of the most fundamental questions of the modern age: do people have an inherent obligation to serve their country of origin?; is there a discernable relationship between personhood and nationhood?; how does a person change after leaving his or her native country? Over the course of my analysis, I will address these questions to better discern the relevancy of McCarthy’s work in America’s current social climate.

My first chapter deals primarily with the relationship between individuals and institutions of power. Using Louis Althusser's theory of ideological recognition, I will identify the ways in which an ideological superstructure—a political affiliation, nationality, ethnicity, or religious organization—interpellates a human being as a member of the community. More specifically, I will use this theoretical concept to examine how the postwar American superstructure operates in the text. On both sides of the border, John Grady and Billy are confronted by forces of institutional power. Since these powerful entities often abuse their positions of authority to secure dominance over the weak, the relationship between individuals and superstructures is critical to any reading of the novels. McCarthy's trilogy draws its conflict from the problem of subjectivity, so by analyzing the effects of superstructural subjugation on his fictitious characters, I hope to better understand the realities they represent. In my analysis of this relationship, I will show how the mechanisms of social interpellation define and complicate the lives of individuals.

The first chapter focuses exclusively on *The Crossing*. Although published after *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing* predates the first book by roughly ten years in narrative chronology. For this reason, I find it most appropriate to begin my work with this text. This allows me to follow the trilogy's historicity chronologically. And since the first two novels take place in different states with completely different casts of characters, I do not find it problematic to read them in this order. Set in 1939, as global tensions are escalating toward another world war, *The Crossing* narrates the bildungsroman of a rancher's son who has had little exposure to anything beyond the fence posts of the family tract. When the boy, Billy Parham, finds evidence of a Mexican grey wolf on the ranch, he resolves to trap and kill it in order to protect the family investment. His plans change, however, when he finds a pregnant she-wolf still alive in one of

his traps. Upon finding the wounded animal, Billy decides that instead of killing her, he will transport her across the Mexican border and return her to the land from which she has come. His decision puts into motion a bizarre (and at times disjointed) series of events that will complicate his objective. Not long after he crosses the border, he notices that the social conventions of his native land begin to change. As the lonesome American cowboy, Billy's romantic notions of rugged individualism are juxtaposed against the collectivist philosophies of a cave-dwelling sage, a desert mystic, a blind revolutionary, a Yaqui Indian, and a caravan of gypsy hirelings. Billy is enchanted by the romance of self-sufficiency, yet he is unable to sustain a life of isolation. Like the wolf, Billy roams the land in solitude, but the independence he recognizes in the wolf is something unattainable to him as a human being. Ultimately, he fails to remain a solitary individual and chooses to return home. This re-entrance is pivotal because it underscores the paradox of ideological identification. Billy finds that his identity is contingent upon American ideology, even if he feels personally underrepresented by that ideology.

In my second chapter, I will focus on *All the Pretty Horses*, applying Althusser's theories on personhood and subjectivity to the development of a national consciousness. As sixteen-year-old John Grady Cole and his friend Lacey Rawlins enter into the unfamiliar interior of northern Mexico, they encounter a national epistemology different from their own. The year is 1950, and with no economic prospects at home, they decide to quit the failing ranchlands of their childhoods to pursue a hand-to-mouth existence in the unadulterated plains south of the border. It is not long before John Grady finds that his presence in the foreign country is problematic. When he encounters different communities on the other side of the border, he unintentionally initiates a clashing of ideologies. Though he possesses no ideological dogmatism himself, he unwittingly represents an American worldview. His presence therefore poses a threat to the culture he hopes

to inhabit. When lectured on the misconceptions of democratic egalitarianism and the idealistic causes of Mexican revolutionaries, John Grady is disheartened by the fact that he cannot escape his own identity. Because he is an American, he is told, he cannot truly conceive of life in a foreign land.

Since John Grady feels so conflicted about his identity, I will use border theory and post-colonial criticism to address his behaviors. His literal border crossings are clearly significant to the persisting theme of the trilogy, but the conventions of border theory will allow me to more thoroughly critique the meaning of his figurative crossings (i.e. his moral, spiritual, and political transitions). Building on the works of Homi Bhabha, Frantz Fanon, Benedict Anderson, and Timothy Brennan, I will analyze John Grady's character development to determine how the border functions as a place of personal and national ambiguity. For example, the borderlands are a kind of *frontera*, which is to say, a liminal third space between two ideological pillars, that allows for a critique of multiple identities instead of focusing solely on the linear identity of the American cowboy. As John Grady traverses the novel's *fronteras*, I will show how the mythical exceptionalism of the classic cowboy figure begins to falter.

My third chapter is a comparative analysis of Billy and John Grady's unhomey return to the United States after their separate journeys abroad. By the time John Grady and Billy finally meet in *Cities of the Plain*, they have each borne witness to a world in transition. As hired ranch hands in New Mexico, they struggle to live an isolated lifestyle that is becoming increasingly more difficult to maintain in a postwar age of hyper-mechanized militarization, where the government has begun re-appropriating private lands for weapons test facilities. As John Wegner explains, "Isolation and alienation seem at the heart of McCarthy's [border] novels; however, the alienation of the individuals comes at a time when America has exponentially increased its

world-wide involvement in other countries' affairs" (85). In the final installment of the trilogy, I am most concerned with the effects of superstructural change on individuals and the land to which they stake claim. The epilogue to *Cities of the Plain* follows the trajectory of American ideology to its logical and bitter end. By the time the trilogy reaches its finale, America is scarcely the same place it once was. It looks more like an apocalyptic nightmare than a land of opportunity. And while it is a revisionist history of the American west, the collection implicates the nation's future as much as it does the past. For twenty-first century Americans, the trilogy is a cautionary body of work, warning readers that the future of the nation—as both an ideological concept and a geophysical space—will end in self-destruction. More than likely, this destruction will be the culmination of three compounding issues facing the country's ideological apparatuses: international war, rapid technological growth, and environmental catastrophe.

McCarthy portrays an America that has become so preoccupied with funding and engineering foreign conflicts that it neglects the domestic needs of the American people. In recent years, this preoccupation with foreign affairs has, indeed, become more visible in mainstream American politics. In response to an influx of post-9/11 terrorist organizations around the globe, the United States has gone to great lengths to ensure that the homeland remains secure. As a result, national borders that were once arbitrary are now becoming serious points of contention. For example, the 2018 caravan of asylum seekers migrating from Central America to the United States was, according to President Trump, intermixed with "Criminals and unknown Middle Easterners" (@realDonaldTrump). I point this out only to emphasize that the paranoia surrounding America's current border crisis is nothing new. It is quite similar, in fact, to the postwar America of the Border Trilogy. It is a case of the dominant order creating public hysteria for the purpose of establishing a false sense of communion among its subjects, a unified front

against foreign invasion. Instead of the lurking threats of Germany and Japan, America now has Mexico and the Middle East to contend with. Instead of the Axis, there is ISIS. Instead of fascists, there are Islamists.

Though the names of its international villains have changed over time, America's preoccupation with foreign conflict has consistently benefitted the ruling class because it has allowed the government to infringe upon the rights of citizens in the name of homeland security. This is precisely what the trilogy warns against. Instead of reappropriating private property for nuclear weapons testing, the government has, in recent years, made large-scale executive decisions to glean personal information from the public for the purpose of warding off foreign attacks<sup>1</sup>.

In addition to the problem of war and homeland security, the problem of technology has also persisted in the twenty-first century. America has continued to develop its industrial platform through means of technological growth. While economic rewards may rise steadily alongside increased technological output, the problem with rapid growth is that it has a tendency to change culture faster than people are able to adjust. As the trilogy implies, the effect of this growth is the potential for cultural erasure. A heavily tech-assisted labor force means that human workers are eventually replaced by machines. Clinging to the vain hope that such outmoded lifestyles will survive is to become like John Grady, chasing the hollow promise of self-governance to no avail.

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<sup>1</sup> The creation of the Patriot Act and the Transportation Security Administration are two examples of policy changes allowing the government to retrieve personal information from citizens. While it is not my objective to write a critique of these specific policies, it is worth citing them here since they serve a similar ideological purpose as those I have identified within the Border Trilogy.

In a time when new technology is being produced for the sake of luxury rather than necessity, this national infatuation with technological progress is not only leading to cultural obsolescence, but is also a dangerous mismanagement of natural resources. If America's goal as a world power is to dominate global markets through technological innovation, the text warns it should be wary of doing so at the expense of non-renewable natural resources. It is important to remember that over the course of the trilogy the ranching industry gives way to the oil industry. When Rawlins encourages John Grady to find work on the oil rigs instead of pursuing the life of a cowboy, he is emphasizing America's misuse of land. Once the surface of available earth has been overgrazed to the point that it cannot sustain cattle, the nation turns its attention almost instantaneously to the extraction of subsurface oil. By the end of the trilogy, the land is so depleted of resources that it can only be used for the detonation of nuclear warheads, which destroy the land altogether. Though the twenty-first century has not yet seen the kind of environmental annihilation implied in the trilogy, there have been recent legislative maneuvers to make energy resources more accessible to refinement companies. Hydraulic fracturing for natural gas and transnational oil pipelines have made the extraction and transport of raw materials far more efficient than they have ever been. If the endgame of these industries is economic profit, they will have it at the expense of both human and natural resources.

## **The Picture of the World in Men's Hearts: Subjectivity, Interpellation, and the Role of History in *The Crossing***

Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing* is a study of the paradoxical interplay between selfhood and community. The text creates a space in which its protagonist, Billy Parham, must confront the meaning of his personal identity, then reconcile his sense of self with the greater societal bodies that have shaped him. He must figure out who he is in relation to his country of origin, and as he travels through the foreign deserts of Mexico, he must consider how physical place impacts his self-knowledge. I believe his internal conflict presents readers with an identity crisis that is representative of a larger existential dilemma in contemporary American culture. So, in order to fully understand the trilogy's critique of national identity, it is imperative to first know how identity is constructed on an individual level. Therefore, I will begin my analysis with *The Crossing* because it is most concerned with the development of personal identity. Using Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation, I intend to show that Billy Parham's self-conception is a derivative of his social environment. His identity as a person is dependent upon the ideological constructs into which he is born. Crossing the border between the United States and Mexico, he personifies an ideological clash between two nation states. The friction between these two ideological powers reveals the failures of ideological apparatuses to reproduce a realistic image of the world.

The novel follows sixteen-year-old Billy on an episodic coming-of-age journey across the Mexican border where he struggles to isolate himself in a land sparsely populated with solitary wanderers. After a spontaneous decision to leave his family, his home, and his country, the runaway finds himself in the company of nomadic people groups living in scattered sects on the high plains of the Mexican desert. It is in these meetings that the novel makes a comparative

examination of several differing ideological worldviews. As the lonesome American cowboy, Billy's romantic notions of rugged individualism are juxtaposed against the collectivist philosophies of a cave-dwelling sage and a desert mystic. In his conversations with the wise men of these fringe communities, Billy is cautioned against any self-imposed banishment from communal relations because, according to the men, the identity of an individual person is contingent upon the identity of the group to which the person belongs. Billy's tragedy is that he learns this lesson too late, and upon his return to the U.S. discovers that his parents have been robbed and murdered in the family home. Still, the text uses Billy's tragic lesson to reinforce the idea that personal identity does not exist in isolation; instead, selfhood can only be created by the ideological structure into which the individual is born.

Louis Althusser's concept of ideological recognition is central to this reading of the work because it provides an explanation for Billy's discontentedness. Billy struggles in vain to live independently of any ideological social structure. Althusser argues that personal identity cannot develop apart from the dominant social order surrounding an individual. Therefore, any quest to live independently of society is illusory. According to Althusser, human subjectivity and ideological constructs are interdependent: "[T]he category of the subject is constitutive of all ideology, but at the same time and immediately I add that *the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of 'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects*" (45). In other words, subjectivity and ideology are mutually dependent. While ideology requires the physical apparatus of an individual human form to manifest its material existence in society, the ideological system is the only means by which an individual becomes a subject. Subjectivity is always shaped by ideology because ideological systems always precede the individual. It must follow, then, that selfhood exists only

within the beliefs and values of a given community. For Billy, this means that a departure from community is a departure from self-knowledge. Ironically, when he runs away from home in search of personal clarity, he only obscures his sense of self.

### **All Hail: Ideological Recognition and the Problem of Isolation**

Billy's decision to leave home is initiated by a wolf hunt gone awry. After finding evidence of a wolf on the family property, Billy begins to set traps in order to protect the livelihood of his parents. After several failed attempts to lure the wolf into his traps, Billy eventually manages to succeed one afternoon when he finds a pregnant wolf still alive with its forefoot caught in the jaws of a trap. Rather than shooting the animal where it stands, Billy creates a makeshift harness out of his catch rope and manages to leash and muzzle the wolf without killing it. Then, he resolves to trail the lassoed animal behind his horse to return it to the mountains of Mexico from which he suspects it has come. It is a bizarre plot, and the absurdity of Billy's plan does not go unnoticed. When a local rancher sees Billy's trot line from the road, he calls out, "Have you always been crazy?" (59). To this, Billy has no defense. He cannot articulate his reasons for capturing the wolf, but he stands by his decision to release the animal in the mountains.

Metaphorically, the wolf represents the mystery of existence. Billy sees something in the eyes of the wolf that he cannot fully comprehend:

[H]er eyes burned...like gatelamps to another world. A world burning on the shore of an unknowable void.... When those eyes and the nation to which they stood witness were gone at last, with their dignity back into their origins there would perhaps be other fires and other witnesses and other worlds otherwise beheld. (73-4)

It is in the eyes of the wolf that Billy begins to see the world differently. Though his inner thoughts are unknown to the reader, it is clear Billy identifies with the wolf's independence. His spontaneous decision to leave home has its origin in the wolf's eyes. His desire to leave is a desire to follow the "gatelamps to another world." Just as the wolf cannot be contained to one world or one nation, Billy feels he cannot be contained to the ranch.

The moment he decides to return the wolf to Mexico is significant because it is in this moment that Billy recognizes he has a will separate from that of his father and mother. He desires to see the world from an alternative perspective, a perspective embodied by the wolf. Yet, he fails to recognize how his individual will has been shaped by the ideological configurations of his family and country. He does not understand that his personal identity is the product of the social circumstances into which he has been born. Apart from his mother and father, he has no identity. According to Althusser, human beings are "*always already* subjects, and as such constantly practice the rituals of ideological recognition, which guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects" (47). This means that individuality cannot be separated from the ideological mechanisms of social interaction. It makes sense, then, that Billy runs into trouble soon after crossing into the foreign country. In transporting the animal across the U.S.-Mexican border, he crosses more than just a physical boundary; he crosses an ideological boundary as well. The journey epitomizes the problem of segregating oneself from communal infrastructure.

Shortly after he crosses into Mexico, the wolf is taken from him by a corrupt group of men to stage as an attraction in a grotesque circus act in which she is chained to a stake in the ground and forced to fight pit bulls to the death. Though Billy tries to argue his case, telling the men of his intent to return the wolf to her homeland, he is outnumbered and outgunned. The men

work under the leadership of a powerful alguacil, a crooked sheriff who has no qualms about bending the rule of law to appease the private interests of a local hacendado. As a foreigner, Billy is defenseless against them. He can do nothing but look on as the animal is abused for the pleasure of circus attendees.

Once his plan to save the wolf ends in failure, Billy wanders aimlessly across the vast expanse of Mexican desert. Though he attempts to distance himself from all societal relations, Billy learns that it is no small task to withdraw from human interaction entirely. In the beginning of the second chapter, Billy meets an indigenous group of cave dwellers who offer him food and repair his tattered clothes. Before departing, an elder of the tribe identifies him as a “huérfano” [orphan] and encourages him to “cease his wanderings and make for himself some place in the world because to wander...would become for him a passion and by this passion he would become estranged from men and so ultimately from himself” (134). Considering Althusser’s theory of ideological recognition, it is significant that the elder identifies Billy as an orphan. The act of identification is what Althusser refers to as “interpellation.” According to him, “ideology hails or interpellates individuals as subjects” (Althusser 49). This process occurs by way of ideological state apparatuses (ISA’s) at work in the lives of individuals. Althusser defines ISA’s as “a certain number of realities which present themselves...in the form of distinct and specialized institutions” (Althusser 17). These institutions can be religious, educational, familial, legal, political, economic, communicative, or cultural in nature, but each disseminates its ideological beliefs, values, or creeds through individuals. Participating in these various institutions, and accepting their ideological beliefs, individuals are interpellated as members. Since all human interaction takes place within one or more of these institutional configurations, it is impossible for any one person to socialize free of ideological influence.

The elder interpellates Billy as an identifiable subject. He then tries to explain to Billy that his identity as a unique individual cannot exist without a social structure. The act of naming Billy an orphan is an interpellation which subjects him to a relativistic role within a family unit. As Althusser explains, “Before its birth, [a] child is...always-already a subject, appointed as a subject in and by the specific familial ideological configuration in which it has been ‘expected’ once it has been conceived” (50). So, Billy’s identity as “huérfano” is relative to the identities of his mother and father regardless of whether or not they have died or abandoned him. The epithet—whether symbolic or literal—is contingent upon the role of the parents within the family dynamic because together they form a familial ideological unit which subjectifies Billy as a member. Without his mother and father, he can be neither son nor orphan.

The elder recognizes Billy’s dilemma and advises the boy to find “some place in the world” among men so as not to become “estranged” (134). The elder understands that ideology precedes the individual. Even before a person is fully aware, he/she has been interpellated by ideology. This is why the man tells Billy that estrangement from the global community of men results in estrangement from oneself. To deny the role of communal influence is to deny the self altogether. The elder suggests that ideological constructs—familial or societal—are the epistemological center of human consciousness, and without them human beings cannot make sense of the world. This is why he tells Billy that “the world could only be known as it existed in men’s hearts. For while it seemed a place which contained men it was in reality a place contained within them and therefore to know it one must live with men and not simply pass among them” (134). Here, the man places existential knowledge of the world inside of men’s hearts and claims the only way to access this knowledge is to interact with the people who contain it. His

epistemological conception closely resembles Althusser since it requires the presence of a collective group of men to stand as bearers and bestowers of knowledge.

Billy listens politely to the man but does not heed his cautionary words. Two days later, he finds himself utterly alone in what feels like a post-apocalyptic land “depopulate and barren,” without any sign of wildlife, and “nothing about but the wind and the silence” (134). The absence of life and the barrenness of the landscape create a liminal space within the text, a dreamlike space that seems to exist outside of any physical reality. It is here that McCarthy uses Billy’s lonesomeness to personify the abstract concept of estrangement. Without a community, the world begins to disappear in front of Billy’s eyes. His knowledge of life is greatly diminished by his detachment from others. As he travels across the wasteland, he loses his ability to decode information because he has renounced the communal discourse which had once allowed him to make meaning of the physical world. He cannot comprehend sensory information because there no longer exists a relationship between signs and that which they signify. This loss of knowledge is illustrated by his encounter with cryptic hieroglyphs painted on the walls of a rock face: “Along the face of the stone bluffs were old pictographs of men and animals and suns and moons as well as other representations that seemed to have no referent in the world although they once may have” (135). Without “a referent in the world” to which the pictographs refer, the shapes are nothing but chaotic scribbles. His failure to decode the “other representations” marks a schism between him and the world of human beings. He becomes an abstraction of a person, a subhuman being of lesser intelligence. When he loses his ability to reason, he loses his humanity and with it his sense of self.

The relationship between referent and reference becomes exceedingly important to Billy as he continues on his journey through the void. When he comes upon a solitary priest in the

middle of an abandoned town, he enters (accidentally) into an interpersonal bond which reconfigures his knowledge of self and eventually restores his ability to make meaning of the external world. At the entrance of a dilapidated church, the priest “[calls] out” to Billy, “first in Spanish and then in English” (137). This calling out is noteworthy because it is, again, an act of interpellation. Like the cave-dwelling wise man, the priest hails Billy, projecting onto him an identity. The identity is interpersonal since it requires the priest to act as witness to Billy’s presence. When the man speaks to Billy, he uses two different languages—a hybridization of two ideological systems of thought—to communicate. In their communication, Billy is able to reconstruct his understanding of the world using the linguistic conventions of both ideological systems.

Though Billy does not ask for it, the Priest imparts knowledge on the young wanderer almost instantaneously. Similar to the initial hailing in the street, this bestowing of wisdom on the boy is an act of subjugation. As a representative of the communal body of Christians, the priest speaks on behalf of the larger ideological community of believers. Though he lives a hermetic life in the desert, the priest does not speak as a lone individual. Instead, he is the mouthpiece of a greater ideological configuration (The Roman Catholic Church). This means he has the authority to interpellate Billy as a subject. Not only does he acknowledge Billy’s existence as an individual, but he also gives the boy a philosophical foundation. According to Althusser, the “very precise operation” of interpellation “transforms” “individuals into subjects” (Althusser 48). Thus, the priest transforms Billy into a subject.

By definition, the subject requires an object to which he or she is subjected. Billy, then, is subjected to the ideological authority of the priest because there is no other person to interpellate him as a subject. In a long, parabolic speech, the priest expounds on the idea of subjectivity. He

tells Billy that all people have a personal story, but the story is only made known in its telling: “[T]he tale has no abode or place of being except in the telling only and there it lives and makes its home and therefore we can never be done with the telling. Of the telling there is no end” (143). Each story, then, requires a witness. Without witness, the story can never be made known, even to the individual to whom the story belongs. Without audience, the story cannot be told for there is no one to tell.

The story/witness dyad parallels the subject/object relationship. Story depends on witness in the same way that subjectivity is contingent upon an ideological object. The halves of each binary unit cannot exist in isolation. According to the priest, “Things separate from their stories have no meaning. They are only shapes. Of a certain size and color. A certain weight. When their meaning has become lost to us they no longer have even a name” (142). Like the incomprehensible pictographs, human lives are meaningless if separated from their individual stories. Stories require a witness and are only made known in the telling; this means that human subjectivity does not exist apart from community. The priest elaborates further: “Acts have their being in the witness. Without [the witness] who can speak of [the act]? In the end one could even say that the act is nothing, the witness all” (154). He goes on to say, “This flesh is but a memento, yet it tells the true. Ultimately every man’s path is every other’s. There are no separate journeys for there are no separate men to make them. All men are one and there is no other tale to tell” (157). Here, the priest uses a Hegelian dialectical maneuver to identify a common narrative among all men throughout human history. Hegel’s definition of history “involves a process in which provisional truths are posited as ‘thesis,’ counterbalanced in responses as ‘antithesis,’ then integrated in a ‘synthesis’ of both, which forms the basis of a new and more developed ‘thesis’” (Frye 122). The priest uses this dialectical reasoning to suggest that a

person's individual story (or thesis) is only recognizable when it stands in opposition to a witness (or antithesis). When the story is recounted in the words of the witness, it is synthesized and becomes a new story altogether. The synthesized story, now its own entity, again requires witness; thus, the dialectical process begins anew. This is how the priest arrives at the idea that "all men are one." For him, the human narrative is a communal act which has its being in the interaction between individual persons. I point this out only to emphasize the way in which an individual becomes a subject in society. Both Althusser and Hegel have contributed greatly to Marxist literary analysis, and even though the two theorists did not agree on whether the outcome of this dialectical process was ultimately positive or negative for individuals, they both agreed that individual subjectivity was created by ideological bodies.

As the priest concludes his speech, he explains that "the lesson of a life can never be its own. Only the witness has power to take its measure. It is lived for the other only" (158). Therefore, apart from communal interaction, the life of an individual has no lesson or meaning. All lives are rather part of the larger human narrative which is constructed collectively. According to McCarthy critic Petra Mundik, the human narrative "cannot be lost because it emerges out of the collective unconscious of the human psyche and tends to reappear time and time again in different cultures, different times, and different forms" ("The Illusion of Proximity" 11). Because relationships between individuals are always interdependent, all people must simultaneously exist as both narrators of their own stories and witnesses to the stories of others. The constant subconscious interplay between narrating and witnessing is what perpetuates the global narrative of human history.

As stated previously, Billy's dilemma is that he resists communal life. His journey across national borders is an attempt to live beyond the figurative boundaries—beliefs and value

systems—of any ideological superstructure. When he meets people in the desert, he often refers to himself as a “vaquero” [cowboy], taking great pride in the secluded and antisocial lifestyle which the word connotes. His penchant for self-sufficiency seems reminiscent of the classic trope of the American self-made man, a “remarkable blend of character types: the young hero of the traditional bildungsroman, the mythic frontier American in the making, the outcast cowboy who lives in the vain hope that the land will survive” (Frye 120). It is true that Billy manages to maintain this archetypal role for a while, but eventually he is drawn back into the fold of society. For this reason, he epitomizes the pitfalls of a romanticized individualism. His failure to sustain an isolated “space” for himself in the world of men reiterates the teachings of the priest and the cave-dweller. According to Mundik, “wise men,” like the two mystics, “realize that there is no such space, because separateness and multiplicity are illusory, as is our mistaken sense of self” (“Fear and Marvel” 13). The romantic notions of a pure individualism cloud Billy’s thinking, blinding him to the “true nature of existence, concealing the ultimate reality behind a veil of illusion” (Mundik, “Mourners” 9). The illusion of “separateness and multiplicity” is evident in Billy’s struggle to self-identify. Mundik calls Billy’s attempt to alienate himself “a vain struggle against the terror [humans] feel at the very impermanence of our being” (“Fear and Marvel” 13). He struggles in vain because even as a self-sufficient isolationist living off the land, his identity is still a negative one. It requires the othering of an oppositional force to stand in juxtaposition of him. To be an individualist, Billy must negate society. So, his identity as an individualist is still relative to the society which he rejects. Therefore, in order to establish a sense of self, he must fabricate an *other* against which he contrasts.

The priest understands Billy’s identity crisis because it is a common one among young men. He tells the boy,

That what we seek is the worthy adversary. For we strike out to fall flailing through demons of wire and crepe and we long for something of substance to oppose us.

Something to contain us or to stay our hand. Otherwise there were no boundaries to our own being and we too must extend our claims until we lose all definition. Until we must be swallowed up at last by the very void to which we wished to stand opposed. (153)

What the priest calls a “worthy adversary” is simply the second half of the story/witness dichotomy. Since Billy’s subjectivity depends on the presence of an ideological structure, his only defense against such a structure—one that supports the eradication of wolves from its lands, or one that publicly abuses animals for the spectacle of torture—is to pit himself against it as an adversarial foe. This explains why, earlier in the work, he puts his own life at risk in an attempt to save the she-wolf from the alguacil. Against the wishes of the alguacil (who operates as the obvious symbol of institutional corruption), Billy walks to the center of the circus ring to save the tortured wolf from further debasement. In doing so, he communicates to all who sit in the company of the alguacil that he rejects their demoralization of the animal. His public stance against such an authority figure is, in the parlance of the priest, a “striking out” against his “worthy adversary.” Paradoxically, it is an act which enables him to oppose the ideology of the alguacil (a man of social stature, or “substance”) while simultaneously appropriating the same ideological system for the personal benefit of substantiating his own sense of self.

Within the context of the priest’s speech, it is fitting that Billy’s attempt to save the wolf ends with the death of the animal at his own hand. After he is told to leave the ring, he returns when the dog fights have ended and, without speaking to anyone, walks back to the center of the ring with his rifle and shoots the wolf in the head. The ironic death of the wolf mirrors Billy’s ironic attempt to “stay the hand” of his “worthy adversary” in an effort to substantiate the

“boundaries to [his] own being” (153). In trying to save the wolf from the grotesque sport of the alguacil’s community, Billy commits the same transgression he publicly condemns. Though the means by which he destroys the wolf are perhaps less gratuitous and more humane than those of the circus performers, he nonetheless produces the same end. He becomes one among the community, perpetuating the same decadent culture he claims to oppose. This moment, like his initial decision to run off on his own, illustrates the pitfalls of rugged individualism because it reiterates his inability to escape community.

Again, his behavior is consistent with the words of the priest. Since “all men are one” and are inevitably joined together by the story/witness relationship, Billy plays an active role in the collective killing of the wolf (157). Not only does he shoot the wolf in front of a crowd of spectators, but he also trades his rifle for the wolf’s dead body to prevent it from being further degraded by the spectator to whom the pelt has been promised. The rifle is “worth a dozen mutilated wolfhides,” but Billy still offers to make the transaction in order to save what is left of the wolf’s dignity (124). In Billy’s mind, this transaction seems to be one of redemption, but in reality he is again committing an act which he has rebuked throughout the novel—the selling of the wolf for financial gain. Though he does not profit from the transaction monetarily, he still reduces the wolf to a form of economic currency. For him, the wolf has both an exchange value and a sign-exchange value. The exchange value is clear: he gives the rifle and receives the mutilated hide. The deal does not make him any wealthier, but the commodification of the items allows him the ability to trade. On a social level, the hide has a sign-exchange value that Billy uses to establish himself as the ultimate master of nature. Mundik suggests that the “motif of the wolf, which acts as a mirror to man’s own nature, [reveals] human beings in all their terrible, destructive power” (“Fear and Marvel” 12). Billy seems to use this “destructive power” to

subordinate and domesticate the natural world. In the eyes of the alguacil, the deputies, and all the spectators who waged bets on the fights, Billy's inherent power is revealed when he shoots the wolf. He proves himself dominant over the beast and is allowed to claim his prize. Of course, in order to claim this prize, he must participate in the act he most despises. He must assign economic value to a life, a thing he previously thought to be invaluable.

For some readers, Billy's treatment of the dead wolf might appear to be a restorative act of grace since he buries the body honorably in the mountains; however, the fact remains that his ultimate goal to save the wolf from death ends in failure. This is the tragedy of both the boy and the animal. Neither can live independently of the ideological structures into which they have been born. Having grown up in New Mexico, Billy travels as a representative of a new world America where the Eurocentric mythologizing and demonization of wolves has led to a government-issued eradication of all wolves from its lands<sup>2</sup>. According to Wallis R. Sanborn, the absence of wolves "from the New Mexico of the novel signals man's presence there and becomes a negative metaphor for man's ceaseless appetite for control over the natural world" (25). Despite his well-intentioned plans to save the wolf from a system of senseless destruction and an unrelenting "appetite for control," Billy manages only to postpone the wolf's death and prolong its agony. In the end, he does the work of his adversary. He becomes the instrument of destruction, purging the land of vilified creatures, and reinforcing man's "control over the natural world." The ideology he tries so hard to reject is the same ideology he inevitably upholds.

### **A Blind Visionary**

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<sup>2</sup> "In early modern Europe, with the domestication of sheep and cattle, farmers viewed the wolf as a threat to their existence and sustenance.... And regardless of where European settlers landed in the Western Hemisphere, they perpetuated their phobia and hatred of the wolf" (Sanborn 26).

After the death of the wolf and his interaction with the priest, Billy does not remain in country long. He returns to the family ranch only to find his parents have been killed and his father's horses have been stolen. Devastated as he is by the news of his parents' death, he is relieved to learn his younger brother, Boyd, is still alive and living safely on a neighboring ranch. Once Billy reconnects with Boyd, the two brothers set out for Mexico in search of their stolen property. When they finally track down their horses among a band of thieves, a firefight ensues that is full of the gallantry of Hollywood westerns. After recovering all of the family horses, Billy gallops across the prairie with the thieves in close pursuit. Boyd, who is lying in wait for his brother to return with the recovered horses, hurries to gather up their blankets and bed rolls as he watches Billy try to outride the men behind him. In the commotion, a rifle is fired at long range, and the bullet pierces Boyd's chest. Horrified, Billy hoists his brother's limp body across the saddle of his horse and rides away dodging fire. With the horsemen gaining on him, Billy manages to flag down a pickup truck full of farmworkers who, without asking questions, lift Boyd into the bed of the truck and drive off down the road. With the horse unburdened by the weight of Boyd's body, Billy is able to make an escape.

Alone again in a land unknown to him, Billy is at a loss. Wandering through the barren landscape, he comes upon the home of a woman and her blind husband. Similar to the priest, the blind man speaks to Billy in a long diatribe about the metaphysical meaning of blindness. He tells Billy that while fighting for his country during the Mexican Revolution he was taken prisoner by the federal army at the 1913 battle of Durango. It was in captivity that a German captain of the federal army literally sucked the eyes from the man's sockets and spit them out to "leave them dangling by their cords wet and strange and wobbling on his cheeks" (276). The man tells Billy that, blinded as he was by such an obscene act of violence, he came to understand

truths about the world that were previously hidden from him. With an air of authority, he says, “[T]he wicked know that if the ill they do be of sufficient horror men will not speak against it. That men have just enough stomach for small evils and only these will they oppose....[T]rue evil has power to sober the smalldoer against his own deeds” (292-3). The “true evil” of which he speaks is the evil orchestrated by ideological state apparatuses (though he does not use this term). He explains to Billy that individuals do not have the ability to fully comprehend large-scale humanitarian crises. Instead, they only have the capacity to understand evil on a personal level. For instance, it is somehow more abhorrent to hear about the particulars of one man having his eyeballs sucked from his head than it is to know the full death toll of an ongoing revolutionary war. According to him, the “small evils” of the world are easy to oppose, but this kind of opposition is futile because it does not alter the “true evil” from which the small acts stem. This logic is in keeping with Althusser’s assessment of ISAs because the man is essentially arguing that individuals function as extensions of a higher ideological power. They work within these ideological state apparatuses—political parties, propaganda campaigns, special interest groups, religious organizations—to do the work of a larger governing body. The ruling class, or the “repressive state apparatus” (RSA), uses these ideological institutions to materialize their governing power over large numbers of individual people (Althusser 23). When these individuals commit “small evils,” it is easy to lose sight of the fact that they do so on behalf of a larger power that uses its subjects to carry out similar atrocities *en masse*.

The problem of evil, according to the blind man, is that people do not see it until it affects them personally. What they see instead is an idyllic picture of the world fabricated by institutions of power:

It is rather that the picture of the world is all the world men know and this picture of the world is perilous. That which was given him to help him make his way in the world has power also to blind him to the way where his true path lies. The key to heaven has power to open the gates of hell. (293)

In order to understand his language here, it is important to keep in mind that his blindness is the result of a violence perpetuated by conflicting ideologies. The man does not lose his eyes to the German captain because of a personal animosity between the two of them; he is blinded because he represents the revolutionary cause. The German does not act on behalf of his own deranged impulses; he is an instrument of a larger ideological power. The “picture of the world” to which the blind man alludes is the picture created by those in positions of power. He experiences this picture most directly in his interactions with the federal army, but when he speaks to Billy he speaks more broadly, as if to say that all ideological institutions function in the same way. Such institutions create a structural image of the world which people aspire to reproduce in their personal lives. But, as the man warns, despite the fact that this image can provide men with a purpose to fulfill in life, it can also blind them to their own egregious acts of inhumanity.

### **And You Shall Carry My Bones Up From Here: The Relics of a History in Memoriam**

In the last pages of the novel, Billy finally makes contact with a man who knows the whereabouts of Boyd’s body. The man’s name is Quijada, a “Yaqui indian from western Sonora” (383). Quijada tells Billy that after the brothers had parted ways, Boyd “killed two men in Galeana” for reasons unknown to anyone (384). Billy is not surprised by Quijada’s recount. It is a fate he has come to expect. He only hopes to recover his brother’s body so that he may give him a proper burial in his home country. Quijada advises against this:

I think you may have some problems, [Quijada says].

But that aint all you think.

No.

You think he belongs where he's at.

I think the dead have no nationality. (387)

Quijada does not believe that nationality follows a person to the grave. Once dead, a person's nationality no longer exists. This is the great irony of ideological recognition. People live their entire lives pledging loyalty to their nation, yet they die alone. Quijada expounds on this:

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 is because the way was lost to us already that we have made those names. The world cannot be lost. We are the ones. And it is because these names and these coordinates are our own naming that they cannot save us. That they cannot find for us the way again. Your brother is in that place which the world has chosen for him. (387)

The image of the map has both literal and figurative significance in relation to the topic of ideology. First, ISA's rely heavily on geographic boundaries in order to establish control of a region. If they are to be successful, ISA's must identify the parameters of their jurisdiction. This means that a literal map must be drawn to represent the sovereignty of their governance. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, there must be a clear cerebral map of the cultural territory, a common depiction of civic responsibility that people within the region can emulate. This internal map is created by ISA's and reinforced—subtly, or blatantly—by RSA's.

He explains that maps are created for the purpose of making sense of the world. Maps provide structure and order; but, as he points out, they are ultimately arbitrary. They are always false in the sense that they are always subjective representations created within the ideological surroundings of the mapmaker. This is why he says that the names and coordinates assigned to places on a map “cannot save us.” It is precisely because they are human constructs that all maps are fallible. They try to create the world anew, but they succeed only in creating disillusionment.

Billy wants to bury Boyd in America because he is still trying to reconcile Boyd’s physical being with his ideological identity as a U.S. citizen. Although Quijada warns Billy that Boyd’s burial place is of no consequence, Billy carries out his plan to unearth his brother’s bones and return them home. After finding the grave, digging up the body, and carting it on horseback toward the American border, Billy comes upon a band of gypsies who have been hired to recover the remains of a biplane that has crashed in the mountains. Pulling the wreckage of the plane behind a team of oxen, the leader of the gypsy men tells Billy that he has been hired by the father of the pilot to save what is left of his son’s plane. He tells Billy that the wreckage in tow is actually the remains of two different planes, each with its own origin story for how it came to be abandoned in the mountains. The gypsy’s stories are later discredited, but, as Steven Frye argues, the fictional narratives that the gypsy invents are a “re-creation of a single story through the act of witness” (126). In other words, the image that the gypsy presents to Billy allows him to re-create the history of the plane to meet his own narrative ends. Much like Quijada’s map, the airplane represents the fallibility of history, since history is always perceived and recounted through an ideological lens.

In the same way that Billy has returned to Mexico to recover the bones of his dead brother, the gypsies have come to recover the airplane, which is “little more than a skeleton with

sunbleached shreds of linen the color of stewed rhubarb clinging to [its] steambent ashwood ribs” (401). The two enterprises mirror one another. They are both seeking to restore the physical relics of the dead, suggesting that “there is a sacramental quality to physical artifacts as they reside in memory” (Frye 126). Even though the “essence of what is lost” cannot be restored (Billy cannot resurrect Boyd from the bundle of dry bones), the physical presence of the relics carries narrative weight:

In the end the objects evoke tales that may falsify the chronicle of history, and insofar as they are taken as history they become a form of “idolatry,” a vain worship of lies. But when they inspire the act of telling, which continues in the perpetual act of witnessing, they initiate the narrative that through human seeking becomes the common experience of humanity. The literal truth defined in terms of historical veracity becomes secondary to the deeper truths that may be drawn from stories as they serve to define and enrich both the teller and the witness. (Frye 127)

As the gypsy explains to Billy, “The reverence attached to the artifacts of history is a thing men feel. One could even say that what endows any thing with significance is solely the history in which it has participated” (405). Within the context of my argument here, the images of the map, the bones, and the airplane are crucial. Together, they reveal the trajectory of historical development through the mechanisms of ideological apparatuses. They show the complexities of human identity and the ways in which personal narratives are perpetually re-created by the ever-changing interpretations of history. It is what the gypsy calls the “third history” of the world; “It is the history that each man makes out of what is left to him” (411).

Billy’s ironic tragedy conclusively implies that ideological recognition is inescapable. Once interpellated as a subject within a given configuration, a person is subjected to the

theoretical boundaries of that configuration. The text seems to suggest that resisting such boundaries is futile and will inevitably end in failure.

Initially, this appears to be a grim outlook on personhood and subjectivity; by the end of the novel, however, the perspective becomes less bleak. Once Billy returns to the United States, he seems to realize that his ideological identity joins him—for better or worse—to an enterprise larger than himself. This epiphany manifests itself in the form of a dream:

He slept that night in his own country and had a dream wherein he saw God's pilgrims laboring upon a darkened verge in the last of the twilight of that day and they seemed to be returning from some deep enterprise that was not of war nor were they yet in flight but rather seemed coming from some labor to which perhaps these and all other things stood subjugate. (420)

It is important to note that as his strange and unpredictable pilgrimage comes to an end, he dreams of the voyages of others. He sees himself as part of a lineage of likeminded wanderers, "laboring upon" the unknown. Their ultimate goal is ambiguous and seems both morally and politically ambivalent, but what is clear is that "God's pilgrims" are traveling in unison toward a common destination. Their labor and their voyage are shared experiences that unite them in their subjugation. Though they are subjected to a higher entity which seems unknowable and beyond their control, they move. Like the gypsy says in the end of the novel, "[M]ovement itself is a form of property" (410). Billy, like all interpellated persons, occupies a space within the ideological entity, a space that gives him a personal identity and ensures that he will never be alone.

**What Happens to Country: The Border Between Individuality and Nationality in *All the Pretty Horses***

If *The Crossing* is an examination of individual personhood, *All the Pretty Horses* is an examination of national identity. The text positions its protagonist, John Grady Cole, between the ideological apparatuses of two nation states—Mexico and the U.S.—and makes him the victim of their conflicting value systems. In an essay titled “History and the Problem of Evil in McCarthy’s Western Novels,” McCarthy critic Timothy Parrish calls John Grady’s predicament a “collision of historical epochs” (70). By this, he means John Grady inhabits a country in the midst of cultural transition. The term is certainly appropriate, considering the novel has its beginning in the shadows of the nuclear catastrophe that ended World War II. It is a time in which the neighboring North American countries are trying to determine what will be their legacy in the scope of modern history. As each of the two countries leans toward nationalism, John Grady’s personal journey reveals the failures of such ideological apparatuses to allow their subjects to lead free, autonomous lives. The novel exposes the limited power of nation states to recreate the world in the likeness of their own imagined sovereignty. I say “imagined” here, borrowing from Benedict Anderson’s use of the term. In his renowned exposé on nationalism, *Imagined Communities*, Anderson defines nation as “an imagined political community... imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (6). According to him, nations are imagined because “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear from them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). This definition helps explain John Grady’s dilemma. Traveling outside his home country, John Grady finds that the cultural myths of American sovereignty fail to reproduce a realistic image of the world.

In this chapter, I will examine the relationship between personal identity and national epistemology. Since I have already written extensively on the formation of self-knowledge in my first chapter, I intend to use this chapter to look more broadly at the formation of a national consciousness. Using some of the tenets of post-colonial theory, I will examine the transformation of John Grady's character as he encounters a national system of thought vastly different than his own. I have chosen this critical perspective because, as post-colonial theorist Deborah Madsen explains, "Post-colonial theory is the tool that enables the cultural study of a reformulated identity" (2). Since the postwar years were a time of cultural reformulation for both the United States and Mexico, this theoretical approach helps illumine the ideological differences between the two nations as they progressed into the modern era. Historically, post-colonial theory has not often been used to critique American literature due to the fact that the United States, since its inception, has effectively colonized many parts of the globe by establishing commonwealths, territories, and by-proxy governments through extended military engagements abroad; however, Madsen argues that border fictions set in regions where "America has had a colonial impact...are influenced by definitions of 'America' that carry a heavy colonial inflection" (3). There is no question that throughout its history America has more often been the colonizer than the colonized, so I do not mean to suggest that America is a colonized space. Instead, I intend to use post-colonial theory to emphasize the shortcomings of nationalism (in both the U.S. and Mexico) as it became more prominent in the postwar years. Since John Grady inhabits a liminal space between two countries, he essentially becomes a stateless being, living in what Homi K. Bhabha refers to as an "unhomely" territory: "Although the 'unhomely' is a paradigmatic post-colonial experience, it has a resonance that can be heard distinctly, if erratically, in the fictions that negotiate the powers of cultural difference in a range of historical

conditions and social contradictions” (“The World and the Home” 142). Therefore, I think it is entirely appropriate to use this application to address John Grady’s status as a cultural orphan. Ultimately, my reading of the text illustrates the pitfalls of nation states and suggests that the ideological identifiers of state apparatuses misrepresent both foreigners and their own citizens.

### **Ghosts of Nations: Revisionist History and the Haunted Past**

After the death of his grandfather, sixteen-year-old John Grady is forced to leave the family ranch he’d hoped to one day inherit. John Grady’s hopes of owning the ranch and running cattle diminish before him as the economic stability of the ranching industry becomes uncertain in the postwar years. Within the first pages of the novel, these anxieties are personified by John Grady’s father, who, having fought in the Second World War, returns home a changed man. After failing to reconcile strained marital tensions with John Grady’s mother, his father tries to explain to the boy why divorce is imminent: “It aint her fault. I aint the same as I was. I’d like to think I am. But I aint” (12). His tour of duty in the Third Infantry has changed him. Returning home, he finds that he cannot restore the life he left behind. When father and son ride their horses out onto the plain one evening, his father looks out over the country with “sunken eyes as if the world out there had been altered or made suspect by what he’d seen of it elsewhere. As if he might never see it right again. Or worse did see it right at last. See it as it always had been, would be forever” (23). The war opens his eyes to the fallibility of his nation’s collective consciousness. His homecoming allows him to see that his prewar patriotism (created by America’s ideological state apparatuses and carried out in his actions as an interpellated soldier) is illusory. The national angst characterized by John Grady’s father establishes the setting of the novel. It is an epoch in which the structural integrity of the world is fragmented by war, and it is in this epoch that John Grady confronts the meaning of nationhood.

As a product of his father's cultural angst, he represents a liminal space between personal identity and national identity. In this space, he interrogates the constructs of American exceptionalism. When he tries to reproduce the mythic vision of the American cowboy outside the context of the cultural space in which it has been created, he inevitably fails. In his failure, he comes to see the world anew, or, perhaps like his father, is permitted to see the world "as it always had been, would be forever." Like his father, his perception of American exceptionalism fades before him like a ghost, and he begins to see that his nation's history is, in reality, much different than he had previously known to be true.

McCarthy's westerns, according to Parrish, are "too broad in scope to be reduced merely to American history. In fact, one of the most important achievements is to inhabit the Western form to interrogate what happened when the Europeans discovered and invaded the New World" (68). This is certainly true of *All the Pretty Horses*. Though the novel takes place long after the first arrival of European settlers to the North American continent, it acts as a revisionist history in the sense that it provokes many of the same questions that arose during the ages of exploration and colonization, but draws starkly different conclusions about the native-settler encounters than what is commonly narrated in the Eurocentric plots of traditional westerns. John Grady (the embodiment of western thought) contemplates the meaning of his nationality in relation to the indigenous peoples he meets on both sides of the Mexican-American border. Coming of age in a time when the world as he knows it is falling apart around him—his grandfather's failed ranch, his parents' failed marriage, his country's failure to preserve the lifestyle of the American frontiersmen—he doubts the exceptionalism of his homeland.

In the very beginning of the novel, before he decides to leave home for Mexico, John Grady rides his horse along the remnants of an ancient Comanche footpath. As he rides, he

visualizes the road before him “like a dream of the past where the painted ponies and the riders of that lost nation came down out of the north with their faces chalked and their long hair plaited and each armed for war which was their life” (5). The novel immediately confronts the history of the indigenous tribes of first nation peoples who inhabited the Texas plains long before the arrival of the Europeans. As John Grady imagines the horse warriors who came before him, he makes two observations that are essential to the whole of the novel: 1) the Comanche are a “lost nation” that have been all but eradicated by foreign invasion, and 2) the characteristic that defines them above all others is their propensity for war. The Comanche represent a pre-industrial nation that could not survive the rapid changes wrought upon them by forces of the modern world. And just like the Comanche nation before him, John Grady will struggle to survive America’s cultural transition in the aftermath of modern warfare.

The plight of the Comanche nation is essential because it is a kind of prologue for what will come of John Grady’s own national identity. Discouraged by the state of the ranching industry, he looks beyond the borders of his home country in the hope of finding a lifestyle that is quickly becoming obsolete on the plains of his childhood. Thinking of the Comanche, whose way of life ended in obsolescence, he imagines a caravan of horseback warriors singing “the low chant of their traveling song...as they rode, nation and ghost of nation passing in a soft chorale across the mineral waste to darkness bearing lost to all history and all remembrance like a grail the sum of their secular and transitory and violent lives” (5). His imaginings are a prelude to the crumbling infrastructure of postwar American ideology as the nation struggles to reformulate its identity, lest it become a ghost. And, as if his own observations are not foreboding enough, the last words his father ever speaks to him are a warning of violence to come: “People dont feel safe no more....We’re like the Comanches was two hundred years ago. We dont even know what’s

go in to show up here come daylight. We don't even know what color they'll be" (26). The disappearance of the Comanche underscores the fact that the dominant order has done nothing to benefit its fringe communities. Living within the nation's physical boundaries, yet outside its cultural norms, the Comanche cannot sustain their way of life indefinitely. Eventually, they must assimilate or leave. John Grady identifies with this dilemma. He is born an American citizen, yet he does not feel represented by the status quo. When faced with the option of giving up ranch life to find work in the city or in the oil fields (assimilation), he heads for the border.

McCarthy uses John Grady's disenchantment with domestic life to revisit the history of postwar America, but it should be noted that the novel is not simply an inversion of Eurocentric narratives, in which settlers are changed from protagonists to antagonists while indigenous communities reign victorious over the land that is rightfully theirs. McCarthy's revisionism is more complicated. His westerns "are not revisionist histories in the way that term is normally understood. They accept violence as a condition of being alive and they are not simply (and easily) critiquing a cartoonish version of exceptionalist American history" (Parrish 71).

McCarthy explores the nuanced interactions between people groups by resurrecting the "ghosts of nations" replaced by European settlers, forcing his characters to confront the violent truths of their historical encounters. In this way, the modern America that John Grady inhabits is a land haunted by the past. His encounter with the ghosts of history represents the miry intersection of national ideology and national border. As Bhabha explains, "The problematic boundaries of modernity are enacted in these ambivalent temporalities of the nation-space. The language of culture and community is poised on the fissures of the present becoming the rhetorical figures of a national past" ("Dissemination" 132). McCarthy places John Grady on the historical border between antiquity and modernity. His travels across physical borders, then, signify a cultural

transition. As the country modernizes, John Grady attempts to retreat to a romantic past as a way of forestalling the future of modern life.

John Grady's problem, like Billy's, is his own naivety. He is motivated to leave home by an idyllic form of escapism. If the rugged individualism he so desires cannot be found in his home country, he assumes he can reproduce it in a foreign land. But, as McCarthy critic Nicholas Monk explains in his analysis of the novel's borderlands, John Grady is "in flight from a modern, technologically-frenzied, eco-destructive United States – the 'real' world – to the romantic 'unreality' of Mexico which, in turn, engenders from John Grady's fantasy a darker, brutal, reality of its own" (122). He thinks he can escape the grim reality of postwar America by fleeing to another country, but he soon discovers Mexico has been in an ongoing state of transition for nearly a century as a result of its own domestic wars. Similar to the United States, war presents Mexico with a cultural shift in which the marginalized groups within the country must also struggle to survive a repressive dominant order.

### **Third Space: Liminality and the Historical Binary**

It doesn't take long for John Grady to decide to strike out for Mexico, and it takes little convincing to talk his friend, Lacey Rawlins, into partnering up for the journey. Allured by the freedom of self-sufficiency, they ride their horses across the border into a land they think to be untouched, unregulated, and unadulterated by the mechanisms of modern culture. What they find, of course, is something wholly different. They expect Mexico to be the opposite of America, but it is not. Instead, it is an uncanny territory that Monk has identified as a "Third Space," a region that is "both and neither country simultaneously" (122). The concept of a third space is not unique to Monk. It is a fundamental attribute of border theory, a literary school of thought that explores the meaning of physical and metaphysical borders in fiction:

[T]he borders school puts forth a compelling counter-paradigm of its own—a paradigm that seeks to tell the history of a different (and plural) cultural space, the border or *la frontera*, that is neither the site of assimilation nor the marking of an alien Other. It treats such a space as definitive for an ever-growing number of U.S. residents and explores it as a realm of exile, mobility, survival strategies, and the emergence of alternative and multiple identities mixing old and new that cannot be easily or accurately assimilated into earlier dominant narratives of “American” identity. (Singh 13)

Echoing the gypsy’s concept of a “third history” in *The Crossing*, the third space of McCarthy’s Mexico is a place of liminality. It is a space that represents the ambiguity of national status following the world wars. The borderlands of the novel have implications beyond physical geography. They are more than just a setting in which a plot unfolds. As Monk suggests, the border is a kind of “no-man’s land that is both physical and of the mind” (123). The crossings from one country into another are not simply a matter of locality; they are a matter of ideology as well. Monk goes on to say, “The unpoliced, provisional, and wild borderland of the Trilogy becomes an area in which any one jurisdiction is undermined by illicit entry, and cannot be absolute, creating both immediacy and a form of contact [between cultures] that is to a large extent unregulated” (123). So, McCarthy’s liminal third space does not simply subvert the binary of Eurocentric historicity. In other words, it does not recast Americans as villains, nor does it elevate the indigenous peoples of Mexico to a status of nobility. Instead, it allows for different cultures to encounter one another in a way that begins to dissolve the ideological barriers which inhibit them from seeing each other as fellow human beings.

Shortly after their departure from home, John Grady and Rawlins stop to water their horses. Cooling in the shade of a black willow tree, they look at their map: “There were roads

and rivers and towns on the American side of the map as far as the Rio Grande and beyond that was all white” (34). The fact that the map is completely blank south of the Rio Grande suggests Mexico is unknowable to the American mind. It cannot be mapped because it cannot be understood. The blank space represents a cultural void. The barrier between what is domestic and foreign is similar to Edward Said’s critique of the occident and the orient. Said’s theory of *orientalism*:

Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident.’ Thus a very large mass of writers...have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, ‘mind,’ destiny, and so on. (25)

Although Said’s criticism deals primarily with the borders between Europe and Asia, his theory can be applied to the US/Mexico borders since the same process of *othering* occurs. On the boys’ map, everything south of the Rio Grande is *other*. It is uncharted terrain, foreign to the eyes of the American occident.

The boys are not in Mexico long before they come upon a lone traveler who goes by the name of Jimmy Blevins. Also an American runaway, he is hoping to make a way for himself in the blank canvas of the borderlands. Against Rawlins’ protestations, John Grady agrees to let Blevins join them, and the three ride together across the plains. Heading south one evening, the boys turn in their saddles to see a storm blowing in from the north: “Shrouded in the black thunderheads the distant lightning glowed mutely like welding seen through foundry smoke. As if repairs were under way at some flawed place in the iron dark of the world” (67). It is as though the country they have left behind is up in flames. The world, as they know it, is dying. The

epochs of history are indeed colliding. As the storm begins to touch ground, the rains come “down the road behind them like some phantom migration” (69). Like the Comanche before them, their way of life is fading into the past. Everything they know to be true of the world is in flux, and in their travels southward they must come to see it anew.

After parting ways with Blevins, John Grady and Rawlins push on farther into the south until they reach the Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción. They have heard word of the hacienda in their brief encounters with vaqueros (cattle drivers) along the way. They are hopeful that there will be work for them on the ranch (the kind of work they no longer have the means to sustain in their home country). After dining with the vaqueros at the ranch on their first evening, the boys answer questions about America and American horses. To the men, “the country to the north [is] little more than a rumor. A thing for which there seemed no accounting” (95). Though their conversation is brief, it shows there is a clear cultural barrier between them. For the vaqueros, America is as mythical and lawless a place as Mexico is for the boys. It is a place that only exists in the mind. This moment of encounter between them illustrates the *othering* that occurs on both sides of the occident/orient binary. Each side knows the other by rumor alone, not by experiential knowledge. But, as the boys begin to work the land and befriend the residents of the ranch, their mythologized conceptions of Mexico start to fall apart.

### **A Life Long Relict: The New World vs. the Newer World**

John Grady and Rawlins leave Texas hoping to find the last bastions of an old world utopia, where the land is yet unspoiled by industry, technology, and war. And they believe to have found it at La Purísima. Indeed, the land appears to be an Eden-like paradise: “In the lakes and in the streams were species of fish not known elsewhere on earth and birds and lizards and other forms of life as well all long relict here for the desert stretched away on every side” (97).

This desert oasis, surrounded on all sides by a world in decay, is exactly what the boys have hoped for, but it is a paradise that has not sprung from the ground without cost. The ranch's history is heavily steeped in the same troubled past the boys think they have left behind in America:

La Purísima was one of very few ranches in that part of Mexico retaining the full complement of six square leagues of land allotted by the colonizing legislation of eighteen twenty-four and the owner Don Hector Rocha y Villareal was one of the few hacendados who actually lived on the land he claimed, land which had been in his family for one hundred and seventy years. He was forty-seven years old and he was the first male heir in all that new world lineage to attain such an age. (97)

The six square leagues of land (roughly 40 square miles) Don Hector has inherited is the direct result of a colonization campaign to populate the interior of Mexico, an effort to strengthen local economies, promote industry, establish labor forces, and restore potential servicemen to the country's depleted armed forces after the war of independence. Although Mexico won independence from Spain in 1821, the colonial legacy lived on in the country in the form of land tenure legislation, which allotted public lands to immigrant farmers and ranchers for the purpose of building and stabilizing its markets. In reality, such legislation led to enormous disparities between the nation's wealthy landowners and peasant field workers. With much of its land controlled by an elite ruling class of landowners, the country was effectively turned into a feudal society. Don Hector's tract of land functions like a small kingdom. There is an established hierarchical chain of command on the ranch. Don Hector, of course, sits at the top of this hierarchy, overseeing the many subordinate wage laborers under his employ. So, when the naïve

American cowboys arrive at La Purísima, they mistakenly see it as utopia, when in fact its very existence stems from the same hegemonic control of land they are trying to escape in Texas.

Even though the boys feel the American dream of self-sufficiency can no longer be obtained in their homeland, they still believe in it as an abstraction. They cling to the romantic notion of personal independence, and although they think they've found their true freedom at the ranch, they've actually stumbled upon a quintessential symbol of dynastic empire. It is clear in the passage above that Don Hector and his family benefit from a hereditary "new world lineage" of landowners. It is a system that, by design, mimics the royal governing bodies of prewar Europe, which can "only be preserved if the members of the various dynasties [continue] to marry one another...because aristocratic families [are] emphatically members of one or another national elite" (Ferguson 98). To secure governing power, landowners must ensure the heirs of their estates marry likeminded aristocrats of similar status. This is why there is so much pressure on Alejandra, the hacendado's daughter, to marry a man from a neighboring ranch. If power is to remain in the family, and the family is to maintain its dynastic status in the region, Alejandra must marry within a familial empire like her own. Her marital obligation becomes problematic, however, when she meets John Grady.

Like a twentieth-century Romeo and Juliet, trouble begins for the young lovers as soon as they make contact with one another. John Grady finds Alejandra at a party one evening "dancing with a tall boy from San Pablo ranch" (123). It is a social atmosphere that exists for the courtship of young maidens by the sons of nearby ranchers. John Grady, an outsider with no lineage or land to speak to of, is an ill-fit suitor. Yet, the two fall in love immediately as they share a dance. The physical contact between them is another example of the colliding epochs of history. Alejandra, the embodiment of a pseudo-European aristocracy, and John Grady, the product of

American individualism, represent a cultural confrontation when they come together. For a time, they enjoy a blissful union, but it is destined for failure from the start. Alejandra's family expects her to marry someone like the tall boy from San Pablo, and John Grady, in no way, fits the bill.

As word of their newfound love begins to spread around the ranch, John Grady is warned to stay away from the girl, but neither he nor Alejandra heeds the warnings. While Alejandra is away visiting her mother in Mexico City, John Grady is invited to drink tea and play chess with Dueña Alfonsa, Alejandra's grandaunt and godmother. Dueña Alfonsa represents "oldworld ties" and is well versed in "antiquity and tradition" (132). She keeps a piano in her parlor, along with a pair of Greener guns in an Italian wardrobe. On the wall of the parlor hang photographs of her as a young woman standing in front of "cathedrals in the capitals of Europe" (132). Having studied in Paris, and having worked as a schoolteacher, there is no question that she is an intelligent person. So, when she invites John Grady to play chess, it is evident that the game is intended to challenge his knowledge of traditional European customs, as well as his intentions with Alejandra. The game puts John Grady in a strange predicament. He must decide whether to beat Dueña Alfonsa and prove his intellectual capacity, or concede to her as an act of genteel respect. He beats her two games in a row. Although he is very polite, the wins signify a disregard for the gentlemanly courtesy of her old world traditions.

After challenging him to a third and final game, Dueña Alfonsa speaks to John Grady in philosophical abstractions that he must struggle to interpret. Acknowledging the scar on his cheek from where he'd been kicked by a horse early in his life, she tells him "Scars have the strange power to remind us that our past is real," then rhetorically asks, "The events that cause them can never be forgotten, can they?" (135). Here, she is speaking less about physical scars and more about the problem of cultural baggage people carry with them from childhood. She is

essentially telling John Grady that he cannot escape his cultural history. In her view, his American-ness has not changed simply because he has decided to leave America. He is still a product of the ideology that shaped his home country, and that ideology, which he carries with him and from which he cannot escape, has pitted itself against the ideological norms of colonial Mexico.

She goes on to discuss his relationship with Alejandra. She admits the girl's rebelliousness is a trait she herself possessed in her youth; still, a rebellious disposition cannot erase the larger systems of power at work in society: "I was also rebellious so I recognize it in others. Yet I think that I had no wish to break things. Or perhaps only those things that wished to break me. The names of the entities that have the power to constrain us change with time. Convention and authority are replaced by infirmity. But my attitude toward them has not changed. Has not changed" (136). In spite of her own rebellious nature, Dueña Alfonsa adheres to social conventions. This is where she and Alejandra differ. Alejandra, like John Grady, feels no personal obligation to uphold the customary roles of her social class. She has no problem breaking from tradition in order to be with the one she loves. Dueña Alfonsa, though she understands the couple's angst, warns against such a break. She acknowledges the fact that ideological "entities" weaken and change over the course of history, but argues that they must be respected in their time. Concluding her speech, Dueña Alfonsa is much less subtle. She tells John Grady, in no uncertain terms, that "it is not proper for [the couple] to be seen riding in the campo together without supervision" (136). She then reminds him he is in another country, suggesting that as a foreigner he cannot fully understand the cultural implications of his actions.

Similar to the meeting with Dueña Alfonsa, John Grady is invited to another kind of gentlemen's interrogation, this time with the hacendado himself. Instead of chess, the two play a

game of billiards, but the purpose of the game is much the same. He knows that John Grady has not listened to Dueña Alfonsa's cautionary words, and that the young girl's upstanding reputation in the community has been tarnished by foreign blood. As they begin to shoot pool, Don Hector tells John Grady about the family's history in regard to the Mexican Revolution of 1910 (one of many revolutions in the country). According to Don Hector, the family had been very close to Francisco Madero's family before he came to power as the nation's revolutionary leader. Dueña Alfonsa had at one time been engaged to Madero's brother, but her father would not permit the marriage because "The political views of the family were quite radical" (144). In other words, Madero's revolutionary ideology threatened the power structure of Dueña Alfonsa's landowning family. The marriage was forbidden on the basis of maintaining the European nobility that had led to the family's success. Again, this anecdote is an allusion to John Grady's relationship with Alejandra. It is the hacendado's way of telling the boy that he will never be permitted to marry the girl. They belong to two different systems of thought. "One country is not another country," he says, insinuating that John Grady's identity as an American compromises his ability to be a rightful husband (145).

The conversations between John Grady and Alejandra's elders exemplify the problem of nationality in the modern era. Fragmented by ongoing wars, and threatened by the cultural diffusion that ensued as a result, nationalism was on the rise in many countries across the globe at the beginning of the twentieth century. In a protectionist attempt to isolate and preserve their cultures from an influx of immigrants and refugees, miscegenation was discouraged, and in many cases outlawed. According to Niall Ferguson, by 1901 there was a "worldwide revulsion against 'miscegenation'" (20). Intermarriage was viewed as a treasonous offence as the rhetoric of nationalism grew around the world. John Grady does not understand this. Since he feels no

obligation to his country of origin, he cannot understand why he should be barred from marrying Alejandra simply because he is an American. He does not see himself as a threat to her family heritage or their national idealism, nor does he see himself as a traitor to his own country; he is just a boy in love.

McCarthy's narrative is a compelling one in the context of traditional American westerns because it reverses the role of the American cowboy. John Grady is not a gun-slinging vigilante with a self-appointed duty to protect civilization from the savagery of Indian invaders. He is rather the victim of such nationalist protectionism. He possesses all the virtues of an upstanding American citizen—he is hardworking, independent, intelligent, and resourceful—yet none of his attributes are of any consequence outside his homeland.

Although John Grady is not the victim of a physically colonized space, he takes on the role of the alien *other*. His presence on the ranch means that he inhabits a place of psychological colonization. As such, he becomes like the indigenous peoples of Mexico who have been subordinated by the dominant powers of European colonialism (people like Don Hector's family, who exercise their old world privilege in the colonial spaces of the "new" nation). His subjugation presents the Eurocentric framework of cultural dominance as a failed system. In this way, the novel can be considered a counter-discursive text. Counter-discursivity, according to Deborah Madsen, "refers to a style of expression whereby the 'colonized' is writing back to contest specific narratives that articulate the ideology of colonialism" (67). She explains, "The story of western settlement, which is based upon the concepts of virgin territory, the civilizing mission, and Anglo-American exceptionalism, is still told by the American voice but the story is appropriated" for an alternative "historical perspective" (67). John Grady, who, according to his American heritage, should reap the benefits of a Eurocentric governance, instead suffers. This

subversion of the American cowboy thus offers a counter-discursive perspective on twentieth-century nationalist thinking, which is rooted in Anglo-European colonialism.

### **Post-Colonial Literature and National Epistemology**

As I said earlier, Cormac McCarthy does not simply subvert the binary of Eurocentric historicism. Again, his fiction does not so easily vilify the European experience and dignify the oppressed. This is important to remember when reading his work through a post-colonial lens because, as Helen Tiffin writes in her article “Post-colonial Literatures and Counter-discourse,” “[p]ost-colonial cultures are inevitably hybridised, involving a dialectical relationship between European ontology and epistemology and the impulse to create or recreate independent local identity” (99). The text does not attempt to obliterate the hegemonic history of Euro-colonialism, nor does it attempt to invent an a-historical utopic vision of a classless society. Instead, the text creates a “dialectical relationship” between cultural history and personal identity. In his confrontations with a repressive social order, John Grady must learn to reconcile his personal desires with the European history that stands in the way of their fulfillment.

The night after his conversation with the hacendado, John Grady and Rawlins are taken unexpectedly from their bunks by officers of the law and mounted on their horses with their hands manacled to their saddle horns. Without explanation, they are escorted off the property. Though they are not charged with any specific crime, Rawlins assumes the arrest has been arranged by Don Hector on account of John Grady’s relationship with Alejandra. The boys are led north where they are briefly reunited with Blevins, who has also been arrested. Together in a holding cell, they learn that Blevins has shot three Mexican men (one fatally) in a dispute over a stolen horse and pistol. Since the boys are rumored to be former traveling companions of Blevins, they are suspected of having been involved in the shootings. In spite of pleading their

innocence, they are assumed guilty. Blevins is executed in a roadside ditch, and the other two boys are sent to the Saltillo prison.

While in Saltillo, John Grady experiences another kind of third space. The prison is essentially a lawless borderland outside the jurisdiction of any national authority. Within the confines of the prison walls, men are reduced to a primitive existence in which they must fight to survive:

The prison was no more than a small walled village and within it occurred a constant seethe of barter and exchange and everything from radios and blankets down to matches and buttons and shoenails and within this bartering ran a constant struggle for status and position. Underpinning all of it like the fiscal standard in commercial societies lay a bedrock of depravity and violence where in an egalitarian absolute every man was judged by a single standard and that was his readiness to kill. (182)

McCarthy presents bloody, hand-to-hand fighting as the purest form of egalitarianism, but it is an egalitarianism stripped of the romantic ideals of personal freedom the boys have come to expect. The classical European form of democracy they experience on the hacienda has proven to be nothing more than a façade behind which powerful entities suppress the weak. In Saltillo, however, there is an “egalitarian absolute.” Class and status no longer exist in the form of wealth, nationality, ethnicity, or genealogy. Financial wellbeing signifies nothing. Old world lineages and new world ties no longer matter. The only form of currency is one’s predilection for bloodshed. Yet, even in this “egalitarian absolute” there exists an ironic longing for order and community. In the absence of cultural identifiers and economic class statuses, the prisoners create their own hegemonic power structure.

The violence of Saltillo is classic McCarthy. It is grotesque and gratuitous, but not without reason. The violence serves a meaningful purpose in the context of a post-colonial interpretation. Saltillo strips men of their cultural identity, making each prisoner equal in terms of his social rank. Status, then, is derived from one's ability to physically conquer another. The boys spend their first four days in the prison fighting other inmates. By the end of the fourth day they can hardly move. Having been beaten nearly to death, they start to realize that the exceptionalism of the American cowboy is nothing more than myth. Rawlins jokes, "We think we're a couple of pretty tough cowboys," then admits, "They could kill us any time" (186). The prison is the logical end of rugged individualism, but it is not the romantic dream the boys had hoped to find. The truly egalitarian society is a murderous place. Left to their own devices and their own depravity, the men of this society fight and kill to stay alive.

Apart from their struggle to stay alive, the boys struggle to understand the social order of the prison. Seeking help, they approach a fellow inmate named Emilio Perez, who has his own makeshift home in the prison yard. Emilio tells the boys they are incapable of understanding the social machinations of the prison because of their American upbringing. He says, "You don't understand the life here. You think this struggle is for things. Some shoelaces or some cigarettes or something like that. The [fight]. You know what is naïve? A naïve view. The real facts are always otherwise. You cannot stay in this place and be independent peoples. You do not know what is the situation here. You don't speak the language" (188). When Rawlins tries to protest Emilio's claim, insisting John Grady speaks the language fluently, Emilio disagrees. He is not speaking simply of linguistic barriers but of national discourse. It is true that John Grady knows how to speak Spanish, but the collective consciousness of Mexican nationhood is another matter. Emilio identifies the boys' problem as one of misunderstood independence. The boys have

falsely assumed they can roam the underpopulated Mexican countryside as free agents without repercussion. They have also come under the false impression that their fights inside the prison have sufficiently proven their strength as individuals. Emilio warns that independent bravado is illusory. Unlike in America, personal loyalty in Mexico cannot be purchased with material goods.

A few days after their first meeting with Emilio, Rawlins is caught off guard in the courtyard and stabbed three times by an unknown man. Assuming Emilio has had something to do with the stabbing, John Grady returns to Emilio's hut where the two of them further discuss his predicament. Believing that Emilio has persuasive power among the prison guards, John Grady hopes the man will negotiate their release. Unfortunately, Emilio claims he does not have the influence John Grady assumes. He explains, "Even in a place like this where we are concerned with fundamental things the mind of the anglo is closed in this rare way. At one time I thought it was only his life of privilege. But it is not that. It is his mind" (192). According to Emilio, John Grady's dilemma has nothing to do with the fact that he has been wrongly accused of a crime he did not commit; it is that he has been interpellated as a subject of Anglo-American ideology. Like Billy Parham, he cannot escape his American identity. Having been born into the national discourse of American values, he is unable to see the world from a Mexican perspective. Emilio elaborates, "It is no that [the Anglo] is stupid. It is that his picture of the world is incomplete. In this rare way. He looks only where he wishes to see" (192). Indeed, what he says is true. Remember, the boys literally carry with them an incomplete map of the border regions. Emilio reiterates the problem of the American "picture of the world." Because the boys have been raised under the pretenses of American exceptionalism, they cannot see (or comprehend) the national epistemology of another land.

Concluding his speech, Emilio makes a comparison between the prison and John Grady's American frame of mind: "[T]his type of world you see. This confinement. It gives a false impression. As if things are in control. If these men could be controlled they would not be here. You see the problem" (193). The analogy shows that American ideology confines itself to a limited knowledge of the world in an attempt to control it. But, as Emilio points out, the world cannot be controlled by such narrow systems of thought (or any system of thought for that matter). Any attempt to control the world with an ideological "picture," will inevitably end in a paradoxical subjection to that picture. For example, at the beginning of the novel the boys believe wholeheartedly in the American ideals of self-governance and self-reliance. Since these ideals are instilled in them early in life, the boys grow up thinking they should be able to attain them anywhere in the world. Before they ever cross the border into Mexico, their only knowledge of the world is what is portrayed in the American "picture." It isn't until they confront the characters of the border spaces that they are faced with an alternative view.

After the boys are released from prison, John Grady returns to La Purísima alone, hoping to propose to Alejandra. When he arrives back to the property, he speaks with the vaqueros he had worked with before his arrest. Similar to Emilio, the vaqueros warn John Grady that his American-ness prohibits him from seeing a complete view of the world. They tell him that "[A] man leaves much when he leaves his own country. They said that it was no accident of circumstance that a man be born in a certain country and not some other and they said that the weathers and seasons that form a land form also the inner fortunes of men in their generations and are passed on to their children and are not so easily come by otherwise" (226). It is a roundabout way of telling John Grady that he should return to his homeland. The vaqueros warn him that remaining in Mexico will only invite misfortune which he does not have the capacity to

understand. They suggest that he has been shaped by the Texas plains and conditioned by the generational virtues of its people. In other words, he has been interpellated by American ideology to perceive the world a certain way. In keeping with his American value system, he ignores cultural boundaries and tries to conquer the customs of a place he cannot fully understand.

Hoping to plead his innocence to Don Hector, John Grady manages to meet with Dueña Alfonsa to explain his intentions for marrying Alejandra. In a long-winded, philosophical monologue, the aunt tells John Grady that he will never marry the girl because the societal constructs will never allow it:

I am not a society person. The societies to which I have been exposed seemed to me largely machines for the suppression of women. Society is very important in Mexico. Where women do not even have the vote. In Mexico they are mad for society and for politics and very bad at both. My family are considered gachupines here, but the madness of the Spaniard is not so different from the madness of the creole. The political tragedy in Spain was rehearsed in full dress twenty years earlier on Mexican soil. (230)

Here, she tries to contextualize John Grady's problem by pointing out that the societal machinations of oppression are not unique to any one country. She points out that nation states have historically worked toward the oppression of women and indigenous minorities. She admits that her family's gachupine status has privileged her, but she also recognizes that her privilege is not a Spanish invention. She recognizes that the problem of cultural subjugation predates her family's position of power. In a way, she sympathizes with John Grady's circumstance. She understands that societal machinations repress the needs of individuals for the benefit of

ideological progress, but, unlike John Grady, she has learned to accept this reality as a constant truth of human behavior. She goes on to say,

For me the world has always been more of a puppet show. But when one looks behind the curtain and traces the strings upward he finds they terminate in the hands of yet other puppets, themselves with their own strings which trace upward in turn, and so on. In my own life I saw these strings whose origins were endless enact the deaths of great men in violence and madness. Enact the ruin of a nation. (231)

The puppet analogy is helpful for understanding John Grady's situation because it illustrates what he is incapable of seeing himself. Dueña Alfonsa, as a Spaniard, benefits from both her country's colonial dominance and her family's political prestige; but, as a woman, she is victimized by the very system that privileges her. In this position, she is able to look behind the curtain of ideology, so to speak. She possesses what W.E.B. Du Bois calls "double-consciousness" (9). Due to her national privilege working in tandem with her gendered oppression, she is permitted to see beyond the "veil" of society (Du Bois 8). In this position, it is clear that the ideological constructs of society work for and against her simultaneously. She knows that she is the product of social puppeteering, but she has learned to accept the "strings" as a natural human condition, whereas John Grady attempts to cut the "strings" entirely.

Finishing her speech, Dueña Alfonsa tries to show John Grady that it is fallacious to try to work against the natural conditions of the human experience: "It is supposed to be true that those who do not know history are condemned to repeat it. I don't believe knowing can save us. What is constant in history is greed and foolishness and a love of blood" (239). With this, she tells him that he must accept the reality that he will never marry Alejandra. Their marriage will never be permissible in the eyes of her father. His foreign blood, coupled with the fact that he has

already defiled her good reputation, means that Don Hector would have him dead before accepting him as a rightful husband.

### **No Country for Young Men: An Unhomely Return**

When he finally returns to Texas, John Grady grapples with a deep sense of personal loss. Heartbroken over Alejandra, reeling from his murder of the prison boy, and still struggling to understand Blevins' death, John Grady re-crosses the border a changed man. Visiting Rawlins at his family's home in San Angelo, John Grady confides in his friend. Inquiring about his future plans, Rawlins suggests John Grady settle down in Texas and go to work on the oil rigs. He assures John Grady, "This is still good country," to which John Grady replies, "Yeah. I know it is. But it aint my country" (299). Pressing him to elaborate, Rawlins asks John Grady where he thinks he belongs. "I dont know," John Grady says, "I dont know where [my country] is. I dont know what happens to country" (299). An exile in his own nation, John Grady cannot shed his American identity, nor can he simply accept the social conventions that work against his personal desires. In the end, he cannot bring himself to assimilate, but he cannot leave home either. He has become like his father before him, returning to a place he no longer recognizes and unable to identify his role in society. Like the Comanche in the beginning of the novel, he wanders westward on the plains like the apparition of a nation lost to history. In the final scene, he rides past an encampment of unnamed Indians who watch him disappear upon the plains like their forbearers: "They stood and watched him pass and watched him vanish upon that landscape solely because he was passing. Solely because he would vanish" (301). In his movement, he personifies the border between individuality and nationality, a relationship which will continue to haunt him in the final installment of the trilogy.

### **A Leprous Paradise: The Limits of an Imaginary West in *Cities of the Plain***

*Cities of the Plain*, the third and final volume of the Border Trilogy, creates a space in which Billy Parham and John Grady Cole are finally able to interact with one another. The year is 1952, and the boys have grown into adulthood (Billy is 28, and John Grady 20). On a failing ranch in New Mexico, the protagonists of the first two novels find work mending fence posts, driving cattle, and training horses on what remains of Mac McGovern's vanishing rangeland. Having returned to the United States after their separate crossings into Mexico, the young men re-enter a country that is all at once familiar and foreign. It is an unhomely experience for both of them because they return from their travels changed persons, and as a result of their personal changes have come to see their homeland from alternative perspectives. Having already dealt with their individual identity crises abroad in the first two novels, they bring their cultural baggage home in the trilogy's final installment. Juxtaposed against one another, each of the men struggles in his own way to understand the personal changes he has undergone south of the border. John Grady becomes hopelessly obsessed with recreating his picturesque vision of cowboy life, while Billy has come to terms with the fact that the American frontier is gone for good. The difference in their attitudes toward ranch life illumines a paradigm shift in American culture, revealing ideological changes that have lasted into the twenty-first century. Though they are close friends, each of the characters represents an opposing side of this paradigmatic struggle. The narrative presents the men with a modern dilemma: accept the changes wrought upon them by the forces of power, or be rendered obsolete. Each side of the dilemma carries its own consequences, and in their dialogue with one another, the two friends illustrate for readers the complexities of life in the modern world.

In this chapter, my objective is to focus on McCarthy's portrayal of the ideological developments that take place in the postwar United States, and to better understand the implications those changes may have for the future of American life. I will look specifically at how *Cities of the Plain* addresses America's superstructural approach to modern warfare, technological innovation, and environmental deterioration because the novel's main characters are most directly affected by the changes in these three categories. John Grady, who stubbornly resists any change that threatens his idea of home on the range, is contrasted by Billy, who reluctantly accepts the changing lifestyle of the frontier. In a comparative study of the two characters, I intend to show that John Grady's death at the end of the novel signifies the death of American exceptionalism and personifies the limits of the American dream. At the same time, I will show that Billy's adaptation to the new way of life underscores the inevitability of social, technological, and environmental changes in the modern world.

### **The Boys Are Back In Town: The Unhomely Return of the Prodigal Protagonists**

In *The Crossing*, Billy returns from Mexico after his unsuccessful attempt to save the wolf from death. In spite of the fact that he has failed in his efforts to rescue the animal, his experiences in Mexico mark a significant change in his character. Having endured the physical and psychological dilemmas of the journey, he returns home a different person. Had McCarthy chosen to end the novel with a triumphal homecoming, the story would read as a classic western cliché. Like many coming-of-age narratives, the story could very well have been written as a modern allegory of the prodigal son's naïve departure from home, followed by his humble return to the warmth and comfort of the family hearth. But, this is not the story McCarthy tells. Billy does not come home to a welcome feast. There is no ceremony. There is no fattened calf. Instead, what he finds is an empty house. There are no horses in the barn, and most of the

furnishings have been moved out. When he rides into town to inquire about his family, the local sheriff informs him that his parents were shot to death by horse thieves one night while Billy was off in Mexico.

In his absence, time seems to have passed him by. As he leaves the sheriff's office and walks out into the street, he is cognizant of the fact that he is being watched by passerby:

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

This is a critical moment for Billy because, for the first time, he is unrecognizable in his home country. He is something "wild" and "outlandish." He has become *the other* in his own community. He is the object of the public's collective gaze. The idea that he is both "envied" and "reviled" is significant because it suggests that he is being exoticized by his own fellow countrymen. To them, he represents both a desire for and fear of the unknown. Like the prophetic words of the desert mystic, Billy has literally become a *huerfano* [orphan] in his homeland.

This moment of self-consciousness is an example of what Bhabha calls *unhomeliness*. The home to which Billy had hoped to return no longer exists. According to Bhabha, the unhomey experience "captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world in an unhallowed place" ("The World and the Home" 141). For Billy, the vacant

home means that his personal identity has been compromised. As his home and country become unrecognizable to him, so does his security as an individual. It is an unhomely experience because he realizes that he has been estranged from the place which has shaped his identity. Consequently, he is now a different person. He will never be able to restore the past.

Billy's unhomely moment of self-consciousness represents a collision of his past and present selves. It is the personal domestic space interacting with the outside world. It is a classic example of unhomely displacement. It is in this kind of displacement, Bhabha explains, that "the border between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting" ("The World and the Home" 141). The empty house creates an uncanny moment in which Billy must reconcile his romantic memory of the past with the present reality of his parents' violent death. It is a moment in which he must confront the idea that his home—a place of comfort, safety, and stability—has been transformed into a place of barbarism. The foundations of his worldview have been disrupted, and as a result, he begins to question his relationship to his country.

Billy epitomizes the deep sense of loss that persists throughout the trilogy. When he eventually arrives at the McGovern ranch in *Cities of the Plain*, Billy is still learning to cope with his unhomeliness. This is perhaps why he and John Grady have become fast friends. Both share a common experience of having run away to Mexico in their formative years. Now that they have returned home, they must determine what those experiences mean for them and their respective roles in society. In this aspect, the young men are in good company. They spend most of their days with ranch hands who have also been physically and socially displaced. Together, they grieve the loss of their homeland to mechanisms of war, technology, and a diminishing natural environment. For example, when Billy and Troy drive Mac's pickup truck through the

desert, Troy is visibly upset after an owl unexpectedly flies into the windshield. When Billy asks him what's wrong, Troy tries to shrug the question but is clearly bothered. The death of the owl reminds him of his brother who died in the war, and as they continue driving down the road, Troy quietly laments the reality that "the country that [he had] grown up in and that he thought he might go back to and where his dead brother was buried was all behind them" (35). From a plot standpoint, this scene is rather insignificant, but within the context of their unhomely struggle to know their place in the rapidly changing climate of American life, this moment is essential because it shows that the characters' unhomeliness allows them to better intuit the problems of postwar modernity. The proverbial veil has been lifted, and they begin to see the destructive nature of American ideology. Troy becomes aware that the country of his childhood only exists in memory. The land itself is gone, and he will never return to the place he knows as home. In addition to the physical loss of land, he is grieving the personal loss of his brother, a loss created by the American military (an ideological apparatus that has interpellated the young boy as a soldier). Though the war is over and America has claimed victory abroad, Troy underscores the loss on the home front.

### **Wars and Rumors of Wars**

Everyone who works on the McGovern ranch knows he is working on borrowed time. Mac's land is one of the last few working ranches in the region, and the threat of eminent domain is causing the wage laborers to reevaluate their lives as cowboys. At the beginning of the novel, Billy tells John Grady of a rumor regarding Mac's property: "Mr Johnson says the army sent people out here with orders to survey seven states in the southwest and find the sorriest land they could find and report back. And Mac's ranch was settin right in the middle of it" (11). The backdrop of the novel is a country in the midst of physical and cultural transition. The United

States government is re-appropriating private lands for the purpose of building nuclear test facilities and weapons production sites. Under the guise of national security, the military is acquiring privately owned domestic lands to perpetuate the postwar nuclear arms race abroad. The government uses the imminent threat of nuclear catastrophe as its evidentiary rationale for heightening its own weapons productions. The effect of such production is the emboldening of a monocular national consciousness that, ironically, endangers the livelihood of the American people.

In his essay “On National Culture,” Frantz Fanon offers a definition of national culture that is helpful in understanding the metaphorical function of war in McCarthy’s work: “A national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify, and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence” (120). In *Cities of the Plain*, war is the “action” that allows the governing body of the United States to maintain a unified populace. What Fanon refers to as “the efforts made by a people” are, in the context of the novel, the efforts of the government to bolster its military defenses. In order to produce a competitive output of large-scale weapons, the government needs both the cooperation and the property of its people. Ironically, though, in its attempt to secure the rights and freedoms of its citizens, the government is effectively limiting the personal liberties of those it claims to protect. This is an example of what Fanon identifies as “the pitfalls of national consciousness” in his essay of the same name. He writes,

National consciousness, instead of being the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people, instead of being the immediate and most obvious result of the mobilization of the people, will be in any case only an empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty of what might have been. (121)

Fanon argues that national consciousness only serves to protect the power of a national bourgeoisie. The ruling class benefits at the expense of the larger population. This is indeed true on Mac McGovern's ranch. For Mac and his hired hands, the greatest threat to American heritage is not a foreign regime, but the American government itself. The American dream of self-reliance, individual rights, and private property ownership is unattainable because America's ideological apparatuses stand in the way of the very ideology they are supposed to preserve.

Since all of the ranch hands have come to McGovern's place on account of their own personal displacement, the men become a kind of fringe community within their own country. They are outsiders in their own land, and as outsiders, their unhomeliness privileges them to view the acts of the government with skepticism. They come to see that the nation to which they pledge their allegiance is imaginary, at least in Benedict Anderson's use of the term. Anderson's definition is useful in this reading of *Cities of the Plain* because the men on the ranch realize their communion with fellow Americans is imaginary. They are not represented by the status quo of mainstream American ideology. In order for the national community to unify and flourish, the local community of the ranchers must be dissolved. While they love their country, they become critical of blind patriotism, especially when it comes to the topic of war and the land needed to sustain modern combat. For example, in a dinner table conversation with Mr. Johnson, John Grady inquires about the news. Turning the radio off, Mr. Johnson tells John Grady, "It aint news no more....Wars and rumors of war. I dont know why I listen to it" (61). Soured by the Army's takeover of southwestern rangelands, and cognizant of the personal costs of two world wars, Mr. Johnson, like all of the hired hands, is frustrated by America's obsession with warfare because it has proven to be detrimental to traditional frontier life. Multiple wars have only benefitted superstructural powers at the expense of individual lives.

For Billy and John Grady, who come of age in this postwar period of cultural transformation, the reality of war poses an ever-present threat to their futures. When the two discuss the possibility of one day owning land and running cattle, John Grady is optimistic about the future, while Billy is much less confident. Billy tells John Grady,

When you're a kid you have these notions about how things are going to be....You get older and you pull back some on that. I think you wind up just tryin to minimize the pain. Anyway this country aint the same. Nor anything in it. The war changed everthing. I dont think people even know it yet. (78)

Though he is saddened by the prospects of the future, Billy is willing to admit that the war has changed the course of history forever. He is nostalgic about the old days of cattle drives on a seemingly endless range, but he is also a realist. He knows America will never be the same. The Second World War, like the first, has not ended global warfare; to the contrary, it has only provoked questions about the extent of military ingenuity. McCarthy portrays this time of hyper-mechanized nuclear engineering as a period that has changed not only the trajectory of martial action, but a period that has fundamentally altered the American landscape as well.

Billy recognizes that the military's need for private lands is part of a fictitious national narrative intended to unify the public and keep citizens in false communion with one another. Similar to Fanon and Anderson, Timothy Brennan's critique of nationhood can be of use here. In his essay "The National Longing for Form," Brennan explains that nations are "imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions" (49). He argues that "The idea of nationhood is not only a political plea, but a formal binding together of disparate elements. And out of the multiplicities of culture, race, and political structures, grows also a repeated dialectic of uniformity and specificity" (62). In Billy's case, the problem is that

he does not feel bound to the nationalist rhetoric that is forcing him to abandon the land he loves. He does not feel a sense of uniformity in regard to his obligatory role as an American national. As I have said, Billy is essentially an exile in his home. As such, his story is one in which “the contradictory topoi of exile and nation are fused in a lament for the necessary and regrettable insistence of nation-forming,” and in his contradictory state of existence, he “proclaims his identity with a country whose artificiality and exclusiveness have driven him into a kind of exile – a simultaneous recognition of nationhood and an alienation from it” (Brennan 63). Billy’s liminal existence on the border between nation and alienation allows him a vantage point from which to see his country from outside the imagined uniformity of American nationalism. Strangely, this liminality enables him to survive in the postwar era because he is able to accept his alienation without having to fully sacrifice his American identity.

Unlike Billy, John Grady cannot bring himself to accept the cultural and environmental effects of war. As evidence of a vanishing terrain presents itself more and more over the course of the novel, John Grady becomes increasingly romantic about his frontier vision. He knows that the war has greatly impacted common life in the southwest, but he refuses to let it dictate his personal future. He has already witnessed his father’s inability to re-acclimate after returning from a tour of duty with the Third Infantry. Determined not to leave the same defeated legacy, John Grady dreams of making his home on the prairie and living out his days as a cattleman. Ultimately, his dream is to reproduce his childhood experiences on his grandfather’s ranch, “[a]s if he were never to be disinherited by war and war’s machinery” (204). Bastardized by war, John Grady tries to recreate a dreamlike memory of his prewar childhood. He wants to return to a home that no longer exists. The ideological machinery of warfare has unhomed him, and he cannot bring himself to admit that his utopic image of the rangeland is no more than a desert

mirage. Although he senses that he will never see his plan to fruition, he remains stubborn in his resolve to die trying, because the alternative means he must subject himself to an ideology he cannot abide.

The difference between John Grady and Billy is the difference between adaptation and escapism. Billy understands that the governing body of the United States has prioritized military development above all other facets of American life. For this reason, he knows that his days at the Cross Fours Ranch are numbered, and he will eventually need to leave ranching behind once the military appropriates the remaining pasturelands in the region. John Grady, on the other hand, wants to escape by recreating the prewar living conditions of a pastoral southwest. Since Billy lives into old age, and John Grady dies before his twenty-first birthday, the text suggests that Billy's adaptation allows him to survive the circumstances of modernity. Conversely, John Grady's failure to inhabit the liminal space between nation and alienation suggests that his idyllic conception of personal freedom will never materialize.

### **From Buggy to Bomb: Technological Obsolescence**

One of the trilogy's enduring metaphors is the ancient iconography that appears on the sides of rock faces when the characters are wandering through vast reaches of the desert. In *The Crossing*, for example, Billy observes the incomprehensible markings of a tribal code on an outcropping of rock as he rides alone across Mexico. Similarly, just before John Grady reenters the United States in *All the Pretty Horses*, he dreams of riding his horse upon a boulder field in which "the rocks lay smooth and rectilinear as the stones of ancient ruins," as if they were the monolithic structures of "an antique site where some ordering of the world had failed" (*ATPH* 280). In *Cities of the Plain*, these images are most significant because they create a stark juxtaposition when placed alongside the many symbols of modern technology that appear in the

novel. For instance, after John Grady tends to a wounded calf one day on a solo ride, he eats his lunch in “an outcropping of lava rock” where he finds “ancient pictographs among the rocks, engravings of animals and moons and men and lost hieroglyphics whose meaning no man would ever know” (*COTP* 49). The imagery is striking because it portrays a prehistorical civilization lost to history. And while the pictographs reveal the existence of precolonial communities who once inhabited the region, they also reveal the temporality of such communities. When John Grady lunches alone in the outcropping, it is as though his dream from *All the Pretty Horses* has proven to be prophetic. He has actually wandered upon the ruins of a society that could not survive the progression of human technology. His presence among the relics of ghost nations symbolizes his inability to survive the cultural changes of his own country. As a representation of the classic all-American cowboy, his place among the ruins suggests that his way of life is also becoming obsolete.

The reason technological imagery is a critical part of my argument is that it exposes civilization’s failure to preserve itself eternally by way of the mechanisms of technological innovation. Though technology has the power to prolong a culture’s longevity, the text reminds readers that all human societies will inevitably fall to ruin. To an extent, technology has the power to propagate and protect the ideological values of a people; but it cannot replace the people themselves. This tragic reality is best illustrated by Mr. Johnson, who struggles in his old age to reconcile a changing technological landscape with the fact that his familial lineage has ended: “In his time the country had gone from the oil lamp and horse and buggy to jet planes and the atomic bomb but that wasnt what confused him. It was the fact that his daughter was dead that he couldnt get the hang of” (106). In spite of the many luxuries of modern invention, technological progress cannot preserve his family line. On a nuclear level, Mr. Johnson’s family

represents the broader implications of technological development on a culture. Though jet planes and weapons of mass destruction have provided America the resources to defend its ideology, it is still not immune to change.

Like war, technology can be used as an instrument of ideological posturing. It can unify and mobilize a people toward a common goal, but it cannot make them immortal. Eventually, all communities will become obsolete as they are overcome by oppositional forces.

### **Gone for Good: The Environmental Impact of the American Dream**

As they sit together at the dinner table, Mr. Johnson warns John Grady about the environmental impacts of life on the range: “Dont be fooled by the good rains we’ve had. This country is fixin to dry up and blow away” (62). Due to overgrazing and climate change, the range is drying up. The lands which early settlers once thought to be limitless pastures of plenty are now nearly all gone. Mr. Johnson’s warning should be read both literally and figuratively here. The physical land is certainly in a state of decay. The earth is brittle and can longer sustain livestock. Ravaged by drought and overproduction, the ranches are literally blowing away. But, Mr. Johnson’s words suggest also that the infrastructure of American identity is dying as well. The country, as an ideological entity, is deteriorating. So, Mr. Johnson’s warning to John Grady is twofold. Not only must John Grady find a new place to live; he must find a new livelihood altogether.

Later in the novel, the two characters speak again on the topic of land, and Mr. Johnson elaborates on his observations of the changing country. Flicking the butt of a cigarette out into the yard, Mr. Johnson says, “Aint nothin to burn out there. I remember when you could have grassfires in this country” (126). His memory of wildfires on the range reiterates the fact that the

land is in a state of atrophy. It is already so badly depleted of resources that there is nothing left to burn. "There's hard lessons in this world," Mr. Johnson tells John Grady. When John Grady asks what the hardest lesson is, Mr. Johnson replies, "I dont know. Maybe it's just that when things are gone they're gone. They aint comin back" (126). Again, the meaning of Mr. Johnson's words is multilayered. The land itself will never fully recover from the exhaustive ranching industry. The ground is too far gone to be restored. Metaphorically, the dead land represents the limits of American idealism. The dream of infinite opportunity on the open country has proven to be false.

In the final conversation between Mr. Johnson and John Grady, Mr. Johnson implies that there is no new land to be found anywhere in the country. Reminiscing about the past, Mr. Johnson says, "I miss the old range life. I went up the trail four times. Best times of my life. The best. Bein out. Seein new country. There's nothin like it in the world. There never will be" (187). Mr. Johnson dispels the myth that the American frontier is a boundless space of untouched land waiting to be discovered. When he says there will never be anything like the discovery of virgin terrain, he does not simply mean that his penchant for exploration is unmatched by any other pastime; he indicates that the age of discovery has ended. The exploration of new lands is impossible in the twentieth century because there are no lands left to be explored. John Grady's hope of finding such lands is nothing more than disillusionment. All of the country's lands have been desecrated by human use. The nation's appetite for productivity has led to the overproduction of farms and ranches, and once the lands have lost their value as economic commodities, the government repurposes them in order to substantiate their claim to global military power.

### **The Death of American Exceptionalism**

John Grady's romanticism becomes fatal in the latter half of *Cities of the Plain* when he attempts to marry a Mexican prostitute who works for the infamous pimp Eduardo. John Grady's ludicrous plan to cross the national border, purchase the girl's freedom outright for two-thousand dollars, and elope with her to a bungalow on the outskirts of Mac's ranch is doomed from the start. Eduardo warns John Grady well in advance that his plan will not succeed. And when John Grady sends Billy to Eduardo's brothel to advocate for the girl's release, Eduardo says, "Your friend is in the grip of an irrational passion....He has in his head a certain story" (134).

According to Eduardo, John Grady's problem is not that he is hopelessly in love with a girl he cannot marry. It is deeper than that. His problem is rooted in a false image of the world. Eduardo explains, "What is wrong with this story is that it is not a true story. Men 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). Eduardo identifies John Grady's fatal flaw as a misunderstanding of the world. This misunderstanding stems from the myth of American exceptionalism. John Grady's picture of the world, created and shaped by American ideological apparatuses, is nothing more than a dream.

When Billy returns to the brothel a second time to defend John Grady's honor, Eduardo lectures him again on the cultural misconceptions that have led to John Grady's crisis:

In spite of whatever views you may hold everything that has come to pass has been the result of your friend's coveting of another man's property and his willful determination to convert that property to his own use without regard for the consequences. But of course this does not make the consequences go away. Does it? (240)

While the text ultimately casts John Grady as the tragic hero, Eduardo is the voice of reason in this passage, despite his role as the novel's villain. He articulates John Grady's tragic flaw better

than any other character in the trilogy. Eduardo reveals the delusional picture of American exceptionalism. He tries to explain to Billy that his friend's predicament is a uniquely American phenomenon. The idea that John Grady should expect to enter a foreign land, exchange monetary currency for a human life, retreat home, and go on living without consequence is a product of America's colonial legacy.

Eduardo's critique of American arrogance continues when John Grady comes to the brothel to avenge the death of his murdered lover. In the knife fight that ensues, Eduardo gives a diatribe against the American worldview. Wielding his knife and feinting at his opponent, Eduardo tells John Grady that farm boys such as he are misguided by a longing for something unattainable: "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. Being farmboys of course the first place they think to look is a whorehouse" (249). The term "leprous paradise" simultaneously depicts John Grady's disillusionment as well as the reality surrounding his false image of the world. The paradise he has envisioned for himself is based on the classic American dream of personal and providential prosperity. The doctrine of Manifest Destiny—which initially portrayed the nation as an abundant promised land endowed by Almighty God to his faithful disciples—is still alive in John Grady's mind. Eduardo tries to explain, however, that John Grady's mind is diseased with the false ideology he has inherited from his nation's forbearers. Manifest Destiny has given him the false notion that he is entitled to any future he envisions for himself, regardless of whatever obstacles may stand in his way. Eduardo emphasizes John Grady's disregard for Mexican culture by placing it within the context of a colonial heritage.

After fatally wounding John Grady in the fight, Eduardo ends his speech with a final criticism. He tells John Grady that American superstition is the symptom of a flawed national

ideal. According to Eduardo, the mystery of prosperity, the longing for a dream now extinct, is what draws men like John Grady to a culture unknown to them. He says,

[Mystery] is what has brought you here and what will always bring you here. 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—[Eduardo] 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. (253)

From Eduardo's perspective, the trouble with America is that it cannot accept the world at face value. Instead, Americans are always trying to impress upon the world some elevated version of paradise. They try to fabricate a promised land where it does not exist. And, if they are unable to create their version of paradise within the confines of their own national space, they will attempt to broaden the boundaries of their homeland in order to claim what they believe to be rightfully theirs. The "questions" upon which the American worldview "totters" are questions of national inheritance. John Grady assumes he can enter into Mexico and lay claim to land and people. As Eduardo points out, John Grady is not an anomaly; he is the norm. He typifies American inheritance. He believes he can conform the world to his own ends without recourse.

In the end, both adversaries die. They destroy one another. Although John Grady manages to kill Eduardo, he does not make it out of Mexico alive. He bleeds to death from the wounds inflicted upon him in the fight. There is no triumphant victory. The hero does not return home with his pride and his spoils. The object for which he yearns—the American dream—is lost to him. He dies alone in the streets, having failed in every aspect of his journey. For this reason, the novel presents a different image of American identity than what is commonly

depicted in American westerns. It is counter-discursive in the sense that it rejects the linear narrative of American exceptionalism. It is a story of failure rather than one of national dominance. In spite of its efforts to preserve the colonial legacy through means of military strength, technological innovation, and land development, the country cannot keep its own ideological dream alive. As evidenced by John Grady's death, the dream is unsustainable.

It is important to note that almost immediately after John Grady dies, the American landscape becomes inhospitable. It is fitting, of course, that the land he so closely resembles dies with him. He has seen the American dream to its logical conclusion, and the result is an empty space devoid of life. Having witnessed John Grady die trying to preserve the last vestiges of range life, Billy has no choice but to leave the land behind: "In the oncoming years a terrible drought struck west Texas. He moved on. There was no work in that country anywhere. Pasture gates stood open and sand drifted in the roads and after a few years it was rare to see stock of any kind and he rode on. Days of the world. Years of the world" (264). By the end of the novel, McCarthy places the narrative in the context of a geological time scale. The days and years that John Grady spends trying to resurrect a forgone dream of prosperity are little more than fleeting moments on the timeline of geological history.

## **Conclusion: The Immappable World of Our Journey**

The epilogue to *Cities of the Plain* follows an aimless Billy as he wanders the vapid southwest in the latter years of his adult life. Having given up on ranching, and unable to secure long-term employment in another field, he takes up the life of a vagabond. One day, under a freeway overpass somewhere in Arizona, Billy encounters an unnamed fellow wanderer who recounts for him a dream. It is a bizarre tale, prompting many philosophical intrigues, namely the question of agency within one's own personal history. The dreamer comes to doubt his agency as the conjurer of his metafictional dreamscape, and he muses on the autonomy of the characters he has dreamt. As he narrates the tale for Billy, the line between dreamer and dreamt becomes increasingly obscured, which prompts Billy to ask his own questions about consciousness, free will, and the function of human narratives. Unlike the rest of the trilogy, the epilogue is set in the latter half of the twentieth century. I mention this because I think it helps situate the three novels within the current state of American affairs. The epilogue offers profound insight into the trilogy's contemporary implications because it does not take place in the years immediately following the world wars. The epilogue allows readers to see the progression of national ideology over time and helps place the lessons of the three novels within the context of present-day American life. In a new epoch of American history, where hyper-mechanized warfare, technological communities, and disintegrating natural landscapes are among the most controversial issues challenging the identity of the national public, I believe the text offers extraordinary insight into questions of border, nationality, and self.

Before I begin my analysis of the epilogue, I want to be clear about the theoretical lens through which I am reading this final body of work. Borrowing again from Benedict Anderson's critique of nationalism, I will focus on his understanding of maps as a metaphor for ideological

dissemination. Anderson argues that, together with censuses and museums, maps are an important institution in the development of a national space. Of these institutions, he writes, “[T]hey profoundly shaped the way in which the colonial state imagined its dominion – the nature of the human beings it ruled, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry” (164). For my intents and purposes here, I will be concentrating primarily on the map as a representation of the geo-political spaces upon which America stakes its ideological claims. Applying Anderson’s conceptualization of maps to McCarthy’s use of cartographic imagery, I will: 1) explain how maps represent the process of creating and perpetuating national ideology, and 2) review the consequences of this process in twenty-first century America.

### **The Process**

Maps are reproductions of physical spaces which allow nations like the United States to justify their expansion into neighboring territories. And this is certainly not unique to the Americas. The process was developed by European nations before America’s westward expansion ever began. According to Anderson, “Europeans frequently attempted to legitimize the spread of their power by quasi-legal methods. Among the more popular of these was their ‘inheritance’ of the putative sovereignties of native rulers whom the Europeans had eliminated or subjected” (174). As European history indicates, assuming ownership of lands and communities is a rite of inheritance made possible by the creation of maps. When a nation surveys and produces a succession of maps for a particular territory, it establishes a historical narrative in that place which legitimizes national claim to the area. Before the twentieth century, European nations developed pictorial expressions of their geographical inheritance and historical rootedness. Through the arrangement of chronological maps, over time “a sort of political-biographical narrative of the realm came into being, sometimes with vast historical depth”

(Anderson 175). Maps were used not only to illustrate the geographical features of a place, but to engrave upon that place an ideological insignia as well. The same system of mapping continued into the twentieth century, and the effects of such a system are evident in McCarthy's work.

When Billy meets the wanderer in the epilogue to *Cities of the Plain*, he listens attentively to the man's story. At the heart of the wanderer's story is a map. It is an epistemological symbol around which his entire narrative revolves. Using cartographic imagery as the rhetorical foundation of his tale, the man ruminates on the ways in which human beings come to know the world: "In the middle of my life...I drew the path of it upon a map and I studied it a long time. I tried to see the pattern that it made upon the earth because I thought that if I could see the pattern and identify the form of it then I would know better how to continue" (268). The erroneousness of his attempt to find a pattern among his past travels has nothing to do with his desire to know the meaning of his life; it is common for most people to experience a similar existential crisis at some point in their lives. His error, though, is that he assumes he can impartially judge the pattern he has mapped. As he tells Billy, "[I]t is difficult to stand outside of one's desires and see things of their own volition" (269). By this, he means it is impossible to determine the significance of his own journey. Because it is a map of his own life, he cannot remain impartial. He will inevitably see whatever he desires to see.

When the man begins to detail his dream, he elaborates on the idea of impartial self-consciousness. He tells Billy that the main character in his dream is a nameless wanderer. When Billy asks the man if the character in his dream is he himself, the man replies, "I dont think so. But then if we do not know ourselves in the waking world what chance in dreams?" (271). Here, he reiterates the difficulty of fully knowing oneself. Since the map of his waking life has not revealed any new self-knowledge, the man cannot expect the dream to produce such revelatory

information either. He goes on to say, “I think the self of you in dreams or out is only that which you elect to see. I’m guessing every man is more than he supposes” (271). In relation to my argument, this commentary on dreams sheds light on the problem of American ideology (or any national ideology for that matter). The dreamer suggests ideology is always a misrepresentation of reality because it will only find what it chooses to see. With this in mind, it makes sense that John Grady dies trying to recreate a world that doesn’t exist. He believes in the abstract concept of the American dream and, therefore, does not heed Eduardo’s warnings because he is unable to see them. He is blinded by his own idealism. For him, the intangible dream of personal prosperity prevents him from recognizing the fact that such a dream world will never materialize.

As he continues to speak, the dreamer blurs the line even further between reality and reverie. The main character in the dream begins to have dreams of his own, which leads Billy to question his autonomy. Billy doubts that the dreamt man can act of his own free will since he is the figment of someone else’s imagination. In response to these doubts, the dreamer says, “You can see the problem. Let us say that the events which took place were a dream of this man whose own reality remains conjectural. How assess the world of that conjectural mind? And what with him is sleep and what is waking?” (272). Again, the dreamer’s words highlight the problem of ideology and the formation of a national self-image. Like the dreamt man, the existence of any nation is speculative. The dreamer’s use of the word “conjectural” is synonymous with Anderson’s use of the term “imaginary.” Like dreams, nations exist as imaginary spaces, so their reality is conjectural. A dreamer creates his dream in much the same way as an ideological apparatus creates a national identity for its inhabitants. And like the dreamt man who roams the imagined world of the dreamer, citizens live within the ideological parameters of their nation-state.

The relationship between the dreamer and the dreamt is analogous to the relationship between ideological apparatuses and their subjects. When Billy asks the dreamer about whether the dreamt man can act of his own free will, he is asking a fundamental question about subjectivity. He is asking whether individuals have the ability to see the world apart from the image that has been created for them by instruments of ideology. The dreamer assures him that power structures cannot take away the personal autonomy of their subjects: “The proprietary claims of the dreamer upon the dreamt have their limits. [The dreamer] cannot rob the [dreamt man] of his own autonomy lest he vanish altogether” (274). This suggests ideological apparatuses are limited in their ability to control their subjects absolutely. Though their influence is far-reaching, ideological apparatuses cannot rob individuals of their free will. This explains why Billy is able to survive the cultural and economic shifts in postwar America without conforming to the ideological norms that created those shifts. Billy’s multiple border crossings have allowed him to see beyond the veil of his nation’s self-image. As a freethinking individual, he has the personal autonomy to reject the normative behaviors of a destructive American ideology even though he continues to live within the physical boundaries of the country.

The dream analogy underscores the failures of nation states to recreate the world in their own images. If the dreamer’s map is a representation of national sovereignty, then the analogy shows that the entire concept of sovereign states is misguided. The map tries to reshape material existence to its own likeness, but this it cannot do. As the dreamer explains, the map attempts to lay claim to that which is un-claimable: “The picture seeks to seize and immobilize within its own configurations what it never owned. Our map knows nothing of time. It has no power to speak even of the hours implicit in its own existence” (274). The history of westward expansion is a prime example of the pitfalls of this kind of ideological mapping. American settlers,

motivated by the promise of wealth and independence, migrated in troves across the Great Plains to stake claim in the undeveloped virgin territories of the west. Settlers assumed permanent ownership of lands previously held by Native American tribes because the United States reimaged the landscape to its own ends. It reshaped wild hunting grounds into grazing lands for domesticated livestock, and it effectively erased the nomadic hunters of the region, replacing them with stationary farmers and ranchers. And eventually, the farmers and ranchers are replaced by the false dawn of nuclear explosions.

### **The Consequences**

The trilogy shows that, over time, the process of trying to “seize and immobilize” a land mass or a community is unsustainable. There are limits to how much a nation can reorder the material world for its own benefit. Eventually, the system will collapse on itself because it will exhaust the raw materials necessary to create a new cultural order. Mac McGovern’s ranch—a legatee of colonial vision—represents the kind of restructuring of Native American hunting grounds mentioned above. While the American ranching industry remains secure for an extended period of time, Mac proves that it eventually squanders the land into an un-arable void. In reshaping the western territories to produce a model American idyll, the ideological apparatuses of McCarthy’s southwest have consequently turned the region into an uninhabitable wasteland. In conclusion, McCarthy’s narrative casts a much different light on American progress than what has historically been shown in classic portrayals of the southwest. Though the text is sympathetic toward Billy and John Grady, their individual failures indicate that the American dream will eventually result in the destruction of the nation.

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