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# "No Order Save That Which Death Has Put There": Identity Formation In Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy

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“No Order Save That Which Death Has Put There”: An Examination of How Identity is Formed

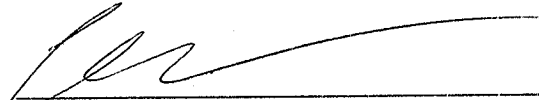
In Cormac McCarthy’s Border Trilogy

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in English from  
The College of William and Mary

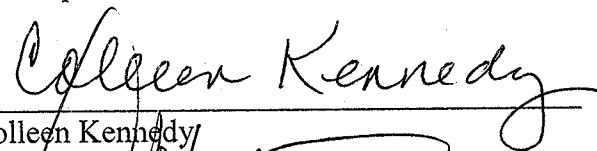
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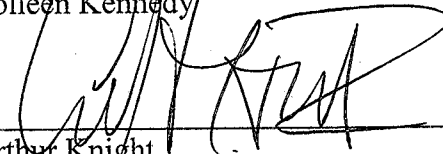
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Accepted for Honors  
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**“No Order Save That Which Death Has Put There”: Identity Formation In Cormac  
McCarthy's Border Trilogy**

Late in *The Crossing*, we encounter protagonist Billy Parham, now homeless, intruding in the den of “an old dog gone gray about the muzzle...horribly crippled in its hindquarters and its head askew...” (423). Rather than share the wandered-upon adobe refuge with the “arthritic and illjoined thing” he chooses to pelt it with mud clods, chase it with “a threefoot length of waterpipe,” and chuck gravel at it until it runs away, leaving him alone. The next morning he wakes up repentant, goes outside and calls the dog to no avail, before sitting in the road, “[taking] off his hat and...[weeping]” (426). For the first time in *The Border Trilogy* we see a cowboy who is defeated, who has been beaten down by circumstance, and as a result who has failed to live by his own code. His is just the first in a series of failures in the trilogy, as despite the cowboy's willing himself to be true to his own conscience, to live a life according to a personally defined moral code, he inevitably will fail so long as he holds out hope in a romanticized version of how the world should be. The cowboy, like everyone else in McCarthy's *Border Trilogy*, regardless of race, gender, or cultural background, must come to realize that the world is ordered solely by violent chaos. As a result, he will either die in order to never disobey his own code, or grow old in a place that is not his home, sulking in the knowledge that he “ain't nothing” (*Cities of the Plain*, 292).

In order to most accurately convey what McCarthy, a man who believes “there's no such thing as life without bloodshed” (interview, NY Times), is getting at, I must first examine the Western genre and how this conceptualizes its chief protagonist “the

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cowboy.” From here I turn to an examination of how identity is formed from the perspective of McCarthy’s white male cowboys, focusing on how the places that they come from and their experiences have led them to become the men who they are.

Bearing this in mind I will then discuss the trilogy’s peripheral characters, including Mexicans, indigenous people, and women. Despite their relative lack of development as characters, they often challenge and deepen our understanding of McCarthy’s universe.

We come to see that despite our cowboy protagonist’s best efforts to achieve the romantic visions of their imaginations, they ultimately can do nothing but fail.

The Cowboy, according to Robert Warshow’s 1954 essay, “The Westerner,” maintains a position of great solitude; he chooses to be lonely because he understands the realities of the world that people not from the West, usually a female love interest, simply cannot. According to Warshow, “He finds it impossible to explain to her that there is no point in being ‘against’ these things [killing and being killed]: they belong to the world” (Warshow, 704). The West is a violent and lawless place, simply put. Because the cowboy is adept at the things he does, be it roping or shooting or riding or breaking horses, there is no question about his morality. He does his job well, better than anyone else, so he must be ethically superior in comparison to less skilled cowpokes. Warshow offers:

We know he is on the side of justice and order, and of course it can be said he fights for these things. But such broad aims never correspond exactly to his real motives; they only offer him his opportunity... When an explanation is asked of him, [he] is likely to say that he does what he has to do... (706)

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A cowboy can never falter whether he lives or dies, because he stands in the name of what is good, and therefore falls in its name as well, an outcome which he deems equally rewarding.

Western films, according to Warshow, cannot be considered art until the moral code of the cowboy is seen to be imperfect.

At his best, a cowboy character's moral ambiguity makes him believable. If he kills, no matter what his justifications may be, he is a murderer, a term with none too subtle moral connotations. The cowboy, as Warshow seems to be describing him, always has a good reason for killing, so we as film viewers have few qualms about rooting for him. Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy—*All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, and *Cities of the Plain*—written in the late twentieth century, comes at a time in American cultural history when the Western film and literary genre has long been waning. His characters share much in common with this traditional viewpoint described by Warshow, who writes in 1954, of what a cowboy should be. This leaves one pondering, to what extent does Cormac McCarthy know and buy into the well-established stereotypes and weaknesses of the Western genre? While his Westerns in many ways resemble the early and developing Westerns described by Warshow, in many ways do they not also transcend these?

His books seem to relish violence and make a point of showing in graphic detail all the terrible things that happen to his characters, from hanging intestines caused by a gouge sustained in a knife fight to the removal of a living man's eyeball before burning him alive and shooting him to death. None of this would be shown on screen in such a

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simplistic Western as *Stagecoach*, produced in 1939. Neither would it seem likely to occur in more developed Westerns like *The Searchers* (1956) or *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* (1962). That said, it does not seem far-fetched to say that such events could be shown in a movie such as *Unforgiven* (1992), produced contemporaneously with the first novel in the series, *All the Pretty Horses*; the commonality between them being that both works make a self aware effort to acknowledge said violence and the further reaching implications that accompany it. Another point of interest is McCarthy's handling of issues of social and political importance. While his main characters (John Grady and Billy Parham) are white cowboys from the U.S. side of the border, he allows Native Americans and Mexican revolutionaries time to speak their minds on several occasions, leading to mixed portrayals of such non-European characters.

It seems likely, as Susan Kollin implies in her essay, "Genre and the Geographies of Violence: Cormac McCarthy and the Contemporary Western," that McCarthy is playing with the genre, both as literature and film. By showing how the narration of stories—Westerns—has evolved, he seems to be telling a bigger story about both the evolution of the western man and the stagnancy that he cannot avoid. The trilogy begins with a romantic vision reminiscent of early Western ideals—detailed descriptions of open expanses, as well as a general optimism on behalf of the protagonists at the prospect of a land, that being Mexico, without borders. The characters are shown to adhere to a personally defined, but clear, moral code, and serve as the bastions of light in a land of moral haze. The narrative is simple as it is in the aforementioned films: protagonist John

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Grady, upon losing his claim to his grandfather's farm, seeks to maintain his way of life by moving to Mexico where things appear to never change.

By the time of *COTP*, the characters have been broken down, the victims of circumstance again and again. Instead of living in the open expanses of Mexico, the main characters John Grady and Billy Parham are now trapped, working on a ranch in the United States that is not even going to be around much longer due to its desirability as an atomic bomb test site. As Phillip Snyder puts it, "Endangered by habitat loss and familial dislocation, McCarthy's cowboys must adapt to a new western environment or die, particularly after their attempts to relocate themselves in Mexico, the original, centuries-old site of cowboying in the Americas, prove to be instructive and evocative but ultimately unsuccessful" (199). The violence that is shown is still graphic, but now the protagonists—specifically Billy—are no longer above it. Instead of capturing and attempting to free the predators that have been devouring their livestock, as they would have before, the cowboys find themselves hunting these down—not even wolves, but wild dogs—and killing them brutally by dragging them behind as they gallop their horses. The simple plot structure of the earlier *ATPH* is muddied now. Things are not as they appear. Greater metaphysical ruminations in the forms of dreams and soliloquies prove that the once thought to be borderless Mexico is in fact full of borders and complexities that even a man like Billy, who by his seventies has spent many years there, has trouble fully comprehending. In her essay Kollin parallels this to McMurtry's *The Last Picture Show* (1971), writing, "[the film] builds on the theme of the West as depraved and corrupted space, with the characters in a small Texas town living empty,

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dead-end lives that barely resemble the possibilities and promises dreamed up by the region's earlier white settlers" (558).

Over the course, the trilogy seems to shift from Western to anti-Western—a critique which incidentally upholds many conventions of the Old Western. Since the Western is innately structured by competing and contradictory impulses—good guys who are willing to murder rather than contradict their personal moral code—it is innately a complex genre in its artistic form. As a result it becomes difficult to lineate the Western according to the notion of the “Old” versus the “New.” Westerns in actuality seem to exist on a continuum where each film or literary title has a place, generally evolving from most simplistic to most complex with many steps in between. As a result, some would argue this complexity is also a limiting factor, as even the most complex Westerns can only be but so complicated in order to maintain their “Western” features. As Kollin notes:

the ‘textual unconsciousness’ of Westerns...works against the surface of the narrative, undermining in turn what the text appears ‘so clearly to approve’...The concept of a purely faithful or fully critical text loses its explanatory power. If classic Westerns contain moments of resistance and self-reflection, carrying with them their own critique, to what extent might anti-Westerns preserve moments of desire, moments of connection and identification with elements of the classic Western? (Kollin, 560)



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While McCarthy's works are closer to the Anti-Western end of the spectrum, the works still tend to preserve and identify with many of the same notions common in the most traditional of Westerns.

Moving on to the more pertinent question of *The Border Trilogy*, the subject of personal identity, one deliberates upon the question of who a character is and where they fit in the world. The protagonists in both novels leave home in search of something. John Grady and Billy Parham, being cowboys, move, travel, and act as if stability is stagnation and therefore holds little promise for them. It can be argued that this mobility eventually contributes to their undoing. They seem incapable of ceasing to be in transition, of contentedly living on one ranch doing the job that they both love, working as cowboys. In large part this goes back to their motives for going to Mexico in the first place.

Early in the exposition of each of the novels the protagonists lose something—a family member dies, a farm gets sold, horses get stolen—all of which implies that nothing is permanent, everything is transient. It also brings up questions about the nature of home, a thing which each of the protagonists now lacks in his loss. Ashley Borne brings this up in her essay “Plenty of Signs and Wonders to Make a Landscape,” stating, “The idea that place is...constantly in flux...this is the central paradox of...the construction of identity: that one longs for stability, a fixed sense of place and self, but that one is also compelled to perpetual motion, seeking out those spaces where place and self will stabilize” (Bourne, 109). Inevitably, they must leave, and go searching for that which has been lost. In *Cities of the Plain* the protagonists go to Mexico in order to find,

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as Eduardo puts it, “a thing now extinct among them. A thing for which perhaps they no longer have a name” (*COAP*, 249). In his opinion this is also their flaw, “[John Grady’s] hunger for mysteries...has undone him...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 teeters on an unspoken labyrinth of questions. And we will devour you my friend” (*COAP*, 253). John Grady and Billy Parham are looking for something, true, but this still does not answer the question of what they are trying to find.

Another approach to answering this question begins with the positive of the earlier query: what have they lost? This question now is: what do they have to gain? In both cases the protagonists, serving the traditional role of cowboys as described by Warshaw, leave home at an early age and head toward Mexico in the hopes of righting some wrong; something which they see as morally, spiritually, or personally faulty. In Billy’s case each of his original trips to Mexico (there are three in *The Crossing*) becomes a matter of correcting something beyond his control. When he finds a wolf ensnared in a trap that he set at his father’s behest, he chooses to allow it to live, heeding the word of a mysterious old trapper named Don Arnolfo who tells him that while “men believe the blood of the slain to be of no consequence...the wolf knows better...the wolf is a being of great order and that it knows what men do not: that there is no order in the world save that which death has put there” (*The Crossing*, 45). Furthermore, to right what he perceives as his own failure without betraying his father and his cattle, he decides to carry the wolf back to Mexico, “a place where acts of God and those of man

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are of a piece. Where they cannot be distinguished" (*Crossing*, 47). Perhaps, as Eduardo has earlier implied and Don Arnolfo says here, Mexico represents a thing apart from the Western world of the United States. It is a place closer to the actuality of the universe, more primordial.

In each of Billy's next two trips it can also be said he seeks to right some sort of wrong. He returns to America to find his parents murdered and the family horses stolen. Therefore, to right this personal affront he makes off with his younger brother Boyd and brings him into Mexico in pursuit of the culprits (170-171). In the case of the third trip, Billy has been abroad in America for some time, camping on the plains and working, feeling somewhat betrayed by his brother, who has left him in pursuit of a relationship with a young Mexican girl. Now that Billy has returned, he is hoping to let bygones be bygones and is looking for his brother in order to pursue a relationship with him. Once he finds out that he has died, the mission becomes to properly inter the remains in a place more suitable than the foreign and uncultivated terrain of Mexico, a stark contrast to his earlier attempts to bring the she-wolf back to where she belonged. This, more than anything else, is a pointed reference to how Billy has changed over the course of the novel, become less able to empathize and see the world as it really is.

In *All the Pretty Horses*, protagonist John Grady travels to Mexico along with his best buddy Rawlins in search of something closer Eduardo's "thing now extinct among them...for which perhaps they no longer have a name" (249). In comparison to the roads and rivers and towns that splotch up the American landscape, he craves the open plains, the uniqueness of a place that he perceives "ain't never been mapped," a place where

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“there ain't shit” (*ATPH*, 34). Grady lives by an even more rigid Warshowian moral sensibility in that if he sees something or someone suffering he wants to make things right for them. In *Cities of the Plain*, upon realizing that a small group of wild dog pups will die without his assistance, John wakes Billy early in the morning and digs them out, an action which involves moving a giant boulder, saying he would “hate leavin em down there” (172). This ability to empathize with the creatures of the world is what makes him such a good horse wrangler. It is also what leads to his downfall.

This empathy is readily recognized in the first book of the series in his relationship to the young boy Blevins. Despite his buddy Rawlins's hesitations, he allows the boy to get closer and closer to the duo, attaching himself to them and following them into Mexico. When things begin to happen—the boy loses his horse while hiding in a ravine, drunkenly trying to avoid the perceived dangers of a thunderstorm, only to have it turn up in a nearby town—they are irrevocably linked to the boy. When Blevins steals back the horse, shooting his way out and stealing away in a fury—which is about the only way the boy seems to know how to function—the two cowboys are roped to him, despite their relative lack of involvement, which eventually leads to their arrest and Grady's consequential first foray into knife fighting within the confines of a Mexican prison.

In *Cities of the Plain*, the main storyline centers on Grady falling in love with the prostitute Magdalena. He wants very much to save her from a life in which

She had been sold...to settle a gambling debt...stripped naked and beat[en] with a whip made from the innertube of a truck tire...[taken] to a room in the basement

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where there was a dirty mattress [and raped]...[and] when they were through with her...sold...[beaten] with fists and slammed against the wall and knocked down and kicked...[sent] wordlessly with men to a room at the rear for a price of less than two dollars. (*COTP*, 139)

This also leads to both of Grady and Magdalena's deaths at the hand of the procurer, Eduardo, who despite his own apparent affinity for Magdalena murders her. Believing "the blood of the slain to be of no consequence," he repeatedly refers to Magdalena as a whore and chides Grady for his foolish failure to see "the simplest truths...the most elementary fact concerning whores..." (*COTP*, 249). Ultimately though, it is a belief in doing the right thing, his "refusal to lose heart in the world completely...[despite] all the cruelties that befall him" (Caron, 165), which drives John Grady throughout the trilogy.

Important to McCarthy's version of the cowboy in this trilogy, these characters are dealing with deeply personal issues—whatever malignant problem or thought that bothers them, they must act on their impulses as men of action—as cowboys. Whatever they feel, they must see it through to the end, reason be damned, whether it be for the better or worse. Grady and Parham both understand that ultimately, the only person they have to answer to is themselves. They create their own world. They create their own vision of what they need out of life, and therefore their own satisfaction. Another way of interpreting their motives for going to Mexico in the first place, going back to the point about Grady's looking for a place without borders, is that they go in an attempt to create in the physical world what they are working towards in their own minds. That is, they hope to make their own world, or at least to experience the existing one as if it were new

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and unexplored. To them borders are insignificant, both in the physical sense and the metaphoric one.

Assuming this to be their chief motivation as characters, an issue arises within the text in that if they answer only to themselves, this seems to mean that they disregard all the other structures and things that people typically have to reckon with. These include structures and inventions that people create—or have created for them—to give order to their lives, including notions of justice (God, government/laws) and personal relations (family/friends). And let us not forget an issue ingrained in all of McCarthy's work, a line marbled and subtly chiseled in all his conclusions and stoic and beautiful imagery of the plains and deserts—that there is a natural order of things, and that to deny this would be simply throwing stones at the sky. How can one explain away McCarthy's notions of fate, that the world and the events occurring within are predetermined, if not by God, by some other, larger force?

Looking to the end as a starting point, in the epilogue of *Cities of the Plain*, Parham comes across a mystical figure while lunching under an overpass. The fellow traveler, an unnamed man from the South, presumably Mexico, describes a dream in which a traveler stops to rest at a rock that had once been used as an altarstone for human sacrifices by indigenous people. A noteworthy aspect of the dream is that the man describing it seems to identify with the protagonist within, but without being willing to claim the character as himself. When Billy asks, "Was it you?" the man responds, "I don't think so. But then if we do not know ourselves in the waking world what chance in dreams?" (271). Continuing with the dream's narrative, the man describes a scene in

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which the man within the dream falls asleep to find a group of natives about to sacrifice a young girl. A very moving passage follows:

He saw...the strangeness of the world and how little was known and how poorly one could prepare for aught that was to come. He saw that a man's life was little more than an instant and that as time was eternal therefore every man was always and eternally in the middle of his journey, whatever be his years or whatever distance he had come. He thought he saw in the world's silence a great conspiracy and he knew that he himself must then be a part of that conspiracy and that he had already moved beyond his captors [the natives] and their plans. If he had any revelation it was this: that he was repository to this knowing which he came to solely by his abandonment of every former view. And with this he turned to his captors and he said: I will tell you nothing. (282)

This leads to an existential dilemma: if man is only a victim of fate and circumstance, then what is the point of living? Some would answer this by saying that it is to discover a true "self," to become aware of one's own despair and put one's faith in the higher power of God. McCarthy, however, while ambiguous on the topic of God, seems to prefer the eternality of the natural world—"the desert about us was once a vast sea...Can such a thing vanish? Of what are seas made? Or I? Or you?" (286). But if the natural world is a constant, can we say that human nature allows McCarthy's characters to be their own agents, especially given that they all are eventually victims of fate? Is there evidence to support this?

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In McCarthy's novels, we see characters acting as their own agents, making their own choices, which often lead to their downfall. But McCarthy expresses frequently the sentiment that "if a dream can tell the future it can also thwart that future... God will not permit that..." (*The Crossing*, 407). To McCarthy, while there may be such a thing as a future that can exist without being experienced, we can neither change nor alleviate the pain of what is to come. At one point in *The Crossing* Billy has the future revealed to him by a fortune teller who, reading his palm, tells him that his life will be long—despite his rowdy lifestyle—and that while one of his brothers is dead, another will emerge who inevitably will meet the same fate as the first (369). The cryptic message, spoken in Spanish, proves true in *Cities of the Plain*, in that John Grady does serve as a fill-in for Billy's dead brother. Billy either fails to recognize or forgets her prediction about his surrogate brother meeting a violent end by the time it comes to fruition. It would appear that in his failure to recognize the factuality of the palmist's statements, Billy has once again supported the theme that the future cannot be changed, that there is but one path, one story, and all that is deemed contradictory is but a part of the whole.

But what is this unifying force? What is it that binds us and makes us part of the whole? Obviously it is not God. As the Captain puts it, "Everybody know that God is no here" (180). Is it nature? But is this not but a part of a higher power as well? According to McCarthy: "The day is made of what has come before. The world itself must be surprised at the shape of that which appears. Perhaps even God." (*The Crossing*, 387). The answer comes in the dialogue of a blind former revolutionary:



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There are two things which perhaps he will not know. He will not know that while the order which the righteous seek is never righteousness itself but is only order, the disorder of evil is in fact the thing itself. Nor will he know that while the righteous are hampered at every turn by their ignorance of evil to the evil all is plain, light and dark alike. This man of which we speak will seek to impose order and lineage upon things which rightly have none. He will call upon the world itself to testify as to the truth of what are in fact but his desires. In his final incarnation he may seek to indemnify his words with blood for by now he will have discovered that words pale and lose their savor while pain is always new.  
*(The Crossing, 293)*

Two things here. First, this is but another prediction, pointing out exactly what will happen to both of Billy's "brothers." In the case of Boyd, he falls in love, runs away, and then, posing as a revolutionary tries to restore order and justice, only to discover that neither ever really existed (*The Crossing*, 385). Upon this rude awakening, he dies a bloody death, at the hands of men who kill for no apparent reason, no obligation, no loyalty, other than "they pay...." (*The Crossing*, 385). In the case of John Grady, he too casts his lot with the romantic notion of love at the expense of everything. When his Magdalena is murdered, however, he has nothing else on which to hang his hat. He seeks vengeance upon the man responsible for the act, only to discover love to be as Eduardo has described it, "superstition...a world of adornment only" (*COTP*, 253). According to Daniel Alarcón, Grady's fall is but another in a long line of "infernal paradise" mythologies, in which an "American male...leaves 'civilization' behind to seek a

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different way of life in the 'wilderness.' Despite all that has happened to him, [Grady is unable] to see that he and his romantic ideals are very much a part of what happens to country" (Alarcón, 64). He, like his romanticized version of the old West, dies, painfully in a pool of blood, just as the blind man predicted, just as cowboys are supposed to.

It seems abundantly clear at this junction that according to McCarthy, the unifying force above all others is "the disorder of evil." Yet, this in and of itself is contradictory. If the world can be ordered by disorder, would this not also imply that disorder can be ordered? That man can create his own disorder, and that the individual is responsible for the fate that he lives? Even by living such a fate, it proves that a man never was fated to be anything other than that which he chose to become. It seems just as plausible to assume that characters are responsible for the things that happen to them, as it is to believe that everything occurs according to systematic principle.

Up to this point I have been focusing primarily on the notion of agency and whether or not the white male cowboys found in McCarthy's novels are in control of their own lives. The argument has been that the cowboys are in control, and that forces greater than themselves, whether God or the equalizer of disorder, only have minimal bearing on who they become as people. Every person is responsible for the choices they make regardless of where they lead them. Beyond these cowboys, how does agency, or a lack thereof, emerge in the seeming "marginal" figures in the trilogy, including those who come from Mexico or are of indigenous descent? And what about women, who serve a greatly diminished role in the novels, repeatedly failing to receive names and most often serving as set pieces around which events occur? What is McCarthy getting at

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here, and to what extent are these portrayals deliberate efforts as all of his portrayals throughout the novels seem to be?

With McCarthy a dichotomy exists between characters who are part of the hegemonic culture and those who are to various extents not. It is readily apparent that he chooses to focus on certain types of characters—white male cowboy protagonists John Grady and Billy Parham rather than women, Mexicans, and indigenous people. But the story takes place on the Mexican-American border, an area known as much for its diversity as for its open expanses and its history of violence, both of which play prominent roles in McCarthy's fiction. As a result, McCarthy does include Mexican characters in his stories. He does show numerous indigenous people. He does allow numerous female characters to emerge over the course of the books. However, according to some theorists, like Katherine Sugg, the trilogy remains problematic in that, “[the author's] supposed revisioning of racist ideologies and male heroism continues to rely on discourses of racial and gender difference that are foundational to North American perspectives on the border” (119). In many ways I would agree with Sugg, but I would also caution that McCarthy's minor character depth also depends on the extent to which he develops said characters.

These characters do not share much in common beyond the marginal position they inhabit within the story. They are a diverse set of characters from vastly different backgrounds, which are at times developed and others not. Some are born with power and descend from a long line of aristocracy. Others have worked within the confines of a violent society to move up in the ranks and assume a position of power. Others are

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maids, rural peasants, traveling theater folk, gypsies, immigrants, nameless bands of Natives, or simply travelers who come from the south. Many are unnamed and go without clear description, and yet have insightful things to say about the nature of man and the natural order of things. With some exceptions from the periphery, all seem to contribute to theme, teaching lessons the protagonists with their Western perspectives of “the way things are” cannot gather through intuition.

McCarthy most often achieves this through conversations in which his protagonists, while present, do little more than listen to their minor counterparts. To a great extent, these moments resemble soliloquies, but they are unique in that the characters that soliloquize have gone through or will go through very little development otherwise. At times they feel like little more than vehicles used to directly state a theme. These oftentimes resemble one another in tone, but not necessarily in content. At the risk of overlooking some of the more minor characters, it seems pertinent now to focus in on specific characters who, despite coming from vastly different backgrounds and subject positions, share in common a Mexican culture that the protagonists only understand peripherally.

Starting at the top in terms of power and cultural approachability, the character of Alfonsa from *All the Pretty Horses* does a great deal of work in the twenty or so pages in which she speaks her piece. Besides giving her reasons for mistrusting a relationship between her grandniece and John Grady, she goes to great pains to describe her own personal story, thereby giving pertinent background information on why many of her Mexican compatriots react the way they do in certain situations. She was very much an

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idealist in the days leading up to the Revolution. Despite her aristocratic background, she supported fictionalized versions of real-life political activists and Revolutionaries Gustavo and Francisco Madero, both of whom would fall victim to the violent revolution they helped create. According to Alfonsa,

[The Maderos] did not understand Mexico. Like my father [they] hated bloodshed and violence. But perhaps [they] did not hate it enough. Francisco was the most deluded of all. He was never suited to be president of Mexico. He was hardly even suited to be Mexican. In the end we all come to be cured of our sentiments. Those whom life does not cure death will. The world is quite ruthless in selecting between the dream and the reality, even where we will not. Between the wish and the thing the world lies waiting. I've thought a great deal about my life and about my country. I think there is little that can be truly known.  
(ATPH, 238)

Alfonsa has no reservations in proclaiming the Revolution and the foolhardy goal of equality dead in the face of violence and oppression. She has come to believe that this is simply, at least for Mexico, the way things are. She continues, "What is constant in history is greed and foolishness and a love of blood and this is a thing that even God—who knows all that can be known—seems powerless to change" (239). As a result, a part of her supports John Grady and the ideals he tries to stand for: truth and love and personal resourcefulness. She goes to some pains to get him out of prison and to give him a horse and money before explaining herself to him, although she realizes the error in his logic as she has seen first-hand the price that has been paid for being an idealist.

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What does such a soliloquy say about Alfonsa as a character? How has she formed an identity relative to that of John Grady or say, Billy Parham? For starters, it seems readily apparent that she comes from a family of not only great wealth, but of great importance in society. While Mexican, she is from a stock of people strongly associated with the Spanish and therefore European colonizers. So, while she is likely to have native blood in her, as most Mexicans do, this would more than likely be lesser than her European heritage. It is therefore interesting that such a character, born into a situation in which “no one ever took a book from [her] hands” and in which she is allowed to attend “two of the best schools in Europe” (239) would willfully give up her advanced societal position and support the revolution.

Perhaps it stems from her observation that society “seemed largely [a] machine[] for the suppression of women” (230), a place where God himself allowed injustice (232)—both of which seem the possible result of her “readings.” An alternative understanding of Alfonsa’s liberalism, however, stems from her perceived disfigurement caused by accidentally blowing her fingers off while shooting at pigeons. Through some encouragement from her also disfigured friend and love interest, the one eyed Gustavo, she comes to realize the innate value of a person regardless of their circumstances. She states,

I wanted very much to be a person of value and I had to ask myself how this could be possible if there were not something like a soul or like a spirit that is in the life of a person and which could endure any misfortune or disfigurement and yet be no less for it. If one were to be a person of value that value could not be a

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condition subject to the hazards of fortune. It had to be a quality that could not change....I knew that what I was seeking to discover was a thing I'd always known. That all courage was a form of constancy. That it was always himself that the coward abandoned first. After this all other betrayals came easily...I believed that anyone who desired it could have it. That the desire was the thing itself. The thing itself. I could think of nothing else of which that was true.

(*ATPH*, 235)

Alfonsa, as she describes herself here, seems very much a believer, like John Grady, in the personal formation of identity. This notion is swiftly refuted however as she comes to reveal her disbelief, at least in her own country, in the possibility to will something into existence. J. Douglas Canfield attributes this to "her inability to transcend class [in order] to become a real revolutionary," stating that, "she represents the tenacious *hacendado* class that still retains power despite the Revolution" (Canfield, 263). Others would argue that through years of circumstance—recall the scene of the man she once loved being brutally murdered by a mob—she has come to find that her father was right in staying out of political affairs, nodding to those in power, and keeping his mouth closed.

Once more, though she wants to feel otherwise, she has come to find that it is not ideals that allow one to stay alive and prosper, but rather a valuing of "what is true above what is useful...not what is righteous but merely what is so" (240). This is also what makes Grady such an unsuitable suitor for her grandniece; his perceived lack of wisdom to the ways of the world. She therefore comes to uphold the aristocratic position into which she is born, forgetting her former ties to the working class and

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revolutionaries in favor of keeping her grandniece from making the same mistakes that she did. Alfonsa believes man's fate to be beyond his own control, but she also believes that with some luck he can manipulate his situation to retain whatever power he may come into the world with, just so long as he does not concede this by believing in falsely optimistic premises.

An interesting distinction about the Captain, also known as Raul, is, despite his position of considerable power as the nominal police chief of his town, he does not seem to have been born into this. Unlike Alfonsa, the Captain appears to come from and identify more readily with the working class, and as such he has taken a very active role in the creation of his current position of political power. His power seems to stem more from his ruthless ability to do the things that others are unwilling to do, rather than from any moral positioning or personal need for justice. The Captain makes it a point on several occasions to make known to Grady and his compatriots how willing he is to use violence as a means of expressing personal power, but he also uses it as a means of maintaining his position within his community. In fact his motivation in going after Grady and Rawlins in the first place seems to be to get a corroborating story to justify his future actions—the murder of Blevins—thereby expressing his influence to make things “right” by whatever means necessary. He subscribes to a skewed version of morality, but, that said, he raises important questions about the nature of truth and righteousness, subjects that John Grady and Billy Parham fail to address beyond their own simplistic but self-created beliefs.



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On first reading it is easy to hate the Captain as he readily slips into a position antithetical to the whole-hearted goodness of protagonist John Grady. The Captain is violent and not shy in expressing this through his actions, as when he coerces Rawlins into telling him “whatever [he] want[s] to hear” (165). Beyond this, the Captain does not want the truth as Rawlins sees it, nor as John Grady does. The Captain wants a very specific version of the truth, one that, though it seems relatively clear here, is in reality most subjective. He states at one point, “You have the opportunity to tell the truth here. Here. In three days you will go to Saltillo and then you will no have this opportunity...then the truth will be in other hands. You see. We can make the truth here. Or we can lose it. But when you leave here it will be too late...Who can say what the truth will be then?” (168). Stopping short of saying that the Captain is morally justified in his coercing of blatantly false testimony, it is important to acknowledge as McCarthy does that “the Captain inhabit[s] another space and it [is] a space of his own election and outside the common world of men” (179). In effect, the Captain is a self-driven persona, and while he all but acknowledges his own moral ambiguity, it is hard to argue with his sense of personal truth—he must do what he must do to make matters right with both the people of his community and by proxy also with himself.

It is therefore unfortunate that the space The Captain inhabits, different from that of the righteous, happens to be “privileged to men of the irreclaimable act...[and] contain[s] no access to [others]. For the terms of election [are] of a piece with its office and once chosen that world [can] not be quit” (179). In this instance of McCarthy inserting his omniscient narrative voice into the story, the author makes it clear that what

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sets the Captain apart from others is his willingness to do the irreclaimably evil things that civilization requires. He will murder, he will torture, he will create falsified versions of the truth, but according to McCarthy, these are just things that human beings do, although far from their most attractive actions. This is why as a boy he is able to kill a woman who refuses to sleep with him due to his age (181). It should be discerned here that he does this not simply because violence is innate, but going beyond this, because self-preservation in a hyper-masculine society is. From his perspective, the woman is in effect questioning his position as a man—that is, a person with agency who can control his life to the extent that he is not made ashamed or embarrassed by the actions of others towards him. This is also why he is able to shoot the boy Blevins when the murder victim's brother El Charro is unable to do so.

He talks about his situation, “This man came to me. I don't go to him. He came to me. Speaking of justice. Speaking of the honor of his family. Do you think he truly want these things? I don't think many men want these things” (180). In reality what El Charro seems to want in his seeking vengeance against Blevins is a sense of power in a world where men who are not like the Captain are powerless in the face of the violence. The Captain conversely is trying to hold onto that exact thing. While chauvinistic and innately disrespectful of the rights of other human beings, including that of due process, the Captain can be said to be a man who is truthful to himself. He did not ask to be born into the situation that he comes from, but he did choose to actively participate in the life he lives. As a result he can be said to have acquired through force the power that was denied him at birth.

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A character who operates in a particularly marginal role in the books, Don Arnolfo from *The Crossing*, holds a position of importance in that he plays a pivotal role in the formation of Billy's moral code and thus also his identity. In fact, it is his conversation with Billy about how to trap the wolf and his sense of the near-sacred position that such creatures inhabit which sets off the chain of events that makes up the plot of the entire book. In his brief appearance in the book, he serves two roles: He is both the catalyst that sets Billy off on his adventure into Mexico to release the wolf he captures at his father's behest and a mouthpiece for McCarthy to express his own ideas about the nature of violent chaos in the world. That said, Don Arnolfo is perplexing in that he remains mostly undeveloped as a character. Unlike the Captain and Alfonsa, he is given no real opportunity to explain his personal history, nor does he want to. Instead we are left only with the image of an emaciated old man who appears to be of Hispanic origin, living in a bed in a mud-floored room which smells of "woodsmoke and kerosene and sour bedding" (42). He is a mysterious but wise old sage, or at least is conveyed as such, and as a result we, but more importantly Billy, listen to him when he explains things about the wolf, about man, and about the world in which they exist, things of which we would otherwise probably remain unaware.

In regards to the wolf, Don Arnolfo explains that man cannot know the things that the wolf does. To Don Arnolfo, to seek to know such a thing would be like asking what the stones know, "Tan como preguntar lo que saben las piedras. Los arboles. El mundo" (45), or the trees, or the world itself. He also asserts that the wolf as a hunter is different from what men suppose it is; while murderous in nature, the wolf understands

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the significance of what it does and understands the order that comes with death and violence. Meanwhile man is ignorant and slow on the uptake—he sees “the blood of the slain” as being “of no consequence.” Men fail to see the world as it really is because they are too wrapped up in themselves, their own creations, and their own perspectives on how things are. As Don Arnolfo puts it, “the world between is invisible to them” (46). While Don Arnolfo is expressing ideas familiar from several other McCarthy soliloquies, an important distinction here can be made in that he seems to be expressing something about the natural order of wolves that makes them worthy of empathic consideration. This is important considering that this appears to be a formative influence on the future personal rules of Billy, and also echoes those of John Grady who can do nothing but empathize emphatically with every creature or being he encounters.

But why does McCarthy use a character like Don Arnolfo to express these ideas? Though he is underdeveloped, the question of what defines him still seems particularly apt. And while we are not given personal history, we know him because we know how he views the world. He has become who he is as a result of his ability to empathize with and respect the wolves. This is characterized by the realization that he has come to that the wolf is like the snowflake in that “you catch the snowflake but when you look in your hand you don't have it no more... If you want to see it you have to see it on its own ground. If you catch it you lose it. And where it goes there is no coming back from” (46). And he is the last of a dying breed. He realizes and wishes to impart in others the knowledge that he has realized too late—that there are no more wolves left because of his own actions as a former hunter and trapper and those of people like him. As a result his

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identity as a hunter has also been nullified and he is left wondering about his own identity. In large part the reason he is able to speak so eloquently about the nature of man is that he is one and he sees now his own ignorance, his own inability to comprehend the higher order of the wolf and the earth. The sad fact is that though he now realizes the error of his ways he cannot go back and undo what has been done. This is why he lays in bed old, decrepit, and helpless. He has not been true to himself as a cowboy should and as a result he seeks to make amends.

Conversely, another minor character of great importance, Quijada, comes from a background vastly different from those thus far discussed, in that rather than being tied to aristocratic colonizers or the Mexican institution—with which only Don Arnolfo appears to also have little to no affiliation—he goes to pains to make it known that he identifies solely with the Yaqui people, a group of Native Americans from the Sonora region of Mexico. However, it is worth noting that when he first appears and introduces himself his first inclination is to tell the brothers, Billy and Boyd, that he works for Mr. Simmons, a white land owner, and that he is the superintendent of the Nahuerichic, a nearby ranch. It is later discovered that he and his cohorts are known as “agringados” because they work for white men raising a breed of white cattle specific to the region of Senora known as Babicora. This too becomes pertinent in the discovery that Quijada, despite his claims of indifference to the outside world, identifies strongly with the Yaquis. He states, “Now that the Yankees have again betrayed them, the Mexicans are eager to reclaim their Indian blood. But we do not want them. Most particularly the Yaqui. The Yaqui have long memories” (385). But there is still something that does not make sense about the

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alignment of Quijada, a man with a very clear view of who he is in the world around him, with rich white land owners.

Very much like Alfonsa and the Captain before him, Quijada can to a large extent be considered a character who, over time and through experience, has developed a world view based not on ideals, but on how the world actually is. He has no qualms in compromising, so long as the compromises do not interfere with his identity as a Yaqui. There are moments when he acts in a manner which some could extrapolate as being romantic—a la Alfonsa—but he clearly looks out for himself, and his seemingly positive actions merely reflect moments of little personal consequence. In regards to these romantic lapses, both of which involving help provided to Billy, they each prove vital in advancing the protagonist's plotline. The first of these occurs when Quijada, after a bit of deliberation, decides that Billy and Boyd are in fact the rightful owners of several of the horses in his possession. He decides that the horses should be returned to the boys. Something particularly worth noting about this scene is the manner in which Quijada makes his decision. Without consulting his higher ups nor second guessing himself after a brief moment of consideration, he commits to the deed and even goes so far as to write out a voucher clearly stating that he personally allowed the boys to take possession of the horses (254). This seems like a risky move at first glance, but then, it should also be noted that as superintendent of the ranch that he has a fair amount of autonomy—at least based on John Grady's experience with Don Hector in *All the Pretty Horses*. The second event is the favor he does Billy in not only allowing him to pass through the area unscathed despite the alguacil's (local government agent) desire to detain him, but in

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telling him both of his brother Boyd's fate and the whereabouts of his grave (384).

Quijada seems to be sticking his neck out to help Billy, though it is hard to determine the extent to which these actions actually affect Quijada and his own well being. At a glance they do seem to cast him as morally noble.

Regardless, Quijada does Billy two major favors, actions that make the reader inclined to identify with him, perhaps even consider him one of the good guys, if such a character exists in these stories. But the more we hear him speak in his conversation with Billy, the more his moral character is brought into question. He states, "There is the latifunio [large estate owners] of Babicora...with all the wealth and power of Mr. Hearst to call upon. And there are the campesinos [the workers] in their rags. Which do you believe will prevail?" (384). He then responds to the question of why work for the Babicora—white men like Mr. Hearst and Mr. Simmons—simply by stating, "Because they pay me." Continuing on, he tells the story of Socorro Rivera who "tried to organize the workers against the latifundio. He was killed at the paraje [residence] of Las Varitas by the Guardias Blancas five years ago along with two other men" (385). To an extent this seems to explain much about the contradictions inherent in the peripheral position of Quijada in that he knows that if he rebels like the many who have before him, he will be killed. Whether you fight or do not, you are inevitably doomed to lose agency and become subservient, so why not just give in and accept the offered pay? He seems to have resolved this issue for himself by disconnecting himself from the plight of the poor Mexican campesinos—"I am not a Mexican. I do not have these loyalties. These obligations. I have others...If it had to come to [shooting Boyd]...yes [I would have]"

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(385). As a result, we, like Billy are left feeling unsure about the man who has repeatedly saved his neck.

But, as previously stated, Quijada, like the Captain, finds a way to be true to himself, despite any perceived contradictions we as readers may see. While talking about Boyd he touches on this: “[Boyd] didn’t want to be taken care of...What makes one a good enemy also makes one a good friend” (385). He seems to be saying that Boyd, despite his young age, and in part because of his lifestyle, had come to take control of his own life by becoming the violent revolutionary he eventually turns out to be. While he does make an off-handed comment about Billy not caring for his brother enough (386), he seems more interested in discussing how and what Boyd eventually came to be as a result of both circumstances and the actions that he and his brother each took. He uses the notion of the corrido (populist folk song) as an avenue to discuss these things:

The corrido is the poor man’s history. It does not owe its allegiance to the truths of history but to the truths of men. It tells the tale of that solitary man who is all men. It believes that where two men meet one of two things can occur and nothing else. In the one case a lie is born and in the other death. (386)

Apart from the message about interconnectedness made here, Quijada appears to be pushing the conversation towards ideas about truth. Based on this it would seem that he does believe in a single historical truth—a notion quite different than that of the Captain’s subjective reality. But he says that the song’s truth is different than the historical one, it being the truth of man, to which Billy responds “It sounds like death is the truth” (386). Once more, we see the common thread that connects everything throughout the course of



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the trilogy: death and chaos are the ruling principles of the universe. As a result these forces grabbed Boyd, and allowed him in adopting the persona of revolutionary to become a thing much different than what he previously was. "He cannot be reclaimed," Quijada states (386), not even in death because he has become this transcendent thing that the poor boy who lost his family back in New Mexico could never begin to comprehend.

In large part Quijada does seem interested in helping Billy, although it is unclear if he does this out of sympathy or empathy for a relatable subject position. Perhaps he sees Billy like himself, unfairly dispossessed by circumstance. He does go out of his way to offer him advice and help him out a third time, this time advising him further about the order of the world and chaos. He says, "Your brother is in that place which the world has chosen for him. He is where he is supposed to be. And yet the place he has found is also of his own choosing. That is a piece of luck not to be despised" (387-388). He is trying to let Billy know that, while Boyd is dead and in Mexico, it is not his place to move him. Rather, it is chaos which has led him there as it eventually leads all people, none of whom may be brought back. And furthermore, Boyd himself has chosen that path by his actions, as has Billy himself in bringing him into Mexico in the first place. That said it is not really bad that these events have occurred but simply the way things are, the way they have been, and the way they always will be.

The final minor character of particular relevance, Eduardo, is taken from *Cities of the Plain*. Eduardo occupies a position of significant difference from those previously mentioned. While it is true that he, like each of the aforementioned, can be considered a

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Warshowian cowboy, in that he lives by a certain code and does not fail so long as he lives up to his own standards, there is something about his sense of self that seems distant from those of his predecessors. It also seems to differ from what many would consider human. Firstly, it should be noted that like Don Arnolfo, his background is shrouded in mystery. We have little indication about his race beyond his Mexican name, nothing of his class history, nor do we hear any of the personal commentary and background that comes with so many of the other minor characters who come and go throughout the trilogy.

The only character who really compares, the aforementioned Captain, seems relatively fleshed out in that we at least are given a rationale for him becoming the man he is. Although we may not agree with it, we understand him a little better because of the story from his childhood in which he violently asserts himself as a means of earning respect. This scene, while terrifyingly violent, humanizes the character in a fashion we never see with Eduardo. The difference here seems to be that the Captain wants people to understand him, and as a result he chooses to explain himself. But Eduardo never attempts to explain himself, nor does he care whether John Grady, or anyone, understands his background or the events which have led him to become who he now is. Rather than defending himself, he speaks in a chastising tone, condescendingly. He says things like, "Lessons are hard...Does he [in reference to Grady] still hope for some miracle? Perhaps he will see the truth at last in his own intestines" (252).

If anything he seems to be trying to inform the ignorant John Grady of the realities of world, not for his own benefit, but out of concern for Grady. And it should be

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noted, more starkly than with any of the other characters who hint at this, that for Eduardo it is not a matter of making Grady see his point of view, but revealing to his foe the way the world is. To reiterate, the real distinction for Eduardo is that he does not have the humanizing elements of those before him, and as a result, we as readers are more likely to take his word—the word of an extra-human, a figure more akin to an omniscient narrator—as truth. Also, the proximity of his rants to the end of the trilogy is noteworthy as a sort of penultimate conclusion before we get the epilogue interactions between Billy and the man from the south. McCarthy to great extent seems to be hammering home his point.

Taking a step back though and focusing less on the far reaching implications of Eduardo's statements and more on how his interactions reflect his own world views, Eduardo, like Alfonsa, the Captain, and even Quijada, is, as previously mentioned, a believer in the world as it is. Though it is unclear what has driven him to develop this world view—the man is in an elevated societal position as the procurer of a brothel, slightly higher than *el campesinos*, but not quite a member of the aristocracy either—he seems more than determined that Grady get the message that the world is not the romantic place that he believes it to be. He says to Parham when he shows up to negotiate a purchase of Magdalena—a problematic proposal in and of itself—“your friend is in the grips of an irrational passion. Nothing you say to him will matter. He has in his head a certain story. Of how things will be. In this story he will be happy. What is wrong with this story? What is wrong...is that it is not a true story” (134). It is fact to Eduardo, and inescapable at that. This differs starkly, again, from the Captain's multiple

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truths. It is also different from Billy's outlook when he agrees with Eduardo briefly before explaining his hesitancy, "It feels like a betrayal of some kind," and then deviating, "...Some men get what they want" (134).

Eduardo responds, and this time he states, "No man [gets what he wants]. Or perhaps only briefly so as to lose it. Or perhaps only to prove to the dreamer that the world of his longing made real is no longer that world at all" (134-135). Eduardo, strikingly enough, seems to be assigning agency to fate—as if this force, whatever may be behind it—though it seems to be a little more than "the way things are" here—can purposefully alter reality to teach people a lesson. Even more, it does not seem a stretch to say that Eduardo identifies as an extension of these forces—which is megalomaniacal to say the least. From his limited perspective, his will and the world's, the forces of destruction and chaos, are one and the same, and he must work to ensure that things go the way that they are supposed to. This explains his willingness to play an active role in making sure that whatever happens, John Grady does not wind up happy, living his romantic dream of a simple life with a woman he loves. At the same time though, it is also possible that Eduardo is simply justifying his future course of action as a result of his own will. In giving up Magdalena he would be losing power, a thing which Eduardo cannot do and maintain his power position.

Another way of characterizing Eduardo is his ability to justify his own actions. After having Magdalena killed, he says, "In spite of whatever views you might 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

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without regards for the consequences” (240). Pushing aside yet again how blatantly chauvinistic these statements are, it should be noted that Eduardo seems more bothered by the notion that a dreamer like Grady gave Magdalena a reason to hope, than by the actual act of stealing her from him. From his perspective, he is upset that an unrealistic child, a boy of only twenty who has yet to learn the chaotic nature of the universe, had the audacity to come into his world and think he could get away with making it into something other than what it is. This sort of reasoning obstructs his own world view's validity. It makes him question himself. For the first time we begin to see that despite the unflappable nature of Eduardo's character, he too has his doubts. Were Grady to make off with the girl, then Eduardo would be wrong, a circumstance that McCarthy was unwilling to write, perhaps because of his own beliefs on the matter. But, Eduardo ends this soliloquy by deterministically arguing the logical rightness of circumstances: “But of course this does not make the consequences go away. Does it?...[You] have almost certainly colluded in enticing away one of the girls in my charge in a manner that has led to her death. And yet you appear to be asking me to help resolve your difficulties for you. Why?” (240-241). To Eduardo it was not he who had Magdalena killed, it was the circumstantial consequence of Billy and John Grady's conspiring to steal that which did not belong to them.

McCarthy appears to affirm this argument. He brings John Grady back to Juarez to seek his vengeance on Eduardo, the logically chaotic conclusion to all of the events that have led up to this moment. Naturally, Grady will die, being the classical Western hero who must kill or be killed because his code will not allow him to live with himself

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otherwise. Yet somehow, in the ensuing knife fight even while Eduardo nonchalantly teaches Grady a lesson with every connecting laceration, the person who emerges victorious is not Eduardo. Despite having demolished Grady, ripping his intestines out and humiliatingly writing the letter "E" on his thigh in cuts, Eduardo gets caught unaware, the knife "brought...up underhand from the knee and slammed...home...The clack of the Mexican's teeth as his jaw clapped shut" (254). In gasping his final breaths, Eduardo thereby invalidates all of his lessons:

He is deaf to reason. To his friends. To the blind maestro. All. He wishes nothing so fondly as to throw himself into the grave of a dead whore...He says nothing and yet how many times was he warned? And then to try to buy the girl? From that moment to this all was certain as dark and day... (251)

and all of his taunts:

You're like the whores from the campo [country] farmboy. To believe that craziness is sacred. A special grace. A special touch. A partaking of the godhead...But what does that say of God?...In his dying perhaps the suitor will see it was his hunger for mysteries that has undone him. Whores. Superstition. (253).

While it may be true that God is not the ruler of the universe within the border trilogy, and that in his stead a fatalistic chaos reigns, it must also be made clear that neither is Eduardo the personification of this chaos. Eduardo is simply a human who has fashioned himself as such. As a result he winds up nothing more than Grady, a victim of the forces of which he believes himself a part. When he addresses Grady, saying, "It was his

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hunger for mysteries that has undone him. Whores. Superstition. Finally death... That is what has brought you here and will always bring you here" (253), he is inadvertently speaking just as pertinently of himself, a victim rather than an agent.

Going back to the question, why does McCarthy leave non-white and female characters undeveloped, it would seem that the original statement has proved, Katherine Sugg's statements notwithstanding, only somewhat true. After all, he has developed to great extent many characters of diffuse backgrounds through his use of soliloquies and interactions with the protagonists. However, with few exceptions—Alfonsa principally, but also the Primadonna and the Fortune Teller from *The Crossing*—females in McCarthy's trilogy maintain a weakened position. In McCarthy it is rare for a female to have a speaking role, and if she does it is normally brief relative to the soliloquies of her male counterparts. Women often fill subservient roles as maids—maternal, yet rarely examined or considered beyond what they do for the protagonists and other male characters. Even female characters who have great bearing on the stories' various plotlines—Alejandra, Magdalena, and Boyd's unnamed Mexican girlfriend—never say or do much except as a reaction to a more empowered person's speaking or acting toward them. One might go so far as to say they are irrelevant to the story and the points which McCarthy is hoping to convey beyond their necessity as motive for why white male cowboys do the things they do. However, by virtue of their underdevelopment, they do seem to represent many of the notions that brought the cowboys to Mexico in the first place: mystery, adventure, and the allure of that which is unknown, but also the possibility for a return to the home which has been lost (*COTP*, 145).

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Patrick Shaw argues that women in the novels, failing to assert themselves as characters, serve more of a collective role—to be the alternative to the males who are “characterized by traditional narrative techniques.” He continues, “The passive women regulate those actions through a keen sensitivity to the male ego and to the female’s covert powers in an overtly patriarchal society” (262). Shaw implies that women in the trilogy move beyond their seeming subservient role collectively by working behind the scenes to manipulate the world into what they would have it be. He cites examples such as Alejandra using Grady for sex and casting him aside, Duena Alfonsa getting him out of prison simply “so that she might continue her modicum of control over Alejandra,” and Magdalena’s supposed manipulation of Grady and Eduardo into murdering one another (Shaw, 262)—stretches to say the least. Overlooking the oversimplified and largely inaccurate readings of each of the aforementioned females, Shaw fails to see the simple fact, articulated up to this point, that no man, or woman, has the power to change the world and make it into something other than what it is. As a result it seems no surprise that women assume a role of powerlessness within the novels. However, this does not address the question of why they do not have a role more akin to the less significant male characters of the story.

Nell Sullivan alternatively argues that “By divorcing femininity from women and allowing the male performance of both gender roles, McCarthy in effect creates a closed circuit for male desire” (Sullivan, 230). While an interesting and well argued point, Sullivan seems lacking in that she makes problematic assumptions about the implications of events, such as the likening of a bleeding wound to menstruation (237, 242). She does



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however offer a strong understanding of feminist theory, as when she states, that “while male performance of the feminine seemingly undermines the notion of ‘natural’ male domination, it also becomes one more strategy to contain feminine power and obviate women” (252). McCarthy’s omission of strong female characters cannot be denied, and while this may make some sense in the context of such a strongly patriarchic society, an even more accurate interpretation of this omission might be that such an inclusion would contradict McCarthy’s notion of the universality of violence, a thing which some would argue is patriarchal in nature. Ultimately though, we are left with the words of Boyd’s unnamed Mexican girlfriend, for whom he leaves his brother, never to be heard from again:

To be a woman was to live a life of difficulty and heartbreak and those who said otherwise simply had no wish to face the facts...since this was so nor could it be altered, one was better to follow one’s heart in joy and in misery than simply to seek comfort for there was none. To seek it was only to welcome in the misery and to know little else...these were things all women knew yet seldom speak of. If women were drawn to rash men it was only that in their secret hearts they knew that a man who would not kill for them was of no use at all (322).

In many ways this quotation seems to sum up McCarthy, at least as he is represented here in his Border Trilogy—to be a *human being* is to live a life of difficulty and heartbreak, and those who said otherwise, cowboys like John Grady and Billy Parham, wind up dead or old and alone, still lacking those things which brought them into Mexico in the first place. A sense of home, of placeness, the allure of going

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somewhere "that ain't never been mapped," living free on the plains by a personally defined code: these are all things which the American cowboys seek, and yet each can be observed as never having existed. As John Wegner puts it in his essay "Mexico para los Mexicanos: Revolution, Mexico, and McCarthy's Border Trilogy," "Mexico is not some borderland region, simplistic and Attic, where "warriors would ride on in that darkness they'd become, rattling past with their stone-age tools of war" (*ATPH*, 6). The continual revolutions, the constant revolving of history, signify the constant retelling and recreation of history. The tale never ends; the thread of the story runs from character to character" (Wegner, 72). In the end we are left with the realization that in the world of Cormac McCarthy, while each man is said to be "the bard of his own existence" (*COTP*, 283), in reality, "there are no crossroads. Our decisions do not have some alternative. We may contemplate a choice but we pursue one path only...and since death comes to all there is no way to abate the fear of it except to love that man who stands for us" (286, 288). Death is that man, and it is his tale which we must listen to.

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