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Relocating the Cowboy: American Privilege in "All the Pretty Horses"

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American novelist Cormac McCarthy is often hailed as one of the champions of post-modernist literature. In 1992 McCarthy published the first novel in his Border Trilogy entitled *All The Pretty Horses.* Each installment of the series would be tied together by solely one repeated action: the crossing of the Mexican-American border.[1] After the last novel of the trilogy was completed, critics like Mark Busby would praise the project for "McCarthy's genius," for he "melds…the dominant American fiction of the first half of the century, with Western fiction with its roots deep in the traditional frontier myth and its emphasis on the border between the east/west frontier…[which] McCarthy then swivels north/south and uses…in a new way" (Busby 228). Busby's quotation presents the border in such a way that identifies two geographical binaries, north/south and east/west, that have inherent hierarchies rooted in the Western tradition; the West is privileged over the east, and—as Busby notes—the North (America) over the South (Mexico). The latter binary, AMERICA/Mexico, pervades McCarthy's border trilogy and brings into question the most sacred conviction of American exceptionalism. Busby notes in his discussion of border that this binary has an obvious visual existence—indeed, many conventional contemporary maps of the Western hemisphere would clearly designate a difference between the two nations with a thick line. In addition to the visual designation, America's value for industrialization has produced another hierarchal binary between the two nations that further arbitrarily divides the two countries: while America is "civilized" and desirable, Mexico is its

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[1] Like all of McCarthy's novels, the Border Trilogy incorporates elements of American history. The Mexican Revolution—which is referenced and thoroughly recounted in *All The Pretty Horses*—had an enormous impact on Mexican-American relations because of its socialist, anti-imperialist sentiments. In John Wegner's "'Mexico para los Mexicanos': revolution, Mexico, and McCarthy's Border Trilogy" discusses the consequences of the war and how McCarthy engages this history in detail and would be an insightful analysis for further reading. In the article, Wegner quotes Michael C. Meyer's in stating, "The *laissez-faire* attitude toward the U.S.-Mexico border region underwent a dramatic change in the fall of 1910 with the outbreak of the…Revolution" (Wegner 253).

undeveloped and undesirable opposite. In this sense, *All The Pretty Horses* is problematic because the hero John Grady Cole does not subscribe to the binary ideology established within the novel. In fact, he desires precisely the elements of Mexico that constitute its inferiority, for American society celebrates the very elements—namely, civilization, industry, and limitation—that destroy the cowboy's purpose within the Western. Thus, by revealing that civilization has actually come to imprison the symbol of American freedom, the binaries at play in *All The Pretty Horses* work to undermine the myth of the American dream—in effect deconstructing the American narrative and the hierarchical binary rootedness of the ideology behind American exceptionalism.

McCarthy's novel is not only a Western, but also a *Bildungsroman*—a popular genre in American literary tradition. The Western typically illustrates the journey of a man, usually a horse-riding cowboy, into the Western frontier where he must conquer nature "in the name of civilization or [confiscate] the territorial rights of the original inhabitants…Native Americans" (Newman 150). What this brand of mythology promotes is precisely the values of American culture: rugged individualism, achievement and success, activity and work, democracy and enterprise, and—most importantly—freedom. *All The Pretty Horses* embodies all the typical themes of this genre. The protagonist John Grady Cole, a sixteen-year-old boy with a knack for horses, fits the role of the cowboy perfectly; however, he is unfortunately born in the wrong time. The American frontier has already been conquered, developed, and populated, and the automobile has all but completely replaced the horse. By the end of the first chapter John Grady Cole has already set out to Mexico, the only unconquered land left, to become a ranchero. Thus John Grady's plight engages "that archetypical American genre in which a youthful protagonist turns his back on civilization and heads out—into the forest, down river, across the sea or, as in

John Grady's case, through desert and mountain on horseback—into the wilderness where innocence experiences the evil of the universe and risks defeat by it" (Morrison 178). McCarthy's coming-of-age novel follows in the tradition of American writers before him—Hawthorne, Twain, Melville, and James—but his respective historical moment on the post-modern stage allows for a radical perspective on the traditional story that is the premise of this paper.

McCarthy's tone in *All The Pretty Horses* is nostalgic, "considerably gentler in tone and imbued with an archetypal aura of romance" (Morrison 175).[2] McCarthy achieves this organic, wholly romantic tone through his vivid depiction of the novel's landscapes. It is this discussion of landscape that has consumed much of the scholarship on the novel. This discussion is particularly significant to understand how the argument has unfolded since the novel's publication. Alan Cheuse and later Vereen M. Bell replied to McCarthy's novel in 1992—the same year that it was published. Bell and Cheuse both used a structuralist lens and arrived at a similar conclusion. Henceforth, the scholars would set the topic of discussion and the interpretation of the topic for almost a decade. Alan Cheuse's article, "A Note on Landscape in *All The Pretty Horses,*" analyzes the patterns in McCarthy's rhetorical and grammatical structure, which Cheuse argues work in order to make landscape an autonomous being. He opens his essay by employing a quote from Octavio Paz, a critic famous for defining the Mexican literary tradition, found in his essay "Landscape and the Novel in Mexico" in which he argues that "[the landscape] does not function as the background or physical setting of the narrative…It

[2] *All The Pretty Horses,* though the first of the border trilogy, is actually the second of McCarthy's Westerns. The first, *Blood Meridian,* is often considered an "Anti-Western" because of its dark tone and stress on the lawlessness of the time period in which Westerns take place. *Blood Meridian* fictionalizes the historical Glanton gang, which became infamous for massacring and scalping Native Americans for pleasure in the America-Mexico borderlands in the nineteenth century.

is something that is alive…a voice entering into the dialogue, and in the end the principal character in the story" (Paz 56). Bell subscribed to Cheuse's interpretation of landscape. His essay asserts the significance of McCarthy's depiction of nature: "Nature…exists wholly on its own, indifferent to human purpose or desire; his vivid, austere landscapes seem mysteriously to be gazing at us rather than the reverse…enveloped in an aura of stylization and romance" (Bell 89). Most scholarship that followed the influential pair would apply the same structuralist theory in an attempt to revolutionize their predecessors' theses. However, no argument broke very much ground, and each structuralist perspective always arrived—once again—at the same discussion of landscape (Kreml, Luce, Spurgeon, Spellman). By autonomizing the landscape in *All The Pretty Horses*, Cheuse and Bell sanctified it—injecting it with a myth of presence that would limit the discussion around McCarthy's novel for years.

In 2000, David Holloway would finally challenge the field to produce something new in his essay "'A false book is no book at all': the ideology of representation in *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy." In his essay Holloway remarks, "Since *All The Pretty* Horses, interest in McCarthy has risen at such a rate that discussion of the novels themselves has become almost indivisible from debate about the insubstantial body of critical opinion that has risen up around them" (Holloway 185). Holloway's assertion, however scathing, did what was needed: it challenged the academic circle to move past or against the scholarship that had achieved "canonical status within the academy" and frozen the conversation for eight years. In the same year Holloway's article started the race, Mark Busby would publish "Into the darkening land, the world to come: Cormac McCarthy's border crossings," in which he would question Bell's identification of romanticism as the autonomous landscape's fundamental trait. The landscape, though picturesque, is *physical:* "Metaphors of…dream are seemingly opposed by the 'real' of

trees, rocks, rivers and emphasize [a] liminal state" (Busby 227). Busby argues that it is precisely that "liminalism" that highlights the tension of "the border living in a world of between" (227). Busby's work finally elucidated that landscape was not the paramount object of discussion, but rather a channel to illuminate border as the *real* subject of scrutiny.

In 2012, two years after Busby turned the spotlight to the border, Jordan Savage would write the article that answered Holloway's prayers and truly shattered the premise of Cheuse and Bell's dominating argument. Savage's dauntless '"What the Hell Is a Flowery Boundary Tree?' Gunslinger, All the Pretty Horses and the Postmodern Western" would completely undermine the accepted autonomy of landscape. In the essay Savage asserts: "Land is only land: it has no intrinsic values other than those assigned to it externally, according to an artificially developed human code. This code bears the same relationship to the reality of the land it names, and claims to represent" (Savage 997). By removing land from its throne within the scholarship, Savage would crown Busby's border ideology as the new focus of discussion; but rather than a crown, Savage would prop a jester's hat onto the concept border. Indeed, Savage criticized its very existence by applying a Marxist post-modern lens: "There is no such thing as a border, and national identity is a myth propounded by white-supremacist, capitalist societies to support a system founded on competition" (Savage 997). Savage asserted that lines on a page meant to "represent the intricacies of a civilization" are completely arbitrary and are only used in order to promote competitive ideology among lower-class members of capitalist societies (998).

But if border is indeed only a construct, then the very premise of McCarthy's novel seems to be more elusive than it appears; indeed, if the border defined by maps does not designate two inherently different lands—as ideology assumes—then what does border truly divide, and why does John Grady Cole desire to cross it? To answer this question, it is profitable

to identify the ideas that are associated with the respective lands that the border divides—the conceptualization of which has been consumed by Western ideology and regurgitated in the form of several core binaries that *All The Pretty Horses* portrays. The primary binary, which carries all the weight of American exceptionalism, is the AMERICA/Mexico binary. According to the Western tradition, America is desirable because it is "civilized," industrialized, and built on democratic values, while Mexico is undesirable, uncivilized, and anarchistic post-Revolution. Those assumptions are the basis of the consequent hierarchical binary sets that accompany AMERICA/Mexico, particularly CIVILIZATION/nature, INDUSTRY/open range, and LIMITATION/freedom.[3] By presenting this hierarchical set of binaries, *All The Pretty Horses* deconstructs the very core of American exceptionalism through John Grady Cole—the mythical American cowboy who embodies all of Romantic American values—who chooses Mexico over America and thus invalidates the presumed superiority that the concept of the American dream grants the foundational AMERICA/Mexico binary.

The tension created by the CIVILIZATION/nature binary[4] is presented at the onset of the narrative, quickly creating a distinction between America—which has been quickly and utterly industrialized—and Mexico. It appears that nature is only a ghost of the past in the States. In one instance the cowboy, John Grady Cole, stares straight into his decaying American dream: "There was an old horseskull in the brush and he squatted and picked it up and turned it in his hands. Frail and brittle…He squatted in the long light holding it" (McCarthy 6). The horse skull symbolizes destruction of the frontier by civilization, the consequent death of nature, and the

[3] As each of these binaries is developed, many of them are engaged by the same selections of textual evidence—illuminating the undivorceable interconnectedness that our ideology has projected onto them.
[4] The CIVILIZATION/nature binary is the general binary, but the language of this binary inherently engages other subsets—particularly MAN/savage and MAN/animal—that are discussed in this paragraph but voiced under the overarching binary for the sake of simplicity.

extinction of horsemanship due to the popularization of the automobile. Thus, this scene is truly an omen for John Grady Cole, who recognizes that *America* is no longer a feasible home for the *American* cowboy. But Mexico, as America's binary opposite, has not yet been developed and exists in a natural state; because of its underdevelopment, the country offers John Grady a place where his horsemanship will be useful and an unexplored frontier to conquer. Several times before he departs on his journey, John Grady Cole visits a site on the edge of his town where he can see into Mexican territory. Here he fantasizes about what he sees in the lands:

> When the wind was north [he] could hear them…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…all of them pledged in blood and redeemable in blood only…the horses and the breath of the horses and the horses' hooves…like the passing of some enormous serpent and the young boys naked on wild horses…and the dogs trotting with their tongues aloll. (5)

McCarthy's language lush, vivid language in this quotation envelops the savage in romantic aura. The image of the savage—oozing with life and blood (the source of life), enraptured with passion, and in touch with nature—fleeing America "and longing south across the plains to Mexico" starkly contrasts the traces of nature left in America—the dry, decaying skull. John Grady Cole's sympathies again lie with the horse, the Comanche savage, and the hunting dogs, all of which represent the natural half of the binary in this scene. Faced with the consequences of civilization in America—the disappearance of the horse and other natural features—John Grady feels he must follow the path endured by the savages years ago in order to find an intact frontier.

The demands of civilization as well as the novel's historical setting in Texas during the mid-twentieth century propagate the rapid industrialization of the land that is already well on its way when the novel begins. Industry and its opposing concept, the open range, create their own respective binary within *All The Pretty Horses.* Naturally for a cowboy whose principal treasure is the horse, John Grady Cole's greatest enemy seems to be the Ford automobiles—the symbol of American industrialization: "It was just dark and the streetlights had come on. The first vehicle along was a Model A Ford truck and it came skidding quarterwise to a halt on its mechanical brakes and the driver leaned across and rolled down the window part way and boomed at him in a whiskey voice: Throw that hull up in the bed, cowboy, and get in here" (14). This instance is laden with tension between INDUSTRY/open range: the streetlights come on to artificially pollute the darkness, the truck—which McCarthy describes pointedly as "mechanical"—aggressively interrupts John Grady's peaceful walk home, and the man driving the Ford drunkenly mocks John Grady—who is carrying a saddle gifted to him by his father—because of the saddle's impracticality. The same tension surfaces when John Grady Cole recalls his grandfather's story about the Comanche tribe who previously starred in his vivid daydream. Yet this time the stories come to him while John Grady Cole sits awake late at night during a thunderstorm: "Through the front window he could see the starlit prairie falling away to the south. The black crosses of the old telegraph poles yoked across the constellations passing east to west. His grandfather said the Comanche would cut the wires and splice them back with horse-hair" (McCarthy 11). Industrial electrical wires interrupt John Grady's view of the stars—which are visible in the unpolluted skies south of civilization. But what fully captures the tension of the INDUSTRY/open range binary embodied by this moment is the image of the Comanche, the champions of nature and seekers of the open range, attempting to sabotage industry by

reintroducing elements of nature. Like the Comanche, the cowboy can never accept industrialization. When John Grady Cole last sees his father (another, though aging, cowboy), he teasingly asks his father if he would buy any of the cars parked along the street had he the money. John Grady Cole's father responds: "I had the money and I didn't" (McCarthy 11). The scene exhibits, perhaps once and for all, that the cowboy will always choose the horse over the automobile and the open range over industry.

The effects of civilization and industrialization on John Grady Cole produce the final binary: limitation/freedom. Indeed, John Grady Cole feels victimized by the encroachment of civilization and industry on his happiness because they both render him unable to achieve his only dream to work as a ranchero on his family's ranch in Texas. The ranch that John Grady Cole values so dearly, the last hope for a sanctuary in which he can carry out his ranchero dreams, is disbanded before the novel begins with the death of John Grady's grandfather. However, the description of its history is one of industrial destruction: "The original ranch [was built]…in eighteen sixty-six…In eighteen eighty-three they ran the first barbed wire. By eighty-six the buffalo were gone...and [now] the ranch was disbanded" (McCarthy 7). In the history of the ranch's destruction lurks again the tension between civilization and nature—once the barbed wire (man and industry) goes up, the buffalo (nature) is soon destroyed. But here the symbol of industry is also a symbol of boundaries and limitation; it confines the land so that neither the animal nor the cowboy can survive upon it because they both need the land to roam. John Grady makes a final plea to salvage the ranch to his mother, who voices the societal expectations John Grady Cole does not want to hear: "Anyway you're sixteen years old, you cant run a ranch… You're being ridiculous. You have to go to school" (15). Thus American society is limiting to John Grady Cole. He is a teenager is expected to attend school, not operate a ranch. But Mexico

is an escape from all limitations, for it is a land free of the restricting rules of American culture and a land unfenced and undeveloped where John Grady becomes a successful ranchero on a wealthy hacienda. It is only in Mexico that John Grady Cole is able to achieve the freedom to pursue the dreams ironically unavailable in the land of opportunity and freedom.

By analyzing the binaries in *All The Pretty Horses* that have influenced Western perception of the AMERICA/Mexico binary and the Mexican-American relationship, it becomes clearer why—despite the traditional privileging of America and the virtues associated with the nation—cowboy John Grady Cole, who represents the pinnacle of those American virtues set forward by the Western genre, ultimately leaves America to find solace in Mexico. Specifically, John Grady embodies rugged individualism, strong work ethic, loyalty, and simplicity; indeed at face value, his character should thrive in American culture where society claims to value those very traits. But the very premise of John Grady Cole's character—a cowboy traveling across the Romantic Western landscapes—operates *through* those values; for example, he desires nothing but his horse, open pastures, and ranch work precisely because he internalizes the values of simplicity, individualism, and worth ethic. Yet in the increasingly industrialized America his desires are impractical and his American dream is thus rendered metaphorically dead, leaving him to turn to the only uncharted territory left in Mexico. But if the cowboy—the pinnacle of American virtue—can only achieve happiness by crossing the border into Mexico, then America no longer retains superiority within the binary based on its claim to values like freedom and individualism. Thus, American exceptionalism is exposed to be as much of an ideological construct as the myth of the border that propounded the binary in the first place.

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