Cormac McCarthy’s *The Crossing*: Demystifying American West through Bioregional Reinhabitation and Nomadic Border-Crossing

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I. *Cormac McCarthy: Western Fiction Writer, or Anti-West Author?*

Cormac McCarthy’s *The Crossing*, as the title suggests, is about three border-crossings between the Southwestern US and Mexico made by the protagonist Billy Parham, who, during the process of three journeys, realizes the bare existential truth of life. The novel depicts the difficulty of drawing a line between humanity/alterity, contingency/necessity, and place/space. Among the many lessons Billy’s border-crossings imply, I am especially interested in the dynamics between place and space that begin to emerge as Billy is led to live a nomadic life back and forth across the borders, which I believe plays a primary role in dispelling the American Western myths.
Geographically speaking, McCarthy has decidedly eluded a clear-cut regionalist nomination, straddling on the Southwestern borderland. As Dana Phillips has pointed out, Southern readers tend to align McCarthy with the Southern genealogy, conceiving him as “the heir of William Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor” (434). A majority of non-Southern readers, on the other hand, consider his works primarily as Western fiction, associating his works with Owen Wister’s novel *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains*, or Richard Slotkin’s frontier thesis of “regeneration through violence.” To call McCarthy “a Western novelist” would not strictly be a misnomer although such a simplistic appellation requires further elaboration.

Many critics, such as Barcley Owens and George Guillemin among others, have associated McCarthy’s Border Trilogy with Western myths or the American pastoral, focusing on such themes as “the dispossessed yeoman and Jeffersonian agrarianism, the last cowboy and the frontier, the New Adam and rugged individualism” (Guillemin 107). Shifting a focus away from these obviously discernible Western


2) Richard Slotkin has famously defined the American Western frontier with “the myth of regeneration through violence” (5). Slotkin delineates the formulation of Western myth from “first American mythology,” which primarily depicts the hostile relation between the colonist and the natives, into “new version,” in which the mythical hero’s role is to “mediat[e] between civilization and savagery,” such as the yeoman farmer (21).

3) Barcley Owens examines some of the genre characteristics of *The Crossing* in his essay titled, “Western Myths in *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing*.” Owens contends that “McCarthy’s Western novels remain solidly fixed on white male experiences” while “the Mexicans are left on the periphery in supporting