

**Pariahs , Tricksters, and the Subversion of Modernity: The  
Decolonial Borderland Narratives of Cormac McCarthy and  
Eduardo Antonio Parra.**

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**Abstract**

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This dissertation analyzes how decolonial borderland narratives unveil the rhetoric and promises of modernity. In particular, how they reject Western ideals of progress, development, and civilization, while also conveying their own ways of being and independent thought in acts of epistemic disobedience and delinking.

I examine these competing narratives through my developing idea of decolonial borderland scripts, which draws from Walter Mignolo's decolonial theories that critique the logic of coloniality and the rhetoric of modernity. The chapters of my dissertation move from questions of theory and methodology in borderland narratives, specifically the works of Cormac McCarthy and Eduardo Antonio Parra, to diverse readings of migration, violence and criminality, in relation to epistemic disobedience, gender and ecology.

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## Introduction: Epistemic Delinking

The late Lakota theologian of liberation, Richard Twiss, in an online video titled *A Theology of Manifest Destiny*, cogently argues that biblical narratives of exodus and chosen-ness guide the logic of Manifest Destiny, while host nations (natives) have historically been represented as Canaanites who impede the building of a kingdom of heaven, especially in the North American context. North American continental expansion is, thus, articulated as a civilizing mission steeped in the rhetoric of modernity. This dissertation, through the North American borderland narratives of Cormac McCarthy and Eduardo Antonio Parra and decolonial theory, will unveil the hidden side of modernity, which is the logic of coloniality. My theoretical framework, which I outline extensively in chapter one, is rooted in Walter D. Mignolo's critique of modernity, most recently outlined in *The Darker Side of Modernity* (2011). Decoloniality, in sum, has "the analytic task of unveiling the logic of coloniality and the prospective task of contributing to build a world in which many worlds coexist" (Mignolo, 54). Pluriversality is a world where many worlds coexist, rather than one conceptualized and governed through one self-congratulatory narrative of universality. Borderland narratives, in contrast to Western and Border Literature and rooted in border thinking, are decolonial in that they highlight a multiplicity of epistemologies that co-exist within and across the temporal spatial boundaries created by the imposition of difference as a measure of modernity. Whereas the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality are present in the borderland narratives of Cormac McCarthy and Eduardo Antonio Parra, I argue that their border dwellers are the pariahs of modernity. Moreover, their stories transgress and circumvent binary values and ideas. The borderland narratives of McCarthy

and Parra challenge national interpretations of the borderlands while becoming, in turn, transnational narratives that delineate national literary projects, while also juxtaposing colonial legacies.

This dissertation asserts that decolonial borderland narratives, in their pluriversality, delink from their colonial legacies and national ideologies, as manifested in the narratives of Cormac McCarthy and Eduardo Antonio Parra. It will be organized around the themes of border thinking, narcoviolence, and modernity/coloniality. The dissertation will be divided into three chapters. The introduction will contextualize the works of McCarthy and Parra as decolonial borderland narratives, while also providing an overview of border theory and literature. The first chapter, on defining the borderland narrative, will provide the theoretical background and framework for the literary analysis and critique. The remaining chapters will contain the bulk of my contribution to the field via the analysis and critique of the themes of narcoviolence and subverted modernities elucidated by the respective authors.

The canonical, primary and secondary, texts of border theory and border literature focus primarily on the fiction and criticism of two major authors, one writing from north of the line (the U.S., Cormac McCarthy), and the other writing from the South (Mexico, Parra). Of the many themes—violence and landscape—that unite these two authors, I am particularly interested in contextualizing their respective decolonial borderland narratives within and across the colonial matrix of power, which is the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality. Each author offers a unique vision of these overriding themes and their various manifestations across the U.S.—Mexican borderlands. Whereas Parra's characters are lured by the modernity of the U.S., McCarthy's Southwestern natives take refuge in the

“traditional” aspects of northern Mexican society that are delinked from projects of modernity, or what I refer to as unfulfilled modernities. Most, if not all, of the worthwhile criticism devoted to both Parra and McCarthy is limited to their respective national realms, and no one has yet undertaken a comparison of these two authors, or explored the transnational dimension of their works, which a comparison of their works will help to reveal. My analyses will aim to address that significant void, while contributing to current discussions related to the work of these two major authors within decolonial thinking.

### **Cormac McCarthy and Eduardo Antonio Parra**

The transnational borderlands narratives of Cormac McCarthy and Eduardo Antonio Parra undermine nation-based concepts of literature, while at the same time eschewing the exoticizing quest for the Other. Their narratives present contrasts between rural and urban spaces, as well as between U.S. and Mexican varieties of negative valuations of modernity, emanating from urban spaces and featuring sympathetic representations of wilderness and rural spaces as victims of modern-urban reform. In McCarthy's U.S.-based narratives, the critique of modernizing projects is largely epistemological, as demonstrated in his characters' philosophical introspections, and to a lesser extent, ecological. In Parra's Mexican-based fiction, in contrast, these epistemological and ecological issues are less foregrounded, though the arid desert "wasteland" forms a constant backdrop for his characters' travails. Instead Parra focuses on issues of social equality, centering on the resentment and (self-) destructive rebellion on the part of rural populations against projects of modernity dating back to centuries of exploitation and abuse.

McCarthy's Southern novels (set in Eastern Tennessee), *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), *Outer Dark* (1968), *Child of God* (1974), and *Suttree* (1979), deal largely with redemptive and regenerative themes—within a nation-based framework. Interlocutors of McCarthy's Western and borderland novels, however, are introduced to themes of wider relevance and with a broader worldview (transnationally and inter-culturally) that decenter national binaries. Sara Spurgeon (2002) has noted how McCarthy's first borderland novel, *Blood Meridian* (1985), can be read as an allegory for—and interrogation of—the subjugation of the West by the East through the quintessential frontier experience. *Blood Meridian* and *Border Trilogy*, however, go beyond the Orientalist motifs that characterize much "first-

world” literature and film. McCarthy further abandons imperialist themes in the *Border Trilogy*, by creating biliterate characters that transgress stereotypical representations of Mexico as a primitive Eden. McCarthy deviates from conventional interpretations further in the *Border Trilogy* by creating hybrid characters whose transcultural and transnational experiences circumvent stereotypical (inferentially desirous) representations of Mexico where “gringo interlopers” go to regenerate and/or redeem themselves. McCarthy’s borderland novels, in contrast, represent a “new West” that elucidates larger sociocultural critiques as well as socio-historical problematics (increasing violence and instability, lack of social mobility, and government complicity with drug trafficking organizations).

One specific intervention that McCarthy deploys in the *Border Trilogy* is the first protagonist in the series, John Grady Cole, whose knowledge of Spanish—untranslated and sans italics—as a prime manifestation of his linguistic and cultural code-switching. In his analysis of *All the Pretty Horses*, José Limón (1999) notes how Cole avoids denigrating stereotypes of Mexicans through his benign movements between northeastern Mexican Spanish and West Texas English: two binaries with a troubled and highly stratified past. Through his sociolinguistic code-switching, Cole can thus be interpreted as an intercultural character who is holistically integrated into the Texas-Mexican borderlands, due to his familiarity, alliance, and affinity with Greater Mexico, and with ethnic and national Mexicans. However, his identification with Mexico is not limited to people who share his profession—ranching and cowboy culture, early transculturations—but extends across most Mexican social hierarchies. These sociolinguistic interventions and interactions, thus, extend beyond national and regional binaries. In sum, Cole transgresses the Mexican binary by genuinely and benignly participating in and exchanging with many differing

aspects of northeastern Mexican society, while transcending U.S. (Western) binaries by acting as an autonomous agent, rather than one steeped in the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality. By presenting non-binary constructions of the West (Texas-Mexican borderlands), McCarthy's novels provide new entrances and analyses of the region where, previously, they were marked by narratives of Anglo dominance. The cultural exchanges presented by McCarthy—for e.g. , Cole as a *vaquero*—challenge the Western trope of violence as the primary agent of the expanding state. This is evident in *Blood Meridian* where a band of mercenaries metes out violence with impunity against natives and Mexicans under the auspices of a corrupt governor in Chihuahua whose imperial aims are genocide across the borderlands.

In the context of Mexico's Northeast, the dominant neoliberal narratives present Monterrey as an ideal site for late modernist projects of rapid industrialization, privatization, and globalization. Parra's narratives disrupt these neoliberal constructs through the agency of protagonists who are able to frustrate modernity through daily-lived activity yet still struggle to sustain a way of life that is now constrained by border militarization and the carceral state. Parra's protagonists are border dwellers who face fragmented lives and identities marked by physical violence, economic insecurity, and the loss of geographic mobility. There is a misfit between the "cultural borderlands" – that stretch across the international boundary for hundreds of miles in both directions and the political nation-state border imposed after 1848. This creates friction in the lived experiences of Parra's protagonists. In Parra's first novel, *Nostalgia de la sombra* (2002), we are presented with an assassin who once harbored cinematic hopes until a perilous situation catapults him onto the life of an outlaw. Similar to McCarthy's Cole heading south

after his mother sold the family ranch, the novel's protagonist, Ramiro, seeks fulfillment elsewhere, in the criminal underworld of the borderlands, whose illicit products (chiefly human and drug trafficking) and repercussions (violence, corruption and lawlessness) have evolved into the only actions that render the border truly permeable.

Regarding these tropes, Ignacio Sánchez Prado (2006), among others, has noted how the commodification of violence in recent Latin American narrative and film represents an imperialist mentality that exoticizes the region by dwelling on what Sylvia Molloy refers to as an "imperative of violence" (Prado, 50). From the metropolitan perspective, this violent exoticization can be read, as Mexico's inability to attain full modernity due to narcoviolence, corruption, and ineffective governance—themes undermined and interrupted in the narratives of Parra and McCarthy. I argue that it is not so much the commodification of violence in the borderland narratives of McCarthy and Parra, but rather violence as a cultural (McCarthy) and social (Parra) currency.

Both authors allow us to read the violence of the region *historically*. McCarthy, beginning with *Blood Meridian*, documents the initial social conflicts between Native Americans, Mexicans, and Anglo Texans that permeate and define the region throughout the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. In the *Border Trilogy*, McCarthy uses the encroachment of modernity to illustrate the hotly contested social and political spaces of the border region where he presents the modernization coming into fruition on the U.S. side as ranching and wildlife are erased across the transborder landscape. It is also in the *Border Trilogy* where interlocutors offer the local critique of the false promises and apparent failures of modernity on both sides of the border, from haciendas to Ciudad Juárez's seedier underworld driven by unquenchable gringo desires (1940s-1960s).

McCarthy continues his exploration of social conflict in the region with *No Country for Old Men* (2005) by exploring a borderland—especially on the Texas side—that has grown accustomed to the ubiquity of violence pervasive in the recent past and has been made all the more brutal by violence spawned from an increasing drug trade (late 1970s-1980s). The history of borderland violence, in this context, reaches its apogee in *Nostalgia de la sombra*, where it has moved beyond the monopolization of the state and its direct and indirect agents, and into the private entrepreneurial and criminal realm, which is the theme of my second chapter.

## **Border Theory and Literature**

Since the late 1980s, border theory and borderlands literature has been steadily gaining momentum, in both the U.S. and the Mexican academy, in the wake of increasing attention to issues of globalization, migration, and diaspora. In the past three decades, literary scholarship has shifted to a transnational perspective, permanently changing established notions of national and ethnic literatures. In the wide-ranging debate on transnationalism, border theory and literature occupy an important, specific function that attends to the material borders among nation states. Landmark texts of border theory and narrative include Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza* and Guillermo Gómez-Peña's *Warrior for Gringostroika*. My project is dedicated to gauging the value of border theory and borderlands narrative, through close analysis of two exemplary authors within the theoretical framework of decolonial thinking.

Borders and borderlands are fundamentally ambivalent, riddled by deep contradictions and divisions. The focus of hopes, as well as fears, they give rise to utopian dreams of transgression, reconciliation, and escape from monolithic concepts of culture and identity. At the same time, they are the sites of violence, separation, hatred, and death (the border as wound, scar, and wasteland). For example, mainstream U.S. literature on globalization and borderlands tends to emphasize the utopian potential, to eulogize borders as the vanishing point of national essentialisms and absolutist identities. As a result, border metaphors have proliferated, celebrating borders and borderlands as sites of liminal, in-between spaces, exchanges and interactions across all kinds of differences and divisions (geographic, cultural, psychological, sexual, etc.). Against these abstract border discourses, this dissertation is committed to reaffirming the materiality of the border, by

focusing on one specific site, the U.S./Mexican borderlands. In general, we can distinguish five general methodologies and theorizations of the border: (1) mainstream U.S. approaches (2) Chicano/a border studies, (3) Mexican border studies, both regional (Northern Mexican) and centrist-national (emanating from Mexico City), and (4) the transamerican perspective. Chicano border theory and narrative (in addition to Anzaldúa, see Ramón Saldívar, José David Saldívar, Héctor Calderón, José Limón and others) arose in response to mainstream U.S. approaches, grounding itself in one specific and material border site, the U.S. Mexican border. While Anzaldúa and some other critics affirm the possibility for a more tolerant and hybrid world, conceptualizing the border as a redemptive space, Chicano border narrative also draws attention to the dystopian aspects of the border—violence, loss, racism, and xenophobia. However, although Chicano border texts affirm the centrality of racism and the question of Mexican Americans as minorities and the cultural Other, it can be argued that in general they remain indebted to a metaphorical, abstract sense of the border, because their dialogue is with dominant U.S. culture.

In contrast, Mexican border scholars and border scholars of a transamerican persuasion reveal that the U.S.-Mexico border is less easy to cross than it seems from north of the line. Emphasizing the border as the lived reality of people without U.S. passports, northern Mexican narratives of the border remind us that the border remains a barrier and a dividing line for the non-citizen, the poor, the non-white, and the non-privileged. They disclose the fundamental asymmetry of the U.S.-Mexico border by dividing the “first” and “third” worlds, whereas utopian border theory tends to be written from north to south, and the celebration of border crossing is a northern project. This “southern” everyday border

experience is reflected in, among others, the works of María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba, Humberto Félix Berumen, and Miguel G. Rodríguez Lozano. Finally, transamerican border scholars, such as Robert Irwin, adopt a methodology that focuses on “the histories and cultures of a contact zone such as the U.S.-Mexico border from the multiplicity of perspectives that are relevant to the analysis of any shared cultural space in the context of the Americas” (24). This methodology, and variations on it, are demonstrated in the works of Claire Fox, Diana Palaversich, Claudia Sadowski-Smith, María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba and Debra Castillo. Although my research is theoretically and analytically indebted to these authors and their research, this dissertation will use them as a transition into analyzing borderland narratives through decolonial thinking.

## Chapter One: Decolonial Border Thinking

First and foremost, decolonial borderland narratives are highly suspicious of the colonizing and emancipatory ideologies that constitute the macronarratives of modernity:

Christianity, liberalism, and Marxism. Within the theoretical framework of decolonial thinking, these macronarratives are critiqued as hegemonic discourses that devalue local knowledge and experiences. That is to say, modernity as a blue print for a “developed” future is frontally questioned as a hegemonic discourse. As such, decolonial borderland narratives delink from these uni-versalizing macronarratives, while rooting themselves in a multiplicity of local cosmologies. It is a theoretical orientation that is pluriversal, rather than uni-versal. Decolonial borderland narratives, as I contend in the first chapter, intentionally circumvent and categorically reject the modernity of the U.S., which is linearly rooted in “futurity,” as well as the coloniality of Latin America, which is positioned as “developing” en route to “future.” These narratives, ultimately, highlight two distinct visions. The first vision is imperial and is oriented towards “newness” (growth, progress, and development) and encompasses “civilizing” ideals. The other vision is decolonial and it emphasizes co-existence, which is an inter-cultural, transnational imaginary. It is, in short, border thinking, which is a way of thinking *and* being that is rooted in double and multiple frameworks, as demonstrated in my discussion of María Novaro’s films and, later, in the borderland narratives of Cormac McCarthy and Eduardo Antonio Parra. Furthermore, as decolonial thinking unveils the dark side of the rhetoric of modernity through the logic of coloniality, it must be noted that it is not an alternative modernity as put forth by Néstor García Canclini in his canonical text *Culturas híbridas* (1990), wherein he claims that tradition and modernity co-exist and is a condition where actors are constantly entering

and exiting modernity—as in a city—and can occur beyond borderlands. Through the lens of decolonial thinking, Canclini’s theory is still steeped in the rhetoric of modernity with its temporal (linear) orientation. In contrast, border thinking, functions within a circular conception of time and space, which I elaborate on in the first chapter. Decolonial thinking, therefore, is pluriversal and, as posited by Walter Mignolo in *The Idea of Latin America*, it is a “paradigm of co-existence [that] works at the crossroads between Indigenous and Western forms of knowledge” (122).

## Chapter Two: Sicaresque Sagas

In this chapter I specifically focus on the lure of violence in the border narratives of Cormac McCarthy and Eduardo Antonio Parra and how their *sicario* protagonists reject capitalist subjectivity through murder-for-hire guided by a nuanced outlaw code.

The *sicario* (anti-)heroes Chigurh and Ramiro, in ironic contrast to a “market society” that has sold out all values, do embrace moral and spiritual positions, while plying their murderous trade under the specific principles imposed by their respective “outlaw” codes. Their rejection of capitalist subjectivity is paradoxical as Ramiro and Chigurh are indeed paid for their mercenary efforts. However, I also argue that in their rejection of capitalist subjectivity, it is not financial compensation that motivates their murderous actions, but their search for autonomy in rejection for status and position in market societies.

In her brief study of narcoliterature, Palaversich (2006) has noted how Colombian and (Greater) Mexican narcoliterature is often not viewed negatively by some popular Mexican media, due to its highlighting of deeper social problems: government corruption and complicity with drug trafficking organizations and the relative lack of social mobility. Palaversich attributes the expansion of narcoliterature to the marketability of its major themes: money, sex, drugs, corruption, and violence. One seminal category within the narco genre is that of the narcocorrido, ballads that celebrate the heroism of illicit activity associated with drug-trafficking as the social class of the consumers of narcocorridos are generally different from that of narconovelas that are texts that tend to be from the lettered middle class.

Two groups that have increasingly controlled the border in recent decades are the drug trafficking organizations and the corrupt government officials in their pay. Long and

sustained cross-border drug trafficking has, in turn, given rise to a subgenre of the traditional corrido or folk ballad, the narcocorrido. The traditional corrido tends to extol local and regional heroes, social bandits, and revolutionaries, while evoking communal stances against deviant social behaviors and other illicit activities (Paredes, Herrera-Sobek). In the more recent narcocorrido, the local heroes have been replaced by drug-dealing outlaws, with their flaunting of the law, unchecked hedonism, and violence (Wald, Edberg). These narcocorridos flourish within the thriving drug-trafficking industry in Mexico, alongside NAFTA and its maquila industries, while finding a receptive audience not only on the border, but also in the country's interior and throughout the transnational Mexican communities.

Narcocorridos contain and contextualize the themes mentioned above, yet also reflect changing gender roles in Mexico, where women have increasingly been striving for greater autonomy in the professional and personal realms. Within the violent and hypermasculinized context of drug trafficking, men have dominated the genre. In a reflection of societal changes, the andocentric narcotrafficker in songs and in deeds now includes women as narcotraffickers and as capos—not merely as lovers and supporters of the capos (Edberg, 114). When they are the protagonists of narcocorridos, women are particularly celebrated, as they succeed in a highly gendered industry rife with violence and indifference towards death and legal consequences (113). More importantly, the widespread receptivity of narcocorridos is also indicative of the spread of narcocultura, revealing its growing popularity as an alternative source of income in the context of shrinking economic opportunities and the proliferation of government corruption and complicity with the illicit trade.

The emergence of narcoliterature also marks a shift in Latin American literature. That is, whereas mid-to-late twentieth century Latin American narratives tended toward novels of the dictator as well as historical and romance novels, narcoliterature highlights the failures of democratization and neoliberalism (modernity) by linking it directly to increased social inequality. More importantly, narcoliterature emphasizes the shift from state violence vis-à-vis political actors to violence closely associated with drug and human trafficking between state and armed actors.

Democratization and economic liberalization during the 1980s and 1990s have failed to address, and in fact have amplified, these social-historical problematics, creating larger and continuing fears underlining the atmosphere of violence in the borderlands. Dictatorships and military rule in Latin America have been replaced by other “armed actors” from modernization through post-democratization. Throughout projects of modernization organized social and political violence was clearly based on ideological battles between authoritarian states and well-defined armed and unarmed opponents. However, with the advent of democratization “state and non-state violence continues to mark social and political life in many Latin American countries” (Koonings and Kruijt 1). This problem of organized violence is now increasingly attributed to interconnections of various political, economic, and criminal interests.

Narcoliterature, in short, is a compelling genre that allegorically critiques social problems through actual events initially documented in narcocorridos. In sum, this chapter will, first, provide an extensive survey of narcoliterature, and, second, focus on its transnational dimensions, as manifested in the works of McCarthy and Parra. Although most works of narcoliterature do not directly critique drug violence and the complicities in

which they thrive, I shall argue that they implicitly provide a context from which readers can critique these issues, especially vis-à-vis the desire for just, stable governments and sustainable development, while also critiquing the rhetoric of modernity through their rejection of capitalist subjectivity.

### Chapter Three: Subverted Modernities

The borderlands novel is a transnational, pluriversal novel embroiled within two competing systems of coloniality that are historical and ongoing: that of the English (U.S.) and the Spanish (later *criollo* and *mestizo*). However, if Mexico, with its unfulfilled modernity, is a country of deindianized Indians—as posited by Guillermo Bonfil Batalla in *México Profundo*—there are still significant remnants of indigenous and pluriversal (border) epistemologies present within and across the borderlands that have persisted throughout the history of these two competing systems of coloniality. These surviving remnants are manifested in the Cormac McCarthy’s philosophical narratives in the *Border Trilogy* and Eduardo Antonio Parra’s rural protagonists.

Through the theoretical framework of decolonial thinking, I emphasize how their characters transgress and transcend many of the characterizations associated with border binaries. McCarthy, in particular, writes north of the line but his characters permeate and continually transgress monolithic boundaries. Parra’s narratives reaffirm Mexican conceptions of the border as a stratified barrier; however, there is still physical movement within and across these divides, while many of his characters do not return indefinitely to Mexico, despite numerous hardships that they confront on the U.S. side. Both authors nevertheless decenter national and historic binaries, by presenting transcultural (McCarthy) and fragmented (Parra) protagonists whose experiences unveil the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality. McCarthy and Parra provide us with narratives that circumvent the ideological conventions in which their respective national societies are embroiled. Their narratives, in contrast, are intercultural, transnational texts that transcend national (binary) belonging and imaginations. Their characters, in short, also

employ a transnational imaginary that are counter-narratives of the conventional Western, the frontier myth, and modernizing projects. Such spatial and conceptual linkages can also be amplified by Mignolo's (2005) discussion of modernity (as a salvatory project) and coloniality (developing colonized areas and beings). What is analytically compelling in the narratives of McCarthy and Parra is how the U.S. is critically portrayed as a site of modernity and Mexico as a location of coloniality—areas that are still in the process of Westernization (modernity). First, Mignolo (following the pioneering work of Edmundo O'Gorman) affirms that the "Americas" are an invention of the Western imagination "forged in the process of European colonial history and the consolidation and expansion of the Western world view and institutions" (2). In short, it consists of an imposition of perspectives where modernity "presupposes the triumphant European and imperial perspective on world history" and where coloniality produces the idea that certain people do not belong to history. That is, those who experience coloniality have yet to subscribe and submit fully to modernity as a Christianizing, civilizing (socio-culturally), and developing (economically) mission. Mignolo cogently demonstrates how modernity is a project of salvation. Concerning modernity/coloniality, this is the crucible for the borderland characters of McCarthy and Parra as they are either caught in between both (Parra) or adamantly averse to both (McCarthy) making exits from such Manichean doctrines. Their works, therefore, compel us to think, in what Ramón Saldívar (2006) refers to as a double-framework (non-binary) that reveals differentials in power relations (Saldívar 9). In other words, their borderland protagonists exist within and across other ways of being, while struggling to define themselves by what they are not: binary, monolithic, national beings. Instead, as Saldívar emphasizes, transnational and global

linkages are emphasized: *affiliation* and *engagement* with other languages and ethnic groups (318, 341-42).

These differentials in power relations—the colonial difference—can be analyzed through modernity/coloniality, where the narratives of McCarthy and Parra suggest that there is no salvation, but rather the possibility of our species' self-destruction. Perhaps of greater disturbance, their narratives highlight our increasing destruction of the natural environment—a “progression” exacerbated by modernity/coloniality. However, their entrances towards a more transnational imaginary demonstrate exits from that dichotomy. That is, an exit from the *idea of superiority* that is, perhaps, the chief tenet of modernity (Mignolo 27). A rejection of the idea of superiority is a leitmotif in their works. In Parra's writings they are manifested in *situaciones límites* whereas with McCarthy they come to fruition in our destruction of the ecology and our perpetual conflicts with each other.

## **Chapter 1. Decolonial Borderland Narratives: Mapping Autonomous Genealogies of Thought**

Decolonial borderland narratives unveil the rhetoric and promises of Western modernity, while rejecting binary oppositions, oftentimes highlighted on national borders. A decolonizing perspective highlights the following socio-historico problematics: patterns of conquest and colonization and how they are guided by the logic of coloniality and the rhetoric of modernity. This colonial pattern is comprised of four mechanisms: (1) racial classification of indigenous and hybrid bodies, (2) legitimation of institutions to support the elite class, (3) redistribution of spaces to uphold elite goals, and (4) the systematic subjugation or erasure of indigenous (and hybrid) forms of knowledge. The latter is what my present research is most concerned with, as I argue that decolonial borderland narratives emphasize an awareness of the coloniality of being, by rejecting Western ideals of progress, development, and civilization, while also conveying their own ways of being and independent thought in acts of epistemic disobedience and delinking. In other words, mapping autonomous genealogies of thought. To prepare the way for my analyses of borderlands narrative in the following chapters, I outline below the theoretical framework with which I am working and then proceed to undertake an analysis of two films by Mexican filmmaker María Novaro, in relation to borderland thinking.

My theoretical framework is rooted in Walter D. Mignolo's critique of Western modernity, most recently outlined in *The Darker Side of Modernity* (2011). Decoloniality, in sum, has "the analytic task of unveiling the logic of coloniality and the prospective task of contributing to build a world in which many worlds coexist" (54). Pluriversality is a world

where many worlds coexist, rather than one conceptualized and governed through one self-congratulatory narrative of universality. Decolonial theory rejects the Western Code, which posits the belief in one sustainable system of knowledge bent on “saving the world.” The rhetoric of Western modernity is salvatory, rooted in religious conversion historically, and by “development” and “progress” in the contemporary era. My research contends that interepistemic border thinking highlights these epistemic struggles, while rejecting and challenging the universalizing principles inherent in the Western Code.

Decolonial theory thus serves as the theoretical framing device of my dissertation. Although I will focus on two borderland authors, Cormac McCarthy and Eduardo Antonio Parra, to highlight decolonial borderland narratives, two borderland films by María Novaro will allow me to contextualize the decolonial in borderland narratives. That is to say, the nomenclature and founding principles of decolonial thinking. *El jardín del Edén* (1994) emphasizes border thinking as it pertains to border dwellers, whereas *Sin dejar huella* (2000) demonstrates shifts in the geography of reasoning, from global, linear thinking to one where there exists a multiplicity of perspectives (pluriversality). In short, the shifting of the geography of reasoning rejects the thinking and writing of universal history. These films, in addition to the borderland narratives of Cormac McCarthy and Eduardo Antonio Parra, embody what I refer to as decolonial borderland narratives.

In seeking other modes of existence, decolonial borderland narratives go beyond the models of the nation-state and Western modernity. Their movements, in other words, are acts of mobile and epistemic disobedience. Like Mignolo (2011) and other decolonial practitioners, my work seeks to unveil “the rhetoric and promises of modernity, showing its darker side, advocating and building global futures that aspire to the fullness of life

rather than encouraging individual success at the expense of the many and of the planet” (122).

The borderland narratives of McCarthy and Parra, in tune with decolonial thinking, reveal “that to be modern, in the Western sense, is becoming less and less of a concern. That is what dewesternizing and decolonial means in the final analysis” (132). To engage in decolonial thinking, then, one is scrutinizing the Western Code. According to Mignolo, Occidentalism is “the belief in one sustainable system of knowledge [that] is pernicious to the well-being of the human species and to the life of the planet” (xii). Whereas the Western Code has contributed some sustainably positive ideas, such as the idea of emancipation and independent thought, nevertheless, it is rooted and cloaked in what Mignolo refers to as the colonial matrix of power. This matrix, according to Mignolo, has a hidden agenda—or, in his words, a darker side—wherein the rhetoric of modernity attempts to mask its predecessor, the logic of coloniality. In other words, coloniality “is constitutive of modernity—there is no modernity without coloniality” (3).

Mignolo refers to this theoretical framework as decolonial thinking, which differs from postcolonial theory in that postcolonialism “emerged as an option to poststructuralism and postmodernity,” whereas “decoloniality emerged as an option to the rhetoric of modernity” (xviii).<sup>1</sup> Postcolonialism places its origins in the British Empire’s

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<sup>1</sup> Decoloniality, in short, is concerned with Occidentalism. Postcolonialism, in contrast, is more associated with Orientalism, or the invention of the Orient, which Occidentalism precedes. Furthermore, decoloniality, in attempting to create a world where many worlds coexist, implores epistemic disobedience and epistemic delinking from the rhetoric of modernity, while unveiling the logic of coloniality. As such, it is increasingly linked to political and epistemic projects—especially in the Andean region of South America, notably Bolivia—rather than a disciplinary field of study, such as postcolonialism. In analyzing the compatibilities and

version of history, whereas decolonial thinking is grounded in modern/colonial history within and across the Atlantic, from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. Its imperial history begins on the Iberian Peninsula, followed by the respective empires of Holland, France, and England.<sup>2</sup> In other words, postcolonialism and decoloniality have different responses to Western cycles of conquest and colonization. According to Madina Tlostanova and Mignolo, whereas postcolonialism assumes poststructuralism and postmodernity, while not questioning the rhetoric of modernity contemporarily enshrined in progressivism and developmentalism, decoloniality does not derive its “ideas from European post-structuralism but from the colonial histories of South America and the Caribbean” (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 34). Decoloniality, in other words, does not begin with Kant, Lacan, Derrida, or Foucault, but with indigenous imaginaries and decolonial voices, such as Fanon, Anzaldúa, and the Zapatistas, among others. Decolonial thinking, again, does not seek to disregard Western ideas that are non-hegemonic, such as the idea of emancipation and freedom of conscience, but only to build *an autonomous, pluriversal genealogy of thought*. Decolonial thought, therefore, does not seek “to change the

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differences between postcolonialism and decoloniality, Mignolo highlights how they have different points of origin. In his words, “both trajectories have in common the specter of the colonial experience in the modern world, the first of the Spanish/Portuguese inauguration and the second of the British and French following up and taking over the first” (55).

<sup>2</sup> Mignolo highlights that “although the point of origination of the particular conceptual structure (modernity/coloniality/ (de)coloniality) was located in South America, its scope is not limited to South America and the Caribbean.” Furthermore, decolonial theory rejects the notion that theories that emerge in the metropole have a global and universal validity (3). It is this assumption of the globality and universality of Western theories that decolonial theory seeks to unlearn to relearn and “revisit the local histories of different geopolitical spaces, and always within the colonial matrix of power” (6).

'disciplines' but rather to 'decolonize' knowledge, to undo imperial and colonial differences, ontologically and epistemically" (36).

The Western Code, in Mignolo's schema, has two pillars: the colonization of time and space. He contends that "the colonization of time was created by the Renaissance invention of the Middle Ages," whereas the colonization of space was spawned by the colonization and conquest of the new World (2011, 6). The Renaissance is key to establishing the Western Code as a universal abstract principle, as it gave root to the celebratory rhetoric of modernity (i.e. salvation and newness), which is cloaked in self-serving European achievements. Thus, the "colonization of time and space are foundational for the rhetoric of modernity" in that "the Renaissance colonized time by inventing the Middle Ages and Antiquity, thus placing herself at unavoidable present of history and setting the stage for Europe becoming the center of space" (21).

The rhetoric of modernity, ultimately, is the rhetoric of salvation mired in other key terms: progress, development, modernization, newness, and democracy. It is the rhetoric of imperium, with its chief mission intent on "saving the world" by making it an extension of Euro-America. Decolonial thinking, however, seeks to unveil the colonial matrix through the analysis of coloniality, which critiques the interconnected hierarchies within and across the colonial matrix of power, while also contesting its universal abstract principles intent on imposing one imperial trajectory to prevail over other epistemologies and cosmologies. In contrast, decolonial thinking, in line with the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional's political dictum, promotes a world in which many worlds coexist.

To reiterate, one of the major tenets of decolonial thinking is that *the colonial difference is epistemological*, wherein the Western Code espouses a universal abstract with

the mission to salve the quandaries of humanity. In short, it seeks to “incorporate” all other epistemes into its mode of thinking and living. It seeks homogenization (incorporation) where only one world exists, governed by its epistemology and cosmology. It is, in short, an imperial project that seeks to impose its will on all other modes and ways of thinking that are “foreign” to its precepts and principles. As a result, one of its chief attributes—the colonial wound—is the wound of indignity. Whereas the rhetoric of modernity is self-congratulatory and triumphalist (salvation, conviviality, prosperity, freedom, etc.), its darker side is the logic of coloniality, whereby there is discrimination, racialization, incorporation, domination, unilateralism, and exploitation. Mignolo refers to this as the geopolitics and body-politics of knowledge whence:

The colonial difference is the main factor that extracts dignity from people: being racialized and seen as inferior by the dominant discourse makes us believe in our own inferiority. That is what taking away our dignity means. ‘Dignity’ is one of the markers of coloniality and therefore one of the engines that makes the decolonial option and the shift from zero point epistemology to border epistemology and decolonial thinking (214).

Concerning the colonial matrix of power, the conceptualization of coloniality is rooted in Latin America (the colonization of space), whereas the conceptualization of modernity originates in Europe (the colonization of time). Therefore, one cannot speak of modernity without summoning coloniality in that “coloniality is, like the unconscious, the hidden weapon of both the civilizing and developmental missions of modernity” (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 38). In short, the bedrock of Western modernity is the rhetoric of

salvation. That is to say, salvation from backwardness, primitivism, and savagery (civilization, development, progress, etc.) to salvation from avarice and exploitation (communism and socialism). Moreover, “historically, coloniality is the hidden logic of control and management” from the Western colonization of time and space, the mass exploitation of labor and “natural resources” to the colonization of life itself (39-40). In short, the colonial matrix of power seeks to create a dynamic (to impose, to alter) through a universal abstract principal, rather than to let a dynamic emerge from a multiplicity of perspectives.

Coloniality, the darker side of Western modernity, has a distinctive historical and theoretical meaning. Whereas, historically, it focuses on the iniquitous aspects of modernity, theoretically, it emphasizes that coloniality is the veiled side of modernity, which is a self-congratulatory, triumphal narrative rooted in Western Christendom, secularism, and a capitalist economy. From a religious standpoint, its triumphal tones are rooted in salvation from idolatry, whereas its civilization narrative is grounded in the uprooting of modes of living (economically, politically, etc.) outside of the Western Code. “Developmentally,” its salvatory rhetoric is grounded in “progress” within capitalist economy and Western market democracies (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 8). In its salvatory tones, the rhetoric of modernity, borrowing from biblical macro-narratives, evolved from its sacred narrative to a secular one, by viewing history as a linear progression. Decolonial thinking emphasizes that the colonization of time came to fruition during the Middle Ages, where it was an internal colonization of time embedded in Europe’s internal history. On the other hand, the colonization of space was fully realized via Europe’s external history, through imperial and colonial projects beginning in the Western Hemisphere. This is the

distinction between the singular, historical process of imperialism/colonialism, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the rhetoric of modernity/logic of coloniality (9).

Decolonial border thinking marks an epistemic shift from Hellenic and Latinate taxonomies, which informed modern epistemology, to the lived experiences of colonial subjects whose ontologies and epistemologies were deemed as inconsequential by cycles of conquest and colonization. In my argument, although echoing but going beyond Tlostanova and Mignolo, border thinking views all projects of modernity as hegemonic exercises in control and management with one end in mind: conversion to Western modernity. In other words, border thinking rejects and questions inorganic ideas that seek to displace and denigrate local (organic) ideas<sup>3</sup>. Regarding the locality of ideas, Mignolo notes how “decolonial intellectuals do not believe in the universality of statements made from any local history. And there is nothing but local history. The ideas of global or universal histories are just an imperial epistemic euphemism” (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 64).<sup>4</sup> Border thinkers, in contrast, exit imperial abstract universals, and enter pluriversal abstractions. That is to say, instead of engaging in abstract universal principles, border thinking promotes the coexistence of universals (65). Border thinking, in this case, implies

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<sup>3</sup> Concerning border thinking, Linda Martín Alcoff, in her critique of “Mignolo’s Epistemology of Coloniality,” notes how border thinking is a “double positionality” that has the ability to critique in many directions, rather than uni-directionally (94). See Alcoff’s “Mignolo’s Epistemology of Coloniality” in *CR: The New Centennial Review* 7.3 (2007): 79-101. Print.

<sup>4</sup> Mignolo is amplifying Santiago Castro-Gómez’s original idea of the hubris of the zero point, which emphasizes the tendency of Western epistemology to universalize its local history as the “zero point epistemology,” wherein the knowing subject taxonomizes the world and its quandaries, while classifying people and projects into what is good for them so that they may be “saved.” See Mignolo’s “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom” in *Theory, Culture & Society*, December 2009, vol. 26, no. 7-8: 159-181.

“a specific epistemic response from the exteriority of Western modernity, a response from the outside created from the perspective of the inside” (6). More specifically, “border thinking is the epistemology enacted in the variegated responses, around the globe, to *the violence of imperial territorial epistemology* and the rhetoric of modernity with its familiar defects, from *forced universal salvation* to taking difference to sameness, from subject-object slip to naturalization of Western epistemic privilege” (7).

Whereas border thinking is the decolonization of being, thinking, and knowledge, shifting the geography of reasoning means placing oneself as an epistemic subject who engages the world from one’s own lived experience and education. This geographical shift of reasoning is an exit from the labyrinth of the colonial matrix of power—marked by a totalitarian epistemology—and entrance into epistemic equity, defined by pluriversality. The concept of pluriversality recognizes that there are many (decolonial) options to pursue, as opposed to invoking universal truths, which are hegemonically impositional. In short, it shifts the geography of reasoning from the enunciated to the enunciator by accentuating non-Western areas and people who “are not connected as objects but through the logic of imperial enunciation” (10-12). Furthermore, this delinking process proposes to plan and organize knowledge along local and indigenous points of view, as opposed to one universal abstract principal. Critical decolonial thought, therefore, seeks to answer the following questions: “What kind of knowledges are produced from and transformed? Who produces and transforms them, why, and for whom? What knowledge contributes to management for the benefit of the few, and what knowledges contribute to the liberation of the many from the management of the few?” (16).

These questions, on general principle, explore the quandaries that emerge from the colonial matrix of power, which unveils modernity's rhetoric of salvation through the logic of coloniality, which is hegemonic (oppressive, controlling, and dominating). In turn, critical decolonial thinking proposes unlearning and delinking from modes of imperial education (governed by the Western Code), while building decolonial knowledges (28).

Maria Novaro's films provide us with a feminist vision of Mexico, and the world, that is indicative of generating decolonial knowledges among border dwellers. She does this, specifically, by highlighting border thinking in *El jardín del Edén* (*The Garden of Eden*, 1994) and, moreover, by shifting the geography of reasoning in *Sin dejar huella* (*Without a Trace*, 2000).

### **Border Dwellers in *El jardín del Edén***

*El jardín del Edén*, based in pre-NAFTA Tijuana, is a borderland film centered on the lives of three women exploring their personal and professional identities, as well as their attempts to explore and assert their autonomy. Serena is a commercial photographer who is recently widowed and arrives in Tijuana with her four children to establish some familial stability, with the support of her strong-willed Tia Juana. Liz is a Chicana artist curating an exhibition on Chicana/o art who is struggling with her ethnic identity. Jane, Liz's friend, is a North American woman exploring her artistic expression through photography, while striving to avoid touristic voyeurism through cultural immersion. As with all of Novaro's films, we are presented with independent women who search for spaces outside of patriarchy. Carla Olsen Buck notes how the "film is an important reminder for feminist critics that questions of power and domination must be laid bare and negotiated before there can be any solidarity between women across borders" (237).

Buck's observation highlights Novaro's overall critique of asymmetrical relations within and beyond patriarchy. Also, similar to Andrea Noble, I agree that *El jardín del Edén* presents us with narrative circularity, as opposed to linear/formulaic progression, catalyzed by Jane.

However, I would expand that by proposing that the film's protagonists converge on Serena's son, Julián (as I will elaborate below). Furthermore, I argue that each protagonist is seeking exits out of Western modernity by exploring a myriad of ways in which they can become their own persons wherein they assume agency in their own lives. Whereas Noble argues that the protagonists seek their own paradise (note the rhetoric of modernity), I argue that they seek to exist in a more pluriversal world. Miriam Haddu, similarly, notes

how Tijuana and the border in “Novaro’s vision is a space where all the different Mexico’s that make up Mexico are unified” (114). I would extend Haddu’s contention by stating that the film, through its protagonists, seeks to create a space where many worlds exist within and across the U.S./Mexican borderlands (pluriversality).

Concerning pluriversality in Novaro’s *El jardín del Edén*, Brent Smith notes how “the film challenges both the dominant temporal and spatial logic of the border,” while also resisting a “binary reductive understanding of the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico” (273). Similarly, Noble notes the film’s narrative circularity as an alternative to “limiting binary oppositions” (191), whereas Haddu emphasizes that Novaro reshapes the “theoretical and cinematic constructs of the borderlands “ (104) by highlighting the experiences of various characters who are in search of their own paradise. Elsewhere, Concepción Bados-Ciria highlights the locality of the borderlands over the mass-culture encroachments of globalization in Novaro’s border films. I would add that Novaro’s two “border” films, *El jardín del Edén* and *Sin dejar huella*, are examples par excellence of border thinking, which seek to shift the geography of reasoning.

To engage in shifting the geography of reasoning—that is, to exit from the zero point of epistemology and its abstract universal principals—one must first acknowledge that one knowledge is predicated on one’s senses. To this end, Mignolo claims, “knowledge starts in and from the heart, and . . . the mind categorically processes what the heart dictates” (201). These decolonial acts of world-sensing, therefore, are not anchored in Descartes’ philosophical statement of “I think therefore I am,” but rather in the decolonial dictum, “I am where I think and do.” This world-sensing responds to specific geo-historical and biographical localities within and across the colonial matrix of power. By shifting the

geography of reasoning, one exits “the prison house of Western modernity” (Mignolo, 2005) by seeking new epistemic dwellings beyond patriarchal, racial, and exploitative hierarchies. This shifting and world-sensing, however, does not seek to totalize border, or decolonial, thinking. Instead, it circumvents, from a perspective of exteriority rooted in the colonial wound, binaries established and sustained by imperial and colonial differences. In making such shifts, decolonial thinking urges us to embrace border thinking as an entrance into pluriversality. To this end, Mignolo believes, as do I, that “border thinking and border epistemology are the antidotes to the virus of zero point epistemology” and that “these are the anchors that support the shift in the geography of reasoning” (208).

Furthermore, I argue that the protagonists’ journeys in *El jardín del Edén* reject the rhetoric of modernity embodied in the word “paradise.” Etymologically, paradise can be traced to the archaic Persian word that refers to a walled garden. Whereas a garden—especially a walled garden—is a human alteration of the natural environment to be controlled and tended by humans, the film, I argue, highlights their individual quests to create a space of their own choosing where they can become their own persons. In other words, their search for autonomy eschews constrictive barriers and boundaries.

Although the film revolves around female protagonists, Serena’s son, Julián, is the catalyst of all characters, with his interest in Chicano urban culture (lowriders and cholos) and his bond with migrant worker Felipe. Although Novaro is noted for her portrayal of strong females and the networks that they establish outside of patriarchy, Serena’s widowhood provides a fatherly and avuncular void that Felipe fulfills with her eldest son, Julián, and that Frank, Jane’s cetologist brother, fulfills with her other son, Sergio. Is it

through Julián the catalyzer that the following connections coalesce: Jane with Felipe, Frank with Sergio, Liz with Serena, and Frank with Serena.

Julián's individual expression launches when he discovers a vintage camera at Tia Juana's second-hand store and begins to explore the everyday life of his new home, Tijuana. Eventually, he gravitates toward Chicano urban culture, which, in this case, consists of lowrider cars and clubs, a transnational cultural movement historically rooted in the lifestyle of pachucos and cholos. The lowriding culture, although rooted in these two marginalized and lauded groups, has now evolved into car clubs and aficionados unaffiliated with these two groups. This is highlighted when Felipe is negotiating with a coyote to smuggle him to Oxnard, California. Previously, while alone, Felipe confides to Julián that he has loved ones working the coastal city's surrounding agricultural fields. Julián then enthusiastically chimes in that Oxnard also has many lowrider car clubs. Julián's encounter with lowrider culture is a significant part of the film, I argue, because it is his first exposure to non-national elements of Mexican and U.S. mainstream cultures. That is to say, his affinity for lowriders and rap music are two cultural phenomena rooted in marginalization of the Chicana/o, African American, and Puerto Rican, U.S. experience.

Whereas Julián is attracted to the transnationality of Chicana/o popular culture, Liz, on the other hand, is a Chicana artist attempting to cultivate an identity rooted in indigeneity. Liz is in Tijuana to curate an exhibition of Chicana/o art and alternative videos rooted in the Chicana/o experience that range from a biliterate performance from the iconic performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña to documentary interviews with Chicanas who have been denied their ancestral heritage in the historico-national U.S. and Mexican

contexts<sup>5</sup>. That is, their indigeneity. In one of these interviews a Chicana laments her inability to identify with an indigenous Mexican women. Using the language of the late anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla they are deindianized subjects, which is to say that they are products of the preeminent colonial wound: indignity. Upon seeing an image of an indigenous woman, the Chicana laments that she was so disconnected from her (indigenous) culture and heritage that it “was as if I’d expected to see a white person,” which is who she ultimately identified with up to that point. I argue that she ultimately saw herself as a modern subject, which means she was one who submitted to Western modernity, which posits the Westernization at the expense of an indigenous subjectivity.<sup>6</sup> I argue that the Chicana, ultimately, laments the empty images of a denied ancestry and heritage, her indigeneity.

These empty images are recovered and cultivated through Julián’s photography (cholos as deindianized Indians par excellence) and Liz’s art. Liz, as with the Chicana interviewed, experiences moments of disconnections with national Mexicans (notably with her “pocho” Spanish) and indigenous Mexicans (with her inability to communicate with them in English or “pocho” Spanish). One such character is a native of Oaxaca’s Isthmus of Tehauntepec, Margarita Luna, whom Jane befriends at a seaside restaurant, operated by indigenous Mexican women, who communicate with each other in their mother tongue,

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<sup>5</sup> I argue that the official narratives of both nations, Mexico and the U.S., are rooted in their quest for Western modernity. The late anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, in his canonical text, *México profundo*, characterizes this phenomenon as a process of De-Indianization, wherein coloniality succeeds when “ideologically, the population stops considering itself Indian” (46).

<sup>6</sup> Bonfil Batalla’s conception of de-Indianization, as it pertains to Mexicans, articulates this false identification as one in which “the clear and undeniable evidence of our [Indian] ancestry is a mirror in which we do not wish to see our own reflection” (18).

Zapotec. Jane introduces Liz to them and an awkward moment of linguistic and socio-cultural awkwardness permeates the ambience between them that Liz later notes with Jane. Liz's highlights this to Jane by demanding that Jane cease introducing her to other (national) Mexicans as her Spanish is, in her opinion, atrocious. Jane, then, humorously notes that Margarita Luna has very limited Spanish-speaking skills as well. In many ways, within the rhetoric of modernity, Liz and Margarita Luna are ideal candidates for Westernization. What Liz seeks, in my argument, is what deindianized Indians lack: an indigenous subjectivity that has been denied through the colonial wound (indignity). Nevertheless, Novaro's borderland films provide her protagonists and viewers with ample decolonial options.

Novaro, moreover, goes beyond the presentation of decolonial feminist options by presenting us with male characters that are also mapping sovereign genealogies of thought. In this case, Jane's brother, Frank, a former writer disillusioned with U.S. society and the traditional nation-state (whales don't have borders), and engrossed in cetology. Frank becomes acquainted with Serena's younger son, Sergio, after Sergio injures himself near Frank's house, which also doubles as a cetologist lab. Sergio becomes engrossed with the images of whales and Frank informs him of some of their pod behaviors off the Mexican coast. Sergio then states that, in that case, they're Mexican whales, to which Frank responds that, fortunately, no one has yet to put borders on whale's behaviors and movements. This comment, among others, suggests that Frank, unlike many white males one encounters in the annals of borderland literature and film, is not an American Adam seeking to challenge and recreate himself in an infernal paradise, but one who has chosen to live in a world where many worlds exist. Frank seems to have a disconnection from U.S.

society that, I argue, is his personal attempt at shifting the geography of reasoning. In this case, he does it with whales, which he does not seek to control and manage, since they are a species he admires for their stellar communication ability, mobility, and continued scientific mystery.

As border dwellers, the major characters of the film challenge boundaries (epistemological, national, gender, socio-economic, etc.). Moreover, the final shot of the film shows a pod of cetaceans surfacing, as Mexicans take in the ocean view on the Mexican side of Border Field State Park, alluding to the mammals' overall liberty, whereas the mobility and legality of those on that side of the fence is asymmetrically limited by the "Tortilla Wall." The term is a denigration of what is officially referred to, on the U.S. side, as the San Diego Wall. It is a heavily surveilled barrier marked with street and political graffiti and grievous mementos of failed attempts, from detainment to deportation and death. The graffiti especially is noteworthy as it often has critical socio-historical overtones, such as one captured by a close-up shot of border youth taunting Border Patrol agents with political graffiti on the wall that proclaims the following: "si el muro de Berlin cayó este porqué no?" [if the Berlin Wall fell, why not this one?] .

Novaro's use of such imaging throughout *El jardín del Edén* constitutes thinking and dwelling *from* the border. It emphasizes double consciousness and a multiplicity of perspectives that are messy, blurred, and interactive, rather than views that are structural and binary. These nuanced, decolonial perspectives are expanded in her second borderland film, where she goes beyond border thinking and dwelling and shifts the geography of reasoning vis-à-vis Western modernity.

### **Shifting the Geography of Reasoning in *Sin dejar huella***

*Sin dejar huella* (*Without a Trace*, 2000) is an allegorical road film centered on contemporary national issues in Mexico, manifested through the stories of the film's two protagonists, Aurelia and Marilú. Their journey begins at the U.S./Mexican border in the North and follows them through Mexico to the Yucatán Peninsula in the South. Aurelia is a prototypical *mestiza* and single mother from Ciudad Juárez—a border city infamous for the recent murders of hundreds of women, as well as drug and human smuggling—who tries to eke out a living for herself and her sons working in the maquiladoras. However, her knowledge of the drug trade allows her to leave the Northern border city under adverse circumstances, which trigger her exodus south.

Her antithesis is Marilú, a highly educated Mexican woman who consistently has to assert her nationality due to a Peninsular Spanish accent acquired from her adolescent upbringing there. Professionally, Marilú specializes in “pre-Hispanic art,” particularly of the Classical Mayan period. But she is also involved in smuggling and selling fake antiquities from that same period, in an intricate web involving international museums and buyers, local Mayan artists and communities that she has a strong rapport with, as well as the federal police. Her journey begins in the Northern Mexican desert region bordering the State of Arizona, where she walks across a hole in a chain-link fence and is shortly thereafter met by two Mexican federal officials on a dusty desert road. One of those officials is Mendizábal, and his passive sidekick Licenciado Chaparro, or Lic. Both of the protagonists' stories weave together their struggles within a contemporary neoliberal realm of unfulfilled modernities, where Aurelia and Marilú connect in their search for autonomy and pluriversality.

*Sin dejar huella (SDH)*, critically portrays the shift from one socio-economic order (epitomized by NAFTA), consisting of *maquiladoras* in the North, to another globalized socio-economic order in the South, comprised of tourism, denationalizing oil companies and relocated *maquiladoras*. Against this scenario Novaro juxtaposes issues such as neoliberalism and the complicity between Mexican authorities and narco-traffickers.

In my interpretation of the film, *SDH* is critical of the failures of Official Mexico's pursuit of Western modernity, highlighting the negative socio-economic effects of "free trade" and tourism. The film does not directly confront national problems but, rather, contextualizes them via the personal experiences of her female protagonists, who in turn are representative of gendered and socio-economic subjects seeking greater autonomy within emerging social configurations. That is to say, in places where many worlds, outside of Western modernity, coexist. Cynthia Steele (2003) has noted how Novaro's road movies feature female protagonists in search of autonomy and happiness outside of urban confines, building stronger female relationships and associating with groups often located on the fringes of Mexican society: sex workers, transvestites, indigenous, and working-class Mexicans. Novaro's protagonists primarily seek greater autonomy in non-urban areas, in indigenous communities, and most particularly on beaches, or redemptive shores. These shifts, I argue, can be read as decolonial movements towards pluriversality that seek an existence outside of patriarchal hierarchies and socio-economic iniquities.

*SDH* is dominated by themes of natural (Eastern/Western shores) and political (North/South) borders where hybrid cultures and connections (decolonial options) are manifested. Furthermore, *SDH* highlights another form of decolonial border thinking, Anzaldúa's theory of a *mestiza* borderlands consciousness, that functions "as an alternative

to essentialist notions of belonging and citizenship in a nation or culture” (29), which contrast with centralist (Mexico City) notions of Mexican national and cultural identity, in pursuit of Western modernity, with its universal abstract principals, epitomized by Octavio Paz’s 1950 canonical *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. Finally, *SDH* offers a particular critique of neoliberalism (Western modernity) that can be analyzed within the following categories: the decline of maquiladoras as a form of economic development for the Mexican middle-class; the illicit trafficking of drugs, sex workers, and migrant workers; the increased denationalization of the oil industry; and the tourist industry as an alternative source of income, albeit with many negative socio-cultural ramifications, to the decline of the maquiladoras. *SDH*’s allegories can also be interpreted as Novaro’s foreshadowing of these issues that have augmented Mexico’s current crises with violence vis a vis the government and drug trafficking organizations (DTOs), growing turbulence along the northern border, oil denationalization, and a dwindling economy.

As stated above, *SDH* begins on Mexico’s northern border with the U.S., the traditional site for exploring issues of imperialist cultural influence; however, its characteristics and narrative trajectory immediately head south, following the trajectory of recent developments in the tourist and oil industries and in relocated maquiladoras. Northern Mexico, like its North American neighbor, epitomizes Western modernity, as well as alienation and marginality in the borderlands, and the hope of the possibility of employment and economic prosperity. Southern Mexico, on the other hand, symbolizes that which is “authentic”, exotic and primitive (indigenous), and at the same time economically regressive.

*SDH* further juxtaposes the traditional trope of the border as a launching point for movement north, by shifting the geography of reasoning inwards, expeditiously venturing south into Mexico and ending the journey in the polar opposite end of the telltale border tale, which usually takes place in the northern reaches of the country. This counterintuitive migration in the film showcases crucial issues regarding the nation state, such as gender, ethnic, cultural, and national identity in the context of dependency and neoliberal development.

The shift, in my argument, constitutes a decolonial move towards pluriversality. The film begins where Novaro's previous border film, *El Jardín del Edén/The Garden of Eden* (*EJE*, 1994), ended, on the border, but not amidst the urban sprawl of Tijuana, but rather in the desolate desert outside Ciudad Juárez. This shift evokes recent immigration routes stemming from border city and river crossings to desert incursions further inland, and from the barren northern deserts to the lush but impoverished tropical regions and southern sands. *SDH* takes a cinematically innovative approach to the borderlands by negating the notion of the northern Mexican border as a launching point for the *sueño fronterizo* and the American Dream, an approach that has historically, throughout the second half of the twentieth century, been associated with Mexican men migrating north. *SDH* departs from this approach by leaving *la frontera del norte*, both metaphorically and implicitly, while facing inward from equally personal and national perspectives.

In *Women Filmmakers in Mexico* Elissa Rashkin describes Tijuana as being “the ground zero of [Mexican] national identity in the 1990s,” as “a liminal and transitory gray zone between countries and cultures (190).” This gray zone, now centered on Ciudad Juárez, had long been critiqued from the center (Mexico City) as an area belonging neither

to the *provincia*, Mexico City, nor the U.S., but rather as its own grotesque conglomeration of the ills—social, cultural, linguistic and political—of both countries, from the writings of José Vasconcelos to the film *El Norte* (1983), where one character describes Tijuana as “*el cagadero del mundo*” (the shithole of the world). As such it is often imagined as a place that “has no history, no architecture, [and] no claim on the [Mexican] national imagination” (Castillo & Córdoba, 194). This assertion is taken a step further in *SDH* when the two protagonists, separately and unbeknownst to each other, depart the northern border and those other “*cagaderos*,” the stifling and unforgiving Sonoran Desert and Ciudad Juárez, for the southern reaches of Mexico. The imagery of the border in both films can also be starkly contrasted. While in *EJE* the border (Tijuana) is “ground zero” for a diverse array of characters—and the protagonists’ quest for pluriversality—from the north and south, in *SDH* the border is portrayed, on the one hand, as a place of failed hopes (Marilú), and on the other hand (from Aurelia’s vantage point on the Río Bravo side of the river), it can be seen as industrially alienating, as well as permeable and corrupt.

The permeability of the border echoes Claire Fox’s observation of the “artificiality of the fence (10),” as the national divider, and yet highlights a porosity that is very real, one that Novaro describes as “ese muro esa línea, que tan violentamente divide dos culturas, dos lenguajes, dos formas de vida” (Arredondo, 141). From the perspective enshrined in the rhetoric of modernity it may be seen as a buffer between a “developed” (highly industrialized) nation vis à vis a structurally “undeveloped” nation that, through its socio-economic system, directly and indirectly sends “hordes” of its citizens to its southern wall. In contrast, from a decolonial perspective it can be seen as a frontier to overcome social, economic, educational, and, perhaps, ethnic differences. It may then become artificial and

permeable, though, when decolonial subjects traverse it in search of their own opportunities.

The decolonial films of María Novaro, especially *SDH*, present and criticize—both explicitly and implicitly—the shift from one socio-economic order (epitomized by NAFTA) in Mexico, consisting of *maquiladoras* in the north, to another globalized socio-economic order in the south, comprised of tourism, denationalizing oil companies and relocated *maquiladoras*. The two protagonists' journey to southern Mexico dominates the film, while the first half hour of the film follows the two protagonists' departure from the north. Upon entering the southern realm the *norteña* Aurelia notes how lush the south is, to which Marilú counters that it is sometimes too lush, in reference to floods that often inundate a region with few resources or governmental support. Marilú is particularly astute in her critiques, as she is represented as one who knows the southern region's socio-cultural, political and economical issues through years of study, fieldwork and allied acculturation. Marilú, in other words, is an example par excellence of a decolonial, knowing subject who seeks decolonial options outside of the colonial matrix of power.

In a subsequent scene, shot in Acanceh, Yucatán, Novaro presents a panoramic shot of a traditional plaza, emphasizing the town's inhabitants, Mayans, going about their daily routines in the foreground of two other contrasting symbols: a "pre-Columbian" Mayan ruin adjacent to a domineering Catholic cathedral. Although the cathedral's size is imposing, the presence of the ruins along with the Mayans—further heightened by women wearing traditional garb and Marilú's chum Heraclio greeting and speaking to passersby in Mayan—suggests the inhabitants' historical resiliency against outside forces. Heraclio is a biliterate Mayan who is a cultural and official authority on Mayan artifacts and archaeology.

In shifting the geography of reasoning south, towards indigenous imaginaries and decolonial options, the film also emphasizes the cultural and historical contrasts between the north and south. For example, the Yucatán Peninsula is often seen as a region distinct from the rest of the republic for the historically strong Mayan resistance against colonial and national forces, further heightened by its Mayan historical and cultural history, which do not correlate with official Mexican policy regarding the myths of descent and foundation, in which Aztec culture and civilization are preeminent (Gutiérrez, 3). The government and local communities have both utilized in this narrative to promote tourism, each with a distinct approach.

While tourism has provided economical benefits for the local populace of the Yucatán Peninsula, it has been minimal and restricted “usually [to] basic service jobs that offer only low wages, few benefits or stability, and little opportunity for socio-economic mobility (Martín & Martín González, 165). In response, local and indigenous workers have responded by being more assertive and independently entrepreneurial in their approach to tourism and art. Alicia Re Cruz has noted how “Mayan migrants in Cancún learn how tourism can be seduced by nationally sponsored versions of Maya history and culture,” by applying local “knowledge and human capital to sponsor local versions of Maya tradition and culture (144).” This approach is particularly manifested in the film with Heraclio and Ana’s collaboration, which embodies subversion of the official tourist industry. Other articles have demonstrated how Mayas have increasingly become active agents in both the invention and development of the region’s tourist industry (Castañeda, 1996) and how Mayan handicraft vendors proactively and independently participate in the global economy

by constructing and utilizing flexible socio-cultural identities to economically provide for themselves (Little, 2004).

The contrasts between the north and south are once again contrasted as Marilú and Aurelia are aboard a ferry—a metaphorical vessel transporting them from one socio-cultural realm into another. Once again, Aurelia notes her fascination with the south's greenery, only to be interrupted by Marilú's query about whether she knows how to get to "El Paraíso." Marilú then draws a map of their current nautical location and Paraíso, Tabasco, noting how one arrives at Paraíso via a dirt road, then she goes on to offer Paraísos for every traditional tourist taste and disposition: beaches, hotels, bars, and brothels. In addition to the additional tourist services, Aurelia adds, one can also find maquiladoras, in particular Paraíso Sports Inc., the maquila company she worked for in Ciudad Juárez. Both impressed and perplexed, Marilú then returns to the drawn map charting their journey further up the coast to what she calls "a horrendous town worthy of its name: Frontera." Aurelia quickly retorts that *she* likes borders. Nevertheless, the two women's radically different interpretations will merge at the end of the film, in a pluriversal southern beach.

At another beach, Playa Bananitas, the sign notes that "aquí solo encontraras [sic] amigos" (here you will only find friends) In an allusion to the rampant consumption she is accustomed to and has just fled on the northern border, Aurelia remarks, "aquí no se vende nada" (here nothing is for sale). Both run into the beach after Aurelia asks whether Marilú is her friend. While this scene strengthens their bond with each other, it does not solidify it, since Aurelia ends up feeling even more alienated from Marilú by the time they reach the abandoned hacienda that has been occupied by its former serfs, the Mayas. Upon their

arrival at the hacienda Aurelia immediately feels uncomfortable with Marilú's easy communication and rapport with the Mayas in their native language. Aurelia feels out of place, like a foreigner, especially after having taken jabs at Marilú for her peninsular Spanish accent and (local) cosmopolitanism. Further, Aurelia's disillusionment is heightened when she finally arrives in Cancún. Since the 1960s the Mexican government has encouraged the growth of package holiday, archeological, and heritage/cultural tourism throughout the Yucatán Peninsula. Cancún figures most prominently as a luxurious tourist complex, which was initially developed in the 1970s through federal financing that supported infrastructural development (Cardiel Coronel, 1989). Although the development of the tourist economy has created more employment opportunities, it has also fostered uneven development, especially in urban areas catering to domestic and international tourism (Torres & Momsen). The residential areas of downtown, along with the tourist complex of Cancún, contrast sharply with the *áreas populares*, where a "lack of social services, such as electricity, sewers, running water, and public transportation" predominate in largely migrant neighborhoods of Mayan workers (Re Cruz, 141). The trends in infrastructure tend also to be similar to those of the maquiladoras in the north, with transnational corporations and the consumption—and production—led migratory flows of local workers spearheading tourism's' growth in the region.

It is in this socio-economic context that Aurelia's heightened sense of alienation in the south is heightened while living and working in Cancún. The restaurant in which she works is distastefully named "Tequila Sunrise/Mayan Party," catering to touristic imaginings of the Mundo Maya, while alluding to tequila as the national spirit, despite its lack of agricultural and historical attachment to the Yucatán Peninsula. The name is

complimented by faux Mayan architecture and workers dressed in silly and imitative “native” garb, punctuated by Aurelia’s obvious dissatisfaction with her work and general predicament. The scene suggests that neither maquiladoras in the north nor the booming tourist industry in the south provide any dignified or livable employment opportunities. Aurelia’s alienation is further emphasized when she takes a “recycled” school bus to the city’s shabby periphery, where she goes to a bare, tattered and disgustingly hot apartment in a drab housing complex. Settling in to breast-feed her infant son Billy in front of a fan, she sighs, “Ni modo, mi’jo, hay que echarle ganas” [Oh well, kiddo, we’ve gotta hang in there”]. Shortly thereafter her older son Juan arrives at the airport, greeted by a group of local tropical/Caribbean musicians. The ‘admirer’ who arranged the musical arrangement is the long-lost Marilú, with whom Aurelia proceeds to reconcile in a bittersweet homecoming.

Before transitioning to the credits, one of the film’s final scenes presents us with the title of the film: *Sin dejar huella*, accentuated by footprints leading into the beach, implying that the women’s tracks and tumultuous journey end there, at the beach. However, although they may have found some stability and tranquility, the scene shifts to scenes updating the viewer on the fate of other characters in the film, and continuing the dual note of ironic criticism of corruption and celebration of civil/social resistance. At a political rally, presumably celebrating Licenciado Chaparro’s electoral success, the public is probably unaware of his previous history of corrupt and illegal exploits. Saúl, Aurelia’s ex-partner, is one of his bodyguards, evoking the menacing covenant between *narcotraficantes* and corrupt officials in a space that has legitimized their pact. The positioning of the supporters is suggestive as well. Licenciado Chapparro’s supporters are faceless and have

their backs to the camera, with Licenciado Chaparro befittingly dressed in black garb and sunglasses, suggesting the common Mexican politician's detachment from his or her constituency and his true identity as villain. In contrast, Herculio's closing scene depicts him surrounded with women and children who are facing the camera, celebrating his recent electoral success, possibly the town's mayorship, with the tricolors of the Mexican flag draped across his chest. Both of these scenes juxtaposed represent the governmental corruption rampant in the north and south but, in addition, Herculio's scene provides a new decolonial model of hope and change based on local and indigenous political organizing and progress.

If these two scenes compare and contrast Mexico's socio-economic and political situation in the north and south, then the final scene is an allegory and critique of the nation and its political and socio-economic future within the colonial matrix of power. In this scene, a shabby PEMEX sign on the fringes of the oil field is being replaced by a shabbily dressed worker, with an EXXEL sign (combining Exxon and Shell), illustrated by an inverted shell. Depicted together the new sign suggests international oil corporations/cartels returning to expropriate nationalized Mexican oil fields, once the pride of post-Revolutionary Mexico and the nation's hope for a new economic model marked by self-reliance and prosperity. In the context of PEMEX's precarious status and the recent nationalization of other major industries, including the telephone company, this scene portends the victory of foreign interests and national corruption, over the interests of the local citizenry. Finally, the worker ponders the new sign and shakes his head in disbelief.

As a decolonial film, *SDH* features characters exploring themselves in situations that allowed them to experiment with *other ways of being* (i.e. decolonial options) a woman, by challenging, directly and indirectly, gender roles and other societal constraints. Such actions allowed them to delink themselves from unwanted societal roles within the colonial matrix of power and, in effect, recreate themselves. Throughout the film, the women travel from one end of the country together, which also served as a metaphor for confronting their personal and national obstacles. In turn Aurelia and Marilú delinked from the *sueño fronterizo* coveted by so many Mexicans and other Latin Americans, enhancing the confrontations and encounters among people of varying backgrounds and identities, while bringing to light ethnic, gender, and socio-economic levels of stratification within and across both Mexican borders. In Novaro's other films the beach is part of a purification process in the physical journeys of her female protagonists. The ends of these journeys also allude to a longing for the rural, campesino (peasant) and indigenous lifestyle, which contrasts with the alienating urbanization of the cities—sites of unfulfilled modernities—where many of her characters fend for themselves against ever more difficult odds.

Despite their different backgrounds and their mutual departures from men and certain episodes in their lives, Aurelia and Marilú solidify a strong rapport, despite their initial suspicions of and reservations about each other. Of particular importance are the images and presence of national (shades of male dominance, differences rooted in the colonial matrix of power, etc.) and transnational forces (neoliberalism and drug-smuggling) that affect their everyday lives. One such force with national and international connotations ubiquitous throughout the film are the images of PEMEX as a symbol of the failures of the post-revolutionary nation-state and its promises of economic prosperity. In

addition, there are many other subtle, decolonial critiques of the failures of the nation-state to provide more viable options beyond the basic necessities, let alone the promises of the Revolution and post-Revolutionary to provide more pluriversality (national unity through the inclusion of all ethnic and social groups).

Novaro's borderland films highlight an illusory modernity, while presenting models for a decolonial future. Furthermore, they are decolonial interventions that displace the colonial matrix of power by eschewing asymmetrical power relations for reciprocity, parallelism, and complementariness. In short, for pluriversality.

Novaro's decolonial borderland films allow me to bridge the borderland literature of McCarthy and Parra, while asking the following questions pertaining to decolonial borderland narratives: are borderland writers, through their commitment to the English and Spanish languages, also committing to a nationalist framework through which their border stories emerge? Or, are the writers using the vehicles of Spanish and English languages as a means through which to contest and create border imaginaries? How do the discourses of border imaginaries, respectively, manifest through the characters, landscapes, and plot points of U.S. writer Cormac McCarthy and Mexican writer Eduardo Antonio Parra? Given that the border, by definition, signifies contested terrain, and specifically, physical and epistemological terrains that burgeoning nation-states demand from the original indigenous inhabitants of those terrains, then what is the role of indigenous epistemologies in the U.S. and Mexican border literary imaginaries? How do the discourses of indigenous imaginaries manifest through the characters, landscapes, and plot points of border writers McCarthy and Parra? How does this situate the borderlands novel as an aesthetic expression of coloniality in the era of late modernity? Finally, if the project

of Western modernity has been active for over five centuries, how could decolonial indigenous imaginaries remain vigorously present within and across the borderlands? In response, I propose that decolonial borderland narratives do this by emphasizing an autonomous genealogy of thought rooted in decolonial and indigenous imaginaries. Whereas Western modernity opposes and attempts to repress both local epistemologies and ontologies, decolonial borderland narratives delink from colonial negation of local histories. Decolonial theory, thus, is my primary theoretical lens in which to examine the doomed enterprise of Western modernity in borderland literature and film. Decolonial borderland narratives do this by abrogating Western modernity's triumphalist, universal narrative of linear progression. That is to say, these narratives are committed to the dismantling of a universal modernity modeled on Western modernity.

Like Mignolo, I propose that the notion of an autonomous genealogy of thought offers a cogent theoretical framework for examining the continuity of indigenous, decolonial, and borderland imaginaries throughout cycles of conquest and colonization, as part of a coherent decolonial borderland oeuvre. Furthermore, it also highlights a common decolonial enterprise among writers, cineastes, and artists who are not interested in the pursuit of Western modernity. I advance an alter-native modernity that exits the myths of Western modernity (progress, salvation, newness, etc.) and enters new modernities rooted in local histories. These alternative conceptions would not be oriented towards the past (i.e. a glorified indigenous past), but would provide a fresh, delinked lens in which to imagine the world. In short, decolonial borderland narratives are not geared towards expansion (coloniality), but toward local sustainability (pluriversality).

## Chapter 2. Sicaresque Sagas: The Decolonial Narco Narratives of Cormac McCarthy and Eduardo Antonio Parra<sup>7</sup>

*Lo vi con este ojo: parecía un gusano con sombrero de paja  
y mirada de asesino  
y viajaba por los pueblos del norte de México  
como si anduviera perdido,  
desalojado de la mente,  
desalojado del sueño grande, el de todos,  
y sus palabras eran, madre mía,  
terroríficas.  
Roberto Bolaño  
El Gusano*

Sicarios, or at least, their fictional avatars—the protagonists of *narco narratives*—are murderous prophets of destruction whose actions and words, as poeticized by Bolaño, are terrifying. Their words, just like their murderous actions, are terrifying, for they stem from a strict personal code in conflict with civil society and mercantile ethics (which is also depicted in a state of erosion). As contemporary outlaws, they are individuals permanently alienated from society. Their careers and their alienation originate in an expanding drug trade that has reached every strata of U.S. and Mexican society, especially within and across the borderlands. This contemporary social development also marks the arrival of a new genre that is the subject of this chapter: *narco narratives*, and, most recently, the *narco-bildungsroman*, which depicts the genesis of this permanent alienation of the hero from official society at the level of subject formation. *Narco narratives* are the most recent embodiment of an established genre—crime fiction—which, unlike detective fiction, focuses on the commission of crime and on the criminal or outlaw as central protagonist and (anti-)hero. Two works in the emerging field of *narco narratives* will be closely

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<sup>7</sup> I would like to thank Monika Kaup for assisting me with the early drafting this chapter.

examined: Eduardo Antonio Parra's *Nostalgia de la sombra* (2004)—a *narco* bildungsroman—and Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* (2005).

Trafficking in drugs, weapons, women and labor, and violence in the form of serial murder of women, drug shoot-outs and mutilations, has proliferated in the northern border region of Mexico over the past decade. In a recent article concerning problems in narratives about professional killing as a way of life, Rebecca Biron (2012), also analyzes narratives about “murder work” that expose shifting notions of work, ethics, and life in global capitalism. Similar to Biron's analysis of two 2010 narratives featuring Mexican hit-men (*sicarios*), I explore how *narco narratives* complicate notions of good and evil with the human experience in globalization within and across the U.S./Mexican borderlands. A seminal connection this chapter will emphasize is the complicity between the *narco-industry*, corrupt governance, and how these phenomena are encouraged by the international growth of the drug and sex industry, along with weak police and judicial systems and generalized corruption in Mexico, as well as denials of responsibility in the U.S. This context foreshadows the issues that have augmented Mexico's current crises with violence as a result of rivalry between the government and the cartels.

In December 2006, shortly after his contentious election to the Mexican presidency, Felipe Calderón declared a “war” on drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) to be led by the Mexican military and federal law enforcement. This “war” has ushered in an era of hyper violence—foreshadowed in *No Country for Old Men*—negatively affecting every strata of Mexican border society. Since the 1970s the complicity between elements of local, state, and federal Mexican police with drug traffickers has been ubiquitous, due to the rapid

expansion of the narcotics market, planned and executed by major drug cartels, and funded by their illicit activities and broad socio-political influence (Shannon).

The emergence of DTO's and the corresponding emergence of *narco literature* affects the entire territory of Mexico. To invoke Castillo & Tabuenca Cordoba's opposition between writing "about" the border—from a centrist/national point of view—and writing "from" the border, my claim is the following: although the erosion of state power by DTOs, armed non-state actors, and *sicarios* is, in principle, a centrist concern of the Mexican nation as a whole, unlike Carlos Fuentes' *Crystal Frontier*, both Parra's and McCarthy's *narco narratives* are written "from" the border about these issues, which also happen to be a general Mexican national concern. In the most general terms *narco violence* results in—and *narco narratives* depict—a weakening state and eroding state authority over the border region. In this respect, there are important north-south inequalities: Mexico is a weakened dependent state, where the "narco" theme figures as the supply of drugs, which are one of the things poor countries provide to rich countries. In contrast, the U.S. is a strong state, where the "narco" theme figures as the consumption—rather than the production and supply—of drugs.

This chapter will specifically be focused on the lure of violence in the border narratives of Cormac McCarthy and Eduardo Antonio Parra. Each author offers a unique vision of these overriding themes and their various manifestations across the U.S.—Mexican borderlands, albeit from specific nation-based perspectives. Both McCarthy's and Parra's characters contend with the ubiquitous racialized violence that has characterized life in the borderlands since the colonial era (early nineteenth century). Although most *narco narratives* do not directly critique the *narco culture* and the drug violence that they

depict and from which they derive, I shall argue that they implicitly provide a context from which readers can critique these issues, especially vis-à-vis the desire for democratic, stable governments and sustainable development. The characters of McCarthy and Parra search for just such stability—from positions of social, economic, and political displacement—within an increasingly fragile and perilous situation. A central argument of my chapter is that the border asymmetries mentioned above are reflected in structural asymmetries in *narco violence* as it plays out in U.S. and Mexican border regions; and that these differences between south-of-the border versus north-of-the-border settings, are in turn expressed in the fictional mode of *narco narratives*. South of the border, the expansion of the *narco economy* has resulted in a weakening of the Mexican state in relation to armed non-state actors (DTOs), whereas north of the border DTOs have, fortunately, yet to endemically infiltrate all U.S. state functions.

Violence is one of the major leitmotifs in the narratives of Cormac McCarthy and Eduardo Antonio Parra. The lure of violence will inform this analysis, which falls into three categories: localized violence on the site of the material border; violence as a result of modernization and ethnic social conflict; and violence emanating from armed non-state actors (as a parallel structure). Each author, however, offers a unique vision of these overriding themes and their various manifestations across the U.S.—Mexican borderlands. In *Nostalgia de la sombra* the novel's protagonist, Ramiro, develops into a *sicario*, or hit man, first out of necessity (self-defense), then as a source of pleasure, and finally as part of a process of professionalization. In *No Country for Old Men*, in contrast, we are presented with a mysterious and thoroughly professionalized *sicario*, who enjoys radical autonomy while also following a strict private code of ethics that he rigidly enforces throughout the

borderlands. Before I begin my close reading of both *narconovelas*, let me outline some conceptual and sociological markers pertaining to a shift in mercantile ethics, the quest for individual autonomy, as well as public safety and instability.

### **North/South Asymmetries: Mercantile Ethics and Murderous Codes**

In Jean Franco's analysis of modernization in the "New Novel" in Latin American narrative (1960s-1970s), she noted that the main characters, as well as their authors, were often deprived of "that essential of the entrepreneur—an investment in the future", where "the only freedom open to them is that of being able to reconstruct the past" (295-96). The obstruction of social mobility and justice in an authoritarian state, at all levels, were one of the defining leitmotifs; the tragedy was that there was "no real space in which individuals [could] fully realize their aspirations" (296). In Latin America, democratization and economic liberalization during the 1980s and 1990s have further failed to remedy these social-historical problematics, creating continuing and even larger fears of uncertainty. Moreover, dictatorships and military rule in Latin America have been replaced by other non-state "armed actors," from modernization through post-democratization. Throughout modernization organized social and political violence was clearly based on ideological battles between authoritarian states and well-defined armed and unarmed opponents. However, with the advent of democratization "state and non-state violence continues to mark social and political life in many Latin American countries" (Koonings, 1). This problem of organized violence is now increasingly attributed to interconnections of various political, economic, and criminal interests. *Nostalgia de la sombra* depicts the repercussions of organized violence in Latin American narrative, beginning with modernization/authoritarianism and continuing through democratization, specifically, the complicity between armed actors and core institutions. The lack of social mobility, public safety, and the failure of democratization at the rise of neoliberalism— crucial to a functional civil society—foster the protagonist Ramiro's gradual conversion into a *sicario*.

These socio-historical problematics are exhibited in the character's various transformations, culminating in his professionalization as an assassin for hire.

With regard to Mexico, we are dealing with key elements of the state that have been "captured." This can be traced to the erosion of patronage politics under the "perfect dictatorship" of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), which lasted from 1929 to 2000. When drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) lost their tacit institutional cover under PRI's patronage politics, they responded by increasingly seizing pockets of power in civil society, via public-sector corruption, and in banking, via money laundering (Finnegan, 2010). Whereas in Mexico the drug trade has created social and public instability via violence and ineffective governance—especially in the areas (plazas) where DTOs reign—in the U.S. there are larger societal ramifications. Whereas DTOs have yet to reach all sectors of Mexican society, in the U.S. drug abuse is rampant—involving both illegal and, especially, prescription drugs—and has highlighted what Harvard political philosopher Michael J. Sandel characterizes the shift from a market economy to a market society.

In a recent essay concerning the rift between drug abuse as a quandary between either combat (War on Drugs) or treatment, Michael Specter notes: "There is no country where illegal drugs kill as many people as legal addictive substances. The World Bank estimates that tobacco will kill five hundred million of the present global population." At the national level: "In the United States, the misuse [abuse] of legally sold prescription medications has become a bigger health problem than the sale of narcotics or cocaine" (37-8). More importantly, the drug crisis marks a societal and philosophical rift on the question of how government and society should deal with rampant substance abuse: through either rehabilitation or punishment. Perhaps more disturbing, it marks the moral limits of

markets. After all, it is a very profitable industry, as McCarthy's narrator suggests, "You finally get into the sort of breakdown in mercantile ethics that leaves people settin around out in the desert dead in their vehicles and by then it's just too late" (*No Country*, 304).

Sandel attributes this breakdown in mercantile ethics to a shift from a market economy where the market is "a tool—a valuable and effective tool—for organizing productive activity" to a market society that "is a way of life in which market values seep into every aspect of human endeavor." And, even more troubling, the market economy becomes "a place where social relations are made over in the image of the market," reaching every strata of society.

Sandel, however, notes a larger issue that, I argue, is at the core of the *sicario's* permanent alienation from society: the lack of a social—that is to say *public*—moral code, along which threatens the public good, or a breakdown in ethics. The *sicarios* in McCarthy's and Parra's *narco narratives* seek to compensate for a public order—public safety, the rule of law—that is missing, or is fast disappearing from their respective societies and professions. Sandel notes how "part of the appeal of markets is that they don't pass judgment on the preferences they satisfy. They don't ask whether some ways of valuing goods are higher, or worthier, than others." In contrast, Anton Chighurh and Ramiro, the assassin protagonists of *No Country for Old Men* and *Nostalgia de la sombra*, do operate on the basis of immaterial values and principles, — each possessing a full-fledged private ethics or "code." This distinction marks their permanent alienation from society. It is important to point out this essential premise of contemporary *narconovelas* written in the age of neoliberalism: the outlaw's deliberate self-segregation from society coincides with the complete degeneration of society into lawlessness and impunity. The long-standing

equation between official society and the state on the one hand and moral values such as justice in the other has collapsed completely; therefore, the criminal's transgression of official law and order is justified by way of negative example. Or, at the very least, if it cannot be justified, it certainly cannot be condemned by the standards of any external public moral norm that is actually in force. For a nonjudgmental stance toward values, Sandel argues, "lies at the heart of market reasoning, and explains much of its appeal. But our reluctance to engage in moral and spiritual argument, together with our embrace of markets, has exacted a heavy price: it has drained public discourse of moral and civic energy, and contributed to the technocratic, managerial politics afflicting many societies today." The *sicario* (anti-)heroes Chigurh and Ramiro, in ironic contrast to a "market society" that has sold out all values, do embrace moral and spiritual positions, while plying their murderous trade under the specific principles imposed by their respective "outlaw" codes.

In illuminating this paradoxical situation of *sicarios* operating according to idiosyncratic outlaw codes of justice, I parallel Biron in that my analysis of *narconovelas* also seeks to shed light on "the subject-producing effects of *sicario* work" (831). That is, I argue that both Parra's and McCarthy's novels pose the question of ethics—in the form of the *sicario*'s private "code." They portray the *sicario* as a human being who—under the inhuman conditions of the neoliberal "market society," a society that has opened every realm of the life-world to market values—has pushed them into killing-for-hire in order to assert their claims to the ultimate prizes of human identity: dignity and freedom. In this way, both Parra's and McCarthy's novels provocatively dispute the notion that *sicarios* are

reducible to the market logic of for-profit-action. On the contrary, they are complex characters who have developed a code that governs their professional practices.

I use the concept of “code” in the sense of a personal ethos, a self-ordained set of principles governing the behavior of Parra’s and McCarthy *sicario* protagonists. I argue that Ramiro’s and Chigurh’s codes fill the void left by the erosion of the rule of official law, as a result of the weakening state vis-à-vis armed state actors (DTOs) and the erosion of civil society via an expanding drug trade. More importantly, this personal ethos is the law that the outlaw gives himself. As I elaborate in the following section, the *sicario*’s permanent alienation can be traced to a shift in mercantile ethics. In terms of content, the code’s main principles are honor, fearlessness, defending the defenseless, the quest for autonomy and independence—premised on a self-segregation (and permanent alienation) from society—and a clear ethical wedge that differentiates the *sicarios* from their victims, with respect to their sense of honor and business ethics. More specifically, they seek a path of fairness; however, it is one that is mired in disillusion and bloodshed. Their disillusionment is with the doomed enterprise of a market society—an unfulfilled modernity—replaced by a bloody enterprise that has a prodigious appetite.

Concerning the unfulfilled modernity of neoliberalism in Mexico, Diana Palaverisch (2009) has cogently demonstrated how the illicit drug trade has shifted from the national margins—the borderlands—to the center, where “el fenómeno forma parte inherente de la sociedad mexicana, y . . . el dinero procedente de este negocio mega lucrativo lleva nutriendo, desde hace décadas, la economía del país, como también llenando los bolsillos de funcionarios y oficiales en todos los niveles de la administración gubernamental” [the phenomenon is an inherent part of Mexican society, and the money garnered from this

lucrative business has sustained, for many decades, the country's economy, as well as the personal finances of officials and functionaries at all levels of governance] (8). Palaverisch argues that *narco narrative's* northern Mexican roots were, initially, the symptom of its "anti-hegemonic discourse" critiquing centrist Mexican corruption and ineffective governance. However, Palaverisch argues, when taken outside of the Mexican north and into the global realm of the market, "la narconarrativa pierde su fuerza contestaria para convertirse en un ejemplo más reciente de la exótica barbarie mexicana, Mexican curios, que circula en el mercado cultural global" [narconarratives loses its contestary force when it is exoticized into a current example of Mexican barbarism, Mexican curios, that circulates in the global cultural market] (15). While Palaverich presents a compelling argument for the global context of *narco narratives*, this chapter is concerned with its locality within the U.S./Mexican borderlands, in particular, North-South asymmetries that play out in this, as in all, border contexts. Nora Guzmán Sepúlveda, in her analysis of *Nostalgia* notes that the novel emphasizes an ideological complicity between corporate power, political power, and organized crime. In addition, she argues that the novel questions excessive consumerism, materialism and the violent nature of the all-pervasiveness of the market (190). Concerning its specificity to the border, Guzmán notes how "la frontera tiene una carga ideológica cultural. Las elites superan fácilmente esas fronteras [mientras] la clase baja sólo se acerca a ellos a través de los símbolos del consumismo que la televisión le puede ofrecer: el subalterno es tocado por las redes de la globalización periféricamente" [the border has a cultural ideological charge. Whereas the elites can easily negotiate border crossings, the lower classes access them via televised symbols of consumerism: the subaltern is touched by these networks of globalization peripherally] (206).

The border, with its maquiladoras, drug trafficking organizations and advanced stage of neoliberal modernization, offers fertile ground for the development of the *sicario* and *narco culture*. It is at the border that we witness the culmination of two seminal factors: the border as a key crossing point for illicit goods and as a failing economy, modeled on the maquiladora system. In his discussion of an upsurge in recent borderland violence, especially in Ciudad Juárez, journalist Charles Bowden has noted how “Juárez for decades has been a laboratory for free-trade ideas. The murder of five thousand three hundred people in twenty-seven months is part of the report” (Blake). Thomas P.M. Barnett refers to such areas as “disconnected states,” to the detriment of civil society and the global economy. Moisés Naím has also noted how global illicit trade has been on the rise since the 1990s, due to the weakening of borders and to neoliberal reforms. Naím notes that “not only is illicit trade on the rise, but its interplay with social crisis—conflict, corruption, exploitation—is more complex than it has been since the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade” (3). The dissemination of *narcocultura* throughout the region, and specifically in the borderlands novel, highlights these unfortunate developments, where one resorts to a life of force, especially when the economic alternatives are few. Across the borderlands, it is especially the Mexican side that offers such an ecological niche for assassins to ply their trade, especially in the absence of stable civil society and security. As there is no transparency, nor accountability, the Mexican side cannot accommodate a heroic cop/detective. Further, As W. H. Auden has pointed out, unlike crime fiction, which may invite law-abiding readers to indulge in fantasies of crime and murder, detective fiction actively “dissociates” the reader from the criminal through the device of a detective hero. The neoliberal condition of rampant commodification under the “market society”

actually serves to strengthen crime fiction's bond between reader and criminal hero observed by Auden at mid-century. Thus, like many a technocrat wishing to advance in the Mexican realm, as a *sicario*, Parra's protagonist Ramiro has to make the obligatory pilgrimage to the federal capital to professionalize and increase his chances of upward mobility. It is in the national center that Ramiro triumphs as a professional assassin, in the employ of Damián. Yet Ramiro is formed on the border. This is why the border location of the novel is crucial.

### **Parra and the Narcobildungsroman**

The *bildungsroman* is a novel of personal maturation and development, or of coming-of-age and apprenticeship. The classic *bildungsroman*, which emerged in Europe in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, has three major characteristics: first, there is a dialectic of home versus the world, and a circular journey which takes the protagonist away from home on a journey of self-discovery and self-realization and finally to a (symbolic) return home. A second theme is one of conflict between the self and society, in which (a) the self strains against the constraints placed upon him by society, but (b) finally finds his place in society and is assimilated into it. The third characteristic is the idea of maturation as inner-development; that is, as a successful unfolding of inherent personal potential (Hardin). This is the process of *bildung*, or education and maturation.

Beneath the surface of a realist novel, many classical *bildungsromane* actually follow what Northrop Frye refers to as the “romance” archetype, a phase in the Western myth of the quest of the hero, where the formation of identity is forged through an adventure story and a series of tests, culminating in a crucial existential struggle. The tests can be categorized within three phases. The first phase consists of “preliminary minor adventures.” The intermediate phase is the “crucial struggle,” or existential crisis, in which the protagonist undergoes a near-death experience that leads toward his or her transformation and rebirth. The final phase in the romance archetype is the “exaltation of the hero,” that is to say, his or her social recognition and acceptance for having been tested and proven themselves. According to Frye, the plot of the romance consists of “a sequence of minor adventures leading up to a major or climactic adventure, usually announced

from the beginning, the completion of which rounds off the story. We may call this major adventure, the element that gives literary form to the romance, the quest” (Frye 186-87).

If the *classic bildungsroman* tends to be structured through Frye’s “romance” archetype, culminating in the self-realization, triumph, and social integration of the hero, then the twentieth-century *bildungsroman*, in contrast, and especially in colonial settings, depicts not the triumph, but the failure of the protagonist’s education—his or her thwarted development. According to Esty’s study of the *modernist bildungsroman* in what he calls the Age of Empire (1880-1920), two major issues are to be noted. First, the reconciliation of the individual with society is no longer possible. The protagonist, in short, is thwarted by a permanent alienation. Second, his development is characterized by regression rather than progression—his is what Esty calls an “unseasonable youth,” a youth of uneven and arrested development. That is to say, his *bildung* is a process of de-formation rather than the classic formation by way of inner-development. Analyzing the *modernist bildungsroman* as a narrative that depicts the individual and his or her integration into the national community within an emerging global system rooted in European imperialism, Esty argues that “colonialism introduces into the historicist frame of the *bildungsroman* the form-fraying possibility that capitalism cannot be moralized into the progressive time of the nation” (17). This failure to “moralize” capitalism into the narrative of the nation (the national imaginary), I suggest, is also the defining characteristic of *narco narratives* and the *narcobildungsroman*. It thus constitutes one of my chief concerns in this chapter dealing with *sicarios* and a burgeoning drug trade within and across the U.S./Mexican borderlands.

Furthermore, whereas the *classic bildungsroman* is marked by a single existential struggle, and the *modernist bildungsroman* in colonial settings—according to Esty—can be

characterized as one of thwarted development, I argue that the *narcobildungsroman* takes on elements of both through *multiple existential struggles* and, as a result, the permanent alienation of the protagonist. More specifically, in Parra's example, whereas the *traditional bildungsroman* is chronological (narrated from adolescence to maturation), the *narcobildungsroman* is retrospective (narrated from the point of view of the *sicario* as a permanently alienated adult). In the following I will discuss *Nostalgia de la sombra* as a *narcobildungsroman*. It is, in short, *narco narrative's* adaptation—and deformation—of the *classic bildungsroman*, which narrates the hero's quest for self-realization and inclusion into society.

### **The Formation of a *Sicario* in *Nostalgia de la sombra***

*Nostalgia de la sombra* is a *narcobildungsroman*, retrospectively narrated by a *sicario* protagonist, Ramiro (née Bernardo, El Chato and Genaro). In Chapter Two we are introduced to Bernardo, a disillusioned university-educated proofreader for a local newspaper in Monterrey, Nuevo León, and a family man with cinematic aspirations. Bernardo's disillusionment can be attributed to being proverbially overworked and underpaid, with limited opportunities for advancement. While enjoying a few well-earned beers, his internal musings go over a prospective screenplay that would be a denunciatory film about government complicity with drug trafficking organizations (DTO's). The musings are interrupted when an aging cowboy begins to sing a famous borderlands (Mexico-Texas) *corrido*, *Pistoleros famosos*. Through a close reading of this *corrido*, we can contextualize what constitutes Ramiro's first transformation—the first of the “preliminary adventures” in his development into a *sicario*.

Por las márgenes del río /  
 de Reynosa hasta Laredo /  
 se acabaron los bandidos /  
 se acabaron los pateros y /  
 así se están acabando /  
 a todos los pistoleros... los mataron a  
 mansalva los rinches que son cobardes /  
 en los pueblitos del norte siempre ha  
 corrido la sangre ... los pistoleros de fama  
 una ofensa no lo olvidan /  
 si se mueren en la raya no les importan la  
 vida /  
 los panteones son testigos es cierto no  
 son mentiras /  
 y así se están acabando todos los más  
 decididos /  
 por eso se les recuerda cantándole sus  
 corridos /  
 murieron porque eran hombres no  
 porque fueron bandidos

Along the banks of the river  
 [Bravo/Grande] /  
 from Reynosa to Laredo /  
 the days of the bandits have come to an  
 end /  
 so have the pateros [migration  
 facilitators, smugglers] /  
 and that's how all the legendary  
 gunslingers are also coming to an end and  
 dying out /  
 many were killed by the cowardly  
 Rangers /  
 in the towns of the north the blood has  
 always flowed /  
 the legendary gunslingers do not forget  
 an offense /  
 they'll put their lives on the line /  
 the graves are witnesses, this is true /  
 and that's how all the legendary  
 gunslingers are coming to an end /  
 That's why we remember them, singing  
 their corridos /  
 They died because they were men, not  
 bandidos

The traditional borderlands *corrido* emphasizes the independence and daring of *pistoleros* and *contrabandistas* (smugglers) vis-à-vis their nemesis, the Texas Rangers. It also emphasizes their decisiveness and willingness to die to defend their honor, traits that proofreader Bernardo, especially as a *norteño*, does not project. Indeed, the recurring phantasmal image of the aging cowboy can be read as an allegory of the disappearance of such regional protagonists. In this sense, his transformation into Ramiro can be connected to Paredes' examination of the border hero, an ordinary man or common hero goaded into violence while defending his rights (Paredes, 149). However, Ramiro's transformation is also indicative of another border figure, outlaws who are "quite frankly rogues—realistic, selfish, and usually unrepentant" (144). These outlaws were often smugglers—the narcos' predecessors—who "occupied in the Border's scale of values a much higher place than the robber, a place very close to that of the border hero fighting for his right" (144). In short, Ramiro twistedly embodies the righteous *corrido* hero's dark double—the outlaw.

The *corrido* provides analytical entrances into two groups that have increasingly controlled the border in recent decades: the DTOs and the corrupt government officials in their pay. This cross-border drug culture has, in turn, given rise to a subgenre of the traditional *corrido* or folk ballad, the *narcocorrido*. The traditional *corrido* tended to extol local and regional heroes, social bandits, and revolutionaries, while evoking communal stances against aberrant social behaviors and other illicit activities. In the more recent *narcocorrido*, the local heroes have been replaced by drug-dealing outlaws, with their flaunting of the law coupled with unchecked hedonism and violence (Edberg & Wald). For their part, the *narcocorridos* flourish within the thriving drug-trafficking industry in Mexico, alongside NAFTA and its *maquila* industries, while finding a receptive audience not

only on the border, but also in the country's interior and throughout transnational Mexican communities. More importantly, the large receptivity of *narcocorridos* is also indicative of the spread of *narcocultura*, revealing its growing social influence as an alternative source of income, in the context of shrinking economic opportunities and the proliferation of government corruption and complicity with illicit trade. *Narcocorridos*, along with the genre's predecessors, the *Romancero pan-Hispánico* and the Mexican *corrido*, extol the virtues of independent agents—*hombres decididos*, or determined men—who anticipate and accept a violent death.

In contrast to the *hombres decididos* of both forms of ballads, Bernardo lacks any semblance of independence or bravery. His life, on the contrary, is dominated by inaction and timidity, “la tibieza, la indiferencia, el conformismo definían su existencia desde hace muchos años atrás. O el miedo. O quizás otra cosa. Así vivimos todos. En esta pinche ciudad cada uno acata lo que dicta la norma. Por sumisos, por apocados, porque a cada minuto del día estamos cagándonos de miedo” [a lack of enthusiasm, indifference, an air of conformity had long defined his existence. Or fear. Or, perhaps something else. That's how we all live. In this damn city, every one follows the rules. Because we're weaklings and spineless, since every minute of every day, we're shitting our pants with fear] (48). The rules people follow are apathy vis-à-vis a life of force and intimidation. The first transformation of the protagonist, however, is the confrontation of these two dichotomies, when Bernardo resists and defeats his assailants while bystanders apathetically watch the assault. In overcoming his fears Bernardo disdains the actions of the witnesses, “no acuden a ayudarme, sino a acusarme. Los mismos que ahora lo miraban aterrizados habían permanecido impasibles cuando lo asaltaban” [they don't try to assist me, but rather they accuse me. The same

ones, who now looked upon him terrified, were passive during his assault] (54). In a region increasingly marked by a lack of public safety, Bernardo's actions cannot be read as those of a workingman hero who defeats interloping thugs, but as those of someone who resorted to a life of force to exert his autonomy. Bernardo's aggressive response to his assailants, and the apathy of the bystanders, highlights the lack of public safety and the increasing erosion of civil society. This moment marks Bernardo's first transformation from apathy to agency, which paradoxically—given the deterioration of the state—necessitates his conversion from citizen-subject to outlaw. This is why Bernardo's first transformation, in which he self-realizes as an active agent, also makes him homeless, a social outcast and a nomad.

In *Nostalgia de la sombra* the border produces *sicarios* because the border is where many Mexicans go as socio-economic upstarts—to explore greater economic activities or to migrate to the U.S. Ramiro begins his formation into a *sicario* as a traditional *corrido* hero who defends his honor, as well as the honor of the defenseless. In this sense, Ramiro's actions, in defense of the defenseless, can be read as a continuation of the traditional borderlands *corrido* hero. The *corrido* tradition is governed by a culture of honor, where every insult is to be met with swift, violent repercussions. It is a hyper-masculine ethos that seeks to defend one's masculinity and the purported weakness of the opposite sex, children and the aging against malicious aggressors. Ramiro's first transformation (as Bernardo), then, begins with his fearlessness against assailants in his native city of Monterrey. It culminates in the murdering of a *pollero* (smuggler) after he arrives on the border in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas. In his various transformations, Ramiro remains a border hero up to his "arranged" release from prison by Damián, the owner of a firm of

paid assassins. It is under the technocratic employ of Damián that Ramiro is professionalized into a *sicario*, and is employed—indeed, deployed—in the national center—the Mexican capital, Distrito Federal. It is upon his removal from the border and “promotion” to *sicario*, or assassin for hire, that Ramiro ceases to be a border hero. It is in the center where his “dishonoring” begins, for he now kills for money, not honor. Ramiro’s eventual return to the borderlands from the center is an egregious violation of the traditional *corrido* code. As we shall see, Ramiro manages to reverse this process when he returns north, to his native city, Monterrey, for his last assignment.

Returning to the chronology of Ramiro’s sequential tests in his *sicario bildung*, Ramiro’s second transformation occurs in Chapter Six, when he murders a jogger for his clothes. This is Ramiro’s second homicide, and unlike the first, it is murder in cold blood. His second persona, “Chato,” is created then, and he next shows up at the local urban dumpster in Monterrey, better versed in killing, to defend life but also to get something he wants. Chato fully resorts to a life of force amidst the dregs of society, *pepenadores*, or trash pickers—those living among, and from, society’s waste. The protagonist’s development at this stage of living among the urban homeless also provides sociological glimpses into northern Mexican society. Chato categorically rejects society to embark on an austere and nomadic journey—anathema to modernistic ambitions of consumption and accumulation. In addition to developing his killer instinct (the thrill of the kill), Chato learns the language of the downtrodden, and is increasingly subject to modern ailments such as blackouts and anxiety, as well as paranoia. Bernardo’s transformation into Chato also makes irrevocable the transition from domestic existence to homeless nomadism—initiated after his first homicide in self-defense—as the condition of existence for a *sicario*. Also, it is amidst the

dregs of society that the protagonist begins to develop a “code”—a characteristic of *sicario* narratives.

The *sicario*'s code can be read as an attempt to create order within chaos, and although he is generally a self-serving outlaw, its adoption can sometimes be read as an altruistic gesture for the occasional defense of the defenseless. As such, this code can also be related to the *corrido* warrior ethos, wherein the protagonist defends his honor with his pistol in his hand (Paredes). In rationalizing the murder of fellow *pepenador*, El Moncho, the protagonist reflects, “hice bien. Libré al mundo, a estos compas, de un alacrán” [I did good. I freed the world, and these guys, of a scorpion] (144). Although the protagonist adopts a nomadic life of force, he is also an observer—and critic—of the impunity of crime in the contemporary Mexican state. Thus, adopting the role of dispenser of popular or private justice against official injustice and impunity, Chato commits the brutal, and public, murder in Nuevo Laredo of a crooked coyote or human smuggler (*pollero*, *patero*, etc.) who preys on defenseless migrants. It is this murder in the border city of Nuevo Laredo that marks Ramiro's third transformation: El Chato becomes “Genaro” when he is arrested and sent to a local prison for this crime. Chato's protective code extends to all civilians who do not live a life of force, decisiveness and purpose. They include women and children, as well as workingmen such as El Negro, the teamster who transports Chato from Monterrey to the border. While commuting with El Negro, a discussion of names posits Chato's rejection of a conventional life for a rogue and nomadic resistance. Chato's position on identifiers conjures Foucault's critique of questioning the “order” of things: “do not ask me who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order” (Bernauer, vii.).

In Chato's development as a *sicario* we get glimpses not only of his societal observations, but of his social critique as well: "Además, ¿pa que sirven los pinches nombres? Nomás pa' marcarte...son igualitos que las marcas de las vacas. Si te los ponen, ya no se quitan. A mí no me cuadran las marcas en el pellejo...Prefiero los parches, si te aburren, nomás los cambias y ya está, ¿no?" [Anyway, what good are damn names? They only serve to brand you... It's just like cattle brands. Once they put them on you, you can never take them off. I'm not down with brands...I prefer patches, if you get tired of one you just trade it for another, don't you?] (180). The tags that Bernardo (indirectly) or Chato (directly) rejects can be read as allegories of what Franco refers to as a lack of opportunities to fulfill one's aspirations. Indeed, Chato ponders what kept him secluded in obscurity and disillusionment in Monterrey, "pura desidia, pura apatía" [pure idleness, pure apathy] (181). In his quest for autonomy our *sicario* is exercising a form of "retarded" resistance in a society with few outlets to exert his autonomy and fulfill his aspirations. Ramiro, then, resorts to a profession that affords him supreme autonomy and substantial profit, professional killing. One, however, may argue that it is not necessarily the money that motivates Ramiro, but rather, the thrill of the kill. As a hit man, Ramiro is no longer the observed, but the observing predator. It is in this element that he's competently at ease: "¿quién pensaría que un secuestrador, un matón, un ratero, un traficante, reiría así con sus compañeros tras los muros de la penitenciaría?" [who would've thought that a kidnapper, a killer, a thief, a trafficker, would laugh with his friends behind prison walls?] (242).

While imprisoned in Nuevo Laredo for the "honor killing" of a human smuggler, Ramiro learns of the complicity between DTOs and government, especially through the character of Cóster, a fellow prisoner, who personifies those illicit interconnections.

Indeed, it is his confrontation with C3ster that solidifies his determination to live a life devoid of fear. It is the same fear that held him captive as a proofreader, the same fear exhibited by bystanders during his own attack and during the one on migrant women, when they were accosted, that he now puts behind him.

The border is the site of the novel's crucial turning point: it is the location where Ramiro's "existential struggle," the life-or-death struggle, takes place, in the border city of Nuevo Laredo and, more specifically, in a border city jail. This turning-point episode occurs as a negation, or frustration, of the hero's original desire to cross the border: Genaro the *narco*-assassin is something like a frustrated undocumented migrant and future assimilated Mexican American, a Chicano who wasn't allowed to be one. This can be connected to a seminal episode in Chapter 10, when, after killing the sadistic *pollero* Gabriel, Bernardo-El Chato-Genaro tells himself that it's better that he didn't manage to cross north after all, because he realized that he really is an assassin, and in the U.S. these folks end up in the gas chamber or the electric chair. Only Mexico, rife with ineffective governance, will offer an ecological niche for assassins.

Ramiro's ultimate transformation—his fourth metamorphosis—into the *sicario* named "Ramiro" occurs in this same chapter, while he is in prison. In what should have been his final, or decisive, "existential struggle"—according to the frame of the romance archetype underpinning many classical *bildungsromane*—he defeats a tyrannical and murderous prison leader, El C3ster. According to prison and borderland lore, C3ster—an ex-police officer with the infamously iron-fisted Los Angeles Police Department, and a repossession man to boot—relocated to the Texas/Mexican borderlands to take financial advantage of DTO's security functions (e.g. kidnapping, protection rackets, assassinations).

In short, he is an opportunistic mercenary within the global, illicit drug trade who quickly developed his power and influence within and across the borderlands. Genaro, for his part—the person Ramiro becomes after Chato is incarcerated for killing the *patero*—gains borderland notoriety for brutally bludgeoning an abusive *patero*. Fatefully, the latter turns out to be an associate of Cóster. Thus, Genaro’s murder of the *patero* still falls within the parameters of the traditional borderlands *corrido* of defending his own honor and that of the weak and vulnerable, as well.

The crucial struggle with Cóster is based on seeking revenge for Cóster’s arbitrary murder of Genaro’s prison comrades: Reyes Menchaca, La Florinda, and Loco Pruneda. This existential—literally, life-or-death—struggle culminates in a fist and knife fight, one in which both antagonists barely survive. In a development that sheds light on two disparate governmental systems, shortly after their confrontation, Cóster is extradited to the U.S., whereas Genaro—as a new borderland hero—garners the attention of a powerful businessman, Damián Reyes Retana, whose specialty is providing mercenary security and enforcement for DTOs. Damián, eventually, arranges his release from prison, on condition of enlisting in his employ as a professional hitman. What follows is an abrupt reversal: Genaro, instead of fulfilling his final transformation as a hero in the romance archetype of the classic bildungsroman, becomes a mercenary, or an abomination of the traditional borderlands *corrido* hero. This constitutes Ramiro’s ironic “recognition”/exaltation as a *sicario*. Prior to his arranged release and training as a professional *sicario*, courtesy of Damián, we get glimpses into Genaro’s subconscious, where he is seen to resist this double-edged salvation and to yearn for closure: “no quiero ir, lo que quiero es morirme. Que vuelvan los sueños, la libertad, esa ligereza sin amarras que me hacia volar por encima de

todo, descansando, solo, en medio de la oscuridad. Solo déjenme en paz. En paz” [I don’t want to go, what I want is to die. For the dreams to return, freedom, that lightness without nets that would let me fly over everything, resting, alone, in the middle of the darkness. Just leave me alone. In peace] (271). Ramiro, however, will not have peace. What awaits him in the north, the borderlands, is a thwarted development—moreover, a regression—culminating in his murder-suicide.

The final episode of Ramiro’s formation, which takes the *sicario* back north, to his native city of Monterrey on a final assignment, culminates in the contract killing of Marícruz. Parra’s *narcobildungsroman* reaches its apex, in confronting Ramiro with an impasse that motivates him to disobey his employer in a heroic but suicidal act of rebellion that restores his honor even as it brings about his death. It is a direct violation of Ramiro’s code beyond its monetary basis for it is to be perpetrated against a woman. Furthermore, with Marícruz, Ramiro encounters his dark double: like Ramiro, Marícruz is an ambitious upstart with humble antecedents; like Ramiro, she has made bad decisions in order to excel. However, in Marícruz’s case, the infraction is money laundering. Nevertheless, both sold their souls, as it were, to make a better living. Ramiro identifies strongly with Marícruz and her efforts to attain greater autonomy and independence, “Por algo eres mujer de hierro. Estabas cansada de tu pasividad, aterrada ante las perspectivas de una vida que prometía repetirse idéntica mañana a mañana, tarde a tarde, hasta la decrepitud; de la honradez aprendida en la casa paterna.” [That’s why you’re a woman of steel. You were sick of passivity, terrified at the prospect of a monotonous life stretching before you in identical mornings, identical afternoons, leading to decrepitude; of the honor you learned about in your father’s home] (220). However, whereas Marícruz embodies

resilient individualism, our sociologically observant *sicario* is more pessimistic about the attainability of independence: “No serías diosa, tendrías dinero si, y mucho, pero seguirías perteneciendo a las filas de la servidumbre. Sólo habías cambiado de amos, Marícruz; tu condición continuaba la misma” [You wouldn’t be a goddess, you would have plenty of money, but you’d still belong to the ranks of servants. You only switched masters, Marícruz; your life hadn’t really changed.] (221). In the world of Ramiro and Marícruz, genuine autonomy is elusive when confronted by larger social factors (corruption, gender inequality, etc.). In their milieu they must consort with an illicit system that rewards graft and complicity. Keep in mind that such a system is largely out of reach of their compatriots, especially those with fewer ambitions (and more scruples) than Marícruz and Ramiro. Thus, both have attempted to distance themselves from the masses: “estabas hasta la coronilla de ese miedo que abunda entre la gente común y que para algunos de nosotros llega a ser asfixiante obligándonos a reventar” [you were fed up with the fear that permeates the masses, and that for some of us, chokes the life out of us until we explode.] (220). In interviews Parra has labeled such asphyxiating restraints as “*situaciones límites*,” or “extreme situations,” where peril forces one to take an existential stand. Allegorically, one could also interpret the initial transformations of Ramiro as a rejection of the dishonor of modernity, in that it takes the fight out of one, the dignity of struggle. This context foreshadows the issues that have augmented Mexico’s current crises with violence vis-à-vis the government and the cartels.

Ramiro’s final—and fifth—transformation—culminating in both his and Marícruz’s death—is a testament to his thwarted development. Despite his gendered philosophical qualms in killing a woman, and an intentionally ignored early morning phone call—

probably from Damián, to abort the mission—he decides to murder Marícruz, but in his own fashion. That is, with a knife rather than a firearm; a more “intimate tool.” Ramiro’s final, bloody confrontation is similar to early, and transformative, existential struggles: as an initially frightened Bernardo warding off assailants; as El Chato, killing a predatory indigent, El Moncho, and an abusive *patero*; and as Genaro, who avenged his prison comrades from the predacious El Cóster. By employing his own method with Marícruz, he is returning to the intimate thrill of the kill (*nada como matar a un hombre*) that helped him overcome his fears and transform into an autonomous being. After a struggle with Marícruz’s driver and bodyguard, in which the driver shoots him in his left side, Ramiro murders Marícruz up close by slicing her throat. While killing her he pities the witnesses for their lack of assistance—through passivity and fear. This is similar to his first transformative experience, in which he was assaulted by thugs, and which contributed to his alienation from society. Ramiro then laments the loss of independence and self-proscribed honor he had prior to his mercenary employment with Damián: “¿Para que me salvaste, Damián? ¿Para contar con un perro agradecido, fiel, atento a cada una de tus órdenes? [Why did you save me, Damián? So that you could have a grateful and faithful dog, attentive to your every command?](292).” The manner in which Ramiro chose to murder Marícruz, with complete disregard for his personal safety, can be read as a murder-suicide to restore his sense of self-honor and independence and, more importantly, to rid himself of Damián’s influence: “Nunca has matado a nadie. Nomás das las órdenes. Y a mí ya no vas a ordenarme nada...Olvidate de mí, jefe. Ya no voy a matar más a tus amantes, a tus cómplices, para que tú te guardes los dólares de los narcos. Búscate otro perro. O vete a la chingada. Lo que decidas” [You have never killed anyone. You just give orders. And

you will no longer give me orders...Forget about me, boss. I will no longer kill your lovers, or your accomplices, so you can keep the narcos' dollars for yourself. Find yourself another dog. Or go to fucking hell. Whatever] (298-90).

In returning home to fulfill—and fail—his last test, Ramiro reclaims his previous transformations and realizes that he must die to accomplish his independent and nomadic journey: “Quédate con la casa del doctor Guillén, Damián. Te la regalo. Yo prefiero el basurero, el río, la carretera. Esos son mis sitios” [Keep Dr. Guillén’s house, Damián. Consider it a present. I prefer the dumpster, the river, the road. Those are my elements] (299). Ramiro recovers the agency and integrity that he has long realized he sold out in agreeing to work for Damián in exchange for his release from prison. Ramiro eventually returns to the banks of the river, where he began his first transformation from a fearful and apathetic Bernardo into an *hombre decidido* and he “recuerda la figura del viejo demonio que lo increpaba a gritos y se estremece al comprender que su mano extendida no era una señal de amenaza sino de invitación. Ya te vi. Tienes miedo. Es cierto, lo tenía. Y a partir de esa noche dejé de tenerlo. ¿Eso intentabas de decirme, vaquero?” [recalls the figure of the old demon who reprimanded him with cries and shudders to understand that his outstretched hand was not a sign of threat but invitation. I saw you. You’re afraid. It’s true, I was too. And after that night, I stopped being afraid. Was that what you were trying to tell me, cowboy?] (299). Ramiro’s fearlessness can also be a larger critique of the powerlessness of the populace, in relation to an ineffective government and predatory DTOs. It is the populace’s fear that Ramiro despises. Their demoralization and complicity—via inaction—is what the complicit forces rely on. He dies alone and peacefully near the banks of the river, having reasserted his independence and autonomy

from his employer Damián and having regained inner peace. Or, as he stated: “Déjanme en paz, cabrones” [Leave me alone, you bastards] (298).

In his newfound identity as a killer, Ramiro has willingly rejected any conventional sense of order. Ramiro’s astute observations also mark shifts in the socio-political climate. Whereas in the past *la gente común* may have had entities (insurgent and official) advocating for their improved social conditions, those are now absent. That void has now been filled by DTOs and complicit governmental entities, with their highly profitable, and illicit, organizations. It is such changes that McCarthy’s sheriff in *No Country for Old Men* premonitorily feared and that characterize the subject of protagonists in *narcocorridos* and *narcoliteratura*, specifically, that drug-related crime has circumvented national boundaries with no recourse. It is troubling that illicit crime is often one of the few areas where borderland protagonists can exert their autonomy. These barriers, however, are not limited to the borderlands. They are also present in U.S. inner cities (the War on Drugs) and in the poppy fields of Afghanistan (the War on Terrorism), and other places where few viable economic or social opportunities exist. These sites, similar to Parra’s region of northeastern Mexico, highlight the lack of sustainable integration (governance) that augments socio-historical problematics where organized crime flourishes.

**With His Cattle Gun in His Hand: The Assassin as a Radically Autonomous Interpellator**

*No Country for Old Men* is a borderland *narconovela* narrating what happens when a Vietnam veteran and welder, Llewelyn Moss, encounters a large amount of illicit money left at the site of a drug slaying, while hunting out in the rural West Texan plains. Moss becomes the catalyst of the story after stealing two million dollars in cash from the site of the drug slaying site at the beginning of the story. What ensues is a chase plot that pits three men—Moss, Sheriff Ed Tom Bell and the assassin Anton Chigurh—against each other. Although Moss is the catalyst, an existential struggle percolates between Sheriff Bell and a mercenary, Anton Chigurh, who quickly emerge as the protagonist and antagonist, respectively.

*No Country* is narrated in both the third-person and the first person narrative by an intradiegetic narrator, Sheriff Bell. Sheriff Bell is a nostalgic, World War II (European theatre) veteran, who has the task of investigating a slew of murders that relate to the rapidly expanding drug trade along the U.S./Mexican borderlands in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The three central characters (Bell, Chigurh and Moss) are supported by secondary characters, which include Carla Jean Moss, Llewelyn's young wife, and Carson Wells, another Vietnam veteran, who is privately commissioned with retrieving the money and murdering the renegade Chigurh. What ensues is a borderland noir where morals are ambiguous and violence is rampant. *No Country* is a borderland *narconovela* in both geographical (Texas/Mexican border) as well as, temporal setting: it is set in the early 1980s, the period that saw drug shipments from South America shift from the Caribbean corridor to the U.S./Mexican border. If Miami of the 1970s and 80s was ground zero of the

United States' "War on Drugs" (see *Cocaine Cowboys*, 2006), then the U.S./Mexican border replaced it from the 1990s to the present. Prior to *No Country's* publication (2005) the novel was a film script that McCarthy labored over for twenty-five years. In that sense, it is one of the first *narco narratives*, especially on the U.S. side, among many that have arisen over the last ten to fifteen years.

McCarthy's borderland *narconovela* subtly alludes to the then fledgling DTOs that controlled the relatively minor—compared to Miami—drug trade in that region. Or, as Sheriff Bell put it: "I expect some cartel will take it over sooner or later and they'll wind up just dealin with the Mexican government. There's just too much money in it. They'll freeze out these country boys. It wont be long, neither" (137-8). We can read Sheriff Bell's premonitions as an acknowledgement of the Mexican centrist complicity—that is, the perfect dictatorship of the PRI prior to its electoral defeat in 2000—in the development of the drug trade along the border. Of equal importance, it also alludes to the complicity with drug trafficking of the well-entrenched Texas oil industry, the fictional Matacumbe Petroleum Group of *No Country*, which may be a variation of the actual Matacumbe Oil Company, Inc, based out of Hialeah, Florida. Furthermore, of all the characters it is Sheriff Bell who helps establish the novel fundamentally as a border novel; like Moss, he is from the region, whereas Chigurh is a mysterious outsider. In his discussion with his Uncle Ellis, Ellis notes how: "This country was hard on people...How come people dont feel like this country has got a lot to answer for? They dont. You can say that the country is just the country, it dont actively do nothing, but that dont mean much. I seen a man shoot his pickup truck with a shotgun one time. He must of thought it done somethin. This country will kill you in a heartbeat and people still love it. You understand what I'm sayin?" (271).

Ellis is referring to the history of the region as a borderland, alluding in particular to the period before WW II, when the U.S./Mexican border was more porous than it is in the present. Ellis is especially concerned with its bloody history, from the various legacies of successive Hispanic and Anglo cycles of conquests and colonization it has endured since the sixteenth century. It is an insight that Sheriff Bell returns to in one of his later musings at the sight of the initial drug-slaying: "I stood out there a long time and I thought about things...I still keep thinkin maybe it is somethin about the country. Sort of the way Ellis said...and it just seemed to me that this country has got a strange kind of history and a damned bloody one too. About anywhere you care to look" (284-5). The strangeness is in fact its "hardness" on people, in the form of protracted violence, or, as Sheriff Bell says in his final musing: "That country had not had a time of peace much of any length at all that I knew of. I've read a little of the history of it since and I aint sure it ever had one" (307). Indeed, the borderlands have long been an area of warfare and bloodshed. In recent history (the nineteenth century to the present), the nature of the conflict along the Texas/Mexican border has revolved largely along ethnic and national lines, with Anglos pitted against ethnic and national Mexicans. Or, as the late Anglo Texan folklorist J. Frank Dobie wrote about the region where *No Country* is set: "In Southwest Texas the battle of San Jacinto, which made Texas a republic free from Mexican domination, did not end the warfare between Texans and Mexicans. Rather it marked the beginning of that warfare" (44). That conflict consisted largely of Anglo institutional and social domination of ethnic Mexican Texans and was also highlighted in the proxy conflicts fought by *contrabandistas*—the *narcos*' predecessors—with local and state security forces. *No Country*, however, highlights how the state-sanctioned racial violence of the early twentieth century—which

still continues to influence social relations in southwest Texas—is increasingly being replaced by private agents across the Tex-Mex borderlands. Although the border settings and border-crossing nature of *No Country* permeate the entire novel, specific examples include the Mexican license plates of a truck that runs Sheriff Bell off the highway in a hail of bullets, and the Mexican license plates of the vehicles at the initial drug slaying. Also, the border sister-cities of Piedras Negras, Coahuila and Eagle Pass, Texas serve as a major battle area between Moss, Chigurh, and armed, private agents. In this last example, Chigurh's "borderlessness" is amplified, as he is the only outsider. The novel also highlights how neither side of the border is immune from the perverse socio-cultural ramifications of the illicit drug industry.

This borderland *narconovela*, through Sheriff Bell, also examines the social and civil decay that the drug trade would enact on the region. It must also be noted that the novel was published prior to the outbreak of the most recent—and bloodiest—conflict between the Mexican government and DTOs, which began in 2006 and has lasted to the present (2013). Fortunately, it did not reach the same violent proportions on the U.S. side, although the two countries are interdependently linked within the drug trade. This link highlights the North/South asymmetry mentioned previously, but with a twisted role reversal. Whereas Mexico provides the U.S. with illicit drugs for rampant consumption, the U.S. supplies Mexico—a country with stringent gun laws—with the majority of firearms used in the current drug conflicts, as well as in other crimes. Furthermore, if the rampant abuse of illegal drugs in the U.S. manifests one of the symptoms of a market society, then the social and civil instability spawned from recent Mexican drug conflicts represents the failure of a market society where drugs and their ramifications are the major driving force. Moreover,

the influence of *lo narco* on Mexican society has resulted in what noted Mexican researcher Rossana Reguillo has referred to as “la cultura de la ilegalidad” (the culture of illegality), which she describes as: “un entorno social en el cual la corrupción, la impunidad y la relatividad ética—practicadas inclusive desde las cúpulas del poder—se han convertido en el marco (in)moral y la norma de la sociedad [a social environment in which corruption, impunity and ethical relativity—practiced even from the domes of power—have become the (im)moral framework and the norm for society]” (Palaversich, 2012).

Whereas *No Country*, via Sheriff Bell, highlights the social and moral concerns that drug abuse has wrought on the region, with Chigurh it is reduced to the individual and the particular choices his victims make, within the tumultuous parallel realm of drugs and illegality. The culture of illegality, therefore, provides Chigurh with an ideal ecological niche in which to ply his trade. That is, in an environment unburdened by traditional quandaries, such as national and ideological boundaries. Or, as another infamously anonymous *sicario* put it: “El narco no tiene fronteras” (Rosi). Not only does the narco not have any boundaries, Chigurh’s lack of boundaries, or borders, further enhances his radical autonomy and governing code, where Chigurh is intentionally differentiating himself via rogue interpellations (I will discuss below) and the use of violence as an effective and justifiable tool—in his parallel realm of private *narco*-given law. Whereas in mainstream society there is uncertainty, fear and chaos, in Chigurh’s realm there is an embracing of the chief human equalizer and absolute truth: the certainty of death. Mortality is accepted, along with a willingness to defend his principles with a pistol, or cattle gun, in his hand. As demonstrated in Américo Paredes’ canonical borderland text *With His Pistol in His Hand*, there have historically been two laws along the Texas-Mexican borderlands: one for Anglos

and the other—discriminatory—for Mexicans. Chigurh, with his mysterious origins, circumvents this traditional dichotomy, as he does not have the historical antecedents (coloniality, repression, etc.) of either side. It epitomizes the *narco* not having any frontiers and signals the displacing of the historical hero of the *corrido* with the *narco* and *sicario* of the *narcocorrido*. Furthermore, if in *Nostalgia* we were presented with the *narcobildungsroman* of a *sicario*, then in *No Country* we are presented not with a narrative of development and maturation but with the portrait of a *sicario* in his prime state of radical autonomy. In contrast to Ramiro, we know nothing of Chigurh's origins or his formation. As a radically autonomous agent, from a historico-regional perspective, Chigurh is similar to the Latin American caudillo. From a regional literary perspective his antecedent is another McCarthy protagonist: the Judge in *Blood Meridian*. In addition, I use Louis Althusser's theory of Interpellation by Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) to discuss Chigurh's supreme sovereignty (suzerainty). Sheriff Bell, meanwhile, attempts to piece together some understanding of his murderous and mysterious enigma.

In her analysis of caudillos in contemporary Latin American fiction, Gabriela Polit-Dueñas (2008) notes how caudillos (political-military leaders, or strongmen) “son . . . dictadores porque rompen con el orden democrático establecido” [they are . . . dictators because they disrupt the established democratic order] (26). The caudillo, in addition to his other negative attributes (for instance, misogyny and megalomania), also exercises “el abuso de poder y la violencia como manera efectiva de gobernar” [the abuse of power and violence as an effective way of governing] (34-5). Historically in Latin America, it has been caudillos and their despotic tendencies that have maintained absolute power through force and coercion. This lack of accountability and transparency is one of their sinister

hallmarks. In the neoliberalized and drug-infested borderlands, and in the region's *narco narratives*, I contend that *sicarios* are modern, non-state and outlaw smaller manifestations of the caudillo arising in conditions where increasing organized crime and corruption has threatened and diminished democratic governability (Bailey & Godson). The *sicario* in *No Country*, Anton Chigurh, paradoxically contravenes the insecurity of the region resulting from a weakened state, by imposing a strict code of ethics and professionalism on those who enter the reach of his domain of private force. Chigurh, however, is only concerned with those who have transgressed the unwritten laws of the criminal underworld. It is then that he uses violence as an effective form of governing (interpellating) *individuals* into subjects of his outlaw code, rather than at a larger social level. Like caudillos, Chigurh is concerned with absolute power; that is, having complete dominion over his realm and, if necessary, enforcing it through force. His fearlessness and sense of purpose are a sinister duo in his ordering of the universe. Furthermore, *sicarios* are an example par excellence of drug trafficking organizations as a parallel society rivaling the state where violence is used as tool to instill fear and order throughout the "disconnected state"—the violence is not random and senseless. To that effect, noted writer and literary critic Juan Villoro has noted how, in Mexico, "over the decades, drug trafficking has created a subculture, a kind of parallel normality" where DTOs provide services (security, medical care, etc.) in direct competition with the state. Indeed, *narco* narratives tend to highlight the increasing weakness of the modern nation-state vis-à-vis global, organized crime.

In his foundational essay on the theory of interpellation (the formation of subjectivity by way of subjection to ideology and ideological state apparatuses), Althusser adapts examples from Christian religion. Specifically, he cites biblical scenes of God calling

upon Moses and other prophets, in which the latter are hailed into subjectivity by way of a call-and-response scenario. For example, God calls on Moses (Moses!) and Moses responds (I am here Lord, at your service). Althusser argues that interpellation works in a parallel fashion in the secular setting of the modern state, which also creates subjects by way of a ruling ideology calling upon individuals, for example, in public arenas such as education, the law, and other realms of media and culture. Just as an officer of the law hails a suspect and the suspect turns around to heed the call, “ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects” (117). The call-and-response scenario explains how individuals become “subjects” by way of sub-jection—literally being “thrown under” the rule of authority (divine law in the Bible; secular law in the modern state). Institutions of the modern state, according to Althusser, take the position of divine law via Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA). The process of forming subjects by way of subjection to ideology consists of two steps: the first is a scene of interpellation, when “ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects” (117). The second is recognition, when “the one hailed always recognizes that it is really him who is being hailed” (118). As a result, “individuals are always-already subjects” (119). That is, we are born into ideology and behave accordingly. What connects God and the State in these scenarios of interpellation is their status as lawgivers, that is to say, possession of the authority to name individuals and make them subjects by sub-jecting them to their law. In Althusser’s schema, state institutions can be divided into two categories. The first, ISAs, disseminate ideology via institutions such as the family, education, religion, and mass communications. The second comprise the Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs), which are tasked with utilizing violent force via state security forces (the police, the military, etc.). “What

distinguishes the ISAs from the (Repressive) State Apparatus is the following basic difference: the Repressive State Apparatus functions ‘by violence,’ whereas the Ideological State Apparatuses *functions by ideology*” (97).

Althusser’s theory of interpellation and his discussion of the different roles of ISAs and RSAs points to the central trait of the figure of Chigurh in *No Country for Old Men*—the role of law-making and law-dispensing. The latter constitute the roots of Chigurh’s radical autonomy: like the Biblical God, Chigurh claims the position of the Absolute Subject (“I am who I am”), arrogating to himself the position of lawgiver who calls on individuals (his future murder victims) and constitutes them as subjects (by subjecting them to his law). Introduced to us as a finished, fully developed character, Chigurh is presented as a “suzerain.” That is to say a being with self-appointed, supreme authority. I borrow this term, denoting supreme sovereign or radical autonomy, from McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*, where it is used to characterize Judge Holden. But whereas in Althusser’s model State Institutions—Repressive State Apparatuses and Ideological State Apparatuses—predominate, *McCarthy’s narco narrative depicts the privatization of RSA & ISA functions—their transformation in conditions of the decline of the state authority and the development of private networks*. Filling the void created by the erosion of state power and state institutions (state RSAs and ISAs), Chigurh assumes the role of absolute authority as a private individual, imposing law in lieu of the absent state by executing his own idiosyncratic “outlaw” law, as a one-man *private* RSA and ISA. His murder victims are the individuals Chigurh “interpellates” as subjects of his private justice: in this process, his weapons (RSA) hold the victims captive and allow him to sermonize (ISA)—that is to say, interpellate them as subjects of his assassin law—at the point of his gun. Chigurh, in other

words, appropriates interpellation for a new, private purpose. This is the reason why he is obsessed with the law (and constructs his private code). This is the source of Chigurh's mysterious sovereignty. This is why Chigurh likes to stage his murders as extended face-to-face confrontations, so that he may "interpellate" his victims before they die. By naming his victims—similar to God calling on Moses, or an officer of the law hailing a suspect, and sub-jecting them to (casting them under) their code of ethics, Chigurh transforms his murders into scenes of outlaw interpellation, where individuals (private citizens such as Carla Jean, but also retired state officers, such as Wells, etc.) are reconstituted as sub-jects to Chigurh's private code of justice. The point is that Chigurh's legal code is neither divine law, nor the secular law of the modern state, but *sicario* law—the private code of ethics forged and practiced by a *sicario* has filled in the void left by the erosion of state authority. As I have explained earlier, this is made possible by a neoliberal system where all areas of human activity are opened to market logic (Sandel). In his diabolical way, Chigurh views himself as restoring the authority of ethics—that is to say, asserting that not everything is for sale—, a principle that official society has abandoned for the sake of market values. For example, in the phone conversation with Moss, Chigurh informs him that his wife will be held accountable if the money is not returned. Here we see how in this murder—as in all of his killings—Chigurh is performing two distinct roles successively: first, as *sicario* ISA (asserting ideological authority), he interpellates individuals into subjectivity when he lectures to his future victims. Second, as *sicario* RSA (imposing violent authority) he actually murders his victims. Although similar to caudillos in exercising absolute authority, as a *sicario*, Chigurh is not a provincial officer or head of state. Rather, he is a private agent operating outside official law.

The Althusserian lens also facilitates further insight into, a crucial difference between Parra's *narco bildungsroman* and McCarthy's *narconovela*: while the plot of both novels is structured around a series of murders committed by the *sicario* protagonist, unlike Ramiro's killings, Chigurh's do not mark stages of identity formation and transformation. As we have seen, Ramiro becomes someone else each time he kills (Bernardo, El Chato, Genaro). In contrast, Chigurh's murders are repetitive assertions of his authority as the self-appointed officer of a private *sicario* authority. Stunningly, Chigurh's rogue ISA/RSA outlaw trumps—asserts itself as a superior force to or “outside of”—the law of even the outlaw DTOs. This is a “genie out of the bottle” phenomenon: the DTO set Chigurh on his path as a hitman in their employ, but in the course of events, Chigurh rebels, succeeding to assert his individual authority in his turn on the very organization that paved his way by asserting the force of private corporate law against official state law. This struggle between Chigurh and the DTO highlights the difference between a *sicario* code and a market society increasingly bereft of a social contract.

In addition to a *sicario* rearticulation of ISA/RSA and the Latin American caudillo figure (his lack of accountability and non-transparency), Chigurh's enigmatic radical autonomy also connects him to another of McCarthy's borderland figures, Judge Holden of *Blood Meridian*. Both like to lecture others on ideas of violence and justice. But whereas Judge Holden gives extemporaneous lectures, Chigurh delivers deadly interpellations, following up instruction with murder, or, in a couple of instances, offering potential reprieves in the form of a coin toss. Nevertheless, I would argue that the Judge is *the* literary predecessor of borderland *sicarios* in McCarthy's borderlands fiction, in that he represents the dependent links of violence—either state-sponsored or propagated by

private, armed actors—within and across the borderlands, beginning with conquest and colonization and continuing into the contemporary globalized era.

Judge Holden is a leader—along with Captain Glanton—of a scalp-hunting expedition sanctioned and funded by both U.S. and Mexican border state governors. Whereas the majority of the expeditionary force is concerned primarily with murderous profit, Judge Holden’s motives are more of an existential nature, comparable to Chigurh: the struggle between life and death which governs all living beings (a leitmotif in the works of McCarthy). I argue that Judge Holden is the ultimate philosopher of destruction in McCarthy’s literary westerns. Moreover, he has cogent ideas and arguments as to why humans are the chief practitioners of it. In his introduction to the novel (Modern Library Edition), literary critic Harold Bloom argues that Judge Holden represents War Everlasting. In one particularly drawn-out lecture to fellow scalp hunters, Judge Holden lays out his explanation for the causes behind such existential struggles centered on perpetual conflict:

Men are born for games. Nothing else...The value of that which is put at hazard...War is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one’s will and the will within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god (249).

Furthermore, if “the essence of war is a violent struggle between two hostile, independent, and irreconcilable wills, each trying to impose itself on the other” (United States Marine Corps), then Judge Holden is an acolyte of that god. Here Judge Holden is disturbingly suggesting that humanity reaches its pinnacle in struggles between life and death, the ultimate game. This fatalistic, predatory philosophy demonstrates how and why violence still works in achieving one’s political, monetary, or personal objectives.

As many philosophers have demonstrated, ideas of right and wrong, justice and virtue, are not universal and vary between cultures. Nevertheless, all living beings are equal in one respect: the certainty of death. And it is in this realm that both the Judge, and Chigurh excel. As Judge Holden explains: “Decisions of life and death, of what shall be and what shall not, beggar all question of right. In elections of these magnitudes are all lesser ones subsumed, moral, spiritual, natural” (250). Similar to Judge Holden, Chigurh is also a suzerain, “a special kind of keeper” who “rules even when there are other rulers. His authority countermands local judgments” (198). This is why Chigurh will not speculate about the violent nature of the world, because, like Judge Holden, he knows that “only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth” (ibid). Similarly, Judge Holden seeks to alter the natural and human terrain via the imposition of his will: “the man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear...but that man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate” (199). It is this attempt to control one’s own destiny, albeit immorally—that links *sicarios* to one another, for their codes demonstrate a moral superiority (contempt) from the societal norms. They are explicit in their codes, for in their world, existential truths are laid bare and deceptions are exposed. Chigurh’s connection to the Judge is essential, as it provides us with a genealogy of the *sicario* in the literary landscape of McCarthy’s borderlands, whose code—governed by fate, will and destiny—is manifested in his interpellations. One clear distinction between their suzerainty, however, must be noted. However, whereas the Judge is prone to

extemporary preaching to anyone, Chigurh interpellates only his individual victims, and he does so in a face-to-face, private conversation. Furthermore, whereas other literary and historical protagonists of the region are marked by national allegiances, both Judge Holden—as well as his literary *sicario* successor Chigurh—eschew these traditional ties.

Considering the recent publication of *No Country*, the contemporary scholarship on the novel is extensive, linking the novel with other *narco narratives* and the infamous Judge. Many observations in existing scholarship assume additional meanings when related to my reading of Chigurh as a rogue *sicario* ISA/RSA. For example, in a recent collection of essays, Stephen Tatum examines the evil represented by Chigurh on a socioeconomic level via *narcocorridos*: whereas the *narco's* primary allegiance is to money, Chigurh is motivated by “his narcissistic personality disorder” (Spurgeon, 90). Jay Ellis, on the other hand, echoing Sheriff Bell’s claim that Chigurh cannot be written off as a mere lunatic, argues that “Chigurh is more complex than just a figure of pure evil. He brings people to account” and, more importantly, “functions not only as an executioner, but also as a Socratic figure who, when he has time, engages in extended dialogue intended to help his victims see, that their past actions, in conjunction with chance events, have determined their fated end at his hands” (96). Clearly, Ellis’ Socratic reference is another way of addressing the educational interpellation of Chigurh’s ISA. Concerning parallels between Judge Holden and Chigurh, Woodson has noted how many critics have likened Chigurh to a latter-day Judge Holden, as one who fashions men’s fates and as an instrument of death (King, 6). Woodson amplifies this connection by arguing that Chigurh represents the murderous willingness to be the instrument of moral responsibility and determinism (11). On the other hand, Covell argues that, although “Chigurh shares many of the judge’s

characteristics, he is not the reincarnation of the judge: Chigurh is more the kid, reborn, having chosen the judge's path" (103). This argument is not persuasive, I would argue, as the Kid loses his penchant for mindless violence towards the end of the novel, whereas Judge Holden remains the ultimate practitioner of war. Returning to parallels between Judge Holden and Chigurh, Wallach argues that, unlike the epically mythical Judge, "Chigurh's character is proper to an ideological age rather than to a heroic or even to a philosophical one. Whereas the judge's oratory is always expansive, often anecdotal or parabolic, Chigurh's pronouncements are spare and direct" (xiii). Similarly, I would argue that, to Sheriff Bell, Chigurh represents a laconic prophet of destruction who inflicts a fresh wave of violence upon the borderlands—adding a new cycle to the region's history of violence. However, this fresh wave of violence, as represented by Chigurh, departs from the mythical and ideological and demarcates a privatized realm beyond the sway of commodification, where Chigurh imposes his "suzerainty" via interpellations and murder.

A closer look at the interpellations that Chigurh delivers to his victims—even those whom he offers a reprieve by means of a coin toss—provides us with further insight into the structure of his private *sicario* code. As noted above, Chigurh appropriates the authority of the law as its legislator (ISA) and executor (RSA). Each one, in turn, is an amplification of his code, wherein Chigurh explains how causality lies in his victim's past actions and chance, leading them to be interpellated and killed. Indeed, Chigurh's code is nothing but vigilante law. Chigurh's first notable victim is a rural store clerk. The clerk attempts to engage Chigurh in small talk and is confounded by Chigurh's curtness. The curtness can be attributed to Chigurh's suzerainty, which he quickly asserts by way of a coin toss, with the wager being the (unsuspecting) clerk's very existence. When the clerk chooses the right

side (heads), which ( without the clerk realizing this) saves his life, Chigurh provides a philosophical explanation (interpellation) in his customary fashion:

Dont put it in your pocket you wont know which one it is... Anything can be an instrument, Chigurh said. Small things. Things you wouldnt even notice. They pass from hand to hand. People dont pay attention. And then one day there's an accounting. And after that nothing is the same. Well, you say. It is just a coin. For instance. Nothing special there. What could that be an instrument of? You see the problem. To separate the act from the thing. As if the parts of some moment in history might be interchangeable with the parts of some other moment. How could that be? Well, it's just a coin. Yes. That's true. Is it? (57).

The lesson Chigurh is teaching (which the clerk fails to understand) is that the coin toss illustrates the precariousness of his life under his *sicario* interpellation. In this case, the act (Chigurh's potentially fatal interpellation) cannot be separated from the mundane object (a coin). All of Chigurh's murders take place in face-to-face contact, a requisite condition for interpellation. Indeed, in one early murder he implores his victim to look at him: "Dont look away. I want you to look at me...Chigurh shot him through the forehead and then stood watching. The light receding. Watching his own image degrade in that squandered world" (121). It is this squandered world of his victims, I would argue, that Chigurh despises. If Ramiro despises the fear of his fellow citizens, then Chigurh despises their lack of intentionality and autonomy. Like Judge Holden, what Chigurh lacks is a worthy adversary. However, that is the definition of the position of absolute subject that he has abrogated to himself, and with each interpellation he reinforces his supreme sovereignty.

Carson Wells, a loose associate of Chigurh and a former Special Forces officer, provides a brief sketch of Chigurh when he reasons with Moss to return the stolen drug

money. Here Carson describes Chigurh as “not somebody you really want to know. The people he meets tend to have very short futures. Nonexistent, in fact...this man wont stop looking for you. Even if he gets the money back. It wont make any difference to him...he would still kill you. Just for having inconvenienced him” (150). Herein lies Chigurh’s paradox. Unlike most, if not all, hit men, Chigurh is not motivated by monetary reward but by non-material values—his quest for suzerainty. That is, for Chigurh being a *sicario* is not a job—work in the employ of external paymasters—but a personal philosophy, the way he lives his life. His principled motivation makes him supremely dangerous. Wells articulates this clearly: “you cant make a deal with him...he’s a peculiar man. You could even say he has principles. Principles that transcend money or drugs or anything like that” (153). Chigurh, unlike Ramiro or *El Sicario* (Rosi), stands out within the *narco industry* for his set of principles that transcend materialism: he does not desire drugs and/or money.

Although Wells cautions Moss, he fails to live up to his own observations when Chigurh interpellates him. Wells put it more succinctly to Moss: “I dont know anything about you. But I know you’re not cut out for this. You think you are. But you’re not” (155). Of Chigurh’s three adversaries—Sheriff Bell, Llewellyn Moss and Carson Wells—it is Wells who has the potential to be a worthy adversary to Chigurh, as he knows that Chigurh will not compromise his principles. As Wells is the only character with prior knowledge of Chigurh, this creates greater consternation, from the latter’s perspective, throughout their subsequent confrontation: As Chigurh admonishes:

You should admit your situation. There would be more dignity in it. I’m trying to help you...You think I’m like you that it’s just greed. But I’m not like you. I live a simple life...If you dont respect me what must you think of yourself?...You’ve been giving up things for

years to get here. I don't think I even understand that. How does a man decide in what order to abandon his life? We're in the same line of work. Up to a point. Did you hold me in such contempt? Why would you do that? How did you let yourself get in this situation? (176-78).

Chigurh is emphasizing his identity as a “non-consumer” who lives a simple life with purpose. Chigurh rejects the wanton materialism of market society—with its unchecked consumerism—embracing an austere code of immaterial principles. Chigurh does not want what many in a market society seek: money, status and material possessions. His principles, in short, will not allow him to become obsessed with, nor defined by, commodification.

Near the conclusion, Chigurh's professional code as a suzerain is revealed to another agent of Matucumbe Petroleum Group, as someone who is “in charge of who is coming and who is not.” Chigurh notifies this anonymous agent that they will be dealing with new people, as the old people “moved onto other things,” for “not everyone is suited to this line of work.” According to Chigurh, the latter are not suited because they are motivated by greed and “the prospect of outsized profits leads people to exaggerate their own capabilities. In their minds. They pretend to themselves that they are in control of events where perhaps they are not. And it is always one's stance upon uncertain ground that invites the attentions of one's enemies. Or discourages it.” Chigurh, in turn, goes to great lengths to avoid such vanities, while exacting his will and fate in his immediate realm. The purpose of his visit, explains Chigurh, was “simply to establish his bonafides. As someone who is an expert in a difficult field. As someone who is completely reliable and completely honest.” What's more, Chigurh advises his prospective business partner that it would

behoove him to consider “how you lost this money in the first place. Who you listened to and what happened when you did.” As with most people he converses with, Chigurh does not expect him to “absorb all of this at one sitting.” It is Chigurh’s “bonafides”— good faith, sincerity in intention, despite the outcome of an action—that distinguishes him from his potential enemies’ excessive self-regard and the inflation of their capabilities. They are potential enemies, for he has none, as he does not “permit such a thing” (251-3). If there is a positive aspect of Chigurh’s radical autonomy—if one may point to such in this situation—is its function as a grotesque alternative, by way of offering a critique of the materialism of the neoliberal market society.

Chigurh’s interpellations are so terrifying because they amount to *the imposition of a private justice* beyond the possibility of redemption, ransom or pardon. While interpellating Wells, Chigurh informs him how getting hurt changes him, his perspective, and how it allows him to take inventory with himself. When Wells attempts to bribe him with a large amount of money, “a good payday,” in exchange for his life, Chigurh replies: “It is. It’s just in the wrong currency” (173). The currency that Chigurh deals in is one that Wells lacks: absolute “suzerainty,” involving a categorical refusal of the logic of (material) exchange.. Chigurh then asks him: “If the rule you followed led you to this of what use was the rule” (175)? Thus pressed, Wells is unmasked as someone who out of greed has long abandoned whatever principles he may have followed in the past. It is only after this revelation that Wells dies. Furthermore, Chigurh goes to great lengths throughout to avoid “collateral damage,” an infamous incidental in his profession. Chigurh’s initial contractor was the Maticumbe Petroleum Group, who in their growing alarm about Chigurh’s autonomous murdering and deviation from his professional tasks hire Wells to rein in the

“loose cannon.” Predictably, Chigurh pays the first contractor a visit after murdering Wells and shoots “him in the throat with a load of number ten shot. The size collectors use to take bird specimens” (199). While watching the man slowly die, Chigurh reveals that he is “the man you sent Carson Wells to kill. Is that what you want to know?” Here, as throughout, Chigurh’s interpellations allow him—and his victims—to explain themselves. In this case, it is too late for the contractor, and the last words that he hears are Chigurh’s explanation for using the birdshot: “The reason I used the birdshot was that I didnt want to break the glass. Behind you. To rain glass on people in the street” (200).

Of all the adversaries that Chigurh faces, it is only Moss who seriously injures him; however, it is also Moss who puts him in a precarious situation with Moss’s wife, Carla Jean. After healing from his gunshot wound, courtesy of Moss, and murdering Wells, Chigurh briefly speaks on the phone with Moss regarding his few remaining options. There are only two alternatives: “You know how this is going to turn out, dont you?...You just havent accepted it yet. So this is what I’ll do. You bring me the money and I’ll let her walk. Otherwise she’s accountable. The same as you. I dont know if you care about that. But that’s the best deal you’re going to get. I wont tell you can save yourself because you cant” (184). In this interpellation of Moss, Chigurh informs Moss of the verdict passed on him: the death sentence for Moss is immutable, a reprieve is only available for his wife, on condition that Moss personally surrenders to Chigurh. . Because Moss refuses to cooperate, Chigurh is compelled by his code to murder Carla Jean as well as him. However, it is Carla Jean who shows the most courage under the barrage of Chigurh’s interpellation.

After burying her mother, Carla Jean returns home to find Chigurh sitting, creepily, in her darkened bedroom, awaiting her. When Carla Jean implores him that he has no

cause to harm her, Chigurh explains that he has given his word to her husband and, as such, they are “at the mercy of the dead.” Contrary to the contemporary idea that the living owe nothing to the dead, Chigurh explains, he remains attached to traditional ideas of honor: his “word is not dead” and “nothing can change that...Even a nonbeliever might find it useful to model himself after God. Very useful, in fact” (255-6). Chigurh’s conduct with Wells and Carla Jean offers further evidence of his sicario appropriation of god-like absolute justice. In other words, in each interpellation Chigurh seeks to conceal his limited individuality beneath appeals to absolute principles, even as he is in fact sub-jecting his victims to his own private outlaw’s law. Carla Jean, meanwhile, is the most courageous of his victims, for she is quick to recognize and accept the inevitability of her fate. Instead, Carla Jean insists that it is not the coin that will determine her fate but Chigurh. His last victim, Carla Jean unmasks Chigurh’s hubris and arrogance, exposing Chigurh’s private appropriation of absolute law. Carla Jean tells him what his previous victims would not: that it is Chigurh who controls their fate, not abstract law or chance (the flip of a coin). She directly challenges Chigurh’s claim about how he came into her life: “I got here the same way as the coin...For things at a common destination there is a common path. Not always easy to see. But there...a person’s path through the world seldom changes and even more seldom will it change abruptly. And the shape of your path was visible from the beginning...You’re asking that I make myself vulnerable and that I can never do. I only have one way to live. It doesn’t allow for special cases” (258-9). She dismisses Chigurh’s attempts to sub-ject his victims to private justice as if it were abstract law as nothing but make-believe, even though Chigurh declares adamantly that it is “how to prevail over that which you refuse to acknowledge the existence of” (260). That is to say, the certainty of

their death via his interpellation. Carla Jean, in short, successfully exposes Chigurh's interpellative code as a code and law of his own devising.

Finally, Chigurh's bid for radical autonomy frees him of conventional social categorizations, ethnic, national and ideological. It is not that he has "post-identity," it is that his existence is based on his self-appointed, supreme sovereignty as an outlaw ISA/RSA. In short, Chigurh's identity is not social but meta-social, an identity that would determine the conditions of the social. One of the few physical—and illuminating—descriptions of Chigurh, is provided in his confrontation with Moss: "Blue eyes. Serene. Dark hair. Something about him faintly exotic. Beyond Moss's experience" (112). Sheriff Bell points to the key role of this lack of knowledge about Chigurh's external appearance: "The reason nobody knows what he looks like is that they dont none of em live long enough to tell it...I dont think he's a lunatic though" (192). Interviewing one of the young boys who assist Chigurh after his auto accident, Sheriff Bell asks: "What did he look like? Was he Mexican?" to which the boy responds: "I dont think so. He was kindly dark complected is all...He didn't look like anybody. I mean there was nothin unusual lookin about him. He didnt look like anybody you'd want to mess with. When he said something you damn sure listened" (291-2). In short, like a diabolical parody of God, Chigurh is beyond description, present only through his words "given" to his subjects. Sheriff Bell, however, cannot attribute Chigurh's actions to pure evil, as he does not know, or comprehend, his nature beyond his murderous actions. In this case, Sheriff Bell is not unlike FBI agent Clarice Starling in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), who seeks the advice of the jailed psychiatrist and serial killer, Dr. Hannibal Lecter, on capturing another serial killer, Buffalo Bill. In classic Socratic method, Lecter advises Agent Starling on how to begin: "First principles,

Clarice. Simplicity. Read Marcus Aurelius. Of each particular thing, ask what is it in itself? What is its nature? What does he do, this man you seek? ... He covets. That is his nature." Eventually, Lecter assists Agent Starling in what it is that he covets: the flayed skin of his female victims, to wear as a "suit." Correspondingly, what Sheriff Bell—as opposed to Carla Jean—does not understand is Chigurh's nature, which, as I have argued, is governed by his claim to supreme sovereignty as an outlaw ISA/RSA. As much is revealed to Wells when Chigurh explains the circumstances of his first murder in the novel, when he strangles a sheriff's deputy with his handcuffs. Prior to that, Chigurh had committed another murder and "allowed" the deputy to capture him to "see if I could extricate myself by an act of will. Because I believe that one can" (175).

Sheriff Bell's quandary is that someone like Chigurh—isolated even within a non-state drug trafficking society—not only circumvents, but is also indifferent to public law and thus unstoppable. Chigurh does not respect public law because, in his view, it is for those unable to fend for themselves. What is more, Chigurh has the will (and the weapons that are the means) to enforce his private code of law. His fictional predecessor, Judge Holden, explains this by way of a reference to the Nietzschean figure of the overman:

moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak. Historical law subverts it at every turn. A moral view can never be proven right or wrong by any ultimate test...for the argument is indeed trivial...decisions of life and death, of what shall be and what shall not, beggar all question of right. In elections of these magnitudes are all lesser ones subsumed, moral, spiritual, natural (250).

Given north-south border asymmetries and the weakening of the state vis-à-vis DTOs as a development that is characteristic of Mexico but has not (yet) occurred in the U.S., the surprising, and alarming, lesson of McCarthy's novel is that it projects this situation as occurring in a north bank setting. Chigurh's rogue *sicario* figure is a "Mexican" problem that has jumped scale, as it were, to the U.S. side.

In closing, we can connect Bell's quandary with his initial musing at the beginning of the novel: "there is another view of the world out there and other eyes to see it and that's where this is goin...Somewhere out there is a true and living prophet of destruction and I dont want to confront him...I wont push my chips forward and stand up and go out to meet him" (5). Here Bell acknowledges his mortality and his powerlessness in the face of a superior force. For as long as violence, ultimately, works in deciding what shall be and what shall not be, there will always be a Judge and a Chigurh. The historical cycles of conquest and colonization in the borderlands merely provide the foil for the Judge to thrive, just as *lo narco* has provided the same arena for *sicarios*. In a diabolical way, Chigurh, in short, represents the reassertion of individual agency against the institutional structures of both the state and non-state DTO's.

### **Chapter 3. Subverting Modernities in the Decolonial Borderland Narratives of Cormac McCarthy and Eduardo Antonio Parra**

*Iberians and Englishmen originally envisioned different economic goals in colonizing the New World, as well as different legitimate means of attaining those goals.*  
- Patricia Seed (178)

McCarthy and Parra's borderland narratives are clearly rooted in their respective Anglo versus Hispanic settler-colonial traditions of conquest. Anglos primarily conquered land; therefore, the conquest of nature figures prominently in McCarthy's decolonial philosophical interjections. Hispanics, on the other hand, conquered natural resources and indigenous peoples to conscript for the purposes of their exploitation, which, in turn, is at the center of Parra's anti-colonial critique from south of the border. Both hemispheric colonial projects, however, engaged in "Westernizing" projects epistemologically and socio-culturally, which McCarthy's and Parra's respective borderland narratives challenge and subvert through a multiplicity of perspectives or what is referred to in decolonial theory as pluriversality<sup>8</sup>. That is to say, their respective borderland narratives are not centered on, nor do they privilege, settler-colonial narratives. In other words, their narratives are not complicit with the logic of coloniality and, I contend, they can be read as counter-narratives to settler-colonial narratives rooted in the logic of coloniality and the rhetoric of modernity. In short, their decolonial borderland narratives disrupt settler-colonial discourses by

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<sup>8</sup> Pluriversality, according to Mignolo (2011), differs from pluralism in that pluralism is rooted in liberal political theories that "are based on paradigmatic example of modern-imperial societies (England, France, Germany)," whereas pluriversality is "based on the experiences of modern/colonial societies" (71-72). In other words, is oriented towards a multiculturalist perspective, whereas pluriversality is oriented in a multiplicity of philosophies rooted in indigenous and/or experiences with (de)coloniality.

centering and privileging decolonial voices, while also exposing settler-colonial introspections by characters who endorse projects of modernity.

The borderlands novel, in my argument, is a pluriversal, novel embroiled within two competing systems of coloniality that are historical and ongoing: that of the English (U.S.) and that of the Spanish (later *criollo* and *mestizo*). However, if Mexico, with its unfulfilled modernity, is a country of deindianized Indians—as posited by Guillermo Bonfil Batalla in *México Profundo*—there are still significant remnants of indigenous<sup>9</sup> and pluriversal (border) epistemologies present throughout the borderlands that have persisted throughout the history of these two competing systems of coloniality. These surviving remnants are manifested in Cormac McCarthy’s philosophical narratives in the *Border Trilogy* and in Eduardo Antonio Parra’s rural protagonists. In addition, these socio-historical themes constitute a circular (indigenous, border, pluriversal) comprehension of the universe as opposed to one that is hegemonically universalizing, where “nature” (barbarism, wilderness, etc.) is in opposition to “civilization” (modernity), a perspective germane to both competing systems of coloniality in the Americas. On the other hand, the borderlands offer a “hybrid” perspective rooted in pluriversal epistemologies—supplemented by incorporated elements of the competing colonial systems—constituting an ecological (interactive) system in juxtaposition to the structural (rigid) nature of the

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<sup>9</sup> By Indigenous, I refer to what Jodi Byrd and Michael Rothberg (2011) outline as the “the category of indigeneity [that] marks an intellectual theorization located at the crossroads where analyses of colonization intersect with peoples who define themselves in terms of relation to land, kinship communities, native languages, traditional knowledges and ceremonial practices.” Moreover, Byrd and Rothberg emphasize that “Indigeneity also marks an intellectual project that challenges and disrupts the logics of colonialism that underwrite liberal democracies in order to question Euro-American constructions of self, nation-state, and subjectivity that have also been the purview of postcolonial theory” (3).

former. Whereas many of McCarthy and Parra's characters belong to their nation's respective systems as socialized subjects that are structural and constraining, they do, however, make entrances into more pluriversal ways of being.

Concerning the history of differing colonial systems between the English, Spanish, and Portuguese in the Americas, Patricia Seed (2001) offers an anthropological lens, in which she unpacks the cultural categories guiding rationalizations for colonial authority, where each group, historically, developed culturally sanctioned objectives with present-day ramifications. In short, "Englishmen 'labored'—that is, they created ownership rights—whereas those whom they colonized did not" (155). More specifically, "Native Americans did not 'labor'—that is to say, they did not 'improve' the land" (166). On the other hand, "nearly all Spanish narratives portray Iberians as engaged in a moral mission to eliminate 'the ugly things' that Native Americans were doing", according to their cultural and moral norms. In short, the English and Spanish colonial legacies focus either on "improvements" of the land through labor (planting and farming), or on saving of souls, but more specifically on indigenous labor, entrusted to Spaniards by the Crown via the *encomienda* system<sup>10</sup>. In the late twentieth century, these historical colonial systems can be juxtaposed in the decolonial borderland narratives of Cormac McCarthy and Eduardo Antonio Parra. Furthermore, in the contrasts between rural and urban spaces, the works of McCarthy and Parra, respectively, offer U.S. and Mexican varieties of negative valuations of modernity, emanating from urban spaces and sympathetic representations of unaltered and rural

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<sup>10</sup> The *encomienda* system was a grant conferred by the Spanish Crown to colonists in the Western hemisphere that gave the colonist the authority to demand tribute and forced labor from the indigenous inhabitants of the area. For an exhaustive and canonical study on the topic refer to Lesley Byrd Simpson's *The Encomienda in New Spain the Beginning of Spanish Mexico*. American Council of Learned Societies Humanities E-Book, 2008.

spaces as victims of modern-urban reform. While both writers seem to reinforce this view of rural spaces as vanquished edens in McCarthy's U.S.-based narratives, the critique of projects of modernity is epistemological and ecological. In Parra's Mexican-based fiction, in contrast, ecological issues are not as prevalent. Instead Parra focuses on social concerns centered on the resentment and (self)destructive rebellion on the part of rural populations against modernization, that are presented as dating back to decades and centuries of exploitation and abuse. This contrast— epistemological in McCarthy/U.S. versus the long historical view of modernity as the legacy of colonial civilizing campaigns in Parra/Mexico, can be traced to a politico-moral dividing line rooted in competing systems of colonization that share the same epistemological underlining: the ideology of progress. On one hand, the Spanish idea of improvement was linked to their categorization as *gente de razón*, officially charged with civilizing their colonial subjects' souls. On the other, the English measured their improvements as planters via farming (material progress) and, later, ranching. The enterprise of both colonialities, however, was to actualize Western modernity in their respective dominions.

### **From Southern Gothic to Borderland Narratives: Cormac McCarthy's Fiction**

In his collected works, which mark a major shift in genres from Southern Gothic to Southwestern/Borderlands, McCarthy demonstrates that *it is* possible to think in another culture. The literary criticism on McCarthy's Southern and Western oeuvre is voluminous; however, very few of the pieces of criticism focusing on his "Westerns" has a borderlands orientation.<sup>11</sup> That is to say, rather than acknowledging and exploring McCarthy's pluriversality, much "Western" criticism focuses on its national (U.S.) myths. I assert, however, that McCarthy's *Border Trilogy* goes beyond the Western frontier script by delinking from these settler-colonial narratives in *All the Pretty Horses*, which are highlighted in their Iberian (criollo) guise with Dueña Alfonsa and Don Héctor. On the other hand, in addition to delinking from Western frontier scripts in the first installment of the trilogy, McCarthy offers decolonial voices in *The Crossing*. Furthermore, rather than reading Cole and Parham as 'American Adams', I contend that they roam throughout the borderlands as pariahs and tricksters of modernity. Robert Rebein, makes a similar claim when he states that "Meditations on the meaning of *the western land*, the novels in McCarthy's Border Trilogy, like Larry McMurtry's early work, show how *modern man* has become separated from the earth by his exploitation of it and how he must now wander its surface in perpetual exile" (my emphasis, 132). However, it is worth noting that Rebein's

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<sup>11</sup> For criticism of McCarthy's borderland narratives with a Western frontier script orientation, see Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne T. Luce's edited volume, *A Cormac McCarthy Companion: The Border Trilogy and Cormac McCarthy's Western Novels* by Barclay Owens. In addition to their reading of McCarthy's *Border Trilogy* as a Western frontier script Phillip Snyder (2000) and Megan McGilchrist (2003) examine gender dynamics in McCarthy's borderland narratives. Whereas Snyder claims that John Grady Cole (and Parham) embody masculinist "cowboy codes" that champion an individually rugged, stoic, white male of the US West, McGilchrist contends that "John Grady's overarching desire is to control the feminine, landscape, or woman" (87).

analyses, through the rhetoric of modernity he employs, still privileges a settler-colonial view of landscape. As Seed emphasizes, in Anglo North America, the settler-colonial narrative was founded on the “development” (exploitation) of the land, whereas Cole and Parham, I argue, are subverters of modernity—or what Parra refers to as *desterrados* (the exiled, or displaced) in his most recent novel. Sara Spurgeon (2011) also puts forth this argument that McCarthy’s borderland novels are decolonial: “Rather than glorifying the project of Manifest Destiny—the assumption that an Anglo-American conquest of North America was divinely ordained and racially inevitable—as many traditional Westerns do, McCarthy’s Southwestern novels strip away such ideological dressing. Forcing readers to confront the racism, greed, and brutal violence that fueled westward expansion and which lie just beneath the surface of the contemporary American West” (10). The decolonial borderland novel, I would add, seeks to go beyond these mythological surfaces. Further on, Spurgeon notes how “there are scholars who feel McCarthy offers a romanticized defense of Western icons such as the cowboy rather than a meaningful critique of them, especially in *All the Pretty Horses*, which most resembles the typical western” (10).

However, Spurgeon and other critics who celebrate McCarthy’s decolonial move do not consider the ways in which McCarthy’s vision remains constrained by his positionality as a denizen of the U.S. that does not integrate the other colonialist and decolonial genealogies that could and should have framed the epistemic grounding of the counter-protagonists encountered in these narratives.

Although the journey south may be read as a western frontier script and one may argue that the *Border Trilogy* summons a Western frontier script by sending its protagonists “South-of-the-border” in quest of the lost pristine wilderness/primitive

Mexico, I still contend that *All the pretty Horses* is where McCarthy begins to delink from these settler-colonial narratives by exposing them in their *criollo* form and, more importantly, by privileging and centering decolonial voices in his character's philosophical introspections. Elsewhere, Mark Eaton emphasizes how "*Blood Meridian* and *All the Pretty Horses* may be seen as McCarthy's attempt to contest in his work the official story of Manifest Destiny, according to which [North] American interests took precedence over the claims of indigenous peoples" (158). However, I argue that it is not just the claims of indigenous (and Mexican) peoples at stake here, but their coerced assimilation (as subjects to be "civilized/modernized") and their forceful removal (read extermination). David Evans also notes how the settler-colonial historiography of the U.S. West began a critical shift, with historians such as Patricia Nelson Limerick, William Cronon, and Donald Worster, who "undertook to rewrite the traditional monologic narrative of the western settlement, replacing the heroic epic of civilization's progress with a multitude of tragic, ironic, and sometimes comic stories—foregrounding the brutal extermination of native peoples, the mindless environmental destruction, and the marginalization of non-European groups that were an integral part of that history" (863). I note that the work of these thinkers was anticipated and prefigured by the work of Chicana/o studies scholars like Rudolfo Acuña whose *Occupied America* (1972) is really the first to offer a critical revisionist history of the U.S. "Western" or "Southwestern" states. Furthermore, I contend that McCarthy, by privileging indigenous and mestiza/o decolonial voices in his borderland narratives, offers a perspectival shift that is not epistemically committed to the settler-colonial narratives of U.S. exceptionalism that constitute a large part of the Western frontier script.

Even noted borderland critic Daniel Cooper Alarcón, in his self-proclaimed “preliminary assessment” and “cursory reading” (Lilley, 145) of the first installment of the *Border Trilogy*, *All the Pretty Horses*, disregards how these pluriversal texts can be read as borderland narratives critical of the rhetoric of modernity. It is Cooper Alarcón’s “cursory reading” (his words) of *All the Pretty Horses* that unjustifiably allows him to limit McCarthy’s immersion in borderlands thinking and history, under the imperializing literary genre of “Infernal Paradise,” which he claims mythologizes “undeveloped” lands “to suit the author’s [Othering] needs.” McCarthy’s borderland narratives, according to Cooper Alarcón, mythologize Mexico within the Infernal Paradise tradition, by following a “tendency to perceive and represent Mexico in Manichean terms” (142). Furthermore, Cooper Alarcón initially claims that “McCarthy’s Mexican novels fit neatly within the Infernal Paradise tradition, doing little to challenge its assumptions and conventions” (149).

Whereas Cooper Alarcón argues that McCarthy’s “Mexican novels” perpetuate American Adamic literary traditions, another noted borderlands critic, José Limón, places McCarthy within a borderlands literary tradition, by arguing that “amidst, embedded in, and *through* his philosophical introspection, his linguistic complexity, his allusive and elusive metaphors, and even his spiritual concerns, McCarthy also offers...a powerful critique of the prevailing social order with regard to Mexico and the United States at its narrative moment and now” (Limón, 199). Not only does Limón’s reading acknowledge how Mexico defeats any potential Adamic tendencies in *All the Pretty Horses*’ protagonist, John Grady Cole; he also argues that “the Mexico the boys discover is not some wholly mythicized place,” but a Texas/Mexican borderlands that allows us to “reflect upon its critical

ideological significance, an invitation largely refused by all of the novel's commentators, as far as I know" (200-1). Limón, I argue, acknowledges how McCarthy pluriversally (epistemologically, ontologically, socio-linguistically) enters the borderlands in his *Border Trilogy*. Whereas Limón argues that McCarthy fulfills this shift by orienting his protagonists and readers in the region's linguistic and cultural traditions, I would argue further that McCarthy's borderland narratives emphasize pluriversality (borderlands thinking). That is to say, rather than protagonists engaging in Adamic, imperial adventuring, McCarthy, in Limón's words, offers a "radical revision of the hegemonic western genre" (204). Similarly, I argue that McCarthy's borderland narratives (not "Western" nor "Mexican") are not only a critique of the hegemonizing Western genre, but, more broadly, they are decolonial borderland narratives that challenge and subvert the master narratives of modernity through his characters' philosophical stories. These stories shift the geography of reasoning by placing his protagonists in a pluriversal realm where there are a multiplicity of perspectives and lived experiences.

If there is a point of departure for me to initiate a decolonial critique of McCarthy, it is simply that he does not appear to recognize or utilize the counter-protagonists' resistance to a more diverse set of colonialist scripts with genealogies that run much deeper and farther than the limited Anglo project of Manifest destiny. For example, in *The Crossing*, there are numerous passages involving the articulation of epistemic disobedience and interpellation of the protagonists by unnamed and presumably indigenous or mestiza women. These become missed opportunities for McCarthy to further decolonize his standpoint by recognizing and valuing (elaborating) the specific genealogies of power/knowledge these women characters enunciate. Had McCarthy taken this additional

step of recognizing the pluriversality of the hegemonic frames, he could have explored why these unnamed presumably indigenous or mestiza women are constantly intervening with ethnobotanical remedies or warnings about the violent 'fugitive' landscapes the protagonists are about to enter.

In sum, McCarthy's philosophical narratives offer a broader critique of the rhetoric of modernity than Cooper Alarcón acknowledges. McCarthy's decolonial philosophical narratives offer a critique of civilizational, national, and regional epistemologies rooted in the ideology of progress and the rhetoric of modernity. In the words of Mignolo, these narratives of epistemic disobedience delink from the "assumed totality of Western epistemology" as one that is invalid for the "entire planet" (Moraña, 252). Mignolo also notes how the macronarrative of Western civilization "is tied to historiography (the Renaissance) and philosophy (the Enlightenment)" (248). The totality of Western epistemology, as an abstract universalist macronarrative of progress, is rooted in the Enlightenment. Enlightenment scholar Jonathan Israel emphasizes how the Enlightenment was most formative in shaping modernity. According to Israel, the movement was "consciously committed to the notion of bettering humanity" and is, therefore, "best characterized as the quest for human amelioration" (7). From a decolonial perspective, Israel goes on to argue, this universalizing quest, which disregards and silences other localized epistemologies and cosmologies, can also be characterized as an impositional epistemology.

With regard to the literary criticism on the *Border Trilogy* in particular, it is voluminous, so I will limit my analysis to a specific body of criticism that explores its "Western" (regional) orientation and its attributable myths rooted in settler-colonial

narratives. These frontier myths can be summarized in three broad categories. The first myth is that of virgin land, which emphasizes a barbarous and uncultivated frontier awaiting salvation and settlement. Second, there is the heroic male who functions as a lone male regenerating himself in the wilderness and through violence (read: taming nature and savages). Secondly, there is the myth of civilized chivalry, which emphasizes the innate goodness of settler-colonists. Whereas many characters in *Blood Meridian* embody these fallacious attributes, the protagonists of the *Border Trilogy*, John Grady Cole and Billy Parham, lack them.

However, according to Barclay Owens, “the *Border Trilogy* is grounded in nostalgic, mythic remembrance of the Old West and American cowboys” (ix). Owens’ reading of the trilogy, in contrast to my interpretation, further claims that, despite the frequency of bilingual passages, it remains predicated upon a very Anglo point of view, “where the Mexicans are left on the periphery in supporting roles” (64). In contrast to both of those claims, I would argue that McCarthy’s philosophical borderland narratives, as delivered by ethnic and national Mexicans, figure prominently in the trilogy. Whereas McCarthy’s Southern Gothic novels emphasize decay and despair in the antebellum South through social transgressions (bootlegging, necrophilia, incest, etc.), and *Blood Meridian* highlights eternal war as the chief attribute of human history, especially as manifested in the borderlands’ cycles of conquest and colonization, the *Border Trilogy*, in my argument, delinks these myths connected to the Old West, by positioning Cole and Parham as biliterate<sup>12</sup> characters in narratives that directly question and challenge the rhetoric of

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<sup>12</sup> Maria de la Luz Reyes (2012) defines biliteracy as “the ability to decode and encode meaning from written texts in two languages. In addition to comprehending, speaking, reading, and writing, biliteracy includes constructing meaning by making relevant cultural

modernity and the ideology of progress in the borderlands context. Indeed, echoing Limón, it took an honorary Mexican from Texas via Tennessee—McCarthy—steeped in the Southern Gothic tradition to appreciate the multiplicity of perspectives within and across the borderlands without recurring to Manichean formulations or Old West myths. In short, Cole and Parham’s southern sojourns into Mexico mark the death of the west in McCarthy’s “Western” novels. Rather than immersing his characters in the nostalgia and pastoralism of the Old West, McCarthy’s borderland protagonists enter a pluriversal realm that is not only highlighted in decolonial philosophical narratives, but is also present in the regional customs, traditions, and language of Greater, northern Mexico, where they have the ability to speak from more than one system of knowledge<sup>13</sup>. In their biliteracy, Cole and Parham are able to inhabit and function in the myriad (some would say “messy”) ways of being within and across the region, which is not a rejection of one in favor of the other, but is an act of pluralizing ontologies. Similarly, Sara Spurgeon (2005) notes how “literature from and about the West allows us to continually reimagine how multiple cultures should coexist, how humans should interact with nature, what we should think and how we should feel about our history and our future” (ix). Further echoing Spurgeon, McCarthy’s borderland narratives are pluriversal in that they put forth “a new vision of American literature that forces acknowledgment of languages other than English, *visions other than European*, myths and stories that have met and crossed and recrossed countless times” (x, my emphasis).

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and linguistic connections with print and learners' lived experiences, and manipulating the two linguistic systems to make meaning” (249).

<sup>13</sup> For a cinematic example of Mexican vaqueros and Anglo cowboys inhabiting a pluriversal borderland, see the film *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*.

Returning to myths and representations in McCarthy's "Western" novels, Megan McGilchrist offers another poignant critique of the myths embedded in these particular narratives, by claiming that McCarthy genders the landscape as female, by radically revising "'the myth of the frontier through the characters' perception of disastrous landscapes" (208). I agree with her claim that "McCarthy tells us the Kid represents the world which John Grady and Billy think they desire, but reveals the raw image of what their desires actually mean" (210-11). However, I disagree with her reading that Cole and Parham "follow the myth of the frontier because they believe in its truth and believe that it offers them roles in life" (198).

Concerning humans and their relationship with the natural environment in the Western hemisphere, prominent Western and ecological historian William Cronon notes how "there has been no timeless wilderness in a state of perfect changelessness" (11). This position echoes Don Arnulfo's position on *cosas incognoscibles*, which I will discuss further below. Along those lines, Cronon, cogently claims that "The choice is not between two landscapes, one with and one without a human influence; it is between two human ways of living, two ways of belonging to an ecosystem" (12). Don Arnulfo's philosophical enunciation suggests a decolonial view with respect to other ways of viewing the world that is present throughout the *Border Trilogy*. I argue that the philosophical narratives in McCarthy embody a border epistemology in that they highlight the ability to speak from more than one system of knowledge. Moreover, they are decolonial to the extent that they are not hegemonic epistemologies. As a result, the *Border Trilogy* is not about the Turnerian frontier experience, where one moves into a savage wilderness and reverts to primitive ways of life to rediscover themselves (the American Adam trajectory). Instead it

is a decolonial narrative about the borderlands experience, where a multiplicity of perspectives and ways of living coexist. More importantly, McCarthy's decolonial narratives, as a whole, reinsert non-Western, decolonial voices—rooted in indigenous imaginaries and borderlands thinking—into a region that was theretofore (officially) a Euro-American palimpsest that was imagined in the Euro-American genealogy of thought as virgin land, uninhabited land, waste land. That is to say, in the official macronarrative it was a land of savagery where the Euro-American experience with “wilderness” occurred. On the other hand, from a decolonial view, one can cogently argue that the land does not become savagely wild until the land is altered according to the rhetoric of modernity: to be controlled, managed, developed, and improved. This, in my argument, is what Don Arnulfo is referring to when he speaks to Parham of *obras desalmadas* [heartless deeds]; that is, the extinction of flora and fauna masked in the rhetoric of modernity.

To reiterate, border thinking rejects universal absolutes. Although McCarthy began his “Western” narratives with *Blood Meridian*, I contend that it is not a Western Frontier Script in that it does not endorse settler-colonial narratives rooted in U.S. Exceptionalism. Instead, McCarthy examines borderlands violence not just from one western-moving-impulse perspective but through multiple perspectives, including Mexicans and a non-homogenous cluster of various indigenous groups. The *Border Trilogy*, on the other hand, marks his entrance into border thinking through the inclusion of pluriversal philosophical introspections in his narratives. This geographical and narrative shift marks his immersion in other (non-European) ways of thinking and being, beginning with *Blood Meridian*, which indicates McCarthy's initial foray into exposing self-serving, settler-colonial narratives.

***All the Pretty Horses***

The first installment of the *Border Trilogy* begins with the vigil of John Grady Cole's maternal grandfather and takes us through his southern sojourn into Mexico with his friend Lacey Rawlins and their eventual, separate returns to Knickerbocker, in western Texas. In their journey south, prior to finding work as cowboys on a hacienda, John Grady and Rawlins encounter Jimmy Blevins, a teenage waif and marksman who inserts himself into the duo—to Rawlins' chagrin—and who may very well be a horse thief. In the second part of the borderlands novel the boys head south, are involved in an affray, courtesy of Blevins' horse, work on the hacienda where John Grady begins an unsanctioned liaison with the unbeknownst hacendado's daughter, is advised on gender matters in Mexico by the hacienda's matriarch (Dueña Alfonso), and, finally is detained on account of their involvement in the affray with Blevins, who is murdered extra-judicially. The third part of the novel consists of John Grady and Rawlins's violent prison experiences, replete with a philosophical introspection on the Anglo mind by a political prisoner, Rawlins' stabbing, and John Grady's knife fight with a young pachuco sent to murder him. John Grady murders the young *filero* (knife fighter) in self-defense and is then released at Dueña Alfonso's advocacy and behest. In the fourth and final part of novel, John Grady reunites with Alejandra and realizes that she will not ride off with him into the proverbial sunset. He returns to the hacienda, where Dueña Alfonso provides a long philosophical introspection on Mexican history, her involvement in the Mexican Revolution, and, finally, why Alejandra will obey her wishes to forsake her love affair with John Grady. The forlorn cowboy then kidnaps the agent who extra-judicially murdered Blevins, in order to obtain his horse and is wounded in a shootout with the agent's cohorts in the course of

expropriating his father's horse. Finally, he returns to Texas, where he attempts to find the rightful owner of Blevins' horse and is brought before a judge, who exonerates him of any wrongdoing. John Grady later confides in the judge outside of the courtroom that he is beset with grief for murdering another young man, the *filero*. The novel ends with his return to Knickerbocker, where he informs Rawlins that, although the area is "good country," it is no longer *his* country. The penultimate scene is the burial of his Abuela, who is of no biological relation but worked for his family for over fifty years and raised three generations of Grady boys, "and he called her *his* abuela and he said goodbye to her in spanish" (301, my emphasis). Finally, he rides on, and encounters some natives encamped in the countryside, who "had no curiosity about him at all. As if they knew all that they needed to know...Solely because he would vanish" (301). Later, he witnesses an atomic blast that produces a heavy wind and reddens "all the sky before him" (302). The final three paragraphs, synthesized above, shift from cycles of conquest and colonization throughout—while centering decolonial experiences—the Texas/Mexican borderlands to the nuclear age, while highlighting how John Grady is now a man without country, in a nation intent on bringing modernity to the rest of the world.

Contrary to Owens' claim that Mexicans in McCarthy's *Border Trilogy* have a peripheral role, in *All the Pretty Horses* the first Mexican to share his view of the world is Don Luis, a cavalry veteran who imparts his experience and wisdom on horses and warfare to John Grady. Regarding horses and their connection with warfare, Don Luis says: "men believe the cure for war is war. . . [but] the souls of horses mirrors the souls of men more closely than men suppose and that horses also love war." However, more importantly, according to Don Luis, "the horse shares a common soul and its separate life only forms it

out of all horses and makes it mortal. Don Luis further advises that “if a person understood the soul of a horse he would understand all horses that ever were.” As an avid listener and an astute student of equinology, John Grady asks for Don Luis’s view on the souls of men, to which he says, “among men there was no such communion as among horses and the notion that men could be understood at all was probably an illusion” (*APH*, 111). John Grady’s query and use of the honorific Don suggests that he highly respects Don Luis’s social status as an elder and, moreover, values his expertise on horses, a subject in which he is also conversant and well-experienced, despite his youth. This is hardly the posture of a writer who devalues non-Anglos by positioning his protagonists as American Adams who view their Mexican hosts as subordinate to their ways and customs. As a biliterate borderer, as previously outlined in Limón’s reading, John Grady has the ability to speak from more than one system of knowledge, which is one of the cornerstones of a border epistemology.

Whereas John Grady’s first philosophical introspection was from the “common man” experience of Don Luis, the two major introspections that follow are delivered by a group that Don Luis and many others fought against during the Mexican Revolution: the landed gentry (*hacendados*), which was increasingly viewed as oppressive and expansionist. Don Héctor’s critique of “ideas,” in my view, acknowledges that their ideas are grounded in the genealogy of European history and thought.

Concerning the Enlightenment and its relevancy to the Mexican historical experience, John Grady receives a philosophical introspection on the subject from both Don Héctor and Dueña Alfonsa, the scions of a sprawling Hacienda, Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción in the State of Coahuila, where John Grady and Lacy Rawlins find work as *vaqueros*. Although Don Héctor’s introspections are pithy and limited to the

discussion of horses and Mexican history, especially as it pertains to Dueña Alfonso's previous struggles, his analyses of her involvement with their family friends and fellow hacendados—the Madero clan and their prodigal son, Francisco Madero, who spearheaded the demise of the Porfirio Díaz regime—is historically concise and critically astute<sup>14</sup>. While playing billiards with John Grady, who knows the game as “pool,” Don Héctor informs us that “like Madero she was educated in Europe. Like him she also learned these ideas, these...she always had *these ideas*.” One can almost hear his disdain for “those ideas,” while he emphasizes to John Grady that “one country is not another country. Mexico is not Europe.” Don Héctor continues: “they went to France for their education...They all returned full of ideas. Full of ideas, and yet there seemed to be no agreement among them.” Don Héctor is careful to distinguish his post-revolutionary generation—albeit privileged—from Dueña<sup>15</sup> Alfonso's: “they were in agreement on matters of fact. The names of people. Or buildings. The dates of certain events. But ideas...People of my generation are more cautious. I don't think that people can be improved in their character by reason. That seems *a very french idea*.” While commandeering the billiard match, Don Héctor offers a contrarian maxim to French rationalization: “Beware gentle knight. There is no greater

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<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, I must emphasize that, although Don Héctor is adept at identifying genealogies of thought, especially with respect to Euro-American (read European and *criollo*) epistemologies, I am not suggesting that he represents an intolerant and nativist (*criollo*) view of Mexican society. However, I am arguing that in his discussion of “ideas” that clearly have a European genealogy of thought (i.e. Christianity, liberalism, socialism, etc.), he implicitly concedes that there are other ideas present in Mexico and the Western Hemisphere that are non-European.

<sup>15</sup> Dueña is the archaic form of doña. However, this honorific in the borderlands implies the chaperone of a young lady, which in this case would be Dueña Alfonso's niece, Alejandra. See: Vicki L. Ruiz, *et. al.*, and Tey Diana Rebolledo, *et. al.*, for further discussion on the social and gender roles of a Dueña throughout the borderlands.

monster than reason...That of course is the spanish idea. You see. The idea of Quixote. But even Cervantes could not envision such a country as Mexico” (145-6, emphasis mine). Again, this is hardly the dialogue of a character whose ideas are subordinate to an Anglo point of view, as Owens claims. Don Héctor, I would argue, is offering a nuanced, if highly synthesized, version of the Mexican Revolution and its ideological proponents, that delinks Mexican history from universalist, absolutist designs embedded in the rhetoric of modernity. As a descendent of *gachupines* (a derogatory term, in the Southwest, for Spanish settler-colonists and their descendants), Don Héctor’s character would be highly cognizant of inorganic ideas, as well as their inapplicability to Mexico. Don Héctor, I contend, emphasizes that Madero’s and Dueña Alfonsa’s “ideas” are inorganic to Mexican experiences—and history—within the colonial matrix of power. That is to say, their theoretical assumptions are inappropriately Eurocentric. In this case, I contend that Don Héctor’s critique of “very French ideas” alludes to Jacobin Enlightenment ideas that were deemed “universalist,” wherein, according to decolonial analyses, subjugated peoples and their epistemologies and experiences were regarded as irrelevant within the colonial matrix of power.

Although Don Héctor does not represent a progressive hacendado who concedes portions of his vast hacienda to the local peasantry, he unveils the revolutionary ideas of the Madero brothers and Dueña Alfonsa as alien to the local history of Mexico and as global designs that are, in theory and in practice, hegemonic epistemologies. That is to say, the ideas of the Maderos and Dueña Alfonsa are part of the imaginary of European history (Christianity, Capitalism, Marxism, etc.) that is rooted in the genealogy of European thought. Furthermore, whereas Occidentalism (the Western Code) is universalizing, I

argue that decolonial borderland narratives place an emphasis on being able to speak in and from various systems of knowledge; it is not a rejection of one in favor of another but, rather, an act of pluralizing epistemologies and enacting sovereign genealogies of thought. Dueña Alfonso's point of view, however, will not be limited to a gendered and external interpretation of her experiences, least of all by her nephew, no matter how urbane or erudite he may be. After being falsely detained for the theft of a horse, his trail companion, Jimmy Blevins, was murdered extra-judicially by the arresting agent. Cole then goes through a brutal prison experience that culminates in a knife fight where he murders a *filero* (knife-fighter) sent by unknown entities to assassinate him. John Grady then returns to the hacienda and is granted a final audience with Dueña Alfonso, who arranges his release from prison. However, before we fully unpack Dueña Alfonso's dialogue with John Grady, allow me to contextualize "Anglo points-of-view" with another "Mexican point-of-view."

The perspective in question is attributed to another Mexican character, Emilio Pérez, who is an influential political prisoner in the same Saltillo penitentiary, "whose power could only be guessed at" (190). After granting Cole an audience, Pérez informs him that life in the penitentiary is a serious business and admonishes him that: "you don't understand the life here. You think this is a struggle for these things. Some shoelaces or some cigarettes or something like that. The *lucha*. This is a naive view. You know what is naive? A naive view. The real facts are always otherwise. You cannot stay in this place and be independent peoples. You don't know what is the situation here. You don't speak the language" (188). We should note that, although John Grady is a biliterate borderer, Pérez is making a distinction between socio-linguistics and a larger issue present in the prison: the

struggle for existence *and* status. And *that* is a language that John Grady Cole does not speak. Concerning his naivete, Pérez adds that he “can say certain things about those who come under my protection. But the others? . . . The others are simply outside. They live in a world of possibility that has no end. Perhaps God can say what is to become of them. But I cannot” (188-89). Pérez, as with any governing entity, is offering his protection in exchange for their subjectivity, which John Grady is unwilling to relinquish. In a subsequent meeting, Pérez returns to his analysis of the “Anglo mind” (his term), by highlighting how “even in a place like this where we are concerned with fundamental things the mind of the anglo is closed in this rare way. At one time I thought it was only his life of privilege. But it is not that. It is his mind” (192). Pérez continues with his philosophical introspection on Anglo consciousness: “it is not that he is stupid. It is that his picture of the world is incomplete. In this rare way. *He only looks where he wishes to see. You understand me?*” (193, my emphasis). Pérez’s chief contribution, in my argument, is to foreground future philosophical narratives—beyond the everyday prison experience—that examine borderlands history and lived experiences within a multiplicity of perspectives. These philosophical introspections, I argue, go beyond centrist national myths, both U.S. and Mexican, which allow McCarthy to exit and delink from traditional Western tropes and enter a pluriversal borderland where one cannot merely look where one chooses to see, but where one must negotiate hybrid epistemologies and everyday experiences. Again, the (Mexican) philosophical narrators are cognizant of the differing views, whether they are Mexican, French, Spanish or Anglo.

Returning to Dueña Alfonso, in her first meeting with John Grady she reminds him that, although she “grew up in a world of men,” as an autodidact she became an

independent thinker at the age of sixteen and was keenly aware then that “the names of the entities that have the power to constrain us change with time” (*APH*, 136). Dueña Alfonsa speaks to John Grady of Mexican history from her perspective. That is to say, a feminist perspective: *desde la mujer, no sobre la mujer* [from the experience and view of a woman, not about women]. In this sense, Dueña Alfonsa is not unlike Novaro’s women protagonists, *quienes cuentan las cosas como mujeres* [who convey things as women]. Moreover, if, at a minimum, a feminist is one who believes in the equality of women and men, then McCarthy demonstrates his feminist positioning through Dueña Alfonsa, since she cogently highlights how she is not a society person, as the societies to which she has “been exposed seemed to me largely machines for the suppression of women” (*APH*, 230).

Dueña Alfonsa then proceeds to tell Grady how Mexico “was and how it will be again” (231), in no less than fourteen pages. The majority of her philosophical introspection is centered on her connection to the Madero brothers, Francisco and Gustavo (her fictional suitor in the novel), and how she “began to see how the world must become if” she “were to live in it” (233). In her telling of Mexico—and their brave and honorable men—their Pollyannish ideas were met with betrayal and violence. According to Dueña Alfonsa, it was Francisco’s Pollyannish view that was his demise: “his trust in the basic goodness of humankind became his undoing” (237). Concerning the destruction of haciendas and subsequent agrarian reforms in post-revolutionary Mexico, Alan Knight emphasizes how, although the reforms mark a historical transformational change in Mexican society, “benign, consensual social transformations exist only in the minds of political and academic Pollyannas” (Knight, 104). Don Héctor, similar to Juan Rulfo’s literary character Pedro Paraamo, embodies an hacendado who was able to adapt to the

agrarian reforms of the Mexican Revolution by maintaining his vast estate amidst governmental land distribution (*ejidos*). That is to say, Don Hector is a hacendado who represents with excesses of settler-colonial enrichment, while also acknowledging other ways of being and thinking.

In Dueña Alfonso's retrospective judgment, it is not ideas that bind people but bonds of grief: "the closest bonds we will ever know are bonds of grief. The deepest community one of sorrow." This is hardly a view in keeping with Jacobin Enlightenment views. Expounding further on Madero, she notes how he and his brother, in her view, "did not understand Mexico. Like my father he hated bloodshed and violence. But perhaps he did not hate it enough. Francisco was the most deluded of all. He was never suited to be the president of Mexico. He was hardly even suited to be Mexican." This is not in line with a view of Mexico as Infernal Paradise fascinated with death, but an acknowledgement that death and the idea of Mexico are historically intertwined, as Claudio Lomnitz states elsewhere: "if death has been in a looming presence in Mexican political discourse, it is because the political control over dying, the dead, and the representation of the dead and the afterlife has been key to the formation of the modern state, images of popular culture, and a properly national modernity" (Lomnitz, 483). Both of these positions on death and Mexico connect with another protagonist in *The Crossing*, Quijada, a Yaqui who is the *gerente* (manager) of a large portion of a sprawling Hearst hacienda. Quijada hosts Parham for an evening and provides him with information about his brother Boyd's death and other borderland matters. Quijada then provides Parham with a view of Mexico that is rooted in an indigenous epistemology and lived experiences. Quijada tells him that "the soul of Mexico is very old. . . Whoever claims to know it is either a liar or a fool. Or both.

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" (*TC*, 385, my emphasis). Quijada's local view of death is not attached to Mexican nationalism, as he believes that in addition to death being *the* truth, he also thinks that "the dead have no nationality" (*TC*, 387); consequently, his brother's body cannot be reclaimed. This view of death reconnects with Dueña Alfonso's view of the Mexican Revolution: "In the end we all came 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" (*APH*, 238). This is a harsh retrospective for our dreamer par excellence, John Grady. This view, however, does not dishearten his dream of reuniting with Alejandra, who Dueña Alfonso assures him will not ride off into the proverbial sunset with him. Dueña Alfonso is emphasizing that, unlike her upbringing, which was one of denied individual autonomy, she will be deciding Alejandra's fate, as a way of demonstrating how to live free of patriarchal or socially repressive forces. Dueña Alfonso's recounting of her personal trajectory in this way is similar to Novaro's leading women, in that it highlights circular, rather than linear, narratives.

### ***The Crossing: Centering Decolonial Voices***

With respect to prose and philosophical introspections, *The Crossing* is McCarthy's densest novel to date. His protagonist, Billy Parham, is exposed to more philosophical narratives—delivered from non-peripheral Mexicans (ethnic and national)—than in any of his other texts. It is an ambitious novel that attempts to explain the universe beyond Manichean terms, and beyond epistemologies centered on settler-colonial narratives of civilization and progress.

In an attempt to seek poignant advice on how to lure the she-wolf, Parham calls on a bilingual and bedridden wise man named Don Arnulfo. After exchanging pleasantries, Don Arnulfo asks Parham where he lives and, when learning of the location, Las Charcas, informs him that “hay una historia allá...una historia de obras desalmadas” [there is a story over there...a story of heartless deeds] (43-4). Don Arnulfo is presumably referring to the hunting of wolves into near extinction. However, Parham is not merely interested in hunting the she-wolf; he also seeks to understand the wolf. Don Arnulfo then informs Parham that “el lobo es una cosa incognoscible...el lobo propio no se puede conocer. Lobo o lo que sabe el lobo. Tan como preguntar lo que saben las piedras. Los arboles. El mundo” [the wolf is an unknowable thing...the wolf itself cannot be known. Wolf or what the wolf knows. It is the same as asking what rocks know, or the trees, the world even](45). Here, in my reading, Don Arnulfo is critically questioning the very idea of creationism, as well as scientific reasoning. He is suggesting that Parham not imagine the world as he would like it to be, but as it actually is, on its own terms. In other words, the narratives we develop about wolves, trees, rocks, and the world are merely tales of our relation with them. Concerning how flora and fauna have been altered in the U.S. West, William Cronon notes

how “much of what we today call ‘environmental history’ has been written in this country under the guise of *western* history” (171). That is, the human uses of the earth—especially under the guise of “settling” the land, as outlined by Patricia Seed—which focuses on the history of how human beings have interacted with, and altered, the landscape. Cronon then poses a crucial question that can be connected to Don Arnulfo’s philosophical narrative: “How *do* nature and humanity transform each other?” (175). The doing and transformation, in my argument, are the essence of Don Arnulfo’s view as he chooses to focus on heartless deeds. That is to say, rather than instructing Parham on how to “capture” the wolf, his ontology is philosophically opposed to the hunting and knowing (read “managing and controlling”) of wolves. Don Arnulfo then informs Parham that the wolf is, at heart, a hunter and that “men believe that the blood of the slain to be of no consequence but that the wolf knows better. He said that 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” (45). Once again, Don Arnulfo is emphasizing that there is the world as it is, and there is the world as we observe, describe, and alter it. Don Arnulfo’s message to Parham, I contend, does not endorse the English or Iberian view of altering the land, but derives from another system of knowledge, a pluralized epistemology that stresses living in harmony with the ecosystem, or, in the words of Cronon: “The choice is not between two landscapes, one with and one without a human influence; it is between two human ways of living, two ways of belonging to an ecosystem” (*Changes in the Land*, 12). Don Arnulfo goes beyond English and Iberian epistemologies by suggesting to Parham that, if he wants to see the wolf, or a snowflake, or the world: “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” (*TC*, 46). Here Don Arnulfo

provides the first pluriversal philosophical narrative of *The Crossing* that, in my contention, prepares him for the various other figures throughout the text, who will offer their own philosophical introspections.

Much later, after encountering highwaymen who rob Parham of his meager possessions, stab his father's horse Niño, and desecrate the corpse of his brother Boyd, he comes upon a caravan of Roma from Durango who are transporting a plane downed in the mountains decades ago. These world wanderers and men of the road befriend the bereaving cowboy and concoct a home remedy of boiled leaves, applying a poultice to the injured horse. At a campfire, the leader of their small clan recounts, per Parham's request, the various versions of the downed airplane. The philosophical narrative that follows demonstrates how nomadic peoples and "the way of the road" are anathema to modernity and its temporal orientation towards progress and futurity. With regard the question of nomadism and Roma cosmology, the interdiagetic narrator informs us that, in their roaming, they stand "in no proprietary relationship to anything, scarcely even to the space they occupy. Out of their anterior lives they had arrived at the same understanding as their fathers before them. That movement itself is a form of property" (410). Once again, McCarthy is pluralizing epistemologies by introducing the interlocutor to an ontology immersed in spatiality vis-à-vis transience, rather than futurity and progress. The nameless leader goes on to emphasize how he is bereft of superstitions, while highlighting to Parham "that the great trouble with the world was that that which was held in hard evidence to past events. . . [is] a false authority" (410). It is at this point that McCarthy returns to one of his recurring themes: the act and role of witnessing. The Roma leader goes on to note how "the witness could not survive the witnessing" because "the past...is

always this argument between counter-claimants,” and, although we as a species may seek witnesses, “the world will not provide one.” More importantly, the Roma leader emphasizes, history is that which “each man makes alone out of what is left to him” (410-11). Our nameless leader—in his thinking, bereft of rationalism, materialism, or utilitarianism—continues with his circular narrative by recounting to Parham how “as a child he had traveled in the land of the gavacho” and it was there that his father collected old photographs and hung them “by clothespins from the crosswires above the cart” (412). This philosophical narrative is particularly important to the multiplicity of perspectives that constitute a border epistemology, because, in the words of this nameless Roma leader, it introduces the interlocutor to “the gypsy mind.” That is to say, in an epistemology rooted in indigeneity, there is skepticism of a linear and temporal orientation.<sup>16</sup> Although, Parham’s travels throughout the borderlands are goal-directed, they are, in my argument, rooted in his positionality as a pariah of modernity. Concerning the photographs, he notes that, although the gorgios [non-Roma] sought to find some small immortality to oblivion in their photos, the Roma emphasizes that oblivion “cannot be appeased,” and this was what his father “meant to tell him and this was why they were men of the road” (413).

It is at this juncture that we can connect the Roma’s indigenous epistemology with Don Arnulfo’s border epistemology, which holds that the great equalizer and order of the world is oblivion (death). Or, in the words of the Roma leader, time “would always slay the messenger before he could ever arrive” (413). And, echoing Don Luis of *All the Pretty*

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<sup>16</sup> The Roma as displaced indigenes embody Byrd and Rothberg’s definition of indigeneity, which they define as “an intellectual theorization located at the crossroads where analyses of colonization intersect with peoples who define themselves in terms of relation to land, kinship communities, native languages, traditional knowledges and ceremonial practices” (3).

*Horses*, who questions the notion that men could be understood at all, he concludes by stating “pensamos, he said, que somos las víctimas del tiempo. En realidad la vía del mundo no es fijada en ningún lugar. Como sería posible? Nosotros mismos somos nuestra propia jornada y por eso somos el tiempo también. Somos lo mismo. Fugitivo. Inescrutable. Despiadado.” [We think, he said, that we are the victims of time. In reality, the way of the world is not fixed in any time or place. How can that be possible? We are our own day’s journey and that is why we are also time. We are one and the same. Fugitive. Inscrutable. Ruthless.] (413-14). As the final decolonial, philosophical introspection of the *The Crossing*, the Roma leader re-circularizes the ideas put forth by, most notably, Don Luis, Dueña Alfonsa, Don Arnulfo, and Quijada, while highlighting how the borderlands novel is transnational and pluriversal.

### **Eduardo Antonio Parra**

The northern Mexican author Eduardo Antonio Parra has consistently received critical praise for stories centered within and across the U.S./Mexican borderlands, in particular, his home region of northeastern Mexico. The breadth of Parra's oeuvre presently consists of nine short story collections (including his combined stories up until 2009) and two novels, as well as three film scripts and some literary criticism. In the short stories of Eduardo Antonio Parra, rural areas located in the northern reaches of Mexico are hosts to ritualistic atmospheres of violence and persecution towards seemingly benign urban interlopers. These narratives and social tensions, however, can also be read as a continuing dichotomy between "traditional" and "modern" Mexico, a process that has its origins in the conquest and projects of Westernization, implemented throughout colonization and continuing through projects of modernization/modernity from the nineteenth-century to present-day neoliberal projects. Many of these state-building projects, aside from drastic and often detrimental economic changes such as NAFTA, reached rural Mexico via urban educators and functionaries of the state in post-revolutionary Mexico, as is dramatized of Parra's two short collections *El cristo de San Buenaventura* and *El Pozo*. Within these narratives barren landscapes tend to heighten rural animosity and persecution vis-à-vis *fuereños* (*outsiders*).

In the article "El lenguaje de la narrativa del norte de México," Parra notes how many writers from northern Mexico—notably, Rosario Sanmiguel, Elmer Mendoza, Luis Humberto Crosthwaite, and Patricia Laurent, among others—creatively utilize the region's unique dialects, inflections, and colloquialisms to highlight their proximity to the U.S., their distance from centrist Mexico, and the preservation of an archaic Spanish (2004). In

another article titled “Norte, narcotráfico, y literatura,” Parra emphasizes how norteño writers tend to eschew centrist visions in their narratives, while emphasizing “una variedad de voces, estilos, recursos, intereses y temáticas cuya meta [va] más allá de las divisiones geográficas . . . ” [a variety of voices, styles, resources, and thematic interests whose goal [goes] beyond geographical divisions . . . ] (2005, p. 61). That is to say, they embrace a multiplicity of perspectives referred to in decolonial theory as pluriversality. Although Parra’s narratives, chiefly explore *situaciones límite* (life-and-death situations), the violence and despair that he depicts does not caricaturize the region as a bastion of infernal paradise, where it is exoticized for foreign and bourgeoisie interlocutors. Instead, Sánchez-Prado emphasizes how the violence Parra depicts, rather than placing a value judgment (moralizing) on violence as a social ill to be conquered, is “a social code that enters the urban [and rural] environment as a strategy of social relationships and as a component of subjectivity” (46). In his literary criticism, Parra is highly cognizant of how non-Mexican writers, in the country’s literary history, have oftentimes fetishized death and violence in Mexico from a voyeuristic orientation. Parra, however, emphasizes in a book review shrewdly titled “El privilegio de la barbarie,” (‘the privilege of barbarism’) that, for a narrative of “bloody Mexico” to have any literary merit, it ought to, at a minimum, go beyond a compendium of aberrations, while also exploring new insights into the region’s violence that are free of Manichean categorizations of civilization versus barbarism (2004).

Concerning Parra’s leitmotif of *situaciones límite*, Vicente Torres notes how many of his narratives center on rituals of violence and vengeance, which demand that his characters place the ultimate wager: to gamble and risk one’s life (2006). Noted literary critic Miguel Lozano Rodríguez highlights Parra’s ability to immerse his interlocutors in

“los mundos marginados...y el universo de la noche” [the worlds of the marginalized and the nocturnal realm] (67). With respect to limits, María Concepción González-Esteva notes how Parra’s narrative “nos lleva a la frontera misma de nuestra ética y moral” [he takes us to our ethical and moral frontiers] and, moreover, “va mas allá y desmitifica el concepto de limite, de frontera” [he goes beyond that and the very concept of limits, of borders] (126). Elsewhere, from a socio-economic cum psychological perspective, Lilia Leticia García Peña argues that his short stories are paradigmatic in that “en ellos aparecen las identidades de los excluidos sociales que constituyen aquel sector de la sociedad al que se le niega el acceso a los frutos del crecimiento económico y las oportunidades sociales” [in his stories, there appear the identities of socially excluded characters, constituting that sector of society whose access to the fruits of economic growth and social opportunities have been denied] (132). García Peña refers to his protagonists as “las parias de la modernidad” [modernity’s pariahs], whose socio-economic exclusion is inevitably linked to acts of violence. Similarly, Nora Guzmán Sepúlveda, who cogently argues how Parra’s stories highlight a crisis of modernity within and across the borderlands that fosters violence, insecurity, injustice, corruption, deterritorialization, and migration (2009).

The border spatiality of Parra’s texts, as part of a growing “nueva narrativa del norte” [new northern narrative] has been emphasized by literary critic Diana Palaverisch. The latter, in citing noted Mexican literary critics—chiefly, Humberto Félix Berumen (Tijuana), Miguel Rodríguez Lozano (Mexico City), and María Socorro Tabuena Córdoba (Cd. Juárez)—distinguishes these “new northern narratives” from Chicana/o Border Writing (Palaversich, 2007). In a previous article, Palaversich boldly—but, in my view, unjustifiably—claims that Chicana/o border critics only refer to their side of the border

and, in monopolizing the genre, have silenced voices from the Mexican side. In contrast, I would argue that Parra—as well as McCarthy—excel in presenting a myriad borderlands culture that is socio-linguistically and socio-culturally unique, which is to say, pluriversal. Nevertheless, as Aldona Pobutsky highlights, Parra’s protagonists have difficulty in asserting their self-worth in that—from her postcolonial perspective—they are so “steeped in the colonial propaganda of success, they cannot imagine any way to triumph other than by crossing that frontier” (470). However, rather than echoing her postcolonial view that notes the colonial propaganda of success, my decolonial framework goes beyond that to explore how many of Parra’s stories challenge and subvert the rhetoric of modernity, whose origins are in the coloniality of power and its cycles of conquest and colonization.

Although the scholarly criticism of Parra is, lamentably, still limited in scope and breadth—supplemented by general summaries and descriptions of his oeuvre—nevertheless, one notable northern Mexican critic, Nora Guzmán Sepúlveda, has observed that “la escritura de Parra se ubica en el presente y aborda la transformación del mundo rural y de la urbe en la región” [the writings of Parra are located in the present and address rural to urban transformations in the region] (9). At the same time, she emphasizes that “los procesos modernizadores no tuvieron—ni tienen—el mismo impacto en los distintos grupos sociales de la región” [the modernizing processes did not have the same impact on the various social groups of the region] (11). Guzmán Sepúlveda’s observations highlight the quandaries of Mexico’s increasing urbanization, while Parra provides his interlocutors with narratives that intersect both spaces culminating in the Texas—Mexican border (Cd. Juárez and Nuevo Laredo), where two distinct economic and quotidian binaries exist that “para unos, un lado significa la realidad, el presente; para otros, la utopía, el futuro” [for

some, one side represents reality, the present; for others, utopia, the future] (82). Not all of Parra's protagonists, however, venture and/or gaze north, as we shall see in *El cristo de San Buenaventura* and *El Pozo*.

***El pozo***

*El pozo* is a dense short story about a rural teacher who exacts revenge on the son of his former business partner, with whom he swindled unsuspecting *campesinos* of land deeds and other funds, before succumbing to their collective wrath of retributive, vigilante justice. However, before I analyze this short story and contextualize it as a decolonial borderland narrative, allow me to place it within its cinematic and socio-historical context.

The theme of avaricious civil servants in contemporary Mexican society, especially when perpetrated by urban interlopers in rural settings, is a recurring theme in the annals of Mexican literature and cinema. One recent cinematic example, among many in the past and present, is the turn -of-the-century film *La ley de herodes* (1999), directed by Luis Estrada. *La ley de herodes* is a political satire of the perfect dictatorship that reigned under the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI)* for seventy-one straight years, throughout the majority of the twentieth century. The film, which was initially censored by the PRI for its unapologetic satire of its political reign, is set in late 1940s rural Mexico, in the fictitious town of San Pedro de Saguaros. The town is bereft of public services and has a history of inept political leadership often at odds with the indigenous habitants. Upon the beheading of the previous *presidente municipal* (mayor), the political elites of the party, led by Licenciado López (Pedro Armendáriz), promote a low-level party functionary, Juan Vargas (Damián Alcázar), from municipal dump manager in Mexico City to the mayor of San Pedro de Saguaros. Lic. López rallies Vargas to the position by imploring him to bring modernity and social justice to the village in the name of the revolutionary party. Upon assuming leadership of the village, Vargas, who is idealistic and intent on leading the town without graft or corruption, soon learns that the real power brokers are Doña Lupe (Isela Vega), the

madame of a brothel, and the Catholic priest (Guillermo Gil), who performs fee-based ecclesiastical acts. In Vargas's unfruitful attempts to rally financial support from the local populace and its leaders for his "modernizing projects," he returns to Licenciado López, in hopes of expanding his presupuesto (municipal budget), but to no avail. Licenciado López, however, does provide Vargas with some invaluable advice that will boost the municipal coffers, which soon bolsters his personal financial gain, repeating the cycle of ineffective governance inherited from his predecessors. Licenciado López provides Vargas with a copy of the Mexican Constitution, a product of the Mexican Revolution and its sweeping reforms, and a pistol to impose the letter of the law and, more pointedly, Vargas's individual will. These domineering symbols of (state) power and (arbitrary) authority mark a major shift in Vargas's overall orientation. Whereas, initially, he was embroiled in the rhetoric of modernity, he is now steeped in self-gain legitimated by the ruling party, which rules by patronage and force.

In a previous chapter, I highlighted how the *sicario* Anton Chigurh developed an outlaw code that I analyzed through the theoretical lens of Althusser's Ideological and Repressive State Apparatuses (ISA/RSA), and, once again, I would make that connection with Vargas. Whereas the assassin Chigurh utilizes interpellations and murder as his own, private ISA/RSA, Vargas utilizes the Mexican Constitution as a means to interpellate (subjectify) the local villagers, and, if necessary, the pistol as his RSA. As Vargas's avarice and corruptions augments, he increasingly relies on the pistol to impose his will for self-gain, while his ideological orientation, premised on the rhetoric of modernity, increasingly diminishes. Vargas even expands his ISA, when he removes parts of the Constitution that are not in his favor and adds his own amendments, which, in sum, allow him to retain

indefinite powers of office. In the end, of course, the cycle of retributive justice continues, with an enraged populace clamoring for Vargas's death. Vargas, however, seeks refuge atop his sole "modernizing project," an electric pole that was to herald the bringing of light into the community. This symbol of modernity is also a symbol of religious salvation. Nevertheless, the cross/pole as modernity, or as spiritual salvation, are symbols deeply imbedded in the rhetoric of modernity, which, in decolonial thinking, highlights the narrative of futurity (progress) as a uni-versalizing epistemology. These impositional actions and symbols, in my argument, augment the cycles of conquest and colonization highlighted in decolonial borderland narratives.

In his definitive study of patterns of social behavior in indigenous and peasant communities in colonial Mexico, historian William Taylor cogently demonstrates how rural villagers defined their communities vis-à-vis outsiders, who often were urban representatives of the colonial state, followed by agents of the nation-state. Taylor notes how "the political conquest and the economic and social sanctions of colonial rule disturbed native society at all levels, but European intrusion was most destructive of the indigenous elite, which rested on a massive rural base" (1). I use this quote as a historical connection to trace the fissures between rural and urban Mexico as a continuing project of modernity. That is to say, whereas the colonial state was epistemologically-premised on "saving souls" (note the rhetoric of salvation), the nation-state—culminating in the sweeping changes of post-revolutionary Mexico—is epistemologically-premised on bringing modernity to Mexico, especially to the increasingly diminishing rural populace. Regarding this rural-urban rift in post-revolutionary Mexico, Enrique Krauze has emphasized how: "El problema número uno era la división entre los dos Méxicos: el

parroquial y el moderno. Por un lado estaba el país rural, pues la mayor parte de la población vivía en comunidades pequeñas. . . . De hecho según el censo de 1950, el 63 por ciento de los mexicanos vivía en comunidades pequeñas de menos de cien habitantes” [The number one issue was the division between the two Mexicos : that of the parish and the modern one. On one side was the rural country, because most of the population lived in small communities. In fact, according to the 1950 census , 63 percent of Mexicans lived in small communities of less than a hundred inhabitants] (167). Parra’s borderland narratives, usually focus on urban areas within and across the borderlands that are also areas of unfulfilled modernity, whereas his short stories set in rural areas, are chiefly spaces where an increasingly diminishing rural populace is hostile to outsiders, who tend to arrive with projects of modernity in mind. Parra’s two short stories, *El pozo* and *El cristo de San Buenaventura* highlight this continuing rift.

*El pozo* is a dense ten pages centered on urban interlopers in rural Mexico and retributive justice. In *El pozo* we are introduced to a fallen and bitter urbanite turned rural dweller, who is leading an urban captive to a decrepit well where, decades before, he was left for dead by his urban accomplice, after they were discovered cheating villagers on their claims to land (*repartos de tierra*). The cruel abductor was originally from Mexico City but he headed north with his partner, in an avaricious scheme that cheated *campesinos* of their land claims and grants (*ejidos*). Along the arduous journey the exacting abductor explains to his captive, the son of his accomplice, the abductor’s rural demise, where initially “robar a los campesinos fue muy fácil: son ingenuos y confiados. O al menos lo eran en aquellos tiempos; ahora ya no tanto. La vida los ha maleado y ya no se dejan. Los han jodido mucho. Sólo viviendo tantos años con ellos como yo lo he hecho puede uno darse cuenta” [stealing

from the campesinos was real easy; they're naive and trusting. Or at least they were in those days; now, not so much. Life has treated them badly and they are now wiser. They've been wronged by many. Only by living with them as many years as I have, can one realize it] (87). The localized abductor then articulates how *campesinos* became increasingly skeptical of urban outsiders purporting to help them. The reprisals for betrayal were often swift, as the guide emphasizes that "son duros los campesinos si se trata de venganza" [the *campesinos* are steadfast when it comes to vengeance] (88). He then muses on being rescued from the well by an *arriero* (muleteer) whose *curandera* (traditional healer) wife cured him of his ailments, and of being appointed the village school teacher shortly thereafter, a position that garnered much respect and admiration.

The monologue of the abductor--we never hear the direct voice or pleas of the captive--consistently differentiates between urbanites and country-folk, "la gente de la ciudad cree que en la noche se propicia la violencia. Yo no. Yo me encuentro más sereno" [city folk think that the night favors violence. I don't. I am more at peace with myself] (86). In the narratives of Parra that are located in rural zones, the people from the city, no matter how good their intentions, tend to represent the ills of modernity (avarice, greed, and a lack of respect for local customs and traditions), which the rural dwellers resist with violent, vengeful, and unforgiving reprisals. It is within these larger societal tensions, the local ways of being versus projects of modernity, where socio-cultural tensions are heightened in the rural narratives of Parra. *El pozo*, in my argument, can be read as a terse *compendium of the grievances and tensions* brought to light in *La ley de Herodes*. The nameless teacher, "redeemed" of his urbanite schemes, delivers pithy indictments against his previous profession (law): "era bastante ambicioso...en esos tiempos los abogados ya

no tenían tanta oportunidad para enriquecerse como a principios del gobierno revolucionario” [I was very ambitious...in those times it was not as easy for lawyers to enrich themselves as they did in early days of the revolutionary government] (87). The teacher also makes larger socio-economic connections, such as the contemporary diminishment of rural human activity: “Si antes nadie pasaba por aquí, ahora menos: en cuarenta años el desierto se ha ido ensanchando” [If no one previously came around these parts, much less today: in forty years the desert has widened] (94). He also notes how his ontology has been localized as he explains their retributive, private justice: “Son duros los campesinos cuando se trata de de venganza...la venganza es rápida. Pero ellos tenían la mirada serena, el espíritu en calma. Necesitaban castigarnos por asunto de justicia” [with the *campesinos* vengeance is fast. But they kept a clear gaze, a calm spirit. They needed to punish us as a matter of justice] (88). He emphasizes how, as a society yet to be thoroughly integrated into the nation-state—that is, as a parallel society—they must enact their own justice, as the government has historically been ineffective in protecting and honoring their interests. Government entities, rather, serve the interests of ambitious swindlers and people of influence: “burócratas, lambiscones de políticos,” [bureaucrats, brown-nosers of politicians] as well as lawyers who enriched themselves in Mexico’s post-revolutionary government, and the historical mainstays: caciques (strongmen) and latifundistas (landed gentry) (87). The story also demonstrates how the technocracy lauded in the latter stages of post-revolutionary Mexico is not as lucrative as nefarious activities (i.e. drug-trafficking organizations and their complicity with politicians and other agents of the state). However, although the aging teacher began his life amidst urban poverty, he emphasizes this trend toward corruption: “yo viví una infancia dura. No me quejo, siempre luché para no

quedarme ahí” [I had a tough childhood. I do not complain, I always strived to get away from there] (86). In addition, he had a malicious streak: “de joven no fui muy derecho. No me importaba robar, aunque no hubiera necesidad: ni traicionar la confianza de los que creyeron en mí, ni venderme a los que tenían el dinero para poder comprarme” [In my youth I was not so upright. It did not bother me to steal, even when it wasn’t necessary, nor to betray the trust of those who believed in me, nor to sell myself to the highest bidder] (87). In other words, in an environment that rewarded graft and manipulation, he found a purpose, albeit unethical, in which he could thrive. That is to say, a code.

The aging teacher’s code revolves around the fearlessness—stemming from overcoming situaciones límites—as well as the night’s symbolization in allowing him to transform himself from a dubious urban lawyer into a rural dweller: “Sí, estoy hecho para la oscuridad. No siempre lo supe, pero me di cuenta en el pozo” [Yes, I was made for the dark. I did not always know that, but I learned that in the well] (86). Furthermore, he emphasizes how his view of humanity is increasingly Darwinian: “estoy seguro de que la oscuridad debería ser el elemento del hombre” [I am certain that darkness must be man’s element] (85). In fact, if the aging teacher has any fears, it is that he will be unable to bear witness and tell his tale: “es curioso: así como los viejos no necesitamos de los ojos, nos es imposible prescindir de la lengua. Nos volvimos más y más habladores con los años. No conozco ningún mudo de mi edad. Seguramente se mueren de desesperación por no poder contar todo lo que vieron” [it’s strange: just as the aging don’t need our eyes, it is imposible for us to do without language. I know of no deaf-mute of my age. Surely they must die of despair over not being able to tell about everything they’ve seen] (86). In the end, after being accepted into the rural community and serving as their teacher, the teacher’s

sympathies become localized, and to a similar extent, he adopts their form of retributive justice, albeit with the wrong person—his former partner's son. This suggests that the villagers, similar to McCarthy's Quijada, have a long memory of injustices committed by outsiders. I don't understand how this sentence follows logically on the previous one.

### ***El cristo de San Buenaventura***

Whereas in *El Pozo* the guide later found some redemption as the village school teacher, in *El cristo de San Buenaventura* the town villain, Juan Manuel, embodies the proselytizing secular spirit of post-revolutionary Mexico, when he and his wife, Apolonia, zealously believe that education will emancipate rural Mexico from poverty and social isolation. After alienating the traditional authority of the village *curanderas* and leading the remaining group of pupils on a disastrous fishing trip in the mountains, where all the children and Apolonia perished, Juan Manuel was traumatized and labeled as possessed by a prominent *curandera*. Such labeling began a ritual of violence where Juan Manuel was publicly and violently attacked for any inexplicable illness in the village, especially those related to children. This story can also be read as the inverse of the popular Mexican legend of *La Llorona*, another embodiment of tensions between “traditional” and Westernizing Mexico that is highly gendered, where in the Colonial era a beautiful *mestiza* woman drowns her children in hopes of being able to dedicate herself fully to a *criollo* lover. Whereas in *La Llorona* the culprit was condemned to helplessly wander in search of her children for all eternity, in *El cristo de San Buenaventura*, Juan Manuel is the village scapegoat and catalyst for tensions between traditional and modernizing Mexico. Conversely, the lagoon in *El cristo de San Buenaventura* becomes a sacred place for Juan Manuel, where he can purge himself of the fishing tragedy and the village’s ritualistic beatings.

Don Rodrigo, the urban narrator’s innkeeper, is one of two people who outlines Juan Manuel’s history with the village. Don Rodrigo embodies a *criollo* (*ladino*) epistemology, in that his interpretative framework of Mexican socio-historical relations is based on the

civilization versus barbarism binary, which is to say that he employs the rhetoric of modernity when contextualizing these problematics. In this case, he contextualizes the arrival of Juan Manuel and Apolonia as a civilizing mission through an educational incubator. As secular civilizers Don Rodrigo states that “venían a hacerse cargo de la escuela, que entonces no era sino un jacalón vacío, con dos décadas de abandono. Impregnados de aquel espíritu apostólico de los primeros educadores, para ellos enseñar, más que un oficio, encarnaba una misión que redimiría de la pobreza y el aislamiento a comunidades como San Buenaventura” [they came to take charge of the school, which was at that time nothing but an empty hut, abandoned for two decades. They were full of that apostolic spirit of new educators. For them teaching, rather than a trade, embodied a mission that would redeem communities like San Buenaventura of poverty and isolation] (127). Although at first glance their educational fervor, as a means to achieving social justice, may seem altruistically and selflessly noble, their efforts, nevertheless, were conducted without regard for local customs and traditions and, more importantly, without the blessing of the local power brokers: a matriarchal conglomerate of *curanderas* and *parteras* (midwives), who would play a crucial role in denigrating Juan Manuel as an evil harbinger of collective ill-will. Don Rodrigo goes on to explain how the villagers resisted these inorganic changes: “la gente reaccionó. San Buenaventura no tenía costumbre de tanto cambio, de tanto alboroto” [The people reacted. San Buenaventura was unaccustomed to so much change, of so much uproar] (128).

Furthermore, Don Rodrigo’s insights contextualize a major concern of decolonial theory, the colonial difference, which concerns itself with changes that come from within a community, as opposed to changes that are brought in from outsiders purporting to know

what's best for locals. He states: "San Buena no cambia. Estos territorios aún son algo paganos, bárbaros pues, sin ley, sin religión, sin cultura..." [San Buena does not change. These parts are still rather pagan...in fact barbaric, without law, religion, or culture] (128). That is to say, un-Westernized, which positions San Buenaventura as a site of unfulfilled modernity amidst fierce local resistance. According to Mignolo, "the colonial difference was mainly and foremost epistemological" and "epistemic colonial differences are built on the presupposition that epistemic differences indicate ontological inferiority" (279). It is within this context that Don Rodrigo and the teacher promote the logic of coloniality by employing the rhetoric of development and progress. The villagers, of course, resist living in a "developed" world and capitalist society. Elsewhere, Mignolo highlights these problematics in the following manner: "decoloniality and dewesternization are making a statement; they are making evident that the road(s) to the future can no longer be controlled and marked by Western gatekeepers and road-helpers. Gatekeepers are losing their function, saviors and missionaries are being looked at with suspicions, and road-keepers are no longer needed" (283). In my reading, the Western Code ends where decolonial practitioners—of the theoretical, political, and practical variety—assert their own ways of being.

The nameless teacher, nevertheless, remains steadfast in his mission "to save" the village from themselves, with the same fervor mustered by Juan Manuel and Apolonia in the past. The language that he employs is also governed by the rhetoric of modernity and supplemented with medical terminology: "no tardé mucho en darme cuenta: San Buenaventura es un pueblo enfermo" [it didn't take long for me to realize: San Buenaventura is a sick town]. What's more, in his attempt to "ameliorate" (read improve,

develop) the town, he asks: *¿Cómo nace esta enfermedad y cuál es su cura* [how did this sickness come to be and what is its cure?] (116)? The cure that he purports to administer is an epistemological and secular one, through modern education. In other words, through reasoning and science. In my reading of this short story, it is not Juan Manuel who is the Christ-figure of San Buenaventura. Rather, the teacher, like Juan Manuel, is merely a symbolic scapegoat that the community ritualistically bludgeons to purge themselves of perceived tragedies that cannot be readily explained by local customs and traditions. Also, as a means of self-atonement, Juan Manuel is a willing participant in their vengeful rituals of violence. To this end, the teacher notes how *“su martirio es indispensable para expiar las culpas de todos. Vivirá para que lo sigan maldiciendo, para encarnar sus temores y sus odios”* [his martyrdom is indispensable to atone for everyone’s sins. He will live so they can continue to curse him, to embody their fears and hatreds] (134). In other words, Juan Manuel lives—not dies—for their collective “sins.” Or, as the teacher says later: *“Es su diablo: ellos lo crearon. Por eso se apersona en cuanto lo evocan, por eso no se larga y siempre está al alcance de su furia, aguardándolos para cuando lo necesiten”* [He is their devil: they created him. That is why he continues to appear whenever they evoke him; that’s why he doesn’t go away and he’s always within reach of their fury, waiting for them when they need him] (135). The teacher as the modern savior, however, views this violent arrangement as secularly untenable and goes on to observe that: *“somos piezas de una trama urdida por el lado oscuro de la naturaleza”* [we are chess pieces in a plot woven by the dark side of nature] (139-40). He continues with his language of salvation, in hopes of ameliorating Juan Manuel’s individual situation and the town’s purported barbarism: *“sólo quiero ayudarlo”* [I just want to help him](141). To “save,” or “cure” Juan Manuel of

this perennial cycle of ritualistic violence, he then takes it upon himself to end it with his own ritualistic act of violence: he bludgeons Juan Manuel to death with a large rock<sup>17</sup>.

As alluded to in the narrative by Don Rodrigo, village teachers tend to stay for very short periods, so as to reduce their influence on village customs and everyday activities. Juan Manuel's perceived culpability by the village creates a sect of violence and revenge that is heightened by a distrust of outsiders. As in *El Pozo*, Parra's rural narratives develop a culture built on a distrust of outsiders, where historical and continuing tensions of Westernization and modernity continue to stratify rural Mexico. Parra's examined rural narratives, in sum, demonstrate the incommensurability between urban interlopers intent on implementing projects of modernity in the countryside, with unrelenting locals determined to maintain local customs and traditions. In "El Pozo," the modernizing urban exploiter—after being found out by locals—goes "native" and becomes vengeful and cruel, like the indigenous local population. Here, the representative of modernity was evil from the start. In "El cristo de San Buenaventura," the modernizing urban teacher becomes abject after a tragic event, and submits to the role of scapegoat. Here, the representative of modernity is benevolent at the start, but makes a fatal error, which seals his fate. These contested zones are further heightened throughout Parra's narratives on the borderlands, where rural and urban Mexico vie for a space within close proximity to the promised land,

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<sup>17</sup> Juan Manuel's death can also be read as an allusion to the ending of Juan Rulfo's widely lauded novel, *Pedro Páramo* (1955, 2005). In the novel's ending, the protagonist and antagonist, Pedro Páramo, dies in a similar fashion: "Después de unos pasos cayó, suplicando por dentro; pero sin decir una palabra. Dio un golpe seco contra la tierra y se fue desmoronando como si fuera un montón de piedras" (132) ["After a few steps he fell; inside he was begging for help, but no words were audible. He fell to the ground with a thud, and lay there, collapsed like a pile of rocks" (124, translation by Margaret Sayers Peden, 1994)]. Also, as in *Pedro Páramo*, the rugged, rural landscape in *El cristo de San Buenaventura* plays a central role in Parra's story.

represented by the U.S. Whereas McCarthy tends to use philosophical introspections to critique the rhetoric of modernity, Parra's short stories offer more dense and nuanced reflections that highlight the lived experiences of the "pariahs of modernity" in his narratives. Both authors, nevertheless, constitute decolonial borderland writers, in that their protagonists are examples par excellence of subverted modernities—McCarthy's often by choice, and Parra's usually through inaccessibility.

## **Conclusion**

### **The Radical Border Act: The Right to Name One's Self**

This study engages the epistemological process of a delinking from the colonial matrix of power, which consists of the logic of coloniality and the rhetoric of modernity, in borderlands literature and film. In short, delinking refers to options, rather than missions that are oftentimes cloaked in salvatory, civilizing, and development rhetoric, which are, in turn, presented as universal truths. Through the pursuit of (decolonial) options there is a de-linking from these universalizing truths. Walter Mignolo refers to this type of delinking as a decolonial identification that both “dis-identifies” with the logic of coloniality and the rhetoric of modernity, while “re-identifying” with other ways of being that are not rooted in coloniality.<sup>18</sup>

I argue that decolonial borderland narratives emphasize an awareness of the coloniality of being, by rejecting Western ideals of progress, development, and civilization, while also conveying their own ways of being and independent thought in acts of epistemic disobedience and delinking, where other ways of being (pluriversality) exist as viable options beyond those proscribed by nation-states. Pluriversality is a world where many worlds coexist, rather than one conceptualized and governed through one self-congratulatory narrative of universality. Decolonial theory rejects the Western cCode, which posits the belief in one sustainable system of knowledge bent on “saving the world.” The rhetoric of modernity is salvatory, rooted in religious conversion historically, and in notions of “development” and “progress” in the contemporary, secular era. My research

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<sup>18</sup> For more on decolonial options and identification see: Gaztambide- Fernández, Rubén A. “Decolonial Options and Artistic/aestheSic Entanglements: An Interview with Walter Mignolo.” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3.1 (2014): 196-212. Print.

contends that interepistemic border thinking highlights these epistemic struggles, while rejecting and challenging the universalizing principles inherent in the Western Code. In seeking other modes of existence, decolonial borderland narratives go beyond the models of the nation-state and Western modernity. Their movements, in other words, are acts of mobile and epistemic disobedience.

The borderland narratives of Cormac McCarthy involve what I claim is a refusal to identify with Western frontier scripts rooted in white settler-colonial worldviews like Manifest Destiny. Instead, he privileges decolonial subjectivities that constantly articulate dissident philosophical introspections by precarious characters who nevertheless are able to engage in the disruptive counter-hegemonic interpellation of the protagonist. These decolonial philosophical narratives shift the geography of reasoning by placing the protagonists in a pluriversal realm with a shifting multiplicity of perspectives and lived experiences. In this narrative space, the genealogies of power/knowledge and resistance often escape the gaze of the colonizing Other, and remain “strategically invisible” to the sovereign powers. McCarthy’s philosophical narratives in this manner enunciate a broader critique of the rhetoric of modernity, or, if you prefer, the ideology of progress wed to a state of exception that marginalizes the other through a juridical order that refuses to recognize the Other as a coeval being. These decolonial philosophical narratives offer a critique of civilizational, national, and regional epistemologies rooted in the ideology of progress and the rhetoric of modernity which includes the imposition of the border itself as a “zone of exception” where sovereign powers can suspend the rule of law to produce the types of “modern subjects” that suit telluric political ambitions.

Eduardo Antonio Parra, on the other hand, unveils the rhetoric of modernity in many of his short stories by juxtaposing the civilizing missions of urban interlopers in rural Mexico and through explorations of the failures of post-revolutionary Mexico to address socio-historical problematics associated with cycles of conquest and colonization. Parra's rural narratives develop a culture built on a distrust of outsiders, where historical and continuing tensions of Westernization and modernity continue to stratify both rural and urban Mexico. These contested zones are further heightened within Parra's narratives on the borderlands, where rural and urban Mexico vie for a space within close proximity to the "promised land," represented by the U.S.

By analyzing these narratives through a decolonial analytic framework, I have demonstrated how these two borderland writers reject universalizing nationalist frameworks. The writers use the vehicles of genuine regional Spanish and English, as well as Spanglish and non-European languages, as a means through which to contest and create border imaginaries. Although the border, by definition, signifies contested terrain, and specifically, physical and epistemological terrains that burgeoning nation-states demand from the original indigenous inhabitants, the role of indigenous and decolonial epistemologies in border literary imaginaries is still persistent, as demonstrated in the works of Cormac McCarthy, Eduardo Antonio Parra, and María Novaro. Their decolonial borderland narratives do this by emphasizing an autonomous genealogy of thought rooted in decolonial and indigenous imaginaries. Whereas Western modernity opposes and attempts to repress both local epistemologies and ontologies, decolonial borderland narratives delink from and supercede the colonial negation of local histories. Decolonial theory, thus, is my prime theoretical lens in which to examine the doomed enterprise of

Western modernity in borderland literature and film. Decolonial borderland narratives do this by abrogating Western modernity's triumphalist, universal narrative of linear progression.

As a delinking project, this dissertation is oriented towards constructing a more comprehensive decolonial framework in borderlands literature and film. To that end, in the future, it will allow me to expansively outline and amplify the persistence of decolonial narratives across the borderlands. Concerning McCarthy's borderland narratives, in the future I will develop an analysis of his work that is rooted in "wildness" as an option to the Western frontier script of "wilderness." According to William Denevan, the fundamental difference between "wildness" and "wilderness" is embedded in what he refers to as the "pristine myth," which maintains that, wherever people are present, they affect ("humanize") their natural environment. Furthermore, Denevan's "pristine myth" dispels the notion of "ecological Indians," which in settler-colonial narratives serves as a justification for the invasion and colonization of uninhabited, virgin, and/or wastelands.<sup>19</sup> The list of "wilderness" writers, among others, is long and stretches from James Fenimore Cooper and Henry David Thoreau to Wallace Stegner in the U.S., and their most notable Latin American counterparts, Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, and Ricardo Güiraldes. In my reading of McCarthy, he delinks from the settler-colonial narrative of the "wilderness" by privileging decolonial and indigenous epistemologies, while also portraying flora and fauna as "wildness."

Similar to McCarthy's decolonial borderland narratives, I will further explore the borderland narratives of Leslie Marmon Silko in my future writing projects. Silko's literary

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<sup>19</sup> See: Denevan, William M. "The 'Pristine Myth' Revisited." *Geographical Review* 101.4 (2011): 576-91. Print.

protagonists are borderland beings that present their interlocutor with decolonial and indigenous epistemologies. Many of her characters are detribalized borderland beings, as opposed to “mestizos.” I use the term detribalized in lieu of “mestizos,” as I argue that the former term embodies characters with multiple shifting subjectivities that do not constitute thoroughly assimilated (Westernized) subjects. According to Channette Romero, rather than being rooted in nationalist identities, Silko’s (indigenous and detribalized) characters “are connected not through national affiliation or location on either side of the border but through their relationships to the land and the spirits of the land” (628).<sup>20</sup> These spiritual connections to the land, along with tribal and detribalized coalitions are some of the myriad ways in which decolonial and indigenous borderland imaginaries manifest through the characters, landscapes, and plot points of decolonial borderland narratives.

In the future, one of the major arguments that I will develop as a result of this dissertation is that many decolonial voices in the borderlands are also rooted in detribalized experiences and memories that have not been thoroughly Westernized. By further examining decolonial borderland narratives in literature and film, I plan to explore decoloniality as it pertains to multiple identities and allegiances that are not anchored in single allegiances to nation-states or indeed to the idea of the nation-state itself. For example, there are artists and producers who negotiate what is in a practical sense transnational or supra-national citizenship. Adelaida Del Castillo (2007) has studied how the unauthorized practice of social citizenship allows out of status (qua undocumented) immigrants to create their own communities and networks along with the production of

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<sup>20</sup> See: Romero, Channette. “Envisioning a ‘Network of Tribal Coalitions’: Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*.” *The American Indian Quarterly* 26.2 (2002): 623-40. Print.

art, song, dance, and foodways. Julio Salgado, himself a self-identified queer undocumented person, produces artwork for the social movements coalescing around the #UndocuQueer, #Not1More, and #UndocuBus youth movements. They produce film, poster art, and ethnographic and ethnopoetic narratives—including fictional biographies—that are producing these movements.

I arrived at my understanding of decolonial thinking organically, through a prior understanding of Indigeneity, and through my borderlands life experiences. That is to say, I had already been thinking and reading as a borderlands thinker long before matriculating at any university. Fortunately, I did not have the original challenge of attempting to abide by a linear process, where discovery through the existing literature precedes writing, or where the reading and the writing is the methodology of investigation and understanding of a logic already embedded in my way of thinking. Whether I had encountered the work of Walter D. Mignolo or not, I would have arrived at the same conclusions. It just so happens that Mignolo is one of the few scholars that has operationalized the logic of decolonial thinking. However, that does not mean that he *understands* or *lives* decolonially.

Moreover, I think that some border thinking is rooted in detribalized epistemologies, but not *all* border thinking. It is my contention that the plurality of border thinking is rooted in *specific productive rejections* of tribal epistemologies, which unveils the roots of how detribalization occurs. That is to say, it is not entirely coercive or unwitting, as I think happened for many borderland beings. Perhaps many chose to become nationalized subjects (either Mexican or American) and were derisive to those who did not choose to do so, which is highlighted in preferences of nationalism over Indigeneity.

The theoretical value of understanding the processes of detribalization is that it helps to reveal how there are ways of being that are not inherently oriented in “imagined communities.” The national(ist) being may have a hard time understanding that there are ways of thinking that are non-nationalist, and even some that are anti-nationalist, and not in an anarchistic sense, but just because, for many borderland denizens, there is not an overwhelming value to participating in any kind of nationalism, whether it is American, Mexican, or Indigenous. For some, the value is to live in the interstices. The white Anglo nationalist and the Mexican (Europeanized) nationalist are both products of a modernizing project that depends on the structural and cultural (epistemic) violence articulated by telluric partisans, in the worst sense of this term as originally applied by Carl Schmitt (and elaborated most recently after Agamben (2005)). The telluric partisans see their homeland as being violated and invaded by the Other, the alien, the illegal, the criminal—all constructed as social pariahs. These tropes and discourses are not just played out in literary narratives but are in fact as old as the birth of this particular set of racial formations as nation-states (both based on the Europeanization of the elite and national identity-making culture).

In my judgment, one of the chief attributes of living in the interstices is the right to name one’s self. However, I must emphasize that this must be distinguished from the notion that an individual has total “sovereign” control over the self. I say that because I think there is a better term than “sovereign” to describe the right to name one’s self. There is a more capacious term for that phenomenon. In some ways, I think that it is like a dysmorphic unexpected outcome of the Rousseau-ian desire to individuate through the conquering of the self in the wild frontier, in which the self doesn’t eventually become a

productive member of a single American dream society, but rather becomes a kind of epistemic claimant in a space of competing metaphors, competing narratives, competing claims. A person who defies the expected national(ist) narratives through the right to name one's self, *designs* one's own dream (imaginary). When one thinks about it, the right to name one's self on the borderland in fact represents an extremely radical thought, an extreme act, especially for a historically marginalized person (someone who emerges from cycles of conquest and colonization). It is a way of saying no (delinking) to forced co-optation and collaboration. It is a way of saying no (dis-identifying) to arbitrarily and politically imposed traditions and expectations. It is my contention that this phenomenon is profoundly woven into border thinking, which is the mindset of a subject contesting both imposed (lived, experienced) and imagined national-origin communities, a straightforward counter-nationalist orientation that dwells in the idea of a multiple shifting subjectivity able to transgress both physical and epistemic boundaries. This transgressive quality, itself also de-linked from hegemonic formations through the performance of 'liminality' is, I argue, a powerful re-signifying turn. This seems especially important given how many border thinkers have written from the position of having had their Indigenous languages stripped from them, their names frozen into either 'Maria' or 'Jose'. This misinterprets the subject as the bastardized (read "hybrid") offspring of Catholicism as it unfolded in Greater Mexico. Border thinking, like that embodied in the fiction of Cormac McCarthy and Eduardo Antonio Parra, or like the theorizations to which I hope to contribute, challenges the idea of authenticity by virtue of its hybrid, liminal, and contingent qualities.

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