Trauma and Mythologies of the Old West in the Western Novels of Cormac McCarthy

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Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................. 3
Declaration/Copyright .........................................................................................4
Acknowledgements ...............................................................................................5

Introduction ..........................................................................................................6

Chapter One:
Trauma, Myth and the Quest Narrative in *The Crossing*..................63

Chapter Two:
Trauma and Heroic Masculinity in
*All the Pretty Horses* and *Cities of the Plain*...............................111

Chapter Three:
Trauma: Past, Present, Future and National Identity in
*No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*.................................181

Conclusion..........................................................................................................253

Bibliography.......................................................................................................262

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Abstract

This thesis explores how McCarthy uses figures of trauma to interrogate the creation of myth in three categories: mythic narrative, mythic masculinity, and mythic national identity. Focusing on McCarthy’s five most recent novels, *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, *Cities of the Plain*, *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*, I argue that this interdependency of myth and trauma helps explain the repetitive cycles of loss, failure and defeat that pervade his work. Most critics of McCarthy have failed to explain adequately the relationship between these cycles of failure and the various mythologies of the West in these novels, sometimes even praising his supposed rejuvenation of the ‘exhausted’ myths of cowboys and the Western frontier. But recent developments in trauma theory help explain how McCarthy uses figures of loss and trauma to re-imagine the very structure of myth in twenty-first century America, particularly in relation to mythic models of the heroic quest, heroic masculinity, and American Exceptionalism. Furthermore, this reading of McCarthy also extends trauma theory by enabling a reconsideration of both myth and trauma in terms of futurity. McCarthy’s fusing of trauma with myth exposes how myths are typically a cyclically violent and destructive cultural phenomenon, as well as revealing how myths always depend upon the projection of a future event that ultimately collapses into failure. By explaining these connections between trauma, failure, myth, and futurity, I thus revitalise the criticism devoted to McCarthy’s writing and open up new ways to think about the larger concerns of narrative, genre, gender, and nation.

I investigate how and why McCarthy takes the mythologies of the Old West, and rather than revising or subverting these myths, strives for a further model of myth in the form of heroic narratives that always end in failure and unresolved traumatic experience. And yet, McCarthy does not simply offer the failure or collapse of myth itself. Rather, his engagement with trauma in these Western novels reinstates the mythic as a cyclical pattern in which the present experience of trauma invokes some kind of loss in the past, sometimes even an unspecified loss, and projects some kind of further loss into the future, so as to keep the very notion of myth in constant play or motion. The model of myth that McCarthy offers is thus an eternal cycle that can never resolve itself as redemption. In the process I will examine how McCarthy’s traumatic model of myth helps us understand how a failing and defeated cowboy culture, with its heritage based on mythic visions of mastery and loss may, in striving for a sustained mythic experience, remain trapped in unresolved traumatic cycles and patterns of violence, crisis and suffering which nevertheless produce a further cycle of traumatic myth.

I engage McCarthy’s negotiations of the mythic quest in my analysis of *The Crossing* in Chapter One, in which I show how the traumatic failure of the quest infuses that quest with mythic symbolism, and spurs the inevitable repetition of the quest in order to preserve that mythic cycle. In Chapter Two I examine the relationship between myth, trauma, and masculinity in *All the Pretty Horses* and *Cities of the Plain* where I argue heroic masculinity relies upon the attempt to master the defeat and failure associated with trauma. In Chapter Three I examine how, in *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*, the myth of American nation is associated with perpetual affirmations of chosenness and survival and how McCarthy’s novels open up new ways to understand how American culture builds a mythic past out of a sense of traumatic loss and projects that mythic vision onto an illusory and destructive future.
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Introduction

Cormac McCarthy’s Western novels seem to tell the same story over and over again. It is a story that begins with absence and loss, continues with a quest, a journey or a challenge to retrieve or redeem that loss, yet always ends in failure or further loss. My readings of McCarthy’s recent novels *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994), *Cities of the Plain* (1998), *No Country for Old Men* (2005) and *The Road* (2006) explain why McCarthy tells this story not once but many times, and why the repetition of failure is crucial for understanding McCarthy’s particular engagement with mythologies of the Old West in his Western fiction. I argue that in this repetition of failure running through the Western novels McCarthy explores the sense of the persistent irresolvable loss of the Old West at the heart of American culture. And I show how these novels’ preoccupation with patterns of repetition and re-enactment of loss must be understood not only in terms of Old West mythologies, but also as mythologies that are imagined and experienced, both in the novels and in American culture, as a form of trauma. McCarthy evokes this sense of loss at the beginning of *All the Pretty Horses* in the last words John Grady Cole’s father says to his son:

The last thing his father said was that the country would never be the same.

People don’t feel safe no more, he said. We’re like the Comanche was two hundred years ago. We don’t know what’s goin to show up here come daylight. We don’t even know what color they’ll be.¹

Again at the end of the novel, John Grady having ended his quest into Mexico echoes this loss. In response to his friend, Lacey Rawlins’ question, ‘Where is your country?’ he replies,

‘I don’t know [...] I don’t know where it is. I don’t know what happens to country.’ Both John Grady and his father here mourn the loss of ‘country’ as both a physical and a figurative space that cannot be restored. This mourning for ‘country’ underpins McCarthy’s need to retell repeatedly the same tale of unresolved loss. I argue that the sense of absence or loss of ‘country’ that permeates these novels is a continuing cultural wound that his characters transmit from generation to generation by repeatedly attempting and failing to heal that wound through various quests. McCarthy’s Western novels revolve endlessly around this cultural wound, this absence which has displaced the ‘true country’ where heroic narrative and masculinity once supposedly flourished and could find fulfilment again, if only that country could be rediscovered. The absence or loss that haunts these novels from the outset can best be understood, I argue, as a form of persistent cultural trauma. Reading McCarthy’s novels in terms of trauma helps unlock the patterns of loss, quest and further loss throughout these five novels. And trauma thus explains McCarthy’s complex engagement with the mythologies of the Old West. The loss of ‘country’ can never be resolved because the ‘country’ never existed in the first place except in terms of the mythic and imaginary Old West. The repetition of the questing narrative that seeks to recover the mythic ‘country’ thus re-enacts a form of cultural trauma because this mythological lost space is simultaneously the source of individual and cultural wounding and the idealised goal that, if achieved, promises to heal that wound. The quest to resolve the trauma of absence and loss only generates a further sense of cultural trauma because the mythic past – which never existed in the first place – is lost once more through the failure of the quest, instigating newer quests to resolve that trauma over and over again. McCarthy’s retelling of this myth is a form of traumatic re-enactment because the loss of the myth is never resolved, it cannot be resolved, and yet, is impossible to forget or accept.

2 Ibid., 299.
I explore how the lost country can only ever be felt and experienced as an absence or loss but I also show how, in McCarthy’s fiction, it is imagined and re-imagined in terms of a real land beyond the border, or as a distant and wayward wolf, horse, brother or lover that would bring a form of redemption if retrieved successfully. These surrogates themselves become the ‘missing thing’ that embodies the limitless and indeterminate loss of that mythic country of the Old West. A reading of McCarthy through contemporary trauma theory offers an understanding of the obsessive need to engage in the quest for that irrecoverable ‘country’ or the ‘missing thing’ that comes to represent that country. Despite the repetition of violence, tragedy and failure throughout McCarthy’s Western fiction, no one has yet tried to explain those repetitions in terms of trauma. Yet trauma theory offers a particularly useful model for explaining how and why McCarthy’s novels invariably involve a search for something that should restore a sense of completeness, yet that always fails because the missing thing can never fill the space of what is always a mythic and imaginary world. I show how McCarthy’s protagonists seem to be forever ‘catching up’ with the absence of a lost world, trying desperately to retrieve what was only ever experienced as a sense of loss from the beginning of the narrative and thus can never be reached because it never existed in the first place, except as loss. This quest for the ‘country’ or missing thing that has been lost drives McCarthy’s fiction in destructive and cyclic patterns, and those patterns, I argue, are best understood in terms of trauma.

Through a reading of McCarthy’s five most recent novels, I investigate how the quest for lost myth provokes cycles of trauma in contemporary evocations of the cowboy in American culture and how those cycles resonate throughout American culture as a whole. These novels cover the period from the beginning of World War II in The Border Trilogy, to the post-Vietnam era of No Country for Old Men, through to the futuristic but nevertheless still ‘Western’-driven narrative of The Road. I have not included McCarthy’s first Western
novel, *Blood Meridian*, as part of my study because that novel explores the West at the time when the frontier was being forged. In its portrayal of the frontier as a landscape of unremitting war and violence, that novel reveals McCarthy’s vision of the Old West as one of trauma, a vision I will return to frequently throughout this thesis. But I focus here on the more recent novels in which that vision of the Old West as trauma collides with a contemporary yearning for a mythic and heroic version of the past, of a history that never existed. McCarthy’s shaping of this attempted retrieval of mythic history in terms of cultural patterns of absence, failure, and violence enables me to look at the history and myth of the Old West again through the post-mythic lens of the mid-twentieth century cowboy heroics of *The Border Trilogy*, the post-Vietnam border lawlessness of *No Country for Old Men*, and the futuristic pioneer journey of *The Road*. The McCarthy cowboy figures in these novels experience a pervasive sense of absence and alienation and reach for the endlessly elusive sense of completion, integration and resolution embodied in those myths of the Old West. Their elusive quest for wholeness, in turn, enacts and represents the ways in which mythologies of the Old West lead to traumatic re-enactments of past violence and loss in the contemporary West. I argue that McCarthy has an uneasy and complex relationship with myth in that he understands how the yearning for a mythic past that never existed both distorts that past and also drives those seduced by such myths into destructive cycles of action. At the same time, he has chosen to write a series of Westerns that do more than merely debunk the myth of the Old West. These novels, I argue, reveal the culture’s captivation with that myth, a captivation that the novels both recognise and also, at times, share. The narratives of frontier and pioneer heroism that comprise the myth of the Old West coalesce within the collective memory of McCarthy’s post-frontier Westerns. These narratives inform the actions of characters in these Western novels who long to live out their lives as if they were those mythic narratives of the Old West. This thesis argues that, at the
same time as wishing to live out these lives in contemporary versions of Old West heroism, McCarthy’s cowboy figures experience the memory of the mythic Old West as a form of loss, a myth that can never be brought back but must nevertheless be sought at great cost in the form of the quest. I explore the interaction between the myth of the Old West and trauma in these novels in relation to the mythic quest, mythic masculinity and myths of national identity. A study of these McCarthy novels also allows me to explore the complex relationship between the mythology of the Old West, the trauma of American history, contemporary cowboy masculinity and American national identity post-Vietnam and post-9/11.

McCarthy and the Myth of the Old West

If the myth of the Old West is expressed and explored in these McCarthy novels as a contemporary cultural wound that cannot be resolved or healed, then an understanding of this cultural wound requires a wider evaluation of the frontier as both a historic place and a place of mythic heroism. The myth of the frontier may broadly be traced back to the middle of the nineteenth century when, in 1845, a journalist John L. O’Sullivan coined the term ‘Manifest Destiny’ as a means of expressing the right of the people and government of the United States ‘to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions’. The term became a totemic label for white expansionism across the American continent sanctioned by God and fate. The myth of the frontier as developed in this doctrine of Manifest Destiny and expanded in Frederick Jackson Turner’s thesis on ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History’ (1893), celebrated the freedom of the

individual to explore, tame and civilise the western wilderness. The frontier experience, according to Turner, shaped the archetypal male American character – rugged, individualistic, courageous and essentially white. Turner mythologized the white settler facing an environment that ‘is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish.’ However, ‘little by little he transforms the wilderness’, and from this struggle there emerges ‘a new product that is American’. Turner, therefore, sees the frontier as ‘the meeting point between savagery and civilization’ where ‘that dominant individualism’ of the white male American is forged. He sees the fundamental source of American identity manifested in ‘this expansion westward [...] its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society’, which ‘furnish the forces dominating American character’. Turner established the philosophical framework for this creation and perpetuation of American identity wrought out of singular physical courage and individualism. He established the creed through which ‘the ideals of the pioneer in his log cabin shall enlarge into the spiritual life of a democracy’, and envisaged the frontier as ‘the line of most rapid Americanization’.

The idea of the frontier, however, even at its inception with Turner’s thesis, was qualified by a sense of pessimism and loss. At the very moment when the indomitable American character was being defined for the first time in its most essential sense in terms

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5 Ibid., 33, 34.
6 Ibid., 32, 59.
7 Ibid., 32.
8 Ibid., 33. See also Richard Slotkin Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier 1600-1860 (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 268-368, for the development of the myth of the frontiersman generated, in particular, by the life and adventures of Daniel Boone. See also Turner, ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History’, 44.
that spoke of individual freedom and destiny pitted against landscape and savagery, Turner was declaring that ‘the frontier has gone’. The very westward sweep of discovery and settlement that established the frontier spirit had simultaneously exhausted the geographical possibilities of further expansion. Therefore, even at the point of its invention, the spirit of the frontier was undermined by the uncertainty associated with physical boundaries. In order to perpetuate the spirit of the frontier there had to be the creation of a psychological or mythical equivalent to the physical settlement westward. It is in response to what Stephen McVeigh has termed as the ‘rapid and traumatic change’ that characterised the closing decades of the nineteenth century that the West came to embody a nostalgic longing for a simpler, more virtuous and heroic way of life. McVeigh writes:

A number of men took the frontier as the embodiment of all that was good about America, presenting it as a place of tradition, inspiration and heroism, the arena in which the American character was forged in the past, and the repository of these values which could heal America’s ills in the present.

One of these men was William F. Cody or Buffalo Bill whose Wild West Show, drawn loosely from his own exploits as a frontier scout and Indian fighter, celebrated a West that had already disappeared but could now be re-experienced as an imaginary, even fantasised, space of heroic pioneer virtue. McVeigh notes how ‘even in its heyday, the Wild West Show was celebrating something already lost and replacing it with myth.’ Similarly, Richard Slotkin writes:

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11 Ibid.
12 Ibid., 34.
If the Wild West was a “place” rather than a “show,” then its landscape was a mythic space, in which past and present, fiction and reality could co-exist; a space in which history, translated into myth, was re-enacted as ritual.\textsuperscript{13}

It was in such creations as the Wild West Show, therefore, that the myth of the American West took hold of the American imagination at the very moment when the frontier as a geographical and physical space became exhausted. McVeigh notes how Cody’s show furthermore was responsible for establishing the cowboy as ‘the symbol of the character of the American West, a symbol that would resonate throughout the twentieth century’.\textsuperscript{14} Dee Garceau also writes:

As open-range herding faded, the nomadic cowboy took root in the American imagination. By the first decade of the twentieth century, the cowboy myth had been popularized in mass culture through Erastus Beadle’s dime novels, travelling Wild West shows, and best-selling novels like \textit{The Virginian}. Formerly a marginal worker, the cowboy was elevated to a masculine ideal in popular culture […]. The mythic cowboy became a cultural icon who symbolized honor, physical prowess and rugged individualism.\textsuperscript{15}

In reality, however, cowboys were far from noble and heroic individuals and were, as Garceau notes, of ‘marginal status’, and, as ‘transient’ workers, they ‘lacked the civilizing


\textsuperscript{14} McVeigh, \textit{The American Western}, 34. Original emphasis. See also 13-21, for the ways in which Theodore Roosevelt promoted further the myth of the virtuous, honourable and heroic cowboy. .

\textsuperscript{15} Dee Garceau, ‘Nomads, Bunkies, Cross-Dressers and Family Men: Cowboy Identity and the Gendering of Ranch Work’ in Matthew Basso, Laura McCall and Dee Garceau (eds.), \textit{Across the Great Divide: Cultures of Manhood in the American West} (New York: Routledge, 2001), 149-168, 152.
influences of women’ and were ‘vulnerable to social and moral degradation’. Similarly, McVeigh reveals, cowboys were, in reality, ‘generally considered less than wholesome figures, at best foul-mouthed, drunken delinquents, at worst, criminals capable of any amount of violent excess.’ The myth of the open range and the Old West was always founded on an illusion divorced from the often squalid and morally bankrupt reality of cowboy life.

Cody’s Wild West Show, therefore, exemplified the ways in which American culture absorbed the myth of the Old West and the cowboy into its essential understanding of that frontier history as a site of mythic white heroic virtue. David Hamilton Murdoch describes the transformation of the Old West into a mythic domain as a ‘trick’ devised ‘to change the West into a timeless world on which images of the present could be endlessly reimposed’. Murdoch examines the frontier as an immortal concept and presents the West as a place that was never lost, ‘because the spirit of the frontier was embedded in the American personality forever’. This spirit of the West and American ‘character’, evoked in the mythic memory of the white American cowboy, can thus be passed on from generation to generation and can be culturally accessed most particularly during times of national or social crisis. The generic Western as developed in literature and film has embodied these frontier cowboy characteristics and established them as an essential foundation for an archetype of heroic white American masculinity.

The frontier, therefore, has always been a concept open to question and uncertainty, even from the moment of Turner’s thesis. And yet, because it has always been as much a

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16 Ibid., 153, 154.
17 McVeigh, The American Western, 33-34.
19 Murdoch, The American West: The Invention of a Myth, 79.
mythological as a historical place, it has constantly been revised and regenerated at different times in American history. Just as the frontier was physically exhausted at the time of Turner’s thesis and had to be revived and regenerated perpetually as a mythical concept, the question of whether a similar sense of exhaustion is endemic to the myth of the Old West and its cowboys has perpetually confronted the white male American psyche. These myths are attractive to the white American male as they feed illusions of heroism, virtue, superiority and entitlement to conquest over environment and indigenous peoples. At the same time, such mythic legacy carries with it delusions of grandeur and, particularly in McCarthy’s novels, a sense of loss. Murdoch describes the trans-historical power of this legacy in terms of:

A mythic image of the West whose essence was somehow genetically transmitted.

Once adopted, that notion meant that the story of the West moved out of history and the West became a timeless world.21

This notion that the cowboy and frontier attributes of courage, resilience and dynamism are a matter of genetic inheritance handed down from generation to generation and secured as a natural component of the American character, is one that remains extremely compelling to white American men. In McCarthy’s novels, however, what is handed down from generation to generation in the white contemporary cowboy culture is a sense of loss, a sense that the myth that once upheld all those frontier virtues can only be retrieved through a quest or an act of outstanding courage or endeavour. I explore in Chapter One how these failed heroic endeavours include Billy Parham’s attempt to take the wolf back to the wilderness and his other quests into Mexico; in Chapter Two how they manifest themselves in John Grady Cole’s heroic lost causes; and in Chapter Three how they become the impetus behind Sheriff Bell’s attempt to track down and kill Chigurh, and the father’s attempt to make it to the shore.

21 Murdoch, The American West: The Invention of a Myth, 80.
with his son in a ruined world of the future. All of these quests and endeavours are attempts to restore a sense of something lost or something missing that pervades all the novels from the outset. Underlying this sense of loss or absence is the vanished myth of the Old West and all that it stood for in terms of an idealised white cowboy virtue and heroism. McCarthy’s characters are always engaged in quests and endeavours that are imbued with failure because what they are trying to retrieve never existed in the first place, namely the mythic frontier country of heroic cowboy manhood.

An underlying premise of this thesis – that McCarthy’s cowboys experience the mythic frontier as a country of loss that they try to retrieve in a cycle of perpetuating and ever-increasing trauma – requires further underpinning in terms of what exactly is understood by the term ‘myth’ in relation to the American West. Henry Nash Smith’s 1950 publication of Virgin Land is a landmark work in establishing the West in terms of ‘myth-and-symbol’, an interpretation of the West as a timeless evocation of images that reflect what was then considered to be the dominant representation of American culture and nationality.22 This mythic interpretation of the American West evokes a prevailing narrative of how white European settlers and pioneers created a national identity through the exploration and conquering of a continent. The myth-and-symbol evocation of the West dominated American cultural discourse until the mid-1970s, when this vision of the American West which was, in effect, a perpetuation of the mythic narrative established by Turner’s frontier thesis and the tenets of Manifest Destiny, began to be re-evaluated.

Smith himself revisits his myth-and-symbol thesis in his 1986 essay ‘Symbol and Idea in Virgin Land’, where he addresses the ways in which his earlier work both posits a consensual view of a history of the West that might be fallacious, and also one that ‘avoids

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dealing with conflicts that are ideological in the political sense’. Sacvan Bercovitch similarly attacks this false ‘consensus history’ that accompanies the myth-and-symbol vision of the past, on the grounds that it ‘has often served, rhetorically, as a defence against the facts of pluralism and conflict’. Both Bercovitch and Smith here challenge those myth-and-symbol versions of history that evoke a false image of the past and avoid engagement with any history of the West that challenges a coherent and essential American frontier identity. Smith admits, not only that in Virgin Land he ‘lost the capacity for facing up to the tragic dimensions of the Westward Movement’, but also that his earlier work ‘suffers to some extent from Turner’s tunnel vision’.

Slotkin takes Smith’s revisionism further in his exploration of the dangerous ways in which myth comes to represent some unsubstantiated legendary moment in the past that now resides as an incontrovertible cultural ‘truth’ in the present. He writes:

Mythological statements always represent the ideology of the moment as if it were the embodiment of divine or natural law, or the reflection of a tradition so ancient that its origins are beyond historical ken [...]. The antidote to mythological thinking – or part of the antidote – may lie in rehistoricizing the myth.

Slotkin’s view of myth is closely associated with the post-structuralist ideas exemplified by Roland Barthes which claim that myth ‘transforms history into nature’, that myth constructs a

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particular view of the world through a rhetorical practice that is inculcated within a culture as ideology. Slotkin claims:

A myth makes a single metaphor out of a large swath of history, and its implications therefore invoke the authority of the dominant ideology, the givens that shape cultural and political discourse.

For Slotkin and Barthes ‘myth deprives the object of which it speaks of all History. In it, history evaporates.’ Myth thus transforms history into a universal and mechanically-accepted narrative that is ideologically bound-up with the dominant power structures of the culture. For example, Slotkin reveals how Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show transforms the disastrous U.S. cavalry defeat at Little Big Horn into what was in actuality a minor victory at San Juan Hill, and in the process endows that victory with a mythic power that validates further expansion of the U.S. empire overseas:

This substitution of an imperial triumph carried off in “Wild West” style, for a ritual re-enactment of the catastrophe that symbolized the end of the old frontier, completes the Wild West’s evolution from a memorialisation of the past to a celebration of the imperial future.

The way in which ideology and myth overlap in post-structural discourse is an important element in evaluating McCarthy’s interrogation of myth. According to Slotkin, myth makes ‘an implicit demand that we make of the story a guide to perception and behaviour’ and it insists ‘that we acknowledge and affirm the social and political doctrines

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that its terms imply’. 31 In Chapters One and Two I argue that McCarthy’s cowboys are unaware of the demands made upon them by the allure of a myth that has indoctrinated the culture, are unaware of the sociological and ideological constructions that generate their yearning for the Old West. Driven and blinded by desires for a lost country that represents everything in their lives that is either missing or is being taken from them, they seem equally unaware that such a country never existed in the first place. Furthermore, in Chapter Three I explore how McCarthy interrogates, not just individual cowboy obsessions with myth but also the American national enslavement to the myth of the Old West, particularly in times of crisis.

An understanding of the ideological basis of the cowboy myth also further substantiates the associations I make throughout this thesis between myth, loss and trauma. In John Grady’s consternation as to ‘what happens to country’ lies a sense of loss, even bereavement, for a way of life that never really existed. The fact that he ‘does not know’ what has happened to his ‘country’ reinforces his innocent blindness to the cultural manipulation inherent in the mythic implications of that concept. He is oblivious to the extent to which that one word ‘country’ resonates within his culture with a mythic register of meaning that is ideologically freighted with a range of longed-for, but now lost, values and status. McCarthy’s cowboys are either broken men who feel permanently excluded from a ‘country’ that was once their rightful and heroic domain, or they are questing heroic characters like John Grady who are desperately trying to get back to a place that never existed. Because they are unaware of the culturally and socially-embedded nature of their mythic yearning, unaware of the ways in which myth has insinuated itself into the very core of their behaviour and expectations, they are always going to experience the failure of that myth in the form of a profoundly unexpected and shattering shock or trauma. That ‘country’, in its mythic form

31 Slotkin, Ideology and Classic American Literature, 84.
proceeding from Turner, Manifest Destiny and Cody’s Wild West onwards, was never available to them and never available to anyone. The reaching for that country through the quest can only end in failure, can only lead to further trauma because the country never did exist and never will. Furthermore, the power of the myth resides in its insistence within the cowboy culture that it is an antidote to the loss of the contemporary cowboy’s sense of value and purpose in post-war America. It is also experienced by those cowboys as an absence of ‘country’ that needs to be restored. McCarthy’s novels, therefore, explore how the myth of the Old West is powerfully permeated within the cowboy culture because it is predicated on repeated loss rather than retrieval and redemption. They interrogate the way the myth of the Old West generates itself through and from the experience of trauma. It is an interrogation that peels back the imperative written into the myth – an imperative that demands that individuals and the nation seek to resolve the absence that cannot be resolved and in ways that only generate further loss and trauma.

McCarthy’s novels engage with the myth of the Old West generated from what has become an ideological conceptualisation of national identity and history – that of the white heroic frontier American male. At the same time, as Neil Campbell comments, this version of history and identity derives from ‘an essentialist position in which everything looks back to a point at which the identity was formed and whole, but which has subsequently been altered and corrupted’. The New Western historians revisit the narrative myths of the Old West that rely on those ‘essentialist positions’ and deconstruct them and enforce a reworking of history. This reconstruction of Western myths involves the reworking of what may have been established as ‘mythic history’, involving ‘the subaltern voices’ of the past that were

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originally excluded from the grand narrative of the white frontier myth. Patricia Nelson Limerick in her plea for ‘a rendezvous theory’ of the West raises the issue of competing narratives that challenge and ultimately absorb the monolithic and unyielding white frontier perspective. These New Western perspectives emphasise the extent to which the essentialist white cowboy identity is a mythic construction based on an imaginary idealised heroism. Turner’s view of historical progress, his vision of the United States lying ‘like a huge page in the history of society [...] line by line the record of social evolution’, is essential to the myth of the Old West as a story of unaltering white colonial triumph and vindication of American exceptionalism. The New Western historians, by contrast, offer alternative qualifying perspectives of failure, exploitation, loss and destruction.

The imagined West, founded on Turner and Manifest Destiny and embedded as a given ideology that is taken for granted within the culture, abides as an asocial, ahistorical, idealised, depoliticized and mythic space in the Barthesian sense discussed earlier. New Western history and criticism, on the other hand, is a project that sets about, to use Slotkin’s phrase, ‘re-historicizing the myth’, providing a new historical and geographical context that challenges and ultimately demystifies the Old West narrative. For example, Edward Soja evaluates the West as ‘thirdspace’, a challenge to the mythic binary structures of ‘savagery/civilization’, ‘them/us’, and ‘an invitation to enter a space of extraordinary openness, a place of critical exchange where the geographical imagination can be expanded to encompass a multiplicity of perspectives’. Annette Kolodny exemplifies this devotion to

33 Ibid., 14, 13.
‘multiplicity of perspectives’ and the dissolving of binary concepts, in her contention that ‘both geography and chronology must be viewed as fluid and ongoing’. Susan Kollin demands that ‘we understand the region not as a closed or bounded space but as a continually changing and evolving entity in both content and form’. Campbell conceives of this continuous change and cultural flux as a ‘rhizomatic West’ of divergent and diverging communities which calls for ‘a radical language through which to express some of the New West’s multiple identities and its endless capacity to develop and change through the processes of interaction and relation’. This ‘radical language’ and geographical, historical and ideological fluidity can be found in works that open up multiple ethnic and spatial boundaries and reposition the West and the South-West in a range of political and cultural transformations – works, for instance, such as Gloria Anzaldúa’s Chicano feminist and bilingual text *Borderlands/La Frontera*. New Western criticism such as Campbell’s and destabilizing literature such as Anzaldúa’s, therefore, reflect a discourse that moves away from the exhausted mythology of the Old West and resonates with Slotkin’s imperative to find new mythic forms to represent a changing, but simultaneously timeless, cultural experience:


A new myth will have to respond to the demographic transformation of the United States and speak to and for a polyglot nationality. Historical memory will have to be revised, not to invent an imaginary role for supposedly marginal minorities, but to register the fact that our history in the West and in the East, was shaped from the beginning by the meeting, conversation, and mutual adaptation of different cultures.\textsuperscript{41}

However, when John Grady’s father claims that ‘we’re like the Comanche was two hundred years ago. We don’t know what’s goin to show up here come daylight. We don’t even know what color they’ll be’, he re-establishes the reactionary response to the cross-pollinization and shifting political and cultural ground in the rapidly changing New West. He connects with the Comanche only to re-constitute the binary certainties of the old myth – those certainties that rely on ethnic separation. The only way he can understand the Comanche is in terms of mutual dispossession of land and their usurpation by a race that had a different colour of skin. McCarthy’s texts position the dispossessed cowboy as reaching for an exhausted myth in the contemporary West – a world in which that myth is no longer viable and is here re-validated in terms of anachronistic and racist positions.

One another example of the reconstruction of the West as a hybrid and inter-communal space that resonates with the idea of lost ‘country’ in McCarthy’s texts is found in the dialogue between humanity and landscape analyzed within New Western ecocriticism. To this end Donald Worster insists that historical revision of the West must reformulate the region and its landscape as a ‘place of rapid change, repeated dislocation, and surreal discontinuities, a place in which time has often seemed to break completely apart’.\textsuperscript{42} Other critics, such as John Beck, see the ‘discontinuities’ and ‘dislocation’ of the West in terms of geopolitical exhaustion and the waging of continuous war. Beck sees this region as ‘the

\textsuperscript{41} Slotkin, \textit{Gunfighter Nation}, 655.
nuclear West’, a world of dismantled and marginalised racial and social groups fractured by relentless government appropriation of land for defence bases and technological detritus, ‘a West that has become, metaphorically and literally, the arsenal, proving ground, and disposal site for America military-industrial power’. 43 Within this power-structure in which he finds himself to be one of the dispossessed and diminished victims, the contemporary cowboy, according to Beck, is marginalised but reclaimed as an anachronistic totem from the past and re-appropriated as a hollowed-out national mythic prototype. This mythic tokenism acts as a ‘symbolic compensation’ within the cultural matrix for the cowboy’s fragmented and itinerant existence. Beck sees this relationship between exhausted mythology and exhausted lives as pertinent to McCarthy’s fiction:

Under these circumstances, the wasted lives of The Border Trilogy’s protagonists are the human analog of the wasteland that is appropriated and sacrificed in order to preserve national security: they are outside and yet also belonging to the symbolic order, the externalised waste product that confirms the productivity of the inside. 44

The multi-faceted constructions and fragmentations of the New West all seem to move towards the exclusion and dissipation of those cowboy figures McCarthy characterises as understandably lost and confused as to what is happening to their ‘country’. 45 The more isolated and alienated they feel, the more they are faced with their own wasted existence, the more seductive seems the lost myth of the Old West which will endow their lives with meaning. The changing physical, cultural and mythical landscape of the West renders their associations with that myth more and more problematic. As the West becomes a place of...

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43 John Beck, Dirty Wars: Landscape, Power and Waste in Western American Literature (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 4.
44 Ibid., 139.
45 See also Krista Comer, ‘New West, Urban and Suburban Spaces, Postwest’, in Nicolas S. Witschi (ed.), A Companion to The Literature and Culture of the American West (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 244-260 for a reading of ‘country’ and ‘the changed space of the West’ in All the Pretty Horses, 256.
increasing flux, movement and dispossession, the mythic heroic cowboy past can only be experienced as a ‘country’ increasingly remote, a ‘country’ that registers only as an absence that must, but at the same time cannot, be resolved.

McCarthy’s novels, therefore, interrogate this ‘essentialist’ mythic frontier identity in the post-World War II West where the reduced and marginalised lives of contemporary cowboys are haunted by a metaphysical absence exacerbated by the loss of their land and status. The ‘country’ for which they mourn never existed. They are unwitting products of a culture that has been indoctrinated into believing it did exist. And, furthermore, the cowboy’s sense of identity associated with the ‘country’ of the West is collapsing in the contemporary exhaustion and rupture of land and territory. As John Grady’s father indicates, the cowboys of The Border Trilogy, the border lawmen of No Country for Old Men, and the pioneer/cowboy father of the future depicted in The Road, are as beleaguered and unsettled by developments in the contemporary world as were the native Indians of the nineteenth century frontier. Rather than simply perpetuate the myth of this marginalised white cowboy identity that looks backwards towards a mythic, lost frontier that never existed – yet is nevertheless all the more seductive and all the more illusory because of the reduced circumstances in which the cowboy figure now finds himself – McCarthy’s novels examine and critique that identity through narratives of trauma and failure. They address the ways in which the white contemporary cowboy figure reacts to the New West by turning his back on it and reaching for a lost myth that he thinks he can retrieve through a heroic quest or action. The texts thus speak to a contemporary evaluation of the cowboy in American culture that depends on those past illusions and feels their loss as a wound that cannot be healed. Campbell refers to more transitional and inclusive visions of the West as:
The relational West [...] the New West which is not exclusive but problematic and multiple, putting back the richness of its history rather than the one dimensionality of myth.46

But McCarthy’s novels unravel a culture traumatised by the loss of the Old West, a culture that turns its back on this New, ‘relational’, West and seeks a return to a past that never existed in a perpetual cycle of further failure and trauma. I investigate McCarthy’s interrogation of the Old West ‘certainties’ in the context of the shifting perspectives of the New West in which the contemporary cowboy has to keep reaching back into the past for those certainties, a past that is experienced in terms of an unregenerate timeless wound because that past never existed except in myth. I argue that the dependence on the lost myth of the Old West evinced by the alienated white cowboys of the New West is enacted in McCarthy’s work as a form of quest-seeking trauma that proceeds from loss and moves forward into a future of further loss in its failed attempt to retrieve those illusions of the past.

I explore how McCarthy presents this beleaguered cowboy masculinity ranging across different eras, from the beginning of World War II in The Crossing through to the ‘cowboy’ of the future in The Road. McCarthy reveals, through this representation of cowboy masculinity across contemporary history, both the trans-historical nature of the myth of the Old West and also how that myth resonates throughout contemporary American culture in cyclically destructive ways. The ways in which these contemporary cowboys look back on the mythic Old West also reveal how the Old West has a resonance that goes beyond the failing cowboy culture of the border territories. McCarthy’s evocation of the mythic Old West allows him to move across history, and yet these novels also are saying significant things about the time and place in which they are written. A study of these novels allows me to investigate American culture and politics in the late twentieth and early twenty first

46 Campbell, The Cultures of the American New West, 22-23.
centuries, from the post-Reagan America of 1992 when McCarthy published All the Pretty Horses, through to the publication of The Road in 2006 and the period associated with the post-9/11 War on Terror.

McCarthy’s novels interrogate, for example, the resurrection of the myth of the Old West that has been a particular feature of Republican Administrations since 1980. One of the main preoccupations of Ronald Reagan, for example, was to redeem the legacy of failure in the Vietnam War through an insistence on the ethos of the frontier and its enduring relevance to the identity and vitality of the American nation. Susan Jeffords recognises ‘Reagan values as reactionary, harking back to an earlier era in which the U.S. could effectively play the world’s cowboy hero [...] always winning in the end’. The enduring power of the frontier myth with the American people was indicated by Reagan’s election to the White House after a campaign in which he glorified himself in the ‘Bedtime for Brezhnev’ poster depicting him dressed as a cowboy holding a six-gun on the trembling Soviet leader. Slotkin claims this example illustrated the source of Reagan’s enduring appeal to the American electorate as he regularly, in this way, ‘transformed the most ridiculous of pop-culture formulas [...] into recipes for renewal of the American myth’. I explore how these McCarthy novels speak to that resurrection of the Western myth in the Reagan era and more generally address how the myth of the Old West has constantly been regenerated and evoked whenever the nation has faced a challenge. The resurgence of the frontier myth in the face of a lethal and demonised adversary typifies the resilience of that myth and its adaptability to changing times. As McVeigh writes, ‘America [...] is a nation that understands the world and its place in it in adversarial terms: it understands its values by defining and testing them against an “other”’. 

49 McVeigh, The American Western, 213.
Those ‘values’ are embodied in the frontier myth and the themes thereafter explored in the traditional Western. More recently another Republican President, George W. Bush, declared after the attacks of 9/11, ‘We are a country awakened to danger [...] we have found our mission and our moment.’\(^{50}\) The events of 9/11 had, according to McVeigh, ‘provided the enemy America so needed’, and Bush could position himself as the ‘heroic leader of a Western posse’ in the War on Terror.\(^{51}\) In his speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention at Salt Lake City in August 2005, Bush, referring to the threat facing America post-9/11, made an implied comparison between Islamic terrorism and the native Indians who faced the pioneers on their journey westward: ‘Our enemies are not organized into battalions, or commanded by governments. They hide in shadowy networks and retreat after they strike.’\(^{52}\) McVeigh suggests that Bush’s evocation of a frontier enemy to describe Al-Qaeda was not just for the purposes of heroic nostalgia:

In his evocation of the Turnerian paradigm of savagery versus civilization as a means of comprehending the nature of 9/11, Bush is effectively projecting American values, such as democracy and freedom, onto the rest of the world.\(^{53}\)

Throughout the last thirty years, therefore, the myth of the Old West has been evoked by American Presidents to re-unite the nation in the face of crisis and defeat. With this national rhetoric of frontier heroism as a backdrop, McCarthy addresses, from *The Border Trilogy* onwards, how the loss of that mythic country of the Old West is experienced by the marginalised cowboys of the New West as an unresolved trauma. McCarthy’s novels offer, in a period when the heroic Old West undergoes frequent revivification in the national and political arena, a different portrayal of the attempt or the yearning to recover that lost world,

\(^{50}\) Cited in McVeigh, *The American Western*, 216.
\(^{53}\) McVeigh, *The American Western*, 218.
an attempt that ends in failure and further trauma for these cowboys of the New West.

McCarthy’s characters, from The Border Trilogy through to The Road reach back to a similar reactionary mythic moment in order to recapture a lost heroic past, but their endeavours are always overshadowed with failure. McCarthy’s novels thus address the revival of the myth of the Old West in post-Vietnam and post-9/11 politics, and demonstrate how that revival can be reconsidered through the perspective of trauma and failure instead of revamped frontier triumphalism.

McCarthy’s preoccupation with the mythology of the Old West has been acknowledged by a number of critics but none of them have addressed directly the repetitive sense of loss and failure in these novels associated with that myth. Some critics have discussed how McCarthy resurrects the myth of the Old West to recognise its continuing power, but at the same time to reveal its potent and dangerous capacity to delude those who go in search of that myth in the contemporary world. Barcley Owens recognises that ‘McCarthy is retelling the same classic myth’ that represents ‘the American wanderlust for adventure, the whole westering manifesto’.54 However, he tempers this interpretation of the novels as a ‘manifesto’ for the Old West with the claim that McCarthy may resurrect this myth only to reveal its illusory nature and that ‘the hard lessons of McCarthy’s westerns teach us that the green hopes of youthful dreams [...] are fanciful chimeras’.55 Similarly, Mark Busby claims that McCarthy’s purpose is to ‘examine the sharp division between the frontier myth that lives inside and the diminished outside world fraught with complexity, suffering and violence’.56 Jay Ellis likewise speaks of ‘myths of orders insupportable on a

54 Barcley Owens, Cormac McCarthy’s Western Novels (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2000), 84, 116.
55 Ibid.
human level of reality’ in McCarthy’s works. Ellis also addresses the disintegration of the myth of the Old West in the face of other cultural and historical voices and explains how this adds to the sense of loss, deracination and alienation felt by McCarthy’s characters. He claims that McCarthy’s work hinges on a paradox that embodies ‘both the myth of flight into frontier and its dissolution into the realities of history’. These critics place McCarthy’s protagonists in conflict with the modern world as isolated individuals locked in a failed attempt to recapture a lost world and the heroism and freedom associated with it. However, they fail to acknowledge or explain how and why that failure is revisited over and over in these novels from All the Pretty Horses onwards.

Some critics such as Susan Kollin recognise McCarthy’s revision and subversion of the Western myth, but also point towards his development of ‘the anti-Western [...] an unstable and shifting form that engages in a critical dialogue with the genre but that is also shaped by a certain desire for and attraction to the classic features of the Western’. John Cant claims that McCarthy, in the process of this critique of the Western myth, uses ‘the language and imagery of a particular mythology in order to create his own counter-myth’, and that, although McCarthy subverts the traditional myth of the Old West, this ‘recreation of myth [...] reflects an acknowledgement of the inescapability, indeed necessity, of myth as a foundational element of any cultural matrix’. Cant and Kollin, therefore, suggest that although McCarthy represents the myth of the Old West in an exhausted form, at the same time he is aware that the Old West narrative still has a cultural significance that generates an

58 Ibid., 37.
anti-myth or counter-myth in response to this exhaustion. Kollin’s ‘dialogue with the genre’ to create an ‘anti-Western’ and Cant’s ‘counter-myth’ suggest, along with Owens, Busby, and Ellis, that McCarthy’s uneasy negotiation with the Old West of the past is both a resurrection and subversion of that myth. But Kollin and the others also suggest that McCarthy is reaching for a different form of myth to take its place.

Kollin and Cant cover the ways in which McCarthy revises and subverts the myth of the Old West. They indicate how McCarthy is doing more than debunk this myth – that he is also recognising the ways in which myth is a necessary component of this cowboy culture, and that he is attempting to generate, out of his deconstruction of the exhausted cowboy myth, a new kind of mythic form. These critics, in their assessment of McCarthy both as revisionist of old Western myth and as explorer of new ways in which myth may emerge in a contemporary cowboy setting, offer an important contribution to my argument. However, they remain inexplicit as to how this new myth manifests itself in McCarthy’s work, and they rely on indeterminate expressions such as the creation of ‘anti-myth’ or ‘counter myth’ or ‘desire to move beyond’ old myths. I argue that what McCarthy is doing in these novels, is not so much creating new myth, but revealing, through failure and defeat, how a certain type of cowboy myth works, and how the exhausted myth of the Old West, in its evocations of defeat and failure, generates a further mythic cycle emerging from that defeat and failure. I investigate how the dynamic in McCarthy’s fiction between the yearning for the Old West and the negotiated movement beyond into the world of the contemporary West generates a continuing mythic cycle that can only be understood through the interaction between this exhausted myth and trauma.

Although recognising McCarthy’s incessant circling and contemplating of exhausted mythic territory, critics fail to ask, never mind answer, awkward questions regarding McCarthy’s presentation of the myths of the Old West. Why does McCarthy choose to ‘retell
the same classic myth’ over and over again in his Western novels? Why does McCarthy perpetually set up this mythology for subversion while at the same time acknowledging its power, or attempting to gesture towards a new kind of myth to replace the old? Why does the never-ending quest for that mythology frame the narrative over and over and again in McCarthy’s work? Critics have not fully addressed these questions, or have settled for an acknowledgement of their existence without digging deeper as to why McCarthy is perpetually preoccupied with the loss of the Old West and the failure to retrieve it in some way. I argue that McCarthy re-enacts the quest for the lost myths of the Old West in repeated cycles of narrative because the loss of those myths is experienced in the cowboy culture, and beyond in the culture of the nation, as a continuing trauma that cannot be resolved and yet cannot be forgotten or given up.

I approach the investigation of trauma in McCarthy’s work through an exploration of how a pervading sense of absence or void haunts McCarthy’s Western novels from the outset. I argue that this absence or sense of loss that exists from the beginning of each of these novels is associated with the traumatic loss of the mythic Old West that cannot be retrieved. The attempt to resolve that loss or absence sets in motion the narrative or quest or searching for redress or restoration that, in turn, sets up the cyclic failure and defeat that leads to further failure and trauma. The sense of loss or absence that exists at the heart of these novels from the outset can be found, for example, in the descriptions of father and son at the beginning of All the Pretty Horses. John Grady Cole and his father are riding out for ‘a last time’ over the range which John Grady’s mother is about to sell off.61 John Grady’s father is described as:

Looking over the country with those sunken eyes as if the world out there had been

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61 McCarthy, All the Pretty Horses, 22.
altered [...]. As if he might never see it right again. Or worse did see it right at last. See it as it had always been, would forever be."62

The father’s vision here is that ‘the world’ configured around his vision of ‘the country’, when seen ‘right’ delivers a sense of defeat that stretches back into the eternal past as ‘it had always been’ and forward into the eternal ‘forever’ of an equally bereft future. The ‘country’ he is ‘looking over’ is one that is already and ‘had always been’ lost to him. John Grady is described thus:

The boy who rode on slightly before him sat a horse not only as if he’d been born to it which he was but as if were he begot by malice or mischance into some queer land where horses never were he would have found them anyway. Would have known that there was something missing for the world to be right or he right in it and would have set forth to wander wherever it was needed for as long as it took until he came upon one and he would have known that that was what he sought and it would have been.63

Coming at the beginning of the first of the five novels I will be exploring, this passage reveals how McCarthy establishes his cowboy world as one that circles around loss in the past and the probabilities of further loss in the future. McCarthy posits here the possibility of John Grady’s horses disappearing and the effect that this would have on him, how he would then know ‘that something was missing for the world to be right and he right in it’. McCarthy also suggests that such knowledge would lead to John Grady’s endless search for this ‘something missing’, the lost horses, ‘until he came upon one’. The language McCarthy uses here is the language of the quest, how John Grady ‘would have set forth to wander wherever it was needed for as long as it took’ to find the ‘something missing’. The language of loss, the

62 Ibid., 23.
63 Ibid.
suggestion that the world is imbued with absences that need to be recovered in the process of a quest that may last forever, the sense that the future may be bound up with unending journeys of attempted recovery, or alternatively a sense of eternal despair, all haunt these early descriptions of father and son. The language of ‘would have set forth to wander’ stretches forward into a future conditional perfect tense, a sort of temporal limbo of conditional modalities conjured by the repetition of the subjunctive ‘would’. It is a future world already defined by the possibility of loss and failure to find something configured as ‘missing’. Also the odd use of the tense embodied in ‘would have set forth to wander’ – a future anterior tense, suggests the projection into the future of ‘something missing’ already registered in the past. There is no reassurance here that such a horse would be found, the main emphasis being loaded on ‘that was what he sought’ and the seeking to retrieve the ‘something missing in the world’ and the quest that ‘would’ follow from that. This passage suggests a world hovering between the lost country of past and present that the father experiences as a form of loss and an uncertain future associated with notions of his son’s quest for the ‘something missing’ that would put that lost world right.

The sense of absence in McCarthy’s work, of ‘something missing’, has been noted by other critics who often equate it with the novels’ melancholy moods. Gail Moore Morrison has noted how McCarthy’s fiction is ‘permeated with a sense of loss, alienation, deracination and fragmentation’. 64 Georg Guillermin has commented on the ‘homogenous narrative voice that grounds the novels in a profound melancholia’ which is ‘insistent in its grief over a loss that can neither be remembered nor forgotten […] steeping the text in sadness from its inception’. 65 Guillermin further writes:

65 Georg Guillermin, “As of Some Site Where Life Had Not Succeeded”: Sorrow, Allegory and Pastoralism in Cormac McCarthy’s Border Trilogy’, in E. Arnold and D. Luce (eds.), A
Despite the melodramatic hardships on the plot level [...] there is reason to believe that the melancholia felt by the protagonists actually precedes these hardships and is actually conducive to their occurrence through a sense of premonition, like a self-fulfilling prophecy.\(^{66}\)

Like Guillermin, Stephen Tatum acknowledges the existence of a sense of mourning or absence that haunts the narrative ahead of the specific losses that the protagonists suffer as the plot unfolds:

As a result of a felt absence in the world and human existence – figuratively rendered in the novels as the death of a relative or the dissolution of the family unit – the typical McCarthy protagonist is a social outcast or a nomadic exile hoping to find that ‘something missing for the world to be right’ [...]. McCarthy portrays various quests to find this desired resonance with the natural and human worlds as processual journeys to find a lost child or a missing brother; to recover a stolen or lost horse; to rescue a whore from her pimp; or to return a wolf to her Mexico home range. McCarthy’s ‘one’ tale, then, braids together the themes of loss and exile, of inevitable social conflict and resultant human alienation, with the abiding theme of the journey or quest for an enlightened existence in, to cite a key word in All the Pretty Horses, one’s true ‘country’.\(^{67}\)

Tatum associates the sense of absence with an actual event, such as bereavement, but even then he concedes this as a ‘figurative rendering’. The overriding implication here is that McCarthy’s characters would feel alienated anyway and would be compelled to find their ‘true country’ even without an actual loss or bereavement providing the impetus. Tatum

\(^{66}\) Ibid., 96.

\(^{67}\) Stephen Tatum, Cormac McCarthy’s All the Pretty Horses (New York/London: Continuum Press, 2002), 22.
suggests that McCarthy’s Western novels configure loss in terms of a ‘true country’ that might be brought back or taken back through some heroic endeavour. Tatum offers an essential understanding of the ‘something missing’ in these novels, and explores how it informs the ‘one tale’ that McCarthy tells over and over again. He reveals how the ‘one tale’ becomes a quest for the ‘lost country’ that will resolve the ‘loss’ ‘exile’ and ‘alienation’. However, Tatum, Guillermin and Morrison together still do not address how and why that quest repeatedly fails in each of these novels, nor do they explain why McCarthy repeats the ‘one tale’ over and over again.

Other critics have noted the repeated cycles and patterns in McCarthy’s work and have even used the language of trauma to articulate their understanding. But no critic has gone so far as to relate this language to a reading of absence and repetition specifically in terms of trauma theory. Robert Jarrett has noted how McCarthy’s characters seem haunted by past experiences and cannot ‘be relieved of this compulsion to repeat and re-narrate either within [...] lived experience or, perhaps more disturbingly, within [...] dreams’. John Wegner has remarked how ‘these novels cry out against the meaninglessness of war and the repetitive historical patterns that create war.’ Christine Chollier speaks of the ‘interminable circularity of representations’, and Dianne C. Luce has noted how the novels rely on a ‘repetition and emphasis’ regarding ‘vanishing and the temporary nature of things’. James D. Lilley associates this alienation felt by the characters from the outset with a repetitive cycle of ‘absence’ running through McCarthy’s work:

The McCarthy canon is patterned by a network of fables and tales, but there is one story that is told time and time again. This involves a youth whose childhood is permeated with pain and absence. Born into an existence that is always-already inscribed with the most profound of losses, the child escapes in a futile attempt to restore some sense of worth – of wholeness – to his life. And yet this quest for novelty, for freedom, takes place within a landscape that has already determined and doomed its outcome. McCarthy’s texts form the same narrative shapes time and time again, mapping the repetitive movements of pawn-like protagonists who are dragged around an uncompromising landscape by forces completely outside of their control.\(^71\)

Lilley uses the expression ‘always-already’ to describe the retroactive sense of loss the characters feel, how they are ‘always-already’ imbued with a great sadness even before their ill-fated adventures begin. Lilley sees their quests as attempts to redress that sense of indescribable loss, but these enterprises are doomed to failure, in Lilley’s understanding, because of the deterministic nature of the world upon which they are projected.

There is a strong case to be made for a prevailing determinism in McCarthy’s work, but I argue that the characters themselves are always convinced of their own agency, are always embarking on adventures and crusades with a full commitment to their own autonomy, fully convinced, as John Grady would be in his search for the mythical horses, ‘that that was what he sought and it would have been’. Lilley’s assessment does not overtly recognise these ‘narrative shapes’ as indicative of trauma. Yet, in pointing to the ‘always-already inscribed’ sense of loss, ‘repetitive movements’ and ‘doomed outcomes’, Lilley is nevertheless using the language of trauma to evaluate what he sees as the deterministic nature of McCarthy’s universe. However, an understanding of what may be construed as

\(^71\) James D. Lilley, “‘The Hands of Yet Other Puppets’: Figuring Freedom and Reading Repetition in All the Pretty Horses”, in Myth, Legend, Dust, 272-287, 272.
determinism in McCarthy’s work in terms of cultural trauma allows an understanding of the ways that McCarthy repeatedly re-enacts the failures of the past as part of unresolved processes. Lilley’s view that the characters are pitted against a universe that offers only a predetermined ‘doomed outcome’ may be rethought as an attempt to resolve past failures and move towards a redemptive resolution, but one that always will fail as the final but ever-recurring stage in a culturally traumatic process. A deterministic evaluation of McCarthy’s universe such as Lilley’s, re-evaluated in terms of trauma, enables an exploration of individual autonomy and choice in culturally and historically recurring cycles of accumulating loss. Understanding these novels in terms of an underlying and unresolved cycle of trauma also entails looking within the cycles to see the stories of individual loss that play out as traumatised but heroic attempts at resolving those patterns that cannot be resolved. I argue that McCarthy’s attitude to myth is ambivalent in that he reveals the loss and trauma that is associated with the attempt to retrieve the lost Old West. However, through the heroic failure of the quest to restore a lost world, McCarthy also creates a further level of Western myth that emerges from the ongoing trauma. McCarthy evokes within these cycles of failure and loss a heroic mythic quality that takes his stories beyond the ‘pawn-like’ and ‘doomed’ dynamics suggested by Lilley.

The recurrent failure of the quest in McCarthy’s fiction has also been discussed in relation to the postmodern preoccupation with the failure of grand narratives. McCarthy’s repeated patterns of failure and return display, according to Jarrett, ‘a principled refusal of the totalizing grand recit or “master narratives”’.\(^72\) Jarrett asserts that the failed quests to retrieve lost horses, wolves and women reveal the ‘inadequacy of mythic cycles to coherently structure the protagonist’s experiences’.\(^73\) Jarrett’s reading, however, does not address why

\(^{72}\) Jarrett, *Cormac McCarthy*, 106.
\(^{73}\) Jarrett, *Cormac McCarthy* 107.
McCarthy would want to repeatedly return to the beginning to start again on another cycle of the failed quest only to emphasise and re-emphasise the postmodern failure of the grand narrative. David Holloway takes this argument much further and equates the failure of the quests with McCarthy’s awareness that his fiction can only represent a provisional and arbitrary version of existence, and also that, in the postmodern world, there may be a huge gulf between the desire for the heroic quest and the possibility of its fulfilment. According to Holloway, in order to recognise that condition, McCarthy engages with his fiction as ‘an act of wilful self-cancellation, a writing from which any claim to determinate meaning or hermeneutic engagement with the world has been wilfully expunged’. Holloway claims that the failed quest, therefore, becomes an embodiment of ‘the storyteller’s belief that even the creative imagination itself can no longer think a space, or even a meaning to life, that is autonomous, or that evades entrapment in the world as given’.

However, Holloway is not satisfied with a strictly postmodern reading of McCarthy’s work and maintains that such an interpretation is reductive as McCarthy’s novels represent ‘a kind of writing that embodies aspects of the postmodern so as to map a route through and beyond the condition it describes’. One of the ways in which Holloway further elaborates on this ‘route through and beyond’ postmodernism involves his response to the failure of the quests and the ways in which those failures do not feel altogether totalizing or absolute:

The dramatic failure of each of these quests may confirm the paralysis of the adversarial act, the absence of transformative oppositional space in McCarthy’s fictive (and our ‘real’ world) [...]. But the failure of the quests does not diminish or dislodge them from their centrality in the narratives they generate. In each of the three

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75 Ibid., 147.
76 Ibid., 3.
cases it is the attempt itself, the deep sense of longing for some unattainable moment of transcendence that lingers, bathing the Trilogy in a kind of dialectical afterglow in which the extant fictive order of things, having reasserted its authority in the harshest possible ways, seems somehow weaker, or at least less monolithic, as a result.77

Holloway suggests here that in these failed quests there remains ‘a dialectical afterglow’ that implies that the failure has somehow conveyed a further meaning other than that of defeat and ‘paralysis’. In so doing, Holloway reveals something essential embodied in these failures – in the ways in which McCarthy is stressing the force of the ‘attempt itself’, and the aftermath of yearning and longing that is never extinguished no matter how disastrous the enterprise turns out to be. Holloway’s insight that ‘the failure of the quests does not diminish or dislodge them from their centrality in the narratives they generate’ invites two further ideas – both of which are central to my thesis. First is the idea that ultimate failure and loss is an essential element in McCarthy’s quest. It is the very failure of these quests that actually constitutes, for the purposes of my argument, their ‘centrality’ in the narrative. The second idea that Holloway’s insight invites is that something lies beyond the failure of the quests. I argue that this ‘something’ beyond the failure, for McCarthy, is the re-emergence of myth. Taking Holloway’s analysis of ‘the dramatic failure of these quests’ but looking at McCarthy from a slightly different angle, albeit one that also offers a view of McCarthy’s writing that ‘goes beyond’ a strictly postmodern reading of his work, I explore how it is in those moments of failure, which invariably involve profound suffering, loss and trauma, that McCarthy evokes the reincarnation of the mythic West. And it is this reincarnation of myth at these moments of loss in the narrative that embodies, to use Holloway’s term, the ‘longing for some unattainable moment of transcendence’. No matter how disastrous the failure of McCarthy’s quests, the longing for and realization of myth still endures despite and even

77 Ibid., 147-148.
because of the scale of the failure. Holloway’s reading of ‘the dramatic failure’ of these quests in terms of an abiding ‘afterglow’ speaks to my understanding of the ways in which McCarthy repeatedly returns to the myth of the Old West after and as a result of the failed quest.

McCarthy, as most critics have explored, recognises the heterogenic nature of the New West, and he may evoke what Campbell claims is ‘a vision of the New West [...] as complex and as multiple as postmodernism allows’. But his novels always return, finally, after the failure of the quest in this ‘complex and multiple’ narrative to the way in which myth of the Old West endures. This return and re-emergence of the myth of the Old West is not because McCarthy wishes to reassert defiantly this myth in the face of its failure, or wishes to engage in a reactionary reassertion of that myth in the face of multiple narratives of the New West. Rather, in always showing how myth of the Old West re-emerges out of the traumatic failure to recapture it, McCarthy is exposing the submission of the culture to the power of that myth. Even in the face of the failure, loss and trauma invoked in the quest to retrieve the lost mythic country of the Old West, the myth still endures. He is demonstrating how the myth re-emerges but also the ways in which the cowboy culture, and by extension the nation, and even his own fiction, are immersed in these patterns of trauma. He shows how the American culture and nation cannot let go of a mythic past and how that myth will be re-invoked no matter how destructive it may have been and may promise to be again. This process, I argue, is a form of cultural trauma, a never-ending cycle of quest, failure, trauma and the re-establishment of myth that must be enacted again and again because the real trauma at the heart of the culture is never addressed – that the mythic idealised world that is constantly being sought never existed, except in a brutalised and savage history that was itself a form of trauma.

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I will now address, in the next section in this introduction, trauma theory in more detail, particularly the elements in the theory which help us understand McCarthy’s fiction in terms of trauma configured as a cultural phenomenon. To this end, I explore an aspect of trauma which structurally but non-specifically works within a culture as a form of indeterminate absence associated with the genesis of myth. I also explore how and why McCarthy’s work, with its irresolvable patterns of failure and cycles of defeat, fits with theories of trauma associated with endlessly acted out repetitive and irresolvable cycles.

**McCarthy’s Western Novels and Trauma Theory**

The discussion and exploration of trauma theory in this introduction will be selective, as trauma theory in general covers so many different aspects and experiences of trauma. For example, I do not discuss or explore at length the body of theory related to individual memory, witnessing and survivor testimony, particularly the major corpus of work done on trauma and the Holocaust by critics such as Bruno Bettelheim and Robert Eaglestone and artists such as Claude Lanzmann. And I do not cover in detail the work undertaken by theorists such as James Olney and Georges Gusdorf on the relationship between trauma and what are considered ‘real’ experiences associated with the trauma memoir. While these projects overlap with my own concerns relating to trauma and literary and cultural narrative, these particular explorations of trauma are not entirely relevant to this study of McCarthy’s fiction because they are mainly concerned with the complex interconnections between witnessing, memory, and trauma associated with personal testimony and ‘real life’ traumatic events.  

79 These theories, while essential to any understanding of contemporary trauma

studies, are not readily appropriate for analysing the literary treatments of Western myths in McCarthy’s fiction. Because I focus on cultural and literary representations, rather than ‘real life’ experiences, this thesis instead adapts and extends focuses on theories that help explain the relationship between trauma, history, and culture. Thus, I mainly focus on the ways that theories of structural trauma and cultural trauma offer useful models for understanding McCarthy’s literary representations of quests, masculinity, and nation in relation to the exhausted myths of the Old West. This analysis allows us to make claims about the presence of structural trauma in contemporary American culture, but in no way do I mean to conflate my literary analysis with a study of ‘real-life’ experiences of trauma. Although, at times, I explore McCarthy’s characters in relation to trauma, I am careful not to ‘diagnose’ them as if they were real people. Rather, this engagement with individual, structural and cultural trauma in the framework of a literary analysis enables me to discuss the relationship between the traumatic patterns that shape both the narrative forms and characters of his fiction, as well as the wider cultural and historical framework in which his novels take part.

Any discussion of trauma theory, particularly in relation to literature, must begin with the work of Sigmund Freud, whose theories of trauma form much of the bedrock of contemporary theory. In Studies on Hysteria (1895) Freud pioneered the concept of traumatic hysteria from cases where the trauma derived from an accident. These early theories suggest that there are experiences that are so painful or psychically wounding that they are not fully integrated into the personality. The ways in which trauma emerges encoded within the troubled dreams of the traumatised patient is the subject of his Interpretation of Dreams.

Here he explores the ways traumatic experience breaks down this barrier between the individual self and the external world, and how in the compulsion to repeat the experience in dreams, the patient signifies for Freud a universal human effort to master trauma. In his essay ‘Aetiology of Hysteria’ (1896) he investigates the ways in which traumatic experience has associations with infant sexual experience.

Freud’s theories regarding these experiences are further developed in ‘Screen Memories’ (1899) where he explores the idea of memory being a fantasised and malleable facility. These ideas form the basis for the notion that traumatic experiences may be both fantasmatically and retrospectively determined and that trauma may be linked to individual fantasy and possess its own particular temporality. Freud explains his theories on how trauma is repressed and buried in the unconscious in ‘A Note on the Unconscious’ (1912) where he explores how the memory of these experiences continues to exist in the unconscious in a repressed state and how these memories could be reactivated if the patient experiences an event associated with the original trauma. In Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920) Freud further develops his theories on how trauma, an event that happens before the individual is able to assimilate it at the time, distorts temporal space, and how the patient then returns to the event in dreams or flashbacks in an attempt to master the experience retrospectively. Along with these ideas he also develops, in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, how and why the patient exhibits the compulsion to repeat traumatic experiences in order to gain mastery over the trauma.80

There is a vast amount of contemporary trauma theory which derives from Freud, and, again, there is a great deal of this which I do not explore in this thesis. Freudian theories relating to the ego and the subconscious, for example, are not within the parameters of this thesis. Similarly, Freud’s extensive study on the forgetting of names and words in relation to the psychopathology of everyday life are not the focus of my concern. As with trauma theory in general, these fields of research are more concerned with the traumatic psychological experience of the individual and not directly related to cultural and historical landscapes that form the backdrop to my investigation of how McCarthy explores trauma and its relation to the myth of the Old West. There are many competing readings of Freud, and there are many ways in which Freud has influenced contemporary trauma theory. My use of Freud in this thesis is informed specifically by those theorists and critics who have discussed and developed Freud’s theories of trauma in relation to the concept of cultural trauma, particularly Cathy Caruth’s theories on the association between cultural trauma and mythology developed from Freud’s late work Moses and Monotheism (1920). Additionally, Freud’s theories regarding trauma, repetition and mastery are particularly important to this thesis. In Chapter Two, I explore in specific detail the ‘fort’da’ game that Freud discusses in Beyond the Pleasure Principle as it relates to my investigations into mythic and heroic masculinity. Freud’s theories have had a profound effect on contemporary trauma theory where it focuses on themes of absence, repetition and cultural trauma, patterns that also, as I have stated, run through McCarthy’s fiction. However, an understanding of McCarthy’s work

in terms of trauma also depends upon contemporary theorists, and the ways they have taken
Freud’s theories and developed them.

In contemporary trauma theory the relationship between trauma and culture proceeds
from the same ideas that apply to the ways that trauma distorts memory and experience
within the individual subject. Therefore, I will discuss those problems of representation that
relate to the individual, before turning to the more specific concern that this thesis has with
cultural trauma. For the individual, any understanding of the relationship between trauma and
memory involves the attempt to reconcile the reaching for some form of narrative
reclamation of the experience, alongside the paradoxical implication that any recall of trauma
is only approximate since the traumatic experience is not available to consciousness and
cannot be represented in language. Cathy Caruth develops this paradox:

Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past,
but in the way its very unassimilable nature – the way it was precisely not known in
the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on.\(^83\)

According to Caruth traumatic experience is both absent and ever present at the same time
and can only be interpreted or known in a delayed attempt at understanding. This
‘understanding’, if attainable at all, must involve some kind of narrative reclamation of an
event that is somehow obscured by the traumatic shock of the experience. Caruth points to
the essential aporia of traumatic affect, with its impelling need to represent and express
emotional ideas that are irretrievable and defiant of such attempts at representation. Caruth
suggests that what is incomprehensible to the traumatised victim is not necessarily the
experience itself but the ‘incomprehensibility of one’s own survival’.\(^84\) She considers that the

\(^83\) Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, (Baltimore: Johns
\(^84\) Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 64.
compulsion to ‘repeat’ past experiences is related to the need to make sense of having survived the trauma. Attempts to make sense of the past through a repetition of the trauma involve an impulse to forge some kind of narrative from the incomprehensible nature of the traumatic experience. These problems of representation, and the repetitive cycles enacted in order to make sense of an experience that cannot be represented, are important to my reading of McCarthy’s work. In McCarthy’s novels, the loss of the myth of the Old West is, I argue, a non-specific loss, one that cannot be pinned down or located in a specific historic moment. The attempts to relocate that loss in acts of heroic endeavour are, I suggest, attempts to both represent and to retrieve that loss and forge a narrative from this sense of ‘something missing’ on both an individual and a cultural level.

The vast critical attention given to the inassimilable and inexpressible nature of the narrative and language of trauma draws upon the ways in which the Holocaust has been interpreted and represented by contemporary theorists and critics. Although I do not wish to explore or apply Holocaust theory in detail throughout this thesis, it is necessary to acknowledge the role it has played in terms of understanding the relationship between trauma and the language used to represent it, as Holocaust theory speaks directly to the investigation of the ‘non-representational’ nature of trauma. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub problematise the evidence of testimony relating to Holocaust experience, on the basis that any interpretive knowledge of an extreme event is impossible to remember and that, if such remembering were possible, the language available to express the memory would be inadequate. Felman and Laub present the Holocaust as ‘a radical historical crisis of witnessing [...] an event eliminating its own witness’. In this assessment, the Holocaust becomes the central focus for the aporia of trauma – the paradox of assigning a meaning to an event that cannot be

explicated. Trauma, therefore, becomes an event beyond meaning, an event that cannot be represented, and any attempt to assimilate that experience in language constitutes a trivialization of the trauma.

The failure of narrative to reclaim or make sense of trauma in the aftermath of the Holocaust is explored by Jean-Francois Lyotard who articulates the inbuilt failure of all culture, all language in the shadow of Auschwitz. Lyotard claims that a work of art can only be successful if it articulates its own failure to give a voice or expression to the overwhelming nature of the Holocaust. For Lyotard the faithful representation of the inexpressibility of the event is the only valid expression of the paralysis of representation after Auschwitz and one that offers a model for all aesthetic response to an overwhelming post-traumatic experience. He writes: ‘What art can do is bear witness not to the sublime, but to the aporia of art and to its pain. It does not say the unsayable, but says that it cannot say it.’

Roger Luckhurst reviews this reverence for the ‘unsayability’ of trauma and its claim to a moral integrity in its refusal to contaminate traumatic experience with a language that would be reductive and trivialising:

The aporia is the threshold on which academic discourse of trauma hovers, hestitating between the possible and the impossible, caught on the horns of a dilemma because every occasion will produce a kind of ethical violence. As a result, Lyotard’s sublime [...] always favours the aporetic or non-representational as the lesser evil, favouring the figural by abjecting the literal.

Lyotard, post-Holocaust aesthetics, and trauma theorists such as Caruth all claim that once trauma has been ‘explained’ or articulated, the explanation can no longer be a faithful

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86 Jean-Francois Lyotard, Heidegger and ‘the Jews’, A.Michel and M.Roberts (trans.) (Minneappolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 47.
representation of the experience because such ‘truth’ is impossible to frame into language or narrative. The need to find a way of witnessing and narrating in turn dissolves the integrity of the initial trauma. It is in this attention to questions of representation that these critics are all useful for a literary study of trauma in the novels of McCarthy, though their discussions of witnessing and survival are, of course, less relevant. These problems of representation, as they apply to cultural as well as individual trauma, inform my reading of McCarthy’s novels as interrogations into the ways in which the trauma of history is transformed perpetually into a revived mythic narrative. I argue that McCarthy’s novels show us how that transformation of trauma into myth is also bound, in a never-ending cycle, with the failure to recapture that myth except in terms of a lost idealised country of the past that never existed.

Luckhurst acknowledges the problems of representation regarding trauma explored by other trauma theorists, but his work is also useful for a study of literature because he points to how trauma may be narrativized and how ‘our culture is saturated with stories that see trauma not as a blockage but a positive spur to narrative.’\(^{88}\) He claims:

If trauma is a crisis in representation, then this generates possibility just as much as impossibility, a compulsive outpouring of attempts to formulate narrative knowledge.\(^{89}\)

Other trauma theorists such as Dominick LaCapra also envisage the possibility that responses to traumatic experience do not have to be paralysing, fatalistic, repetitive and self-destructive, and suggest the possibility of this ‘working through’ of the trauma:

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\(^{88}\) Ibid., 83.  
\(^{89}\) Ibid. Original emphasis.
[This] means coming to terms with the trauma, including its details, and critically engaging the tendency to act out the past and even to recognise why it may be necessary and even in certain respects desirable or at least compelling.  

Similarly, E. Ann Kaplan is ready to acknowledge that issues regarding dissociation and representation are irrefutable, but she maintains:

Telling stories about trauma, even though the story can never actually repeat or represent what happened, may partly achieve a certain “working through” for the victim.

She claims that this process of ‘working through’ ‘may also [...] permit a kind of empathic “sharing” that moves us forward, if only by inches’. She therefore proposes a ‘more complex’ model in which ‘how a victim will respond depends on the particular situation, on an individual’s specific psychic history and formation, and on the context for the event’. She is particularly interested in the impact of the political context for the event and evaluates the individual’s relationship with his environment and community as crucial factors in how he reacts to the trauma.

Helping bridge the connections between individual and structural or cultural trauma, Kaplan understands trauma as existing within a particular culture in the form of an intergenerational cultural wound that is inherited as a result of a real historical event such as slavery, or as a non-specific absence that cannot be located in a historical time or place. She writes:

90 Dominick LaCapra, Writing History, Writing Trauma (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 143-144.
92 Ibid.
93 Ibid., 38.
Cultures too may be traumatised, and that they too may “forget” horrendous actions performed in the past and simply split off from the daily consciousness in the culture.\(^9^4\)

Kaplan is particularly interested in the hidden resonances of cultural texts, ‘what the texts cannot know because that knowledge has been displaced’, namely, the embedded references to collective traumatic experience that a culture ‘forgets’. This ‘forgetting’:

> Is not because the events are literally unable to be recalled, but because, for political or social reasons [...] it is too dangerous for the culture [...] to acknowledge or recall, just as the “forgotten” contents in individual consciousness are too dangerous to remember. Individuals and cultures, then, perform forgetting as a way of protecting themselves from the horrors of what one (or the culture) has done or what has been done to oneself or others in one’s society.\(^9^5\)

As contemporary theories such as Kaplan’s formulate a concept of trauma that underlies individual and cultural identity, it is possible to conceive of a culture as well as an individual being trapped in traumatic patterns of forgetting the horrors of the past, or trying to retrieve some lost glorious moment of chosen survival, or being haunted by a sense of absence that will not be resolved. This idea that trauma is a cultural phenomenon and that cultures, like individuals, endlessly attempt to ‘work through’ or represent the trauma, is central to my investigation of McCarthy’s texts as explorations into the U.S. as a traumatised culture.

In relation to this notion of culturally transmitted trauma, Caruth evaluates the traumatic experience as potentially infectious when narrated, or carrying the capacity to translate across generations within cultures, claiming that trauma ‘is never simply one’s own

\(^{9^4}\) Ibid., 68.
\(^{9^5}\) Ibid., 74.
... but precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas’. In adopting Freud’s theory from *Moses and Monotheism*, Caruth interlinks ideas about the essential transmissibility of trauma, the incomprehensibility of personal survival for the traumatised victim and Freud’s notions of cultural and historical trauma. Caruth adopts Freud’s idea relating to the latent temporality of collective trauma registered in the foundation of Jewish civilisation. She suggests that what the Jewish people experienced at this point of embracing their monotheistic culture was, not only the revisiting of the murder of their father, but also of having committed that murder and having survived it:

If monotheism for Freud is an ‘awakening’, it is not simply a return to the past, but the fact of having survived it, a survival that, in the figure of the new Jewish God, appears not as an act chosen by the Jews, but as the incomprehensible fact of being chosen for a future that remains, in its promise, yet to be understood.

Caruth assesses the ‘traumatic structure’ of Jewish monotheism signifying ‘a history of Jewish survival that is both an endless crisis and the endless possibility of a new future’. She claims that ‘the history of chosenness, as the history of survival thus takes the form of an unending confrontation with the returning violence of the past.’ I return to Caruth’s theory in Chapter Three to discuss American mythic national identity, where I argue that traumatic experience on these terms can be the generating impulse behind a mythology of exceptionalism. But here, I wish to focus on how Caruth extends her claim that trauma, being inassimilable into language, becomes inaccessible, not only to individual but also to cultural memory. She maintains that ‘the historical power of trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is

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97 Ibid., 71. Original emphasis.
98 Ibid., 68.
99 Ibid.
first experienced at all”.\textsuperscript{100} Therefore, nations may only begin to experience a collective trauma in the form of a distorted or even erased history that ‘can only be grasped in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence’.\textsuperscript{101} The idea that nations ‘forget’ the trauma of their history and in this ‘forgetting’ transform it into a mythical narrative of glorious origin or heroic survival is significant in my reading of McCarthy’s work. I argue that McCarthy’s vision of American history is one of unrelenting trauma, but also that McCarthy shows how this trauma is buried in the cultural memory. McCarthy’s Western novels serve to offer a remembering of history as trauma, and show, at the same time, how a culture seeks to remember or recapture that trauma and translate it into another version of the mythic West.

Jenny Edkins takes Caruth’s views on how trauma can be transformed into a foundational mythic narrative and explores how that mythic narrative is sustained through an institutionally enforced commemoration of past violence and the erasing of traumatic memory through national memorial and celebration. She writes:

\begin{quote}
Dominant powers can use commemoration as a means of forgetting past struggles.

For example, they can use accounts of heroism and sacrifice that tell a story of the founding of a state, a narrative of glorious origin.\textsuperscript{102}
\end{quote}

Therefore, she maintains, ‘in order for this charade to work, for the fantasy of the democratic state to be believable, the visions of survivors have to be hidden, ignored, or medicalised.’\textsuperscript{103} Edkins claims that the trauma of combat survivors must be concealed by a culture and that individual survivor testimony is obscured, even silenced, through state commemoration and institutionalised celebration of sacrifice in order to sustain the false mythologies upon which the state is founded. This state transformation of trauma into a celebration of heroism is an

\begin{footnotes}
\item[100] Ibid., 17.
\item[101] Ibid., 18.
\item[102] Jenny Edkins, \textit{The Memory of Politics} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 54.
\item[103] Ibid., 52.
\end{footnotes}
extreme form of the false cultural representation of trauma. The ways in which Edkins perceives the transposition of trauma into myth as a means of collective or cultural forgetting is important in my investigation into McCarthy’s treatment of myth and its interaction with the trauma of American history. McCarthy’s novels interrogate how versions of American history transform trauma into myth on a number of levels. In Chapter Three I investigate how the trauma of American history is remembered in mythic reformulations through Sheriff Bell’s holding onto the mythic past in *No Country for Old Men* and the father’s insistence on claiming a reactionary mythic exceptionalism for him and his son in the face of trauma past and present in *The Road*. In Chapters One and Two I explore how McCarthy reveals the ways the myth of the Old West re-emerges wherever the heroic cowboy quest fails and collapses into trauma. McCarthy enacts, through the narrative of the failed cowboy quest and the lost causes of a heroic masculinity, a cultural cycle of destruction, a cycle of trauma which produces more myth and which ultimately entails, therefore, more ‘forgetting’ of the failure and loss. My thesis shows how McCarthy’s novels interrogate the ways that trauma is transposed into a ‘forgetting’ of history through a retreat back into the irretrievably lost myth of the Old West. McCarthy reveals this retreat as another recurring stage in the cyclic return to the wounded ‘missing’ unspecified absence of that lost mythic past that is perpetually yearned for but cannot be recovered.

As the study of trauma as a form of non-specific absence within a culture is crucial to my argument, Dominick LaCapra’s theories of this concept and its manifestation as ‘structural trauma’ are also crucial. He considers historical trauma to be associated with ‘particular events that do indeed involve losses, such as the Shoah or the dropping of the atom bomb on Japanese cities’. Historical trauma is ‘specific, and not everyone is subject

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104 LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 80.
to it or entitled to the subject position associated with it." Structural trauma, on the other hand, involves an ‘absence’ which is not associated with an event and is atemporal and transhistorical, unspecified and uncertain. LaCapra claims that such absence is a structural feature of all cultures and suggests that ‘the conversion of absence into loss is essential to all fundamentalisms or foundational philosophies.’ This ‘metaphysical’ sense of absence is ‘the absence of an absolute that should not itself be absolutized and fetishized such that it becomes an object of fixation’. According to LaCapra, this ‘absence’ creates a cultural anxiety that seeks a cause or a source of tangible loss. This loss becomes the ‘absolutized’ known but surrogate version of the unknown and unknowable absence. LaCapra points here to the ways in which a structural absence may lie at the heart of a culture as an abstract and intangible void that is impossible to represent or articulate in concrete terms. However, that cultural void and the attendant cultural anxiety that goes with it provoke a yearning for the surrogate loss as something that must be retrieved or restored and a culture will consequently create a narrative of restoration or retrieval around this lost object or place or person.

LaCapra’s theory allows one way of understanding the sense of absence or loss that haunts each of these McCarthy novels from their outset. In LaCapra’s theory, the unspecified absence within a culture may become associated with a specific loss but the trauma generated by this absence cannot be fully expressed or represented and becomes conflated with the desire to retrieve something that substitutes as a specific ‘lost’ entity. The conflation of absence into loss theorized by LaCapra helps us to evaluate, in terms of trauma, the repetitive cycles of McCarthy’s fiction, where an inherent absence becomes projected into a specific surrogate loss that must be retrieved but becomes itself a focus for further accumulating loss, and a compounded sense of the world becoming even more incomplete, more traumatic, with...
each loss. As I will show in Chapter One on narrative form, in Billy Parham’s repeated search for specific ‘lost’ individuals and animals – a brother, a wolf, a horse and even, at the end of *The Crossing*, an old and abject dog – these things stand in for an intangible sense of ‘something missing’ but themselves become absorbed into the underlying and irresolvable absence of ‘structural’ trauma. The fact that these objects can never really represent the intangible absence of mythic country means that the search and the quest for them go on and on because what they represent can never be found. LaCapra’s theory thus offers a way of understanding McCarthy’s repeated quest as a representation of an irresolvable cultural yearning for the absent, always unattainable, but nevertheless still sought-after ‘country’ of the Old West.

For LaCapra, structural trauma and its attendant anxiety can only be ‘worked through’ if one learns acceptance and coming to terms with an understanding of the problems of representation associated with this absence. La Capra suggests that what often happens is that the absence is conflated into a particular loss because this provides an individual or a culture with a concrete surrogate that stands in for the general, unspecified absence. This conflation offers the opportunity to create scapegoats for a sense of personal or social unease or something lacking, and it creates the illusion of, according to LaCapra, ‘some original unity, wholeness, or identity that others have ruined, polluted or contaminated and thus made “us” lose.’ LaCapra claims that in such cases of ‘structural’ trauma the absence is converted into a specific loss that can supposedly be retrieved, but is, in fact, a culturally imagined phenomenon. For LaCapra, desire is unspecified when associated with absence and therefore ‘inherently indeterminate and possibly limitless’. I will show how McCarthy’s novels interrogate the relationship between structural absence and desire specifically in relation to

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108 Ibid., 57.
109 Ibid., 59.
American mythologies of the cowboy frontier and the cultural longing for the illusory lost country. In McCarthy’s work, such a desire remains perpetually unfulfilled because the ‘country’ only exists in the realm of unspecified metaphysical absence. I argue, in Chapter Two on heroic masculinity, that such an absence invokes John Grady’s setting ‘forth to wander wherever it was needed’ to retrieve what can never be retrieved, or master the loss that goes with the failure of that retrieval. I argue throughout this thesis that such questing attempts to find the ‘missing thing’ that can never be found always fail because the ‘thing’ itself represents an underlying cultural absence or void.

According to LaCapra, the tendency to particularise the ‘structural’ trauma of absence attempts to transform what is in fact a condition of anxiety, an experience of absence, into a historically sourced event. This argument in LaCapra is useful because it points to an initial sense of unease, anxiety, or absence within a culture. Yet, McCarthy’s novels extend this idea even further in their preoccupation with the repeated quest for the mythic ‘country’ or object that will relieve the sense of suffering, or evoke a sense of illusory mastery, only for that project to fail endlessly and begin again in a cycle of aggregating loss. What happens in structural trauma, according to LaCapra, is that the anxious ‘fear’ of absence becomes conflated into a surrogate loss and this leads to an endless ‘acting out’ of the trauma that can never be resolved. In the ‘acting out’ of trauma, the victim becomes:

Haunted or possessed by the past and performatively caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes – scenes in which the past returns and the future is blocked or fatalistically caught up in a melancholic feedback loop.\(^\text{110}\)

LaCapra points to the ways in which trauma that cannot be represented or assimilated is associated with a permanent state of melancholy and the repetitive compulsion to ‘act out’

\(^{110}\) Ibid., 21.
invariably ‘violent scenes in a way that is predetermined and self-destructive’. I investigate how McCarthy’s novels enact the ways in which such patterns of repetitive compulsion manifest themselves within the narrative quest, in the often suicidal determination of his protagonists to begin the cycle again, driven on by the endless yearning for something they can never retrieve or find.

Like Caruth and, prior to that, Freud, LaCapra insists on the ways in which trauma is associated with the foundational myths of culture. He sees structural trauma based on an absence leading to ‘the genesis of myth wherein trauma is enacted in a story or narrative from which later traumas seem to derive.’ LaCapra envisages this ‘story’ emerging from conflation of absence and loss. Absence, in the form of anxiety, seeks a cause or a source, a definite but imagined loss that stimulates a yearning for the return to wholeness or unity – an idealised state that must be sought and regained:

A mythical belief in a past-we-have-lost may be combined with an apocalyptic, often blind utopian quest to regain that lost wholeness or totality in a desired future, at times through violence directed against outsiders who have purportedly destroyed or contaminated that wholeness. Compressed between a past and future, one may also construe lost wholeness nostalgically and link it to a future perfect – what might have been if only those in the past had recognized what we presumably know: how to create a true community that will endure as a radiant polity.

I explore how LaCapra’s associations between trauma and foundational myth in a culture speak to the ways that McCarthy’s novels reveal the endurance of the myth of the Old West at the point of traumatic failure in the narrative. LaCapra’s ‘blind utopian quest to regain that

\[111\] Ibid., 143.
\[112\] Ibid., 82.
\[113\] Ibid., 195-196.
lost wholeness or totality’ relates, not only to the quests in McCarthy’s fiction but also to the ways in which McCarthy’s quests are concerned with the desire to ‘regain’ that lost world. I argue that McCarthy shows us how the quest for the lost country of the Old West is a quest for ‘lost wholeness’, but also McCarthy is showing us, in the failure of such a quest, how the further myth unfolds. I also argue that this cycle is then perpetuated in McCarthy, with further trauma proceeding from the initial failure of the quest. LaCapra’s idea of myth being conjured in a ‘future perfect’ helps explain McCarthy’s heroes’ traumatic quests to relocate endlessly in the future something from the past that never existed in the first place. These relocations in an uncertain future time are implied, for example, in the connection between the lost horses and John Grady Cole who ‘would have set forth to wander wherever it was needed for as long as it took until he came upon one’. 114 I argue that McCarthy reveals how the ‘lost wholeness’ embodied in the myth of the Old West becomes projected into a future in which that loss can be restored; but in the process of trying to rediscover that loss and failing to do so, even the future itself becomes a space contaminated with an irreparable trauma. This explains why these novels always seem to be moving forward from a lost past to an already equally lost future.

In Chapter One, adapting the theories of structural trauma proposed by LaCapra, I investigate how, in The Crossing, traumatic structural absence projects the narrative forward and how patterns of trauma shape literary narrative more broadly in McCarthy’s other Western novels. I explore how the narrative moves perpetually forward to anticipate the retrieval of some lost surrogate object, such as a wolf, a horse, a brother’s body, a ‘missing thing’ that can never compensate for the underlying irresolvable and intangible absence that may best be understood in terms of structural trauma. The impetus for the quest comes from an anterior loss that can never be resolved, but nevertheless establishes notions of a retrieval

114 McCarthy, All the Pretty Horses, 23.
in which such resolution is mooted as possible, if only the right object can be found and
brought home. In *The Crossing* the quest ahead is always a projection from a broken past, an
anticipation which only unfolds into a continuum of failure and loss. I investigate how the
series of quests that Billy Parham undertakes all seek recovery of an object that will
somehow reconstitute the world, will somehow make it right again and resolve the sense of
absence that settles on the text from the very opening of the novel. The quests anticipate
some redeemed future to which the novel is always travelling but never arrives. I argue,
therefore, that *The Crossing* remains a text trapped in a cyclic loop haunted by loss in the past
and always moving both forwards towards some redemptive retrieval that never materialises,
and also backwards towards the redemption of a past unspecified trauma that can never be
resolved. McCarthy conceives of Billy’s quests as both heroic and traumatic in order for them
to represent the attempt and failure to retrieve the lost world of the Old West. And in the
process of this heroic failure McCarthy reveals the re-emergence and endurance of myth, but
a myth that can only endure, ironically, when the failure of the quest re-enacts the perpetual
traumatic cycles of absence and further loss.

In Chapter Two I develop further the connections between irresolvable loss and heroic
failure as I explore how, in *All the Pretty Horses* and *Cities of the Plain*, McCarthy imagines
a heroic brand of masculinity that depends on attachment to, and mastery of, loss so that men
like John Grady Cole can reinvent and then sustain the lost mythic heroism of the cowboy. I
investigate John Grady’s masculinity in terms of an attachment to the loss of the Old West as
a form of irresolvable trauma that nevertheless seeks release through repeated attempts at
mastery in increasingly impossible and suicidal ordeals and quests. I explore this heroic
cowboy masculinity through the application of two theoretical standpoints: Freud’s theory in
*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* regarding the child mastering the loss of his mother through
the ‘fort-da’ game; and Lauren Berlant’s theory of ‘cruel optimism’ regarding enduring
attachments to objects despite, and even because of, the certainty that they will be lost at some time in the future. I will explain the significance of both of these theories in detail in the body of this chapter on heroic masculinity. And, by bringing Freud’s and Berlant’s theories together, I show how McCarthy’s version of heroic masculinity involves a perpetual engagement with increasingly life-threatening challenges and attempted mastery over the subsequent failure and loss in order to sustain that heroic status. John Grady’s revised mythic cowboy figure, I argue, is dependent upon a form of heroic trauma, an attempted but perpetually failing mastery over sought-after and life-threatening danger and loss. In this chapter I develop further the relationship between trauma and the future in McCarthy’s work. I argue that heroic masculinity for McCarthy involves attachment to loss and mastery of loss in both the past and the future.

In Chapter Three I develop how these destructive interactive patterns of trauma and myth project onto a national canvass and how in No Country for Old Men and The Road, a sense of mythic national identity is associated with perpetual crisis and confrontation in the past, present and future in order to sustain notions of chosenness and exceptionalism. Cathy Caruth’s interpretation of Jewish history and culture offers a useful model here for thinking about the presence of trauma in the American Exceptionalist vision of history and its relation to mythic narratives of conflict and survival not just in the Old West but throughout American history. I explore Caruth’s theory and her adaptation of Freud’s Moses and Monotheism and the ways she interlinks ideas about the essential transmissibility of trauma and Freud’s notions of cultural and historical trauma. I investigate, through an analysis of No Country for Old Men and The Road, how ideological affirmations of chosenness and survival underpin the perpetual adversarial and confrontational traumatic encounters with other ‘non-

exceptionalist’ cultures and nations. I argue that McCarthy reveals his vision of history as a continuing national trauma, a trauma that is never resolved but only repeats itself in an ever-perpetuating loop of crisis, confrontation and destruction from the past that stretches forward into an eternally traumatic future. In this chapter I conclude with a discussion of how McCarthy may envisage a way out of the cycles of crisis and destruction in the form of non-traumatic futures emerging from moments in the present that are not tainted with exceptionalist ideology.

Although I am interpreting these novels in different ways in these different chapters, nevertheless I wish to show how trauma and myth interact in a perpetual cultural cycle in all of these novels. I will show, therefore, how each of these novels is part of a wider McCarthy project to formulate one prolonged mythic traumatic cycle representing the ways in which American culture is trapped in an obsessive and destructive relationship with its cowboy frontier past. By telling, what is, basically, the same tale over and over again McCarthy is creating a continuous vision of a nation and culture locked into a perpetual traumatic re-enactment of the myth of the Old West.
Chapter One:

Trauma, Myth, and the Quest Narrative in *The Crossing*
Introduction

Towards the end of The Crossing, on the return from his final trip to Mexico having retrieved the body of his dead brother Boyd, Billy Parham comments: ‘This is my third trip. It’s the only time I was down there that I got what I come after. But it sure as hell wasn’t what I wanted.’\(^1\) Billy’s regret encapsulates how The Crossing unfolds around the repeated failure of his cross-border journeys to recover something lost and that, even though on this ‘third trip’ he ‘got what I come after’, in returning with his brother’s body, this retrieval is a form of ‘success’ that carries with it an even greater failure. Billy’s three trips to Mexico are in the form of a series of unsuccessful quests: the first to rescue a wolf and free it in the mountains of Mexico; the second to retrieve his father’s lost horses stolen in an Indian raid in which his parents are murdered; the third to bring back his brother who has gone missing and is discovered to be dead.

Billy’s statement with its implications of cyclic loss raises the question as to why McCarthy repeatedly inserts loss and failure into the quest narrative in this novel. In the Introduction I explored how critics have acknowledged the repeated patterns of mythic quest, failure and loss in McCarthy’s Western novels, but they have not answered why these insistent patterns run through these novels. This question begins my investigation in this chapter into the exploration of myth, trauma and narrative form in McCarthy’s quest narrative. It is an exploration that could readily apply to any of the five novels that are the focus of my thesis, but, for the purposes of this chapter I investigate how, through the enactment of repeated heroic failure in the quest narrative in The Crossing, McCarthy interrogates the exhausted cowboy myth of the past. I explore how McCarthy exemplifies the ways that the failure of the quest ironically preserves or sustains the literary form of the

cowboy genre by necessitating both the repetition and the further failure of the quest and thus the need for further storytelling in a repetition and extension of the fictional narrative itself. I explore how McCarthy’s narrative enacts loss, quest and failure in a perpetual traumatic cycle and how it is through the traumatic failure of the quest that the myth of the Old West re-emerges.

When Billy says, of Mexico, ‘I quit this country once before [...] It wasn’t the future that brought me back here,’ he seems to be explaining how his actions are driven by a desire to remedy the past. 2 His words actually reveal a paradox: he has ‘quit’ the country only to be ‘brought back’ by something that went wrong in the past. However, they also reveal the narrative pattern based on compulsive and repetitive action. A man ‘quitting’ a country suggests agency, but ‘being brought back’ implies something beyond his control. Cathy Caruth has noted how ‘the experience of trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will.’ 3 Billy’s comment on his repeated experience of failure thus represents something more than an individual character’s lament for his own personal loss. It also serves as a comment on the way that the structure of the novel revolves around a pattern of repeated failure. Billy’s comment suggests the way his repetitive action can be viewed as a traumatic pattern, and by extension how the novel’s structure, in its insistence on the repetition of the failed quest, is itself a narrative enactment of trauma. Even within the protagonist’s own words here, there is a small scale representation of the traumatic forces associated with compulsion and repetition that shape the broader patterns in the novel. In this chapter I argue that a reading of these repeatedly failing quests in terms of trauma allow us to evaluate and understand more clearly McCarthy’s exploration of the cowboy myth, both in the past and in the contemporary age.

2 Ibid., 202.
3 Caruth, Unclaimed Experience, 2.
My exploration of this link between trauma and form in *The Crossing* enables an understanding of how McCarthy’s treatment of the myth of the Old West interacts with trauma to generate a further cycle of myth from that failed quest. Contrary to what other critics have argued, I argue that through the repetition of heroic failure in the quest narrative, McCarthy shows us the way in which his formulation of cowboy myth re-emerges through repeated suffering and loss. Trauma helps explain why this repetition dominates McCarthy’s fiction and thus reveals how McCarthy is doing something else with the concept of myth beyond either revitalizing it or lamenting its exhaustion.

Northrop Frye has famously argued that the quest constitutes a ‘central unifying myth’ and that ‘the complete form of romance is clearly the successful quest’, commencing with ‘the perilous journey’ on through to ‘the crucial struggle’ and concluding with ‘the exaltation of the hero’, which entails some form of ‘discovery’ or ‘recognition of the hero’.⁴ For McCarthy, however, the quest narrative establishes a pattern of repeated failure that refers back to an irretrievably lost myth of the Old West and the impossible aspiration to rediscover this myth through heroic endeavour and, by extension, through narrative storytelling. Unlike Frye, McCarthy’s narrative confirms the failure not only of the quest, but of the cowboy myth that the quest is attempting to rediscover and re-enact. Through an engagement with the theories of structural trauma proposed by Dominic LaCapra, explored initially in the Introduction, I argue that McCarthy presents the exhaustion and loss of the cowboy myth as a form of cultural trauma, a wound that is re-enacted over and over again in an ever-perpetuating cycle of loss. For McCarthy, therefore, this traumatic cycle constitutes the antithesis of Frye’s vision of the ‘successful quest’ that culminates in the ‘exaltation of

the hero’. Frye also points to how ‘a threefold structure is repeated in many features of romance in the frequency for instance with which the [...] hero is [...] successful on his third attempt.’

McCarthy’s quest in *The Crossing* also operates in this threefold way, but, again, invokes the threefold structure to produce a confirmation of failure as opposed to Frye’s ‘successful’ endeavour. On the third attempt, Billy acknowledges he has retrieved ‘what he come after’, but it only reinforces the consummate nature of his failure, the third attempt at retrieval only succeeding in revealing the full extent of his cyclic and all-encompassing loss.

I explore how the exhaustion of myth is signalled at the beginning of *The Crossing* in the form of a pervasive sense of loss or ‘structural absence’. This absence, I argue, is a form of cultural trauma corresponding to LaCapra’s absence of ‘some original unity, wholeness or identity’ that cannot be defined or specifically located. It constitutes a cultural wound associated with a lost or ‘absent’ mythic country of the Old West, for which McCarthy’s characters yearn and which they wish to recover through the undertaking of the quest. The ‘lost country’ corresponding to the lost myth of the Old West, also is configured in the form of missing people or animals which become the object of the quest narrative. Because these figures are surrogates for the underlying lost or absent mythic experience of the Old West, then these figures themselves acquire, as the narrative progresses a form of mythic status by proxy. Billy’s statement, ‘I got what I come after. But it sure as hell wasn’t what I wanted,’ underpins how the McCarthy quest can never succeed, how it is never possible to ‘get’ what you really ‘come after’, because the underlying goal of the quest is the recovery of the irresolvable absence of a mythic country or cowboy way of life associated with the Old West, a world that never existed except as myth, and therefore can never be ‘brought back’.

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5 Ibid.
6 LaCapra, *Writing History Writing Trauma*, 57.
As I will show, the surrogate figures, such as the wolf, the horses, the brother, in standing in for the indefinable void or absence, become the focus for the quests, and may be understood in terms of structural trauma which relates to a sense of something absent or missing that is conflated into specific loss. The absence can never be defined or ascribed to a specific experience or event as it constitutes a structural lack or void that cannot be represented in terms of a historical moment. ‘Trauma’, in this sense, means the registering of an absence which assumes, in LaCapra’s terms, an ‘original full presence, identity or intactness’, the ‘absence of an absolute’ that never existed but was only ever culturally imagined. As this chapter demonstrates, against the backdrop of such a void, McCarthy’s narrative unfolds as a representative traumatic failure to ascribe meaning to this absence, which, in turn, is represented by the failed quest.

**Trauma and Narrative Framing**

A sense of absence may be discerned from the opening page of *The Crossing* in the depiction of the death of Billy’s sister and grandmother, a sense of absence that locates itself in the most recent losses associated with Billy in his childhood years at the beginning of the novel. These deaths of Billy’s sister and grandmother predate Billy’s narrative and shroud it with an indeterminate and unresolved sorrow. The deaths appear as specific losses, but the language of the text suggests that they are also a part of some wider intangible absence that haunts Billy’s existence from the outset. They serve to establish an all-pervading sense of something missing that is non-specific and unresolved stretching back in time. The novel begins:

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7 LaCapra, *Writing History Writing Trauma*, 51.
When they came out of Grant County Boyd was not much more than a baby and the newly formed county they’d named Hidalgo was itself little older than the child. In the country they’d quit lay the bones of a sister and the bones of his maternal grandmother. The new country was rich and wild. You could ride clear to Mexico and not strike a crossfence. He carried Boyd before him in the bow of the saddle and named to him features of the landscape and birds and animals in both Spanish and English. In the new house they slept in the room off the kitchen and he would lie awake at night and listen to his brother’s breathing in the dark and he would whisper half aloud to him as he slept his plans for them and the life they would have.⁸

In this first paragraph McCarthy establishes a sense of grief and mourning as an overshadowing presence, depicting Billy’s childhood world hovering between the losses of the past and a reaching out for a new life in a new country. The promise of a fresh start filled with expectation and new beginnings in ‘the newly formed county they’d named Hidalgo’ is undercut by the immediate recognition of past grief and sadness left behind ‘in the country they quit’ where ‘lay the bones of a sister and the bones of a maternal grandmother’. The family’s negotiation of grief involves movement and the quest for a ‘new country [...] rich and wild’ away from the mourning and unfulfilled purpose of Grant County.⁹ Already Billy is dreaming of a land beyond this new country whose open terrain invites adventures further afield ‘clear to Mexico’, and ‘at night’ he whispers to his sleeping brother ‘his plans for them and the life they would have’. Projections of new journeys and past grief, juxtaposed with each other in this opening paragraph, provide a model for a conventional quest narrative: a future of quest-seeking deliverance proceeding from past sorrows.

⁸ McCarthy, The Crossing, 3.
⁹ Ibid.
There is also an emphasis on the contrast between old country and new country, the ‘old’ synonymous with death, loss, and the ‘bones’ of the past, the ‘new’ with the promise of adventure and new beginnings. The movement from old to new country undertaken by Billy’s family embodies a restless movement forward in the pioneer tradition reaching out for a new life.\(^{10}\) Billy’s family, as they move on from the past grief of Grant County, unwittingly to further death and loss in Hidalgo, invest in the hope of a ‘new’ country, in the manner associated with the frontier myth. The family’s move to Hidalgo represents this mythic desire to retrieve the sense of lost country in the richness and promise of a new land, following the pattern of the pioneer and frontier myth, but in a country that no longer is ‘new’. The family cannot rediscover land that has already been settled and they cannot re-invent the frontier myth with its promise of unspoiled new beginnings, because the frontier is closed and has been ‘gone’ for almost half a century.\(^{11}\)

However, this reading of the pioneer myth underlying this passage changes dramatically when put next to the final passages of Cities of the Plain, where the reference again to the sister indicates a larger structural absence beyond, even before, the specific loss of the sister cited in the opening. Billy, now an old man, drifting aimlessly through his final years, falls asleep beneath a highway ‘somewhere in central Arizona’ and ‘dreamt of his sister dead seventy years and buried near Fort Sumner’\(^ {12}\). In this dream his sister is wearing ‘the white dress her grandmother had sewn for her from sheeting and in her grandmother’s hands the dress had taken on a shirred bodice and borders of tatting threaded with blue ribbon’.\(^ {13}\) These intimate details of the sister’s dress, and its making by the grandmother, establish Billy’s sense of returning grief to a past located before the beginning of The

\(^{10}\) See Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence*, 411-413, 479-483, for the frontier myth as the impetus for a new life and new beginning.

\(^{11}\) Turner, ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History, 60.


\(^{13}\) Ibid.
Crossing. They also prepare us for the unbearable sorrow of Billy’s dream self calling ‘out down that empty road in infinite sadness and infinite loss’.\(^\text{14}\) This ‘infinite sadness and infinite loss’ seems a hyperbolic estimation of his sister’s and grandmother’s deaths in relation to the overall narrative of grief that constitutes Billy’s life, a life that has been a catalogue of specific losses of those close to him. It seems hyperbolic because it relates once more to the sister’s and grandmother’s deaths, which McCarthy has previously referred to only in passing at the beginning of The Crossing as bereavements predating the beginning of the novel and a loss he never refers to again until the end of the trilogy. Billy’s inconsolable sadness at the end of his life seems to be initiated by the dream but is associated with something more universal and more profound than his sister’s death over seventy years previously, in order for it to be described as ‘infinite’ in this way. However, the link between the death of the grandmother and the sister at the beginning of The Crossing with the return to their memory at the end of Cities of the Plain, acts as a framing for the ‘infinite sadness, infinite loss’ that permeates the whole of Billy’s story. Immediately after this dream Billy ‘woke and lay in the dark and cold and he thought of her and he thought of his brother dead in Mexico.’\(^\text{15}\) These grief-laden references to his dead sister drift into other meditations on mourning regarding his dead brother, which suggest these deaths and the associated grieving are interchangeable. The closing half of this frame narrative helps us to read the opening half in a different way that moves us beyond a specific trauma to a more generalised trauma.

McCarthy develops this framing device further in these final pages of the trilogy when Billy returns to the country his family ‘quit’ in the opening pages of The Crossing and ‘looked for the grave of his sister but he could not find it’.\(^\text{16}\) His journey has come round full circle, as he now seeks, at the end of his life, the grave of the sister who died when he was a

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\(^{14}\) Ibid.  
\(^{15}\) Ibid., 266.  
\(^{16}\) Ibid., 289.
child, in the country that his family left in search of a new life. The fact that he cannot find the grave is symbolic of the failure of Billy’s lifelong quest to make sense of the intangible absence he experiences. The fact that Billy cannot find his sister’s grave also suggests that the narrative itself has come full circle. The failure to find the dead sister’s grave symbolises the pervading but unspecified sense of absence that signposts the beginning and ending of the two novels. The lost grave also symbolises the loss of country and continued failure to find the ‘true country’ of promise culminating in Billy’s late life as an exile in aimless wandering.

The ‘infinite sadness, infinite loss’ Billy feels at the end of the trilogy are not just associated with the death of his sister years ago, before the onset of Billy’s story, but also mark the traumatic absence that frames Billy’s life. In framing Billy’s life journey in this way McCarthy refuses to give us any notion of a time or state of being before ‘infinite loss’. The sister acts as an unnamed and irretrievable placeholder at the beginning and the end of Billy’s life for the unspecified traumatic absence that always haunts his existence. During the course of The Crossing, Billy experiences the death of each member of his family – his grandmother, sister, parents and brother, and through into Cities of the Plain, the death of his friend, John Grady Cole. None of these losses, in itself, constitutes a foundational, specific trauma, but like the losses of grandmother and sister at the beginning of The Crossing establish and re-establish a sense of interchangeable, fathomless suffering.

Absence with Wolves

If the framing of Billy’s story destabilizes our ability to ascribe any particular loss, and thus makes us read the failure and sadness of Billy’s life in terms of a non-specific absence that haunts him from the outset, then this attention to narrative structure also changes how we need to evaluate the formative experience he has with the wolves at the beginning of
The Crossing. We have seen how, in the opening paragraph of the novel, McCarthy juxtaposes the relationship between loss in Billy’s past and his yearning for an adventurous future in the ‘new country [...] rich and wild’. The second paragraph introduces Billy’s first encounter with wolves, which, at first, seems to reinforce the promise of the young man’s natural affinity with that country. He wakes knowing intuitively that the wolves ‘would be coming out onto the plain in the new snow to run the antelope in the moonlight’. Indeed, this encounter has been interpreted by some critics as a visionary, formative experience for Billy, a transcendent, truth-bearing vision so profound that it shapes Billy’s life thereafter. Barclay Owens names this ‘a transfiguring moment of epiphany for Billy. Stronger than any domestic tie with his parents, he feels the “call of the wild” in the mountains.’ Robert Jarrett comments on the otherworldly nature of this experience for the young Billy and on how significant it is for him that this moment is registered in the wolves’ returning stare:

Looking out over the scene where the wolves have ‘crossed’ before him, the child Billy glimpses a perception of another world – a world whose contours are radically different from the human. The wolf’s identity is one unalienated from the natural and its own predatory nature [...] That the wolves, in mirrorlike fashion, “know” Billy is clear in their returned gaze at their return from the hunt, passing within 20 feet of the boy.

David Holloway also notes how, in McCarthy’s fiction, the apprehension of the primal nature of certain animals, such as Billy’s encounter with the wolves, can be seen to ‘stand for the essential itself, for the authentic truth-bearing core of things’. Holloway claims that McCarthy’s preoccupation with such revelatory encounters with the natural world involve

17 McCarthy, The Crossing, 3.
18 Owens, Cormac McCarthy’s Western Novels, 74.
19 Jarrett, Cormac McCarthy, 115.
20 Holloway, The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy, 149.
what he considers to be a ‘modernist return to the search for the “quintessence,”’ the unmediated moment or epiphany, when what is conceived to be the artifice of life is stripped away and the inner natural essence of the “the thing itself” shines through’. Like Jarrett, John Cant also comments on the direct connection between Billy and the wolf:

Billy’s fascination with the wolves lies in his sense that they apprehend the world directly. He attempts to emulate this ability, to gain the wolf’s direct sensory apprehension of the world, an experience unmediated by a cultural matrix and needing no structuring narrative.

Could this encounter, if it has such an intense and transcendent quality as these critics maintain, be so foundational in Billy’s experience that it overshadows the rest of the novel and transforms the post-encounter world into one that is permanently experienced as a traumatic loss? These critics provide a resonantly co-ordinated reading of Billy’s encounter with the wolves as far-reaching, visionary and momentarily fulfilling. However, another way of looking at this sequence, immediately after the opening paragraph registering the absence of sister and grandmother, is to read the encounter as one that continues to establish the sense of inexplicable absence that Billy experiences from the beginning of his life. Having established Billy’s instinctive hearkening to the wolf’s hunting cry, McCarthy then describes in detail the difference between Billy and these primitive creatures, with an all too human account of him getting dressed, ‘by the faint warmth of the stove’, pulling on his breeches, shirt and ‘blanketlined duckingcoat’ to contend with the cold outside, and holding his ‘boots to the windowlight to pair them left and right’. McCarthy further implies Billy’s paradoxical association with and, separation from, the identity of the wolves with descriptions of Billy going ‘forward on knees and elbows with his hands pulled back into his

21 Ibid., 159-60.
23 McCarthy, The Crossing, 3.
sleeves to keep them out of the snow’.\(^{24}\) This suggests Billy himself has become transformed into a crawling wolf-like entity, but he still has to retract his vulnerable human hands ‘into his sleeves’ to protect them from the cold. McCarthy reinforces the conjunction between boy and wolf and the antelopes he watches moving on the plain below through the similarities regarding how Billy’s ‘breath smoked in the bluish light’ and how also the creatures’ ‘breath smoked palely in the cold’.\(^{25}\) Similarly, Billy awaits the arrival of the wolves at ‘the last of the small juniper trees where the broad valley ran under the Animas Peaks’, where, wolf-like, ‘he crouched quietly’.\(^{26}\) Here the young boy reaches the edge of his parents’ homestead on the threshold of another world, the mountain country of the ‘Animas Peaks’, from which emerge the ‘running’ ‘harrying’ wolves whose approach he awaits. The mountains represent yet another country, another form of existence that lies beyond the Hidalgo country and the world of family and domesticity, sleeping ‘in the room off the kitchen’.\(^{27}\)

However, although Billy reaches out to this new ‘country’ of wolves in the mountains of the Animas Peaks, McCarthy also re-establishes how these creatures are ‘of another world entire’, a world of which Billy has a vision but one that isolates him as he experiences it. As Billy seeks out a more intimate encounter with the creatures, his discomfort becomes predominant as he is ‘very cold’, and his breath vanishes ‘constantly before him in the cold’.\(^{28}\) Eventually, after waiting ‘a long time’ in this alien environment, the wolves reappear and are, unlike Billy, obviously in their element, ‘Loping and twisting. Dancing. Tunneling their noses in the snow. Loping and running and rising by twos in a standing dance and running on again.’\(^{29}\)

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 4.  
\(^{25}\) Ibid.  
\(^{26}\) Ibid.  
\(^{27}\) Ibid.  
\(^{28}\) Ibid., 3.  
\(^{29}\) Ibid., 4.
The wolves reveal an intimacy with themselves and the landscape that seals Billy off from their company. If this is an epiphany for him, it is one that is characterised, at least in part, by an experience of separation rather than unity and a shared truth. For instance, we can see how the momentary ‘gaze’, held as so significant by Jarrett in establishing Billy’s union with the wolves as a ‘perception of another world’ for Billy, may also offer a vision that the child can only observe but never inhabit: ‘He could see their almond eyes in the moonlight. He could hear their breath. He could feel the presence of their knowing that was electric in the air.’

As he watches, separated on a purely physical level as the wolves ‘bunched and nuzzled and licked one another’ in an intimacy he cannot share, this visual connection is disturbed and broken by their awareness of Billy’s alien presence:

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Then they stopped. They stood with their ears cocked. Some with one forefoot raised to their chest. They were looking at him. He did not breathe. They did not breathe.
They stood. Then they turned and quietly trotted on.
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The moment when they return his gaze, the moment in which he is closest to the natural connection he seeks, can only be sustained with that most unnatural of processes – the holding of breath. However, the wolves lose interest first and turn their backs on him.

Billy’s failure to achieve a union or a communication with the wolves on a sensory level equates the experience of the wolves with sorrow and loss. However, this is not a primary loss, but another in a series of irresolvable wounds, along with the dead grandmother and sister that haunt the opening three pages of this novel. This opening presents a world dominated by absence, an absence that is unable to be alleviated because it has no ultimate source. The wolves, like the sister, buried back in Fort Sumner, are configurations of a wider, more intangible wound. The sister and grandmother’s deaths were the first specific losses.

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30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 4-5.
registered as having already happened, but that experience is not directly portrayed in the novel. Billy’s encounter with the wolves is the first full account of an encounter within Billy’s life that involves a direct experience with loss but one that is also part of a wider pattern the novel has already set up with the loss of sister and grandmother.

Dominick LaCapra explains how an unspecified absence may become associated with a specific loss but the trauma generated by this absence cannot be fully expressed or represented and becomes conflated with the desire to retrieve something tangible that substitutes for that absence. LaCapra writes:

Anxiety – the elusive experience or affect related to absence – is a fear that has no thing (nothing) as its object [...]. The conversion of absence into loss gives anxiety an identifiable object – the lost object – and generates the hope that anxiety may be eliminated or overcome.\(^32\)

LaCapra’s ‘identifiable lost object’ offers a way of understanding the shifting of sorrow in this opening to the novel from grandmother to sister to wolves. In this swift early movement from loss to loss in the opening pages, McCarthy registers the way specific but interchangeable separation or grief emanates from preceding but infinite and intangible absence, in order to give the absence form. Through the evocations of family mourning and the unfulfilled connection with the wolves in these opening pages of the novel, McCarthy establishes an underlying absence of structural trauma that forms the basis for Billy’s questing impulses to find the ‘identifiable object’ or ‘missing thing’ that will put things right. The encounter with the wolves is the first direct experience Billy has with both the yearning for that absence to be resolved and the returning sense of absence and separation when his communion with the wolves does not materialise.

\(^{32}\) LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 57.
Immediately after the encounter, the novel reinforces Billy’s sense of separation from the wolves by his refusal, or inability, to discuss what he has seen with Boyd: ‘He didn’t tell him where he’d been nor what he’d seen. He never told anybody.’

Billy’s silence may support the critics such as Holloway and Cant who interpret, respectively, Billy’s encounter with the wolves as an ‘unmediated moment or epiphany’ and ‘an experience unmediated by a cultural matrix’ and a bond therefore untranslatable into human language. However, trauma theory also enables us to interpret such silence as a symptom of his failure to communicate with the creatures, a failure that spreads to the inability to communicate the failure. Dori Laub writes, regarding the experience of trauma:

There are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in thought, memory, and speech.

Billy’s failure to communicate with the wolves extends to his permanent and universal silence regarding this experience and has all the hallmarks of a silence associated with the trauma of separation and loss.

After Billy’s initial encounter with the wolves the narrative suddenly moves forward several years to when Billy is sixteen. Hidalgo now reveals itself as drained of that essential primal vitality that was imagined in the opening paragraph and inherent in Billy’s apprehension of the wolves. Here the novel presents a scene of wintering decay and exhaustion with what appeared once as the ‘new country’ now manifesting before Billy as a place where ‘the trees inhabiting the dry river bed were bare from early on and the sky was

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33 McCarthy, The Crossing 5.
gray day after day and the trees were pale against it."\(^{35}\) The attenuation of the natural world reinforces the losses associated with dead relatives and the wolves and suggests that the spectre of death haunting the family’s transit has not been left behind. The ‘pale cottonwoods with their limbs like bones’ mirror the ‘bones of the sister and the bones of the maternal grandmother’ that were abandoned ‘in the country they’d quit’.\(^{36}\) The ‘new country’ has become, or always was ‘old’, and is now being seen by Billy, like Grant County before it, as another failed country. The echoes of mortality, grief and loss registered in the opening lines of the novel have followed the Parhams and settled with them in this territory. The spectre of death cannot be evaded and is also embodied in ‘the indian’ the boys encounter in this wilderness who demands food from their house and who is responsible, later in the novel, for the murder of the boys’ parents.\(^{37}\)

The disappearance and extinction of wolves from this country reinforces the theme of unregenerate decline and implicitly associates this exhaustion with Billy’s sense of separation from the creatures. Both Billy’s father and the old wolf trapper, Don Arnulfo, tell him ‘there were no more wolves’ in the country.\(^{38}\) When a wolf is discovered, Billy’s father insists that it has to be tracked, trapped and then exterminated like vermin. Billy follows his father to the cabin owned by the absent tracker Echols where there are wolves’ body parts contained in jars for bait in traps. The mystery and primal authenticity of the free-running wolf is here distilled and reduced to a bottled essence of ‘dark liquids’ and rendered into ‘dried viscera. Liver, gall, kidneys’, body parts deployed as a bait to exterminate the species.\(^{39}\) These reductive ‘inward parts of the beast’ inspire, paradoxically, in Billy a meditation on the otherworldly essence of the creature:

\(^{35}\) McCarthy, *The Crossing*, 5.
\(^{36}\) Ibid., 5, 3.
\(^{37}\) Ibid., 5.
\(^{38}\) Ibid., 24, 45.
\(^{39}\) Ibid., 17.
Who dreams of man and has so dreamt in running dreams a hundred thousand years and more. Dreams of that malignant lesser god come pale and naked and alien to slaughter all his clan and his kin and rout them from their house. There is a noticeable shift in the language here from the anatomical description of body parts to a spiritual register, arcane and resonant with its biblically rhythmic references to gods, dreams over a hundred thousand years old, and clans being routed from houses in mass exterminations. This language and the reference here to the ‘lesser god mankind’ and its opposite, the free running spirit, suggest a mythic conflict between man and wolf. McCarthy also establishes, in this conflict, mankind as ‘the lesser god’ and the wolf as a superior form of spirit creature slaughtered by man, a ‘lesser’, but even more ferocious beast. This mythic dimension is further developed through the reference to the wolves’ adherence to ‘an old order. Old ceremonies. Old protocols.’ The wolf here becomes something timeless, far more than just an endangered and dangerous creature. McCarthy elevates the contest between man and wolf to an eternal struggle where the wolf is an ancient spirit creature and mankind the voracious predator. Mankind’s lesser status emerges through the numerically sterile capacity for cataloguing the wolf’s destruction, trapping the wolf in a ‘number four and a half Newhouse’ and reducing the wolf’s vital essence to a finely processed bottled ingredient known as ‘No.7 Matrix’.

Billy perceives the wolves as something ‘other’, something greater than this reduction that mankind has imposed on the creatures. When he returns from the Echols cabin with the body parts and baiting essences he is, as he was after his first encounter with the wolves, noticeably silent, and is described as ‘sitting at the window [...] watching the moon over the

40 Ibid.
41 Ibid., 25. See S. K. Robisch, ‘The Trapper Mystic Werewolves in The Crossing’ in Myth, Legend, Dust, 288-292 for references to the mythic properties of the wolf and the mythic struggle between wolf and man in the West
42 McCarthy, The Crossing, 17, 18.
river and the river trees and the mountains to the south.' He is looking out on to the scene of his first encounter with the wolves, the nearby trees and beyond the Animas Peaks from which the wolves came running. His silent meditation on this scene and the mountains beyond suggests his wistful association with the creatures he has just witnessed rendered into bait and body parts. He is unable to make a full connection with the creatures he venerates but is nevertheless caught in the middle of this primal struggle between wolf and man.

Jarrett balances Billy’s contemplation of the wolf’s nobility with the more pragmatic perspective of his father, pointing out Billy’s dilemma to either follow the economic imperative of extermination supported by his father, or his own deeper understanding and appreciation of the wolf’s place in nature:

Originally viewing the wolf as an economic threat and as intellectual challenge, the 16-year-old Parham had assumed from his father the task of trapping the wolf. Yet as the dreamlike incident from the novel’s start suggests, he from the beginning has held a contradictory view of the wolf as his own double, representing the desire for an intellect unalienated from the natural.

As Jarrett here points out, Billy’s motives for finding the wolf on his own put him at odds with his father’s practical, but reductive inclinations to trap and kill the creature. However, Billy’s position is more complicated than Jarrett’s assessment, in that, although the wolves may represent, for Billy, a ‘desire for an intellect unalienated from the natural’, this does not mean that Billy can share in that ‘intellect’. He is still defined by his limitations as a human being, and cannot become one or commune with the wolf. The wolves still represent, for him, an experience of loss, a sense of loss reinforced by the knowledge that the wolves have now been exterminated by man throughout that country. The one wolf that has been

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43 Ibid., 19.
44 Jarrett, Cormac McCarthy, 115-116.
discovered in the mountains, therefore, assumes, for Billy, a heightened symbolic status as the last of its kind, and also as Billy’s last chance to achieve his communion with these creatures.

McCarthy strengthens the connection between Billy, this remaining wolf and the wolves he encountered in his childhood, through Billy’s attempt to recapture, in his imagination, that initial experience he had and apply it to the wolf now out in the wilderness and being tracked:

He closed his eyes and tried to see her. Her and others of her kind, wolves and ghosts of wolves running in the whiteness of that high world as perfect to their use as if their counsel had been sought in the devising of it.45

It is important to Billy’s apprehension of the wolf and the loss he feels that he remembers her in mythic terms as ghost-like and ‘running’, in ‘that high world’, as the apotheosis of limitless freedom inhabiting some ineffable and unattainable level of experience, and not caught in a trap or compressed into a glass container. The wolf’s entrapment and degraded conversion to body parts in a glass at the hands of that ‘malignant lesser god’ mankind serve to confirm further, for Billy, that, the more extreme and specific the physical containment, the more tangible is the loss of the creature itself. Billy’s own personal failure to connect with the wolf in the opening scene of the novel, along with the wolf’s subsequent near-extinction and the representation of man as ruthless hunter and predator, create an expectation of further loss around this one surviving wolf. In the stages leading up to Billy’s quest to retrieve this one remaining member of the endangered species, McCarthy thus generates an expectation of continued failure from Billy’s past encounters with the wolves.

Before Billy discovers the wolf, McCarthy makes further connections between this last wolf and the wolves Billy watched in the opening of the novel. The description of the wolf’s journey through the mountains harks back to the description of Billy’s first vision of the wolves ‘running on the plain harrying the antelope and the antelope moved like phantoms in the snow and circled and wheeled and the dry powder blew about them in the cold moonlight.’

The lone wolf in the mountains is described in a similar way:

At night she would go down onto the Animas Plains and drive the wild antelope, watching them flow and turn in the dust of their own passage where it rose like smoke off the basin floor.

The same location, the Animas Plains, and the repetition of night-time movement circling the antelope, whose frantic churning of snow and dust evoke a dream-like but deadly dance, create an association between the wolves that Billy witnessed as a child and this one wolf that remains. The hypnotic unreality or hyper-reality associated with these ‘phantoms in the snow’ reinforces McCarthy’s earlier arcane mythic description of the wolf’s ‘god-like’ mystery.

McCarthy further establishes a connection between the idea of the wolf as something beyond apprehension except on a mythic level and a representation of a more general sense of absence pervading the novel, when Billy visits the old wolf trapper Don Arnulfo. The old man asserts that ‘the wolf is like the copo de nieve’, the ‘snowflake’ which ‘you catch [...] but when you look in your hand you don’t have it no more.’ He proposes that the essence of the wolf is fundamentally elusive and that ‘if you catch it you lose it. And where it goes there

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46 Ibid., 4.
47 Ibid., 25.
48 Ibid., 46.
is no coming back from. Not even God can bring it back.\textsuperscript{49} The wolf may have been claimed by mankind physically for skins and matrix bait specimens, but this has only resulted in a confirmation that the true wolf is beyond man’s capacity to appropriate either physically or relationally. Through Don Arnulfo’s symbolic associations, the wolf becomes synonymous with the world itself, beyond man’s comprehension except in terms of absence, like the disappearing snowflake in a man’s grasp: ‘The wolf is made the way the world is made. You cannot touch the world. You cannot hold it in your hand for it is made of breath only.’\textsuperscript{50} Don Arnulfo’s symbol of the wolf as an entity that is, like the snowflake, both there and not there, incorporates a metaphor that goes beyond the wolf to enfold ‘the world’ itself as a place that is evanescent and cannot be held or controlled by man. Through this snowflake metaphor, the wolf passes into the domain of the symbol and the non-specific, a signifier for what has both been lost and, at the same time, was always absent. McCarthy’s treatment of the wolf as ‘copo de nieve’ allows us to see how any such attempt at capture, or as in Billy’s case communion, is as elusive as the grasping of a snowflake. McCarthy thus transforms the one remaining wolf into a symbol for the unattainable – the creature that stands in for all that is in the ‘world’ that disappears from a man’s grasp the moment he tries to take a hold of it. This symbolic interpretation of the wolf equates with Billy’s early encounter with the wolves and the loss he felt at the moment of failed contact. Don Arnulfo’s perception adds another layer of ineffable elusiveness associated with the wolf, another intimation of inherent failure in any attempt to save or capture the creature. McCarthy establishes the wolf generally, and this wolf now in the mountains in particular, as ‘god-like’, giving it a mythic status that Billy reveres. This mythic status sets up Billy’s ensuing journey to find the wolf as a heroic quest, but one already imbued with a sense of past loss and anticipations of further failure.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
A fuller understanding of this failure requires a return to the structural traumatic absence which underlies Billy’s first failure to communicate with the wolves. LaCapra claims that the process of conflating absence with loss often occurs when an absence is converted into a form of cultural narrative. For LaCapra this becomes transformed into a ‘loss of innocence, full community or unity with the mother and even figured as an event or derived from one (as in the story of the Fall or the Oedipal scenario)’. Such a ‘loss’ is configured around Billy’s relationship with the wolves and the subsequent absence of wolves from the country brought about by a policy of extermination. LaCapra notes how an absence converted into loss and transformed into narrative is a process possibly ‘essential to all fundamentalisms or foundational philosophies’. Absence in the form of anxiety seeks a cause or a source, a definite but imagined loss that stimulates a yearning for the return to wholeness or unity – an idealised state that must be sought and regained. Billy’s desire to commune with wolves embodies that yearning to restore a lost unity or wholeness that he feels is missing from his world. His subsequent attempt to first capture and then free the wolf incorporates, to use LaCapra’s term, ‘absence narrativized’, the process through which the absence enacts a cause or quest that seeks a return to an imaginary and mythic state of completion. McCarthy shows us how such a ‘narrative of absence’ can only be fully represented through the failure of the quest for the reconfigured objectified form of the absence, which, in this case, is Billy’s wolf.

In understanding the connections existing between the origins of myth and the projection of cultural absence into loss, LaCapra further suggests that the absence associated with structural trauma is conflated into a particular loss because this provides an individual or a culture with a particular comforting projection for what is imagined to be lost. LaCapra

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51 LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 49.
52 Ibid., 51.
53 Ibid., 49.
describes this loss and its perceived significance within a culture as ‘some original unity, wholeness, security or identity that others have ruined, polluted or contaminated and thus made “us” lose’.\textsuperscript{54} This projection of a specific loss that stands in for an underlying but intangible absence provides the opportunities to create scapegoats for a sense of personal or social unease or sense of something lacking. In \textit{The Crossing} this ‘scapegoating’ process may explain the extermination of the wolves among the Arizona ranchers struggling to survive in that ‘dry river bed’ of a country.\textsuperscript{55} The ranchers’ extermination policy reveals the wider cultural significance of the absence at the heart of McCarthy’s cowboy culture. As a result of the wolf becoming a scapegoat to the point of it being hounded to near extinction, the last wolf in the mountains then becomes a focus for a final but reductive extermination or, conversely, in Billy’s case, a heroic quest to save and liberate.

\textbf{Trauma, Myth and the Failing Quest}

From his discovery of the wolf caught in the trap, Billy’s wish to protect the creature grows in scope from merely releasing it from the snare, to bringing it home to his father, to a prolonged journey further afield to Mexico and what he believes will be a safe haven for the wolf. McCarthy signifies the crucial turning point with Billy’s decision to ride ‘up onto the broad plain that stretched away before him south toward the mountains of Mexico’.\textsuperscript{56} This moment of heading for another country marks the beginnings of Billy’s quest. It signifies, for Billy, the turning away from a country that represents a series of losses associated with the wolves and a deeper underlying sense of absence that the wolf embodies for Billy. This heading out for new territory repeats the pattern that began the novel with Billy’s family

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 57.
\textsuperscript{55} McCarthy, \textit{The Crossing}, 5.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 63.
moving out of Grant County where they left the bones of ancestors in order to start a new life in Hidalgo. Billy’s setting out for another territory realises a journey into the Animas Peaks, the mountains of Mexico, which McCarthy has signposted from the beginning of the novel as synonymous with the wolves and Billy’s longing to join them. In setting up Billy’s projected journey as a heroic endeavour to save the last wolf and also, at the same time resolve the hero’s own troubled past, McCarthy establishes the narrative foundations for a possible re-enactment of Frye’s ‘successful’ heroic quest.

There are, however, intimations of inherent failure hanging over this quest even at the moment Billy sets off from home to find the wolf. As I have already discussed, the possibility of the loss of the last wolf is at stake here in Billy’s quest. A further loss, however, is heralded at the beginning of Billy’s quest as ‘he rode out of the gate before his father was even up and he never saw him again.’ Although Billy’s quest for the wolf is not a direct cause of his father’s death, there is an implied association in the narrative between the quest to retrieve one loss embodied in the wolf and the commensurate triggering of further loss in the future. Even as Billy is ‘saddling the horse in the cold dark’ the quest is already invoking a further, arguably more profound loss of the father that lies beyond the present quest.

Further indications of failure reside in Billy’s treatment of the wolf once he has caught the creature. Although Billy’s purpose is to free the wolf, for the whole time of their journey together the wolf is tethered and captive. On separate occasions Billy is described as falling ‘upon her, kneeling with the living wolf gasping between his legs and sucking air’, ‘lying on the ground with his legs scissored about her midriff and his arms around her neck’, and forcing ‘her down into the grass by the side of the road [...] astraddle of her’. These violently physical and implicitly sexual descriptions embody a desire to pin down and

57 Ibid., 52.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid., 55, 58, 63.
possess physically a creature which he values for its conversely elusive and intangible mystery.

Billy’s moments of physical wrestling – the implicit desire they represent to force an intimacy with the wolf which he has sought from the beginning – are reinforced with descriptions of Billy’s conjugal tenderness towards the pregnant creature:

He sat stroking her. Then reached down and felt her belly. She struggled and her eye rolled wildly. He spoke to her softly. He put the flat of his hand between her warm and naked teats. He held it there for a long time. Then he felt something move.  

In these moments, he treats the wolf like a loving partner, feeling the cubs within her pregnant belly. This tenderness, while reaching for a connection with the creature that can never be made, also suggests Billy’s desire to guarantee the survival of the wolf and her cubs in order to perpetuate the species, an instinct that further raises the stakes of Billy’s endeavour to protect and preserve the wolf’s welfare. Furthermore, Billy also shares with the wolf his own secrets and other moments of emotional intimacy:

When he touched her, her skin ran and quivered under his hand like a horse’s. He talked to her about his life but it didn’t seem to rest her fears. After a while he sang to her.  

Billy explains to her his decision to take her to Mexico rather than back home to his father to be executed and sold: ‘He made her promises that he swore to keep in the making. That he would take her back to the mountains where she would find others of her kind.’ However, despite this attempted intimacy and Billy’s fantasies of fulfilment and freedom, as Billy

60 Ibid., 74.
61 Ibid., 89.
62 Ibid., 105.
makes these promises ‘the wolf watched him with […] that same recklessness deep of loneliness that cored the world to his heart.’\footnote{Ibid.} The alienating way the wolf watches him re-enacts the failed eye contact between Billy and the wolves in the opening pages. McCarthy thus reinforces, despite Billy’s moments of forced physical contact with the creature alongside his promise to save her, how there is no reciprocal hint of recognition from the wolf, no sense of the unity between man and wolf, but rather a void of emptiness which reflects back the sense of loss Billy himself feels. Whether Billy is violently trying to overpower the wolf or reaching for an elusive intimacy, he is still far away from any integrated experience with the creature. The wolf always remains ‘other’ and alien and beyond apprehension.

McCarthy incorporates these reminders of Billy’s past failure and intimations of further loss into the structure of Billy’s promise to the wolf, in order to establish the intrinsically failing nature of his quest. Billy’s belief in the possibilities of salvation for the wolf in the mountains of Mexico is revealed to be a disastrous illusion when, once they cross the border into Mexico, the wolf is stolen, tied to a carnival pole and savaged by dogs. Billy’s quest to free the wolf ends, not only in failure, but in the reversal of his aims, with the wolf suffering a reduction to carnival meat fodder – a process that mirrors the earlier transposition of the creature to bottled body parts back in the mountain trapper’s cabin.

For McCarthy, the failure of the quest is all important, a failure that is already intrinsically embedded into the quest before it begins, since it involves an attempt to resolve an inherent loss that is really a signifier for a deeper, intractable and irresolvable cultural absence and trauma. Billy’s shooting of the wolf, to put the creature out of its misery, not only confirms the failure to retrieve what ‘can never be held’, but also seals that failure in a defeat and death that generates further trauma. LaCapra argues that ‘when structural trauma is
reduced to, or figured as, an event, one has the genesis of myth wherein trauma is enacted in
a story or narrative from which later traumas seem to derive.”64 LaCapra reveals how the
conflation of absence into a historical event can only exist culturally in the form of ‘story’ or
narrative, a ‘story’ that has the power to evoke myth. It is through narrative, through stories,
therefore, for LaCapra, that a culture can try to make sense of an underlying structural
absence. Through Billy’s story, McCarthy shows how the cultural conflation of traumatic
absence into a loss is transformed into literary narrative in the form of the quest for the wolf.
However, that structural absence can never be represented, and the surrogate object for the
absence, in this case the wolf, can never offer fulfilment or completion. McCarthy’s
representation of this irresolvable absence is, therefore, embodied in the trauma narrative of
the failed quest without resolution.

McCarthy’s refusal to deliver a successful resolution relates to other trauma theory
concerned with the ways trauma leads to repetition and suspension of narrative. For instance,
McCarthy’s unresolved quest resonates with what E.Ann Kaplan terms ‘narration without
narrativity – that is, without the narrative sequence leading to a determined end we associate
with narratives’.65 In Billy’s story we also discern the cycle of destruction associated with the
traumatic event exemplified in Cathy Caruth’s observation that ‘the shape of individual lives,
the history of the traumatized individual, is nothing other than the determined repetition of
the event of destruction.’66 McCarthy’s quest, therefore, follows LaCapra’s model of the
‘story’ which serves as an attempt to make sense of the underlying traumatic absence; and the
failure of that quest signals the impossibility of ever resolving that absence. McCarthy’s quest
follows the narrative pattern of failure and repetition associated with those trauma narratives

64 LaCapra, Writing History, Writing Trauma, 82.
65 Kaplan, Trauma Culture, 65.
66 Caruth, Unclaimed Experience, 63.
indicated by LaCapra, Caruth and Kaplan, in that the quest is endlessly bound to fail because its foundations are based upon an irresolvable trauma.

McCarthy extends the idea of perpetuating a trauma that can never be resolved by revealing how Billy continues to pursue his quest even beyond the point of failure, as he rides with the wolf’s body ‘west towards the mountains’.\(^{67}\) Once there Billy makes a last attempt at a connection with the wolf: ‘He touched the cold and perfect teeth [...] and put his hand on her bloodied forehead’, but, in the last of the failed connections between Billy and the wolf, typified, again, by a failure to communicate at the level of the ocular, the creature’s ‘eye turned to the fire gave back no light’.\(^{68}\) The wolf again fails to return that gaze and Billy closes his own eyes and imagines once more the creature in her natural element ‘running in the mountains’ alongside the deer and other animals with which she is connected in ‘a rich matrix of creatures’. This vision replays, poignantly, the one Billy had of the wolf ‘running in the whiteness of that high world’ before he commenced on the quest.

These images of freedom are juxtaposed with the trauma of the subsequent burial which closes down the future of the species as Billy not only buries the wolf, but also ‘the little wolves in her belly’ who ‘felt the cold draw all about them and they cried out mutely in the dark and he buried them all and piled the rocks over them and led the horse away.’\(^{69}\) The burial of the wolf, with her cubs still living inside her, means that the wolf remains elusively the last wolf, without progeny, permanently unreachable now in death, but still yearned for in Billy’s imagination. Billy takes up the wolf’s ‘stiff head out of the leaves and held it or he reached to hold what cannot be held’, echoing Don Arulfo’s imagery of the snowflake. This recalling of the snowflake metaphor also evokes the equally elusive and wondrous creature

\(^{67}\) McCarthy, *The Crossing*, 125.
\(^{68}\) Ibid., 127.
\(^{69}\) Ibid., 129.
that ‘already ran among the mountains at once terrible and of great beauty’.\(^{70}\) McCarthy here once more transforms the lost wolf into a representation of a god-like and mythic creature that carries the ‘power to cut and shape and hollow out the dark form of the world’.\(^{71}\) In the conflict between the stark burial of the wolf with her cubs still alive inside her and the way in which the wolf’s mythic power grows through loss, McCarthy shows how that the failure of the quest and the concomitant trauma re-emphasises the mythic status of the creature.

McCarthy also combines the full traumatic loss and suffering involved in the killing of the wolf with the subsequent association between Billy and a mythic heroism. As Billy rides into the mountains with the wolf’s body, he identifies himself with heroes of the past:

As he rode he sang old songs his father once had sung in the used to be and a soft corrido from his grandmother that told of the death of a brave soldadera who took up her fallen soldierman’s gun and faced the enemy in some old waste of death.\(^{72}\)

There is an implied connection here between the bereaved and mythic ‘soldadera’ in his grandmother’s corrido and Billy’s heroism as he also ‘faced the enemy in some old waste of death’ in risking his life putting a stop to the carnival killing of the wolf. In singing the heroic ballad form of the corrido, Billy is singing on behalf of himself and the wolf, ‘the fallen soldierman’ in this lament.\(^{73}\) Billy’s failure to free the wolf instils him with a sense of communion with his father, his grandmother and the dead wolf and it also connects him both to a mythic past and future of further failure and loss. The dead grandmother, a past loss, is again referenced, but this time in association with the ‘corrido’, which elevates the dead to a mythic status. Also included in this elegy is his father who sang songs ‘in the used to be’, highlighting a further loss, unknown to Billy at this stage, but already signalled to the reader.

\(^{70}\) Ibid., 127.
\(^{71}\) Ibid.
\(^{72}\) Ibid., 125-126.
\(^{73}\) Ibid., 125.
Billy’s father, he discovers later, has been murdered by Indians in the boy’s absence, but the narrative, here, again foregrounds his passing as he is already configured ‘in the used to be’. Billy’s corrido evokes a composite association of loss that incorporates, wolf, grandmother, and father in a context that resonates with mythic memory. The reference to the doomed mythic hero and heroine in the ‘corrido’ also anticipates a future loss in the narrative associated with Billy’s brother Boyd and his lover who are later killed in Mexico, and who also have a corrido named after them for their reputed but never confirmed heroic exploits. These interweaving references to past and future loss, bound together by the mythic connotations of the corrido, suggest that the failed quest triggers further journeys and further losses in an interconnected spiralling of trauma, heroism and myth. The collective ‘they’ who ‘rode up the dry course of the creekbed [...] up through the low hills’ incorporates Billy and the dead wolf in a heroic but lost partnership. Billy, ‘singing softly as he rode’, is accompanied by, not only the dead wolf, but also the combined mythic presence of his grandmother, father, and the soldieman/brother. The elegiac return to a heroic past imagined through Billy’s reaching back into the folk memory of the corrido at the end of the first failed quest, serve to fold and intertwine the lost myth of the past with present and future trauma together in an ever repeating cycle.

LaCapra’s claim regarding structural trauma and myth has further significance in terms of the ways McCarthy evokes this mythic dimension through the trauma of Billy’s failed quest. LaCapra claims that ‘when structural trauma is reduced to, or figured as, an event, one has the genesis of myth wherein trauma is enacted in a story or narrative from

74 See A. Paredes, *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1958), for the ways in which the corrido, the Mexican folk ballad, transforms past events into myth.
75 McCarthy, *The Crossing*, 126.
which later traumas seem to derive.\textsuperscript{76} His statement speaks to the manner in which The Crossing establishes an initial absence at the beginning, how the wolf becomes a surrogate for that absence and the ways in which, having become a surrogate for that absence, the wolf also embodies the ‘genesis’ of myth through its associations with a ‘god-like’ power and mystery. The quest that follows to retrieve the wolf further reinforces the creature’s mythic quality as the one remaining wolf in the country. The wolf also encapsulates a remnant of the ‘rich and wild’ mythic country that the Parham family sought but failed to find in Hidalgo, and constitutes a further signifier of the lost country of the Old West that has disappeared with the extermination of the wolves from that country. Billy’s failing quest then enacts ‘the narrative from which later traumas seem to derive’, and in the process, through this further trauma, the narrative generates further myth.

McCarthy reinforces this sense of traumatic repetition, reaching forward to further trauma in the future, in the opening sentence to Part Two of the novel, where he immediately registers an epitaph to the wolf’s passing and also a prologue to the next phase of failure and loss: ‘Doomed enterprises divide lives forever into the then and now.’\textsuperscript{77} This opening sentence creates a sense of being suspended between a past that is irretrievable and a present that is divided or fractured, while the reference to ‘doomed enterprises’ suggests a future that is already broken before it begins. LaCapra envisages how, in structural trauma, the conflation of absence and loss into a mythical belief in a lost past may ‘construe lost wholeness nostalgically and link it to a future perfect’. This may, in turn, lead to an experience of a culture or individual losing a sense of time and being ‘compressed between a past that is lost and probably never existed and a future that is unattainable’.\textsuperscript{78} LaCapra expresses here the cyclically repetitive nature of cultural trauma, how it loops interminably

\textsuperscript{76}LaCapra, Writing History, Writing Trauma, 82.
\textsuperscript{77}McCarthy, The Crossing, 129.
\textsuperscript{78}LaCapra, Writing History, Writing Trauma, 195.
from irresolvable absence in the past towards an illusory redemptive and ‘perfect’ future which only perpetuates the sense of absence. In *The Crossing* McCarthy registers, in this opening sentence to Part Two and throughout the cyclic quest narrative, this temporal disruption and ‘compression’ suspended between the ‘then’ of a lost past, the trauma of the present ‘doomed enterprise’ and a future with more of these ‘enterprises’ to follow. McCarthy moves the narrative forward but only to repeat traumatically the process of the failed quest, enacting in narrative form what Cathy Caruth observes as the ‘way in which catastrophic events seem to repeat themselves for those who have passed through them’.79 The opening sentence to Part Two refers to ‘enterprises’ in the plural as the next stage of the novel begins and thereby anticipates how the plurality of these ‘enterprises’ will re-enact perpetually the cycle of grieving past, stretching ahead repeatedly to an equally ‘doomed’ future.

This traumatic repetition runs through the following reinforcement and re-enactment of loss associated with the wolf. Billy goes further into the country he associates with wolves, riding ‘deeper into the mountains’, but no matter how far he ventures ‘in that wild country’ and how much ‘he’d lie in the cold and the dark and listen to the wind [....] he heard no wolves’.80 He persists in his self-imposed exile and finds only a sense of isolation in a ‘country [...] depopulate and barren’ where ‘there was nothing but the wind and the silence.’81 This is the same sense of lifeless isolation that marked the descriptions of Hidalgo with its ‘dry river bed’ and bare pale trees in the opening pages of the novel after Billy’s initial encounter with the wolves ended in a failure to connect. The pattern of fresh territory overcome with a repeated sense of exhaustion and sterility has once more caught up with

80 McCarthy, *The Crossing* 130.
81 Ibid., 134.
Billy, replaying the exhausted frontier myth of new country already rendered dead or sterile at the moment of discovery.

Further repetition in uneasy alignment with past loss is evident with the pronouncement: ‘He thought to become again the child he never was.’\(^{82}\) The lexically awkward and incongruous nature of this statement that embodies a desire to become something again in the future that he never was in the past, suggests the traumatized temporality which Billy inhabits. His paradoxical desire to be a child again when he ‘never was’ a child to begin with encapsulates the repetitive yearning to return in the future to somewhere, or something, that was always either physically or existentially, like the communion with the wolf, unattainable. This statement allies Billy with a yearning to return to a childhood state that never existed, a mythic time that is further evoked by the strange, illogical and arcane usage of the word ‘again’. Through its evocation of a past that is beyond Billy’s memory, McCarthy strives here for an appropriate register to convey the shift of the narrative into a mythic realm. His attempt to invent a mythic language for our times suggests that such a conflation of past loss and future yearning can only be conceived in a register which at times stretches literal understanding. However, within Billy’s yearnings for a state of innocence that never existed and his engagement with a rite of initiation in reverse – to move from youth back to being a child rather than becoming a man – McCarthy interconnects the fallen myth of the lost country, now extended to the Animas mountains where the wolves once roamed, and the childhood lost to irresolvable absences and unfulfilled longings.

McCarthy immediately closes down Billy’s reclamation of childhood and reinforces the process of return home to repeated loss and absence: ‘No lights [...] no horses in the barn and there was no dog [...] The house was empty [...] most of the furniture was gone.’\(^{83}\) Even

\(^{82}\) Ibid., 129.
\(^{83}\) Ibid., 163-164.
the kitchen tap is associated with deathly abandonment giving ‘only a dry gasp and then nothing’. Standing ‘alone in the room off the kitchen, bare save for the tick’ is Billy’s bed, a metaphor for the division in Billy’s life, and in the narrative itself, between the ‘then’, before he left, and the ‘now’ of his return. His parents’ room consolidates this scene of desolation with its ‘empty bedstead’ and ‘the few rags of clothes in the floor’. McCarthy delays Billy’s discovery of what is ‘bad wrong’, namely his parents’ murder, until it registers initially in this abiding sense of what is missing. The revelation of his parents’ murder centres on the ‘empty’ bed and mattress with its ‘enormous bloodstain dried near black and soaked so thick’. This stark encounter with Billy’s parents’ dried blood recalls the intimate sensation he had of the wolf’s blood ‘against his thigh where it had soaked through the sheeting and through his breeches’. The association between the wolf’s and his parents’ blood also correlates temporally and also symbolically the traumas of the wolf’s and parents’ deaths.

For the reader the father’s loss is no surprise as Billy’s father’s death is fore-grounded in the moment when Billy first leaves to seek the wolf. However, this earlier memento mori, along with the interrelated images of blood and violence, suggest a connection between Billy’s quest to find the wolf, the failure of that quest and the return to discover his parents’ murder. The blood imagery also resurrects the associations between the wolf’s death and his father’s passing that McCarthy intimates in the passage where Billy, riding with the wolf’s body alongside him, ‘sang the songs his father sung in the used to be’. McCarthy establishes a further connection between the deaths of the wolf and parents in his description of Billy’s physical response to grief. When Billy lies beside the dead wolf he is described ‘with his

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84 Ibid., 164.
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid., 163.
88 Ibid., 165.
89 Ibid., 125.
hands up before him like some dozing penitent’, and the presentation of Billy as an acolyte of mourning is repeated at the discovery of his parents’ murder when ‘he fell to his knees in the floor and sobbed into his hands.’ ⁹⁰ His grieving contemplation from his parents’ bedroom on the ‘noon light [...] Bright on the Animas Peaks’ also reaches back to when Billy first waited for the wolves ‘where the broad valley ran under the Animas Peaks’, and reaffirms the ways in which the mountains, once the country of wolves and further promise and now established as the locus of the failed quest, have presided over the experiences of loss Billy has felt from the opening of the novel. ⁹¹

Through these interweaving and associated images of lost wolf and now dead father, beneath the ever watchful and now grief-instilled mountains, McCarthy interlinks the death of Billy’s father with other sorrows, and reinforces the perspective that there is not just one individual loss that may be characterised as singularly traumatic. The structure of the novel registers all losses as looping in and out of each other, ‘crossing’ and ‘re-crossing’, within the narrative of the quest to bring them back or to find something that stands in their place. The novel’s title in the singular seems at odds with the fact that there are at least three such journeys within the narrative. However, the singular use of the word suggests the three ‘crossings’ are in fact the same journey, following the same traumatic pattern, repeated three times. McCarthy’s cyclic, see-sawing narrative of traumatic return to loss, followed by further quest and further failure, reaches back within the narrative to the vanishing point of absence at the beginning of the novel.

After the discovery of his parents’ death, this ‘crossing’ begins again, this time, accompanied by his brother Boyd, to retrieve his father’s horses that were stolen in the Indian raid in which his parents were murdered. Billy’s quest for the return of the horses is given

⁹⁰ Ibid., 126, 165.
⁹¹ Ibid., 165, 4.
further motivation in the sense of guilt he feels for his parents’ death as a result of his absence during the Indian attack. He was indeed absent when the lethal attack took place, but he also feels culpable for taking with him ‘the only gun on the place [...] a forty-four carbine and I had that with me’. 

When asked what he traded the rifle for, he is unable to say, admitting ‘I aint sure I could put a name to it.’ Not only has he deprived his father of vital support and the weapon with which he could have defended the home, but he is also unable to put a name to the thing for which he traded the rifle, the wolf’s hide and what it represented. He is unable to define the terms or the outcome of his quest, unable to explain specifically what it was he was looking for and what he was able to bring back from his journey.

We also know that the trade he made for the wolf’s body was, on a practical level, incongruous, the rifle being ‘worth a dozen mutilated wolf hides’. Boyd’s informing him the Indians knew his name ‘like we was friends’ compounds Billy’s guilt further by implying there is a connection between the attack and Billy’s telling the Indian in the wilderness details of his family home. This sense of culpability for his parents’ death intensifies Billy’s experience of trauma and his desire to do something to make amends in the form of another journey into Mexico to retrieve his father’s horses. The trauma of the parents’ murder, therefore, sets up the next quest, the next stage in the cycle. Once more, as with his quest for the retrieval of the wolf, he is embarked on an attempt to put right the losses of the past, to attempt to recover what has been lost. The heroic quest embodied in the failed journey to save the wolf is here repeated in the form of retrieving horses that represent the loss of his father. The father’s death drives the narrative forward to the next quest to bring back

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92 Ibid., 167.
93 Ibid., 170.
94 Ibid., 124.
95 Ibid., 173.
something that will compensate for that loss, raising the possibility for further trauma as Billy has already invested so much personally in the first quest for the wolf.

The quest motif becomes even more pronounced at this stage, as the narrative establishes a quest within a quest when Billy and Boyd save the Mexican peasant girl from kidnappers. Here, McCarthy incorporates further layers of mythic narrative associated with the Old West with the attempt to retrieve the girl reprising the frontier captivity myth.\(^{96}\) McCarthy reaches back into an even more distant medieval tradition of myth with his reference to the boys and the rescued girl as having ‘the look of storybook riders conveying again to her homeland some stolen backland queen’.\(^{97}\) Natalka Palczynski has noted how ‘the narration calls attention to the medieval nature of the chivalric tradition in which Billy, Boyd, and the girl are living.’\(^{98}\) However, the reference to the boys having merely the appearance or ‘the look of storybook riders’, suggests they are not about to re-enact that ‘storybook’ version of myth. The suggestion that their enterprise has a ‘storybook’ fanciful nature suggests that their ‘story’ will not culminate in the traditional redemptive return of ‘the stolen backland queen’, but will ultimately end in some other, less successful way in the stark world of contemporary Mexico.

As the novel develops, quests within the quest are generated through the failure of composite ‘doomed enterprises’. A trapped wolf, stolen horses, a kidnapped girl – they all serve to fulfil the eternal heroic and traumatic quest for the irretrievably ‘missing thing’. In

96 See Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation, 14-15, 467-468 for development of captivity narrative as myth. Although McCarthy’s rescue narrative here departs from the traditional myth of the rescue of the white woman from captivity by Native Indians, the format remains the same, although in this rescue the girl is not even named, thus suggesting her diminished identity in McCarthy’s quest/rescue narrative. Her lack of identity emphasises all the more her status as quest ‘object’ that has to be retrieved to make amends for some deeper loss.

97 McCarthy, The Crossing, 213.

The Crossing, it is the repetition of the quests itself that is the focus of the narrative, not the objects of the quests nor the motives behind the journeys. The symbolic nature of these objects of the quest can be best understood in terms of their inter-changeability but also, more importantly, as objects of loss that initiate the repetitive failure that in turn generates a further traumatic cycle. Billy’s quest to retrieve his father’s horses is a figurative attempt to achieve the impossible, which is to bring back something of his father, a quest that carries with it its own self-contained element of failure. He can never bring his father back, even if he succeeds in retrieving his horses, which he also fails to do. However, if the aim of Billy’s quest is also to make amends symbolically within his family by bringing back the horses his quest carries with it a further extension of failure because he, instead, loses his last remaining family member, his brother, along the way.

At the border on his return to the United States, Billy, now bereft of all family ties, tries to reassert his sense of belonging through associations with his country, while, at the same time, acknowledging his apparent dislocation: ‘I’m an American, he said, if I don’t look like it.’99 He discovers, to his surprise, that ‘this country’s at war’, and, finding himself with ‘no place else to go’, he attempts to enlist.100 Billy’s sense of alienation becomes more severe with his rejection by the army on the basis that he has a ‘heart murmur’.101 He is told by the recruiting officer ‘to just go on home’ but he replies, ‘I don’t have one to go to.’102 Jay Ellis has pointed out how ‘we see Billy is reluctant to be at home wherever he finds himself.’103 This dislocation from both home and nation reveals how central the theme of aimless wandering and ‘lost country’ is, not just to an understanding of Billy’s character, but also to the endlessly unresolved nature of McCarthy’s quest narrative. The emergence into the ‘wild

100 Ibid., 333, 337.
101 Ibid., 339.
102 Ibid., 341.
103 Jay Ellis, No Place for Home 220.
country’ of Hidalgo in the opening pages, the quest for the wolf in the Animas Peaks, the journeys across the border into Mexico – all these indicate an abiding restless attempt to resolve an inner sense of loss that cannot be relieved. On his return this time, Billy experiences an accumulation of loss that now extends beyond his family and community to his severance from national ties. This crisis of identity represents the even more profound foundational lack at the heart of his existence, further reinforced by the irregularity that exists in his very own heart. Billy’s abiding separation from home and nation here now extends to a dislocation deep down at a ‘heart-felt’ level that prevents him from participating in the unifying struggle for a greater cause, a world war that putatively unites all other American citizens.

This restlessness embodied not merely in the character of Billy, but also in the unresolved trauma of McCarthy’s failed quest narrative, manifests itself again in a third journey, a journey undertaken once more to resolve the failure and loss of the previous quests. However, Billy’s return to Mexico to look for Boyd initiates a further encounter of loss when Billy discovers that his brother has been killed in a gunfight. Perpetuating the cycle of trauma from one quest to the next in a chain reaction, Boyd’s death has proceeded from a showdown with the Mexicans who bought his father’s horses from the Indians and then stole them back from Billy and Boyd on the last quest. The news of Boyd’s death generates the beginning of another quest to find Boyd’s body, which constitutes, once again, the quest for a surrogate object for his lost living brother. The Mexican Quijada tells Billy that Boyd ‘was very popular with the people. He was a popular figure.’ After hearing that ‘his brother’s bones lay in a cemetery at San Buenaventura’, Billy ‘heard the lines from the corrido in which the young guero comes down from the north’. This ballad associates Boyd with ‘all just men in the world for as it was sung in the corrido theirs was a bloodfilled road and the

104 McCarthy, The Crossing, 386.
deeds of their lives were writ in that blood which was the world’s heart’s blood.” McCarthy’s adoption here of a mythic register, a striving for mythic language to equate heroism and myth once more with violence and loss, manifests itself in the phrase ‘writ in that blood which was the world’s heart’s blood’. This language raises Boyd’s death out of the nihilistic futility of his violent end in a foreign country and elevates him into a popular icon of folk heroism. He becomes the subject of a corrido which celebrates his bravery and incorporates him into the legend of ‘the young guero’, an outlaw in the mythic tradition of the Old West.

In Billy’s final border crossing to retrieve Boyd’s body, McCarthy intensifies further the associations between the trauma of the failed quest and the heroic cowboy myth. However, at no stage does the narrative suggest that Billy himself knows he is about to fail, or that he incites or invites failure. For him the desire and intention to carry off the task successfully reinforce the traumatic nature of each individual loss and, at the same time reassert the heroic dimensions of each failing quest. The fact that each quest is verging on impossible accentuates the heroism of these enterprises. On finding the burial ground, Billy ‘halted and looked out over this desolation. He turned and looked back at the packhorse and he looked at the gray scud of clouds and at the evening fading in the west’. Boyd’s association with the mythic outlaws of the West is here juxtaposed with the ‘gray scud of clouds’ over his grave, and beyond, the backdrop of ‘the evening light’, like the myth of the Old West itself, is fading once more into the enveloping darkness. To complete this scene of mythic exhaustion Billy is said to be ‘looking back’ as if into a metaphorical past which reveals only ‘desolation’ and a mundane ‘packhorse’. The myth of the Old West, revived briefly in Boyd’s heroic idealisation in the corrido, exhausts itself once more in this scene of

105 Ibid., 374-375.
106 Ibid., 388.
fading western light, at the same time that Billy is disinterring his own brother’s body.

McCarthy describes this process in detail, emphasising the overwhelming effort Billy has to make. For a moment Billy considers the easy option of just walking away but instead chooses the almost impossible task of exhuming the body:

   You could just shovel the dirt back in, he said. It wouldn’t take a hour. He walked over to the horse and unhitched the rope and came back coiling it in his hand and he stood with the coiled rope in the blue and windless dusk and looked off to the north where under the overcast the earliest stars were burning. Well, he said.
   You could do that. 

McCarthy evokes here a vision of Billy as a last cowboy figure in the fading light of the Old West, ready with his rope coiled not to land a steer or a horse, but to drag the coffin of his outlaw-hero-brother singlehandedly out of the ground. His decision to see this task through, no matter what, endows him also with a heroic status, but a heroism that is associated with a traumatically macabre ordeal. Billy is digging up, not only his brother’s body but also, figuratively, the dead myth his brother encapsulates. At the same time Billy himself becomes a heroic mythic figure, but one who, while fading into darkness, is engaged in a ritualised enactment of trauma and mythic exhaustion. This ritual enacts, in miniature, the processes McCarthy performs regarding myth throughout the novel. The coffin, exemplifying the exhausted myth of the Old West dragged to the surface in a traumatic effort, embodies the recycled unearthing of the mythic past through the repeated failure of the quest. McCarthy reveals in this moment, and throughout the novel, how the myth of the Old West, transposed into a contemporary setting, manifests itself in an exhausted, defeated and failed endeavour. However, it is through this exhaustion and defeat that the myth, albeit briefly and amidst ‘desolation’, resurfaces. McCarthy shows us that it is an exhausted myth, but it is through the

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107 Ibid., 392.
exhaustion, failure and trauma that the myth lives on. The heroic, but macabre, effort required from Billy to disinter Boyd’s body and, by extension, restore symbolically, the lost myth of the Old West, reveals how that myth will never die. McCarthy is not endorsing that endurance of the myth, but is showing how that myth continues to live on even though the experience required to re-invoke the myth is traumatic. Through the trauma of Billy’s experience, McCarthy shows that it is only through such traumatic and extreme action that the myth can be reincarnated. The narrative further evokes here a wider cultural dependence on the myth, a relentless cultural yearning to disinter and reincarnate the heroic West. Just as Billy cannot ‘just shovel the dirt back in’ on Boyd’s grave, similarly America, and, moreover, McCarthy himself cannot bury the Western myth forever and leave it to rest beneath the ground. McCarthy, however, simultaneously reveals how that yearning to restore the myth leads to inordinately extreme action associated with the death-related exhumation of a corpse. Through Billy’s ordeal McCarthy thus exemplifies and recognises the morbidity inherent in the eternal yearning within American culture to restore that myth.

It is also through this failure of the quest that McCarthy generates the next cycle of traumatic mythic narrative. The trauma continues with the retrieval of Boyd’s body and the attempted journey home where Billy is attacked by bandits who steal his belongings, stab his horse and scatter his brother’s body. The bandit ‘kicked aside the coverings to reveal in the graying light Boyd’s poor form in the loosely fitting coat [...] He kicked at the poor desiccated thing.’

Boyd’s body is unearthed from its coverings once more ‘awry in its wrappings with one yellow arm outflung’, and Billy’s horse Nino is left ‘lying in the leaves [...] and blood [...] running from the wound again and pooling darkly.’

Having established Billy’s retrieval of Boyd’s body from the grave in traumatic and mythic terms, McCarthy

108 Ibid., 395.
109 Ibid., 398.
then pushes the outcome of the retrieval into further trauma, intensifying and multiplying Billy’s loss. Rather than bringing a final resolution and closure to the cycle of suffering, this final quest emerges as the most futile and desolate. McCarthy suggests, through this depiction of extreme suffering and loss that the only way the mythic West can be restored is through more and more extreme layers of failure and trauma.

McCarthy’s stark refusal to grant resolution within the narrative is evident when Billy brings Boyd’s body back, but the culmination of this quest, the reburial remains undocumented. The quest ends in bathos, the official business regarding the sheriff and a death certificate only briefly acknowledged along with the practical anxieties of the ‘property’ Billy would be ‘diggin in’. The narrative, committed to the cycle of trauma and myth, wilfully withholds any culminating moment of resolution regarding Boyd’s body, the object of the quest. McCarthy’s main focus in this return remains the moment of failure when the bandits ruin Boyd’s body and stab Billy’s horse. It is that moment of trauma and Billy’s subsequent comment on how Boyd’s body ‘sure as hell wasn’t what I wanted’ that marks the quest with the extremes of failure and loss required to generate the myth of the Old West once more. Furthermore the desecration of Boyd’s body and its description as a ‘dessicated thing’ underscores that the body itself is not the object Billy was searching for in that larger mythic sense. The object of his quest in that sense can never be defined in terms of ‘the thing’ he ‘come after’ or ‘wanted’. It can never be defined in those concrete terms at all as something tangible and retrievable.

110 Ibid., 422.
111 Ibid., 416.
Conclusion: The Collapse of the Heroic

McCarthy’s account of Boyd’s re-burial is quickly superseded by the passage that serves, in tracing Billy’s aimless wandering, as a prologue to the novel’s final act: ‘He rode north to Silver City and west to Duncan Arizona and north again through the mountains to Glenwood, to Reserve.’ This passage with its mapping of Billy’s circular journey without purpose introduces a final phase that looks towards a future of endless transience. His journey seems, at first, to be devoid of objectives, an aimless return through the border territories in these ‘days to come’, which suggests a projection into an infinite future of aimless motion through space and time. However, in the final episode of the novel, McCarthy re-introduces the mythic and traumatic dimension of the narrative when Billy encounters another lost creature, ‘a old dog gone gray at the muzzle [...] horribly crippled in its hindquarters [...] An arthritic and illjoined thing’. The dog is described, like Boyd’s body, as a ‘thing’ that becomes here a composite of all the surrogate objects that Billy quests after. Because the real object of the quests is an irretrievable and intangible absence, the surrogate supposedly longed-for focus of the quest becomes objectified and hollowed out as part of the process of mythic exhaustion that the quest enacts. The final ‘object’, the missing dog, exemplifies, in its desolation, the way in which all those ‘missing things’ that were sought have become reduced, by the quests, to signifiers of failure.

In a reversal of Billy’s reaching out to the wolf through the medium of the gaze at the beginning of the novel, it is the dog here which ‘tried to sort him from the shadows with its milky half blind eyes’ and it is Billy who rejects and excludes, chasing the dog away down

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112 Ibid., 422.
113 Ibid.
114 Ibid., 423.
the road by throwing rocks and a steel pipe at it.\textsuperscript{115} The dog’s howl as ‘it began to run, hobbling brokenly on its twisted legs’ sounded ‘something not of this earth’.\textsuperscript{116} McCarthy continues to describe this sound as representative of some indefinable collective sorrow, pre-existing the world of the novel, ‘as if some awful composite of grief had broke through from the preterite world’.\textsuperscript{117} In suggesting the ‘preterite’ and ‘composite’ nature of the dog’s cry, McCarthy suggests its symbolic association with an inchoate sadness and loss manifesting from some prior state anterior to the novel and even to man. This expression of grief commensurate with the sense of indeterminate wounding stretches back into the past before the narrative, even before time. In this way the dog registers on a semiotic level as a mythic entity, one associated with an indeterminate and inassimilable sorrow that cannot be represented or expressed. McCarthy places this creature in the final scene and thereby frames the narrative of the novel with this encounter with the dog and Billy’s initial failure to make contact with the wolves in the opening scene of the novel. It is a similar framing to the one evoked by the burial of Billy’s sister at the beginning of \textit{The Crossing} and again at the end of \textit{The Border Trilogy} in \textit{Cities of the Plain}. McCarthy’s purpose is the same on both counts, to frame his narrative with specific loss, but a loss that only represents an irresolvable cultural absence infinitely regressing back into the interminable past.

The final moments of the novel not only act as a frame alongside the opening registrations of loss, but also repeat, in reduced form, the overall mythic quest structure of the narrative. The dog, a creature articulating a nameless mythic sorrow becomes an object of longing and impossible retrieval. Billy tries to reverse his rejection of the creature and bring it back:

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 423-424.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 424.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
It had ceased raining in the night and he walked out on the road and called and called. Standing in that inexplicable darkness. Where there was no sound anywhere save only the wind.118

As with each of the quests, this last journey ‘out on the road’ once more ends in failure as Billy ‘bowed his head and held his hands in his face and wept’.119 There are striking narrative similarities between this passage and Billy’s first encounter with the wolves at the opening of the novel. On both occasions, there is Billy, alone, waiting in the cold and the dark for some communication with another animal. On both occasions the reaching out for some kind of communion is answered with a failure to communicate. The ‘calling’ for the animal is the final embodiment of Billy’s incessant plea for an answer from a world that offers no response. The forlorn calling back of the dog is the last turn in the cyclic wheel of the narrative – the lost majestic creatures of the opening section of the novel now fold into this one abandoned figure of canine decrepitude. The framing of the narrative with wolves and the dog also represents how the repetitive cycles of trauma based on absence are never resolved, but keep looping back upon each other in ever diminishing and ever accumulating patterns of sorrow.

Again, there is no resolution to this cycle – merely a repetitive encounter with the trauma that proceeds from one ‘doomed enterprise’ to the next. Billy’s inconsolable final weeping absorbs his heroically failed quest for the wolf, the thing ‘terrible and of great beauty’ into the abortive search for the dog ‘the repository of ten thousand indignities’.120 His final attempt to retrieve what had ‘once been a hunting dog [...] left for dead in the mountains’ represents how the quest for the mythic has now become a repeated unanswered

118 Ibid., 425-426.
119 Ibid., 426.
120 Ibid., 127, 424.
calling out in an ‘inexplicable darkness’.

Through the exhaustion of the wolf quest now collapsed into the quest for the lost dog, McCarthy reveals how, although the yearning behind the mythic quest remains, the traumatic cycle that it evokes has finally exhausted its heroic protagonist. Billy becomes a collapsed hero, his search reduced to an incessant unanswered calling for the broken creature that encapsulates the consummate failure of his questing.

The narrative of *The Crossing* continues, with the insistence on the mythic properties of the old dog, to manufacture myth to the end, but the only way to maintain this process is to seek further quests, and more failure and further trauma. This process has defeated Billy by the end of the novel, a process that McCarthy enacts in a quest of repeated failure and final collapse, and through which he reveals the irresolvable wound that resides at the heart of American culture. This wound involves a cultural obsession that requires the pursuit of even further extremes of heroic action in order to reclaim the lost and irretrievable myth of the Old West. Billy’s collapse from heroic questing cowboy to this ultimately wounded and broken figure raises the question what would happen if Billy did not collapse, did not give in. If he carried on questing and pursuing the elusive object, where would that take him? This question sets us up for thinking about the connection between myth, trauma and a heroic masculinity that does not collapse and does not give in. This heroic masculinity, that is determined to carry on the quest for the lost mythic country of the Old West, no matter what, will be the subject of the next chapter of this thesis.

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121 Ibid., 424, 425-426.
122 Ibid., 425.
Chapter Two:

Trauma and Heroic Masculinity in

*All the Pretty Horses* and *Cities of the Plain*
Introduction

In the previous chapter we saw how leaving for a new country gave Billy and his family, as they set out for Hidalgo, the hope of overcoming the loss of family members in ‘the country they quit’. However, this ‘new country’ carries with it the mere illusion of hope and new beginnings, and the Parham family continue to suffer tragic loss in that land. The relationship between loss and the illusory hope invested in a journey into new territory is also a feature of the opening to *All the Pretty Horses*. John Grady Cole, facing the loss and separation from the ranch which he loves but which is about to be sold, sets out on a journey across the Texas border into Mexico. Before he sets off on his journey he recruits his friend, Lacey Rawlins, to go with him, and Rawlins says to him, ‘If I don’t go will you go anyways?’ and John Grady replies, ‘I’m already gone.’\(^1\) This statement is, on one level a straightforward assertion of his unwavering desire to get away from his parents’ breakup and the sale of the family ranch, which has deprived him of his cowboy birthright and beloved way of life, to seek a new beginning in another country. However, it also offers insights into the future loss that he already anticipates in the journey ahead. In this chapter I will consider the ways in which this anticipated loss, and the losses of the past, resonate and define John Grady’s heroic masculinity.

John Grady’s statement configures him as a representation of a certain cowboy masculinity that is ‘already gone’ in a figurative sense, a statement that embodies a past ‘disappearance’ which is about to be re-enacted through his physical vanishing across the border into Mexico. His comment here, part one of intent, part one of recognised loss, is both a confirmation and a prophecy of himself as ‘already’ a cowboy who is ‘gone’ – namely lost in the past, and about to be lost again across the border. John Grady must, in fact, ‘go’, that

\(^1\) McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*, 27.
is, take off for Mexico before he becomes just another lost cowboy when his mother sells the ranch. This journey, for John Grady, is an attempt to come to terms with loss, but also suggests an attachment to further loss ‘already’ anticipated. His statement implies the complex relationship between past and future loss associated with his brand of cowboy masculinity, and opens up an understanding of the ways in which John Grady attaches to the cowboy way of life that is lost in the past, and which he anticipates will be lost again in the future, no matter what he may do to delay or avoid, or master that loss. Through its implications regarding patterns of mastery, attachment and loss, it provides a useful starting point for the subject of this chapter, an exploration of McCarthy’s heroic masculinity and its relationship with trauma in All the Pretty Horses and Cities of the Plain.

In the previous chapter I explored how traumatic patterns of loss and repetition of failure in the quest cycle are intrinsic to the ways in which McCarthy envisages the recreation of the myth of the Old West. At the end of the last chapter, I interpreted Billy’s final failure to retrieve the lost dog as the collapse of the heroic, and I suggested that the only way in which heroic masculinity can be sustained in McCarthy’s quest is through the facing of further quests, further loss. I argue in this chapter that McCarthy, through the heroic quests undertaken by John Grady, interrogates the ways a heroic masculinity, preoccupied with the myth of the Old West, must seek more and more dangerous exploits with traumatic outcomes in order to sustain that heroic persona. In the last chapter, I explored how McCarthy’s quest narrative proceeded from the structural trauma of absence and the need to find and retrieve repeatedly the ‘missing thing’ that stands in for that absence. I argue, in this chapter, that traumatic patterns of loss and repetition also run through McCarthy’s creation of heroic cowboy masculinity. I investigate how the various losses and failures we saw in Billy Parham’s journey also bedevil John Grady’s adventures, but I wish to discuss these
experiences of loss in this chapter in terms of masculinity, and how McCarthy’s heroic masculinity is bound up with the desire to master these losses.

To begin with, I evaluate this masculinity in terms of theories of gender in order to explore the context in which McCarthy’s cowboy masculinity may be considered ‘authentic’ or ‘heroic’. Here, I refer in particular to the theory relating to gender as performance as propounded by Judith Butler and David Savran. I also explore the relationship between gender and the yearning for an authentic masculine heroism located in the cowboy of the Old West as imagined by Abby Ferber. I go onto investigate how McCarthy’s representation of authentic and heroic cowboy masculinity relies upon a desire for mastery over past loss and an attachment to further loss in the future. Just as the quest has to fail and incur loss repeatedly in McCarthy’s contemporary West in order for the myth of the Old West to re-emerge, so McCarthy’s cowboy has to experience repeated traumatic loss in order to be heroic. I will discuss McCarthy’s heroic masculinity in relation to this attempted mastery of loss and the attachment to a failed future, in relation to two theories: Sigmund Freud’s theory regarding the child mastering the loss of his mother through the ‘fort-da’ game; and Lauren Berlant’s theory of ‘cruel optimism’ regarding enduring attachments to objects despite, and even because of, the certainty that they will be lost at some time in the future. Freud’s theory opens up, in my investigation, an analysis of McCarthy’s heroic masculinity in relation to the attempt to master loss. Berlant’s theory enables me to consider a form of trauma associated with an attachment to a future loss which makes such mastery impossible. Both Freud and Berlant together allow an interrogation of McCarthy’s heroic masculinity as a form of trauma that perpetually seeks danger and risks death in the failed attempt to achieve mastery over the loss that necessarily follows. This exploration offers a way of understanding how a certain type of masculinity is drawn towards the necessity of danger and subsequent loss and, in the
process of seeking such increasingly extreme danger, attempts to attain and sustain the ‘heroic’ ideal of the Old West.

The chapter will also investigate a contrasting representation of masculinity, one that is not heroic but is wounded and broken. When Billy’s defeated figure at the end of *The Crossing* re-emerges in *Cities of the Plain*, he is a permanently wounded and much diminished version of the heroic cowboy hero that sought to save the wolf and retrieve his dead father’s horses. I explore how, having been broken down by his experiences, Billy is no longer concerned, in *Cities of the Plain*, with the desire to find or relocate the ‘missing thing’ that characterises his quests and future-orientated actions in *The Crossing*. I investigate the ways McCarthy differentiates John Grady’s heroism from Billy’s and other similar presentations of wounded masculinity, in terms of the homosocial relationship between men as proposed by Eve Sedgewick. I also explore these two types of masculinity in terms of how they relate to loss. I evaluate John Grady’s heroic cowboy masculinity as a form of trauma which must continue to seek further loss in the future, and Billy’s wounded and defeated cowboy masculinity as traumatised by the losses and defeats of the past. John Grady’s statement ‘I’m already gone’, implies the future loss, a future disappearance of the heroic cowboy once again, a disappearance that he must make happen in order to attempt to overcome the loss he has already suffered, the loss of the cowboy life that has ‘already’ occurred.

This interpretation of McCarthy’s heroic masculinity also offers a different way of understanding the relationship between trauma and temporality, as it configures trauma as located and anticipated in deliberately provoked events that are about to happen. I have already discussed in Chapter One how McCarthy’s quest narrative is always moving forward towards a future that seeks a resolution of trauma that can never be, and never is, delivered – a future that only results in further trauma and loss. In this chapter, in exploring a heroic
masculinity that is contingent upon anticipatory loss and trauma at some stage in the future, I reinforce the proposition that, although a great deal of trauma theory focuses on efforts to address, repeat, or move beyond trauma, whether real or imagined, but located definitely in the past, there is also solid grounding for recognising ways in which subjects respond to trauma projected into the future.

In discussing John Grady’s heroism critics have concentrated mainly on the superman-like nature of his exploits. Gail Moore Morrison, for example, describes John Grady as ‘the elemental, untamed, isolated and independent self’, and interprets his adventures in the border landscape as the ‘stripping bare of the human soul to its simple, most elemental level to test its integrity and determine its reason for being’. In her view John Grady emerges at the end of All the Pretty Horses as overcoming ‘inevitable evil in a hostile world’ in what is ‘a sobering rite of passage’. Dianne C. Luce speaks of ‘the true heroism of John Grady Cole’ in All the Pretty Horses and how the novel presents him as ‘courageously acting on what is true’. Edwin T. Arnold writes not only of John Grady’s ‘skill with horses’ but also ‘his innate courage and dignity, his sense of honor’. Similarly Eileen Battersby considers him to be ‘the author’s most purely romantic protagonist’ and ‘very much the young knight’, while Barcley Owens notes how ‘John Grady’s penchant for always standing his ground adheres to the manly code of the Old West’. All of these assessments of his heroism can be summed up in Erik Hage’s definition of John Grady’s character as ‘that

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3 Ibid., 176, 177.
Western cowboy archetype who embodies a sort of fierce individualism’ and ‘a hero of an old and familiar trope’.\(^7\)

Critics have also commented frequently on how that heroism is related to John Grady being out of step with the contemporary world, a heroism that is associated with the outsider stance implied in his statement ‘I’m already gone’. The ways in which he is at odds with the stark realities of the world is suggested by Morrison’s reference to the ‘sobering’ nature of the ‘rite of passage’ in *All the Pretty Horses*:

[John Grady’s] journey portrays him not solely as a modern day horse-taming cowboy [...] but as an unlikely knight errant, displaced and dispossessed, heroically tested and stubbornly faithful to a chivalric code whose power is severely circumscribed by the inevitable evil in a hostile world.\(^8\)

Vince Brewton similarly claims:

Although John Grady is not wholly at odds with his world, it is fair to say that he has not found his place in it, nor can he, for he his fate in the Trilogy is indissolubly tied to the old order of the range that is inexorably passing away.\(^9\)

Also, John Cant has described John Grady’s flight to Mexico as informed by ‘the culture that [...] has left him bereft of any alternative to that of the romantic cowboy mythology.’\(^10\)

There is, therefore, a strong critical tradition interpreting John Grady’s adventures as those of a young man embodying a heroic ideal that is out of step with the realities of mid-

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\(^8\) Gail Moore Morrison, ‘*All the Pretty Horses: John Grady Cole’s Expulsion from Paradise*’, 176.
twentieth century cowboy life in the border territories. These critics, as we can see, have
either simply celebrated that heroism without critiquing it, or they have acknowledged his
outsider status at odds with the contemporary world as a means of further reaffirming his
romantic individualism and his mythic identification with the Old West. There has been,
however, a failure to explain adequately the seeming suicide wish of John Grady as he
deliberately places himself in harm’s way in order to achieve or experience the combination
of wounding, triumph, and failure that defines his masculinity. In this chapter, I explore how
the relationship between John Grady’s heroic masculinity and the abiding wish to be ‘already
gone’, even eventually to the point of his own death, can be evaluated through the language
of trauma. In the process I show how, rather than celebrating the cowboy heroism or
lamenting the passing of its romantic individualism, McCarthy is offering a critique of how
this heroic form of masculinity carries with it a compulsive need to seek constant danger and
ultimate destruction.

**Heroic Legacy**

In order to understand heroic cowboy masculinity in terms of its relationship with the
seeking of future loss, it is necessary to look at how McCarthy contextualises John Grady’s
masculinity in terms of the mythic past of the Old West. McCarthy combines heroic legacy
and loss from the outset of *All the Pretty Horses*. The opening paragraph of the novel sets up
this immediate sense of loss in its depiction of John Grady entering the house containing the
body of his dead grandfather. He looks at his reflection in a mirror with the mirror images of
his dead ancestors’ portraits peering down upon him, as ‘the ‘candleflame and the image of
the candleflame caught in the pierglass twisted’ to offer him a visually unbalanced
perspective as he enters the room of mourning.\footnote{McCarthy, \textit{All the Pretty Horses}, 3.} The ‘portraits of forebears’, these further images of the dead alongside the old man’s corpse, combine the present loss of the grandfather and the extended loss and demise of the male family line whose images nevertheless still dominate the hallway.\footnote{Ibid.} John Grady’s forebears are significantly all ‘behind him’, but he himself also joins their mirrored ranks as he too ‘stood in the dark glass’.\footnote{Ibid.} These mirror images remove both John Grady and his ancestors from the present and project him back into a reflected association with a lost heroic assembly. John Grady embodies a culture that is preoccupied with seeing the present in terms of a heroic frontier past, a culture that is infinitely retrogressive in its attempt to re-establish and mythologize an essential masculine identity. Megan Riley McGilchrist writes:

\begin{quote}
A certain cohort of society purports to believe [...] that American identity is based in the imagery of the western masculinist myth of the endless frontier, combined with appealing chivalric notions of romance which identify the “true” cowboy or western heroic man.\footnote{Megan Riley McGilchrist, \textit{The Western Landscape in Cormac McCarthy and Wallace Stegner} (New York/London: Rouledge, 2010), 127.}
\end{quote}

In establishing John Grady as ‘emotionally attached to the model of western manhood and the frontier’ McGilchrist positions John Grady firmly amongst this ‘cohort’.\footnote{Ibid., 128.} The fact that these figures in the funeral room are ‘dimly known’ to John Grady and ‘dimly lit’ in a mirror suggest both the distant indeterminate nature of the past and, at the same time, the way the past can lend itself to ‘twisted’ versions of history.\footnote{McCarthy, \textit{All the Pretty Horses}, 3.} The dreamlike sense of the past evoked here with flickering images of mirrored figures from the Old West which incorporate but, at the same time, exclude John Grady, suggests a mythic but also distorted vision of that past.
John Grady’s vision is then diverted from the images of the past ‘above the narrow wainscotting’ by the ‘guttered candlestub’, where he asserts his own identifiable mark amidst the ranks of forebears with the imprint of ‘his thumbprint in the warm wax’ alongside his grandfather’s body.\footnote{Ibid.} The stark reality of his grandfather’s corpse with ‘face so caved and drawn’, elicits John Grady’s repeated incantation, ‘that was not sleeping. That was not sleeping.’\footnote{Ibid.} His comment, ‘You never combed your hair that way in your life,’ suggests uneasiness at the grandfather’s disquieting and even humiliating final appearance.\footnote{Ibid.} The stark depiction of the grandfather lying in his wasted state of demise contrasts with the ‘dimly lit’ portraits of heroic ancestry seen through fading candlelight and mirrors. John Grady stands in this interface between the present bereavement and the lost past with ‘no sound save the ticking of the mantel clock in the front room’ as a reminder, not only of his own mortality, but also of how the burden of passing time weighs down on him and his way of life.\footnote{Ibid.}

The relationship between John Grady, his grandfather and his forebears is then extended in the depiction of the Grady family history behind those portraits, revealing a legacy of violence and early death. John Grady’s grandfather ‘was the oldest of eight boys and the only one to live past the age of twenty five’.\footnote{Ibid., 7.} The others ‘were drowned, shot, kicked by horses. They perished in fires.’\footnote{Ibid.} The sudden deaths of these ancestors contrast with the wasting away of old age depicted in the grandfather’s appearance in the coffin. The grandfather’s survival into old age signifies the ‘only’ thing his brothers ‘seemed to fear’ which was ‘dying in bed’.\footnote{Ibid.} These opening scenes thus establish associations between John

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Grady’s mortality and that of his forebears and how that also resonates with the violence of the Old West.

The grandfather’s funeral further emphasises these associations, as it signifies the end of the Grady name, ‘buried with that old man’, leaving John Grady both connected and at the same time cast adrift from the family line: ‘The boy’s name was Cole. John Grady Cole.’ With the grandfather’s funeral the Grady family line here expires, first as result of the violence of the Old West, and finally with the quiet demise of old age. The male line has exhausted itself in the violence of the frontier, and the passage ends with the emphatic syntactic positioning of John Grady Cole’s name now standing alone. The implications here are that he is both connected to and dislocated from the ancestral line but remains the sole inheritor of a mythic but doomed masculinity. He carries the name that is already ‘buried’, but to carry that name forward, to inherit fully the Grady name, means he must seek out the heroic violence and loss that comes with it.

Michael Kimmel has noted how masculinity is essentially dependent on the opinion of older men and patriarchal figures:

The father is the first man who evaluates the boy’s masculine performance, the first pair of male eyes before whom he tries to prove himself. Those eyes will follow him for the rest of his life.

John Grady has generations of ‘fathers’ eyes’ on him with their heroic association with a frontier where the only way a man proves himself is by experiencing a violent death. Kimmel goes on to

24 Ibid.
examine the underlying sense of inadequacy that exists at the heart of this patriarchally-driven masculinity:

That nightmare from which we never seem to awaken is that those other men will see that sense of inadequacy, they will see that in our own eyes we are not who we are pretending to be. What we call masculinity is often a hedge against being revealed as a fraud, an exaggerated set of activities that keep others from seeing through us, and a frenzied effort to keep at bay those fears within ourselves.\(^\text{26}\)

According to Kimmel a man’s ‘real fear’, therefore, is humiliation in the eyes of other men or being dominated by stronger male figures. This humiliation could take the form of falling short by comparison to other men that we respect, admire or see as models of masculinity. In John Grady’s case he is faced with an ancestral masculine line where a violent youthful death is preferred to the slow decline into old age represented by the grandfather and the ultimate associated fear of ‘dying in bed’. In establishing these associations with ancestors from the violent Old West, McCarthy shows us the template for heroism that John Grady must follow if he is to join the ranks of the forebears. McCarthy’s heroic masculinity constitutes more than an attempt to become a heroic contemporary of one’s predecessors. These merging and interacting images of mortality with forebears of the violent West evoke a masculinity that is both heroic and lost. John Grady’s inheritance of this masculinity informs his vision of himself as ‘already gone’, as in ‘already dead’, or ‘already’ racing towards the violent death that awaits him. These early scenes establish the extent to which John Grady’s heroism can only be fully realised in death, but also allow us to see this heroism in terms of trauma. He ‘already’ experiences his life as something ‘lost’, a loss that awaits him in the future and which he must go to meet and attempt to master through the deliberate engagement with a series of increasingly lost causes.

\(^{26}\) Ibid., 188.
McCarthy continues to emphasise John Grady’s identification with the Old West that has ‘already’ disappeared when he goes riding, ‘out to the western fork of the old Comanche road’. Here McCarthy connects John Grady with a world lost in past time as ‘he rode [...] when the shadows were long’ on ‘the ancient road’, ‘in the rose and canted light like a dream of the past’, following the path of the vanished masculinity of the Indian war-tribe ‘nation and ghost of nation [...] lost to all history’. John Grady relives, as ‘a dream’, the passing of the Comanche war tribes as he ‘could hear’ once more ‘the horses and the breath of horses [...] and the rattle of lances [...] and above all the low chant of their traveling song which the riders sang as they rode.’ However, he also imagines them fading away before his eyes ‘passing in a soft chorale across that mineral waste into darkness’. This evocation of the lost Comanche tribe reveals how John Grady can only identify with the end of the Old West and how he only re-imagines it back into life in order to witness once more its loss with the tribe’s ‘passing’ into ‘darkness’. McGilchrist writes:

As the Comanches longed for Mexico, so does John Grady see in that unknown, unfenced, mysterious landscape the possibility of becoming one with the images of the past which are at the core of his being.

This comment points significantly to the association between the Comanches, the lost past of the Old West and John Grady’s yearning to join the Comanches in his own loss that stretches before him in his future journey into Mexico, a journey that will combine the loss of the Old West in the past with its re-enacted loss in the future.

27 McCarthy, All the Pretty Horses, 5.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 McGilchrist, The Western Landscape in Cormac McCarthy and Wallace Stegner, 150.
David Anthony has commented on the attraction the North American Indian can hold for some contemporary white American males, suggesting that ‘in their quest to bolster an endangered manhood, American men created simulations of their Indian trapped in a nostalgic frontier.’ John Grady’s association with the Comanche warriors of the past, as he follows them into the darkness of the setting sun, riding ‘with the sun coppering his face and the red wind blowing out of the west’, suggests such a ‘nostalgic’ white American ‘simulation’ of warrior manhood. This association is further emphasised by how the ‘coppering’ of his face by the ‘setting sun’ transforms John Grady literally into a red man. Similarly associated with this vein of retrospective heroics and masculine identity, Vine Deloria writes:

The white man knows that he is an alien and he knows that North America is Indian – and he will never let go of the Indian image because he thinks that by some clever manipulation he can achieve an authenticity that cannot ever be his.

John Grady’s association with the heroic masculinity of the Comanche braves typifies this wider identification with an ‘authentic’ masculinity that white American manhood may feel to have lost. However, for John Grady, such ‘authentic’ masculinity is impossible because it has ‘already gone’, but ironically only then does it become ‘authentic’ for him because it is unobtainable. McCarthy reinforces this association between John Grady and the disappearing unobtainable male archetypes of the Old West, both white and Native American, in describing John Grady as being ‘like a man come to the end of something’.

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34 McCarthy, All the Pretty Horses, 5.
the ‘authentic’ and the mythic are one of the same, and his idea of being a man is bound up with the sense of being ‘at the end of’ the heroic legacy of the Old West.

Furthermore, the phrase ‘like a man come to the end of something’ opens up a range of speculations regarding John Grady and the authentic cowboy masculinity of the Old West which he embraces. One possibility is to interpret his stance as a pose – the word ‘like’ suggesting an imitative performance of that doomed masculinity, an indication that all he is really able do is imitate that ‘authentic’ masculinity. In his essay on James Jones’ novel *The Thin Red Line*, David Boulting writes of ‘the damage wrought on men [...] by idealised images of the heroic male self’. And furthermore:

The exponentially increasing demands associated with maintaining the essentially fictional male selves behind which the central characters have retreated. Rather than armoring the vulnerable male subject, these male fictions ironically often force the soldier to expose himself to further risk. 35

The heroic demands made on the soldier in battle by his fictionally constructed sense of self become increasingly unattainable, until the soldier is forced into suicidal actions in order to prove his masculinity to himself and other men.

Judith Butler’s view, seminal in the evaluation of gender as a ‘fictionally constructed self’, is that gendered subjectivity is not an internal and inherent concept and that there is no ‘authentically’ gendered self as such. She claims that all gendered identity is a performance imitated and enacted through repetition:

Because there is neither an ‘essence’ that gender expresses or externalises nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires, and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis.  

Butler sees gender as created through a series of acts that are socially and culturally inherited, and engendered through imitation, and that there is no original absolute essence of gender in either the individual self, or external to the self in mythology. She further writes:

Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.

David Savran extends Butler’s idea of ‘performed’ gender further to ‘develop a corresponding theory of masculinity as masquerade’, in which masculinity is conceived as ‘a sequence of postures’. Butler’s and Savran’s analysis, taken alongside the initial image of John Grady reflected in mirrored images besides his ancestors, and the phrase ‘like a man come to the end of something’, raise key conflicting questions regarding John Grady’s masculinity. To what extent does John Grady inhabit an authentic cowboy status, what Abby L. Ferber sees as ‘characterized as unchanging and universal, merely needing to be recovered’? Conversely, to what extent can we evaluate John Grady’s masculinity as a ‘performance’ which he enacts to prove his masculinity, not to other men as in Boulting’s analysis, but to his ancestors and the ‘authentic’ masculine warriors of the Comanche?

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37 Ibid., 123. Original emphasis.
Butler’s theory would discount the existence of any such ‘authenticity’ because such authenticity would equate with an original and essential form of gender. Her view suggests that John Grady’s masculinity could only be another ‘performance’ in the form of a mythic identity derived from cultural influences:

As imitations which effectively displace the meaning of the original, they imitate the myth of originality itself. In the place of an original identification which serves as a determining cause, gender identity might be reconceived as a personal/cultural history of received meanings subject to a sense of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which, jointly, construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self or parody the mechanism of that construction.\(^{40}\)

John Grady’s heroic masculinity would be, in Butler’s terms, an ‘imitative practice’ derived from earlier imitations for which there is no original essential source. Masculinity associated with the heroic mythology of the Old West constitutes, according to Butler’s thesis, something rather like the line of ancestral portraits reaching further and further back into the past at the family home above his grandfather’s coffin. These portraits thus offer the illusion of an essential cowboy masculinity existing somewhere in the retrievable past, but one that can only be articulated in the form of a series of gestures and actions that imitate what is actually a fictive construction. Ferber, however, claims:

> The process of excavating the past is, instead, the construction of the past. Both depict a past where men were secure in their masculinity and the hierarchical gender order remained firmly entrenched.\(^{41}\)

\(^{40}\) Butler, \textit{Gender Trouble}, 176.

Masculinity, according to Ferber, can be located in a traditional code of male heroics, whereas Butler’s theory suggests that such a traditional code, although it certainly exists, can never be located in any originary moment or individual. Butler’s view implies that the code of heroic cowboy masculinity may exist, but there were never any ‘real’ cowboys in this vein. This heroic masculinity could only ever be a ‘performance’ based on an imitation of something that lacks an original model in the form of an actual living individual. Therefore, if the mythic masculinity never existed in a living individual, then John Grady’s assuming of that role must be nothing more than an imitative mirroring of an imagined or fantasised masculinity that has no historical basis. McCarthy interrogates these images of the past and John Grady’s relation to them in ways that suggest that all John Grady can ever amount to is a ‘mirrored’ reflection of that code, a code that could never be located in one heroic real cowboy. The heroic life John Grady seeks is, therefore, a reaching for a mythic form of masculinity, a re-enactment of a life that never actually existed.

However, for John Grady, both the mythic code and the masculine models of that code embodied in his ancestors and the Comanche are something lost, but also something that he wants to emulate. But for him, heroic masculinity can only become authentic once it is lost or about to be lost. It is in ‘feeling like’ he is ‘coming to the end’ of this Western cowboy tradition that John Grady can approach the ‘mythic authenticity’ he desires. John Grady’s heroic cowboy masculinity has to aspire to that terminal moment in order to achieve the longed for, lost, mythic and, thereby, ‘authentic’ status. For John Grady, in his search for the ‘true’ cowboy, there is no dividing line between the mythic, the heroic and the authentic – they are all one and the same. McCarthy’s description of John Grady as feeling ‘like a man come to the end of something’ folds notions of authentic and performed masculinity into one heroic aspiration that must seek endlessly that feeling of being ‘at the end’ in order to remain ‘authentic’. The death of John Grady’s grandfather, the sale of the ranch and the breakup of
his family merge with a more universal sense of the passing of the heroic but violent West, in which he sees the unfolding future of his own disappearing and therefore, for him, ‘authentic’ cowboy self. Attachment to the very loss that defines his masculinity, attachment to losing the cowboy life he loves, his coming ‘to the end’ of this ‘something’, is essential to John Grady’s initiation into what he understands is an authentic and also mythic cowboy heroism.

Even before he leaves Texas, John Grady seeks a re-enactment of the loss he already feels manifested in the vanished Indian tribes, his grandfather’s death and the terminal line of frontier ancestors, as the loss of the Old West. He also already feels this re-enactment of loss imminently embodied in the inevitable sale of his ranch and birthright and his awareness of his father’s illness and despair. In a series of valedictory encounters with his father, mother and girlfriend Mary Catherine, all of whom he knows are drifting away from his life, John Grady actively pursues situations which will involve additional or further loss associated with the persistent wound he feels he carries with him as ‘a man come to the end of something’:

Sometimes at night after supper he’d walk out to the road and catch a ride into town and walk the streets or he’d stand outside the hotel on Beauregard Street and look up at the room on the fourth floor where his father’s shape or father’s shadow would pass behind the gauzy window curtains and then turn and pass again like a sheetiron bear in a shooting-gallery only slower, thinner, more agonized.42

John Grady’s preoccupation with the wounded silhouetted figure slowing down to an ‘agonized’ terminal moment suggests his desire to experience repeatedly, before it happens, his father’s approaching death, a loss that John Grady has already intimated in the older man’s evident illness and evacuation of will and spirit.43 Similarly, John Grady tracks his mother down to San Antonio, where he watches a performance of her play and looks for

43 Ibid., 17, 25.
‘something in the story itself to tell him about the way the world was or was becoming but there was not. There was nothing in it at all.’ After the performance he does not seek out his mother but instead ‘sat for a long time in the empty theatre and then he stood and put on his hat and went out into the cold.’ In this farewell that never materialises, in refusing to meet his mother, John Grady orchestrates for himself a sense of watching her leave, as ‘he watched the play with great intensity.’ The play itself has no meaning for him, but the purpose of the enterprise is to enact, watch and feel her departure before it actually happens. He therefore makes the loss worse by seeing her without saying goodbye, and makes her departure more traumatic by refusing full closure.

John Grady’s pursuit of these situations and experiences involving additional loss can be evaluated in relation to Lauren Berlant’s theory of ‘cruel optimism’. This is ‘the condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object in advance of its loss’ and it offers an understanding of how John Grady is dependent upon an attachment to these lost causes. Berlant focuses upon a futurity dependent on ‘the cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us’. In her theory the subject’s sense of its own continued being is bound up in this ‘cluster’, to the point that it will readily and repeatedly ‘surrender to the return to the scene’ of such promises, no matter how painful or dangerous that ‘return’ may be. In specific reference to Geoff Ryman’s novel Was, Berlant writes:

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44 Ibid., 21.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
48 Ibid., 20.
49 Ibid., 21.
All of these stories are about the cruelty of optimism for people without control over the material conditions of their lives and whose relation to fantasy is all that protects them from being destroyed by other people and the nation.\(^{50}\)

This sense of people being ‘without control over the material conditions of their lives’ is relevant in relation to John Grady’s experience, in these opening scenes of the novel, of a world that seems to be taking from him everything he values – his father, his mother, his girlfriend, the ranch. John Grady however, does not ‘surrender to the return to the scene’ of loss, is not passive when it comes to future action. Rather, he actively seeks out situations that are always already a quest for further loss, a further experience that is willed but unnecessary. Berlant’s explanation of the ‘cruelty’ of such attachments speaks to John Grady’s masculinity which chooses these situations which involve a re-enactment of past loss at some time in the future:

What is cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects who have \(x\) in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object or scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the content of the attachment, the continuity of the form of it provides something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world.\(^{51}\)

Just as we saw, in Chapter One, that there is no one foundational absence at the heart of Billy’s yearning, similarly, John Grady does not have Berlant’s specific ‘\(x\)’ or her ‘object or scene of desire’ in his life that might be taken away. There is no one tangible thing that defines John Grady’s sense of loss. John Grady’s ‘\(x\)’ is loss itself, an attachment to that loss of the past configured in the disappearing Grady male line and the vanished Comanche tribes.

\(^{50}\) Ibid., 33. See Geoff Ryman, Was (St Ives: Gollancz, 2005).

\(^{51}\) Ibid. Original emphasis.
These coalesce into mourning for the heroic Old West and evoke the sense of loss that maintains John Grady’s ‘sense of what it means to keep on living and to look forward to being in the world’. His attachment to loss, the role that loss plays in his essential sense of heroism, and his consequent refusal to come to terms with that loss, means that he must re-enact the loss perpetually. Since these farewells to his parents are unresolved and without closure, the experiences reinforce John Grady’s attachment to the loss he must perpetually recreate. He is about to lose both parents, one to a terminal disease, the other to the attractions of the city life in San Antonio, but Berlant’s theory allows us to explore how and why, through this attachment to future loss he seeks out in advance a wilful repeated anticipatory creation of those departures. John Grady’s attachment, however, is slightly different from that envisaged by Berlant, in that it stems from an attachment to loss already imagined in the past in the idealised but vanished heroic Old West made up of Indian braves and Grady heroes.

John Grady’s anticipation of further loss, and its connection to a past loss, can also be understood in terms of the attempt to master that past loss through its wilful repetition. This desire for mastery over loss can be further developed by considering Freud’s discussion in Beyond the Pleasure Principle of the ‘fort-da’ game he observed played by the child in his nursery. Freud interpreted the sounds the infant child made as he threw from his cot ‘the wooden reel with some string tied around it [...] his expressive “o-o-o-o” sound [...] greeting its reappearance with a joyful Da!’ as a repeated re-enactment of the trauma of his mother’s departure and return.52 Freud writes:

The analysis of a single case as this cannot resolve the issue with any certainty; but the impression gained by an unprejudiced observer is that the child had a different motive in turning the experience into a game. The experience affected him, but his

own role in it was passive, and he therefore gave himself an active one by repeating it as a game, even though it had been unpleasurable. This endeavour could be attributed to an instinctive urge to assert control that operates quite independently of whether or not the memory as such was pleasurable. But we can also try another interpretation. The act of flinging away the object to make it ‘gone’ may be the gratification of an impulse on the child’s part – which in the ordinary way of things remains suppressed – to take revenge on his mother for having gone away from him; and it may thus be a defiant statement meaning ‘Alright, go away! I don’t need you; I am sending you away myself.’

Freud reveals how, in playing this game, the child is willing to experience the ‘unpleasurable’ re-enactment of his mother’s departure for the sake of the feeling of control that the game gives him. There are links here with Berlant’s theory in that both Freud and Berlant understand the attachment to the ‘lost’ object and how that attachment manifests itself in anticipations and re-enactments of loss, rather than in its avoidance. However, whereas Berlant’s theory mainly focuses on the subject’s passivity and attachment, Freud allows us to see how a subject attempts to regain a sense of control and mastery over that attachment in a situation where he actually has none. Freud goes on to say:

> It is plainly the case that children repeat everything in their play that has made a powerful impression on them, and that in so doing they abreact the intensity of the experience and make themselves so to speak master of the situation.

Freud concluded that the game may be a manifestation of the need for mastery and revenge over a traumatic episode as the child moves from ‘passive’ victim to ‘active’ initiator of the experience. The child repeatedly enacts the imagined departure of the mother before it happens in real life, and thereby gains mastery over the anticipated trauma of abandonment.

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53 Ibid., 141-142.
54 Ibid., 142.
Freud observed that the child played the ‘fort’ or ‘gone’ version of the game far more often than the ‘return’ episode, ‘even though the greater pleasure undoubtedly attached to the second’.55 He concluded from this that the pleasurable experience of ‘return’ was forsaken in preference for mastery over the anxious experience associated with the mother’s disappearance or departure.

Freud’s thesis reveals how trauma, repetition and mastery are interlinked, and also how the will to master the departure involves the child’s willed enforcement and repeated playacted loss of the mother. The repeated trauma of departure is therefore repeated and re-enacted wilfully in the process of attempting a mastery of that trauma. It is in this association between the repetitive seeking of trauma and desire for mastery over the trauma that one discovers a key element in McCarthy’s presentation of heroic masculininity. In the child’s choosing to repeat the experience of the unpleasant simulated ‘departure’ in order to master the anticipated real departure, lies an analogy with John Grady’s attempt at mastery through the pursuit of lost causes. John Grady, like Freud’s child and Berlant’s subjects, has no control of what is being taken from him in the past and present, and so, like the child, but unlike Berlant’s subjects, he autonomously pursues situations that are already lost causes.

Freud’s analysis of the processes and stratagems by which the child gains mastery has significance, therefore, in relation to John Grady’s attempt to master the loss of a vanished heroic world through repetitive engagement with further losses that he deliberately orchestrates:

One day when the child’s mother had been absent for many hours, she was greeted on her return with the announcement ‘Bebi o-o-o-o!’, which at first remained incomprehensible. It soon turned out, however, that while on his own for this long period of time the child had found a way of making himself disappear. He had

55 Ibid., 141.
discovered his reflection in the full-length mirror reaching almost to the floor, and had then crouched down so that his reflection was ‘gone’.\textsuperscript{56}

Freud’s analysis of the child’s desire for mastery over his own ‘disappearance’ offers here a useful way of understanding John Grady’s unresolved farewells. These goodbyes can be interpreted as a means of controlling the terms upon which he turns his back on those he loves. For example, just before he leaves to cross the border to Mexico, he has a final encounter with the girl, Mary Catherine, who has thrown him over for a man with a car and a more affluent lifestyle. In saying goodbye to the sweetheart whom he knows has already ‘quit’ him, in seeking out Mary Catherine and then refusing her request that they ‘could be friends’ and then walking away, John Grady transforms their separation into something irrevocably and unnecessarily permanent.\textsuperscript{57} This is another encounter with further loss that he makes happen, that he makes worse than it needs to be. Furthermore, as at the beginning of the novel, where John Grady is depicted in mirrored configurations related to his ancestry, again we see him, in this encounter with Mary Catherine, defined in terms of shifting mirror images:

He didn’t look back but he could see her in the windows of the Federal Building across the street standing there when he reached the corner and stepped out of the glass forever.\textsuperscript{58}

His disappearance in the ‘windows of the Federal Building’ his vanishing from the ‘glass forever’ after refusing her friendship and thereby sabotaging his farewell to her, reveals his desire to bring about his own disappearance. It suggests, taking Freud’s vanishing child in the mirror as a model, his desire to take control of his loss by further enacting it through his

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 144.
\textsuperscript{57} McCarthy, \textit{All the Pretty Horses}, 24, 28.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 29.
ability to make himself ‘disappear’ to Mexico. At the same time it reveals his attachment to that loss in his wilful enactment of that vanishing. In watching himself ‘stepping out of the glass forever’ before his own eyes, he becomes a self-generated contemporary version of the Vanishing American. As with the unresolved secret farewells to his parents, this moment of vanishing enables him to control those moments associated with a departure which is being forced upon him against his will. At the same time, the ‘stepping out’ of the glass, suggesting a wilful participation in his own vanishing, also enacts the moment of further loss, as well as the control, he seeks in order to become the heroic cowboy.

Berlant’s theory also helps us here to see how an attachment to that lost cowboy world, in advance of its future loss all over again, imprisons John Grady in a cyclic dependency on the re-enacted experience of the ‘vanishing’ cowboy. It also helps us to see, in ‘cruel optimism’ the future-orientation of his desire to be ‘already gone’, out of the frame of the ‘Federal Building’ that symbolises an America that he feels is no longer his own ‘country’. Through Berlant and Freud we can see that this moment of ‘vanishing’ may be understood in terms of attachment to and repetition of loss, and therefore as a symptom of trauma, rather than an expression of freedom and escape. This helps us to recognise the future-orientation of Freud’s ‘fort-da’, as dependent on the repetition of loss again in the future, and gives us a word for what Berlant’s theory, for the purpose of my argument, lacks, which is ‘mastery’, in that John Grady controls the moment in which he ‘disappears’.

In the terms of ‘cruel optimism’, combined with ‘fort-da’, mastery can only be maintained in the subject knowing he will experience the loss again at some stage in the future. However, Freud sees mastery as controlling, easing or coping with trauma, whereas McCarthy’s hero can never resolve the loss to which he is inextricably attached. Seeing Mary Catherine, or his mother, or his father’s ailing figure at the hotel window does not give John Grady the mastery over loss that he seeks. He must still head out to Mexico to pursue further
the heroically untenable life that will lead to further loss in the future. Berlant allows us to see this process in terms of a repeated attachment to a loss in the future, whereas Freud, through ‘fort-da’, helps us to understand this trauma in terms of the desire for mastery, which is blocked by the continued attachment to the loss. Both Berlant and Freud taken together complement, and, at the same time cancel each other out and, in this paradoxical, and yet, complementary way, allow us to see how heroic masculinity is caught in an endless traumatic loop of attempting mastery of a loss it can never, and can never want to, resolve. For McCarthy’s heroic masculinity survival of loss is not enough, it must attempt mastery of that loss while perpetually and traumatically attached to its irresolvable nature. Heroic masculinity therefore involves trauma that is doubly ‘cruel’ because it entails an attempt to seek mastery over something that can never be mastered – an attachment to a loss in the past that must be re-enacted in the future. In the trauma of heroic masculinity or ‘heroic trauma’, the past not only occupies the present but also a space associated with the future.

Both Berlant’s and Freud’s theories do not address masculinity specifically but are concerned with a universal subjectivity. ‘Cruel optimism’ is open to anyone and ‘fort-da’ is about mastery but also how that relates to the individual subject and not masculinity. However, when combined, these two theories offer a way of understanding these theories in a way that relates not just to subjectivity in general, but to masculinity in particular. Heroic masculinity is a form of cruel optimism in which the struggle to master trauma is given a masculine dimension of control. Therefore, if we combine Berlant and Freud we can see how working together they formulate a way of understanding masculinity in addition to subjectivity more broadly.

However, it is difficult to consider John Grady’s farewells before he leaves for Mexico as being particularly ‘heroic’ in nature. Saying goodbye without saying goodbye hardly constitutes heroism. What these unresolved goodbyes do is to enact the kind of
anticipated loss John Grady will seek out later in the novel when, as we will see, his actions become ever more perilous, induce ever more losses and require undoubtedly heroic exploits to keep him alive. These actions bring him closer to those lost cowboy family members who all died violently in the Old West, and to those warrior tribes who died fighting for their land. The associations he makes with his dead ancestors and the lost Comanche tribes, along with his series of unresolved farewells, establish the pattern of anticipated loss that John Grady already feels in his identification with these heroic figures of the Old West. It is straight away after this ‘vanishing’ in the mirror before Mary Catherine that he advances his disappearance further by leaving Texas for the wilderness of the border and Mexico and what he conceives as a contemporary version of the Old West. John Grady’s statement to Rawlins just before they cross the border, ‘I’m already gone’, implies, not only his identification with the vanished cowboy of the past, but also his intention to choose a path that will imply his own personal ‘vanishing’ in the future. He has to ‘go’ ahead with the journey into Mexico to seek the mastery he needs over the feeling of being ‘already gone’, as in his suffering the loss of the cowboy world in the past and present. The ensuing cowboy trail into Mexico sets up an adventure in which that cowboy life must once more be experienced and must once more be lost. On this journey John Grady’s engagement with reckless danger and crisis can be understood in terms of the desire to anticipate and thereby perpetuate the loss he needs in order to sustain his sense of the heroic.

**Heroic Trauma**

The journey to Mexico begins, however, as if John Grady and Rawlins are setting out into a world suddenly transformed from the melancholy opening pages of mourning and loss. It is a world, rather like the seemingly ‘rich and wild’ territory of Hidalgo in the opening to
The Crossing in which there are infinite future possibilities.\textsuperscript{59} Similarly here, in All the Pretty Horses, McCarthy evokes the promise of a new life beginning with the boys’ departure from Texas:

\[\text{T}he \text{ earth [...] carried their figures and bore them up into the swarming stars so that they rode not under them but among them [...] loosely jacketed against the cold and ten thousand worlds for the choosing.}\textsuperscript{60}

This glorious beginning of the journey with the boys riding amongst the stars in the ‘dark electric’ is a moment of promise akin to that associated with the ‘new’ country of Hidalgo, a promise that cannot be fulfilled as the ‘ten thousand worlds for the choosing’ narrow down with the restrictions the boys immediately encounter. The next day they have to contend with unexpected constraints on their freedom in the form of ‘crossfences’ where John Grady has ‘to pull the staples with a catspaw and stand on the wires while Rawlins led the horses through and then raise the wires back and beat the staples into the posts.’\textsuperscript{61} In this world into which they are obvious trespassers, Rawlins begins to register unease, and differences between John Grady and his partner, begin to emerge. Rawlins admits that his sense of being ‘ill at ease’ has no reason, except the sense of being ‘someplace you wasn’t supposed to be and didn’t know it’.\textsuperscript{62} His intimation that there is something wrong with this border world and his intrusion into it is disparaged by John Grady’s ‘What the hell’s wrong with you?’\textsuperscript{63} The latter’s refusal to engage with his friend’s anxiety suggests that, for John Grady, the sense of danger, unease and being in the wrong place is not a problem for him and may even be the whole point of the journey.

\textsuperscript{59} McCarthy, The Crossing, 3.
\textsuperscript{60} McCarthy All the Pretty Horses, 30.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 30-31.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 37.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.
Rawlins’ continued anxiety and John Grady’s conflicting willingness to experience the uncertain and even dangerous consequences of their border crossing are revealed in their encounter on the trail with Jimmy Blevins, ‘a kid about thirteen years old’, who has run away from home after his father was killed in the war and his abusive stepfather took over his upbringing. Blevins is a troubled boy who patently cannot look after himself and is also an obvious liability for John Grady and Rawlins. He loses his clothes and his horse in a thunderstorm and exhibits an unpredictable recklessness that Rawlins believes will get them all ‘thowed in the jailhouse’. Blevins’ wayward presence increases Rawlins’ conviction that ‘somethin bad is goin to happen’, and he tries to convince John Grady that they both should immediately abandon the boy out in the desert before it is too late for all three of them. He warns John Grady that ‘this is it. This is our last chance. Right now. This is the last time and there wont be another time and I guarantee it.’ John Grady knows that Rawlins ‘was right in all he’d said and there was no help for it’ and yet the former ‘cant do it’, he cannot leave the boy alone without a horse or clothes in the wilderness. He gives Blevins half of his blanket to sleep under, defends Blevins against Rawlins’ constant criticism and helps the boy to find his horse. John Grady’s tending to Blevins’ needs before his own and his partner’s acts as counterpoint to Rawlins’ ever-present anxiety. Barclay Owens comments on how ‘John Grady will always reach for the forbidden fruit, and thus he sympathizes with the extreme romantic sensibility of Blevins rather than the dull reality of Rawlins.’ Owens adds:

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64 Ibid., 39.
65 Ibid., 41.
66 Ibid., 77.
67 Ibid., 79.
68 Ibid., 79.
69 Owens, *Cormac McCarthy’s Western Novels*, 78,
As the pragmatic one, Rawlins understands the obvious common sense of not inciting trouble. John Grady, however, shares Blevins’s inability to see his limits and thus does not know where his authority ends and the world’s begins.\textsuperscript{70}

However, Owens’ analysis, juxtaposing John Grady’s romantic heroism with Rawlins’ cautious practical nature, ignores the ways in which John Grady \textit{can} ‘see his limits’ and, despite this, simply chooses to assist and hold onto Blevins and the inherent danger of that situation. The Mexican desert is obviously no place for Rawlins, who is afraid of ‘all the stuff that can happen to you’.\textsuperscript{71} Even the name ‘Lacey’ suggests the femininity, sensitivity and refinement that are the antithesis of the violence and brutality that follow. Rawlins can anticipate future loss and suffering, but his instinct is to avoid it, to seek an escape and return to a safe haven. John Grady, on the other hand, refuses to abandon Blevins, but is willing to jeopardise his supposed friend’s life, and his own, in the process.

The novel reveals further recklessness in John Grady when he and Rawlins find work in Mexico on the Hacienda de Nuestra Senora de la Purisima Concepcion. On this ranch owned by the Mexican hacendado Don Hector Rocha y Villareal, John Grady quickly gains the respect and admiration of the other vaqueros for his ability and prowess with the horses, breaking sixteen of them in four days.\textsuperscript{72} Don Hector offers him a position on the ranch, but soon John Grady and Rawlins are arrested, on Don Hector’s orders, as a result of John Grady’s impossible pursuit of the hacendado’s daughter, Alejandra. Rawlins tells John Grady that he had warned him of the dangers involved in his romantic venture: ‘I tried to reason with you that’s all. Tried any number of times.’\textsuperscript{73} John Grady replies:

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 88.
\textsuperscript{71} McCarthy, \textit{All the Pretty Horses}, 91.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 100.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 155.
But some things aint reasonable. Be that as it may I’m the same man you crossed that river with. How I was is how I am and all I know how to do is stick. I never even promised you wouldn’t die down here.\textsuperscript{74}

These words are hardly a comfort for Rawlins, revealing how John Grady has ‘crossed that river’ knowing or even welcoming the possibility of death that might follow. His impossible pursuit of Alejandra reveals a recklessness that has no regard for consequences and a willingness to face death rather than compromise, rather than do something other than ‘stick’.

Towards the end of the novel John Grady makes a similar comment revealing his readiness to seek death, on his return from Mexico, when the judge says to him, ‘There’s nothing wrong with you son. I think you’ll get it sorted out.’ John Grady replies, ‘Yessir. I guess I will. If I live.’\textsuperscript{75} This might be a reasonable comment to make in Texas in the days of John Grady’s ancestors. However, it registers as an incongruous perspective in the Texas of 1949, revealing John Grady’s persistent preoccupation with the proximity and likelihood of danger culminating in his own death.

The episodes that take place in the Mexican jails and prisons in which John Grady and Rawlins are subsequently incarcerated reveal more extensively John Grady’s hope of facing danger and death. His seeming indifference to the likelihood of him and Rawlins being murdered is highlighted by the contrasting fear and horror depicted in Rawlins’ response to the same situation. In the Encantada jail Rawlins is beaten with ‘a leather sap’ and is described as ‘close to tears’ after being interrogated and ordered ‘to put down [his] pants’ by the Mexican captain.\textsuperscript{76} After the Mexican captain has finished with him, Rawlins returns to his cell ‘bent forward to one side and lay holding himself’.\textsuperscript{77} He talks of ‘the shower room’

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 293.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 163.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 165.
and the captain who ‘keeps a white coat back there on a hook and puts it on and ties it around his waist with a string’, and suggests he has been raped, or at least threatened with rape.\textsuperscript{78} During the ordeal Rawlins makes a false admission that he and John Grady are ‘horsethieves and murderers’.\textsuperscript{79} The boys’ position is complicated by the fact that Blevins has also been arrested as a horse-thief and has implicated them in his crime. Rawlins, who warned John Grady about the dangers of association with Blevins, suffers psychological and physical abuse as a result of his friend refusing to heed this advice. However, by ignoring Rawlins’ advice on both counts of pursuing Alejandra and, before that, sticking with Blevins, John Grady puts himself exactly in the place where he is able to solicit an even more dangerous crisis. During his own interrogation by the Mexican captain he refuses to corroborate Rawlins’ story and once more stands by Blevins, refusing to incriminate him. John Grady wilfully brings on further trauma by telling the captain that Rawlins is ‘full of shit’, even though the captain has warned that the consequences of being implicated with Blevins will be imprisonment in Saltillo with the ominous warning that there ‘you will no have this opportunity. It will be gone’.\textsuperscript{80} In refusing to incriminate Blevins, John Grady chooses the even more perilous environment of a Mexican prison for him and his already traumatised friend.

The prison at Saltillo reveals, in even more detail, how eagerly John Grady engages with situations in which he can be tested physically and emotionally. McCarthy describes the prison as ‘a bedrock of depravity and violence where in an egalitarian absolute every man was judged by a single standard and that was his readiness to kill’.\textsuperscript{81} Faced with the horror of

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 169.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 168.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 182.
this world, Rawlins, wounded and his nose broken, is at the point of defeat and insists that ‘They’re going to kill us.’\(^{82}\) However, John Grady tells him:

> You listen to me [...] Dont you let em think they aint goin to have to. You hear me? I intend to make em kill me. I wont take nothing less. They either got to kill us or let us be. There aint no middle ground.\(^{83}\)

Rawlins once more presents a wounded and defeated masculinity in contrast to John Grady’s defiant and uncompromising stance, which “intends to make ‘em kill me”. This ‘intention’ suggests something more extreme than defiance and stoicism. Although his friend, Rawlins, has already been stabbed, John Grady reveals a willing desire to engage with and overcome the ultimate threat of death. This willingness to die a violent death is revealed in his refusal to admit he has money to do a deal with the prison fixer, Perez, which might secure the boys’ release. As Perez tells him, John Grady’s fearlessness towards death ‘will help you to die. It will not help you to live.’\(^{84}\) John Grady, however, refuses to do a deal and instead uses the money that could have bought their release to buy a knife to defend himself against the cuchillero ‘hired’ to kill him in the prison canteen.\(^{85}\)

Already in a traumatic scenario he must put himself in an even more precarious situation which entails further trauma. John Grady’s heroic masculinity is less concerned with the relations of power between men and more preoccupied with the mastery of the trauma of facing that ‘bedrock of depravity and violence’ full on. The fact that the ensuing fight to the death involves knives is significant in terms of trauma – the wounds inflicted by a knife are physically puncturing, penetrating the inner organs of the body directly from the hand of the assailant. Trauma, deriving from the Greek word meaning ‘wound’, applied initially, in

\(^{82}\) Ibid.

\(^{83}\) Ibid., 183.

\(^{84}\) Ibid., 194.

\(^{85}\) Ibid., 200.
seventeenth century medicine, to a bodily injury incurred through an outside agent. The knife wound therefore signifies a direct encounter with trauma in its traditional physical sense. John Grady survives the fight, killing the cuchillero in the process, but is hospitalised for three days, wracked with pain in which ‘every breath he took was like a razor.’86 It is as though the assailant’s knife has entered and remained in John Grady’s body which has been invaded by this intrusive and lethal outside agency. It is a trauma which he has wilfully welcomed, just as he meets the cuchillero’s ‘embrace’ when the latter ‘took hold of John Grady by the hair and forced his head back to cut his throat’.87 This ‘embrace’, in turn, allows John Grady to sink his own knife ‘into the cuchillero’s heart’.88 The sexual dynamic of the knives, with its suggestion of being sexually penetrated and thereby ‘made feminine’ is accentuated here with language that could also apply to passionate lovemaking. It is the cuchillero who seeks dominance and power through violence, as John Grady submits passively and allows himself to be feminised in order to deliver the fatal blow. For John Grady, however, it is not masculine power over the cuchillero and other men that he seeks, but the engagement with and attempted mastery of trauma.

Although these episodes establish John Grady as undoubtedly courageous, at the same time McCarthy reveals how this courage also involves ventures in which the stakes are always fatal. John Grady defiantly insists on making love to Alejandra despite the fact her aunt, the Duena Alfonsa has informed him ‘it is not proper for you to be seen riding in the campo together’, along with Rawlins’ warning that the relationship is ‘fixin to get us fired and run off the place’.89 He deliberately refuses to compromise in the prison at Saltillo where he could buy their way out but chooses to fight instead. He expressly intends to die rather

86 Ibid., 202-203.
87 Ibid, 201.
88 Ibid. 201.
89 Ibid.,136, 138.
than do a deal with Perez. Throughout this series of self-induced calamities he maintains a sustained yearning for danger in his allegiance to Blevins. All these are instances of his attachment to situations which are high-risk and reveal perpetually his enduring and most loyal attachment, which is to loss itself. Unlike Freud’s ‘fort-da’, however, his repeated actions incurring loss never resolve the trauma. The desire to master the loss through repetition, thwarted by the unresolved attachment to the loss, entails a seeking of more and more extreme situations in order to attempt a mastery that is impossible. John Grady’s heroic masculinity is thus caught in a cycle of loss, attachment and attempted but failing mastery, which renews itself with the seeking of further, more extreme loss and trauma.

Even though the boys’ release from prison, and certain death, is orchestrated by Alejandra’s aunt, and even though both he and Rawlins have been badly wounded in the prison, John Grady’s insistent pursuit of impossible situations leads him to return to Encantada, to further danger, to try to find Alejandra and the horses that were stolen from him. Rawlins decides to return home, anxious that the blood transfusion he has undergone in Saltillo has meant ‘they put Mexican blood in me.’

This anxiety reflects a deeper trauma associated with the possible physical invasion of rape at the hands of the Mexican captain in Encantada, and a further emphasising of the physically intrusive nature of the trauma that the boys experience. Furthermore, although Rawlins was unkind to Blevins and was willing to leave him in the desert, he finds it much harder than John Grady to come to terms with Blevins’ murder, saying ‘I keep thinkin about old Blevins [...] I keep thinkin about how scared he was.’ Rawlins is psychologically as well as physically traumatised and can only return home defeated and exhausted, whereas John Grady once more must define himself in

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90 Ibid., 210.
91 Ibid., 212.
heroic terms, returning ‘back down there’ for ‘the girl and the horses’.

Heroic masculinity entails, in its incessant return to danger and subsequent traumatic loss, a cycle of attempted mastery which always looks for the next ordeal guaranteeing a further trauma. When Rawlins tells his friend he cannot forget ‘how scared’ Blevins was before his execution, John Grady replies, ‘I aint Blevins,’ thus asserting, once more, a fearlessly stoical masculinity. All through these exploits John Grady, therefore, may appear as the resurrected heroic cowboy in the mould of the Old West. However, McCarthy interrogates, in these increasingly dangerous and death-seeking exploits, a heroic masculinity that is an essentially traumatic condition that can only be resolved ultimately by the death John Grady is always ready to face. Responding to John Grady’s comparison of himself to the foolhardy Blevins, Rawlins offers his friend a premonitory warning: ‘I wonder how much better off you are than him.’ In this statement Rawlins suggests John Grady’s destructive desire to seek life-threateningly doomed heroics will ultimately lead to the death that awaits him, as it did for Blevins, across the border.

Although Rawlins returns to the safety of home he admits that the trauma he has suffered will not go away and he will not ‘feel better’ when he gets there. By contrast, John Grady returns to Mexico, to the girl who has already abandoned and betrayed him, and therefore, once more he deliberately puts himself in harm’s way. For John Grady the past trauma of now ever-accumulating loss requires mastery, and mastery of an impossible situation that is already a lost cause. The return to Mexico entails his optimism that Alejandra might possibly change her mind and say ‘yes’ this time, but even if she says ‘yes’ the ensuing success of the venture will carry with it life-threatening consequences as a result of Don Hector’s determination to terminate the love affair, regardless of Alejandra’s decision. The

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92 Ibid., 211.
93 Ibid., 212-213.
94 Ibid., 213.
illusion of the optimism regarding Alejandra becomes starkly ‘cruel’, however, with her final rejection of John Grady in the hotel room in Zacatecas:

He saw very clearly how all his life led only to this moment and all after led nowhere at all. He felt something cold and soulless enter like another being and he imagined that it smiled malignly and he had no reason to believe it would ever leave.95

Berlant’s theory helps us to understand John Grady’s attachment to Alejandra as the guiding impulse moving him forward towards further probable loss. Alejandra provides him with his ‘sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world’, but that ‘looking forward’ involves the anticipation of losing her over again.96 John Grady maintains this attachment to her, because she is a lost cause, and, having finally and irrevocably lost her, he feels abandoned in the world with nowhere to go. The language of loss here suggests the external invasion of his inner world by a force that is alien, depersonalising and beyond his control, ‘something cold and soulless’ ‘entering’, penetrating him from without. This penetration echoes the sexual dynamics of the knife fight in Saltillo, but this time it involves an emotional wounding inflicted by a woman instead of a physical wound from a fight with a man. John Grady’s belief that this ‘something cold and soulless’ will never leave him reveals the extent to which he is more permanently wounded by Alejandra than by the physical injury he incurred in the prison. This ‘penetration’ from an external agency once more suggests the feminisation of John Grady’s masculinity. Not only is he vulnerable to physical penetration in the knife fight, he is also susceptible to psychic wounding and penetration in his love life.

In repeatedly evoking this more feminine and vulnerable aspect to John Grady, McCarthy emphasises how John Grady’s version of heroic masculinity is more complex than

95 Ibid., 254.
a masculinity just concerned with domination and prowess or mastery over other men. John Grady’s nurturing feminine instinct is revealed in his dreams where ‘something was afraid and he had come to comfort it.’ Furthermore, although I have interpreted his loyalty to Blevins in terms of his predilection for danger, there is also a sense in which Blevins brings out this caring protective feminine side of John Grady’s nature for this ‘kid about thirteen years old’ dressed in ‘bib overalls’. Also there are times when John Grady exercises mastery but it is not related to power or control over other men or women. On his return trip to Mexico he is able to rescue the horses, Redbo and Junior, and Blevins’ horse, and he also successfully takes the Mexican captain from the Encantada jail as hostage. In these moments he asserts control over his enemies and finds some form of redress. Nevertheless, he shows mercy to the Mexican captain, sparing his life, reassuring him that ‘I aint goin to kill you [....] I’m not like you.’ He asserts that he is ‘not like’ other men such as the captain who exercises his dominance over Rawlins and other men through his ‘shower room’ interrogations. He shows compassion in his fixing the Mexican’s dislocated shoulder and offers to let him escape. However, even these ‘successes’ are tinged with past loss and further possible danger. The two horses he retrieves are rider-less reminders of the death of one boy and the traumatised retreat of the other. Similarly it seems foolhardy and entertaining unnecessary risk to offer to let the captain go.

Further feminisation of John Grady’s masculinity is displayed at the moment when, in cauterising the bullet wounds he incurs in retrieving the horses, he penetrates himself twice with his own gun:

97 McCarthy, Cities of the Plain, 204.
98 McCarthy, All the Pretty Horses, 39.
99 Ibid., 278.
100 Ibid., 169.
101 Ibid., 278, 280.
He [...] jammed the redhot barrel ash and all the way down into the hole in his leg [...] and jammed the gunbarrel into the second wound and held it the longer in deference to the cooling of the metal.  

He can only overcome his wounds through this figurative emasculation, sexually violating himself with his own ‘gun’ and thereby becoming ‘feminine’. Nell Sullivan comments on how, here, ‘even in displaying the feminine, John Grady manages to display the phallic at the same time’. Sullivan argues that ‘by divorcing femininity from women and allowing male performance of both gender roles, McCarthy in effect creates a closed circuit for male desire’. This denotes ‘yet another symptom of McCarthy’s narrative misogyny’ which is ‘perpetually striving to make women themselves unnecessary’. Sullivan’s argument also points to how, even in moments of extreme vulnerability, McCarthy’s hero reasserts his masculine endurance of pain and the willingness to suffer in order to transcend the wound. This act also has implications of heroic warrior status in line with the blood-letting of male initiation rites. Savran writes:

The act of self-mutilation is the purest and most absolute expression of virility.

Fortuitously, this writing of masculinity upon the male body does not require willing partners. Give the man a weapon, let him slice up his own flesh, let him prove himself a warrior.

John Grady’s ‘penetration’ with his own gun is a combined act of self-mutilation, self-feminisation and healing. It reveals the complex interaction between the feminised wounded

102 Ibid., 274.
104 Ibid., 229-230.
105 Ibid., 252.
victim and the virile warrior, between the self-induced suffering and its mastery that comprises John Grady’s heroic masculinity. The ways in which John Grady’s masculinity expands to include the feminine may be, as Sullivan says, a way of excluding women from the cowboy narrative, but this feminisation is complicated by the fact that it is persistently associated with wounding, trauma and self-mastery. The experience of penetration and, by implication, feminisation is depicted in the language of wounding associated both in the knife fight in Saltillo and the self-wounding process and cauterisation of these bullet holes. This self-violating feminisation that, at the same time, denotes an urge to prove his masculine endurance reveals how John Grady’s heroic masculinity is focused on mastery of himself, not others. His mastery here involves a cauterising of his wound through an act of endurance, but it also has strange sexual implications in ‘holding the gunbarrel’ in his leg for a ‘longer’ time. Sullivan’s argument that McCarthy’s narrative is misogynistic in the way it excludes women is persuasive. However, McCarthy may also be exploring not only how, in a world without women, certain men can only become feminine in self-wounding ways, but also how this ‘feminisation’ is then reabsorbed into the masculine desire for mastery in the ‘depravity and violence’ that constitutes the exclusively male world. This shift into the feminine involves a transformation that is, itself, traumatic and can only be accomplished through the experience of a wounding that has to be re-appropriated into the masculine domain through the mastery of that wound. These penetrations with knives and the self-administered penetration with his own gun reveal how the exclusion of women from the narrative turns our attention back to John Grady’s attachment to and mastery of physical and psychic trauma.

In Beyond the Pleasure Principle Freud offers a helpful analysis of the penetration of the psyche that allows us to see how these physical invasions that John Grady suffers, may also be interpreted in terms of the subject’s desire to master psychological assault. Freud

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107 McCarthy, All the Pretty Horses, 182.
envisages the ‘organism’ of the psyche operating in the same way as a physical organ when invaded or penetrated by a traumatic experience. He writes:

An event such as an external trauma will doubtless provoke a massive disturbance in the organism’s energy system, and mobilize all available defence mechanisms [...]

It is no longer possible to prevent the psychic apparatus from being flooded by large quanta of stimulation; instead a quite different challenge presents itself: to assert control over the stimuli; to psychically annex the quanta of stimulation that have burst in, and then proceed to dispose of them. \(^{108}\)

After Alejandra’s departure, John Grady’s experience of being ‘entered’ by ‘an alien being’ is in keeping with Freud’s understanding of trauma as a psychic version of the original physical wound caused by an external force. In evaluating how the psyche is able to ‘dispose’ of the traumatic ‘stimulation’ Freud develops, from the repetitive action inherent in the ‘fort-da’ game, the overall significance of repetition in the attempt to master the impact of this external intrusion on the psyche:

In the case of children’s play it seems readily comprehensible to us that the child […] repeats unpleasantable experiences, because by thus being active he gains far more thorough-going control of the relevant powerful experience than was possible when he was merely its passive recipient. Each new repetition seems to add to the sense of command that the child strives for. \(^{109}\)

This ‘compulsion to repeat’ in order to achieve mastery underlies John Grady’s quest for further engagement with loss in the next ordeal, both in a physical and psychological sense. This compulsion invokes a cyclic loop of attempted mastery of the loss he has to repeatedly

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experience that always leaves him where he was at the beginning of the novel, ‘come to the end of something’ but still seeking the mastery of that position.

When he finally returns from Mexico, having lost Alejandra for good, he continues to feel the loss, as ‘a loneliness he’d not known since he was a child and he felt wholly alien to the world although he loved it still.’\(^{110}\) Despite returning with the horses and having achieved some form of retribution over the Mexican captain, John Grady’s overwhelming experience in this venture is, once more, one of traumatic loss. This inherent and fundamental ‘loneliness’ of his childhood signals a hearkening back to earlier trauma. In the previous chapter, on Billy’s sense of loss in *The Crossing*, I investigated how McCarthy challenges the concept of foundational trauma and makes it impossible to allocate or verify trauma’s specific source. The difficulty of representing or understanding the foundational or original experience of trauma is further explored by Bessel A. van der Kolk and Alexander C. McFarlane:

> Often trauma does not present a radically new experience, but rather confirms some belief that an individual has tried to evade. For many patients, what is most destructive about a traumatic event is that it confirms some long-feared belief, rather than presenting them with a novel incongruity.\(^{111}\)

In his striving towards a heroic manhood, always haunted by the loss of the Old West, John Grady epitomises a masculinity defined, from childhood, by a sense of loss and alienation. As we have seen, John Grady’s loss revolves around the passing of the Old West, but nevertheless, as with Billy Parham in *The Crossing*, McCarthy implies here a further non-specific void, a ‘loneliness’ in John Grady’s life beyond and before that of losing his ranch.

\(^{110}\) McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*, 282.

and the way of life it embodies. When embarked on their border quests both Billy, in *The Crossing*, and John Grady in *All the Pretty Horses* and *Cities of the Plain*, are not just, as van der Kolk and McFarlane describe, ‘evading’ their ‘long-feared’ loss, they are racing towards it over and over again because they are attached to it and simultaneously desire to gain mastery over it.

In the final pages of *All the Pretty Horses* John Grady returns to that sense of abiding loss that haunted him at the beginning of the novel. He returns home but only to confirm his continuing status as a restless wanderer looking for a lost ‘country’. Jay Ellis notes such restlessness in McCarthy’s characters and suggests ‘we might even say they do not exist at all, except when they are moving.’¹¹² There is, however, nowhere for John Grady to go but back out on to the trail and reassume the search for the heroic mythic mantle of the lost Old West. His heroic search, rather than being a mark of masculine superiority, actually condemns him to a wandering isolation, an isolation he has always felt from the beginning of the novel, and even perhaps before that in his childhood. McCarthy thus reveals here, and throughout the novel, the suffering inherent in this heroic masculinity – how it condemns the individual to loneliness and perpetual yearning for a completion and fulfilment that is unattainable. The future for John Grady once more involves a leave-taking out of the country of his childhood where he feels he no longer belongs. ‘I don’t know what happens to country,’ he tells Rawlins, suggesting he does not relate to the country of his birth, and also implying once again the loss of the mythic country of the Old West that he sought on his journeys to Mexico. All that is left for him is to ‘head out’ once more.¹¹³ This uncertain road is his future, but it is also a road leading back into the past, into history, into the myth of the Old West. It is a journey marked by his association, once more, as at the beginning of the

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¹¹² Ellis, *No Place for Home*, 35.
¹¹³ McCarthy *All the Pretty Horses*, 299.
novel, with the Comanche tribes of the past, an indication of how, as noted in the previous chapter with the narrative form of the quests in *The Crossing*, John Grady’s narrative has also come full circle. There is, however, a difference between John Grady’s association with the Comanche at the beginning of the novel, when he imagined riding alongside the mythic braves on the war trail, and his connection here at the end with the surviving Indian tribes camped on the western plains:

> The indians stood watching him. He could see that none of them spoke among themselves or commented on his riding there nor did they raise a hand in greeting or call out to him. They had no curiosity about him at all. As if they knew all they needed to know. They stood and watched him pass and watched him vanish upon that landscape solely because he was passing. Solely because he would vanish.¹¹⁴

Here, it is he, and not the Indians, who represents the Vanishing American, a masculinity vanishing into myth while the Indian tribe witnesses his ‘passing’, watching him ‘vanish’ physically and figuratively into the West. Having enacted his own vanishing once more, as he did at the beginning of his journey in the window of the Federal Building, but this time before the tamed defeated descendants of the tribe he revered, John Grady then rides into a sunset which realigns him with those mythic and ‘authentic’ warrior heroes of the Comanche who have also passed on and vanished. In the final passage of the novel his masculinity moves through loss, as with the quest narrative in *The Crossing* once the quest has failed, into a mythic realm signalled by John Grady’s lonesome slow fade into the desert sunset.

> The decline of the cowboy life is highlighted by the scarcity of cattle in the ‘barren country’ he traverses and further reinforces John Grady’s isolation as one of a vanishing

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¹¹⁴ Ibid., 301.
breed of men.\textsuperscript{115} The only other living creature he encounters in this desert is the ‘solitary’ bull, ‘rolling in the dust against the bloodred sunset like an animal in sacrificial torment’.\textsuperscript{116} This encounter in a landscape otherwise bereft of living creatures suggests the association between this ‘solitary bull’ cast out in the desert and the lone rider himself – the last embodiment of a lost masculinity. The ominous repetition of ‘bloodred’ sky and ‘bloodred dust’, which colours John Grady’s face, ends the novel on an ambiguous note.\textsuperscript{117} John Grady’s ‘coppered’ features in the setting sun and the dust blowing out of the West suggest on the one hand, a retrospective revisiting and re-enacting of the mythic sunset rider of the Old West.\textsuperscript{118} As with Billy Parham’s solitary ride into the mountains to bury the wolf, out of the trauma of John Grady’s border experience there re-emerges a reincarnation of the mythic Old West in the form of this isolated but heroic lone rider. However, on the other hand, these images of ‘blood’ also resonate with past and future violence and loss as John Grady ‘passed and paled into the darkening land to come’. His ‘passing and paling’ suggest a journey where death beckons, and the ‘darkening land’ echoes the ‘darkness’ that covered his movements at the opening of the novel.\textsuperscript{119} There was the ‘dark outside’ as he stepped away from the house dominated by death – the dead eyes of ancestors and the death of his grandfather. And there was the ‘mineral waste to darkness’ into which he imagined the Comanche braves riding into in his ‘the dream of the past’.\textsuperscript{120} John Grady begins the novel in darkness and ends it on the verge of ‘the world to come’ overshadowed by the ‘darkening land’ associated with the same recurring sense of loss. At the end of \textit{All the Pretty Horses}, he exists, for the moment, in a mythic realm, bathed in the glow of the setting sun. However, at the same time, the novel does not celebrate and sustain the mythic sunset, as John Grady passes into the approaching

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 302.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 3, 5.
darkness of a future world. In this world he will once again experience further trauma in his incessant search for the mastery of irresolvable loss.

**Cities of the Plain: Back to the Future**

This ‘darkening land’ into which John Grady rides in the climax to *All the Pretty Horses* is sharply depicted in the opening to *Cities of the Plain*. The ‘bloodred sunset’ and ‘bloodred’ dust of *All the Pretty Horses*’ mythic evocation of the Old West become, in the opening page of the last novel in the Trilogy, the tawdry ‘bloodred barlight of a border town brothel’.121 Billy Parham, last seen as desolate broken wanderer at the end of *The Crossing*, re-emerges here, unrecognisable from the questing cowboy knight of the previous novel, as a ranch-hand in a whorehouse looking for ‘all them good fat ones’.122 In *Cities of the Plain*, McCarthy depicts a failing cowboy culture, one based on past losses and loneliness relieved in desolate trips to town in bars and brothels. It is, as represented in *All the Pretty Horses* by John Grady’s father, a culture of wounded masculinity, where men define themselves by what has been taken from them or in terms of the pain associated with past loss. The disappearing cowboy world that characterises the opening of *All the Pretty Horses* is further delineated in *Cities of the Plain* with the certainty that Mac’s ranch is to be taken over by the U.S. Army which is looking for the ‘sorriest land they could find’ to appropriate.123 The ill-fated ranch is also in a perpetual state of mourning for the death of Mac’s wife, a loss that affects all the men, including Billy Parham who says, ‘this place aint the same. It never will be. Maybe we’ve all got a little crazy [...] You dont get over a woman like that.’124 This pervasive sadness is also characterised in the suffering of male individuals, such as Troy, who

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121 McCarthy, *Cities of the Plain*, 3.
122 Ibid.
123 Ibid., 11.
124 Ibid., 11-12.
on a trip to Mexico with Billy, breaks down and weeps for his dead brother and ‘just ever
goddamned thing’.\textsuperscript{125}

In this world of wounded males John Grady continues to be set apart, as he was in \textit{All the Pretty Horses}, first of all by his ability with horses. Furthermore, Mac says, ‘I wish I had six more just like him,’ and John Grady’s prowess over the horses translates, for the other men, into an idealised integrity associated with the cowboy code. Billy says of him, ‘he’s just got his own notions about things’ and ‘he’s as good a boy as I ever knew. He’s the best.’\textsuperscript{126} It is in this context that John Grady becomes, amongst these men, the one man embodying ‘the all-American cowboy’, the iconic representative hero of a vanished world.\textsuperscript{127} John Grady’s heroic image in the eyes of the other ranch-hands is confirmed by his determination to break the most difficult horses on the ranch, repeating his exploits on the Purisima ranch where he broke sixteen horses in four days.\textsuperscript{128} Here on Mac’s ranch, despite a significant injury, he returns to the horse that threw him, a horse none of the other men will dare to handle. Ignoring advice from Billy and the other men, he perseveres, ‘hobblin around after the damn horse’ until he tames the ‘squirrelheaded son of a bitch’.\textsuperscript{129} For the watching ranch-hands, the horse here becomes a mode of exchange in terms of masculinity, a means through which, in the other men’s eyes, John Grady reveals his superiority, not only over the horses, but over the rest of the cowboys on the spread. The ways in which the men admire John Grady for his skill with horses reveals how susceptible they are and how willingly they subscribe to the idea of an idealised mythic cowboy in their midst. Seen in terms of heroic masculinity, however, for John Grady the unruly horse signifies less a way of dominating the horse, and by proxy the other men, and more as a way of mastering the impossible challenge the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[125] Ibid., 35.
\item[126] Ibid., 20, 244.
\item[127] Ibid., 4.
\item[128] McCarthy, \textit{All the Pretty Horses}, 100.
\item[129] McCarthy, \textit{Cities of the Plain}, 16, 17.
\end{footnotes}

The way in which Billy and the other men evaluate what they see as John Grady’s superiority can be interpreted in terms of the homosocial relations of power that exist between men. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick refers to the homosocial world, the world governed by the ‘bonding’ between males, as one whose shape ‘is not that of brotherhood, but of extreme, compulsory, and intensely volatile mastery and subordination’.\footnote{Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick, \textit{Between Men: English Literature and Homosocial Desire} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 66.} McCarthy interrogates this homosocial view of masculinity through his dual interrogation of mastery and masculinity in this ranch-hand culture. On the one hand, the other cowboys represent a homosocial perspective, revering John Grady for his cowboy domination of the horses. On
the other hand, the desire for mastery of the horse is in keeping with John Grady’s preoccupation with reckless danger and mastery in an impossible enterprise. First through the currency of horses, and later, through Magdalena, the Mexican child prostitute he wants to marry, John Grady is set apart from other men. Michael Kimmel points out how ‘women become a kind of currency that men use to improve their ranking on the masculine social scale.’¹³² We see this currency in women operating amongst the men as Billy, inquiring about Magdalena, asks John Grady if he intends ‘to bring her around some time where we can get a look at her’ and Billy acknowledges that when Magdalena does appear at the ranch he does not ‘expect there’ll be a lot of empty chairs at the table on them days’.¹³³ Billy’s observation suggests that Magdalena is akin to a horse that can ‘be brought around’ as if on a rein to be gazed at by men. Also in Billy’s observation is the implication that Magdalena’s appeal will set John Grady apart from other men, and make John Grady, as much as Magdalena, the object of the male gaze at the canteen table. As with the interaction between John Grady and the horses, Magdalena becomes, for the other men on the ranch, a transactional object in their evaluation of John Grady. McCarthy here reveals the ways in which even defeated men in this cowboy world still find ways of objectifying women in order to assert a spurious male supremacy, and also to reinforce their perceptions of the ideal ‘all American cowboy’ as tamer of women as well as horses. It also reveals the loneliness and desperation of these men, eager for the vicarious pleasure of imagining themselves into John Grady’s world, yet unable to go there themselves. The other men, in their reverence for John Grady as ‘all American cowboy’ reveal how ingrained that imagery of the Old West is in this culture and how the yearning John Grady has for that mythic world also lives on within the lives of these wounded and diminished men.

¹³² Kimmel, ‘Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity’, 186.
¹³³ McCarthy, Cities of the Plain, 85, 180.
The triangular relationship of John Grady, Magdalena and her pimp, Eduardo, offers an opportunity for McCarthy to reveal how a purely homosocial transactional masculinity collides with John Grady’s heroic cowboy. Sedgwick’s relating of the ties between two men in competition for the same woman speaks to, on one level, the relationship between John Grady and Magdalena’s pimp:

[T]he bond between rivals in an erotic triangle [...] being stronger, more heavily determinant of actions and choices, than anything in the bond between either of the lovers and the beloved.\(^{134}\)

Sedgwick’s further explanation of how ‘female sexuality [...] is meaningful [...] chiefly within the context of the exchange of power and of symbolic goods between men’, seems pertinent in this respect, as Magdalena, as a prostitute, is, on one level a commodity, a piece of property that is contested between her pimp and John Grady.\(^{135}\) Her abject state as an abused prostitute and an epileptic consolidates her passive victim status as exchange object in the rivalry between two competing male impulses for dominance. This is in line with Sedgwick’s view:

[I]n the presence of a woman who can be seen as pitiable or contemptible, men are able to exchange power and to confirm each other’s value even in the context of the remaining inequalities in their power.\(^{136}\)

Sedgwick reveals how the more abject the object of desire becomes, in this case an epileptic and abused child prostitute, the higher the stakes are for the competitive ‘transaction of

\(^{134}\) Sedgewick, *Between Men*, 21.
\(^{135}\) Ibid., 146.
\(^{136}\) Ibid., 160.
honour’ that exists ‘between men over the dead, discredited, or disempowered body of a woman’.  

This interpretation of the rivalry between Eduardo and John Grady suggests that McCarthy is crassly objectifying Magdalena as a pitiable focus of masculine competition. Such an assessment of McCarthy’s treatment of women, however, conflates McCarthy’s perspective with that of Eduardo who, in homosocial terms, sees his retention of Magdalena as commodified property as a symbol of his own masculine prowess. John Grady’s heroic masculinity, on the other hand, implies a different perspective on Magdalena and one that does not relate to Eduardo’s proprietorial ownership, and does not conform quite in the same way to the homosocial convention of woman as transactional ‘exchange of power’. John Grady’s against-all-odds attempt to rescue this completely disempowered woman places him once more in the cycle of attempting mastery in a situation that is always already a lost cause. He engages in his attempt to rescue her knowing that she herself ‘believes that Eduardo will kill her’ and the blind maestro in the Moderno also confirms this for John Grady.  

John Grady’s desire to save her is associated once more with an attachment to an impossible outcome, in this case involving the pursuit of his lover despite, and even because of, the fact that it will bring about her death. Eduardo’s objectification of Magdalena can therefore be evaluated as an extreme version of the transactional basis on which the homosocial relations between men are founded. McCarthy reveals, however, how heroic cowboy masculinity, for different reasons, also objectifies the female captive figure, how it makes her a transactional commodity but in a rather different way from that associated with the strictly homosocial. As a victim beyond saving and therefore the ‘object’ of the heroic attempt to bring about the impossible, she represents for John Grady a premium commodity in terms of possible loss. In

137 Ibid., 137.  
138 McCarthy, Cities of the Plain, 197.
this way McCarthy reveals how heroic cowboy masculinity absorbs women into its sphere as mere objects of an irresolvable lost cause to which it can attach.

In depicting the women John Grady encounters – his mother, Mary Catherine, Alejandra and finally Magdalena – as primarily manifestations of attachment and loss, McCarthy reveals how heroic masculinity evaluates and objectifies women in a way that is different from the homosocial transaction proposed by Sedgwick. The necessitated loss of Magdalena in the future also combines with her association with the other elusive Mexican girl Alejandra, from *All the Pretty Horses*, and the loss configured there in John Grady’s past. Magdalena represents a re-enacted loss in her perverse connection with Alejandra, and also, at the same time, an attachment that will almost certainly end in loss in the future. These wounds of the heart reach back further still to the encounter with Mary Catherine at the beginning of *All the Pretty Horses*. Heroic masculinity still sees women in terms of the man’s mastery but not the homosocial mastery over other men that comes with the capture and possession of a woman that other men cannot have. Heroic masculinity, rather, entails the mastery over the loss that the woman embodies and therefore precludes any permanent or long-standing relationship between a man and a woman because it sees the relationship only in terms of the failure and loss it will bring.

Women, for McCarthy, therefore, become synonymous with the wolf, horse and brother in Billy’s quests in *The Crossing*, in that they become placeholders for a sense of loss that can never be retrieved but must be re-enacted in a traumatic cycle. However, it can be argued that these women are even relegated beneath this category in that they are not, as with Billy’s wolf, even objects of surrogate loss, but are possessions that are always already gone, lost or disposed of. McCarthy’s objectification and commodification of women as disposable markers of loss may be partly mitigated or softened by the extremities that McCarthy reveals inherent in John Grady’s heroic masculinity. The extremity of John Grady’s quests for the
impossible calls attention to the objectification of his women and thus enables a readerly critique of the sexism, even misogyny, built into these stories. It is John Grady’s quests for heroic masculinity that do this to women rather than it is McCarthy who is relegateing women to depersonalised and disposable markers of future loss. Equally, not all the women are merely objectified goals at the end of John Grady’s quest for heroic lost causes. Alejandra’s grandaunt and godmother, the Duena Alfonsa emerges as a strong woman in her own right, telling John Grady, ‘In this matter I get to say. I am the one who gets to say.’\textsuperscript{139} Linda Woodson notes how \textit{All the Pretty Horses} ‘remains McCarthy’s only novel where the outcome of the action – the expulsion of John Grady Cole from La Purisima, his and Rawlins’s release from the prison, and John Grady’s return to Texas – is determined by women, Alfonsa and Alejandra’.\textsuperscript{140} However, even Alfonsa who ‘gets to say’ that Alejandra cannot be with John Grady, and Alejandra herself who, as Ellis maintains ‘never intends to become his wife’ are both still directly implicated in the relationship between women and loss in John Grady’s life.\textsuperscript{141} Alfonsa is ‘the one who gets to say’ that John Grady will lose the girl and continue to experience the loss to which he returns when he seeks a final farewell with Alejandra in Zacatecas. And the loss of Alejandra requires mastery in an even more impossible emotional lost cause and requires he embarks upon a quest for further loss in his love for Magdalena.

Therefore, even Alfonsa and Alejandra, women who are admittedly ‘stronger, more appropriately motivated, and more fully realized’ than other McCarthy female characters are absorbed back into the cycle of John Grady’s trauma and masculine quest for mastery over

\textsuperscript{139} McCarthy, \textit{All the Pretty Horses}, 137.
\textsuperscript{140} Linda Woodson, ‘“This is another country”: The Complex Feminine Presence in \textit{All the Pretty Horses}’, in Sara L. Spurgeon (ed.), \textit{Cormac McCarthy: All the Pretty Horses, No Country for Old Men, The Road} (London: Continuum Press, 2011), 25-26.
\textsuperscript{141} Ellis, \textit{No Place for Home}, 212.
John Grady’s relationships with women never escape from this cycle, as we see in the intimations of past and future loss that resonate throughout even moments of emotional intimacy with Magdalena. The first time John Grady sleeps with her he leaves her with ‘above all a knowing deep in the bone that beauty and loss are one’. The last time they make love he tells her all the losses of his life – Alejandra, the prison violence at Saltillo, and further back to the losses that prefigured his first border crossing:

He told her about seeing his mother on stage at the Majestic Theatre in San Antonio Texas and about the times that he and his father used to ride in the hills north of San Angelo and about his grandfather and the Comanche trail that ran through the western sections and how he would ride that trail in the moonlight in the fall of the year when he was a boy [...].

His recital of earlier wounding and suffering over Magdalena’s sleeping form, foreshadowing her soon-to-be-dead body, creates an amalgam of past and future losses. Although John Grady says he wants to marry her and therefore make the relationship a permanent arrangement, he also knows that this is the most dangerous thing he could attempt to do. It is the action which is most likely to bring about her and his death at the hands of an enraged Eduardo. Billy Parham, who initially wants to see Magdalena ‘brought round’ to the supper table to be gazed at like a horse, soon changes his tune when John Grady tells him of his plans to marry. Both men see Magdalena as extensions of their own desires – Billy’s to look on voyeuristically and homosocially at her as his friend’s possession, and John Grady’s as a way of marrying himself to a quest for further loss, which he hopes will not happen, but nevertheless seems more than likely.

142 Linda Woodson, “‘This is another country”: The Complex Feminine Presence in All the Pretty Horses”, 42.
143 McCarthy, Cities of the Plain, 71.
144 Ibid., 205.
Billy, like Rawlins before him, tries, unsuccessfully, to impart anxious words of advice to John Grady and warns him with regard to this proposed wedding:

She aint American. She aint a citizen. She don’t speak english. She works in a whorehouse. No, hear me out. And last but not least – he sat holding his thumb – there’s a son of a bitch owns her outright that I guarangoddamntee you will kill you graveyard dead if you mess with him. Son, aint there no girls on this side of the river?  

In the insistence that John Grady will die in his pursuit of Magdalena, Billy recognises the extremes to which his friend will go in order to maintain the irrational attachment to the girl. John Grady claims to be optimistic that Magdalena will successfully leave Eduardo and counters Billy’s claim that Eduardo ‘says she aint leavin’ with his reply, ‘Well she is.’ Lauren Berlant describes how, in Ryman’s novel Was, Dorothy Gael goes crazy ‘to protect her last iota of optimism’. In Cities of the Plain, John Grady’s optimism also appears as a mark of insanity to Billy who repeatedly tells John Grady that his quest to rescue Magdalena is ‘crazy’: ‘Do I think you’re crazy? he said. No I don’t. You’ve rewrote the book for crazy.’ Just as Dorothy Gael would go crazy rather than give up her attachment to the objects of her optimism, John Grady similarly pursues a ‘crazy’ quest for an impossible rescue that he hopes he can pull off. He is drawn to Magdalena as a woman that he thinks he wants to love, even though wanting her is bad for him, because he knows he can never really have her. However, as it may all end badly, as lost causes tend to end, what he can have, and try to master, is the anticipation of losing her ahead of the loss.

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145 Ibid., 137.  
146 Ibid., 136.  
147 Ibid.  
148 Ibid., 137.
John Grady’s anticipation of this loss of Magdalena is further implied in the preparations he makes for their home in the mountain cabin at Bell Springs Draw. McCarthy encapsulates the impending failure and loss in the descriptions of John Grady’s work ‘long into the nights’ at Bell Springs.\(^{149}\) These ‘nights’ are characterised by their associations, not with hopeful love and the promise of union, but with isolation and intimations of mortality. His meals at the cabin are eaten ‘alone at the table’, while contemplating ‘the faultless chronicling of the ancient clockworks in the hallway’ ticking out his life, and ‘the ancient silence of the desert in the darkness about’.\(^ {150}\) These moments echo his lonely hours of mourning in the ancestral home at the beginning of *All the Pretty Horses*, in the empty ancestral house ‘with no sound save the ticking of the mantel clock’ and the ‘dark outside and cold’.\(^ {151}\) These echoes of past grief suggest how, at Bell Springs, John Grady is more in touch with an act of mourning for the future loss of all that he is building, than he is engaged with establishing the foundation of his marital home. Berlant’s view that cruel optimism leads to ‘to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of attachment in the first place’ is pertinent here.\(^ {152}\) The house should represent an attachment associated with ‘thriving’ potential, but instead is described in terms of mournful exhaustion ahead of the actual loss that has yet to occur. The trilogy has brought John Grady full circle from the opening of *All the Pretty Horses* when he was grieving for his dead grandfather, the last of the cowboy breed, as here once again he inhabits a place resonant with loss and grief, but this time for something that is about to happen.

John Grady’s and Billy’s contrasting representations of masculinity encoded in their different attitudes to Magdalena are also further developed in their differing responses to

\(^{149}\) Ibid., 178.

\(^{150}\) Ibid.

\(^{151}\) McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*, 3.

\(^{152}\) Berlant, ‘Cruel Optimism’, 21.
John Grady’s mountain home. Billy talks of how he ‘used to think I’d like to have a spread up in the hills somewhere like this’, but no longer has that desire, having ‘wintered one time in a linecamp up in New Mexico’, and now having become used to domestic advantages such as ‘when you throw a switch and the lights come on’. 153 The ruined house, however, for John Grady signifies a lost past that might be re-enacted and which engages him in a meditation on the life in ‘the old days’ and whether or not men ‘were a tougher breed back then’. 154 Billy just suggests the men then were possibly ‘dumber’ rather than ‘tougher’ and that he ‘used to think rawhidin a bunch of bony cattle in some outland country would be just as close to heaven as a man was likely to get. I wouldn’t give you much for it now.’ 155 John Grady responds to this pragmatic and unsentimental view of the past with the unequivocal sweeping away of Billy’s predilection for the domestic: ‘I could live here [...] I think I’d like it,’ thereby reaffirming his allegiance to the mythical past, to the reliving of a life that has disappeared. 156

John Grady’s assertive identification with a past heroic identity and Bell Springs Draw signifies for him an opportunity to prove his masculine solidarity with the ‘tougher breed’ of the past. If the ‘country’ is not what is was and never will be again, if the Army is about to take over and drive away what is left of the cowboy life, then the ‘toughest breed’ of man will be the one who refuses to leave. The abandoned house at Bell Springs Draw becomes a symbol of his desire to rework the past, to attempt to master its loss through the Old West masculine pursuit of seizing land and building a home, just before it will be taken from him, either by the death of his future wife, or by the Army’s appropriation of the land. Barcley Owens notes how ‘John Grady’s simple dream of fixing up the shack for his

153 McCarthy, Cities of the Plain, 77.
154 Ibid.
155 Ibid.
156 Ibid.
Mexican bride replays the pioneer’s dream of forging a garden-paradise in the wilderness. However, the ‘garden-paradise’ has already gone, and that vanishing is about to be re-enacted in the selling of Mac’s ranch to the army. Therefore, John Grady wants to rebuild the house in the mountains to reinvent the mythic pioneer life, because he knows that it will soon be taken from him anyway.

Billy’s reflections at Bell Springs Draw, on the other hand, at first glance suggest a rejection of that lost past and an assimilation into the contemporary world that John Grady finds impossible. However, Billy’s eventual reflection on his past losses goes beyond his initial glib reference to the creature comforts of electricity as reasons for his rejection of that old cowboy life, as he intimates some greater abstracted sense of wounding which has defeated him:

When you’re a kid you have these notions about how things are goin to be, Billy said. You get a little older and you pull back some on that. I think you wind up just tryin to minimize the pain. Anyway this country aint the same. Nor anything in it. The war changed everything. I don’t think people even know it yet.

Here, Billy sounds very similar to John Grady’s father at the beginning of All the Pretty Horses, a man wounded and disillusioned, lamenting how his ‘country’ has changed beyond all reckoning. Billy has tried to come to terms with the trauma of his past and now sees that the only thing he can hope for is ‘to minimize the pain’. He is still looking for an externalised cause for that pain, however, as he was throughout The Crossing. The difference is that in The Crossing his pain and loss became projected into mythic quests formulated in the attempt, albeit unsuccessfully, to put the loss to rights. Now the specific source of his pain is focused on the ‘war’, a cataclysm, significantly, that he knows he can do absolutely nothing

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157 Owens, Cormac McCarthy’s Western Novels, 116.
158 McCarthy, Cities of the Plain, 77.
about, and that is already associated with personal defeat because he was never allowed to
serve his country. Billy is trying to offer John Grady practical, fatherly advice, but he is also
speaking for the wounded male who has been defeated by trauma and loss. He answers John
Grady’s question as to how the war changed the ‘country’ with a generalised lament for a lost
past. The war offers only a pretext for the sense of a country having been changed
irretrievably by that conflict: ‘It just did. It aint the same no more. It never will be.’
Billy therefore begins the exchange with John Grady by claiming that he ‘wouldnt give you much’
for ‘the old days’ and ends by lamenting their passing and trying to find some specific reason
– in this case the war – for a sense of loss that he is still trying to locate in a specific moment.

John Grady’s mountain home at Bell Springs acts as the multi-layered trope for both
John Grady’s heroic and Billy’s wounded masculinity. It signifies the lost past of the West
and the certainty of its repeated loss in the future when the land around it is sold to the Army.
It embodies the ways that masculinity exemplified by Billy is concerned only with the loss of
the past, whereas the heroic masculinity exemplified by John Grady Cole, although fixated
with the losses of the past, must always move towards a further loss and trauma in the future.
The mountain home also acts as a locus for John Grady’s equally untenable plan to rescue
Magdalena and then marry her. This future is hopelessly unrealistic and irrational but he
nevertheless objectifies that aspiration in the many days spent converting the wrecked cabin.
He has not seen Magdalena for weeks and his attempt to rescue her is no nearer to realization,
and yet he works on through the cold of the winter up in the mountains. The building of the
home at Bell Springs embodies the ‘attachment’ he has to the loss of Magdalena ‘in advance’
of that loss. He realises the whole project of rescuing Magdalena actually threatens his life,
but the building of the house constitutes, again, to use Berlant’s phrase, ‘the continuity of the
subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living and to look forward to being in the world’.

159 Ibid.
This effort and commitment to the building of the home makes the future loss all the more devastating and therefore requiring a greater effort of mastery to attempt to overcome the loss. John Grady’s construction of the house although seriously untenable as a future home, also evokes mythic narratives of the Old West such as the heroic pioneer building his home for his family and the heroic rescuer from traditional captivity narrative liberating the imprisoned female.

His final visit to the cabin takes place after he discovers that Eduardo has followed through with his threat to kill Magdalena. The ensuing scene with its interaction between a grief-stricken John Grady, ‘his hands between his knees’, and a candle-lit lamp and its shadows ‘on the wall behind him’, again recalls the opening images of All the Pretty Horses where ‘the candleflame and the image of the candleflame caught in the pierglass twisted and righted when he entered the hall and again when he shut the door.’ These cyclic images evoke the ways John Grady’s masculinity is caught in the repetitive pattern of heroic trauma, caught forever in cycles of past loss and further pursuit of an impossible quest. At Bell Springs the candle casts an unrecognisable, ‘hulking shape’ on the wall suggesting how the consequences of John Grady’s action cast a grotesque, almost monstrous, shadow. The harsh external darkness of the opening of All the Pretty Horses is also repeated here in the ‘dark and windy and starless and cold’ world beyond the cabin at Bell Springs. This alien darkness contrasts with ‘the softly lit windows’ with their ‘warm and inviting’ mockery of John Grady as he rides away from the cabin. His final lighting of the lamp and the light in the windows enshrines Bell Springs as a site of consummated loss. At the same time Magdalena’s death means that it has become, in its evocations of the pioneer cabin and also

160 McCarthy, Cities of the Plain, 233, All the Pretty Horses, 3.
161 McCarthy, Cities of the Plain, 233.
162 Ibid.
163 Ibid.
the centre of grief and loss, a mythic site, another instance of how the mythic images and associations with the Old West emerge at the moment of failure and loss. Magdalena’s death, however, means John Grady is ‘done with all that’, and must seek the next ordeal, the next attempt at mastering the loss that is, and always has been, irresolvable. John Grady’s masculinity demands an attempted mastery that finally confirms what has underlined heroic trauma all along: that the trauma he must ultimately seek is his own death.

At the end of John Grady’s journey he faces, in Eduardo, a man who epitomises the dominant homosocial model of masculinity that seeks power over men and women in order to confirm its superior prowess. Eduardo’s description of his assailant’s final quest to avenge Magdalena’s death reduces John Grady’s heroic endeavour to ‘fighting in alleys with knives’ and to that of ‘a farmboy’ seeking ‘to throw himself into the grave of a dead whore’. The pimp’s brutally pragmatic perspective takes John Grady’s heroic quest and transforms it into a prosaic, even sordid, desire ‘for a whore […] for a whore’. This confrontation, like the Saltillo fight, involves John Grady’s heroism seeking a face-to-face encounter with primal masculine violence. Once again, he wilfully faces his enemy in a knife fight with its implications of psychic puncturing and penetration and the trauma of physical wounding. Eduardo’s diction, with its combined images of despoiled romance and barter, takes John Grady’s failed rescue and heroic loss of Magdalena and repositions it back in Eduardo’s world of homosocial conquest. In the fight Eduardo asserts domination, dictating the transactional terms on which the contest is based regarding Magdalena and also the physical terms of the fight based on his prowess with the knife. He transfers his capacity for physical and sexual power over the girl to the overpowering of his opponent, describing the opening

164 Ibid.
165 Ibid., 249, 250.
166 Ibid., 253.
moment of the fight as ‘like a first kiss’. Eduardo’s role throughout the fight is one of complete dominance, suggestive of a lord of the dance or master of ceremonies, continually ‘circling’ and waving his knife ‘like some dark conductor raising his baton to commence’. He deploys his weapon as an instrument of ‘relocation’ in his ‘plan’ ‘to put the suitor’s mind inside his thigh’. He humiliates John Grady, repeatedly calling him ‘suitor’ and disparaging his love for ‘a whore’ who begged Eduardo ‘to come to her’ taunting the boy with ‘the things she wished me to do’. Once again John Grady’s body is penetrated by the knife-carrying assailant as Eduardo carves his initial on John Grady’s thigh in an act of implicitly sexual appropriation. John Grady thus becomes another feminised object in Eduardo’s transactional reduction of humanity into meat. Eduardo gives John Grady two opportunities to walk away, to ‘choose life’, to ‘save’ himself, before he totally possesses the boy in the final killing, an act Eduardo terms as ‘naming’ John Grady ‘completely to myself’. Eduardo’s undertones of sexual possession in his taunting of John Grady are also mirrored in the phallic prowess of his knife, as he disarms and, thereby in Eduardo’s terms, emasculates John Grady by taking away the latter’s ‘weapon’. The phallic penetration of John Grady’s skin again brings his venture directly back into the realm of physical trauma, and also reasserts the recurring overlapping association in John Grady’s suffering between sexual, physical and psychic wounding.

McCarthy brings together here two different forms of masculinity. The sexual subjection intimated in Eduardo’s superior knife-work and verbal taunting represents a masculinity concerned solely with possession, power and prowess. John Grady’s masculinity,
on the other hand seeks, in the contest with the most lethally dangerous of assailants, the final most impossible ordeal to face. They physically converge at the point where Eduardo dismisses John Grady’s heroism in a contemptuous epitaph: ‘Finally death. For that is what has brought you here. That is what you were seeking.’ It is therefore significant that, at this moment, John Grady lures Eduardo in for a lethal murderous and fatal thrust to his own stomach, but which enables John Grady, in turn, to nail Eduardo’s ‘upper skull’ to ‘his jaw’ and silence the latter’s reductive pronouncement on John Grady’s heroism. John Grady’s brutal and brutalising killing of Eduardo achieves a victory over the dangerously powerful male patriarchal figure and secures a ‘heroic’ association with the violent legacy of his ancestors. However, this association can only be achieved at the expense of his life, the meeting with the ultimate trauma of death, the meeting that, as Eduardo says, ‘has brought you here’.

John Grady may, therefore, triumph over the dominant male figure of Eduardo, but McCarthy does not grant him that moment of mastery over the final trauma of death. The novel depicts John Grady, in the last instance, praying for his life in ‘the dark of a child’s playhouse in that alien land where he lay in his blood’. He dies in pain and alone with the omnipresent ‘candle [...] still burning’, the candle of mortality that once more mirrors the one burning by his grandfather’s coffin at the beginning of All the Pretty Horses. The candle image again brings John Grady’s adventure around full circle from the death that began the journey to his own demise here in the children’s ‘clubhouse made from packingcrates’. Images of blood, trauma, violence and death combine here with the separation and journey associated with ‘packingcrates’, and the site of the ‘child’s playhouse’, to create a multi-

173 Ibid., 253.
174 Ibid., 254.
175 Ibid., 257.
176 Ibid., 261.
177 Ibid., 256.
layered finale for John Grady’s heroic trauma. Eduardo’s epitaph, the children’s clubhouse, the burning candle – all point to how the novel incorporates John Grady’s final demise in the cycle of repetition and attachment initiated in the early scenes of the trilogy.

John Grady’s self-destructive cycle, driven by a loss which he is always trying to master, but cannot, because he remains attached to that loss and the need to recreate that loss, comes to an end in this child’s den. Freud observes:

It is plainly the case that children repeat everything in their play that has made a powerful impression on them, and that in so doing they [...] make themselves so to speak master of the situation.\textsuperscript{178}

Freud’s analysis here enables us to understand John Grady’s final moments as a culmination of failed mastery. The termination of his journey in a child’s ‘playhouse’ shows how John Grady has always been like one of Freud’s children seeking ‘to make themselves master of the situation’ through a cyclic pattern of increasingly dangerous heroics. Unlike Freud’s children, however, John Grady never achieves the mastery he seeks because he cannot escape from the necessity to keep on re-enacting and experiencing the loss of the Old West to which he is inextricably attached.

\textbf{Conclusion: Back to the Past}

When John Grady dies, Billy gathers him in his arms and Billy’s world collapses into weeping and trauma:

\textsuperscript{178} Freud, ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, 142.
He was crying and the tears ran on his angry face and he called out to the broken day against them all and he called out to God to see what was before his eyes. Look at this, he called. Do you see? Do you see? 179

Again there is the objectification and misogynistic reduction of women evident as Billy blames John Grady’s death, not on Eduardo’s vanity or John Grady’s recklessness, but on ‘goddamn whores’. 180 Billy’s condemnation may constitute less an indication of McCarthy’s misogyny however, and more of a revelation of how when faced with the extreme and absurd lengths to which men will go in order to prove their masculinity, other men will readily blame anything, God and women included, rather than the extreme actions of their fellow men. His railing against women also indicates his desire to retreat from the world and withdraw further into his wounded self. He quits the ranch, telling Mac, ‘I don’t have to do nothing but die.’ 181 For Billy, the day and all days from now on are ‘broken’ and filled with desolation. This is all connected with the death of his friend, but he is also re-enacting past traumas, particularly the death of his brother, Boyd. The novel ends, as does The Crossing, with Billy’s wounded cowboy figure and as with the end of that previous novel, Billy’s response to trauma ultimately is to ride forever in a nomadic exclusion from the world. He resumes the lost wandering existence with which he ended The Crossing, seeking oblivion in constant movement, ‘riding out in the dark before daylight’ and riding on ‘days of the world. Years of the world. Till he was old.’ 182 The death he envisaged as his only option when leaving Mac, is a living death, a ghost-like haunting of a dead country where ‘sand drifted the roads and after a few years it was rare to see stock of any kind.’ 183 He is also re-enacting the exhausted and wounded cowboy masculinity that refuses to abandon the trail or end the

179 McCarthy, Cities of the Plain, 261.
180 Ibid., 261.
181 Ibid., 263.
182 Ibid., 264.
183 Ibid. 264.
restless wandering. It is significant that the one job he does secure is as ‘an extra in a movie’. This bit-part in a Western mirrors what he sees as his role in his life as a minor character in the heroic mythic narratives of John Grady and Billy’s brother, Boyd. McCarthy suggests here that this mythic masculinity only ever really resided, not in the lives of Boyd and John Grady, but in the images created by popular cinema. Billy resembles the men Savran describes in Arthur Miller’s *The Misfits* (1961), as ‘imitations’ of those ‘commercialized simulacra’ imbibed from cinema and popular culture. In these Westerns Billy here represents a diminished ‘bit part’ version of mythic cowboy masculinity and only then in an ‘imitated’ and ‘commercialized’ form.

At the end of the novel Billy tells Betty, the woman who takes him in: ‘I’m not what you think I am. I aint nothing. I don’t know why you put up with me.’ Billy sees himself in terms of failure, an exhausted reduction of Boyd and John Grady’s heroic cowboy. In an interview with Richard Woodward just before the publication of *All the Pretty Horses*, McCarthy responded to the interviewer’s claim that the novel exhibits ‘a sustained innocence’ with the retort: ‘You haven’t come to the end yet. This may be nothing more than a snare and illusion to draw you in thinking all will be well.’ McCarthy is always revealing, even in what many critics think is an elegiac revisionism of the Old West in *All the Pretty Horses*, the traumatised nature of cowboy heroics. McCarthy reveals this either in the form of John Grady’s heroic masculinity caught in a traumatic cycle, perpetually attached to loss and failed mastery, or in the form of Billy’s wounded masculinity permanently broken by the losses of the past and reduced to an evaluation of himself as ‘nothing’. The heroic

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184 Ibid. 264.
185 Savran, *Communists, Cowboys and Queers*, 47.
186 McCarthy, *Cities of the Plain*, 292.
masculinity in its perpetual and unresolved attempts to master loss always seeks the next crisis and in so doing creates a future of further trauma. The wounded masculinity, on the other hand, can only ever look back, with defeated eyes, to the losses of the past.

McCarty returns finally to this past loss in the ‘framed photograph’ hanging in the hallway of the family home where Billy is given refuge. This photograph ‘printed from a glass broken into five pieces’ pictured ‘certain ancestors’ that were pieced ‘back together’. Billy tries to apportion ‘some third or separate meaning to each of the figures seated there. To their faces. To their forms.’ This image of the past pieced back together in a distorted and broken restoration signifies, not only Billy’s broken masculinity, but also how the trilogy has similarly been a reconfiguration of the traumatic past of the Old West but with the cracks clearly and indelibly on view. The Border Trilogy ends, as it began, with references to portraits of the past and images contorted in mirrors. John Grady begins the trilogy in a similar ‘cold hallway’ beneath the gaze of ‘his forebears only dimly known to him all framed in glass’. This opening to All the Pretty Horses is re-enacted at the end of Cities of the Plain with another photographic image of a lost and irretrievable past, this time of complete strangers broken and re-assimilated by Billy. Even at the end of his life, Billy is still trying to piece together those heroic images of the past that are fundamental to the mythic masculinity of the Old West. His efforts to decipher the photograph reveal how he is still intrigued and enticed by mythic heroism, even though his own life, lived in the pursuit and then the shadow of that heroism, has itself been broken and cannot be put back together. His poignant desire to find meaning in the broken photograph embodies his own enduring attachment to traumatic loss in the past. At the end of the novel this mythic masculinity still carries the same potent

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188 McCarthy, Cities of the Plain, 290.
189 Ibid.
190 Ibid.
191 McCarthy, All the Pretty Horses, 3.
and yet ultimately exhausting legacy, as Billy tries and fails to come to terms with his legendary brother’s heroic memory. His final idealisation of his brother Boyd at the end of *Cities of the Plain*, still holds on to the heroics of the past, echoing the words he used to describe that other ‘all american cowboy’, John Grady:

> He was the best. We run off to Mexico together [...] he was awful good with horses. I always liked to watch him ride. Liked to watch him around horses. I’d give about anything to see him one more time.\(^{192}\)

Although he admits to himself that ‘in everything that he’d ever thought about the world and about his life in it he’d been wrong’, he still clings on to the mythic heroism of his dead brother.\(^{193}\)

However, it is not just Billy who attempts to piece back together the ancestral portrait. The family themselves have ‘puzzled back together’ the broken pieces ‘in a study that cohered with its own slightly skewed geometry’.\(^{194}\) This photograph represents the mythic past that hangs in the hallway of family homes throughout the West. It signifies the cultural reliance on a mythology that is broken and cannot be restored, except in ‘skewed’ versions of that past. Just as Billy laments the loss of his brother Boyd, the country as a whole is looking back to its mythic past in order to piece back together a heroic national identity. McCarthy ‘frames’ the narrative of *All the Pretty Horses* and *Cities of the Plain* with the ‘frames’ of these two photographs. In this way he signifies how the myth of the Old West ‘frames’, not just McCarthy’s stories, but the cultural narrative of a people still looking for that lost country. In the next chapter I investigate further these links between cultural and national identity and mythic and heroic apprehensions of the Old West. In the process I discuss how

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\(^{192}\) McCarthy *Cities of the Plain*, 291.

\(^{193}\) Ibid., 266.

\(^{194}\) Ibid., 290.
the self-destructive tendencies inherent in the trauma-seeking heroic cowboy become
projected onto a national canvas in McCarthy’s latest two novels, *No Country for Old Men*
and *The Road.*
Chapter Three:

Trauma: Past, Present, Future and National Identity in *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*
Introduction

A question raised by the father early in *The Road* reverberates with speculations regarding the relationship between past and future, a relationship that has been the focus of the previous chapters, whereby a sense of loss and trauma connected to the past is projected onto something in the future that gains significance by the implicit fact that it too will be traumatically lost. The question from *The Road* proceeds from the destruction that informs the father’s sense that his own past and future resonate with the futility of a world destroyed beyond relief. It is a question that emerges to form a general speculation that is not directly or immediately answered by the text: ‘Query: How does the never to be differ from what never was?’

The simple answer to this would be that the ‘never was’ relates to a lamented or failed past that might be mended at some time in the future, whereas the ‘never to be’ cancels out any possibility of that future realisation. A more complex response to the question, however, involves an understanding of how the failure of both past and future is traumatic and leaves the subject perpetually in a state of quandary. The question also invites readers to ask how the novel itself may or may not answer the question. Given the post-apocalyptic, yet still overtly ‘American’ context in which this question is posed, finding the novel’s potential answer to this conundrum also necessitates understanding how McCarthy represents the fiction and ideologies of nation. The question also invites an understanding of the sense of a failed American past and how this relates to the prospect of an equally broken future.

An exploration of the relationship, implied in McCarthy’s question, between failed temporalities and nationhood requires an investigation into his vision of trauma in American history. Furthermore, this investigation demands an understanding of U.S. national

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discourses, particularly American Exceptionalism and the ways that this ideology frames the nation’s past, present and future. I argue that American Exceptionalism reveals a built-in sense of trauma that McCarthy tries to engage through an oblique consideration of war and frontier violence in *No Country for Old Men* and the violent history of American nationhood reflected in the destruction of *The Road*. Understanding what McCarthy is exploring in terms of nation and trauma requires an analysis of both novels.

I explore how this built-in connection between American Exceptionalism and trauma may be traced back to Puritan foundations of a sense of chosenness, and the inherent implications of that chosenness in terms of a God who would punish any transgressions. McCarthy does not address directly the Puritan foundations of the nation or the later belief of the founding fathers in the exceptionalist nation, but I argue that, in *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*, his creation of a contemporary version of the American West reveals the connections between the frontier myth and American exceptionalist ideology, whose roots lie in New England. Both the frontier myth and the Puritans’ American errand carry with them an inherent sense of chosenness which presupposes that anyone outside the ranks of the chosen is somehow ‘other’ or alien. Through further reference to Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis and the tenets of Manifest Destiny, I investigate how this idea of the ‘other’, configured initially by the Puritans in terms of those excluded from the covenant with God, is also essential to the later manifestations of exceptionalist nationhood. McCarthy’s work is particularly preoccupied with the frontier of the West with its inherent mythology of a rigidly defined ‘other’ as a ‘savage’ to be exterminated as the ‘civilized’ nation made its progress westward. I explore how McCarthy interrogates this sense of the ‘other’ in a contemporary frontier setting in *No Country for Old Men* and how he envisages in *The Road* the ‘other’ in a futuristic ‘Western’ where most of remaining humanity has survived a global catastrophe and descended into post-apocalyptic cannibalism. I explain these connections between
McCarthy’s novels, American Exceptionalism and trauma through discussions of the critical and theoretical works of Faludi, Baudrillard, Caruth, Butler, Kaplan, Edkins and others. These two McCarthy novels are not specifically about 9/11, and neither is set explicitly in a post 9/11 timeframe: *No Country for Old Men* is set in 1980, and *The Road* at a time in the near future. Nevertheless, I address throughout this chapter the ways they address American history in a post-9/11 context.

I begin this evaluation of McCarthy’s work with a reading of the ways in which Chigurh in *No Country for Old Men* represents the adversarial enemy essential to the exceptionalist narrative, and how the various characters, particularly Sheriff Bell, epitomise the exceptionalist response to this adversary. In this novel McCarthy develops the theme of history as violence and interrogates exceptionalist notions of past, present and future in the effect Chigurh has on the border community and its characters. Sheriff Bell’s response to the trauma of war and contemporary violence signals the nation’s wounded and fractured identity as it clings to an exceptionalist vision that can no longer be sustained. Through a reading of Bell’s connections to U.S. wars, particularly World War II, I examine how McCarthy represents the trauma Bell has experienced as emblematic of the larger cultural trauma associated with the notion of a ‘chosen people’. Bell’s portrayal as model citizen, war-hero, and yet traumatised subject, allows me to explore how the nation is intent on forgetting trauma and how the official national narrative transforms trauma into myth.

This explanation of the connections between trauma and nation in *No Country for Old Men* helps make further sense of the traumatised national landscape of *The Road*. To help explain this dimension of *The Road*, I focus on McCarthy’s insistence on the remembering and witnessing of history through the young boy. I examine how McCarthy interrogates this history through the journey along the road signposting encounters with the nation’s past: Cold War, slavery, frontier violence, colonialism. The novel juxtaposes the boy’s traumatised
witnessing of these horrors with the father’s exceptionalist vision of his son as a god-like representative of the future of humankind. As with Bell's attempt to use an idealized past to visualize a better future, the father’s articulations of traumatic national chooseness reveal the interconnections between trauma and futurity both in the novel and within national discourses of American Exceptionalism. I investigate how McCarthy invokes narratives of national trauma and their relation to choosenness in order to reveal the emptiness of this traumatic model of futurity. I argue that McCarthy interprets the eternal violence underpinning American national identity as proceeding from a past that ‘never was’ and reaching for a future that is ‘never to be’. Thus, as this chapter demonstrates, McCarthy’s two recent novels reveal to us a nation in perpetual trauma, endlessly seeking crisis and confrontation and the reaffirmation of choosenness that comes from the subsequent survival of that crisis. However, McCarthy does not simply shut down any and all notions of futurity. Rather, the final section of this chapter uses the theories of Lee Edelman, Sara Ahmed and José Sebastian Muñoz to show how McCarthy does open some ways to understand a future untainted by the cycle of exceptionalist trauma.

The ‘Other’ in No Country for Old Men

No Country for Old Men, published in 2005 and set in 1980, occupies a borderline point in time in its preoccupation with U.S. participation in three different wars, World War II, Vietnam and the War on Terror. The novel also references World War I and the earlier frontier trauma of a country with ‘a strange kind of history and a damned bloody one too’.² Sheriff Ed Tom Bell as defender of the community must be the one appointed to face and overcome the crisis occasioned by the war between rival drug cartels terrorising the county.

which has brought the homicidal assassin Chigurh into Bell’s domain. Bell’s confrontation with the evil embodied in Chigurh replays in a contemporary context the adversarial contest between civilization and ‘other’, which abides at the heart of the frontier myth. From its opening, the novel establishes the battle lines and simultaneously depicts an uneasy relationship between past, present and future, as Bell heralds, in Chigurh, ‘some new kind’ of lawless evil ‘comin down the pike’ towards the border community. This ‘new kind’ of villain presents ‘another view of the world’ and contrasts, for Bell, with his younger days and their straightforward violence of ‘a fistfight somewheres’. It may be some ‘new kind of evil’ but it is a re-enactment of an old confrontation – that between civilization and the ‘savage other’ that underpins the frontier myth and is now being relived here in these border territories.

Bell, this traditional repository of Western courage, this lawman sheriff figure, confesses that he is not up to the task being asked of him, admitting that ‘I wont push my chips forward and stand up and go out to meet him.’ Instead, Bell yearns for an absolute past with all its certainties, which contrasts with his vision of contemporary social disintegration and even destruction. Bell ‘always liked to hear about the old timers. Never missed a chance to do so’, but this offers him little solace when contemplating a future that he believes is ‘goin to hell in a handbasket’. The re-imagining of the world of the ‘old timers’ cannot save the country from its present decline. His border territory of Terrell County remains unresponsive to law and order, a country terminally destabilised and disintegrating in rival drug wars into a region that is legally, morally and spiritually bereft. The fact that the killer Chigurh remains ‘out there [...] a true and living prophet of destruction’ carries with it the

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3 Ibid., 3, 4.
4 Ibid., 4, 38.
5 Ibid., 4.
6 Ibid., 64, 196.
uncertainty of any future for Bell and for the country he defends. Bell’s prospect of any future for himself or Terrell County has to come to terms with the nihilism of Chigurh’s homicidal terminating purpose, ‘something we really aint never even seen before.’ Both Bell and Terrell County, threatened by a ‘homicidal lunatic’ amidst this ‘warzone’ struggle to come to terms with the realisation that ‘you have come upon something that you may very well not be equal to.’

Chigurh constitutes the dark half of that progressive frontier myth, a contemporary version of that necessary source of crisis and danger that had to be conquered if the frontier was to march forward. Stephen McVeigh writes, ‘America [...] is a nation that understands the world and its place in it in adversarial terms: it understands its values by defining and testing them against an “other”.’ Through the perception of Chigurh as ‘a goddamned psychopath’, McCarthy explores how this adversarial depiction of the enemy reinforces a simplistic solution to the country’s violent crisis, one completely dependent upon Chigurh’s identification and then eradication as the external threat. If, however, Chigurh cannot be faced and destroyed, then the country is faced with a prolonged battle culminating in an exhausted defeat. McCarthy makes Chigurh part of an exploration of American nationalism that contemplates the failure of adversarial notions of good and evil, and asks what happens to the nation when the ‘adversary’ is too elusive or too complex to be defeated by superior will and force.

It is not just through his association with ‘a new kind of evil’ and ‘destruction’ that Chigurh evokes notions of the ‘other’. He is also described as ‘dark complected’ and with

\[7\] Ibid., 4.
\[8\] Ibid., 46, 192, 240, 299.
\[9\] McVeigh, *The American Western*, 213.
\[10\] McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men*, 178.
‘something about him faintly exotic’. His mode of operation also singles him out as ‘peculiar’ in that ‘he has principles’, ‘there’s no one alive on this planet that’s ever had even a cross word with him’ and he has ‘no enemies’ because he does not ‘permit such a thing’. His preferred method of execution is also unique – the cattle-gun with its ‘pneumatic hiss and click of the plunger’ which creates ‘a round hole’ in the victim’s forehead. His main concern after killing a man by the roadside is the fact he ‘didn’t want [...] to get blood on the car’. He claims he has ‘only one way to live. It doesn’t allow for special cases. A coin toss perhaps [...] Most people don’t believe there can be such a person.’ He owes no allegiance to any drug gang or cartel, and assassinates the hit man Carson Wells as well as the head of the Houston conglomerate which put the contract out on Chigurh’s life. Everything about Chigurh, his appearance, his philosophy, his method of killing, his use of coins as a means of intervening in his assassinations, sets him apart from the other outlaws in this border war. In all these ways McCarthy establishes him as an assailant who is essentially and terrifyingly ‘other’ to the point of being beyond comprehension. Through Chigurh and traumatised responses to Chigurh, McCarthy invokes the notions of adversarial conflict and survival which reach back to the frontier myth and also further back in American history to the foundation of nationhood with its categories of chosenness and those categories, by contrast, that were excluded or ‘other’ than the chosen. McCarthy asks the question in No Country for Old Men what happens to a country, founded on its own sense of exceptionalist entitlement, when it encounters an enemy who is himself ‘exceptional’.

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11 Ibid., 291, 112.  
12 Ibid., 153, 253.  
13 Ibid., 7.  
14 Ibid.  
15 Ibid., 260.  
16 Ibid., 199.
To understand McCarthy’s novel more fully in terms of this question and the ways the novel interrogates notions of exceptionalism and ‘otherness’ we need to look further into the concept of exceptionalism itself and how this concept figures centrally in American national identity. A further investigation of McCarthy’s interrogation of the ‘other’ also entails an understanding of Turner’s frontier myth and earlier narratives of frontier expansion and ideological chosenness propounded in Manifest Destiny and Puritan theology, and the ways these ideologies are bound up with violent conquest of the ‘other’. These grand foundational narratives of nationhood with their preoccupation with chosenness and those excluded as ‘other’, and which form the bedrock of American Exceptionalism, enable us to understand the connection between exceptionalism, violence, survival, and the traumatic cycle of history. And an understanding of this connection between American Exceptionalism and trauma is essential in interpreting McCarthy’s vision of a nation trapped in cycles of unregenerate and traumatic violence.

The association between American Exceptionalism and trauma, however, proposed throughout this chapter is just one way of exploring American Exceptionalism and there are no claims being made here that is the only means in which this ideology can be understood or investigated. Nor is it the only way in which the relationship between McCarthy’s work and American Exceptionalism has been addressed by other critics. Cant, for example, sees McCarthy’s work as an interrogation of ‘the American dream, the dream that has grown out of the myth of American Exceptionalism; most are destroyed by it; one or two escape, but not unscathed’.\textsuperscript{17} Cant focuses on what he sees as McCarthy’s main purpose which is ‘to point out the destructive consequences of structuring the consciousness of individuals by means of powerful mythologies which they are not in a position to live out’.\textsuperscript{18} An evaluation of the

\textsuperscript{17} Cant, \textit{Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism}, 15.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 9.
destructive power of the exceptionalist myth in McCarthy’s work, however, need not be restricted to the effect the myth has merely on individuals. McCarthy’s work evaluates the destructive consequences of American Exceptionalism, not just for individuals, but for the wider American national and political experience. Cant’s assessment also does not address the ways in which the destructive nature of the myth engenders cyclic patterns of violence – how the destruction actually fosters further trauma and a perpetuation of a traumatic and mythic cycle of yearning and aggregated loss. His assessment is concerned, primarily, with the destructive power of myth and does not focus on the ways in which that myth gains its enduring power through those cycles of destruction because of the traumatic hold it maintains on the culture. McCarthy’s work may show us the destructive power of myth but also reveals how that myth survives and resurfaces at those moments of destruction and loss. It is because the myth destroys that it retains its power. This chapter is concerned with the ways in which McCarthy’s novels are preoccupied with the cyclic trauma of American history brought about through following the myth of American Exceptionalism. It is necessary here, therefore, to develop further the ways in which the ideology of exceptionalism, an essential lynchpin of American national identity, evokes, throughout that history, traumatic cycles of violence.

**American Exceptionalism and Trauma**

The ideology of exceptionalism can be traced back to associations between the early Puritan settlers and the crisis of survival required to affirm their divinely appointed narrative. This narrative was bound up also with their sense of being a chosen people. According to Perry Miller, the original American errand to actualise God’s kingdom on earth for the edification of Europe established its Puritan practitioners as, ‘performing a job not so much
for Jehova as for history, which was the wisdom of Jehova expressed through time'.

For the Puritans the errand amalgamated concepts of chooseness, the redemption of the past, and the path to a glorious future as manifestations of God’s purpose for the rest of the world to witness and then follow. The necessity of righteousness under this mandate meant that any transgressions endangered the sanctity of the errand and invoked the wrath of God. Consequently, all misfortunes suffered by the Puritans became signs of God’s disapproval and, furthermore, proof of:

How abysmally they had deserted the covenant: crop failures, epidemics, grasshoppers, torrid summers, arctic winters, Indian wars, hurricanes, shipwrecks, accidents and [...] unsatisfactory children.

From this Puritan understanding of suffering as a form of God’s punishment develops what Deborah Madsen has called ‘the notion of a punitive typology at work’, which is also a reaffirmation of chooseness. Madsen writes:

God’s chosen people of New England can take some comfort from the knowledge that the trials they are sent to endure signify God’s continuing commitment to their exceptional destiny.

Therefore, one way of understanding Puritan ideology is to see suffering and exceptionalism as complementary to each other. It is through continued and sustained suffering that the community will feel a continued connection to God and their divine programme to bring about his kingdom on earth. The Puritan vision of chooseness demanded perpetual suffering in order to reaffirm the very sense of being chosen. Explaining the Puritan idea in relation to

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20 Ibid., 6.
22 Ibid., 26.
what we now identify as the earliest manifestation of American Exceptionalism, Sacvan Bercovitch argues that the Puritans saw themselves as a ‘peculiar people’, who were ‘not only called but chosen, and chosen not only for heaven but as instruments of a sacred historical design’ to fulfil a glorious future.\footnote{Sacvan Bercovitch, \textit{The American Jeremiad} (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 8.}

This founding of a culture on the promise of an ordained future, at some unknown point in time for a chosen people, also adopts foundational Jewish beliefs in chosenness and futurity, despite the sin and suffering of the past. As Bercovitch writes, ‘In Hebrew tradition [...] the chosen people had sinned [...] but they remained chosen nonetheless.’\footnote{Ibid., 31.} The Puritan sense of having sinned and being divinely tested as a result became an essential element in the sense of the pilgrims being the chosen of God. The perpetual crisis that God orchestrated by way of punishing obstacles placed in the chosen path became an emblem of the appointed nature of that path. From the sins of the past and crises of the present that confirm survival, leading to an appointed salvation in the future, there developed a cultural identity readily and perpetually engaged with suffering and trauma.

Cathy Caruth’s interpretation of Jewish history and culture in terms of chosenness and her claims that collective trauma and its survival are crucial in the foundations of a nation, offer a useful model here for thinking about the role of trauma in the American Exceptionalist vision of history. She adopts Freud’s theory from \textit{Moses and Monotheism}, interlinking ideas about the essential transmissibility of trauma, the incomprehensibility of personal survival for the traumatised victim and Freud’s notions of cultural and historical trauma.\footnote{See Sigmund Freud, James Strachey (ed.), \textit{The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol.23: Moses and Monotheism, An Outline of Psychoanalysis and Other Works} (London: Visscount, 2001).} She suggests that what the Jewish people experienced at the point of embracing their monotheistic culture
was not only the revisiting of the murder of Moses, their father, but also of having committed that murder and having survived it:

If monotheism for Freud is an ‘awakening’, it is not simply a return to the past, but the fact of having survived it, a survival that, in the figure of the new Jewish God, appears not as an act chosen by the Jews, but as the incomprehensible fact of being chosen for a future that remains, in its promise, yet to be understood.  

Here she emphasises the link between the ‘promise’ of a future, albeit incomprehensible to the survivors of trauma, and the fact that the Jewish nation is chosen to live out that future.

For Caruth, the chosenness becomes inextricable from the violent collective trauma and the people’s survival of it. Caruth assesses the ‘traumatic structure’ of Jewish monotheism as signifying ‘a history of Jewish survival that is both an endless crisis and the endless possibility of a new future’. She claims that ‘the history of chosenness, as the history of survival thus takes the form of an unending confrontation with the returning violence of the past.’ Her theory of how ancient Jewish collective history finds its foundations in violence, trauma and survival reveals how traumatic experience on these terms can be the generating impulse behind a mythology, the source and defining experience behind individual and cultural identity. Caruth’s exploration of the relationship between trauma and the history of survival at the heart of Jewish ‘chosenness’, along with her understanding of the contending temporalities of ‘both endless crisis and the endless possibility of a new future’ reveal how a cultural vision of history may be reliant on traumatic cycles of violence.

Taking Caruth’s theory of cultural trauma as a model there are analogies to be drawn between the Jewish foundational mythologies and Puritan Exceptionalism. There was, as with the Jewish model proposed by Caruth, a corresponding reliance on repeated anxiety, crisis,

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27 Ibid., 68.
28 Ibid.
suffering and survival in New England in order to confirm and consolidate the people’s sustained exceptional relationship with their God. This reliance fostered a culture dependent on a perpetual cyclic engagement with trauma in past and present in order to fulfil the Puritan mission. The New England settlers insisted that crisis must be faced, overcome, triumphed over in order to facilitate the movement towards an emerging and always improving future that, according to Bercovitch, though ‘divinely assured, was never quite there’.²⁹ For the Puritan settlers the trauma of suffering was intrinsic to being chosen; it signified the continuity of chosenness, of God’s enduring confirmation of a suffering as guarantee of final deliverance.

This idea of glorious destiny was essential to the Puritan narrative of chosenness and the two interrelated concepts of futurity and chosenness infused the subsequent mythic narratives associated with the national movement westward: manifest destiny and the frontier. Bercovitch notes how the ‘evocation of crisis as a spur to manifest destiny’, inspired by the Puritan exceptionalist creed also fed ‘directly into the nineteenth century American rationale for expansion’.³⁰ The belief in ‘manifest destiny’, a term that became a totemic label for expansionism across the American continent sanctioned by God and fate, was bound up with Puritan Exceptionalism with its emphasis on the future realisation of God’s design. In 1845, John L. O’Sullivan, a journalist, coined the term ‘manifest destiny’ as a means of expressing the right of the people and government of the United States ‘to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions’.³¹ Earlier, in 1839, O’Sullivan referred to the ‘national birth’ of America as ‘the beginning of a new

²⁹ Bercovitch, The American Jeremiad 23.
³⁰ Ibid., 161, 162.
history, the formation and progress of an untried political system, which separates us from the past and connects us with the future only’. 32 The reaching for this future, however, in O’Sullivan’s essay, involves a forgetting of the past, a denial of the trauma of American history up to that moment, and a transformation of the horrors of frontier genocide and slavery into a glorious narrative of human progress:

It is our unparalleled glory that we have no reminiscences of battle fields […] Our annals describe no scenes of horrid carnage […] nor have the American people ever suffered themselves to be led on by wicked ambition to depopulate the land, to spread desolation far and wide, that a human being might be placed on a seat of supremacy. 33

O’Sullivan claimed that America is ‘the nation of human progress’ and ‘the expansive future is our arena’, ‘the far-reaching, the boundless future will be the era of American greatness’. 34 He asserted that America, in its mission ‘to establish on earth the moral dignity and salvation of man […] is destined to be the great nation of futurity’. 35 The exceptionalist belief in America as Redeemer Nation involved the wilful forgetting of the trauma of history, the forgetting of past battlefields, in order to move on to the appointed future salvation of mankind on earth. O’Sullivan’s highly influential vision of American exceptionalism, therefore, relies upon the forgetting of past trauma, the transformation of war and suffering into a mythically idealised past, and a perpetual conception of the nation’s chosenness in its march towards a golden future. At the same time, conversely, the claim that ‘we have no

33 Ibid., 427.
34 Ibid.,
35 Ibid., 430. Original emphasis.
reminiscences of battlefields’, while remonstrating that no such memories exist in the national psyche, paradoxically conjures the battlefields back into memory.

As with manifest destiny, the myth of the frontier also easily absorbed the Puritan exceptionalist typology and refashioned it with an even greater emphasis on future glory. The frontier myth, according to Bercovitch, transformed ‘the Puritan concept [...] from threat to promise; [...] its purpose was precisely to turn nostalgia for paradise lost into a movement toward the future.’ 36 The West became a signifier for the furthest reaches of the Puritan future, a point where the present began to unfold into the always beckoning tomorrow, ‘the outskirts of the advancing kingdom of God’. 37 At the same time this future could not be approached without crisis and suffering that had to be overcome. The pioneer became an intrinsic part of that mythology, the embodiment of ‘that dominant individualism’ that epitomised Turner’s vision of the unique American character. 38 However, ‘this new product’, ‘this dominating American’ and the unfolding ‘Great West’ to which he aspires can only come into being through the suffering encountered and faced in a harsh environment ‘that is, at first, too strong’, but which must be accepted and transformed at the risk of death. 39 The frontier, so central to McCarthy’s vision of history, was from the onset a site of crisis and catastrophe that had to be confronted and prevailed over in order to fulfil the ongoing narrative of progress at the heart of American Exceptionalism. Turner also sees the frontier as ‘the meeting point between savagery and civilization’ where the unique American individual of the nation’s imagination emerged through this ‘meeting’ and subsequent ‘dominating’ of the indigenous people. 40

36 Bercovitch, The American Jeremiad, 163-165. Original emphasis.
37 Ibid., 164.
39 Ibid., 34, 32, 32, 33.
40 Ibid., 32.
Donald Pease refers to how American Exceptionalism and the associated vision of the future it evoked in the frontier myth sanctioned the use of extreme violence against those considered to be ‘other’ and therefore excluded from the narrative of national progress. He writes:

The apocalyptic imagination enabled its American practitioners to disavow catastrophic outcomes of its exercise – like the Pequot massacre, or slavery, or Hiroshima, or the forcible dispossession of entire populations from their homelands – as Divine Writ inscribing exceptions to law to make manifest America’s special destiny.\(^4^1\)

The necessary repeated extermination of an enemy by ‘divine writ’, an extermination which is then ‘disavowed’ through a mythic reinterpretation of history, all underpin the American exceptionalist journey towards its ‘special destiny’. Richard Slotkin similarly identifies the violent extermination of ‘others’ as integral to the American myth of progress. He places the concept of the ‘savage other’ as crucial to American national identity because it provides the necessary frontier enemy and the subsequent violent conquest which establishes and re-confirms the nation’s mythic frontier spirit:

Violence is central to both the historical development of the Frontier and its mythic representation. In each stage of its development, the Myth of the Frontier relates to the achievement of “progress” to a particular form or scenario of violent action. But in each case, the Myth represented the redemption of American spirit or fortune as something to be achieved by playing through a scenario of separation, temporary

\(^{41}\) Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 78.
regression to a more primitive or “natural” state, and *regeneration through violence*.\(^{42}\)

Slotkin claims that the American people understand American history and American national identity in terms of a renewal and ‘redemption’ through repeated conquest of the ‘savage other’. As well as vindicating the frontier spirit and its reliance on violence, this conquest may also be justified in that the existence of an enemy as the threatening and ‘savage other’ confirms the supremacy and the exclusive status of the self-appointed chosen people. Through a descent into violent conflict and extermination of the enemy, the American myth of the frontier, and the accompanying exceptionalist spirit and will of the nation are renewed in this conflict and the emergent victory.

Slotkin’s view is that such dependence on the putative ‘regeneration through violence’ contributes to an ‘illness of the imagination’ that afflicts the American nation for which the only ‘cure’ is more violence and what he sees as the ‘lie of “symbolic victory”’.\(^{43}\) His plea, with specific reference to the first Gulf War, but one that has a wider resonance, particularly in the light of the post-9/11 War on Terror, is for ‘a new myth’ and ‘productive revisions of myth which open the system and permit it to adjust to its beliefs [...] a myth that can help us make sense of the history we have lived and the place we are living in’.\(^{44}\) Deborah Madsen, however, in discussing the aftermath of the Vietnam War, a war where America was patently not ‘regenerated through violence’, doubts whether such ‘new’ or revised mythic formulations are possible. This mythic reformulation is impossible, she writes:

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\(^{42}\) Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 11-12. Original emphasis.

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 652.

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 655, 654-655.
Because the power of the cultural myths challenged by defeat in Vietnam was such that to change the myths would be to destroy them and the interpretations of the past and the vision of the future that are embodied by those myths and which unite the entire American people.45

Slotkin’s and Madsen’s theories raise several questions regarding American myth, exceptionalism and national identity. How can the American people reinvent or replace mythic foundations that are fundamental to the national identity? How can the American nation escape from the cycle of violent confrontation with the ‘other’ which is integral to its sense of identity and progress? And what happens to the American nation when this confrontation ends, not in victory and an affirmation of survival and progress, but in defeat and continued trauma? These questions, as I will show, are all central to McCarthy’s concerns regarding history, trauma and myth in No Country for Old Men.

However, these concerns are not new ones for McCarthy. From Blood Meridian, his first Western novel, onwards McCarthy has addressed these questions, re-imagining that American history and the mythology it embodies as one of crisis, catastrophe and repetitive traumatic violence. In Blood Meridian (1985), McCarthy examines the founding of the West, not as a narrative of mythic glory but as an unrelenting trauma where the white man, in essence as brutal as any other race, asserts his self-appointed right to racial dominance. According to Vereen M. Bell, Blood Meridian reveals how:

Man [...] has produced firm evidence in history that only violence recurs as the indisputable common denominator of his presence in time. War therefore must be

45 Madsen, American Exceptionalism, 161.
holy, or must be affirmed as being holy, for man’s existence to have any sanctity at all, for war is the main feature of human experience.46

In *Blood Meridian* the western landscape is rendered a permanent warzone, a reinstatement of O’Sullivan’s absent ‘battlefields’ in one atrocity after another. *Blood Meridian* ends in 1878, with the frontier limits reaching their geographical exhaustion in the West. In its vision of ‘A country [...] filled with violent children orphaned by war’ it reveals the promise of a future of perpetual atrocity to be delivered through these ‘violent’ offspring.47 It is not my intention to pursue a detailed review of this novel, as it has been covered extensively by other critics, but its promise of the perpetuation of the cycle of violence, passed down from one generation to the next, continues to be fulfilled through to the contemporary setting of *No Country for Old Men*, just over one hundred years later. In this novel McCarthy is still addressing those questions cited above regarding exceptionalism, trauma and national identity in the confrontation evoked with Chigurh, the indestructible ‘other’ which has to be faced but which cannot be defeated.

**History as Trauma, History as Myth in *No Country for Old Men***

In *No Country for Old Men* it is the adversary and ‘enemy’ killer who is the ‘superior’ force and the most physically resourceful character. Chigurh tends to his own gunshot wounds after a shootout with ‘little evidence that his labours had cost him anything at all’ and Bell acknowledges that he has encountered a superior strategic and military presence when he realises his adversary has escaped and that he and his fellow lawmen have ‘been

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outgeneraled’. Chigurh also evinces an inevitable prevailing dominance, predicting to Wells, the Vietnam veteran turned hit-man, just before killing him, that the money that has been stolen ‘will be brought to me and placed at my feet’. Chigurh, like the exceptionalist divinely appointed chosen people also sees himself as an agent of destiny, as McCarthy reveals it is not just the forces of ‘civilization’ in this western narrative that can be endowed with that sense of certainty and appointed destiny. Chigurh tells Carla Jean, the young pregnant wife of the fugitive Moss, prior to shooting her:

Every moment of your life is a turning and every one a choosing. Somewhere you made a choice. All followed to this... The shape is drawn. [...] When I came into your life your life was over. It had a beginning, a middle, and an end. This is the end.

Chigurh constitutes ‘the end’, the terminal moment of existence for all he encounters, the anti-mythic force with its closing down of all futures, for those who cross his path, and for the country he terrorises. Chigurh represents the elemental adversary in the timeless trial from the past that must be overcome if the progressive march of history is to be sustained. He is the contemporary representative of the ‘savagery’ of Turner’s frontier that must be countered by ‘civilizing’ forces. His termination of everyone that he encounters and his seemingly indestructible nature reveal, however, the unending struggle at the heart of the exceptionalist narrative with its reliance on crisis, trauma and survival. His continued existence ‘out there’ reveals how this American narrative is not actually one of crisis overcome, but one of perpetual crisis and struggle sustained. Chigurh’s eluding of arrest and sustained threat at the end of the novel signify the collapsing of the promised future into a brutal and escalating struggle for survival in the present. Chigurh’s administering of death as a form of ‘scrupulous

49 Ibid., 176.
50 Ibid., 259-260.
51 Ibid., 299.
accounting’ for past decisions and an inevitable consequence of actions, is a terminal reminder that no individual and by extension no nation can stand outside history.\textsuperscript{52} He is the relentless force of historical consequences, the flip side of manifest destiny, that which his victims and, by analogy, the U.S. ‘refuse to acknowledge the existence of’.\textsuperscript{53} Even Chigurh’s instrument of death, an air-powered cattle gun, reducing his victims to the status of beef slaughtered in vast soulless steel factories, carries with it a demythologising force, a sardonically twisted comment on the corruption of the heroic cowboy myth into mechanised violence.

In presenting a contemporary enemy who cannot be tracked down, who cannot be defeated, McCarthy invites comparisons between complex and elusive adversaries facing the nation in Vietnam and the War on Terror. The novel also suggests that this adversary may exist as an essential element conjured within the mythos of nation. Donald Pease, writing in the aftermath of 9/11 and the Iraq War, refers to how, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the United States became, in its global dominance, a self-destructive force:

In the absence of the enemy superpower onto whom the United States was used to assigning responsibility for its crimes, the United States had become its own undeterred Other in the New World Order.\textsuperscript{54}

Chigurh’s indestructible otherworldliness, his retributively punitive philosophy, his emergence out of and disappearance back into nowhere, his indeterminate ethnicity, all imply a destructive entity haunting and destroying the nation’s house from within, rather than an external invasive enemy who can be identified as an external ‘other’. Similarly, along with

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 259.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 260.
\textsuperscript{54} Pease, \textit{The New American Exceptionalism}, 66.
Pease, Jean Baudrillard’s description of the terrorist ‘enemy’, post-9/11, offers us an interesting parallel with this elusive and yet integral ‘other’ quality:

Terrorism, like viruses, is everywhere. There is a global perfusion of terrorism, which accompanies any system of domination as though it were its shadow, ready to activate itself anywhere, like a double agent. We can no longer draw a demarcation line around it. It is at the very heart of this culture which combats it [...] That system can face down any visible antagonism. But the other kind, which is viral in structure [...] against that form of almost automatic reversion of its own power, the system can do nothing.\(^{55}\)

Baudrillard’s vision of terrorism as ‘a virus’ within ‘the system’, and unlike a tangible ‘visible antagonism’ that can be ‘faced down’, speaks to the slippery ‘ghost’-like properties ascribed to Chigurh.\(^{56}\) In this way Chigurh represents what Baudrillard and Pease infer from the trauma of 9/11 and the wars that followed: that the United States, in its ‘savage war’ response to 9/11, has failed to recognise that this desire to confront and exterminate the ‘other’ constitutes a continuum of violence; that America’s War on Terror was actually a war that derived from earlier wars, earlier conflicts to eradicate the enemy; that the real enemy, the real ‘other’ might be America itself in its relentless desire to create and face-off an external adversary in order to gain the victory it craves.

In emphasising the significance of Chigurh as the ‘other’ in a contemporary frontier context, McCarthy evokes the traumatic crisis and confrontation inherent in American exceptionalism in both the past and the present. Furthermore, Chigurh’s presence as an indestructible and prevailing force suggests how the ‘other’ may be both an external enemy


\(56\) McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men*, 299.
and an internal mechanism within the traumatic cycle of exceptionalism. McCarthy’s insistence that Chigurh is still ‘out there’ at the end of the novel suggests this external quality, but also implies that the ‘other’ will always be ‘there’ as part of the adversarial dynamic of American Exceptionalism. Bell and his officers wish to assign Chigurh to that mythical comfort zone of external evil, ‘out there’ and tangibly ‘other’, to conveniently isolate and categorise his menace as something manifestly aberrational and ‘lunatic’. This adversarial response is representative of the national impulse to resolve conflict through confrontation with a discernible enemy. In *No Country for Old Men* McCarthy reveals this impulse to be no more effective than the tracking of ‘a ghost’, and also therefore implies that such confrontations are an attempt to externalise an enemy that resides within. At the same time, McCarthy suggests that such a ‘ghost’ is always, as of necessity for the narrative of exceptionalism to progress, reconstituted as the ‘new kind of evil’ outside and at the door.

Therefore, although set in 1980, and referencing earlier wars, it is clear that *No Country for Old Men* can be read as making an implicit commentary on the War on Terror after 9/11. McCarthy’s interrogation of the eternal ‘other’ that must be destroyed but is, at the same time essential to the narrative of exceptionalism, evokes how the White House, faced with the wounding of 9/11, quickly identified the enemy as global terrorism – as if it was deemed to exist in a tangible form – and consequently rapidly engaged in two major global confrontations in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Bush Administration waged war against the terrorists as if they constituted a ‘visible antagonism’ manifesting itself as enemy nations that could be defeated in a direct military confrontation. Pease comments on how President Bush justified this war on moral and even religious grounds by endowing:

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57 Ibid.  
58 Ibid.
The doctrine of American Exceptionalism with a metaphysical supplement that enjoined the belief that the preemptive violence through which the United States would defend the globe against the threat of Islamic terrorism was metaphysically superior to that of other nation-states.\textsuperscript{59}

The possibility raised by Baudrillard and Pease that the terrorist may exist as an embodiment of destructive tendencies within the mythic perceptions of national identity, rather than as extraneous agency acting against it, is one which has resonance in the context of the Bush Administration’s determination to impose regime change on a nation that had no part to play in the 9/11 attacks. In the insistence of the enemy being external in nature, the White House thus acted out post-9/11 a cycle of trauma and further crisis engendered by the mythic assumptions of American Exceptionalism. McCarthy’s novel, in its refusal to end in cathartic Western shootout evokes the post-9/11 War on Terror without end, a war that continues a cycle of trauma rather than concludes a narrative of progressive victory over enemy assailants and adversaries. The unresolved ending of the novel displaces the conventional mythic vanquishing of the ‘other’ with the dark vacuum of the failed ‘savage war’, as Chigurh remains unopposed and undefeated.

If the embodiment of the adversarial ‘other’ so important to the exceptionalist and frontier myths is Chigurh, then those myths at odds with the brutal traumatic present are most extensively represented in the character of Sheriff Bell. Throughout the novel, in his confronting the struggle with the adversary, and beneath his external appearances of courage, decency and model citizenry, Bell is wracked with doubts about himself and his country. It is not only Chigurh who represents moral decline as Bell sees everywhere around him evidence of social fragmentation and inter-generational breakdown: old people who ‘just look crazy [...] like they woke up and they don’t know how they got where they’re at’; and ‘their own

\textsuperscript{59} Pease, \textit{The New American Exceptionalism}, 182.
grandchildren [...] on the streets of our Texas towns with green hair and bones in their noses speakin a language they couldn’t even understand’. Bell’s disillusion with contemporary society translates into a failing sense of resolve in his work in law enforcement. He feels he is ‘bein asked to stand for something that I don’t have the same belief in it I once did’, a sense of doubt that coincides with a crisis in his territory culminating in the week of nine unsolved homicides in a once peaceful county. Bell knows his duty involves resolving the crisis even if it means being ‘willin to die to even do this job’. McCarthy reprises the unremitting battle with the eternally adversarial villain, whose continued existence not only threatens and destroys life and puts Bell’s ‘soul at hazard’, but furthermore renders Bell paralysed into inaction when he refuses the necessary challenge to ‘go out to meet him’. Bell ultimately finds himself outside the courthouse, having handed in his resignation, ‘beaten’ and just ‘sitting there instead of starting the truck’. This crisis of a conflicted man facing a questionable motive to action to defend a community that is vulnerable, weak or even corrupt, places Bell in the heroic gunfighter mould of the classic Western, such as Shane and High Noon. But, in Bell’s case, he singularly fails to fulfil that role.

McVeigh describes this gunfighter lawman figure from the traditional Western in the following way:

He doesn’t fight back until the community mandates it. He is entirely democratic in his sensibilities until such time as he feels the need to take the reins for the good of

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60 McCarthy, No Country for Old Men, 304, 295.
61 Ibid., 296.
62 Ibid., 296.
63 Ibid., 4.
64 Ibid., 306.
the community, at which point he can act out the role of the heroic leader, sanctioned by the community to avert the crisis.\textsuperscript{66}

This figure, emblematic of mythic courage and nobility harking back to the frontier, reminds the American nation of their heroic heritage at a time when those traditions seem threatened, forgotten or lost. McVeigh further writes regarding the America of the early Cold War years:

\begin{quote}
In the character of Will Kane, \textit{High Noon} offered an anxious public a hero made-to-measure for the times: a hero slow to anger but quick to action, and a hero with a recognized history of achievement and victory.\textsuperscript{67}
\end{quote}

In the post-9/11 climate of fear and uncertainty, the ‘anxious public’ once more clamoured for a hero in the Will Kane mould, but McCarthy refuses to provide this consoling figure. Bell, like Kane, also has such a ‘history’, believes that ‘if you got a bad enough dog in your yard people will stay out of it’, and fully understands that this entails the willingness to take violent action, an essential dimension to the gunfighter’s persona.\textsuperscript{68} John Cawelti similarly identifies this heroic gunfighter as ‘one who, torn by the conflicting demands of different social roles and value systems, yet manages to assert his identity in action’.\textsuperscript{69} Similarly, Richard Slotkin writes of these heroes:

\begin{quote}
[W]e see them operating in a ‘terminal’ environment, standing on a historical border between the world in which things were still ‘possible’ for them and a world in which they and their profession are becoming outdated. Their story will have to reach its climax in a fast-draw shoot-out, in which their calling will reach its pinnacle
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{66} McVeigh, \textit{The American Western}, 55.
\textsuperscript{67} McVeigh, \textit{The American Western}, 101.
\textsuperscript{68} McCarthy, \textit{No Country for Old Men}, 299.
\textsuperscript{69} John G. Cawelti, \textit{Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture} (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 250.
of achievement – followed by its exhaustion. And they will become critically conscious, before the end, of just what has gone wrong with them and their world.\(^\text{70}\) Slotkin and Cawelti point to the gunfighter’s anachronistic and exhausted persona, but they also indicate how that adds to the gunfighter’s charismatic isolation, because, despite this wearied and attenuated status, he still is ultimately, when required, able to act dynamically in service of the wider community.

*No Country for Old Men* establishes the conditions for the traditional gunfighter ‘climax’ to Bell’s story, an anticipated adversarial showdown between the malevolent outlaw figure and the demoralised but noble sheriff who galvanises himself into violent action to ward off evil. However, this showdown never materialises. Bell’s story, to paraphrase Slotkin, reaches its ‘exhaustion’ without the expected climactic ‘shoot-out’. Instead, McCarthy presents the traditional ‘hero’ as a figure of failure and defeat, with Bell resigning from his post so that ‘I won’t be called on to hunt this man’, burdened as he is with the realisation he ‘may not be equal to’ the challenge.\(^\text{71}\) After quitting and leaving the courthouse ‘for the last time’ Bell feels the full force of defeat, ‘more bitter to him than death’.\(^\text{72}\) His sense of failure is compounded by the knowledge that he has ‘felt like this before but not in a long time’, drawing upon his memory of failure and betrayal in World War II. The expectations outlined by Cawelti and Slotkin associated with the gunfighter narrative are derailed by this double admission of defeat. Not only is Bell unable to face Chigurh, he was also never the hero he claimed to be in the first place. In presenting Bell as the seeming epitome of the traditional redemptive violence of the Western, but actually revealing him to be a failed and exhausted influence, McCarthy questions the cultural imperative to look

\(^{70}\) Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 401.

\(^{71}\) McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men*, 282, 299.

\(^{72}\) Ibid., 306.
backwards to World War II, and even back beyond that to the mythic frontier of the Old West for redeeming heroes in a time of crisis.

In seeking consolation amidst this trauma in men ‘of an older time’ and his constant yearning ‘to hear about the old timers’, Sheriff Bell himself also embodies the nostalgia for those Western clichés of heroic certainty.\(^73\) Despite the fact that, as John Cant has acknowledged, ‘the world deals harshly with the myths’ that have sustained Bell through his life, the dream he has of his father suggests the ‘men of an older time’ continue to pull him from the present into the reassuring but illusory narratives of the mythical past.\(^74\) In Bell’s dream, at the end of the novel, his father, long dead, rides ahead, ‘carryin fire in a horn the way people used to’ and waits for Bell ‘somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold’.\(^75\) Bell once again immerses himself in a world of dreams, of idealised mythologies, of landscapes of the past, associated with the father offering to bring the light to a dark, hostile world. Bell, like McCarthy’s other traumatised cowboys, John Grady Cole and Billy Parham, sees the resolution to his suffering in terms associated with the mythic heroism of the frontier. He thinks he can put things right by killing Chigurh, an exploit which would involve his absorption into the mythic Old West as heroic gunfighter. When all this fails, Bell’s final dream of his father marks the extent to which he also has retreated into his own private mythology which merges with the national frontier myth of masculine heroics. In Bell’s using the phrase ‘out there’ to imagine both Chigurh, at the beginning of the novel and his father at the very end, both configured by Bell in some mythic wilderness, the narrative begins and ends with the archetypal villain and the mythic hero from the classic Western conjoined in Bell’s elemental fantasy.\(^76\) The framing of the novel in this way reinforces the extent to which

\(^73\) Ibid., 278, 64.
\(^75\) McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men*, 309.
\(^76\) Ibid., 4, 309.
Bell finally retreats into the mythic realm, as he imagines his father riding out from the past to light a fire in the dark ‘out there’ and thereby implicitly complete the work of confrontation with Chigurh that Bell himself is unable to face. At the end of the novel McCarthy once again shows how the myth of the Old West re-emerges through trauma and loss. McCarthy here shows us that Bell is retreating into an illusory dream-world, but also at the same time shows, as we have seen throughout The Border Trilogy, how it is through trauma and loss that the enduring power of the Western myth resurfaces.

Through Bell’s retreat into past mythic certainties in the face of an adversary like Chigurh, McCarthy addresses the equally backward-looking responses Americans have expressed in answer to other threats to the nation, particularly 9/11. According to Susan Faludi, the United States in the post-9/11 moment returned through ‘some nameless reflex’ to that ‘badlands where conquest and triumph played and replayed in an infinite loop’. Public figures engaged with an instinct that emanates ‘from deep within that dream world’ and ‘the retreat into a fantasized yesteryear’. This national indulgence in a ‘dream world’ involves the evocation of a binary Western confrontation between good guys and bad guys and the re-enactment of the mythic adversarial landscape of exceptionalism. Faludi writes:

Political candidates proved their double barreled worthiness for post 9/11 office by brandishing guns on the campaign trail, our journalists cast city firefighters as tall-in-the saddle cowboys patrolling a Wild West stage set, and our pundits proclaimed our nation’s ability to vanquish “barbarians” in a faraway land they dubbed ‘Indian Country’.

78 Ibid.
79 Ibid., 4-5.
President Bush’s adoption of the role of gunfighter sheriff in the White House was, for the most part, representative of that national mood, especially in those first weeks after 9/11. His white hat/ black hat characterisation of the War on Terror transformed this retreat into the past into a divine mission reaching out to some appointed victory in the future, declaring, ‘We are a country awakened to danger [...] we have found our mission and our moment.’

Bush’s reaching back into the illusory past to find inspiration in the hunt for Osama Bin Laden involved his reimagining the nation’s mythic history and aligning it with his own memories: ‘Just remember, all I’m doing is remembering when I was a kid. I remember that they used to put out there in the old West a “wanted” poster. It said “Wanted: Dead or Alive.”

McCarthy’s vision in No Country for Old Men of a nation ‘in bad shape’, ‘brought [...] to its knees’ by violence and defeat in war, searching for an enemy on whom it can wreak vengeance, but unable to defeat or even locate that enemy, counters this Old West rhetoric and engages with the trauma and wounding of both Vietnam and the post-9/11 moment.

The theories of Judith Butler regarding American nationhood post-9/11 seem to reflect this sense of wounding and communal trauma that McCarthy addresses. Butler, one of several scholars who have turned their attention to the theme of national trauma since 2001, writes:

In the United States, we have been surrounded by violence, having perpetrated it and perpetrating it still, having suffered it, living in fear of it, planning more of it, if not an open future of infinite war in the name of a “war on terrorism”.

80 Cited in McVeigh, The American Western, 216.
82 McCarthy, No Country for Old Men, 294.
Writing of the political and military options facing the United States in the post-9/11 years she has suggested, ‘perhaps there is some other way to live such that one becomes neither affectively dead nor mimetically violent, a way out of the circle of violence altogether.’

Regarding the attacks of 9/11 she considers the ‘recent trauma to be an opportunity for a re-consideration’ of the violent assertion of sovereignty in response to crisis:

Doing this involves a certain ‘loss’ for the country as a whole: the notion of the world itself as a sovereign entitlement of the United States must be given up, lost, and mourned as narcissistic and grandiose fantasies must be lost and mourned. From the subsequent experience of loss and fragility, however, the possibility of making different kinds of ties emerges.

These ‘different kinds of ties’, for Butler, involve an embracing of loss, a living with the wound of trauma, of engaging with the sense of being vulnerable and learning to understand how this vulnerability opens the nation to a sympathetic consideration of other peoples and other cultures. Butler’s view offers a non-adversarial approach to the trauma of history, one that acknowledges America as a nation fixated on combat and violent struggle whenever faced with crisis. It offers a different approach to the violent vision which interprets each crisis as the next instalment in the eternal struggle to survive and to subsequently reaffirm the nation’s sense of chosenness before God. McCarthy’s novel interrogates how the nation clings to those ‘narcissistic and grandiose fantasies’ which Butler believes leads to the ‘mimetically violent’ responses to 9/11. This refuge in the certainties and, consequently, the repeated violence of the past enables the nation to ‘forget’ the trauma of the present. *No Country for Old Men* explores this acting out of the past in the present as a failed enterprise, and re-evaluates how those frontier confrontations are played out to exhaustion in the

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84 Ibid., 42.
85 Ibid., 40.
contemporary border towns of Texas and Mexico, and by analogy in post-9/11 Iraq and Afghanistan.

In its interrogation of the mythic certainties of the Old West McCarthy’s novel resonates with the significant scholarly focus since 9/11 on how collective and individual trauma must not only be mourned but must also be fully ‘remembered’ if the nation is to come to terms with its past and not re-enact these violent cyclic patterns. At the end of the novel, Bell, at the point of defeat, becomes lost in that same mythic ‘dreamworld’ that Faludi characterises, that feeds back into the culture and emerges in Bush’s knee-jerk response to 9/11 as if it were an Indian raid. This national embracing of Western myths performs a kind of forgetting of the traumatic cycles of history and reinforces the violent adversarial struggles that underpin that trauma. E. Ann Kaplan claims that ‘cultures too may be traumatised, and that they too may “forget” horrendous actions performed in the past and simply split off from the daily consciousness in the culture.’

She remarks on how ‘individuals and cultures, then, perform forgetting as a way of protecting themselves from the horrors of what one (or the culture) has done or what has been done to oneself or others in one’s society.’ She is concerned with ‘the strategies by which dominant groups in the United States developed mechanisms to engineer “forgetting” of traumas that they originally inflicted on victims (such as slavery or the decimation of Native Americans).’ Jenny Edkins also investigates the ‘cultural forgetting’ of trauma when she claims that, for the nation, trauma must remain unacknowledged and can only re-emerge as transformed into the heroic narrative of the state. Edkins perceives the state as implicated in the process of refusing to recognise already contaminated and compromised individual traumatic memory, in obscuring, even silencing, individual survivor testimony through state commemoration. She points to how the

86 Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*, 68.
87 Ibid., 74.
88 Ibid., 67.
institutionalised celebration of sacrifice sustains the false mythologies upon which the state is founded:

So memory is central to relations of power. Dominant powers can use commemoration as a means of forgetting past struggles. For example they can use accounts of heroism and sacrifice that tell a story of the founding of the state, a narrative of glorious origin. This obscures trauma. In this context practices that insist on remembering can be insurrectionary and counter-hegemonic. They remind us that power is provisional and contingent and that it contains violence.89

American national identity with its emphasis on crisis and survival and the subsequent ‘forgetting’ of the nation’s battlefields relies upon the cultural ‘forgetting’ of trauma and its re-configuration as part of the mythic exceptionalist narrative. In its engagement with the trauma of war through American history, No Country for Old Men offers a counter-memory of the conflicts in the Iraq, Afghanistan, Vietnam, and, as I will discuss later in the chapter, a counter-memory reaching even further back to World War II, World War I and the frontier.


89 Edkins, Trauma and the Memory of Politics, 11-12.
turn, as ‘a godamned warzone’, and ‘like Vietnam’.\textsuperscript{90} In this way his trade as welder, and his return to a broken country resonates with a nation, ‘in pieces’, trying to piece itself together again after the trauma of war, only for him to find the war, and the defeat that went with it, still continues in a different form in Moss’s own country.\textsuperscript{91}

This home-based war finds him out when he discovers in the desert the dead men and two million dollars from the botched drug deal. Although fatalistically aware when looking at the money ‘his whole life was sitting there in front him’, he seizes upon this opportunity for him and his family to escape from poverty.\textsuperscript{92} Carla Jean, his frightened wife, warns him, ‘It’s a false god’, and he replies, ‘Yeah. But it’s real money.’\textsuperscript{93} However, there are other possible motives suggested at work in Moss’s stealing the money and becoming a fugitive from justice and drug cartel murderers. His first encounter in the desert with the dope dealers pursuing him makes him feel like ‘he’d had this feeling before. In another country. He never thought he’d have it again.’\textsuperscript{94} In this evocation of a response recalled from Vietnam is the suggestion that what Moss rediscovers and re-enacts here in his theft and subsequent escape is an opportunity to reaffirm what was denied in Vietnam, to reassert a sense of victory over the enemy. When the hit man Carson Wells warns him about Chigurh, Moss tells him, ‘You don’t know what you’re talkin about. I’ll take you out with him if that’s what you want.’\textsuperscript{95} Similarly, after Chigurh has killed Wells and is closing in on Moss and his wife Carla Jean, Chigurh proposes to spare Carla Jean if the money is handed over, but, answering Chigurh, Moss threatens ‘to bring you something all right [...] I’ve decided to make you a special

\textsuperscript{90} McCarthy, \textit{No Country for Old Men}, 242, 75.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 294.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 182.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 30.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 155.
McCarthy depicts in Moss a recall to combat, a desire to confront and reckon with the ‘enemy’ on a home territory that has been turned into a warzone by dope dealers, the corporate gangsters who control them, and ‘the ultimate bad-ass’ Chigurh.\(^97\)

The reality, however, is that for Moss, as with Bell, there is no heroic confrontation with Chigurh, no revised version of Vietnam, no intervention to save the innocent on the ground, only a helpless gesture of chivalry in his attempt to save the hitchhiking teenager that leads to them both getting killed. He can save no one, not the girl, his wife, nor himself. His willingness to confront the enemy, to engage in his own private post-Vietnam showdown, exposes Carla Jean to the horrific meeting with Chigurh and it is she, not Moss who has to face up to him. Moss’s death and defeat indicate the failure of post-Vietnam frontier masculinity and the trauma of Vietnam re-enacted in Moss’s futile demise. Moss’s father refers to his son as ‘the best rifleshot I ever saw’, but this expertise, evocative of frontier heroics, cannot save Moss from his final rendition, reduced to a ‘badman on a slab’ with ‘holes in his face and [...] his teeth shot out’, and his wife’s name left on the calling card of a ‘damned lunatic’.\(^98\) McCarthy’s narrative denies any sense of climax regarding Moss’s death which is conveyed through witness accounts, the generic expectations of the Western showdown once more undermined. McCarthy reveals, however, how mythical stereotypes of the Old West are perpetuated through the retelling of the shootout by the lawman witness recounting the incident to Bell. His claims that ‘the Mexican started it’ and his incredulity at Moss’s heroism at being able to shoot back when he ‘was all shot to pieces’ reinforce the enduring binary propositions of white heroism confronting the ‘other’, here characterised as Mexican treachery.\(^99\) McCarthy extends concerns regarding the nation after Vietnam to a

\(^{96}\) Ibid., 185.
\(^{97}\) Ibid., 153.
\(^{98}\) Ibid., 293, 240, 46.
\(^{99}\) Ibid., 237-238.
meditation on how the past present and future, far from being a narrative of mythic heroic progress, always has been and always will be a traumatic cycle of violent and destructive confrontation. The frontier may live on as a site of mythic white heroism but only within the false memory of individuals and nation, a memory at odds with history as a continuing trauma.

McCarthy interrogates this national memory through, for example, the evocation of the mythic dream of the Old West that re-emerges at the end of Bell’s struggle and failure to confront the ‘savage other’. Bell’s crisis is the focus throughout the novel for the conflict between the longing for the mythic past and the brutal reality of that past as a traumatic cycle of violence. By focusing on Bell’s individual struggle and his associated meditations on the nation’s violent past, the novel lengthens the telescope of historical trauma and national forgetting beyond post-9/11 and Vietnam, to include earlier conflicts, in particular World War II, but also World War I and the even earlier violence of the frontier. Bell’s vision of his country as falling to pieces around him, proceeding from the border violence in Terrell County, is compounded by his own personal suffering and trauma proceeding from his experiences as World War II veteran. Bell is a decorated World War II hero, part of that army of returning heroes Susan Faludi describes as:

A team of anonymous duty-bound young men successfully completing the mission their fathers and their fathers’ fathers had laid out for them, defeating a vile enemy and laying claim to a contested frontier – this would be the template for postwar manhood.100

Bell’s war hero status follows this pattern, maintaining the family tradition of male bravery originating in frontier endeavour consistent with and also sustaining Turner’s ‘dominating

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100 Susan Faludi, Stiffed: The Betrayal of the Modern Man (London: Chatto and Windus, 1999), 16.
American character’. Bell, however, is convinced that he is undeserving of the war medal and that he does not match up to the heroes of the past. He has lived his whole post-war existence with an acute awareness of his betrayal of his men in battle that was fortified by the decoration forced on him by the state to cover up any general military incompetence. The major, who confers on Bell his medal and tells him he ‘will wish he is in hell with his back broke’ if he confesses the truth of his combat experience to anyone, epitomises the state’s repression of traumatic experience and the masking of national trauma through commemoration and enforced silence.\footnote{101} McCarthy interrogates the institutionalised dishonesty of the presentation of the war experience in order to explore how the heroic generation of World War II did not constitute either some perfect moment in history from which everything that followed could be evaluated as a falling off, or a mythic landmark in the national narrative of exceptionalist conquest.

In the commemoration of Bell’s war through the endowment of this medal, McCarthy explores, on a larger scale, how a national mythology hinges on the celebration of survival. Many men died in battle and therefore the ‘chosen’ survivor must be idealised and endowed with celebrated and privileged status. However, this ‘chosenness’ is, for Bell, a devastating experience because it fills him with the sense of his own unworthy status as hero. It is not so much the war experience itself that is irresolvable, but the inassimilable paradox invested in his confessional statement, ‘they died and I got a medal for it.’\footnote{102} In this statement resides the traumatic dislocation between the death of his men, his sense of having betrayed them and the double betrayal of receiving a medal for it. His refusal to ‘talk about’ the war, at odds with his perpetual dwelling on the experience – ‘There aint a day I don’t remember it’ – is symptomatic of trauma in the inability to bear witness, combined with a repetitive,
compulsive memory of that moment in his life.\textsuperscript{103} The country he now surrenders to Chigurh and the violent marauding drug gangs merges, in his guilt-ridden conscience, with the men he feels he betrayed through what he conceives as his cowardice during World War II.

When comparing himself to the heroic individuals of his past, his father and grandfather in particular, Bell feels he falls well short: ‘I’m not the man of an older time they say I am. I wish I was. I’m a man of this time.’\textsuperscript{104} Despite his Uncle Ellis’s attempt to reassure him and balance Bell’s heroic view of his own father with his comment, ‘I might could tell you some things about him that would change your mind’, Bell refuses to listen to this reassessment.\textsuperscript{105} Consequently, Bell struggles to maintain what he sees as his own bogus and fraudulent representation of this idealised past, while his job demands that he arrests the social and moral disintegration witnessed in the country around him. His admission at the end of the novel to his Uncle Ellis that he feels he has ‘stolen’ his own life as a result of his abandoning his men in battle is a revealing counterpoint to his stoical endorsements of his public role as sheriff, with its truth-speaking and self reliance.

Ellis’s compassionate suggestion to Bell that ‘maybe you ought to ease up on yourself some’ has significant authority in that Ellis, the last representative of that ‘older time’, has no illusions about the violence and brutality of that era and understands that ‘this country has got a lot to answer for’.\textsuperscript{106} His voice demythologises the heroism of the frontier past and the wars of the twentieth century, remembering the inglorious deaths of Bell’s ancestors, his Uncle Mac ‘shot down on his own porch in Hudspeth County’ and his Uncle Harold ‘dyin in a ditch

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 279
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 278, 279, 271.
somewheres’ in World War I. Uncle Ellis acknowledges the trauma of two World Wars when he claims:

You can be patriotic and still believe that some things cost more than what they’re worth. Ask them Gold Star mothers what they paid and what they got for it. You always pay too much.

Equally, Ellis references the violent legacy of the border and frontier history bleeding into the present with his observation that ‘this country will kill you in a heartbeat.’ Through Ellis, McCarthy presents an alternative to the exceptionalist vision of the mythic past, but it is a view that Bell is unable or unwilling to face, as Ellis’s vision does not comply with the official narratives Bell has relied upon throughout his life.

Through his official status as officer of the law and a representative of the state, Bell colludes with these official narratives and with what is expected of the heroic citizen. In order to complete his job as a bringer of justice, the expectation is that this heroic citizen should not become hindered or impeded by any personal issues or feelings that work contrary to that mission. Yet as a subject, suffering from the trauma of battle, Bell finds that he cannot fulfil this mission completely or successfully. McCarthy thus creates in Bell a dual characterisation: on one level there is the character Bell wants to be and what the state says he should be, the lawman ‘that just wanted to pull everbody back in the boat’; and on another level there is a more complex character, the man ‘forced to look at myself’, whose traumatised psyche limits and subverts the effectiveness of the sheriff ‘citizen’ figure.

Through this duality McCarthy enacts the split between the private wounding of war and the public commemorative ‘forgetting’ that transforms trauma into national myth. Edkins

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107 Ibid., 268, 269.
108 Ibid., 267.
109 Ibid., 271.
110 Ibid., 295, 296.
comments on how ‘the subject only exists in as far as the person finds their place within the social or symbolic order.’ Edkins, Trauma and Memory of Politics, 11. Bell’s striving for a completed ‘citizen-based’ identity within the ‘social order’ is at odds with the traumatised subjectivity that refuses to be buried in commemoration and national myth-making. Jay Ellis writes:

The book ends with Bell so defeated that he can only retreat into an image of a past that never existed, into a mythology that seems more of a defense than a viable dream. Instead of a vision of how a man might live outside the space of his dreams, Bell’s dream only throws into sharper relief the losses of his life. In this sense, Bell’s monologues serve as evidence that his conscious control of life has become overwhelmed by unconscious fears more than those myriad worries he cites in his earlier grumbling over the state of society.  

As we have seen, Bell is left dreaming of an unreal idealisation of his father, who, significantly, according to Uncle Ellis, in real life did not match up to this mythic image. In Jay Ellis’s analysis we see the distinction between the ‘conscious control’ of the decorated hero and ‘unconscious fears’ and trauma of the frightened soldier, a distinction latent in Bell’s refusal to talk about, but inability to forget, the war. His dream of riding after his father involves following the latter into an approaching non-future of death, and at the same time it embodies a voyage into the past. Either way it represents an abandonment of any hopeful or meaningful future for Bell, and by analogy the country he defends.

The only option Bell embraces at the end of the novel is to retreat imaginatively into a mythic past alongside his dead father, or contemplate the future in the form of imminent divine judgement. Through Bell’s prognostications of oncoming apocalypse, McCarthy explores ways in which the exceptionalist visions of the future, as well as the past, provide a

111 Edkins, Trauma and Memory of Politics, 11.
112 Ellis, No Place for Home, 243.
mythic solution to the exhausting violence and decline of the contemporary moment. Bell sees an apocalyptic reckoning coming in the ways his country is moving relentlessly towards some kind of disaster, knowing ‘as certain as death that there aint nothing short of the second comin of Christ can slow this train.’\textsuperscript{113} This end-times apocalyptic resolution to what Bell perceives as ‘the world [...] goin to hell in a handbasket’, is the only future he can imagine, but it is also still in keeping with the American exceptionalist tradition of the chosen people. The apocalypse offers a cathartic confrontational moment with the divine that will either heal or destroy the country, a cosmic equivalent of the grand western shoot-out. Bell’s vision of approaching apocalypse, fortified by his wife Loretta’s reading of \textit{The Revelations of St John}, anticipates a necessary purging for him of the wide catalogue of evils prevalent in the modern world that begins with ‘the breakdown in mercantile ethics’ and ends with ‘people settin around out in the desert dead in their vehicles’\textsuperscript{114} The reckoning that Bell sees foretold in ‘signs and wonders’ in the streets of modern Texas constitutes the ultimate wish-fulfilment of American Exceptionalism, a yearning for the ultimate affirmation of the chosen people and the resolving of Bell’s own and the nation’s trauma through divine intervention.\textsuperscript{115}

It is through this vision that the concept of America as Redeemer Nation, in the form of a heavenly paradise, is preserved for Bell. It is also a view that is reflected in the post-millenialism of much of the neo-conservatism of post-9/11 America. Naomi Klein points to the apocalyptic proclivities of the Bush Administration and thereby offers one explanation for its indifference towards the chaos and destruction carried out in its name:

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{113} McCarthy, \textit{No Country for Old Men}, 159.}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 304.}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 295.}
\end{footnotes}
The Rapture is a parable for what they are building down here – a system that invites destruction and disaster, then swoops in with private helicopters and airlifts them and their friends to divine safety.\footnote{Naomi Klein, \textit{The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism} (London: Allen Lane, 2007), 419.}

Bell’s apocalyptic anticipation articulates this prevalent post-9/11 end-times affirmation of the final reckoning in which the golden nation will be realised in heaven. It promises, for the chosen people, a break with the time-bound cycle of trauma in that it releases them from the struggle for survival which has been the seal of their appointed status before God. However, McCarthy reveals how Bell’s promise of a future released from this struggle is only another dangerous illusion, an idea that McCarthy develops further in \textit{The Road}, as I will show later in this chapter.

Through Bell’s meditation on the apocalypse as salvation from the tribulations afflicting America, McCarthy also interrogates what John Gray recognises as the international violence perpetrated in the name of ‘America’s exceptional religiosity’.\footnote{John Gray, \textit{Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia} (London: Allen Lane, 2007), 112.} Gray believes that the War on Terror is now being waged as an apocalyptic conflict to eradicate an enemy that represents all that is ‘other’ and therefore ‘demonic’, a conflict ‘that anticipates an unprecedented change in human affairs – the end of history, the passing of the sovereign state, universal acceptance of democracy and the defeat of evil’.\footnote{Ibid., p.183.} Gray labels this messianic movement that drove the Bush Administration towards this secular version of the Apocalypse the ‘Utopian Right’, a movement intoxicated by American power and the will ‘to remake the world’.\footnote{Ibid., 33.} He notes how ‘in the aftermath of 9/11 terrorist attacks American politics acquired an unmistakably apocalyptic tone’, and how ‘many of the theo-conservatives who have
George W. Bush’s power base expect an end to come about by divine intervention’. Gray warns, therefore, of the danger for the world that was inherent in the Bush Administration’s millennialism and in its anticipation of a future that anticipated the fulfilment of America as God’s appointed nation in heaven.

Similarly, Donald Pease comments on how ‘Bush associated the U.S. monopoly on the legal use of global violence with the intervention in human time of a higher law (what he called his “higher father”)’. These contemporary analyses of American exceptionalism with their prognostications of shock, catastrophe, disaster and crisis, all conducted in a deadly spirit of incontrovertible destiny, support the proposition that the exceptionalist vision of history depends on and promotes trauma without end. In America, post-9/11, the final reckoning with ‘evil’ did not come. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan failed to end the War on Terror. Equally, the conflicts did not expedite the divine intervention at the end of time, or bring any nearer a golden future for America, either earthly or celestial. In No Country for Old Men, Bell’s anticipation of the Second Coming as a release from defeat and decline suggests the susceptibility of the beleaguered exceptionalist imagination to the attractions of apocalypse. Bell’s and the American end-timers’ anticipated ‘second comin of Christ’ may promise a heavenly release from the struggles of earthly time only to invoke further trauma in the present and future. McCarthy envisages this imagined failure of the apocalypse in the destroyed future-world of The Road. In the horrific transposition from Bell’s dreams of the Second Coming to the ‘nights dark beyond darkness’ at the beginning of The Road, McCarthy reveals how the exceptionalist infatuation with apocalypse will only engender more trauma, the antithesis of release from temporal suffering. John Gray’s perspective on American post-9/11 millennialism, ‘apocalypse failed to arrive, and history went on as before

120 Ibid., 31, 33-34.
121 Pease, The New American Exceptionalism, 112.
122 McCarthy, The Road, 1.
but with an added dash of blood’, also acts as an appropriate caption on how Bell’s yearning for ‘the second comin’ at the end of No Country for Old Men translates into the depiction of a future without salvation in The Road.123

**Exceptionalist Futurity in The Road**

Susan Kollin claims that The Road offers a commentary on a post-9/11 America in crisis ‘when the economy and environment face a number of compelling challenges’ and consequently ‘many Americans are struggling to redefine national identity as well as the country’s role in the world.’124 With regards to this ‘national identity’ she remarks how ‘as an allegory of a hyperabundant America, The Road calls into question various master narratives of national identity, particularly notions of American exceptionalism.’125 In The Road, McCarthy undertakes more extensive interrogations of how the ideology of exceptionalism leads, not to a glorious future of the ‘master narrative’, but back into the cycle of destruction that has already, at the beginning of this novel, laid the world to ruin.

The first of these interrogations of exceptionalism is the concept of chosenness that is revealed in the father’s relationship with and reverence for his son. The father conjures a future from the broken past and present in which he is bearing custody of the special goodness inherent in his son and a view of himself as ‘appointed to do that by God’.126 This ‘appointment’ constitutes another version of the survivor-of-trauma cycle. The father sees himself and his son as the chosen survivors elected to move forward into a future with the

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124 Susan Kollin, “‘Barren, Silent, Godless’: Ecodisaster and the Post-Abundant Landscape in *The Road*’ in *All the Pretty Horses, No Country for Old Men, The Road*, 166.
125 Ibid.
126 McCarthy, *The Road*, 80.
insistence they are the last of the ‘good guys’ ‘carrying the fire’ for humanity.\textsuperscript{127} The man’s insistence on claiming the ground of ‘goodness’ associated with his survival of catastrophe again follows the pattern of those divinely ordained pilgrim settlers of early America setting off for the promised land under God’s command. The father ‘knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke.’\textsuperscript{128} For the father, the child embodies a chosenness that suggests the survival, not only of the human race, but, more importantly, the goodness of God embodied in this one boy. The boy acquires a messianic status in the father’s eyes: ‘He sat beside him and stroked his pale and tangled hair. Golden chalice, good to house a god.’ The father says to the old man Ely, ‘What if I said that he’s a god?’\textsuperscript{129} Donovan Gwinner notes how ‘the father cannot help but think of his son in the holiest of terms.’\textsuperscript{130} The man’s holy vision of the boy and his mission to keep him safe on the road implies an exceptionalism centred on his son’s essentially divine status. It is through saving the boy, therefore, that the man keeps faith with the exceptionalist position, for he clearly imagines that his son could be the beginning of a divinely ordained future for mankind.

The novel enacts, however, the traumatic historic cycle of survival, chosenness and further violence throughout the father’s struggle to keep his son, the sacred signifier of the future, safe. McCarthy constantly juxtaposes the father’s role as ‘one of the good guys’, ‘appointed’ by God to protect his son who is ‘carrying the fire’ of humanity into the future, with the man’s repeated willingness and need to use violence in the name of that ‘goodness’. The father’s emphasis on ‘carrying the fire’ echoes the ‘fire carrying father’ of Bell’s dream.

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 87, 231, 298.  
\textsuperscript{128} McCarthy, \textit{The Road}, 3.  
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 78, 183.  
\textsuperscript{130} Donovan Gwinner, “‘Everything Uncoupled from Its Shoring’: Quandaries of Epistemology and Ethics in \textit{The Road}’ in Cormac McCarthy: \textit{All the Pretty Horses, No Country for Old Men, The Road}, Spurgeon (ed.), 142-163, 146.
at the end of No Country for Old Men with its implications of mythic longings for a past that never existed. McCarthy reintroduces here in The Road an image that concluded his previous novel with an evocation of lost Western heroism. This final image from No Country for Old Men contextualises the ‘fire carrying’ image of the father and son in The Road in terms of the retreat into the mythology of the past that Bell, and by extension the culture he represents, embraces at the end of the previous novel. This association, therefore, positions the father as a descendant of those cowboys of the Old West, carrying what he claims to be the ‘fire’ of humanity, but what also represents, in terms of the continuum of loss and failure running through all five of these McCarthy novels, the torch of the Western myth with its attendant cycle of violence, and trauma.

This association with the Old West is further reinforced in the way the father’s sense of being ‘appointed’ to ‘carry the fire’ of goodness justifies, for him, the use of violence necessary to fulfil that mission. The future of the world embodied in the necessity to preserve the welfare of the boy is dependent, therefore, on a re-enactment of the violence of the past. Old West adversarial values of good guys and bad guys are, thus, constantly emphasised by the father in his insistence that even after he has killed a man and ‘covered with gore’ his own son and had to ‘wash a dead man’s brains out of his [son’s] hair’, he and his son are ‘still the good guys’ and ‘always will be’. These discrepancies between divine ‘appointment’ and graphic violence reveal how the movement to the future, here invested in the boy, carries with it the dangers of dragging history back into a brutal re-enactment of the Old West. In the interrogation of the exceptionalist narrative, and the ways that narrative draws on Old West heroism from the past and mythic chosenness in the future to justify violence, McCarthy addresses a traumatic cycle of history that implicitly endangers rather than affirms the future.

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131 McCarthy, No Country for Old Men, 309.
132 McCarthy, The Road, 69, 77, 81.
of the American nation. The novel suggests, with its evocation of global catastrophe, that the violent impulses on display in this post-apocalyptic world have their roots in a destructive mythology that has brought the world to this point of extinction.

McCarthy interrogates this mythology and the exceptionalist American future it entails, through the journey of father and son and their encounters with the nation’s traumatic past. It is the son’s witnessing of this trauma which allows us to read the interaction between exceptionalism, violence, chosenness and futurity in several registers simultaneously. And one of the things the boy witnesses is his father’s sustained violence. The only protection the father has throughout the journey is his gun armed with two bullets, one each for the boy and himself if necessary, if they are captured by the cannibal tribes. In this world ammunition and weaponry are at a premium and an essential element of survival, again mirroring the violent canvas of the Western frontier. The father exhibits all the instincts and prowess of the archetypal Western gunfighter in an encounter with the enemy when he is described as having ‘already dropped to the ground’, whereupon ‘he [...] levelled the pistol and fired from a two-handed position balanced on both knees at a distance of six feet.133 Such is the father’s accuracy as a sharpshooter that his assailant ‘fell back instantly and lay with blood bubbling from the hole in his forehead’.134 The Road revisits the myth of the Old West with its heroic certainties and demarcations of good and evil but at the same time raises questions regarding the relationship between mythology and the traumatic witnessing of such encounters through the boy’s eyes.

The latent and destructive violence of these heroic gunfighter antics are revealed in another incident when father and son are searching through an abandoned house and are confronted with their images in a mirror. The father, attuned to violent protective responses,
‘almost raised the pistol’ at their reflection, until the boy prevents him from shooting at images in the mirror with the assurance, ‘It’s us Papa [...] It’s us.’ The spontaneous reaching for the gun, even at the image of the son he is ‘appointed’ to protect, reveals the father’s potential for self-destructive and all consuming violence. It is the boy who ‘sees’ and witnesses his father’s violent reflex action reflected back at him in the mirror, an action representative of the father’s readiness to obliterate himself and the boy in order to ‘save’ them both. Later in the novel the father shoots a flare gun at a man who is using a more primitive form of weapon, a bow and arrow. This encounter resonates with historical associations with the frontier conflict between pioneer settler and Indian. The novel re-enacts these signature sequences from the Western genre in a grotesque revival of the heroic ideal of the pioneer and gunfighter. McCarthy resurrects the mythic violent heroics of the struggle for survival while at the same time revealing that such violence only leads down the road to destruction and a world in ruins. He reveals, through the inherent violence of the father’s mission ‘appointed by God’ to keep his son safe, the ways in which the exceptionalist project forever drives the father, and by analogy, the nation back into cycles of violence and trauma.

The father lies to his son, denying that he has killed the man with the bow and arrow, trying to shield the boy from the violence of their existence. Throughout the novel he repeatedly attempts to conceal the horror of their journey from his boy. He tells him, ‘Just remember that the things you put into your head are there forever.’ Later, as they pass a line of corpses the father says, ‘take my hand [...] I don’t think you should see this.’ The boy replies with a question: ‘What you put in your head is there forever?’ and follows this with his own reply that ‘It’s okay,’ and that it does not matter whether he ‘looks’ or not.

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135 Ibid., 139.
136 Ibid., 282.
137 Ibid., 289.
138 Ibid., 11.
139 Ibid., 203.
because these visions are ‘already there’. The boy is traumatised into silence by much of what he witnesses and is described as ‘as mute as a stone’ after his father murders a man before the boy’s eyes. The father counters this silence and fear with constant reassurances and the insistence that they must carry on:

Come on the man said. Everything’s okay. I promise. But when he bent down to see into the boy’s face under the hood of the blanket he very much feared that something was gone that could not be put right again.

The father insists on reasserting they are ‘the good guys’ and telling the boy everything is going to be alright. As long as they keep moving, the father does not have to address what exactly it was in the boy that ‘was gone that could not be put right again’. The father’s assurances to his son regarding their inherent ‘good guy’ status and general sense of being ‘okay’ are at perpetual odds with the boy’s fear and trauma.

Another example of the boy’s crucial witnessing of horrors resonant with the past occurs in the scene where the father and son encounter the plantation mansion with the cannibalised slave people in the cellar. This episode again is illustrative of this interaction in the text between the traumatic past and present which are beguilingly introduced here with the ‘tall and stately’ house ‘with white doric columns across the front’ and ‘windows oddly intact’. This is the only building they enter which is not in some way ruined, but the mansion’s relatively unspoiled condition belies the horror in the cellar that lies beneath the apparent surface normality of the porch where ‘chattel slaves had once trod those boards bearing food and drink on silver trays.’ The mansion’s still impressive edifice that conceals a buried atrocity symbolises the way mythic narratives conceal the underlying foundational

140 Ibid.
141 Ibid., 143-144.
142 Ibid., 111.
143 Ibid., 112.
trauma hidden and unaddressed beneath the surface of history. Down in the cellar, the father and boy discover the horrific human larder:

Huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands. On the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt.¹⁴⁴

The transformation of humanity into a meat larder is a horrific continuation of the transactional reduction of humanity to the commodified flesh of the slave trade. The horror located in the antebellum mansion cellar suggests that on this site of past plantation suffering, a current atrocity is being perpetrated, and that American history is an enacted continuum of the violence and cruelty embodied in that trauma. The father and son only just make their escape from the returning cannibals and afterwards the child is terrified and helpless, but after a while he is asking questions regarding whether or not he and his father would ‘ever eat anybody […] Even if we were starving’.¹⁴⁵ The boy then re-asserts that this would never happen ‘because we’re the good guys […] And we’re carrying the fire.’¹⁴⁶ Images of past, present and future human cruelty fold into one another in the horror of that cellar, but the continuum of trauma stretching unabated into the future is seemingly interrupted, even just momentarily, by the promise of the ‘fire-carrying’ child.

McCarthy, however, undercuts the boy’s symbolic chosenness and transcendent power, making it clear that, for the boy, there is no escaping the trauma of what he witnesses. After this horror in the cellar, the boy himself looks like a victim of human atrocity, resembling ‘something out of a deathcamp. Starved, exhausted, sick with fear.’¹⁴⁷ Although the boy makes comments that are consistent with an emergent and destined survival and

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 116.
¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 136.
¹⁴⁶ Ibid.
¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 123.
chosenness, he is, in fact recanting the exceptionalist mantra of his father. As with his characterisation of Bell as both model citizen and traumatised subject, McCarthy creates a similar duality in the boy. On the one hand there is the boy seen through the father’s eyes, the ‘fire-carrying’ apotheosis of God’s goodness; on the other hand there is the traumatised child, terrified and silenced by what he witnesses. Through this duality of the child, McCarthy embodies both the trauma of the past and present and the illusory but abiding faith in a hollow and destructive futurity. Just as the hidden trauma of history exists beneath the strangely intact facade of the antebellum mansion, similarly, beneath the surface goodness of the boy that the father worships is buried a trauma that also remains unaddressed. The frightened child is unable to speak except to tell his father he is ‘the one’, not the father, ‘who has to worry about everything’.

The novel signposts further the traumatic past in the form of the bunker they discover, a reminder of the Cold War fallout shelters associated with the threat of nuclear annihilation. Again, although the bunker turns out to be a temporary safe haven, the boy is terrified by these ‘stairs [...] leading down into the darkness’, as he instinctively shies away from yet another descent beneath the surface to uncover a traumatic site from the past. The father’s response to the boy’s terror is to reassure him with a pioneer resilience that is also a relic of the mythic heroism of the frontier: ‘This is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They don’t give up.’ However, McCarthy undercuts this pioneer resilience with the father’s doom-laden personal vision when they are leaving the bunker and unloading what they can onto their cart, and the father perceives how ‘the faintly lit hatchway lay in the dark of the yard like a grave yawning at judgment day in some old apocalyptic painting.’

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148 Ibid., 277.
149 Ibid., 145-6.
150 Ibid., 145.
151 Ibid., 165.
father, even the anticipation of the apocalypse has become consigned to an image from the imagined past. Images from the past and future here collapse into each other. The bunker, an emblem of past trauma, resembles a future apocalyptic moment but is associated, at the same time, with some lost representation from the past. Again, we have references to an apocalypse for which, like Bell, the father may yearn, but which has not arrived and can only now be conjured as some artificial ‘painted’ rendering.

Other traumatic episodes from history are uncovered into the present in the field where the man discovers two ‘gray flint’ arrowheads and a coin with ‘the lettering [...] in Spanish’. The textual allusions to the Indian Wars and Spanish colonialism all acknowledge the traumatic past of what is now the USA and of the Americas more broadly. The father thinks of showing these artefacts to the boy, but after ‘he looked about at the gray country and the gray sky he dropped the coin and hurried on to catch up.’ He decides not to draw his son’s attention to these emblems of the nation’s history, as it would entail an engagement with the colonial conquest and violence that the coin celebrates, a universal and timeless violence which has now laid to waste the whole of the ‘gray country’ around them. In these ways the narrative explicitly references the Indian Wars, the frontier brutality, slavery, Spanish colonialism, and the Cold War, in order to highlight such historical episodes that have been, like the coin and the arrowheads, buried and ‘forgotten’, yet always resurgent. Each of these histories themselves once had a golden future of its own, a future that never materialised, that collapsed into the failed and traumatic present. The father constantly wants to keep the boy focused on keeping going towards his own appointed future, heading for the shore, and on averting his glance from the horrors of the present and past. He wants his son to look away from slavery, look away from cannibalism, look away from genocide, look away from colonialism, and keep his focus on ‘carrying the fire’ of the future towards the promise

152 Ibid., 217-218.
of the coast at the end of the road. The father’s insistence on turning the boy’s gaze away from the horror of their passage represents the nation’s forgetting of past trauma, coupled with its incessant fix on the exceptionalist future which sustains the mythic narrative of the chosen.

The boy, on the other hand, seems unable to look away from these horrors. His father after hearing his son cry, ‘Oh Papa,’ after his son witnesses ‘a charred human infant headless and gutted blackened on a spit’, is anxious as to whether his son will ‘ever speak again’.

The boy’s refusal to forget, the refusal to look away and his renunciation of violent retributive action, all resonate with a post-9/11 American engagement with mourning and a different way of responding to national trauma. As we have already seen in the earlier evaluation of No Country for Old Men and the post-9/11 moment, Judith Butler claims that national grief, mourning and loss constitute opportunities for connecting with the loss of others rather than an instant motive for violent reassertion of supremacy. This evaluation requires an appreciation of the possibilities inherent in what she terms the ‘precarious life’, the life awakened to its own inevitable vulnerability, but also enriched with an understanding of the vulnerability of other lives, other cultures, other nations. Rather than emerging through trauma as victorious survivor, Butler’s concept of the ‘precarious life’ offers a different response to trauma, one that begins a ‘slow process’ of developing ‘a point of identification with suffering itself’. Vulnerability, wounding and mourning after suffering an attack as devastating as that of 9/11 are inevitable. Butler’s view is that those feelings are not in themselves ‘passive and powerless’. She writes:

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153 Ibid., 212.
154 Butler, Precarious Life, xix.
155 Ibid., 30.
To be injured means that one has the chance to reflect upon injury, to find out the mechanisms of its distribution, to find out who else suffers from permeable borders, unexpected violence, dispossession, and fear, and in what ways.\textsuperscript{156}

The boy’s insistence that his father help the old man Ely so that ‘he could eat with us’ and his devastation at his father’s ruthless treatment of the thief, whom the boy insists is ‘just hungry’, engage with a response to wounding and trauma that reflects a post-9/11 ‘identification with suffering’ and a compassion that opens up a different response to the wounds of trauma.\textsuperscript{157}

Furthermore, it is through this child’s compassionate witnessing that McCarthy enacts the remembering of history, not as mythology, but as a trauma that must be addressed if this ‘understanding of the vulnerability of other lives’ is to be fully appreciated. The father’s insistence, on the other hand, on the boy’s symbolic goodness is, in fact, an indication of how trapped the father is in exceptionalist notions of his and the boy’s chosen status. However, this self-appointed chosen status cannot save him from the death that awaits him, a death that also represents the exhausted nature of the Old West mythology he is re-enacting throughout the journey. He dies with his task to save the boy uncompleted; the only legacy he can leave his son is the means to destroy himself that goes with the advice to ‘keep the gun with you at all times.’\textsuperscript{158}

McCarthy continues to interrogate the violence accompanying this legacy and its attendant mythology in the boy’s confrontation with the man who emerges as his saviour. This man ‘carried a shotgun upside down over his shoulder on a braided leather lanyard and

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., xii.
\textsuperscript{157} McCarthy, \textit{The Road}, 175, 277.
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 297.
he wore a nylon bandolier filled with shells for the gun’.

He is a Daniel Boone-like figure emerging out of the wilderness embodying a series of conflicting and ambiguous images from the Western myth. He is a redemptive figure in that he brings the boy to safety. The man’s latent potential for violence serves to protect his wife and family from savages and his timely appearance to save the boy suggests that he is a mythic saviour in the tradition of the frontier hero narrative. He reassures the boy he is ‘one of the good guys’, consolidating his position in the traditional Western binary differentiation between good and evil.

He is also reluctant to use violence and keen to avoid any confrontation because he waits until the father has died before he emerges to rescue the boy.

At the same time, however, he refuses to help the dying man, suggesting again the adversarial psychology still at work on this dying frontier landscape. Like the boy’s father, this man conforms to the ‘regeneration-through-violence’ archetype outlined by Slotkin as the essential ‘good man with a gun [...] an armed redeemer’. McCarthy emphasises the marks of this violence characterising the man as ‘a veteran of old skirmishes, bearded, scarred across his cheek and the bone stoven and one eye wandering’. These marks of battle and powers of survival endow him with an iconic status, a survivor, not only in this post-apocalyptic warzone but also as a remnant from the Old West. He is a man in the same category as Shane and High Noon’s Will Kane, a man with, in the words of McVeigh, an ‘underlying capacity for violence [...] the essence of his power, his strength’. The scar ‘across his cheek’ also signifies man’s inherent brutality and primal murder associated with the ‘mark’ of Cain. The ‘mark’ is described by McVeigh, referring to Cain, as ‘a symbol of

\[^{159}\] Ibid., 301.
\[^{160}\] Ibid., 302
\[^{161}\] Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation, 396.
\[^{162}\] McCarthy, The Road, 301.
\[^{163}\] McVeigh, The American Western, 102.
violence and vengeance that will attract the same in others as he wanders the earth’. In *The Road* this man may save the boy and may be ‘one of the good guys’, but he still carries with him man’s cursed mark of the self-perpetuating violence that has already destroyed the world. Also, if the world is to begin again with this man and his family as principal survivors, any hope for a new start bathed in innocence and goodness is tainted by that mark of violence and murder, the mark of Cain, the first adversary, which the man carries on his cheek. The implication is that the next incarnation of the world will be blighted by the same violence, the same cycles of unrelieved trauma and survival that have destroyed the old civilization. McCarthy suggests here that this sense of futurity is already scarred by the violence of the past, and a reliance on such a future will not release history from the same traumatic cycle of violence.

The mother in this wilderness family greets the boy in a way that seems to reassert the divine status conferred on him by his father. She confirms the boy’s connection with God, saying that ‘the breath of God was his breath’ and reiterates the boy’s religious status in the continuity of mankind confirming that this ‘breath’ ‘pass from man to man through all of time’. Through the delivering of the child safely from the trauma of the road to the idealised American pioneer wilderness family, McCarthy seems to offer up an ending that embodies the transformation of national trauma back into myth and seems to imitate the forgetting of trauma that the father has tried to transfer to his son throughout their journey. Richard Gray writes:

> It is as if, at this moment, McCarthy has withdrawn into the sheltering confines of American myth: a myth that is, in this case, a curious but not uncommon mix of the heroic and the domestic. The man is a reassuring blend of adventure and authority, the

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164 Ibid.
woman a source of inspiration and comfort; together, with their two children, they seem to rescue the boy from the dark passage of the road, taking him into the comforting womb of the woods and into the arms of an American form of the holy family. The whole novel could be seen as a covert assault on American exceptionalism, but this moment temporarily drags the narrative back into the consolation of a separate and special national destiny. If this is an act of recuperation, and it certainly seems to be, then it does not work. On the contrary, it is deeply unconvincing – not least, because it is at odds with just about everything that has occurred in the novel before.\footnote{Richard Gray, \textit{After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11} (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 47.}

Gray here acknowledges the disquieting effect this ending has, as McCarthy seems to reaffirm the exceptionalist mythology that the rest of the novel has been subverting, and in a way that seems both trite and unconvincingly sentimental. Gray suggests that McCarthy is attempting, unsuccessfully, to impose a redemptive ending on a novel that is otherwise devoid of any moral or spiritual reassurances. However, there could be an alternative reading to this view that McCarthy presents for us here an ‘unconvincing’ ending – one that acknowledges that the ending is unconvincing, but deliberately so. Its overtly unconvincing nature draws attention to the possibility that it is the only ending available to a culture steeped in an exceptionalist myth – an ending that reasserts that exceptionalism. In this way McCarthy reveals to us how our cultural enslavement to a particular view of the world imprisons even those stories that subvert that view in a reductive re-cycling of mythic rhetoric. He thus shows how the all-permeating influence of that myth within the culture ensures that the crisis, violence and destruction associated with that myth perpetuates itself in a traumatic cycle. McCarthy, therefore, signifies the cyclical nature of this relationship
between trauma and myth with the arrival of the hunter-saviour figure from the wilderness, thus invoking the re-emergence of the mythic Old West, which coincides here, as with those other moments of failure and trauma in the four previous novels, with the father’s death and the boy’s inexpressible grief.

McCarthy’s restoration of the myth of the Old West is not because he wants to celebrate the myth, or to show how the myth is an abiding comfort and inspiration to people and the nation at a time of crisis. In his re-incarnation of the myth as a post-traumatic phenomenon he is showing how the cultural patterns interlinking trauma and myth operate. He is revealing how the Western myth will never die, the extent to which American culture needs that myth to live on eternally, and the brutally stark consequences of the immortal mythic force at work in that culture. Therefore, far from succumbing to the mythic formulations of exceptionalism, McCarthy explores how the exceptionalist insistence on forgetting and transforming trauma into myth is all-pervasive in the American psyche. In the final assimilation of the boy into the idealised ‘good’ family under siege from the rest of mankind, McCarthy shows how the mythic narrative only leads back to the repetitive traumatic cycles of survival, chosenness and futurity associated with exceptionalism, manifest destiny and the frontier myth. The myth of the Old West re-emerges and is seemingly affirmed with the saving of the child, but McCarthy shows us that, in the long view, nothing has really changed. These are still archetypal mythic values of the Old West that the family represent – the chosen of God with a rifle-bearing warrior figure as its guardian in the perpetual struggle for survival. In saving the child, the myth of the Old West is also confirmed, but McCarthy reveals that this only takes us back to the past and we have already been there and seen its horror and trauma on the journey along the road.

The symbolic positioning of the child as a representation of futurity may represent a future, but it is presented in terms wholly in line with the chosenness of American
Exceptionalism, as is the violence required to protect him. On these terms, a future offering the child, and by extension, mankind, such deliverance, is the same future repeated in the embedded myth that invites further trauma in an unending cycle. As with his depiction of Bell’s vision of the apocalypse, McCarthy explores the abiding but dangerous allure of the exceptionalist future in the wilderness mother’s celebration of the child breathing and passing on the breath of God for all time. The novel’s ending suggests that even a seemingly redemptive resolution is blighted with the curse of exceptionalist futurity.

McCarthy’s interrogation of the exceptionalist future presented in the form of the symbolic child resonates with Lee Edelman’s polemic on ‘reproductive futurism’ which challenges the assumptions of futurity as an exclusively child-centred phenomenon. Edelman’s attack on ‘the pervasive invocation of the Child as the emblem of futurity’s unquestioned value’ claims that the child encapsulates an impossible future, a fetish of hope, a fantasy advocated in the certainty that no one dare challenge its symbolic and mythical force. He insists ‘that nothing, and certainly not what we call the “good,” can ever have any assurance at all in the order of the Symbolic’. Edelman rejects an illusory future configured on the culturally sacrosanct value of the child and figures, in response, ‘a refusal of the coercive belief in the paramount value of futurity’. At the end of The Road the adoption of the boy welcomed into the open arms of the mother, with protective father and age-related siblings in the wings, has connections with Edelman’s vision of the non-future as it is embodied in the child. For Edelman, such a child-centred future can only ever be configured in one way: as a re-enactment of the entitlement and the prerogative of those

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168 Ibid.
169 Ibid.
170 Ibid., 6.
privileged within the ‘authentic social order’, namely the heteronormative family. Edelman thus rejects the whole notion of a future if it can only be configured in this child-centred way. In McCarthy’s seeming re-establishment of the exceptionalist heteronormative family unit with the child at its centre there are parallels to be drawn with Edelman. McCarthy challenges the preconceptions associated with the symbolic goodness, innocence and regeneration associated with the boy, as the novel constantly positions the child amidst an adult world that makes him the centre of exceptionalist, and therefore destructive aspiration. The family depends for its safety and wellbeing on the latent violence of the scarred father who tells the boy that the only safe course of action is ‘to keep out of the road’ and to retreat into the woods, back into the wilderness away from your fellow man. The future of this family is dependent upon perpetual isolation or further violence, both of which suggest that the struggle for family survival continues to involve traumatic and doubtful outcomes. The wilderness father’s insistence that they too are ‘carrying the fire’ and the mother’s religious reaching out for a future in which the boy transmits ‘the breath of God’, suggest an exceptionalism, driven into the wilderness, to be sustained by further violence and a continued belief in a chosen divine futurity.

The traumatic obstacles and challenges facing this exceptionalist version of ‘reproductive futurism’ under these conditions of survivalist violence, combined with the difficulties implicated in the religious symbolism embodied in the boy, leave us with an ending to the novel that subverts the hopeful and promising interpretation that it appears to offer. Even if we accept at face value that redemptive reading of the boy as the future of mankind amidst the idealised family, it still feels like an incongruously sentimental conclusion to a novel so extreme in its anxieties over human extinction. Any such hopeful

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171 Ibid., 2.
interpretation not only has to contend with the sudden inconsistent shift in atmosphere and tone, but must also explain why it feels like a bad ending to such a profound exploration of exhausted mythology and nationhood at the end of the world. Such an interpretation, in which the child is absorbed into an essentially chosen future as mankind’s saviour, is overwhelmed by the darker themes that link the child to the cyclic futurity and the trauma of American exceptionalism or the ‘fantasies of hope’ signified by the child in Edelman’s polemic.  

Rather than offering the child as salvation of mankind, the novel explores how having no future at all may be the same as holding on to the belief in the illusory exceptionalist future that will only lead to more suffering and trauma. The novel, therefore, subverts the very salvation it seems, ostensibly, to be affirming, and conversely offers an interrogation of the national devotion to a vision of the future that will only lead back into violent history and trauma. The father’s messianic symbolism invested in the child, like Bell’s millennial vision of the apocalypse, embodies a futurity that encapsulates a reactionary endorsement of the religious Right and the white nuclear family unit. These are visions of the future, like the original vision of American Exceptionalism, which exclude and deny futurity to those who are not ‘appointed’, either by God or Edelman’s ‘authentic social order’.

**Conclusion: Alternative Futurity in *The Road***

This interpretation of both *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road* help us add new ways to interpret the question that started this chapter. ‘How does the never to be differ from what never was?’ ‘The never was’ constitutes the demythologised traumatic version of the past that McCarthy forces us to witness in the father and son’s journey. ‘The never to be’ constitutes the future as part of that same cycle of trauma. *The Road* unfolds as a meditation

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on this ‘never to be’, a vision of the future in which the dream of progress has collapsed irrevocably. The question ‘How does the never to be differ from what never was?’ is fundamental to McCarthy’s vision of collapsing temporalities, as past, present and future become indistinguishable on this horrific journey on the road. At the same time, the asking of the question suggests an unanswered longing for some other future that offers a way out of this collapse. This yearning explains why the exceptionalist myth, with its supposed certainties of appointed and divine chosenness, is so seductive and enduring. I will now investigate how McCarthy explores the other alternative manifestations of futurity that are implied by that speculative question. I will investigate if and how McCarthy proffers other forms of future which may offer a break with the exceptionalist collapsing of that ‘never was’ into the ‘never to be’.

In *The Road* the future revolves around surviving the present and the possibility of a better chance of survival later on, and all survival in that world, as we have seen, relies upon the use of violence. At the same time, the consequences of survival through sustained violence are extended to an extreme and globally destructive level in this novel, where the country is reduced to the physical wasteland and ‘all things of grace and beauty have a common provenance in pain. Their birth in grief and ashes.’ In such a world the whole nature of what it means to be a survivor of such extensive individual and communal suffering is questioned. The tension between the decision to live on amidst the horror and an understandable desire for oblivion is outlined in the conversation between the father and mother of the boy, prior to the mother’s suicide. The father says ‘We’re survivors’ and the mother replies, ‘We’re not survivors. We’re the walking dead in a horror film.’ She adds,
later, ‘You talk about taking a stand but there is no stand to take.’\textsuperscript{176} McCarthy raises the question of what kind of future is available for those still living after the catastrophe, where even the notion of being a survivor is brought into question. The old man Ely tells the father, ‘If something had happened and we were survivors and we met on the road then we’d have something to talk about. But we’re not. So we don’t.’\textsuperscript{177} Equally, the mother’s view is that the world is beyond redemption, that the catastrophe has rendered life ‘meaningless’.\textsuperscript{178} In this void the father refuses to quit even though the will to continue seems almost a curse. Michael Chabon writes:

> Manifestly there is no reason to carry on, fire or not, through this “scabland,” which McCarthy portrays as so utterly defoliated and sterilized – the greatest corpse of all – that the idea of hope itself comes to seem like a kind of doom.\textsuperscript{179}

The mother and the old man Ely deny that there is any meaning left in the survival quest, that there are certain circumstances in which survival no longer serves any purpose – and those conditions pertain when there is no prospect of any future.

The father addresses this question of a meaningless future through the exceptionalist beliefs invested in the divinity of his son, and his own appointed status as protector of the child. Yet McCarthy raises these exceptionalist notions of futurity in order to suggest that they lead, not to the future, but back into a cyclically violent past. Therefore, one has to look more closely at the father’s relationship with his son for an imagined future that offers a possible challenge to the mother’s and Ely’s nihilistic stance. Another dystopian and post-apocalyptic work, released in the same year as \textit{The Road} was first published, is the film

\textsuperscript{176} Ibid., 59.
\textsuperscript{177} Ibid., p.182
\textsuperscript{178} Ibid., p.58
*Children of Men* which presents a similar vision in its concerns for the future, where, in this case, the human race has been rendered infertile. Drawing on this film’s depiction of a world in which there are no children and by extension no future for mankind, Sara Ahmed writes:

It is not that ‘no children’ simply means ‘no future’ but that ‘no children’ signifies the loss of a fantasy of the future as that which can compensate me for my suffering: it is the very fantasy that there is something or somebody who I suffer for that is threatened. If what it is for is what comes after, in this logic of deferral, then the loss of ‘the after’ is experienced as the loss of ‘the for’.

Looking at this analysis in terms of *The Road*, the preservation of ‘the after’, in keeping the boy safe, constitutes the father’s reason for going on and the compensation for his own suffering, in that there is an imagined point to it all in the fantasised survival of the boy. Without that ‘fantasy’, the father would be in the same position as the mother, who, having given up on any future for the boy, stares at the futility of any further pointless suffering. ‘The for’, the motivation for the struggle to survive in the present, is the possibility of ‘the after’, encapsulated in a different future which, although a ‘fantasy’, is nevertheless rooted in the suffering of the present. Without that ‘fantasy’, the present itself becomes meaningless. If there is no imagined ‘after’ then the father’s and son’s traumas become meaningless suffering, with no pattern or form. The father ‘knew he was placing hopes where he’d no reason to’, but nevertheless that hope of ‘the after’, in the ‘fantasy’ of his son continuing to live, compensates him for his suffering and for putting his son through continued suffering in the present. This notion of futurity in the form of a fantasy is also acknowledged by Bell at

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182 McCarthy, *The Road*, 228.
the end of *No Country for Old Men* when he imputes ‘some sort of promise in his heart’ to the water trough made by a man ‘to last ten thousand years’ that Bell remembers from his childhood home.\(^{183}\) Bell says, ‘I would like to be able to make that kind of promise.’\(^{184}\) In the end Bell cannot commit himself to that faith in that sort of future, and he lapses back into a defeat that can only take him further into dreams of the past. McCarthy opens up and then closes down, for Bell, the possibility of this ‘promise in his heart’. By contrast, the father’s intense paternal love and care for his son in *The Road*, embodies some sort of hope that makes the catastrophic suffering in some way meaningful. This search for redemptive human agency in the novel, one may argue, just replaces one fantasy of the future, the exceptionalist illusion, with another, the fantasy of survival. There is one difference, however, in that the fantasy of survival understood in this form does not entail violence and has no connotations of the divinely appointed mythic futurity that contaminates the exceptionalist vision.

However, does McCarthy offer more solid justification for that ‘promise’, something more than a ‘fantasy’ that compensates for the suffering in the present? Those moments in *The Road* when the father and son encounter unexpected and innocent pleasure, even moments of happiness help to answer this question. These moments, interspersed throughout the novel, suggest a space in which the joyful present opens out into a possible future that is not blighted by the pre-eminent need to survive. Just after telling the boy, ‘remember that the things you put into your head are there forever’, the father has a memory of his own childhood, fishing with his uncle. This day ‘was the perfect day of his childhood. This the day to shape the days upon.’\(^{185}\) This ‘perfect day’ constituted, for the father in his own childhood, the foundation for the belief in a future emanating from that day’s happiness. There are moments when the father and son, also begin to experience a similar happiness,

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\(^{184}\) Ibid., 308.
\(^{185}\) McCarthy, *The Road*, 12.
moments opening out into possibilities that even the destroyed world around them cannot extinguish. Such moments occur, for instance, when they both go swimming together, a first-time experience for the boy: ‘He held him and floated him about, the boy gasping and chopping at the water. You’re doing good, the man said. You’re doing good.’\textsuperscript{186} This father-and-son moment mirrors the father’s own boyhood fishing experience with his uncle, a legacy of shared happiness that can be passed on from one generation to the next.

Other moments of shared happiness revolve around the simple joy of eating and drinking, a joy intensified by the unexpected and random encounters with these sensual pleasures. The father’s discovery of water, for example, and the harvest of windfall apples that he brings to the boy with the water, culminates in an ‘afternoon sitting wrapped in the blankets and eating apples. Sipping the water from the jars.’\textsuperscript{187} Similarly, in the underground bunker they find ‘crate upon crate of canned goods’, and ‘the best pears you ever tasted’.\textsuperscript{188} Donovan Gwinner notes how, in the bunker, ‘they both enjoy a brief period of home living, the “good life”’.\textsuperscript{189} In terms of envisaging a future for the child, it is in these moments that father and son begin to inhabit and replicate, in a small, even fragmented form, the ‘perfect day’ of the father’s own childhood.

Another of these moments occurs when father and son search through the ‘littered aisles’ and ‘rusted’ shopping carts of a ruined supermarket.\textsuperscript{190} Here they find ‘two softdrink machines [...] tilted over into the floor [...] Coins everywhere in the ash.’\textsuperscript{191} The father salvages a tin of Coca Cola from one of the machines and offers it to the boy and when the

\textsuperscript{186} Ibid., 39.
\textsuperscript{187} Ibid., 131.
\textsuperscript{188} Ibid, 146, 149.
\textsuperscript{189} Donovan Gwinner, “‘Everything Uncoupled from Its Shoring’: Quandaries of Epistemology and Ethics in \textit{The Road’}, 146.
\textsuperscript{190} McCarthy, \textit{The Road}, 21-22.
\textsuperscript{191} Ibid., 22.
boy offers his father a drink, the latter insists his son drinks it all as ‘a treat’.\textsuperscript{192} This conscious identification of an icon of commodified branding, Coca Cola, amidst the ruins of the hallmarks of consumerism – supermarket, shopping trolley, vending machines, down to the abandoned and worthless coins cast aside in the dirt, serves as a signifier of the future death of capitalism. However, there is also, for a moment, a sort of magic at work, as the father selflessly gives up the ‘really good’ drink for his son to enjoy.\textsuperscript{193} This moment echoes the ‘something else in the object’ evoked by José Sebastian Muñoz’s analysis of what he encounters in the ‘promises’ inherent in Andy Warhol’s and John O’Hara’s visions of drinking Coke.\textsuperscript{194} Muñoz perceives in the artists’ presentation of this experience ‘the past and potentiality imbued within an object, the ways it might represent a mode of being and feeling that was not quite there but nonetheless an opening’.\textsuperscript{195} Muñoz detects, in this ‘opening’, ‘a certain surplus in the work that promises a futurity, something that is not quite here’.\textsuperscript{196} This present moment of momentary pleasure allows the future to invade with prospects of repeating the experience.

The boy then, paradoxically, immediately transforms the moment into one of sadness and the closing down of future options, saying, ‘It’s because I wont ever get to drink another one isn’t it?’\textsuperscript{197} The father’s answer, ‘Ever’s a long time,’ refuses to corroborate his son’s prophecy, and leaves the question of the future open.\textsuperscript{198} Later, after they have visited the now ruined house where the father grew up resonant with ‘a child’s imaginings, worlds rich or fearful such as might offer themselves but never the one to be’, the father thinks again about

\textsuperscript{192} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{193} Ibid., 23.
\textsuperscript{195} Ibid., 7, 9.
\textsuperscript{196} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{197} McCarthy, \textit{The Road}, 23.
\textsuperscript{198} Ibid.
loss and the passage of time. These meditations culminate in a return to the speculations on the future conjured by the drink of Coke and the father’s realisation that ‘Ever is a long time. But the boy knew what he knew. That ever is no time at all.’ McCarthy merges a multitude of signifying images into these episodes of drinking Coke and ruined homecoming – the America of commercial and corporate expansionism and collapsed capitalism alongside the lost American childhood in a destroyed world where all meditations on past and present and future are fused with loss. The boy realises that there is no future – ‘ever is no time at all’ – that the future has been absorbed into the present of the brief momentary pleasure of drinking Coke, now reconstituted as a moment never to be repeated and therefore a moment of loss. Both future and present coalesce with the wider historical trauma signified by the ruined vending machine and discarded coins of a now meaningless currency. The implication of ‘ever is no time’ is that time itself has collapsed into itself in a traumatic loop of past, present and future caught in a repetitive cycle. McCarthy seems to imagine here, briefly, an ‘opening’ to the future similar to that perceived by Muñoz in the boy’s momentary pleasure and the father’s kindness, but then purposefully closes down any consequent projection into a possible future with the boy’s and then the father’s realisation that it will never happen again. The subsequent collapsing of the projected ‘ever’ into the present, that is immediately absorbed into the black hole of the past, seems to empty the moment of any significance in terms of the future.

The Coca Cola, therefore, is exceptional in that the boy realises his father wants him to drink it because there will never be another one. It is also exceptionalist in that it embodies the imperialist corporate expansionism of a ruined economic empire. However, later, when they discover the underground bunker full of supplies, they both do drink ‘Coca Cola’ again

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199 Ibid., 26.
200 Ibid., 28.
not from the iconic can with its corporate branding, but from anonymous ‘plastic mugs’.\footnote{Ibid., 157.} One moment of pleasure drinking Coke opens up into another and on this second occasion in the bunker the drink is lifted from its associations with ruined capitalism and exceptionalist branding. Coca Cola is here, in this second encounter, taken out of its exceptionalist context as the last branded can of Coke on earth, as father and son share the drink from plastic cups in a moment of ordinary demythologised sharing. The first encounter with Coca Cola, although pleasurable, carries with it the branded trauma of failed American history, but nevertheless allows an opening into the second de-branded encounter with Coke in the bunker.

This second moment of drinking Coke does not proceed from trauma, nor does it involve the fantasies or speculations associated with a chosen or appointed people. All future having been absorbed into the past and present suddenly re-emerges unexpectedly in a moment of accidental discovery. It is a manifestation of something akin to Muñoz’s ‘opening’ moment, a ‘futurity’ latent in the first moment. This opening is configured in the moments of simple happiness in \textit{The Road} where father and son participate in swimming together or the eating of pears or the sharing of Coca Cola. It is from such moments that a future may grow, but these moments significantly are devoid of heroic or mythic associations. They are moments, emptied of any mythic connections, which become extraordinary in their evocation of ordinary happiness amidst extreme danger and suffering. Such a moment also resides in the episode in \textit{No Country for Old Men} when Bell and his wife Loretta ride out to Warner's Well and Bell is agonising over his decision to quit being sheriff and she tells him, ‘Put it up, she said. It’s nice just to be here.’\footnote{McCarthy, \textit{No Country for Old Men}, 302.} And he replies, ‘Yes mam. It is indeed,’\footnote{Ibid.} In these moments McCarthy configures a hope that exists free of heroism,
free of a mythic past and future, and free of the exceptionalist sense of chosenness that separates the chosen from the ‘other’ in an adversarial conflict.

In *The Road* the boy is, for the most part, terrified and traumatised, but he does have moments of child-like pleasure, exemplified by the encounter with Coca Cola, canned pears and the swimming-pool. These moments embody a way of imagining a world which is lethally violent, but at the same time unexpectedly and randomly redemptive, a world in which the father, rather than take his son with him into death, holds onto the possibility of a future where ‘goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again.’\(^{204}\) This ‘goodness’ is not the divinely appointed chosenness of exceptionalism, but the ordinary goodness of finding apples, or a second can of Coke or even someone on the road who may look after the boy after the father has gone. This is a future that proceeds from an imagined present that is not traumatised, nor is it suffused with an incumbent mythology, but contains moments of opening that may build towards ‘the day to shape the days upon’.\(^{205}\)

It is in these brief moments of respite, even pleasure, that we may discern the possibility of an imagined, non-exceptionalist, future. The father says to the boy, just before he dies, ‘You need to keep going. You don’t know what might be down the road. We were always lucky. You’ll be lucky again. You’ll see. Just go. It’s all right.’\(^{206}\) This notion of a ‘lucky’ future is not related to notions of chosenness or exceptionalism, or ‘the appointed of God’ or rightful destiny, and it is not concerned with putting to rights a world that is beyond repair. If there is more than one can of a particular soft drink somewhere unexpectedly out there on the road, if abandoned apples can be re-discovered after being buried in the ground, then there is a chance that there may be other unexpected surprises that offer further ‘openings’ of the present into the future. In this way McCarthy offers an alternative

\(^{204}\) McCarthy, *The Road*, 300.  
\(^{205}\) Ibid., 12.  
\(^{206}\) Ibid., 299.
reconfiguration of this ‘goodness’, one that re-emerges, just like the second drink of Coke, in a demythologised, non-exceptional form, and offers the redemption of the same simple kindness the boy represents in his compassionate desire to save Ely and the starving thief. Whether it be a chance discovery of buried apples, or another last can of Coca Cola, or the sudden appearance of another ‘good guy’ with his family on the road, McCarthy imagines a future in which a negotiation with the traumatised past is possible, albeit a future that can only emerge when that past is divested of all its attendant exceptionalist mythology.
Conclusion

At the end of *The Road*, a novel set in the post-apocalyptic future, McCarthy evokes the destroyed world of the past as ‘a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again.’\(^1\) This description of a lost world as something that can never be restored, something that cannot ‘be made right again’ evokes a sense of loss and equally a sense of longing – two impulses that run throughout McCarthy’s work. The loss is for a world that no longer exists, but, in terms of the novel, did exist once, a lost country that can only now exist in the form of a folk memory of the ‘the brook trout in the streams in the mountains’.\(^2\) The longing, however, persists to ‘put it right’, even if the world is now unfixable. This passage at the very end of *The Road* echoes the passage from *All the Pretty Horses*, cited at the beginning of my Introduction, which emphasised John Grady’s search for ‘something missing for the world to be right or he right in it’.\(^3\) The fact that this ‘something missing in the world’ this ‘thing which could not be put back’ is found at the beginning of the first and at the very end of the last of the series of novels that have been the subject of this thesis, indicates, once more, the pattern of repetition and loss that runs through McCarthy’s work.

Other critics of McCarthy’s work have failed to explain why he seems perpetually preoccupied with writing stories of loss, failure and the retreat into a lost mythic world of the frontier. Yet, as this thesis has shown, theories of trauma, particularly theories concerned with cultural and structural trauma, help explain this connection in McCarthy’s work between mythologies of the Old West and failed quests scarred with unremitting violence and unresolved loss. Structural trauma, that is trauma associated with a non-specific moment, is usually experienced as a vague but powerful feeling of absence or something

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2 Ibid., 306.
3 McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*, 23.
lacking. As discussed in the Introduction, the specific objects of the various quests in McCarthy’s fiction are surrogate and conflated losses that are configured as a retrievable focus for the irretrievable, limitless and indeterminate absence that underlies these losses. And in this respect, structural trauma is fundamentally wed to what theorists have identified as cultural trauma, in which both individuals and cultures can be understood as trapped in traumatic patterns of burying or ‘forgetting’ the past, or trying to retrieve some lost glorious moment of chosen survival. In McCarthy’s novels the ‘absence’ associated with structural and cultural trauma is manifest in this sense of a ‘lost country’ that corresponds to the lost mythic world of the Old West that can never be recovered because it never really existed in a historical sense. In McCarthy’s Western fiction, that absence projects simultaneously both back into a lost irretrievable mythic past and forward into an equally illusory future, promoting a repetitive cycle of destructive, traumatic violence. In the final paragraph from _The Road_, McCarthy imagines a future into which we are transported – we become the future, looking back at time, before our time, when there was a mythical prelapsarian ‘world in its becoming’, but a world that can now only be configured as lost. McCarthy’s novels interpret this mythic loss in terms of the Old West, and present the attempt to ‘bring back’ this mythical world as a destructive cultural obsession. McCarthy’s Western novels thus present a vision of a culture trapped in a traumatic cycle of longing and attempting to ‘bring back’ a lost country, a world which never existed in the form in which it is ‘remembered’, while simultaneously mourning for the loss of this ‘country’. And yet, through the various quests that McCarthy’s characters undertake to retrieve what they can never successfully recover, these novels perpetuate a traumatic cycle of failure that ironically enables the re-emergence of that myth. My reading of McCarthy in terms of trauma reveals that he is not reintroducing or celebrating the myth of the Old West out of a reactionary reverence for it. Rather McCarthy allows us to experience the enduring influence of that myth in American
culture precisely by its cycles of failure and inadequacy. I trace the traumatic persistence of the myth in terms of form, masculinity and American Exceptionalism – the three major themes discussed in the central chapters of this thesis.

As I showed in Chapter One, in *The Crossing* McCarthy perpetuates the myth of the Old West through the repetition of the failed heroic quest. Through the failure of the quest McCarthy reveals how this myth can only be re-enacted as a result of extreme loss in a self-perpetuating narrative of trauma. McCarthy gives us, through this narrative, a new understanding of how myth and trauma interact as a kind of perpetual motion narrative machine which *must* fail repeatedly in an endlessly questing cycle so that it can reproduce myth once again. It is only at the point of failure in the quest, when the mythic dimensions of the quest are revealed as exhausted, that McCarthy re-incarnates the mythic Old West as a register of the experience of loss. McCarthy thus critiques the power of the myth of the Old West in American culture and reveals how it both initiates and concludes each cycle in the quest narrative and how it also offers no resolution, only a further sense of loss, before the traumatic cycle begins again.

Chapter Two developed further the idea of the repeatedly failed quest in relation to McCarthy’s portrayal of mythic masculinity in *All the Pretty Horses* and *Cities of the Plain*. Applying the theories of Sigmund Freud and Lauren Berlant, I showed how heroic masculinity depends on a notion of mastery projected onto an unnamed but inevitable loss in the future. Mastery and loss must be learned now in preparation for the endless losses of the future. But here again is failure, for true mastery would end the losses and would end the cycle of further lost causes and, further failed quests with their attendant loss and failed mastery. These conflicting impulses imprison John Grady Cole’s heroic masculinity in a traumatic cycle of increasingly dangerous encounters as he attempts to master the loss to which he is inextricably attached. McCarthy reveals how this heroic masculinity is a form of
trauma that seeks an irresolvable resolution to loss through increasingly dangerous and death-seeking exploits. McCarthy thus exposes the ways in which a certain type of American masculinity attempts to use traumatic encounters to forge an impossible identification with a heroic past that never existed. However, as with the failed quests in The Crossing, McCarthy shows how John Grady does achieve a form of mythic heroism through his constant escalation of – and his increasing risk of failure at – the dangerous tasks he undertakes. On one level his heroism could be considered suicidal and even stupid, and McCarthy is partially offering this portrayal of foolhardy masculinity as a form of an indictment. However, at the same time as critiquing heroic masculinity, McCarthy also shows how John Grady, also, at times, attains the mythic cowboy status because of the failure or near-failure of his endeavours, and how, once again it is through failure and loss that the myth of the Old West re-emerges. I explored, for example, the elegiac evocation of John Grady as the lone rider in the sunset at the end of All the Pretty Horses, in which McCarthy reveals the extent to which his novels are captivated by the myth of the Old West. Yet, at the same time McCarthy reminds us that John Grady’s attainment of that mythic stature carries with it the foreboding of further loss as he rides into ‘the darkening land, the world to come’. This mythic but simultaneously ominous moment exemplifies both McCarthy’s infatuation with the myth of the Old West and his acknowledgment of how that myth is bound to cycles of trauma and loss.

Chapter Three considered these cycles of crisis, loss and failure in relation to myths of nation, particularly American Exceptionalism and its manifestations in frontier and pioneer mythologies of the Old West. McCarthy shows how that mythic apprehension of exceptionalism distorts both past and future and drags the nation repeatedly back into a cycle of violence – how exceptionalist mythology constitutes a cultural pathology that pursues loss.

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4 Ibid., 302.
and destruction in order to act out and to seek out in cyclic exhaustion a mythic future that only leads from past to future trauma. These visions of past and future, although deeply affecting and resonant with human suffering, also show how the American nation stores up a destructive and delusory exceptionalist identity and thereby perpetuates its cycle of traumatic history. McCarthy’s vision of history is one of unremitting trauma, but he reveals in *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road* the ways in which the nation remains seduced and deluded by exceptionalist versions of the past, that include, primarily, a mythic apprehension of the Old West. McCarthy offers a reinterpretation of the past as trauma, but at the same time reveals how that history has been forgotten and transformed into illusory and destructive mythic narratives of heroism and violent origin that lead to a glorious but never realised future. He shows how the need for the myth of the Old West prevails but also shows that such a need is bound up with cultural and national cycles of failure and loss. McCarthy’s ‘remembering’ of American history as trauma, therefore, acts as a disruptive narrative voice, forcing the nation to face its past, its collective national amnesia of the trauma that underpins its identity. At the same time, he acknowledges the power of the myth of the Old West, allowing it to re-emerge and reassert itself, not in a reactionary way but as a way of revealing the tragic inevitability of its abiding cultural influence.

The ways in which myth re-emerges in these works through failure and loss, and the ways in which the re-emergence of myth points to anticipations of a future of recurrent further loss, also invite a different understanding of the relationship between trauma and temporality. In all the quests that Billy Parham undertakes in *The Crossing*, he seeks some future object that will somehow reconstitute the world, will somehow make it right again and resolve the sense of absence and melancholy that settles on the text from the very opening of the novel. The quests project forward to some redeemed future to which the novel is always travelling but never arrives. *The Crossing* remains a text trapped in a cyclic loop haunted by
loss in the past and always moving towards a future shaped and determined by further trauma. Similarly, in *All the Pretty Horses* and *Cities of the Plain*, John Grady Cole’s heroic masculinity anticipates a future overshadowed by the embracing of lost causes and the yearning for a mastery over increasingly impossible challenges that necessitates anticipation of trauma ahead of its occurrence. John Grady’s heroic status depends upon him seeking out the impossible task to overcome, and anticipating and thus mastering the loss that will ensue through the failure of the task. This constitutes a form of heroic trauma, a way of acting that depends upon the projection of a future condition when the next traumatic challenge will arise and the need to be ready for it and to engage with it.

This anticipation of future trauma is not only characteristic of individuals, for McCarthy shows us how the American nation, preoccupied with its exceptionalist identity, is also always looking ahead and even embracing the next crisis and confrontation. *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road* reveal how visions of the future founded on a concept of exceptionalist chosenness endow the chosen with the right to pursue their fulfilment at any cost, and, at the same time, justify the suffering as signposts on the mythic road leading to that future. McCarthy reveals how the cultural preoccupations with moving towards some impossible resolution in which the world will be ‘made right again’ enact a future that is somehow already traumatic because it will inevitably repeat the cycle of the past. Thus, importantly, McCarthy’s work allows us to understand trauma not only in terms of past events and experiences, but also as a condition of the future – an aspect of trauma that most trauma theorists have not considered.

This relationship between futurity and trauma is crucial as we reconsider how and why McCarthy tends to tell the same story over and over again – the question that I raised at the beginning of this thesis. Why do his novels all begin sadly and end badly? Trauma offers one model for answering this question in terms of form, masculinity and nation. But we can
also expand on this last point by reading the novels as a critical investigation of the trauma of violence that has shaped American history – and thus American identity from colonisation to the present. In the pages that followed I have shown how these last five novels may be read as a sustained evocation of the cycles of trauma and myth that pervade American culture. The novels are interlinked as a composite overlapping cycle that covers American history from World War II and the age of U.S. political and economic world dominance, through to the decline of the post-Vietnam era and the future catastrophic destruction of the American empire envisaged in McCarthy’s latest novel. These novels may, therefore, be read together as one mythic traumatic cycle that tracks the American Century from conquest to an imagined future collapse. They reach back into a mythic past that never existed and forward to further mythic re-formulations of that pioneer past in *The Road*, the final paragraph of which recreates, once more, an idealised version of that ‘country’ that ‘can never be made right again’. At the very end of this novel in the last paragraph of this mythic and traumatic cycle of novels, McCarthy takes the narrative back to the beginning of the mythic cycle again with this evocation of the lost land of the Old West.

It is through his fiction and the individual stories which encapsulate the pervasive loss, through the tales of individuals as they struggle within this cultural cycle of trauma, that McCarthy reveals what it is to live entrapped within a culture in thrall to a destructive mythology. In his repeated narrative of individuals caught in the traumatic cycles of history, in his ‘one tale’ of quest and failure, McCarthy is critiquing the myth of the Old West and its destructive influence. However, also, in revealing how out of that defeat further myth emerges, he connects with a profound cultural yearning for myth that persists despite the knowledge that it is illusory and will lead to more suffering. And as my analysis of *The Road*

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suggests, he also tries to explore how different models of futurity – not just the traumatic future that is linked to heroic masculinity and American Exceptionalism – might help us negotiate our cultural enthrallment to the myth of the Old West in productive ways – ways that do not simply succumb to cycles of trauma and loss but enable creativity and survival within those cycles. With the child’s periodic moments of pleasure in *The Road*, McCarthy offers possible ways to map the beginnings of a way out of these mythic and traumatic patterns, but even then, the end of the novel finally re-immerses itself in a mythical past of a lost world that ‘could [...] not be made right again’. Here, and elsewhere in his reinstatement of a lost mythic world, McCarthy seems aware that his own fiction is also trapped within these patterns of cyclic trauma.

However, even as his fiction repeatedly immerses us in the deep-seated cultural trauma associated with a seductive but destructive mythology, McCarthy simultaneously offers a clear perspective on our own entrapment, as it were. McCarthy’s novels may allow an indulgence in a cathartic pleasure from the repetition of loss and the enduring yearning for myth, but they also expose – and thus allow us to critique – the associated historical and cultural patterns that are so damaging. By revealing how we are all, like his characters, caught inside these cultural patterns, he also enables us to recognise the possibility for imagining a different relationship with both the mythic past and the destructive future associated with that myth. His novels promote a form of cultural mindfulness that confronts the irresistible allure of a mythology that underpins and endangers the civilization dependent on that mythology. If these patterns are acknowledged and understood, we can possibly engage with another temporality different from the mythic promise of a future built out of the ruins of a traumatic past – a temporality that, like the boy’s in *The Road*, does not involve a perpetual quest for a heroic, mythic past and future. With an understanding of these patterns of cultural trauma and the ways in which we are trapped within them, it may be possible,
even if it is only for a series of moments, to step outside the cycle of trauma and begin ‘the
day to shape the days upon’.
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