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This project uses Cormac McCarthy’s The Crossing (1994) as a lens through which to explore mythology, belonging and marginalisation in the U.S-Mexico borderlands in the post-WWI era. Using McCarthy’s fictional novel in conjunction with historical sources such as newspapers, personal correspondence and government reports to study the borderlands produces a unique interrogation of power in this region. This project draws attention to experiences of displacement in a period of unprecedented change in the borderlands, where issues of power, exploitation, and local displacement arguably reached an apex before the Second World War. I argue that borderlanders, including communities of Anglo Americans, Mexican Americans, and Mexican migrants, were often isolated from mainstream national narratives that had emerged by this period in both the United States and Mexico. A consequence of this were tensions within the borderlands, particularly regarding questions of race, gender, and control over the powerful myth-making that defined the borderlands as a region, especially in the U.S. imagination.
CORMAC McCarthy’s *The Crossing*: A LITERARY LENS ON THE HISTORY OF THE U.S-MEXICO BORDERLANDS

By

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Introduction

Set on the U.S-Mexico border amid the turmoil of the Great Depression, World War Two and post-Revolution Mexico, Cormac McCarthy’s *The Crossing* (1994) is a novel pervaded by a sense of loss and displacement. While national memory is constructed by the winners, McCarthy articulates the experience of losers. His work draws attention to the lack of power people in this region possessed over the broader historical and economical forces weighing upon their lives at the onset of the Second World War. Thwarted endeavours to demonstrate agency and actively participate in the world around them leave McCarthy’s characters adrift; the doors to modern life shut. Using *The Crossing* as a lens through which to study the U.S-Mexico border produces a unique interrogation of power in the borderlands, raising questions of belonging and national identity in this troubled region. Timothy Parrish argues that “one resists the truth of a given history by writing, or enacting, a counterhistory in narrative form.”¹ This thesis develops that notion, applying a popular fictional narrative to a historical study of the U.S-Mexico border during the late Depression and early World War Two era, drawing attention to experiences of displacement in a period of unprecedented change in the borderlands. In *The Crossing*, McCarthy utilizes history, myth and memory to explore the New Mexico borderland region in the post-WWI era, revealing an environment of great displacement that provides insights not obvious to traditional historical methodology.

The late-Depression and early-World War Two era saw great uncertainty and change on the U.S-Mexico border, a region characterised by instability. David E. Lorey highlights how the border hosts a binational economy, characterised by complex and rapid transformation, with periods of economic boom and bust.² Since the current border’s

¹ Timothy Parrish, *From the Civil War to the Apocalypse: Postmodern History and American Fiction*, (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), 2.
formation in 1848 following the U.S-Mexican War, it has seen a number of shifts leading up
to the Second World War; from a ranching and mining economy, into one centred around
tourism, and finally that of manufacturing and services. The development of the railroad in
the late nineteenth century catalysed economic growth on the border. However, it also created
an extractive economy, in which American business created wealth from the mining,
petroleum and ranching resources that was not returned to the region.3 This resulted in local
poverty and disenfranchisement on both the U.S. and Mexico sides of the border. It was also
a key factor in the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), in which nationalism and anti-
Americanism were important principles. While tourism to the region had developed alongside
the installation of the railroad, southwards border crossings boomed following the
establishment of Prohibition in the U.S. from 1920-1933. This vice-tourism created strong
economies in towns south of the border as Americans travelled to Mexico for the alcohol and
revelry no longer available in the U.S. However, much like the mining and ranching
industries, the saloons were owned and visited by Americans, creating a form of economic
growth dependent on American wealth and presence.4

During the late 1930s, all of these industries were undergoing change. Mining and
ranching practices were modernising to the detriment of local workers and small land holders,
and border vice districts lost their competitive advantage following the end of Prohibition.5
These developments, together with the Great Depression and a rise in immigration
restrictions, took a toll on the border economy and its local population. Rachel St. John
argues that by the 1930s, state control had become the defining feature of spatial organisation

3 Denis Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise: U.S. Tourism and Empire in Twentieth Century Latin America*, (North
along the border.\(^6\) Despite increased integration on the border, with diplomatic relations between the countries better than ever by the end of the 1930s, the mid-twentieth century nonetheless saw an escalation of inequalities of wealth and power.\(^7\) This is reflected in political policy in the region, for example, the 1942 Bracero Programme. The programme, forged by a series of laws and diplomatic agreements, allowed the importation of temporary labourers from Mexico into the U.S, especially as low-skill agricultural workers. It is an example of how lives on the border were dictated by outside forces, and America’s ongoing use of Mexican resources, whether that is land, copper, or people, to further their own objectives. Altogether these developments lead St. John to surmise that by the Second World War, the U.S-Mexico border was shaped less by those living along and moving across it, and more by distant politicians and national ideas of racial and national differences.\(^8\)

It is in the midst of this evolving relationship between Mexico and the United States, the people and government, that Cormac McCarthy situates *The Crossing*’s plot in the southwest New Mexico borderlands. This thesis uses *The Crossing* to understand emotional experience on the borderlands during this fascinating period, in which many of the themes of power, exploitation, and local displacement arguably reached an apex before the Second World War. The central character, Billy, exemplifies borderlands experiences of the 1930s in several ways. He is an American of Mexican ancestry, living in rural New Mexico, with little control over the broader forces that severely impact his life. Billy is confronted with his tenuous relationship to a transforming America by a number of factors. These range from the economic and political, to the cultural and even historical, highlighting the diffused and multi-faceted nature of his displacement and rendering it more challenging to identify and resolve.

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The Crossing is a fictional depiction of the U.S-Mexico borderlands and is therefore an unconventional historical source. This thesis utilises a variety of historical sources in conjunction with The Crossing, together creating a compelling and multi-faceted understanding of displacement on the border during the 1930-1940s era. Historical sources in this thesis provide firm examples and factual foundation for the issues brought up by McCarthy’s text. They ground this study in fact and demonstrate the relationship between power and mythology in a tangible way. Powerful fiction, such as The Crossing, rather than detracting from historical fact can serve to infuse it with heart and relatability. McCarthy’s artistic license and narrative skill provide the reader with a sense of empathy and connection to the historical subject.

Influential literary critic Harold Bloom considers Cormac McCarthy one of the best living novelists in America. As such, his novels are celebrated both in America and globally, and are likely to maintain their popularity into the future, ensuring an enduring interest in their subject matter also. Upon its release, The Crossing was described by the New York Times as “a miracle in prose, an American original. It deserves to sit on the same shelf certainly with ‘Beloved’ and ‘As I Lay Dying.’” Furthermore, El Paso western writer Dale Walker comments that McCarthy’s borderlands characters “have been so carefully drawn that you're affected by what they do and what happens to them.” Together, these descriptions highlight the importance and power of The Crossing to evoke a sense of compassion and investment in readers. As such, the empathy this text provides in a historical study of the early World War Two borderlands is fitting for this thesis. Using The Crossing in conjunction with historical sources creates an interdisciplinary analysis of this subject, balancing fact and historical context with literary evocations to render an insightful conception of power.

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11 Ramon Renteria “Reclusive McCarthy in Spotlight Again,” USA Today, (2nd December 1999)
struggles and displacement in the U.S-Mexico borderlands during a period of profound transformation.

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The beginnings of both the history of the American West and borderlands studies are arguably found in Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis. Turner identified the key features associated with the West that remain to this day. Furthermore, he cemented the importance of the frontier in the American psyche, arguing that the frontier environment was instrumental in allowing America to divest itself of its European roots. His thesis indicated the significant impact that sustained contact with other peoples, cultures and worldviews can have on a nation and individual’s identity. In the 1920s Herbert Eugene Bolton, a student of Turner’s, revised these ideas, arguing that there was an overlap between the Spanish borderlands and Turner’s Anglo-American frontier. Albert L. Hurtado writes that Bolton placed U.S. history among many other national histories, emphasising the ongoing presence of Native and Hispanic communities in the West. This fundamentally challenged Turner’s work, replacing the Anglo-American frontier that overcame wilderness and Native Americans alike, with the idea of a borderlands, in which multiple peoples and cultures continued to overlap and interact.

Bolton highlighted how the United States’ national origins were equally to be found in Hispanic history as they were in the British Empire. His argument finds credence in Walter Prescott Webb’s work in the 1930s, which cemented the inclusion of the borderlands region in broader conceptions of the American West. Webb argued that the post-frontier

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“West” could be defined by specific environmental features; their level nature, the scarcity of timber, and their semi-arid climate, thus incorporating the U.S. Southwest and its border with Mexico.\textsuperscript{15} It is this area of the American West which is focused on in this thesis.

By the 1980s, Turner’s thesis was discredited even further with the rise of New Western History, pioneered by Patricia Nelson Limerick and Richard White. New Western historians sought to revise Turner’s progressive and exceptionalist conception of the American West, studying race, gender, class and the environment to create a more representative, heterogeneous, understanding of the frontier. New Western scholars arguably facilitated a convergence in western and borderlands history, as they turned toward the U.S. Southwest to investigate issues of diversity, subjugation and cultural interaction in the West. Indeed, in regard to this region, Limerick wrote that “in no other field of Western history did the concept of the end of the frontier in 1890 carry so little meaning.”\textsuperscript{16} The Southwestern borderlands proved ripe for investigating the themes of conquest, environmental destruction, and myth-making; central tenets in the revision of the American West.\textsuperscript{17}

These new, increasingly transnational, approaches to history developed in conjunction with the late-twentieth century rise of postmodernism and the culture wars. In this intellectual environment, marginalised groups that had previously been denied historical agency were able to assert the importance of their experience in modern society. Altogether, this opened up historical scholarship of the border to approaches that transcended national and disciplinary boundaries, allowing for interpretations that better reflected the complexity of this region. For example, the work of Gloria Anzaldúa and Carlos Fuentes use both history

and creative prose to create conceptions of history and identity in the borderlands that recognise and celebrate the complexity of experience in this region.\textsuperscript{18}

In this thesis, the term borderlands is used to denote the region surrounding the modern day U.S-Mexico border, thus including both northern Mexico and the U.S. Southwest. Using Webb’s environmental classification of land that constitutes the post-frontier West, this thesis treats the borderlands as a part of the history and culture of the American West, but also a unique region in itself. Echoing Patricia Nelson Limerick’s work, I believe the borderlands a worthwhile setting for exploring the mythologisation of the U.S. West; the presence of the border providing a constant “other” and source of exploitation and adventure that is so fundamental to classic conceptions of the West.

In using literature as a lens through which to study history, this thesis is heavily concerned with the role of mythology in conceptions of the U.S. West. Sara Spurgeon describes myths as the “language through which a society remembers its history and attempts to understand its future.”\textsuperscript{19} I use the term mythology to refer to collective memories and stories used to explain the West’s history and culture. Neither literature nor historical scholarship inherently creates or challenges mythology. However, particularly in the American West, they have become intimately connected to the shaping, popularisation, and also contestation of the myth. As such, my use of a literary source to complement a historical analysis serves to highlight how these two forms of scholarship, while often implicated in the creation of mythology, can also be used to debunk it.

The use of literature in historical study can further open up the American West to new, more nuanced understandings. The reciprocal relationship between history and literature

\textsuperscript{18} See Gloria Anzaldúa’s \textit{Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza} (1987) and Carlos Fuentes’s \textit{La Frontera de Cristal} (1995).

\textsuperscript{19} Sara L. Spurgeon, \textit{Exploding the Western: Myths of Empire on the Postmodern Frontier}, (Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2005), 3.
in scholarship of the American West is well-established. The region’s history was built on a rich tradition of storytelling and observance of fictional tropes, popularised by the development of dime novels, the adventure stories of authors such as Zane Grey, and in Hollywood films. These stories captured the imagination of the American public, serving to forge a national identity and literary tradition seen as incorruptibly American. Furthermore they provided a framework for historians to study and conceptualise the West, to such a degree that Forrest G. Robinson suggests “the distinction between the ‘imagined’ West and the ‘real’ West cannot be sustained.”20 It is arguably for this reason that the mythologised West retains such influence in American thought and culture; historical scholarship added a sense of authority to fictional representations, serving to reinforce and propagate understandings of the West in the popular imagination.

Showing how literary scholars play a key role in the exploration and shaping of national identity and purpose, Samuel Cohen’s After the End of History uses the study of literature to investigate the concept of nationalism in a post-9/11 America. Drawing on Benedict Anderson’s notion of “imagined community,” Cohen asserts the importance of nationhood as a meaningful historical category. The study of culture, politics, and demography within national borders can be greatly enhanced by the use of literature. Cohen writes that novels “can examine their nation’s past not just as it happened but as it survives, as it is retold and understood, and so as it shapes the way people live in the present.”21 By exploring the stories which constitute a nation’s conception of its past, why some events are remembered and others condemned to the dusty archives of a country’s memory, novels have a tremendous power in the analysis of history and identity.

20 Forrest G. Robinson, “We Should Talk: Western History and Western Literature in Dialogue,” American Literary History 16, no. 1 (Spring 2004), 132.
Discussing how memory is transformed into historical writing, Matt K. Matsuda highlights the logic of inclusion, exclusion, and selective incompleteness, according to interest and circumstance. This suggests that there is a degree of human agency and responsibility to memory; that stories are told with certain details emphasised or omitted to serve a particular purpose. Matsuda further argues that the rise of the printing press did more than just capture and record the past: print culture also produced it. Textual works therefore play a key role in the interplay between individual and group memory, shown in Susan Rubin Suleiman’s work on collective memory. She argues that understanding the particulars of an individual text can open up larger perspectives on its subject, especially if informed by historical concerns.

While historical writing is necessarily influenced by both individual and collective memory, it is not stagnant and unreceptive to change. Matsuda writes that “no history can be pure event, pure evolution; each is rather a repetition, a return to a story which must be retold, distinguished from its previous tellings.” Therefore, as long as the West continues to wield influence over the American and global imagination, its history will be reconsidered and retold, including and excluding details that betray key insights into the past.

Richard Slotkin’s use of popular culture to examine the mythology of the American West is an effective example of how literature can enlighten historical study. He writes that myths “derive usable values from history and put them beyond reach of critical demystification.” Slotkin shows how scholarly and popular conceptions of the West are so tied up in mythology and culture that there is significant value in studying them together; to

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separate them tells only half the story. While Slotkin approaches the use of myth and literature to study the West as a cultural critic, Texan historian and folklorist J. Frank Dobie used a similar approach to examine the region’s rich local culture. Focusing particularly on the U.S. Southwest, Dobie writes that, “The usual makes social history. The unusual makes interesting reading. It may be untypical; it is likely to be representative.” While the content of a story may not conform to traditional history’s objective of presenting the most neutral and accurate account of events, it instead is able to connect with people on both a more immediate and lasting level. Unrestricted by the calls for neutrality or full inclusiveness of traditional historical scholarship, both Dobie and McCarthy are able to articulate the past with an artistic freedom that can better convey actual experience. Dobie goes on to state that “My aim is to reveal human beings. (…) No life is alien to another time.” While historical context is instrumental to studying the past, Dobie’s words emphasise that this does not mean the past is inaccessible, or not relatable to contemporary times. Cormac McCarthy’s work shares this notion, exploring how literary traditions of myth, memory and history can converge to reach the heart of human experience, both in the past and the time in which he himself writes.

Published in 1994, The Crossing is the second novel comprising the Border Trilogy, a set of three interconnected stories set on the U.S-Mexico border. The story, set roughly between 1939 and 1945, follows the multiple journeys across the U.S-Mexico border of a New Mexican teenager named Billy. With his small-town rural life in America appearing increasingly obsolete, few employment prospects and a disconnection from the impending international conflict, Billy crosses into Mexico three times, in a futile attempt to regain control over his life. However, rather than finding control, Billy instead is confronted with

27 “Cow People Introduction,” Box 1, Folder 5, J. Frank Dobie Papers, 1898 -1988, Southwestern Writers Collection, The Wittliff Collections, Texas State University-San Marcos.
just how profound his displacement is and how far removed the promise of the West is from reality. Furthermore, the fellow borderlanders he encounters throughout his journey and the stories they tell, reveal that he is not alone in his suffering.

His first journey is to return a pregnant wolf he has captured to her mountain origins. However, with the wolf taken from him, entered into dog fights and ultimately killed, Billy returns to America defeated. Upon his homecoming, he discovers his parents murdered, unable to defend themselves with the lone family gun taken by Billy, and the family’s horses stolen. He crosses the border a second time, with his younger brother Boyd, to retrieve the horses. While Boyd decides to stay in Mexico and join the revolutionary struggle, Billy again returns to the north, to find the United States has joined the Second World War, a historic incident that occurred without his knowing. With no work available to him, and his attempts to join the war thwarted by an irregular heartbeat, he returns to Mexico one final time to locate Boyd, his last surviving link to the people and land of his past. However, his brother is dead, and Billy resolves to return his body and lay it to rest in America. At the novel’s end, Billy is alone, wholly at odds with a new America. This is highlighted by his witnessing of the Trinity Test atomic bomb explosion, signalling the dawn of a new era to which Billy does not belong.

Billy’s thwarted efforts to save the animals and people which give his life purpose and his failure to understand the land and customs he encounters in Mexico highlight the dislocation which permeates existence on the border during this period. *The Crossing* is a novel which confronts the uncertainties of the past, exposing new ways of thinking about the history of the American West and life on the borderlands. McCarthy’s evocative prose and powerful storytelling are heavily concerned with the interconnection between memory, history and myth, and the effect their ambiguous relationship can have on the individual. Used as a lens through which to study the late Depression and early WWII borderlands, *The
Crossing provides an insight into life and experiences on the borderland that history alone can not produce. Studying the historical context of this novel yields a new perspective of the borderlands, both in regard to its position in the U.S. national consciousness and how it was experienced by its inhabitants, who were far-removed from the central historical narrative of their respective nations.

McCarthy’s work on integrating memory, myth, and history precedes the Border Trilogy, with much of his earlier writing set in his home-region of Appalachia. His physical and intellectual relocation to the Southwest in the early 1980s thus signals a conscious focus on this region for literary exploration. The Texas and New Mexico borderlands is rich with history and folklore, proving a fertile and dynamic location for his fiction so heavily concerned with these themes. The Crossing, and the wider Border Trilogy, uses the borderlands as a valuable angle through which to reconsider the role of the West in America’s past and present. In particular, this region lends itself to a reflection of Western mythical identity in America; the country’s relationship to Mexico; and the experience of Southwestern rural youth, in a period of great national and international change.

In addition to its location, The Crossing’s late 1930s setting and 1990s publication is also significant. There are clear and valuable parallels to be drawn between these two eras. McCarthy’s work provokes a reflection on the similarities and differences between the two, highlighting the relevance both eras have to one another. Emerging out of the Great Depression, on the eve of the Second World War, and culminating in the onset of the Cold War, America underwent vast change during this era. With developments in technology and systems of labour, and the evolving role of the government in people’s lives, this period saw a transformation in American life. The idea of the cowboy, and wider conceptions of the U.S. West also changed, adapting to remain relevant and useful in modernity. McCarthy wrote The Crossing at the conclusion of the Cold War, inviting a comparison between the two eras as
the beginning and end of a uniquely American experience. Using the equally American notion of the “West,” McCarthy’s work can be used to reflect upon these changes, highlighting the sense of uncertainty in society.

_The Crossing_ is arguably part of a wider trend of revisionary historical fiction in 1990s America. Following the end of the Cold War, anxiety about the present had eased, affording writers the cultural room for historical assessment.\textsuperscript{29} This underlines how McCarthy approaches his subject, aware of its relativity and value in negotiating contemporary issues. Samuel Cohen writes that “novels reconnect the past to the present and [...] to a future whose tenuousness places it at the centre of the contemporary American historical imagination.”\textsuperscript{30} Fiction can be an agency through which to negotiate America’s identity, recognising that a nation’s conception of itself has strong foundations in its historical experience.

In both the 1990s and late-thirties, America entered a new phase of international politics, democratic ideals and national identity. The international tensions of World War I, together with another impending international conflict, exposed the importance of having a prosperous, democratic, and stable neighbour to the south.\textsuperscript{31} As such, American politicians and thinkers recognised the value in understanding Mexican history and politics, and untangling the complicated culture, ideology and economy that fuels the country’s political instability. Such comprehension would provide a foundation to develop a supposedly mutually beneficial relationship between the United States and Mexico based on economic and political diplomacy. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s 1933 Good Neighbour Policy exemplified this approach, with the U.S. government distancing itself from the armed intervention that had characterised U.S. foreign policy in Mexico over the past thirty years.

\textsuperscript{29} Cohen, _After The End of History_, 8.
\textsuperscript{30} Cohen, _After The End of History_, 4.
Post-WWII, this relationship manifested in the form of loans, immigration and labour policies, and an emphasis on economic development, signalling a new form of U.S. foreign policy in Mexico. This new foreign policy is paralleled in the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1994, which marks a similar attempt to cultivate a relationship between the U.S. and Mexico founded on supposedly mutual economic benefit. The boom in American scholars turning their attention to Mexico in the 1940s, and the borderlands in the 1990s, coincides with these political developments, underlining the value in understanding national history and identity in international relations.

McCarthy’s work explores these trends at the local level, inviting reflection on how a nation’s comprehension and use of history can be both a facilitator and inhibitor to social and political belonging. On the border, such concepts of belonging and citizenship are particularly pertinent when confronted with Mexico’s similar struggle to create an identity, purpose and political system in the face of an uncertain future. Studying The Crossing in light of its 1990s publication therefore emphasises how it is a novel heavily concerned with America’s relationship both to Mexico and to the story of itself, and how personal experience can fail to adhere to this tale.

In light of Cohen’s work, The Crossing can be seen as a significant revision of the nation’s conception of the West at the end of the twentieth century. While highlighting the displacement his characters suffer at the outset of the Cold War, he also joins many other writers such as Thomas Berger and Richard Slotkin in a critical reappraisal of the cowboy, a trend which had gained momentum in the 1960s. Cohen writes that post-Cold War novels “show that history does not end. Historical narrative, as it is constructed, received, and revised, continues to shape in very particular ways how Americans see themselves and, so,
how they act in the world.”

McCarthy’s writing thus engages in the act of uncovering the deviousness of the past and exposing its changeability, unknowable-ness and unending relevance.

In using *The Crossing* in a historical study of the U.S-Mexico border, this thesis employs a number of key terms and theories. Most prominently, the concepts of borderlands, mythology and storytelling frame this work. As the novel is set in the borderlands, it is clear that the environment about which McCarthy writes is essential to the displacement and exclusion he evokes. In this thesis, “borderlands” is defined as the area surrounding the established geopolitical border between the United States and Mexico. These borderlands encompass a large territory due to the far-reaching matrix of cultural and material exchange in the region. This is further emphasised by the border’s changeable nature physically, politically and conceptually, throughout history. As such, my thesis covers territory of northern Mexico, especially the state of Chihuahua, and the U.S. Southwest, specifically the Rio Grande region of New Mexico and Texas. The use of the term “borderlands” highlights how the region, both to the north and south, is absorbed by the border, developing a history often at odds with the nation to which either side belongs.

Although this borderlands history often conflicts with both Mexican and American national history, it has nonetheless survived and flourished through mythology and storytelling. The rich tradition of Southwest and Borderlands folklore, of sharing stories of the past, is not subject to the ordered and sanitised history of nation-states, created to serve the interests of those in power, as will be shown in this thesis. Nonetheless, such myths are the very foundation of mainstream American western mythology, exposing their potential to be simplified and reproduced for the masses, to create a shared and more useable past.

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34 See the work of Oscar J. Martinez and Rachel St. John.
Employing stories and mythology to study the borderlands thus highlights the disjuncture and ambiguous relationship between local and national history in this region. This thesis consequently uses storytelling and mythology as a framework through which to reconsider historical experience, and its relevance to the contemporary era.

The relationship between the borderlands and mythology finds valuable guidance in Yi-Fu Tuan’s work on space and place. Tuan argues that space and place are co-dependent, suggesting that it is human experience that provides the link between the two to create their conceptualisation. An important consequence of this is the subjective perception of land, particularly highlighted on the U.S-Mexico border by the differences between outside and local treatment and knowledge of the land. Another aspect of Tuan’s understanding of space and place which facilitates a historical investigation in conjunction with The Crossing is how experience of space leads to the creation of myths. Writing that myths flourish in the absence of precise knowledge, Tuan observes that our knowledge as individuals and members of a particular society remains “limited, selective, and biased by the passions of living.”35 This leads to the development of two kinds of mythical space; one a conceptual extension of the familiar created by direct experience, the other a spatial component of a worldview and the creation of values within which people carry out practical activities.36 This second type of myth, which Tuan sees as better articulated and more consciously held among people, tends to be found in large stable societies attempting to answer the question of man’s place in nature.37 The creation of myths to make sense of experience and give individuals a purpose is ruminated upon throughout The Crossing.

35 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 85.
36 Tuan, *Space and Place*, 86.
37 Tuan, *Space and Place*, 86.
In conjunction with borderlands and mythology, another important concept dealt with in studying McCarthy's work is that of nationalism and citizenship. In its most straightforward definition, citizenship denotes the capacity to participate in both political and socio-economic life of the community.\(^{38}\) More deeply, the nature of citizenship is a complicated and contested notion. Theories of citizenship broadly fall into two categories; normative and empirical. Normative refers to the attempt to set out the rights and duties a citizen ideally ought to have, while empirical theories seek to describe and explain how citizens come to possess the rights and duties that they have in a society.\(^{39}\) This thesis explores the empirical theory of citizenship, focusing on how social, economic and political processes undermine a sense of membership and belonging in the borderlands, which in turn denies access to the rights and duties full citizenship includes.

Judith N. Shklar argues that citizenship in America is “democratic in principle only”, conditional on agency, empowerment and social standings, and resultantly highly exclusive.\(^{40}\) In *The Crossing*, considering citizenship in this manner, as an issue of belonging, raises questions regarding the experience of social exclusion on the border. Shklar writes that “Citizenship must always refer primarily to nationality,” but in a region where the population is culturally, economically and historically disconnected from the power centre, it becomes clear that this is simply not enough.\(^{41}\) The work of James T. Sparrow connects these ideas of citizenship specifically to the World War Two era, highlighting how this period saw notions of citizenship become broader in definition. There was a new emphasis on social change during this era, implemented on both an individual and institutional level and requiring a


stronger degree of obligation and co-operation between the two. However, in the U.S-Mexico borderlands it becomes clear that this ideal was not easily achieved. Together, considering concepts of mythology, space and place, and citizenship in conjunction with McCarthy’s fiction yields important new conceptions of both the American West and the U.S-Mexico borderlands.

Chapter one of this thesis explores how McCarthy’s work interrogates the Western myth, and the impact of an exalted past in the real world, as it creates unattainable expectations. It becomes apparent that conceptions of the West and, in particular masculinity, are enshrouded in misunderstanding and falsehood, contrived to serve the needs of a select group of individuals. The subsequent disjoints apparent in lived historical experience, exposed in The Crossing, highlight the important connection between these stories and notions of power, from the personal to the national. Such ideas are the focus of chapter two, looking at displacement as a specific problem in the U.S-Mexico borderlands. This chapter considers how exploitative relationships in the borderlands and flawed misunderstandings of history, both within and between nations, can inhibit more inclusivity in this region. The Crossing presents power in the borderlands as disparate and history unclear; Mexico unknowable. The wolf Billy captures and returns to Mexico is particularly effective in exploring the subject of belonging. Billy’s inability to save the wolf is just one failure in his own ongoing struggle to maintain a sense of purpose and relevance, with chapter three exploring the pervasive and multi-faceted nature of displacement on the border during this period.

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In conducting research for this thesis, I consulted a variety of sources and archives. The J. Frank Dobie papers in the University of Texas at Austin were particularly useful, as they contained Dobie’s extensive collection of southwest folklore. The widespread tales Dobie collected, and ruminations regarding southwest mythology between himself and colleagues in these papers, contributed greatly to key themes in my thesis of storytelling and power, and their connection to concepts of space and place. In addition, there were a variety of papers at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque that provided valuable historical support for my thesis. The papers of prominent social worker Katherine Wood, which focus on her work in the 1930s and 1940s, give fascinating insight into the issues social workers faced in trying to provide support for rural, isolated communities across New Mexico.

A challenge I encountered in researching and writing this thesis was the process of drawing connections between a broad source and idea base to create a comprehensive study with McCarthy’s narrative that did both the novel and the historical subject justice. In the scope of an MA thesis, I was not able to investigate every aspect of *The Crossing*, nor all experiences of the borderlands during my chosen period. I therefore focused on the issues that felt most valuable and powerful in regard to the issue of displacement and mythology during the historical period under study: those of dominant historical narratives, exploitative power relations, and struggles to attain a sense of belonging.

Altogether, the sources used support the themes and arguments this thesis covers. Nineteenth and twentieth century American newspapers are used throughout to provide an indication of how people, events and ideas were understood and presented to the wider public. Used in conjunction with media sources, are the papers and writings of key figures such as Theodore Roosevelt, J. Frank Dobie and William Randolph Hearst, all of whom provide important points of focus for exploring themes of power and mythology in this thesis. In order to develop a deeper understanding of real experience of the rural borderlands, this
thesis also uses the New Mexico welfare reports and accounts of cowboys from the 1930s-1940s era. These primary sources are supported by a variety of scholarly writings on my subject, reflecting the broad issues raised by McCarthy’s narrative. In particular this thesis is influenced by the work of Timothy Parrish, Christine Bold, Patricia Nelson Limerick, Richard Slotkin, and Shelley Streeby. These sources create an engaging and holistic image of the U.S. borderlands during my period of study, further enlightened by the emotive image of the region furnished by McCarthy’s narrative.

J. Frank Dobie wrote that “all art is sophisticated, including the art of tale-telling, but the yearning – passion may not be too strong of a word – to hear and to tell tales is instinctive rather than intellectual.” Here Dobie suggests that storytelling is a form of history in its most elemental and human state; it is history for the masses. Both history and literature are responsible for mythologizing the American West, obscuring real historical experience, and both disciplines are equally capable of rendering more accurate, useful conceptions in the contemporary era. This can best be achieved by a dialogue between the two, honouring the traditional convergence begun by the likes of historian Frederick Jackson Turner and novelist Owen Wister at the turn of the twentieth century. Historians who do not recognise the value in such a reciprocal relationship overlook the chance to reclaim a scholarly tradition from the conventional rigidity of Western mythology. *The Crossing’s* resilient celebration of storytelling indicates how this form of history can recover experiences of the past from exile and create new points of belonging.

43 Dobie’s draft work, Box1, Folder 3, J. Frank Dobie Papers, The Wittliff Collections.
Chapter One / Interrogating the Western Myth

Reflecting on how exalted myths unfurl in the real world, The Crossing’s exploration of western mythology indicates the power writers, whether of history or fiction, are afforded in the moulding of what is considered national history and identity. Timothy Parrish suggests that history is ultimately a story, a “way of perceiving the world that is also a fight to make the world over as one wants it to be.” As such, the question of how historical narrative is produced, controlled and understood is an important one. The ambiguous roots and perpetuation of mythology regarding the American West highlights how identifying the source of this historical narrative is not a simple endeavour. McCarthy’s narrative can be used to explore the roots and power of these stories at pivotal points of change in U.S. history, exposing how mythology is an important means to reconcile challenges to the American identity and experience. The displacement suffered by The Crossing’s characters illustrates the relationship between real experience and mythology in the American West. Investigating this relationship reveals a nation’s self-image, its needs and desires, and what is forgotten in the name of these ideals.

This chapter creates a dialogue between The Crossing and key portrayals and interpretations of the West, most notably Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill Cody, as those interpretations crystallised in the late nineteenth century. The novel highlights the ambiguous foundations of the myth, and in particular, the progressive and performative nature of Turner and Cody’s West. This leads to an investigation on how prominent individuals such as Theodore Roosevelt and writer Owen Wister effectively created a “West” during the early decades of the twentieth century that served their own needs at the expense of less powerful rural communities. It is these rural communities, pushed to the edges of

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44 Timothy Parrish, From the Civil War to the Apocalypse: Postmodern History and American Fiction, (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), 1.
mainstream myths about the West, that populate the pages of McCarthy’s work. Comparing the expectations of McCarthy’s protagonists with changes in the domestic and economic role of men leading up to the 1930s exposes the divergence between individuals’ experiences and the mythology that developed around them. Outside of the cultural and economic elite, who manipulated mythology of the West to their own advantage, the young descendants of open-range cowboys in New Mexico nonetheless identified with the western myth popularised by more powerful parties. This chapter therefore highlights how mythology serves to maintain a dangerous gap between hope and reality that results in the displacement articulated in *The Crossing*. Using McCarthy’s work to illustrate how both historians and writers have the power to expose the relationship between myth and reality, the chapter ends with a discussion on 1930s folklore and its relationship to the earlier turn of the century mythologisation of the West.

Solidifying and legitimising an overly-simplistic interpretation of the frontier, Frederick Jackson Turner’s pronouncement of the closing of the frontier in 1893 ironically opened up the region to chronic misperception and flawed renderings. The subsequent romanticisation of the West, notably of the cowboy trope by the likes of Theodore Roosevelt and Owen Wister, underlined how this aspect of America’s past was not held to the standards of accuracy newly associated with historical understanding and conception. The turn of the century Wild West shows of Buffalo Bill Cody epitomised this collision of myth and academic reality, with Cody’s performances selling an ambiguous form of education and entertainment. This continued into *The Crossing*’s mid-twentieth century setting, with the mythologised West becoming a firm feature of mainstream popular entertainment. Meanwhile, the West’s academic standing also continued in a fusion of myth and history, through the work of J. Frank Dobie, a prominent intellectual regarding Southwest folklore and its tangled bond with history.
As the first academic to give serious consideration to the frontier’s impact on U.S. society and identity, Turner essentially crystallised understandings of the frontier and its qualities, which would become intricately associated with perceptions of the West. His interpretations were, from the outset, flawed, failing to recognise the variety of lives that populated these far from empty regions. Turner’s frontier was a vast open space where American advancement was fuelled by the constant challenges provided by the wilderness to the west; it was a place of perennial rebirth. Describing the great American qualities born from the frontier, Turner writes:

That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, (...) that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier. 45

These characteristics, while a product of a specific time and region, became a universalised base for the wider American identity and story over the course of the nineteenth century, as found in the patriotic call for westward expansion of John O’Sullivan in 1839. 46 Such interpretations and stories of the frontier as a progressive, individualistic and exceptional enterprise had existed before Turner’s thesis. His work captured the national imagination and gained in popularity because it legitimised an understanding of the West already existing in public discourse.

Turner’s academic analysis of the frontier served to corroborate more popular perceptions, ensuring a validation that would protect this flawed conception of the past against criticism and secure its power and legitimacy into the future. With a cultural and academic grounding, the mythologised West retained a significance and relevance in the

American imagination not easily challenged. As well as its cultural and academic origins, the myth’s power also lay in its malleable and universal content. As the country underwent social, economic and cultural changes, the “West” could be reimagined and moulded to reflect the needs and values of the American people. In its flawed and mythologised form, the West encompasses a broad spectrum of ideas and is notably adaptable to change, rendering its historical roots of secondary importance to its role as an expression of America’s identity.

However, such timeless expressions of identity, particularly notions of individuality and progressiveness, created a false sense of continuity and stability in social discourse. Literature critiquing the West served to expose these flaws. In McCarthy’s *The Crossing*, such a veneer of cohesion is shown to be increasingly inadequate and unrealistic, with any supposed trajectory of progress exposed as a wholly unviable interpretation of the past. This is apparent in Billy and Boyd’s encounter with an Indian, early in the novel. The Indian comments resentfully, “Spooked everything in the country, aint you?” to which Billy replies, “We didnt know there was anybody here.”\(^47\) This exchange essentially repeats nineteenth century interaction between Natives and Euro-Americans, exhibiting the latter group’s disregard for the way-of-life and history of those already on the land they coveted.

McCarthy does not depict the Indian as either an archaic symbol of the Southwest’s past, or a neglected product of U.S. modernity; both of which would affirm a linear and simplistic interpretation of the past. Instead, McCarthy portrays this figure almost as the confluence of history. Dressed in an old blanketcoat and Stetson, wearing boots mended with wire, and carrying a rifle likely to be a relic from the Indian wars of the nineteenth century, the Indian ridicules the notion that the past is a conclusive and inaccessible entity from which America has progressed. Arming himself with a weapon possibly used to kill his ancestors, this figure shows how tangibly history weighs on the present, how the belief in continual

growth and advancement can not mask the chaotic and ironic reality of America’s existence. Begging for food from the two brothers, the Indian derides the western myth’s key features of progress, independence, and a connection to nature, showing how each notion is laughably unrealised in U.S. society.

In the first half of the twentieth century, these features associated with the West became ingrained in the American psyche through their embodiment in its figurehead, the cowboy. Connecting these broad ideas to a substantive lifestyle, the cowboy presents the myth as an unambiguously attainable reality. Richard White highlights how the western myth evolved into its established form of the twentieth century, observing that the icon of the cowboy was not at first the main attraction. Initially, notions of the “West” centred on the conquering and civilisation of Native Americans. However, as America’s westward expansion slowed and Turner proclaimed the frontier closed, cowboy iconography became the focal point of memories of the West, attaining a symbolic status in American culture. By the onset of the Second World War, the “cowboy” was a staple in popular culture, from the marketing of food and clothing, to the ongoing popularity of pulp magazines such as the All Western.

The rise of the cowboy icon in the late nineteenth century occurred precisely when its corresponding environment of the open-range and cattle drives supposedly ceased to exist. This is also reflected in Billy’s encounter with the Indian: “He looked into the eyes of the boy. The boy into his. (…) Eyes in which the sun was setting. In which the child stood beside the sun.” While the sun sets on the Indian’s bearing on modern America, the positioning of

50 The All Western Magazine was established in 1931 and had 94 issues. For the cowboy in advertising see the 1930s adverts for Coca Cola, Sugar Pops and Levis, among many others.
51 McCarthy, The Crossing, 312.
Billy next to the sun indicates his troubled allegiance with the Western myth, and indeed his own growing irrelevance to the landscape.

Peter Boag observes that remembering and celebrating the cowboy figure was not a natural development. Rather, it was a conscious reaction to changes in American society. Facing a range of social, political and economic issues by the end of the nineteenth century, Americans “looked to the frontier past for solace, escapism, and alternative ways of living.”

With the turn of the century rise in industrialism, America underwent a process of rapid urbanisation and experienced a large influx of immigrants. The issues of racial conflict in cities, together with the decline in small-scale agriculture and subsidiary rural lifestyles raised concerns regarding the future of American society. What existed of the traditional work of a cowboy on the frontier had come to an end, symbolic of the wider change in the social and economic role of men by the onset of the twentieth century. In this environment, mass-produced sensationalised literature on the West flourished, identifying and separating the frontier from the unsettling changes of modernity. Memories and stories of the West provided a source of masculine ideals no longer found in real-life experience.

In 1902, Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* became the genre-defining novel which would be replicated in countless short stories and full-length literary works for decades to come. These wildly popular stories depicted a masculine frontier that supposedly reasserted appropriate gender behaviours, appealing to an audience concerned with the future of gender roles in a modernising America. The cowboy thus became an instrumental figure in bridging America’s western past to a post-frontier future, in addition to connecting abstract

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54 See the work of Zane Grey, Louis L’Amour, and Max Brand.
55 Boag, *Re-Dressing America’s Frontier Past*, 4-6.
aspects of the myth to a more tangible reality. With the American experience increasingly featuring cities and machines over wilderness and a connection to nature, the cowboy alleviated fears of emasculation and over-civilisation in this new order, presenting American male identity as permanently founded in a hyper-masculine past. Since its posthumous inception into mainstream culture, the cowboy has proven especially effective in the task of reflecting the needs and values of Americans.

Of all mythological tropes of the West, this symbol is notably able to encompass, and often reconcile, broad facets of American masculinity and wider nationality. Henry Nash Smith wrote that “history cannot happen without images which simultaneously express collective desires and impose coherence on the infinitely numerous and varied data of experience.”\textsuperscript{56} Such an image can be found in the cowboy, in which the vast experience of men on the frontier and open-range is condensed into a broad monolithic symbol, providing a timeless source of masculine identity and purpose in a modernising U.S. society.

Following the closing of the frontier, the cowboy trope’s accessibility found reinforcement in prominent historical figures such as Theodore Roosevelt, and the creative work of Wister. These men promoted the cowboy as a cultural reality and served to exemplify its supposed attainability. Furthermore, in time these men themselves attained symbolic status as icons of the West, with images of Roosevelt a significant component in the forging of the cowboy trope, and its pervasive masculinity.

In the late nineteenth century, Theodore Roosevelt led a network of influential easterners who sought to harness the American West of the imagination as a source of political and cultural power.\textsuperscript{57} Roosevelt founded the Boone and Crockett Club in 1887. Its

\textsuperscript{56} Henry Nash Smith, \textit{Virgin Land; the American West as Symbol and Myth}, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), ix.
members, including Wister, developed a distinctive and consistent literary voice, rooted in the popularisation of the frontier West. Christine Bold argues that this voice effectively crystallised the Western’s fundamental features, while also serving to further the political goals of an elite seeking to retain their status in a fast-changing society. G. Edward White interprets Wister’s work as an “effort to reaffirm the spirit of the Old West, [which] emerged most clearly in his attempts to demonstrate that some of its heroes could thrive in the twentieth century.” The Virginian featured an America that reconciled the Old West with a new industrial East, and allowed the disappearing cowboy hero to survive the loss of his traditional environment. Wister modified the classic trope of the vanishing cowboy, threatened with extinction, to create a form of the myth that could maintain a relevance in modernity. He dramatized “the full acceptance of the cowboy as one of America’s own.” In doing so, he presented the mythologised West as a reality in the twentieth century.

Bold writes of the Boone and Crockett Club that:

Cumulatively, their hunting tales and conservation essays recreate the American West as a network of white enclaves reserved for superior species, animal and human, fringed and threatened by degenerate species. This vision is an extension of the clubmen’s social outlook.

Wister and other club members created a story that preserved their own status in society, placing themselves into the myth in order to naturalise their positions of power that were threatened by the social and economic changes they faced. So successful were they in this endeavour that the image of the cowboy came to take on an increasingly historic quality, with Edward White suggesting Roosevelt and Wister were seen as “commentators on a dying

58 Bold, The Frontier Club, 2.
60 G. Edward White, The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience, 143.
61 G. Edward White, The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience, 144.
62 Bold, The Frontier Club, 40
civilisation, historians of America."\textsuperscript{63} The authority with which these men chronicled the West in their rise to prominence, together with the increasing sense of the West as the foundation for the true American male, validated their expertise in this new era of U.S. history.

While Wister was instrumental in the formation and perpetuation of the classic Western narrative, Theodore Roosevelt was one of its biggest beneficiaries. In his rise to fame, Roosevelt actively courted the press, giving a performance of Wister’s masculine American cowboy the media and public were happy to consume. For example, the \textit{Daily Oklahoma State Capital} wrote in 1898 that, “Secretary of Navy Roosevelt was himself a cowboy early in his life and is willing to take desperate chances. He does not know the meaning of fear. It is foreign to his composition.”\textsuperscript{64} Such portrayals of Roosevelt were shored up by his own writings, publishing multiple books on subjects ranging from ranching, American Western history and his autobiography.\textsuperscript{65}

As Roosevelt’s political power grew, he continued to consciously align his political image and agenda with western culture. Fighting in the Spanish-American War in Cuba in 1898, Roosevelt formed the First U.S. Volunteer Cavalry Regiment, named the “Rough Riders” by the press. The war signalled a turning point in U.S. foreign policy as the country’s traditionally isolationist stance came to an end. Rendering this change more palatable to the American public through the use of Western and cowboy tropes, Moos writes that Roosevelt brought “Cuba home via the Wild West.”\textsuperscript{66} Roosevelt fashioned an American spirit and masculine culture with deep roots in American soil, for a new imperial future.\textsuperscript{67}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item G. Edward White, \textit{The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience}, 186-187
\item \textit{Daily Oklahoma State Capital}, 4 May, 1898.
\item See \textit{Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail} (1888), \textit{The Rough Riders} (1899), \textit{The Winning of the West} (1889-1896), \textit{Theodore Roosevelt: An Autobiography} (1913), among many more.
\item Moos, \textit{Outside America}, 20.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
continental westward expansion had ceased by the late nineteenth century, he carried its underlying attitudes forward, dressing overseas U.S. imperial and expansionist efforts in the garb of the American West.

Consequently, rather than challenging the foundations of American nationality, Roosevelt and his fellow political and cultural elites instead presented imperialism and the goals of wealthy ranch owners as affirmations of America’s identity and purpose. Roosevelt’s enthusiastic, and successful, appropriation of the cowboy figure further cemented the centrality of this masculine ideal in American culture alongside Wister’s stories. Roosevelt and his Rough Riders became objects of nationalistic poetry, popular songs and advertisements.68 Eventually reaching the presidency in 1900, Dan Moos writes that “Roosevelt brought with him to the White House ideals cemented in the myths of the American West.”69 This is exemplified by Tade Styka’s 1909 portrait of Roosevelt, titled “Rough Rider,” which continues to hang in the White House’s Roosevelt Room.”70 Styka depicts a majestic Roosevelt in a western landscape, on horseback and dressed in his cavalry uniform.71 Paintings such as this illustrate the conscious use of western tropes, to make unsettling changes in U.S. society safe and relatable, establishing and strengthening a particular form of imperial nationality.

The deliberate cultivation of a hyper-masculine Western image by Wister and Roosevelt highlights its wholly constructed status in American culture. It also indicates the participatory nature of mythologisation and storytelling, in which a degree of self-deception, whether conscious or not, is required from all involved parties. The reader of the story, spectator of the show, must wholly buy in to the myth as a reality to confirm its power in American

68 Moos, Outside America, 42.
69 Moos, Outside America, 21.
70 Tade Styka, Rough Rider, 1909, Roosevelt Room of the White House.
71 The Roosevelt Room is a prominent meeting room for White House staff and delegations to meet the President, underlining the continued presence of Theodore Roosevelt’s western image in White House daily life.
society. Such deception is apparent in *The Crossing*, where McCarthy’s characters subscribe to particular stories or worldviews aiding in an understanding of the past that gives them purpose and fixes their otherwise anonymous existence to the larger national changes the country undergoes. “Things separate from their stories have no meaning. They are only shapes,” Billy is told. “The story (…) can never be lost from its place in the world for it is that place.”72 It is through the connection between these stories and the individual that each is afforded a sense of value and purpose. The individual need to find a stake in American society thus becomes the very lifeblood of the western myth, whether that is a high-profile figure such as Roosevelt, or an anonymous farmhand with little perceived impact on history.

Moos argues that to maintain the authority of dominant narratives such as the western myth, they must appeal to the entire nation, allowing all citizens to feel empowered and included in the national narrative in at least a peripheral fashion.73 McCarthy’s work highlights how this mass participation in the construction and perpetuation of the myth, from each individual to wider structures of the media and academia, can expose it at its most powerful and destructive. As Billy is told, the whole world is a tale, and “The seams are hid from us, you see. The joinery. The way in which the world is made.”74 When the myth is so infused throughout the land and culture, it becomes hard to recognise fact from fiction. Furthermore, the ambiguous and artificial West, cultivated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, is not so accessible to those less wealthy, such as the ranchers displaced by the members of the Frontier Club’s vast land holdings. When life was shaped by the basic need to make a living, the West was no playground of masculinity, and day-to-day life far from a romantic adventure. It is only those with power, such as Roosevelt and Wister, who prospered from western mythology.

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The myth promoted by powerful individuals exemplifies the constructed, and staged, nature of masculinity in the American West. The roots of these foundations in performance and storytelling are particularly apparent in Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West show. James R. Grossman observes that Cody’s invented and embellished presentation of the frontier gained an immediate and direct influence, legitimised over time by Turner’s work. Cody’s shows further cemented the myth in American culture by adapting its content to contemporary events. Reflecting a shift in how the myth was used to bolster American political developments, in 1899 Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show replaced a staging of “Custer’s Last Fight” with a re-enactment of the “Battle of San Juan Hill,” a decisive victory for the Rough Riders in the Spanish-American war in July 1898.

Through Buffalo Bill’s shows, the West became an entity where performance and history were “hopelessly intertwined.” The pervasive displacement found in *The Crossing* is a product of this ambiguous and entangled relationship. The chasm between lived experience in the West and the myths subsequently produced, results in a constant attempt to understand the world through a paradigm that simply fails to fit reality. Considering the enduring nature of Turner and Buffalo Bill’s interpretations of the West over others of the era, Richard White suggests that they essentially “divided up the existing narratives of American frontier mythology,” each erasing “part of the larger, and more confusing and tangled, cultural story to deliver up a clean, dramatic, and compelling narrative.” However, for McCarthy’s male characters, this sanitary history and sense of performance has become lost through decades of entrenchment in U.S. culture and local folklore.

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77 Richard White, “Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill,” 29.
78 Richard White, “Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill,” 11.
The performative nature of Theodore Roosevelt and Buffalo Bill’s West highlights the insubstantial foundations on which the myth is built. Their public image contributed to the creation of a monolithic western masculine identity detached from the lives and region in which it was supposedly rooted. As a result, McCarthy’s young Americans have an understanding of the cowboy existence, and expectations of its attainability, wholly unrealistic, destined to remain unfulfilled. The nineteenth century western lifestyle represented by the cowboy image had never existed in its implied romantic simplicity.

Furthermore, the cowboy was not only anachronistic in an increasingly modern United States, but had been undergoing changes for decades. Rather than being a clearly defined and attainable lifestyle suddenly under threat from modernisation, this form of labour and its related masculine ideals, had in reality long been evolving and reacting to wider national factors. As with any occupation and way of life, the West was not static, nor experienced homogenously, as the representations of Roosevelt and Wister suggested. Mythical portrayals were continuously interacting with the real lives of men in the West and their experiences of change in agriculture and labour practices. This creates a history in which the lived experiences of these men were disconnected from the static myth prevailing in culture. By *The Crossing’s* 1930s setting, McCarthy’s would-be cowboys are unable to see this divergence, basing their choices on a code of living that exists almost independently of its historical roots. This creates a tension between promise and reality, setting an unattainable criteria for belonging to wider America.

An example of how the West of Roosevelt and Wister’s creation created tensions with real experience in this region is the role of wagelabourers in the American West. Carlos A. Schwantes’s work on the overlooked prominence of wageworkers in this region underlines how conceptions of the West intentionally omitted peoples and experiences which did not conform to the progressive narrative of individual freedom and achievement. Schwantes
emphasises that wage labour in the West, a common form of work for many at the turn of the century, created tension between the ideal of self-employment and the reality of what work was available. He writes that “the frontier or classic West was simply no place for wageworkers.”

It can be seen that even during this period when the key tenets of the myth took root, there was a gap between notions and expectations of the West and the reality of opportunity. Schwantes highlights how these wage-earning communities were situated in a time and place associated with the classic American West of symbol and myth, sold to potential workers by pamphlets promoting the West as a region of great personal opportunity. This resulted in unrealised dreams of self-employment and a sense of marginality, all the more difficult to reconcile in an area that was synonymous with personal success.

Despite the clear differences between wage labour and self-employment on the frontier, it is important to note that these two versions of the West nonetheless shared some similarities. This suggests that while there was a divergence between expectations and opportunities regarding work in the West, there were nonetheless enough likenesses to render the western dream sufficiently representative and maintain its validity among labourers in the this region. For example, men employed in the West rarely worked alongside women, and led markedly nomadic lifestyles. These are both characteristics that resonate with romantic notions of the cowboy working in a highly masculine environment and moving from town to town, a last vestige of wilderness on the fringe of civilised society. However, by the end of the First World War, not only did this wage labour start to dwindle, but women also began to

80 Schwantes, “The Concept of the Wageworkers' Frontier,” 42, 52.
81 Schwantes, “The Concept of the Wageworkers' Frontier,” 42, 46.
join the western work force in more significant numbers. Subsequently, the avenues to pursue some form of the masculine western lifestyle through wage work diminished.⁸²

Schwantes’s work demonstrates that the demise of the open-range era towards the end of the nineteenth century, and thus the world of the classic cowboy, was not part of a clear-cut, linear transition to urbanisation, and modern farming and employment practices. Rather, different forms of employment and lifestyles characterised the West, existing within larger trends experienced in the region. As such, the end of the open-range cowboy life, while symbolic of important social and economic transitions in the West, did not equate to the end of a golden era of self-employment and independent living. *The Crossing* explores how these protracted developments in labour in the West were lost in mainstream conceptions of the region, exposing Billy’s unrealistic expectations of working as a cowboy in mid-twentieth century America. For example, in Mexico Billy meets a woman who, upon learning he is from New Mexico, supposes he is a miner. He corrects her, telling her he is a “vaquero” (a Hispanic cowboy).⁸³ This woman, outside of the consuming maze of cowboy mythology, exposes the reality of employment in New Mexico in the late 1930s, where copper mining was just as likely an occupation as agricultural work.

Billy shares in the popular and romantic conception of the West, where open-range work was the norm, and validated particular social and masculine expectations. Given this widely-held understanding of the open-range era and the role of profession in masculine identity in the West, Dee Garceau highlights the effect the demise of open-range ranching had on cultures of manhood. The harsh winter of 1886-87 instilled a new emphasis on family ranches and the year-round care of herds. It was at this time that the nomadic cowboy image took root, serving to reinforce the wild masculinity of an occupation becoming increasingly

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⁸² Schwantes, “The Concept of the Wageworkers' Frontier,” 54.
domesticated. Garceau writes that the “Cowboy myth reinforced the masculine occupational identity of raising beef, even as the reality shifted from nomadic all-male herders to men and women together on family ranches.” As ranching practices evolved and the prevalence of wage labour remained obscured, the myth became more opaque, important, and powerful than ever.

The extent to which the western myth was used to define a nation and individual’s self-image following industrialisation is underlined in Connie Brooks’s early 1990s study of New Mexican cowboys in 1917 southeast New Mexico. Examining how New Mexican cowboys as an occupational group responded to the demise of the open-range, Brooks found that these men were largely literate, married with families, owned homes, and were active members of the community. Brooks writes that, “The years they spent as cowboys appear neither to have marred nor glorified their lives.” However, these cowboys’ lives became romanticised nonetheless, by their modern-day descendants and a handful of outsiders. This again supports the connection between the demise of the cowboy occupation with its mythologisation. Furthermore, it reinforces the notion that Wister’s and others’ stories maintained a sense of validity thanks to their investment by western labourers born too late to experience the open-range themselves.

Michael Pettit, a former rancher, discusses the transition to modernity in the Texas and New Mexico cattle business:

Barbed wire and windmills appeared, with homesteaders not far behind; railroads replaced trail drives; the Dust Bowl and oil boom came and went, etching their effects

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86 Connie Brooks, The Last Cowboys: Closing the Open Range in Southeastern New Mexico, 1890s-1920s, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), xi.
87 Brooks, The Last Cowboys, xi.
88 Brooks, The Last Cowboys, 22.
into the landscape and culture; isolated ranches merged into a worldwide web; cowboys onstage supplanted cowboys in the saddle.\textsuperscript{89}

The commercialisation of agriculture brought on changes that impacted all areas of life in New Mexico. In this environment, David Remley argues that “unless the cattlemen had the intelligence, the management faculties, the experience, and the resilience to change with the new demands, his business failed.”\textsuperscript{90} Remley and Pettit’s observations underline how the rural experience of the transition to modernity posed a variety of challenges not all men were able to meet.

The evolution of ranching in the West suggests that the cowboy’s occupational identity and battle between life in the mainstream and periphery began much earlier than during the post-WWII era more commonly associated with this mythic figure’s crisis of identity and loss of relevance. While the open-range aspect of the myth was once a brief reality for cowboys, other elements were in fact never part of the authentic experience. In particular, the notion that cowboys were stoic individualists is shown by Garceau to be wholly untrue. Instead they developed strong fraternal bonds with those they worked with, celebrating their marginal status in society through alternative relationships which challenged the Victorian mores of the time.\textsuperscript{91} The loneliness and displacement Billy suffers highlights how the myth of the solitary cowboy figure obscured the range of relationships that in reality enriched a cowboy’s rough life. Like the wolf Billy captures, Billy’s existence is a struggle to survive without companionship that creates shared experiences and support.

\textsuperscript{91} Garceau, “Nomads, Bunkies, Cross-Dressers, and Family Men,” 154, 160, 163.
The division between popular memory of labour in the West and a more diverse reality places *The Crossing*’s American protagonists in an environment where the culture of manhood has retained certain mythic ideals, while the means to pursue them are constantly in flux. This is made apparent when Billy listens to Mr. Sanders’ stories of working in Mexico, witnessing raids by Villa and buying cattle cheaply after the destructive winter of 1886:

“Cattle so poor the old man said that at evening crossing before the sun where it burned upon the western desert shore you could all but see through them.”

He then responds to Billy’s plan to “hire on somewheres” by commenting “We’re about shut down here altogether.”

This passage emphasises the changes in agricultural practices in the West, from the dying embers of the open-range era Mr. Sanders experienced, to Billy’s struggle to find even the wage labour he sees his chosen occupation as supposedly demoted to.

Garceau writes that, “Long after open-range herding had faded, cowboys on fenced, family ranches shared in the legendary identity of the nomadic range cowboy.” This again supports Brooks’s findings, suggesting that the cowboy myth served an important function for the descendants of open-range cowboys, reconciling the demands of modern ranching practices with their own expectations and identity inherited from previous generations. It can therefore be seen how the evolution in this type of labour, regardless of its misunderstood history, severely impacted widely-held perceptions of masculinity, and its attainability, in the West.

It is clear that masculine identity and its attainability in the West is enshrouded in misconception. The blurring of real experience with story was not simply the product of blinkered historical scholarship and memory, and did not only develop over time. It also occurred concurrently, as wider society either chose or failed to recognise the heterogeneity.

of lifestyles on the frontier. Peter Boag shows how this particularly proved the case in regard to masculinity in the West. Exploring the lives of cross-dressers and homosexuals during the nineteenth century, Boag contends that such behaviour became heterosexualised as part of a wider national undertaking to heteronormalise the Old West. Media portrayals of homosexuals drew upon long-established literary devices and Western tropes, to contextualise their activity in a regional progressive narrative. As a result, western mythology served to erase competing notions of manhood and the region’s pluralism, to assert a dominant monolithic Anglo male authority. R. W. Connell argues that the ideals of hegemonic manhood fail to correspond with the actual personalities of most men in the West. A progressive, one-dimensional ideal of masculinity prevailed over the memory of more real, varied experiences, yielding a similarly teleological mythology.

Work such as Boag’s effectively builds a bridge between reality and myth, illuminating how one can be transformed into the other. While the western myth has a remarkable lifeblood, ensuring an ongoing presence in American culture and scholarship, Boag shows how that does not mean myths are untouchable; nor should they be wholly discarded in the pursuit of truth. Instead, they can be instrumental in revealing how particular regions and the wider nation understand their identity, and how personal experiences can fundamentally jar with the dominant conception of the American West.

Timothy Parrish argues that the truth of an accepted history can be challenged through the use of narrative, to create a counter-history that better reflects real experience. This can certainly be seen in McCarthy’s fiction, where mainstream western history is not only challenged, but also repopulated with the experiences of his characters. The process of mythologisation in the nineteenth century West was at heart one of storytelling. Both

95 Boag, Re-Dressing America’s Frontier Past, 104.
97 Parrish, PostModern History and American Fiction, 2.
Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill essentially told stories, as does McCarthy a century later. A key difference, however, are the claims to truth made by Turner, Cody and also Theodore Roosevelt, not asserted by McCarthy. While all these chroniclers share a varying objective of educating their audience, McCarthy does not declare his West to be the West. He instead uses storytelling as a way to bring relatively unknown aspects of western experience to his readers’ attention, exploring how western myths are manifest in relationships between people and nations on the U.S-Mexico border. Thus McCarthy’s concern with the truth makes no claim to universality or authority over history. Rather, he uses narrative to tell one story among the myriad to be told on the border.

McCarthy’s concern with the power of narrative is made all the more significant by his setting of the plot in the late-Depression borderlands. Stressing the relationship between folklore and the changes occurring in this era, Barry Lopez writes that industrialism, colonialism and capitalism left modern western culture with the task of redefining the nature of community.98 Many rural communities in this period experienced significant upheaval, creating a great sense of shock and helplessness. Studs Terkel’s work on oral history of the Great Depression, *Hard Times* (1970), demonstrates this sense of powerlessness. One interviewee comments that “There’d be this kind of futile struggle, because somehow you never expected to win. We had a built-in losing complex.”99 This period saw a boom in folklore work, with communities turning to local storytelling traditions as a way to comprehend the changes they confronted. John Greenway writes that, “Folklore is the detritus of an advancing culture” preserving the stories that “sift to the bottom and margins of a society where they are preserved by people who share least in the affluence of their

 These people, with no stake in wider society, ironically seemed to partake in a process of storytelling to reconcile broader national and global changes, not unlike Roosevelt and Wister’s reaction to changes some forty years previously.

A prominent folklorist during this era was Texan folklorist J. Frank Dobie, who provides a link between folklore of dispossessed masses and the mythology promoted by popular culture. In reaction to a certain loss of purpose in this challenging era, Dobie sought to translate the richness of the Southwestern land and culture into literature. His interest in the history of this region was driven by his deeper curiosity for its stories and folklore, shaped over generations. Dobie both collected stories and wrote them himself, always with a keen interest in how mythology drew upon and transformed the truth. His work reflected a wider national interest in western mythology and questions of national identity in a modernising America.

In contrast to earlier nineteenth century romanticised depictions of the West, J. Frank Dobie’s work exhibits a keen interest in creating a more realistic, cooperative western mythology. His writing sought to reunite storytelling and historical accuracy, emphasising that myths need not be the simplistic and misleading ideals articulated by Roosevelt and Turner. Dobie’s extensive research into the grassroots origins of various folk tales did not seek to dispel myths so much as celebrate how the truth survived; part of the thrill in hunting for the truth was the unfolding of the extent of its distortion.

By the mid-twentieth century, western terms, images and ideas had, through such extensive popular use, evolved from their original meanings, becoming often self-referential. For example, regarding the use of a photo of a horse incorrectly identified as a mustang, Dobie commented that “I think they are all right to illustrate the movement of wild horses.

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Popular usage has made any kind of wild horse into a Mustang.”

Dobie’s conscious support of the use of inaccurate photos due to their illustrative value shows how the tangled relationship between history and mythology is comprised of more than simply misunderstandings of the West. It is also a case of how best to render the past knowable and relatable.

Both Dobie and McCarthy share a similarly ambiguous and knowing approach to the relationship between history and mythology. Dobie revelled in western mythology, highlighting its value in reflecting the experiences and attitudes of ordinary people. Describing his stories, he wrote that “no attempt at the ‘definitive’ has been made. My aim is to reveal human beings. Nearly all the characters are dead. They represent vanished ways and a vanished tempo. Yet no life of one time is alien to another time.” These tales do not seek to tell a universally accurate story, instead their emphasis is on exposing the connections between people over time, making the past relevant to the present. With so many perspectives and experiences of the past, any attempt to tell one decisive story is fraught with the problems exposed in *The Crossing*’s narrative.

Reflecting on mid-twentieth century western mythology from the 1990s, McCarthy’s work suggests that the power behind these stories and ideas remains an important point of consideration regarding American identity and history. In *The Crossing*, the western myth retains a heavy degree of relevancy and power as Americans seek an anchor to weather the storm of changes posed during the late 1930s. In turn, the novel’s composition in the late-twentieth century highlights how western imagery continues to pervade American society.
framing conceptions of a variety of contemporary issues. Both Dobie and McCarthy pose the question of who has access to myths, and to what end. They share a recognition in the value of mythology to create a sense of belonging and cohesion among many different people and experiences. This underlines the importance in reclaiming conceptions of the West from those in power, and refashioning its mythology to be more applicable to contemporary needs, be that in the late-1930s or the modern day. The malleable and enduring nature of the Western myth can thus be turned into a positive thing, only perpetuating misunderstandings of the past if it is allowed.

Mythologisation is an ongoing process to which all are connected. McCarthy shows how the split between mythology of the West and lived experience on the U.S-Mexico border is not beyond interrogation. For The Crossing’s main protagonist, Billy, the progressive narrative propounded in popular images of the West, does not serve its function of creating purpose and belonging, instead creating a worldview that fundamentally impedes Billy’s life.

Henry Nash Smith writes of the need for images “which simultaneously express collective desires and impose coherence on the infinitely numerous and varied data of experience.” While McCarthy shows the danger in these deceivingly coherent stories, he also emphasises that there is another way to approach Smith’s symbolic West. His creation of new stories in the borderlands reveal how mythology and storytelling need not be an inherently deceiving exercise. It can also be a source of illumination, and an avenue to create new historical memories and understandings as America continues to look to its past to define its present.

103 A prominent example is the use of cowboy and outlaw imagery to describe drug-smuggling on the border in news stories and popular culture, for example “The New Cocaine Cowboys” by Robert C. Bonner and the popular music of narco-corrido artists such as Chalino Sánchez and El Komander.
104 Smith, Virgin Land, ix.
Chapter Two / Power and Confusion in the Borderlands

*The Crossing* highlights the connection between Western mythology and the exercise of power, both at a personal and national level. In the New Mexico-Chihuahua borderlands, issues of displacement and belonging are exacerbated by proximity to another nation, culture and history, compounding the liminal state of the protagonists and hindering attempts to create new relationships and identities on the border. American entrepreneurial activity on the borderlands in the first decades of the twentieth century betrays the unequal relationships of power in the borderlands, often resulting in a selective and incomplete historical understanding of the region. Pekka Hämäläinen and Benjamin H. Johnson write of the ambiguous forces of power on the border, where a nation-state’s weak but nonetheless apparent reach creates a sense of uncertainty at the local level. The changing role of business interests and national governments confuse the operations of power in the borderlands. This results in anxiety regarding how the border region’s inhabitants fit into, or more often are excluded from, the wider dynamics impacting their lives. *The Crossing*’s main protagonist, Billy, shows little knowledge of borderlands history, reflecting wider American perceptions of the region in the first half of the twentieth century. This chapter argues that national narratives of U.S. presence on the border obscure exploitative relationships in the region, framing American perceptions of Mexico that perpetuate incomplete accounts of the border’s history.

This chapter uses McCarthy’s novel to explore how American perceptions of Mexico overlook the complexities of the two countries’ relationship. The historic imbalance of power on the borderlands will first be considered, focusing on the period between the late nineteenth century and the Second World War. The relationship between America’s imperialist ideology

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and individual action south of the border will be emphasised, arguing that the disparate exercise of power in this region was symptomatic of wider relations between the two countries during the first half of the twentieth century. The development of wealth in the borderlands was at the expense of local people, who benefited little from the extractive economy that took hold there. In northern Mexico, local discontent boiled over with the Mexican Revolution in 1910, a pivotal event in borderlands history of which Billy has little comprehension, despite living so near to the action and being of Mexican heritage himself. As such, this chapter will explore how the Revolution was understood north of the border, using media portrayals as a gauge for how elites presented the conflict to the American public. This investigation will focus on the activities of wealthy American newspaperman William Randolph Hearst, who had significant land holdings south of the border, and often interjected on political and economic issues in Mexico. The complicated and protracted revolt, in which America would on multiple occasions intervene, was simplified by the media and presented in a form the American public could easily understand. This simplification of the Revolution can be viewed as another in a long line of interactions between these two countries that are informed by historic conceptions of American dominance in the borderland region.

Fears of U.S. incursions on Mexican soil and violations of Mexican sovereignty have a long history. The U.S-Mexico war, in which Mexico was forced to cede half its territory to America in 1846-48, provides ample validation for these fears. Whether it is tourism or economic opportunity, or even a combination of the two, land south of the border is a historically enticing prospect for Americans. Studying the sensational literature of empire-building in the mid-nineteenth century, Shelley Streeby argues that the U.S-Mexico war was
a crucial point in the history of power relations between these two countries. Popular literature from this period, such as the novels of George Lippard and A. J. H. Duganne’s Dime Novel contributions, present imperial visions of Mexico based on unequal constructions of race, class and nation. Streeby writes that “dime novels that were written about Mexico and the Mexico-U.S. borderlands, (...) should remind us that the West in the dime novel Western is a hemispheric and global, and not only a national, space.” The borderlands remained a space of U.S. imperial vision into the twentieth century, with American popular entertainment such as the western literature and films of the 1930s using the region to explore issues of immigration, foreign policy and class-warfare. Streeby writes that “the relative critical neglect of sensational literature (...) has contributed to an amnesia about the connections among working-class culture, popular culture, and imperialism in nineteenth-century U.S. history.” On the U.S-Mexico border, this has served to obscure the long history of imperial activity of Americans that takes a variety of guises.

Sara Spurgeon suggests that it is part of the frontier myth to carefully ignore or disguise American imperialism abroad, as well as the reality of invasion, conquest, and colonisation that made the U.S.A possible. The historic allure of the borderlands exemplifies this, a region conceived in the American imagination as a source of prosperity and wealth. One observation from the early twentieth century on the romance of mining in this region reflects:

perhaps nowhere else on earth is the appeal of mining so dramatic as in Mexico, where in a history that does not fade the Cortez who four centuries ago exacted tribute

107 Streeby, American Sensations, 22.
108 Streeby, American Sensations, xi.
109 Streeby, American Sensations, 37.
from Montezuma seems more recent than in the United States seems the Theodore Roosevelt who enlisted Rough Riders and preached strenuous living.\textsuperscript{111}

This point highlights how the legendary perception of land to the south as a source of great wealth survives over more recent history of imperial ventures in the name of American ideals. A news story from 1925 demonstrates the survival of these legends, reporting that eighty-four year old prospector, Tom R. Owen, was once again crossing the border to discover his lost vein of gold. The reporter writes “he once found it, many years ago, and since has made fruitless excursions to find it before he passes to the Great Beyond to prospect in some other worlds.”\textsuperscript{112} This attitude exemplifies Spurgeon’s argument, suggesting that repeated incursions onto Mexican soil are obscured by the romanticism of western mythology that presents riches attainable with no consequence.

The ideological features of imperialism, cemented in sensationalist popular culture of the time, shored up a perspective of the United States as the leader of the New World. This attitude would inform America’s later interaction with Mexico, particularly in regard to business relationships between the two countries. The roots of modern U.S-Mexico business relations took seed during the Porfiriato (1876-1911), through Porfirio Díaz’s encouragement of capital expansion and globalisation by foreign investment. However, his push to globalise Mexico’s economy came increasingly at the expense of the country’s sovereignty; politically, economically and culturally. Diaz’s pursuit of foreign markets, in combination with Theodore Roosevelt’s interventionist Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine in 1904, led many to fear a “peaceful American invasion” in the pursuit of Mexican markets.\textsuperscript{113} This became especially

\textsuperscript{111} “Of Gold and Silver,” Box 5, Folder 3, J. Frank Dobie Papers, 1898 -1988, Southwestern Writers Collection, The Wittliff Collections, Texas State University-San Marcos.


apparent in northern Mexico, where geographical proximity to America further cultivated a transnational relationship built of tentative cooperation.\textsuperscript{114}

Industrialisation, and particularly the development of the railroad, became a key factor in northern Mexico’s deeper integration with the United States over Mexico City. The first transborder rail line reaching completion in 1882, stoked a capitalist revolution, based on the opening up of far-away markets previously inaccessible.\textsuperscript{115} The railroad secured ranchers and miners a fast and easy way to move stock and ore to these markets, fuelling the export economy that would continue to characterise the region in the 1930s, often at the expense of those living on the border. The modernisation of the border and wider Mexico, from the industrialisation policies of Díaz in the late nineteenth century, through to the full integration established by WWII, led to a concentration of power in the hands of U.S. businesses which unsettled many Mexicans and challenged the nationalist rhetoric of a hard-fought revolution. As noted by David E. Lorey, Americans owned a disproportionate amount of the business on the border, also having significant stakes in the larger Mexican economy, particularly with regard to oil.\textsuperscript{116} Underlying this expansion was the ideological imperialism described by Streeby; an updating of the bountiful borderlands image from the dreams of men like Tom Owen.

The rapid influx of investors and labourers brought on by the railroad created tensions between the vast interests at play in the borderlands. Ethnic tensions arose within the workforce, leading to outbreaks of violence, and the increase in land claims in the area highlighted a contentious shift to private property. With some earlier claims considered to

\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{114} Rachel St. John echoes Manuel Ceballos-Ramirez and Oscar Martinez’s observation that Diaz and Mexico’s push for capital expansion inevitably ended in the northern states’ integration into the American economy.
\item \textsuperscript{116} David E Lorey, \textit{The U.S.-Mexican Border in the Twentieth Century: A History of Economic and Social Transformation}, (Delaware: Scholarly Resources Inc, 1999), 41.
\end{footnotes}
lack the necessary legal requirements, many locals were dispossessed of their land, as areas were redefined as public domain open to U.S. investors. Issues of ownership and power arising from the modernisation process on the border would prove a key factor in the anti-Americanism which was so strong in the 1920s, and would take on a particularly ambiguous role in the 1930s.

Wealthy foreigners such as William Randolph Hearst provided a significant infusion of capital to fuel the expansion in northern Mexico of commercial agriculture and livestock. With close business ties to Díaz, Hearst’s father, George Hearst, acquired the million-acre Bábicora Ranch in Chihuahua in the early 1880s for just forty cents an acre. William Randolph Hearst inherited from his father both the land and his imperial attitude, writing to his mother in 1886, “I really don’t see what is to prevent us from owning all of Mexico and running it to suit ourselves.” Hearst further demonstrated his indifference to the Mexican people through his support for the dictator Porfirio Díaz at the onset of the Revolution.

Crusading American journalist John Kenneth Turner wrote a heavy indictment of Hearst in response to his support of Díaz:

> Everybody knows that for the United States, and doubtless most other countries, he advocates democracy, freedom of speech, a free press, universal suffrage, regulation of predatory corporations, protection of labour. But Mr Hearst’s readers have just learned that for Mexico he is in favour of despotism, a police ruled press, no suffrage, unbridled corporations, and – slavery.

This suggests Hearst’s perception is one entrenched in decades of popular thought, that the attainment of wealth across the border is of no consequence to those who call this land home.

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117 St. John, Line in the Sand, 72-76.
McCarthy directly confronts Hearst’s imperial activities in Mexico by setting a significant portion of The Crossing’s plot on Hearst’s Babicora estate. The novel here draws attention to how the economic activities of elite Americans were not always well known to their less powerful countrymen:

What’s La Babicora? he said.
The ganadero’s unkempt eyebrows lifted. (...) It is a ranch. It is owned by one of your countrymen, a señor Hearst.
Do they sell a lot of horses?
Not so many as they buy.
Why did they sell the horse?
Quién sabe? The capon is not so popular in this country. There is a prejudice I think is how you would say.121

Billy has never even heard of Hearst or Babicora, and is unaware of the long and exploitative economic relationship between the two countries, once again drawing attention to his ignorance of the historically disparate relationship between Mexico and America.

David E. Lorey emphasises America’s role in their southern neighbour’s capital expansion, with wealthy bankers, investors and corporations effectively controlling the border economy from afar.122 While these parties provided the wealth needed to kick-start Díaz’s modernisation project, the resulting imbalance of power in foreigners’ hands, and the creation of an export economy dependent on outside markets, restricted many Mexicans’ access to the benefits this modernisation yielded. The shift in economic power and upheaval of local traditions brought on by Díaz’s policies led to the anti-American sentiment which fuelled support for the Mexican Revolution in the northern states in 1910.

Mexico’s armed struggle sought an end to Díaz’s tyranny. However, over the course of a decade the revolt transformed into a protracted civil conflict, culminating in vast but ambiguous socio-political reforms in the subsequent decades. As U.S. business interests

121 McCarthy, The Crossing, 510.
across the border region grew in number and importance, so too did political concerns, becoming especially apparent over the course of the Revolution. The nationalist sentiment accompanying the Revolution threatened American-owned land and businesses in Mexico, prompting U.S. political intervention to protect its citizens and commercial interests. This came at the expense of Mexico’s right to self-determination, as the American government actively interfered in the course of the revolution to serve their own needs. Berta Ulloa argues that throughout the Revolution, the U.S. government repeatedly violated Mexico’s national sovereignty. It was, of course, advantageous to the U.S. to have a politically stable neighbour to the south, especially on the eve of international conflict in Europe. However, protecting the interests of U.S. citizens and businesses in Mexico is largely understood as the primary reason for the government’s intervention.

Ulloa discusses the foreign policy of Presidents Taft and Wilson, emphasising Taft’s hand in the overthrow of revolutionary leader Francisco Madero in 1913 and Wilson’s role in authorising General John J. Pershing expedition into Mexico in 1916. These are shown to be central examples of the American government’s direct encroachment on Mexico’s political autonomy, with significant repercussions both in the short and long term. In regard to the immediate impact, Ulloa writes that in Wilson’s “mistaken expectations, he achieved neither peace nor the friendship of the Mexican people (...). To the contrary, his actions caused the reforms of the Revolution to occur more slowly and be more limited in scope.” While the very presence of American business in their country was a source of discontent for Mexicans, the perceived reaction to their revolutionary ideals, which suggested that U.S. interests superseded Mexico’s political sovereignty, revived America’s reputation as belligerent force

to be treated with caution. For example, the U.S.-backed deposition of Madero and subsequent support for the unpopular General Victoriano Huerta, did little to enhance America’s image among the Mexican public.125

Although the U.S. government had clear concerns regarding the course of their southern neighbour’s revolution, the American people were less invested or informed on the conflict. Adela Pineda Franco argues that the Mexican Revolution was considered remote from the immediate political concerns of many Americans.126 It was treated as a cinematic spectacle; literally in the films made about revolutionary figure Pancho Villa, and figuratively in its simplified treatment by U.S. newspapers. That the U.S. could have such a vast impact on Mexican history and society, yet popular opinion remain so unconcerned by this relationship essentially adds insult to injury for those whose daily lives were considerably affected by the actions of Americans in Mexico. United States businesses, perhaps the most easily identifiable front to this exploitative indifference to Mexican sovereignty, were repeatedly targeted in the anti-American rhetoric which developed both during and after the Mexican revolution.

Hearst’s vast land holding in Chihuahua, la Babicora, came under repeated threat and attack by revolutionaries, most prominently Villa. In the winter of 1915, Villa forces took over the Hearst ranch lands, killing a number of employees and cattle.127 Describing Villa as the “absolute dictator of northern Mexico,” Hearst was a vocal supporter of U.S. intervention in the Revolution.128 His mother, Phoebe Hearst, also exercised the family’s public and political influence, sending a telegram to Secretary of State Robert Lansing stating that “as a

citizen of the United States, I suggest to you that it is the duty of this Government to take measures to prevent the de facto Government of Mexico from disregarding and overriding the rights of American citizens who own property in the Republic of Mexico.”

129 The Hearst’s statements highlight how powerful Americans with a stake in the outcome of the Revolution held strong opinions regarding the conflict. Furthermore, through the use of their media empire, they were able to publicise their opinion among the wider public.

Indeed, the U.S. press and film industry were instrumental in framing popular conceptions of the Revolution in America, with popular culture retaining its function of crystallising public opinion, as seen in Streeby’s study of the region over half a century before. Dominique Brégent-Heald describes how the mainstream U.S. film industry popularised the borderlands as a landscape of the romanticised Old West, writing that the U.S.-Mexico border of Hollywood was “perpetually ensconced in Turner’s evolutionary conception of the West.”

130 As such, cinematic representations continued Turner’s work, presenting America’s past in a usable narrative affirming modern Americanism. An important feature of this use of the borderlands was the on-screen mystification of its history, as filmmakers overlooked the historic marginalisation suffered in this region, ignoring the revolutionaries’ drive for democratic reform and instead sensationalising their violent struggle.

132 Pancho Villa understood and exploited the growing popularity of films in America, signing deals with Hollywood that restored his image, garnered support north of the border, and funded his revolutionary cause.

133 Friedrich Katz observes that Villa’s relations with the film industry became an inextricable mix of myth and reality, with the biographical

131 Brégent-Heald, “Projecting the In-Between,” 259.
132 Brégent-Heald, “Projecting the In-Between,” 261.
The Life of General Villa (1904) combining newsreels with fictional film. Writing that “reality was sacrificed to what the producer assumed were the tastes of American film viewers,” Katz’s description of Villa’s relationship to cinema is reminiscent of the creation of Western mythology by figures such as Buffalo Bill, Theodore Roosevelt and Owen Wister. In both cases, the reality of experience was distorted to serve the values and ambitions of the man behind the story.

This distortion was not confined to literary and cinematic entertainment, as Mark Cronlund Anderson argues that the U.S. press collectively framed and interpreted the Revolution in ways resonating with the mythical frontier narrative of America’s own history. Portrayals of Pancho Villa demonstrate this particularly well. The violent, backward stereotypes through which America cast prominent actors in the conflict was capitalised upon by Villa, as he actively sought to define himself in opposition to these images. Bolstered by the mythical fertility of the Southwest borderlands, he encouraged a portrayal of himself as the masculine cowboy so familiar in American history in part thanks, ironically, to the Texas Rangers, long-time persecutors of Mexican-Americans north of the border. The American media seized upon this, having a character through which to make the conflict relatable to their readers, despite the inaccuracies and incomplete story such a portrayal told.

Villa was so successful in this endeavour that even William Randolph Hearst became a brief but outspoken supporter of Villa, printing stories in his papers championing Villa’s agenda. In an editorial from the summer of 1914 Hearst wrote,

The one man in this Mexican conflict and crisis who has appeared to tower above all others in personal power and capacity, in the magnetism to lead, the mastery to

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command, and the ability to execute, is Francisco Villa… If Villa is made president he will remain president and establish a stable and reliable government.  

This opinion, notably expressed before Villa’s attack on his land, exhibits Hearst’s questionable grasp of the ideological underpinnings of the Revolution, supporting or vilifying one of its key figures as benefitted his economic stake in Mexico’s future. A March 1914 article describes General Villa as “grimy with dust and sweat, a red bandanna handkerchief about his neck. (…) He rode up and down lines swearing and cheering, cursing and calling.” Here it can be seen how Hearst’s paper portrays Villa as a noble frontiersman, untainted by the pretensions of civilised society. Indeed, Hearst himself wrote in September 1914:

> There are many men in Mexico more cultivated than Villa, many better educated, many more trained in diplomatic services and in the gentler arts of government. But these qualities are not what is required…. A strong hand is needed, a determined purpose, a masterful mind.

While Villa was a key leader in the revolutionary struggle on the border and successfully cultivated a folk-hero status, the Mexican Revolution did, of course, need educated, diplomatically capable individuals. Hearst’s assertion to the contrary betrays an inability to recognise the deep ideological struggles that permeated Mexican society and the Revolution. This comprehension of Mexico, circulated in Hearst’s newspapers and wider popular culture, can clearly be seen as an extension of the sensational literature Streeby argues shaped American imperialistic attitudes in the nineteenth century. Hearst’s prominent role in the causes and development of the Revolution obscured by the use of narratives familiar to the American public, naturalising an exploitative and unequal relationship common to international relations in the borderlands.

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138 *San Francisco Examiner*, 29th March 1914: 1
139 *San Francisco Examiner*, 26th September 1914: 17.
In the 1920s, U.S. Prohibition and subsequent growth in tourism added another dimension to the unequal relationship between these nations. The 1920s saw a decline in fortune for the Mexican economy, with agriculture especially suffering. Meanwhile, the U.S, and their side of the border in particular, enjoyed unprecedented growth. In addition, while the United States underwent a period of enforced moral reform, highlighted by the economic and social progress promoted by Prohibition, the Mexican border states became the site of moral degradation, effectively absorbing the more depraved sides of human experience no longer able to be satisfied in the United States. Lorey argues that the economic growth these states experienced as a result of Prohibition was uneven, superficial and incomplete, creating few systematic or lasting improvements to the infrastructure.\textsuperscript{140} The economy was built upon outside ownership and decisions made by those with interests not concerning civilian life on the border. This effectively created an economic colony in the 1920s, an area perceived by both countries as a resource to be utilised at will by the larger nation.\textsuperscript{141} It thus became increasingly apparent that the interests of the powerless border residents were of little consideration to the American businesses once more benefiting from the social and economic resources offered by the region.

In \textit{The Crossing}, McCarthy’s Mexican characters are haunted by the Revolution and the sense of being left behind by the industrialisation policies on the border that led wealthy men such as Hearst to profit at the locals’ expense. Billy’s first crossing into Mexico occurs in 1939, during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas, where progressive land redistribution was achieved but somewhat offset by wider trends in urbanisation and industrialisation, and pressure to produce in support of capitalist accumulation.\textsuperscript{142} This proved detrimental to some

\textsuperscript{140} Lorey, \textit{The U.S.-Mexican Border in the Twentieth Century}, 47.
\textsuperscript{141} Lorey, \textit{The U.S.-Mexican Border in the Twentieth Century}, 50.
\textsuperscript{142} Elisa Servín, Leticia Reina and John Turtino (Eds), \textit{Cycles of Conflict, Centuries of Change: Crisis, Reform, and Revolution in Mexico}, 4.
labourers and those on the edges of society, while American investors continued to profit in
Mexico, by simply adapting to the Revolution’s social and economic changes.\footnote{F. D. Roosevelt’s Good Neighbour Policy took a non-interventionist stance to its Latin American foreign policy, while U.S. businesses sought a cultural middle ground which allowed them to operate in Mexico offending their revolutionary ideals. See Julio Moreno’s \textit{Yankee Don’t Go Home!}}

The marginalisation experienced by the local people Billy meets in Mexico is
articulated significantly more acutely than Billy’s; their unresolved displacement at least
afforded a point of convergence in the Revolution’s struggle to forge purpose and belonging
in society. For example, the gypsy Billy encounters towards the end of his journey reflects on
the legacy of the Revolution in regard to memory, nationality and fate. While contemplating
the body of an old aeroplane he is transporting, McCarthy writes:

\begin{quote}
He seemed to ponder its shape there. As if were contained in that primitive
construction some yet uncoded clue to the campaigns of the revolution, the strategies
of Angeles, the tactics of Villa.\footnote{McCarthy, \textit{The Crossing}, 588.}
\end{quote}

The struggle to make sense of and reconcile the divisions in their society underline how
unknowable this country is to an outsider. The blind revolutionary Billy meets earlier in the
novel lost his sight in the conflict. Describing the blind man’s experience, McCarthy writes,
“His pain was great but his agony at the disassembled world he now beheld which could
never be put right again was greater.”\footnote{McCarthy, \textit{The Crossing}, 699.} The revolutionaries of McCarthy’s novel are
presented as pushed aside and forgotten in the march of national myths about the struggle,
their dreams irrevocably un unravelled. “The soul of Mexico is very old,” another character
comments, “Whoever claims to know it is either a liar or a fool. Or both.”\footnote{McCarthy, \textit{The Crossing}, 720.} The Revolution
accentuates how Mexican history and identity, for these people, is a complicated entity,
immune to intimate knowledge and above individual control. Media portrayals of the conflict
by powerful Americans highlight this, simplifying their southern neighbour’s history and reframing the struggle through American literary traditions.

This simplification of experience on the border invites a parallel with the silencing of “real” cowboys in the creation of a cowboy myth in the U.S. However, America does not comprehend its history so wearily. Instead it is edited and consumed by its citizens as needed to define the nation, both to themselves and the outer world. Compared to the reflections on loss and exclusion expressed by McCarthy’s Mexican characters, Billy’s sense of displacement seems almost unconscious. This is demonstrated by his belief that the reclamation of his horses would only be valid upon re-entering the U.S. When Boyd inquires as to why they can’t rely on Mexican law and order to assist retrieving their horses, Billy responds, “there ain’t no law in Mexico. It’s just a pack of rogues.”147 Although it is in America that Billy’s parents are murdered and his horses stolen, his ingrained conception of the differences between the U.S. and Mexico leave him unable to see that notions of authority and justice are not so straightforward in practice. Rachel St. John describes how U.S. citizens would watch revolutionary battles from their side of the border. Despite there being no physical barrier to protect them they felt wholly safe, so confident were they in their legal and psychological power over Mexico.148 This exemplifies the sense of assuredness America held for its own institutions in contrast to those south of the border, maintaining an understanding of Mexico’s problems that did not implicate the U.S.

The prevalence of a selective conception the Mexican Revolution is further demonstrated by memories of the conflict on the U.S. side of the borderlands. The Revolution had a clear impact on this region, most tangibly perhaps through the increase in immigration, illicit border crossings and the revolutionary activity launched from American soil. For

147 McCarthy, The Crossing, 485.
example, Flores de Andrade, a member of the privileged class who turned against Díaz, writes about her reasons for moving to El Paso, Texas in the early days of the Revolution:

I came in the first place to see if I could better my economic condition and secondly to continue fighting in that region in favour of the Liberal ideals … to plot against the dictatorship of Don Porfirio.\footnote{149 “Flores de Andrade Recalls Her Revolutionary Activity as an Immigrant in El Paso, Texas, 1931,” \textit{Major Problems in the History of North American Borderlands: Documents and Essays}, edited by Pekka Hämäläinen and Benjamin H. Johnson, (Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2012), 389.}

Despite the U.S-Mexico border playing a key role in the revolutionary struggle, whether for wealthy Mexicans such as Andrade or key leaders like Villa, comprehension of the Revolution north of the border was both simplified at the time by commentators such as Hearst and overlooked in later national memory. Through an investigation of historical sites of memory in El Paso, David Dorado Romo argues that Revolutionary activity which took place there has only recently been acknowledged by business and political leaders - those who effectively are able to decide what is considered a legitimate historical site or otherwise.\footnote{150 David Dorado Romo, “Charting the Legacy of the Revolution,” \textit{Open Borders to a Revolution: Culture, Politics, and Migration}, edited by Jaime Marroquín Arredondo et al, (Washington D.C: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 2013), 154.} This effacement of the Mexican Revolution north of the border is also seen in McCarthy’s novel. While McCarthy’s Mexican characters on the border are under no illusion as to the influence America has in their country, it is not so well known to the north. The long-held reluctance to recognise the historical legacy of the Revolution and America’s role in it, and how this played out in the borderlands, mean that Billy is not afforded an understanding of this region divested of imperial mythology.

Upon reaching Mexico, Billy and his brother Boyd encounter a small street lined with trees, riding past houses kept with gardens lawns and white picket fences. Boyd asks “What kind of a place is this?” to which Billy replies “I don’t know.”\footnote{151 McCarthy, \textit{The Crossing}, 503.} Mexico does not fit their
romantic expectations. Furthermore, as highlighted by Billy’s confession that he had previously given little thought to Mexico’s past and present struggles, the only Mexico the two brothers know is the one of American construction, a place of timeless tradition and opportunity no longer available in America. However, the Mexico they encounter here is one clearly affected by modernisation and American presence; it is not the timeless land of escape he expects. The long-established myths surrounding the Mexico in the American imagination inhibit Billy from comprehending this country in any more nuanced or realistic way.

U.S. business activities clearly highlight the extractive, unequal nature of cross-border interaction in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. While American investors provided the wealth needed to kick-start Díaz’s modernisation project, the resulting imbalance of power in foreigners’ hands, and the creation of an export economy dependent on outside markets, restricted many borderlanders’ access to the benefits this modernisation yielded. The American use of Mexico for material gain is an important facet comprising the larger fantasising of their southern neighbour, of which tourism is perhaps a more explicit example. However, tourism and business were not wholly separate assaults on Mexican land, with Catherine Cocks suggesting that the development of the railroad in the borderlands was an example of how tourism and business, colonisation and pleasure, worked hand in hand in a symbiotic relationship.152 Whether for personal or economic benefit, or even a combination of the two, land south of the border continued to hold its traditionally enticing position in the American imagination.

Indeed, despite the threats to his Chihuahua land holdings, Hearst maintained possession of Babícora, until it was sold to the Mexican government for $2.5 million in 1953,

two years after his death. Furthermore, he continued to wield influence over political affairs in the borderlands. In 1928 Hearst was implicated in a U.S. Congress investigation into corruption between the Mexican Government and U.S. Senators. The committee reported that Hearst was owner and publisher of the group of newspapers which printed facsimiles and translations of documents purporting to show that representatives of the Mexican Government had paid large sums of money to four United States Senators, for the purpose of influencing their attitude toward Mexican-American affairs.

Although no politicians were ultimately found guilty of corruption, Hearst’s involvement indicates the connections between elites on either side of the border and the degree to which they exercised their power at the expense of democratic proceedings even after the official end of the Revolution which sought to end such foreign interference.

While *The Crossing* is set ten years after this investigation, the sense of disenfranchisement across the border remains apparent. In response to Billy’s attempts to find his stolen horses and a sense of belonging in Mexico, he is advised, “Return to your home. (…) [T]he past cannot be mended. You think everyone is a fool. But there are not so many reasons for you to be in Mexico. Think of that.” Here Billy is arguably told that he cannot change the legacy of his countrymen’s previous actions in Mexico, that the country to which he has sought to escape can provide little for him due to America’s economic and cultural imperialism. Despite such warnings, Boyd joins the revolutionary cause still being fought in McCarthy’s borderlands, fulfilling the corrido heard earlier in the novel of a young man who kills a member of the Guardia Blanca, a mercenary group hired to protect Babcitara from the

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very people Hearst’s possession of the ranch had displaced. The subsequent death of Boyd suggests the futility of pursuing an anti-American cause, and the incompatible reality of any attempt by an American to create a life in Mexico which does not follow the accepted storyline of imperialism and capitalisation. The historical tapestry is ultimately too finely-woven to escape.

The extent to which borderlanders’ identity is restricted by prevailing national history and narratives is reinforced by the use of western mythology to obscure experiences of exclusion on the border, as explored in chapter one. The mythological American West’s intimate relationship with masculinity and labour served to ease changes in agricultural practices and structures of labour in the early twentieth century. In turn, this reinforced the inequalities of power in late 1930s America. These issues are prominent in *The Crossing*, where changes in agricultural practice introduced by the American elite such as Hearst, underpin the displacement suffered by McCarthy’s border inhabitants. Describing how a certain story of the past prevails over others, the gypsy tells Billy:

> A false authority clung to what persisted, as if those artefacts of the past which had endured had done so by some act of their own will. Yet the witness could not survive the witnessing. In the world that came to be that which prevailed could never speak for that which perished but could only parade its own arrogance.\(^{157}\)

This reflection aptly expresses the reality of history and its mythologisation on the border. Those at the heart of the myth have no power over the story which is created by those with license to erase the past. Whether it is a shared expectation regarding individuals or lifestyles, or the larger understandings of historical events and their significance, the authority within these myths is so total that they become difficult even to recognize, let alone challenge.


Despite American attempts to deny the tangled history and relationship shared with Mexico, it has nonetheless repeatedly turned to its southern neighbour as a source of national identity. As Billy is told in the novel:

[W]hat we seek is the worthy adversary. (…) Something to contain us or to stay our hand. Otherwise there were no boundaries to our own being and we too must extend our claims until we lose all definitions. Until we must be swallowed up at last by the very void to which we wished to stand opposed.\textsuperscript{158}

It seems here that despite the suffering of McCarthy’s characters, who are caught between two countries with different perspectives of the borderlands space, the alternative is much worse. If not in opposition to another they are instead consumed by it, becoming everything and thus nothing at the same time. However, the necessarily exclusive nature of this nationalism leaves the powerless border population once again sacrificed for the sake of the wider nation.

The nationalist myths developed in opposition to an ‘other’ in the nineteenth century clearly have far-reaching implications nearly a century later in The Crossing. Richard Slotkin suggests that mythology, whether created around nations, occupations or events, is used to enlist people in a country’s ideological programme, deriving usable values from history and putting them beyond the reach of critical demystification.\textsuperscript{159} The false authority clinging to conceptions of the Mexican Revolution, the cowboy, and the agrarian idyll have elevated them beyond interrogation by those who have found such concepts to be falsehoods. The extent to which these myths serve the needs of those in power is reinforced by the sense of fatalism they instill, which pervades the pages of McCarthy’s work. Billy is told that “while it was true that men shape their own lives it was also true that they could have no shape other

\textsuperscript{158} McCarthy, The Crossing, 462.
for what then would that shape be?" In studying borderland identities, Eeva-Kaisa Prokkola echoes Slotkin’s work, arguing that narrativisation serves to create an order in the world that both constructs and sustains personal and collective identities. Such identities can only be performed through the available social and cultural discourses. Despite any illusion of agency McCarthy’s characters may have, they are ultimately contained by those in power and the wider narrative of their countries. Attempts to act outside of these confines are repeatedly proven misguided and doomed to defeat.

Such an attempt to step outside of the boundaries imposed by the elite is made by Boyd in the rejection of his American identity and joining the cause of the Mexican peasants, resulting in his death. On the other hand, Billy better understands the advice given to him throughout his journey, resigning himself to his nationality of birth however unfulfilling such a life is destined to be. “I’m an American,” he tells the guard as he crosses back into New Mexico, “if I don’t look like it.” Unable to conform to the myths, expectations or nationalist mould of his country, and incapable of understanding or fully integrating into Mexico, Billy is condemned to be a de facto resident of this nebulous border region. However, he is cautioned nonetheless that “men’s ends are dictated at their birth.” This perhaps indicates the importance for Billy of burying Boyd back across the border in America. Despite Boyd’s assertion that he has no home, Billy sees that until his blood and bone lay with the nation to which he was born, he will forever be displaced.

McCarthy’s borderland at its heart is a place of conflict and loss. The use of frontier myths that frame interaction in this region persisted over the twentieth century, much to the detriment of those trying to join the rest of their nation in modernity. Echoing the words of

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162 McCarthy, *The Crossing*, 646.
McCarthy, Patricia Nelson Limerick writes that “false renderings of the past do not make it any less significant.”\textsuperscript{164} The ways in which myths and narratives of national purpose inform American understandings of the border in the first decades of the twentieth century demonstrate this. The frontier myth framed preconceived notions of the border and served to naturalise American activities in Mexico that exploited the local land and peoples.

In \textit{The Crossing}, the unnamed blind revolutionary who speaks to Billy eloquently observes that Mexico is a country “where the future of man stood at dress rehearsal daily.”\textsuperscript{165} With neither sight nor a place in history, this man instead perceives the world through words and stories, understanding the futility of searching anywhere else for a meaning to life. The dominant imperial narratives of George Lippard, mass-produced Dime Novels and Owen Wister had in America created a national story difficult to challenge. McCarthy’s preoccupation with local folklore and storytelling on the border emphasise the traditional relationship between stories, history and power in this region. As Billy is told, “For this world also which seems to us a thing of stone and flower and blood is not a thing at all but is a tale. And all in it is a tale and each tale the sum of all lesser tales. (…) This is the hard lesson. Nothing can be dispensed with.”\textsuperscript{166} History, both in the personal and national expression, is alive with meaning, constantly developing and informing further action. McCarthy’s work shows how borderlanders may be obscured by elite conceptions of the region, however they can not be excluded from the act of telling their own history on the border to reassert their claims to the land over outside exploitation.

\textsuperscript{164} Limerick, \textit{The Legacy of Conquest}, 254.
\textsuperscript{165} McCarthy, \textit{The Crossing}, 589.
\textsuperscript{166} McCarthy, \textit{The Crossing}, 451.
Chapter Three / A Search for Belonging on the Border

The U.S-Mexico border played host to a compelling convergence of political events and transitions at the close of the 1930s. As the world slowly emerged from the depths of the Great Depression into the unprecedented turmoil of the Second World War, the United States began to rethink its democratic principles, both at home and abroad. These developments brought concepts such as citizenship and belonging to the forefront of political and cultural thought, loaded with new meaning and new responsibilities. *The Crossing* provides scholars a lens, revealing how borderlanders of low-economic status experienced these changes, including the idea that western mythology effectively provided a code of living which could no longer be sustained by World War Two. This chapter argues that McCarthy draws attention to experiences of displacement and their extensive roots in a period of unprecedented change on the border, suggesting that it is ultimately through the use of stories that those suffering exclusion can reassert their value and sense of belonging in society.

In exploring how the displacement caused by economic inequality, the tides of modernity and hegemonic mythology in the borderlands, this chapter first begins with a discussion on the changing notion of citizenship in America during the Great Depression and World War Two era. It will then be considered how these developments played out in New Mexico, one of the most impoverished and unindustrialised states in the country at the time, through a study of social welfare reports and political activism in the southern part of the state. The chapter will then explore El Plan De San Diego, a rebellion initiated in 1915 among Mexican-Americans in response to the centuries of disenfranchisement and marginalisation ethnic minorities had suffered at the hands of the Euro-American powers in the Southwest. El Plan de San Diego provides an important example of marginalised peoples’ efforts to forge some kind of belonging on the border, obscured by dominant narratives of the region in which it simply did not fit. The dominant narrative of the southwest was further
crystallised during this period, especially through conceptions of New Mexico in the tourist industry. This chapter will end with an investigation of folklore and historical writing in the World War Two period, highlighting that while a prominent cause in the pervasive displacement in the borderlands, storytelling can also be the source of new understanding and belonging in this region.

Following the Wall Street Crash in 1929, the Great Depression posed unprecedented global challenges. For the American people, new levels of cooperation were required between the U.S. government and its citizens. The expansion in relief programmes comprising Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal aimed to help America recover from the economic hardships. The programmes suggested a realisation that in a country growing in international wealth and importance, the U.S. government had new responsibilities to its people, especially in the face of remote and indifferent interests, such as powerful business activities and global financial panic, that emerged as increasingly powerful over citizens’ lives. With this development in the U.S. government’s social and economic role, the country’s understanding of the concept of democracy evolved also. The relationship between an individual and the government arguably became one based on the idea of mutual obligation, with both participants expected to provide a function for the other.¹⁶⁷

The evolution in America’s understanding of democratic participation brought many positive changes for people, helping to pull them out of the Great Depression and leading the post-WWII charge for a new political order. However, many members of American society were left out of participating in this new America. For example, the omission of racial minorities from democratic participation was particularly prominent on the U.S-Mexico border. This is highlighted by the Bracero Programme, created in 1942. The programme allowed millions of Mexicans to work in the United States on short-term agricultural labour

contracts during WWII. These Mexican labourers worked tough jobs for low wages, and were denied the full rights they had been promised in American society.\footnote{Bracero History Archive, http://braceroarchive.org/about, accessed 27th March 2015.}

In New Mexico’s rural borderlands, the state’s insufficient social welfare facilities of the late thirties did not benefit local inhabitants. This was despite New Mexico receiving more money per capita than any other state, through several New Deal agencies.\footnote{Judith Boyce DeMark, Essays in Twentieth-Century New Mexico History, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994), 5.}

McCarthy’s works underlines how, with no structures of support in the community to assist the establishment of welfare services, and a lifestyle both physically and culturally remote from mainstream America, the rural youth were already irreconcilably detached from their nation’s ideals and future by the eve of the Second World War. Describing Billy’s younger brother, Boyd, following the shooting of their parents, McCarthy writes:

He looked fourteen going on some age that never was. (…) He looked like his own reincarnation and then his own again. Above all else he looked to be filled with a terrible sadness. As if he harboured news of some horrendous loss that no one else had heard of yet. Some vast tragedy not of fact or incident or event but of the way the world was.\footnote{Cormac McCarthy, The Crossing, 486.}

McCarthy here articulates a pervasive and indeterminate sense of loss, suggesting that such an experience is inevitable for his characters. They are almost trapped in a life with no future, too entrenched to change their fate. The resulting sadness is so pervasive as to resist any identifiable causes, instead simply being “the way the world was.” However, as highlighted by the degree of financial assistance New Mexico received through the New Deal, in reality issues of poverty and displacement in this region had been identified by outsiders.

Although too late and insufficient to thwart the inevitable dislocation from society explored by McCarthy, institutional and community attempts to furnish belonging in this region had been made. For example, New Mexico introduced a Bureau of Child Welfare in
1924. However, it was short-lived, facing practical and ideological problems which led to its closure in 1935. With a small staff and no other significant welfare structure in the state, be it private or public, the widespread relief the Bureau sought to generate simply did not have the necessary support to be effectively carried out. The Bureau aimed to help vast sections of society, including “care of the blind, crippled, unemployed, transient, sick, the bankrupt farmer and aged.”\textsuperscript{171} However, tackling these larger concepts for social action required a change from individual to mass social work, which met resistance and hostility from political, professional, business, and social leaders trained to follow one leader or one agency.\textsuperscript{172} The ideological and practical challenges the Bureau faced, as the only form of welfare support in the state, proved insurmountable. Despite this, its original formation does indicate a shifting perspective in the relationship between social institutions, those in power, and people in need, based on the obligation and responsibility to provide relief.

This effort is further shown by the Social Security Act of 1935 which helped to establish a public welfare system in New Mexico.\textsuperscript{173} Despite this, the poorly resourced and bureaucracy-heavy support arguably arrived too late and was ineffective at solving the entrenched societal isolation in the borderlands. Reports for the New Mexico Department of Public Welfare from late 1939 highlight a number of problems undermining efforts to help the struggling local population. A recurring issue across the state’s counties was a lack of staff and resources, weakening both the quality and quantity of relief the offices could provide. For example, Hidalgo County reported that a “definite breakdown has occurred in the quality of casework and recording,” with medical relief cited as being in a particularly

\textsuperscript{171} “Personal Correspondence to Kay Rose Wood, 1983-1992,” box 1, folder 41, K. (Katherine) Wood papers, Centre for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

\textsuperscript{172} “Personal Correspondence to Kay Rose Wood, 1983-1992.”

bad state. Furthermore, a report concerning a small mountain village in nearby Sierra County stated that

the mining industry has died in Hillsboro; one or two large ranches are still maintained, but there is no farming and no private industry of any kind on which the community can depend for a living. Old prospectors who look like characters out of the Bible come out of the hills occasionally to call for commodities or medical relief.

Together, these accounts render an image of southwest New Mexico at the end of one way of life yet not fully engaged with the new America either. With decreasing options to provide a stable livelihood, and no steadfast structure of support to ease the transition to modernity, the impacted populace became relics and found themselves on the periphery of the evolving democratic society in other parts of the United States.

The sense of dislocation from wider society suggested in these reports is especially apparent regarding Catron County, a similarly rural region to the north of Grant and Hidalgo. The desolateness of this land and remoteness of its inhabitants was a huge obstacle to social work, provoking a notably vivid report emphasising the struggles faced:

Pines and rocks and desolation pierced at night by the cries of close-by hungry coyotes and burned to infertility by day stretch on and on and on into the horizon. (…) There are no grass roots in some places in Catron County (…) To attempt to analyse the Public Welfare work done in this County is almost ridiculous when one thinks of how difficult it is to do social work there.

This reinforces the impression that a population had been lost, living far removed from both the ideological and physical efforts to push America into a new era of democracy. The progressive measures of the New Deal did not reach all communities, and this is particularly true for many areas in the borderlands. The sense of removal during this era was a repeated

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174 “New Mexico Department of Public Welfare Reports, April 1939-December 1939,” box 4, folder 31, K. (Katherine) Wood papers, Centre for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.
175 “New Mexico Department of Public Welfare Reports, April 1939-December 1939.”
176 “New Mexico Department of Public Welfare Reports, April 1939-December 1939.”
theme throughout county reports, typically in the form of a discussion regarding the lack of both action and knowledge due to funding limitations. Not only was it difficult to provide relief to people, but to even identify such populations as in need was problematic.

The hardships experienced throughout the 1930s highlighted the need for a broader conception of social action, with social change requiring not only an individual effort, but also an institutional one. Discussing the connection between American citizenship and big government during this era, James T. Sparrow writes that the federal government was empowered to place the collective good above all else, following the guiding philosophy that “a free nation has the right to expect full co-operation from all groups.” In this vision there were no entitlements; a stake in democratic America could only be claimed through obligation and sacrifice. Such an exchange of effort, however, necessitated a degree of personal investment in America’s future. McCarthy shows how exclusion from society obstructed such personal investment, not surprisingly undermining any notion of civic duty. Upon being asked what Billy plans to do following the discovery of his parents’ death, his exchange with the sheriff exemplifies this lack of regard for his nation’s institutions:

I aint decided what all I’m goin to do. First thing I got to do is go get Boyd. (…)
Boyd aint going nowhere.
If I am he is.
Boyd’s a juvenile. They aint goin to turn him over to you. Hell. You’re a juvenile yourself.
I aint askin.
Son, don’t get crosswise of the law over this.
I don’t intend to. I don’t intend for it to get crosswise of me neither.

It can be seen here that Billy has little sense of obligation to America’s norms and values. His disregard for the law here contradicts his faith in American law to assist in reclaiming his

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stolen horses later in the novel, discussed in chapter two. Having grown up in a region largely detached from the larger nation’s march to modernity and democratic participation, he does not recognise the importance of cooperation in a new America; neither Billy nor the law are accountable to each other.

Billy does not exercise his social obligation to the law and appears to receive little in return, regardless of which side is ultimately at fault. He makes little attempt to exercise social agency in America, instead seeking resolution to his problems in Mexico. However, for other social groups in the U.S. Southwest during this period, attempts to exercise social agency on American soil were made. In the summer of 1915 a group of Mexicans in Texas initiated one of the largest rebellions in U.S. history, known as El Plan de San Diego. In this rebellion, resentment from becoming divested of power by Anglos and treated as second class citizens culminated in a series of raids which left locals from all backgrounds in fear. The objectives of the revolt were vast and ambitious, calling for a “liberating army of all races” to take over Texas, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona and California. Preferably rejoining Mexico or otherwise becoming an independent nation, El Plan de San Diego would subsequently assist African Americans and Native Americans to form independent nations in the newly acquired land.180

Although the initial Plan clearly targeted the powerful and wealthy of America, its further ideological goals did not reach maturation until later in its attempted execution. What did transpire was its celebration of armed struggle and an appeal to interracial cooperation, although notably excluding Anglo-Americans.181 This highlights how the rebellion was underscored by a desire to belong, not only by creating a community with shared interests in

the revolt, but also by attempting to exert influence over the direction of the nation and thus belong to its history and culture. El Plan de San Diego’s interracial objectives are especially given credence upon considering the manner in which the rebellion was suppressed. With reactionary vigilantism and proposals for systematic ethnic cleansing on the border, Anglos developed racial solidarity in the face of continued raids by the rebels.¹⁸² In addition, the legendary Texas Rangers (known by their victims as ‘los diablos tejanos,’ the Texan devils) played a crucial role in brutally subduing the rebellion and further cementing their reputation as the embodiment of the Anglo-American frontier myth. Thus while the Plan began as an attempt to assert Mexican identity in America, it instead bolstered the dominant culture and political system they fought against, spurring anti-Mexican racism and oppression in the borderlands.

The uprising’s defeat reinforced America’s conquest over both Mexicans and the Southwest itself. Johnson suggests the Plan ultimately played into the hands of Anglos as their dominance was reasserted through Mexican-Americans’ further loss of land and loved ones, and their disenfranchisement.¹⁸³ The defeated attempt to assert their rights led many ethnic Mexicans to withdraw from social and cultural interaction with Anglo Americans, ultimately adding to their displacement from the country they had called home, and reinforcing their absence from mainstream historical narrative. The rebellion and its suppression are closely linked to developments in social patterns on the borderlands, most prominently the entwined histories that Mexicans, Mexican-Americans and Anglo Americans share. Thus while El Plan de San Diego’s lack of success is not surprising, particularly in hindsight, what is curious is the extent to which it is overlooked in American history. The dearth of scholarship or attention the movement receives in history textbooks is telling of its

¹⁸² Johnson, Revolution in Texas, 109-123.
¹⁸³ Johnson, Revolution in Texas, 144-145.
lack of purpose in the American narrative. Indeed, Johnson’s study in 2003 was the first to comprehensively cover the subject matter.

The gypsy Billy meets toward the end of *The Crossing* muses upon this kind of historical erasure, commenting “one could even say that what endows any thing with significance is solely the history in which it has participated.” With no connection to the prevailing narratives in American culture and history, El Plan de San Diego’s attempted interjection into broader forces of American history is lost of any meaning outside of for those immediately affected.

The failed nature of the rebellion is reinforced by the lack of importance it was afforded by the national governments of Mexico and the United States, both concerned with what were considered more pressing political issues. Viewing the unrest as potentially damaging to Mexico’s attempts to solidify a post-Revolutionary relationship with America, Mexican President Venustiano Carranza collaborated with Wilson’s forceful shutdown of the rebellion. Johnson writes that “Carranza happily sacrificed the interests of Mexicans in Texas to gain Wilson’s cooperation in ridding some of his most prominent critics of their freedom.” Simultaneously in America, interest surrounding El Plan de San Diego paled in comparison to the impending participation in the First World War. It thus received little attention in American media and cultural discourse.

The ignorance which enshrouds El Plan de San Diego is reflected in McCarthy’s *The Crossing* through the lack of attention given to Mexicans while the novel is situated in America. However, they are alluded to through the experience of the wolf Billy captures, originally from Mexico and with no legitimate future apparent in the U.S. Moving out of Grant County to Hidalgo County in the mid-twenties, the land to which Billy and his family

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185 Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 137.
migrate is still perceived as undomesticated and untouched by U.S. civilisation. McCarthy writes that, “The new country was rich and wild. You could ride clear to Mexico and not strike a crossfence.” The sense of wilderness is emphasised by the unobstructed sight of Mexico, combined with the presence of wolves Billy hears in the hills. Now on the eve of America’s involvement in the Second World War, both the wolves and their borderless land have become obsolete. McCarthy presents a landscape far-removed from government institutions, free of the complex histories of the two countries which here converge. While this land is historically of great contention and change, to an unassuming individual it is a vacant, borderless and timeless space.

The difference in perspective of the land between the local and national level is particularly apparent in mapmaking on the border. The national need to reduce concepts to a measurable and ultimately sellable quality is demonstrated by this contentious issue. After the U.S-Mexico War (1846-1848), the Mexican government wanted to create a national map to reinforce their political power both domestically and internationally. However, the process of creating such a map brought to light key differences in the understanding of place, nowhere more-so than in the borderlands. Raymond B. Craib writes that “the unitary and smooth façade of any image can serve to sever it from the multitude of conflicts, confrontations, and contingencies that went into its very construction.” Behind the order and simplicity of a map are lives, stories and histories which can not be incorporated into such an image. The local people living on this previously unmapped land were not “fleeting mirages on the surveyor’s horizon but agents in their own, and Mexico’s, spatial history.” This standardised cartography effectively washed locals from the landscape, allowing the land to

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188 Craib, *Cartographic Mexico*, 11.
be portioned and sold by those in power. Thus it can be seen how such mapmaking served to further displace the powerless border inhabitants, as they were both literally and metaphorically erased from the land.

McCarthy shows the impossibility of creating a map that is truly able to encompass all meanings and experiences ascribed to the land when Billy is assisted by a local in acquiring directions to Casa Grandes:

He commenced to draw trees and houses. Clouds. A bird. He penciled in the horsemen themselves doubled upon their mount. Billy leaned forward from time to time to question the measure of some part of their route whereupon the old man would turn and squint at the horse standing in the street and then give an answer in hours.\textsuperscript{189}

This land is comprised of much more than simply measurable space. The creatures and weather, the individuals and their horses; all of these things alter experience of the country. A journey is much more than simply the distance from one place to another. The validity of mapmaking is subsequently debated by another local in the novel who comments that “in that country were fires and earthquakes and floods and that one needed to know the country itself and not simply the landmarks therein.”\textsuperscript{190} The failure of those in power either in Mexico or America to recognise the history of this region and treat those living there as more than commodities or faceless labourers is underlined by their attempts to map this land, ignorant to the hopelessly subjective nature of such endeavours.

The desire to reduce the land and its boundaries to a scientific and factual existence reflects the broader American trend towards cultural amnesia regarding its relationship to Mexico. America’s apparent lack of reflection regarding El Plan de San Diego is symptomatic of its larger failure to understand Mexican history and its influential connection to the U.S, as discussed in chapter two. McCarthy does not include the events of El Plan de

\textsuperscript{189} McCarthy, \textit{The Crossing}, 493.
\textsuperscript{190} McCarthy, \textit{The Crossing}, 494.
San Diego in his narrative either; a missed opportunity, perhaps, to bring to light other mixed-ethnicity, poor agricultural workers like Billy. Despite growing up on the border, speaking Spanish and having a Mexican grandmother, Billy comments that “I never thought about this country one way or the other.”\textsuperscript{191} Johnson writes that “nations, like individuals, remember only the events and stories that help them to define who they are. And for many years, border stories seemed to have little to say to most Americans.”\textsuperscript{192} The lack of attention given to stories told in America about experiences such as El Plan de San Diego has arguably created a population in this area struggling to identify how they fit into conceptions of American nationality.

McCarthy’s work underscores the impact of the uncompromising entrenched ideology of American expansion on interaction in the borderlands. In \textit{The Crossing}, a key figure illustrating the troubled experience of space and place on the U.S-Mexico border is the wolf. Driven north into America by the need to survive, the wolf shares the borderlanders’ hardships trying to establish a life in this country:

\begin{quote}
Her ancestors had hunted camels and primitive toy horses on these grounds. She found little to eat. Most of the game was slaughtered out of the country. (…) She was carrying her first litter and she had no way to know the trouble she was in. She was moving out of the country not because the game was gone but because the wolves were and she needed them.\textsuperscript{193}
\end{quote}

While outside forces, such as national and business interests, treat this as a space in which to exert their power through the ownership of land and the imposition of politically defined borders, to its local inhabitants it is a place where they are simply trying to live. Like the architects of El Plan de San Diego, the modern cowboys with no open range, and Mexicans

\textsuperscript{191} McCarthy, \textit{The Crossing}, 427.
\textsuperscript{192} Johnson, \textit{Revolution in Texas}, 206-207.
\textsuperscript{193} McCarthy, \textit{The Crossing}, 331.
displaced from their land by businessmen such as Hearst, the wolf’s need to survive can not be contained by geopolitical borders.

Billy shares the wolf’s unawareness of the historical and political legacy of the border. Upon explaining his plan to return this captured wolf to the south, Billy is asked “What have you got against the Mexicans?” to which he replies “I don’t have nothin against em.”194 Billy’s failure to understand the history of poor treatment of Mexicans by America is arguably exposed here, as he fails to see the dangers his return of the wolf could create for those living in the area. However, all the wolf knows is that she is the last of her kind, alone and with her previous means of survival no longer available. The wolf arguably represents the displacement of Billy, who finds himself the last of a dying breed of cowboys and similarly without the means to survive on either side of the border by the end of the 1930s.

It is worth noting that while the communities explored above were removed from new conceptions of citizenship and democracy in America, not all were completely forgotten. New Mexico’s historically diverse ethnic make-up in particular was simplified, preserved and celebrated by the tourist industry in a manner that echoed wealthy industrial America’s use of the American West to negotiate turn of the century changes in American society.195 Hal K. Rothman writes that the Southwest has long served the role in America as a plain on which to work out the complex tensions regarding race and ethnicity that an increasingly diversifying nation posed.196 For example, the Santa Fe Railway’s trips were marketed as a chance to explore America’s past in a simple, mythologised environment. Specifically, a romanticised and timeless portrayal of the native population became the defining characteristic of the Santa

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195 Chris Wilson describes the trope of ethnic harmony between Natives, Angos and Mexicans in New Mexico as a “public ideology of triculturalism.”
Fe Railway advertisements in the early decades of the twentieth century. For example a testimonial in one pamphlet states,

Not until last March had I felt the full romance of our story as a nation. (...) Then I became aware that one who wishes to feel the epic of America must know what is left of primitive America in our great Southwest. Not to have that as a foundation is to leave the structure of our ideas about our country without a base... and it is so easy to get it!"\textsuperscript{197}

Here it can be seen how the land and cultures of the Southwest had a particular purpose in American society, providing an open space in which to reaffirm a progressive history and identity. The images of Native Americans accompanying statements such as these give no indication of what time period is represented. Instead, they are shown to be completely untouched by the forces of modernity or indeed, time itself. When on display, Kropp highlights how the Indians were required to wear native costumes and remove clocks from the walls as they were forced to confirm to a rigid interpretation of “authenticity.”\textsuperscript{198} The concealment of clocks indicates both a literal and figurative desire to suspend this population and culture in time, downplaying their tangible connection to American history and society.

In the Santa Fe Railway promotions Native Americans are depicted as untouched by white Anglo incursion. Furthermore, there is a near-absence of Spanish and Mexican ethnicity from these promotions after 1910, as noted by Victoria E. Dye.\textsuperscript{199} The implication of such selective portrayals is the suggestion of harmonious relations between different ethnicities, with no interaction or impact on each other over time. The Mexican Revolution, El Plan de San Diego, the brutality of the Texas Rangers; these stories of violence and ethnic

\textsuperscript{197} Indian Detour pamphlet, Box 1, Diane Thomas Darnall papers, 09688, American Heritage Centre, University of Wyoming.

\textsuperscript{198} Pheobe S. Kropp, “’There is little sermon in that’: Constructing the Native Southwest at the San Diego Panama-California Exposition of 1915,” \textit{The Great Southwest of the Fred Harvey Company and the Santa Fe Railway}, edited by Marta Weigle and Barbara A. Babcock, (Arizona: The University of Arizona Press: 1996), 42.

\textsuperscript{199} Victoria E. Dye, \textit{All Aboard for Santa Fe: Railway Promotion of the Southwest, 1890s to 1930s}, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006), 60.
tension are wiped from the land. It is a sanitised representation of history, omitting the bloodshed and complex ethnic relations that in reality characterise New Mexico’s history.

The tourist industry sought to effectively freeze New Mexico in a mythical and idyllic past. However, communities in this state did not disappear or remain immune to the tides of modernity. *The Crossing* highlights how many on the border were victims of the changing notion of democracy, their very way of life in divergence to the values and customs America sought to project into the future. A reciprocal relationship developed between the individual and government during this era, with both actors expected to provide a function for the other. America’s participation in the Second World War arguably solidified this relationship based on obligation, calling both the government and citizens to a new standard of accountability in the face of international threats and a precarious future.200 However, in *The Crossing* McCarthy presents individuals, both north and south of the border, unable to provide a function in society and who equally fail to receive any support from the government to ease their struggles. As a result they suffer exclusion from belonging to the new American society taking centre stage on the international scene.

While the advent of social services, public welfare and the nation’s emerging international influence were promoted as benefits to the lives of Americans, in *The Crossing* such changes instead largely signal a loss of power. Billy and his community’s traditional way of life is not compatible with modernity, with the dominating and all-consuming Depression and Second World War underpinning a shift in control from the individual to distant interests and events. This new form of democracy, based on a broad notion of obligation, had little application to life in the borderlands, where inhabitants had modest contact with government institutions or new cultural trends.

McCarthy suggests that a transformation in the myth of the American West further undermined the local norms and values during this era. Although grounded in a number of misguided or plainly false interpretations of American history, and long holding only a tenuous link to real experience in the West, this does not undermine the myth’s importance and relevance over the course of the twentieth century. Particularly in the borderlands, on the geographical and cultural periphery of society, the western myth effectively provided a design for living. Many still believed its tenets to be a viable way of life; a map, or at least some form of direction, for the future. However, during this transformative period of American history, the role of the western myth in society, much like the landscape of New Mexico itself, became a vehicle for reconciling America’s present and past. While the myth lost all application to real life in the West, its continued usage provided a sense of identity to mainstream America and inhibited the development of any alternative map or set of rules for those needing a new direction.

Upon the realisation that a new code for living was required to replace the defunct mythological western lifestyle, Billy attempts to join the army to fight in the international conflict. This is a pivotal moment in the novel, with the protagonist actively seeking to remedy his displacement by participating in a fresh national venture. There is arguably an understanding here that people need rules and boundaries, essentially a guidebook, to frame their choices and behaviour in society. For Billy, the army can offer a code for living he recognises that the Western myth can no longer provide. He is one of many young men reaching the same realisation. Indeed, joining the war effort even affords another avenue through which to honour tradition, with a fellow volunteer declaring, “I want to join the cavalry. (…) My daddy was in the cavalry in the last war.”

With the horse cavalry a diminishing sector of military action by WWII, this boy’s comment exhibits the disjunction

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between the expectations of these youths and the technological changes rendering them unrealistic.

Whether fighting for Spain, Mexico or the United States, New Mexico had a long-held tradition of a citizen-soldier militia leading up to the Second World War. In the first four decades of the twentieth century this began to change. The militia gave way to the National Guard; the citizen-soldier to the professional.\textsuperscript{202} In the build-up to the Spanish-American War, the First New Mexico Cavalry became part of the First U.S. Volunteer Cavalry Regiment, achieving the nickname “the Rough Riders” and led by none other than Lieutenant Colonel Theodore Roosevelt.\textsuperscript{203} As the U.S. entered World War One and saw the increasing threat of the Mexican Revolution spilling over at the border, Barron Oder argues that citizen-soldiers helped define national participation, being the first deployed at the border following Pancho Villa’s 1916 Columbus raid.\textsuperscript{204} However, the cavalry’s resurgence was short-lived; the subsequent U.S. punitive expedition into Mexico in pursuit of Villa would be the last major campaign of the U.S. Cavalry.\textsuperscript{205} By 1939, on the eve of the Second World War and the opening of McCarthy’s novel, New Mexico was still largely unindustrialised and experiencing high unemployment rates. The National Guard’s enrolment was too low to fill its positions. The 111\textsuperscript{th} Cavalry Regiment of New Mexico was converted to the 200\textsuperscript{th} Coast Artillery.\textsuperscript{206}

In \textit{The Crossing}, Billy’s young compatriots will not experience the New Mexican military of their fathers. However, by participating in the war effort nonetheless, they will have the chance to create a new chapter in both their families’ and America’s history. Billy,

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\textsuperscript{203} Oder, “The Military in New Mexico,” 102-103.
\textsuperscript{204} Oder, “The Military in New Mexico,” 106.
\textsuperscript{205} Neil B. Carmony and David E. Brown (Eds), \textit{Tough Times in Rough Places: Personal Narratives of Adventure, Death, and Survival on the Western Frontier}, (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2001), 278.
\textsuperscript{206} Oder, “The Military in New Mexico,” 111.
\end{flushleft}
on the other hand, is turned down by multiple recruiting offices due to a heart murmur. “There aint nothin wrong with my heart” he asserts. “Yes there is” he is informed.\(^207\) Despite his understanding that joining the war effort provides a solution to his lack of purpose in society, his heart problem indicates he simply does not have the soul or spirit to participate in America’s future. Upon appealing “You could pass me if you wanted to,” a doctor responds “I could. But I wont. They’d find it somewhere down the line anyway. Sooner or later.”\(^208\) Whatever Billy may do to try and belong to his nation’s future, an essential part of him will never allow complete participation.

With *The Crossing*’s main protagonist denied the means of belonging by joining the war effort afforded to most young men of this era, McCarthy’s work highlights how participation in society was not simply a matter of volition. The reports from New Mexico’s fledgling welfare system of the thirties and *The Crossing*’s exploration of life on the periphery of mainstream institutions, suggest that access and ability are of equal consequence to any desire an individual may have to belong.

Much like the New Mexico of tourist brochures, the popular U.S. conception of Mexico in the 1930s and 40s was as a timeless land, untroubled by the corrupting forces of modernity or international conflict. It therefore presents to Billy the only recourse from his displacement in the United States. His attempted use of Mexico to regain control over his life and alleviate the sense of dislocation he suffers in America poses intriguing questions regarding identity, national perspective, and these two countries’ shared history. A particularly compelling notion is that in crossing the border south, Billy engages in a familiar endeavour among disillusioned or entrepreneurial Americans. By using Mexico as a place to resolve the problems he has in his own country, Billy ironically participates in a wholly


American tradition. Mexico has long functioned as a space of escape and reflection in the American psyche, and more materially, a source of prosperity and wealth. As such, whether for political, economic, or artistic purposes, the tradition of self-serving American ventures into Mexico is well-entrenched.

As discussed in chapter two, Mexico’s role as a source of prosperity in the American imagination has historically manifested in political, economic and cultural incursions on Mexican soil. As a result, Billy’s repeated crossings into Mexico in the novel arguably become an unwitting exercise in belonging. The treatment of Mexico as a space to resolve discomfort with social and political developments in the United States is a common endeavour. The Mexican Revolution catalysed a political invasion into Mexican territory in the first half of the twentieth century that was mirrored by a significant number of writers and artists who also directed their attention southward. Many intellectuals during the inter-war years, disillusioned with an America increasingly individualistic and materially driven, travelled to Mexico in search of a deeper meaning to their lives. For example, Jack Kerouac was a notable American who, in the late 1940s, crossed into Mexico on his road trips around the continent. His writings on the country exhibit a romanticised vision of Mexico, often contradictory in nature.209

J. Frank Dobie provides a final example of the use of Mexico to resolve issues of displacement. A 1965 biography of Dobie by Winston Bode states:

Riding over the mountains of northern Mexico with his mozo, he had a sense of timelessness. “Except for a few fences and ranchos,” he wrote “the country was all open and unrestricted by man – a country immense, immense.” “It was as if I had never known any other land, any other life, any other beings but Inocencio, the mule, and the two horses…” The Depression in the States was a long way away.210

Although Dobie’s work shows a keen interest in Mexican history and culture, dispelling the idea that he sought to simplify or belittle the country’s turbulent past, he nonetheless appears to treat Mexico as a place to be used; a means through which to reconcile his disconnect from America at that time. His exploration of Mexican history and culture ultimately facilitated a new sense of belonging in America, leading his contemporary Charles Ramsdell to claim that by “interpreting the background of the life in Texas and the whole region of the southwest [Dobie] has given us dignity, something solid underfoot that was not there before, the foundation of a culture.” In travelling through Mexico, Dobie was able to better understand his homeland, afforded a new perspective on his own culture in relation to another.

Although Billy equally seeks to use Mexico as a remedy for his sense of dislocation in America, he does not share Dobie’s success, arguably due to his lack of knowledge on Mexican history and America’s extortive relationship with this country, exposing how misguided his intensions are. When Billy is accused by a local hacendado “You think that this country is some country you can come here and do what you like,” Billy responds “I never thought that. I never thought about this country one way or the other.”211 Billy’s ignorance regarding Mexico underlines how little he understands his own heritage and the land he inhabits. He becomes one more American treating the land south of the border as a place immune to the consequences of history; a world where myths still hold true and tradition retains value above and beyond the corrupting forces of modernity.

Nonetheless, the arrival of the Second World War prompted a change in this perspective. The need for reliable and stable international neighbours meant that Mexico’s endemic political unrest became more than simply a spectacle for Americans to enjoy or ignore as they pleased. Instead, there was an impetus to understand Mexico’s past and ensure it maintained a more politically and economically stable future. A particularly interesting way

211 McCarthy The Crossing, 427.
in which the push to reconsider Mexico’s culture and ideology materialised was in popular historical scholarship of Mexico. Writers such as Mexican-American Anita Brenner sought to untangle the complicated Mexican Revolution for a newly concerned yet largely ignorant American public. Harper’s Publishing proposed a book idea to Brenner in 1942, writing

now circumstance shores these two countries – U.S. and Mexico – closer together. Previously the only Americans who knew anything about Mexico were a handful of newspaper men, science people, radicals, mining engineers and capitalist’s agents. It has now become essential that all of us know what in the hell Mexico is all about.\textsuperscript{212}

Brenner’s \textit{The Wind that Swept Mexico} (1943) was the first concerted effort to explain and interpret the Mexican Revolution for an American audience, the results of which received noteworthy praise. For example, old-time American musician Hobart Smith wrote to Brenner in October of 1943 that while he was well-travelled in Mexico, he had “never understood their ‘revolution.’ It has been too big to grasp just by a little travel and less conversation; and histories give facts but little [insight] of the reasons.” Smith went on to write that “in about 100 pages you have clarified the meanings of these things in a way nothing else I have found has done.”\textsuperscript{213} This reaction to Brenner’s work appears to have been common among Americans with a desire to comprehend Mexican history but lost as to where to begin, given its previously ambiguous portrayal in U.S. popular culture.

By the onset of the Second World War, the American West had undergone vast and unprecedented change, proving especially turbulent on the U.S-Mexico border. Conceptions of the region leading up to the Second World War had been plagued by powerful and restrictive myths. The demand for histories such as Brenner’s that describe these changes free from such falsehoods suggest the developing recognition in the value of extending one’s

\textsuperscript{212} Harper’s ‘Geo’ book idea for Brenner, 1\textsuperscript{st} Sept 1942, box 5, folder 4, Anita Brenner Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, The University of Texas at Austin.

\textsuperscript{213} Letter to Brenner from Hobart Smith, 19\textsuperscript{th} October 1943, box 5, folder 4, Anita Brenner Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, The University of Texas at Austin.
perspective outside of the immediate locality, realising that individual experience and the stories which arise from it know no borders, be those geographical, political or temporal.

Throughout *The Crossing*, Billy hears the stories of fellow wayfarers; rootless people of the road. They are similarly wrestling with their failed participation in national events, and the subsequent sense of displacement to which they are condemned. Much of the content of these stories relates to the Mexican Revolution and ruminates on the validity of what is understood as history. McCarthy’s wayfarers repeatedly declare that there can never be one true account of an event, no definitive history. There are too many experiences, perspectives and resulting stories, each authenticated by their telling, to allow such a reduction. One drifter Billy encounters tells him:

> Things separate from their stories have no meaning. (…) When their meaning has become lost to us they no longer have even a name. The story on the other hand can never be lost from its place in the world for it is that place. And that is what was to be found here. The corrido. The tale. And like all corridos it ultimately told one story only, for there is only one story to tell.\footnote{McCarthy, *The Crossing*, 451.}

Stories imbue a person, an event, an object, with meaning; they fix an individual in the world. If the prevailing national ideologies do not tell a story that can do this, then the individual must instead. The “one story” referred to here indicates that while multiple tales and perspectives do of course exist, each account in itself has incorruptible value.

The significance of the tales collected by folklorists across the borderlands region is in their telling, in the chronicler’s desire to share the story with the wider world. By doing so, these people are able to participate in the assertion of local culture and folklore against the hegemonic narratives perpetuated by powerful individuals to maintain their own status. Steve Siporin writes of how tall tales, particularly in frontier communities, function through the
creation of insider group solidarity.\textsuperscript{215} This forming of culture and belonging does not come from sweeping international or political events, so much as from how they are experienced by the individual. Denied inclusion and agency by a nation holding the individual to evolving standards of citizenship, the sharing of tales provided borderlanders with another avenue to belonging.

J. Frank Dobie understood that it was through these stories that one could comprehend history, not as it necessarily happened so much as how it was experienced. As Billy is told in \textit{The Crossing}: “The corrido is the poor man’s history. It does not owe its allegiance to the truths of history but to the truths of men. It tells the tale of that solitary man who is all men.”\textsuperscript{216} While an individual may not be able to fulfil their civic obligations in a new America, they can never be denied their place, their meaning and their value if they share their story with others. Storytelling becomes a democratic movement; a way to facilitate belonging and to reconcile the loss and pain created by a fast-changing world.

By asserting the power of tales and local folklore, McCarthy reclaims history from those in power and the idea that there is just one story to tell. Instead, history is rooted in multiple perspectives with no single absolute truth or experience. For those that share these tales, regardless of their validity, it becomes a form of participation in society. Storytelling allows a degree of fluidity and creativity which can reconcile the pain, displacement and volatile changes inflicted upon otherwise powerless members of society. There is thus a degree of power and control in the telling of stories, as they hold the potential to create a new code for living in a new world. As Dobie wrote in 1941, “It never bothers me to hear the same story told widely by different individuals – provided the story is good. The men will


\textsuperscript{216} McCarthy, \textit{The Crossing}, 700.
die, but the story, if it is a good one, will live on.” In *The Crossing*, both McCarthy himself and the characters he creates become participants in this democratic movement. By asserting value to their experiences, these borderlanders hold the potential to carve new values, codes of living, and ultimately a means to carry them into an unknown future.

217 J. Frank Dobie, “My Texas,” 22nd June 1941, box 58, folder 11, Frank Dobie Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, The University of Texas at Austin.
Timothy Parrish writes that “history is its most powerful - its most true - when it is rendered as fiction.”\textsuperscript{218} This is perhaps because fiction can portray human experience in a way that forges empathy and connection to the subject, thus making the history a reality. Parrish goes on to state that the post-modern novel provides a field on which old-fashioned history is critiqued, and new history made.\textsuperscript{219} This is certainly apparent in \textit{The Crossing}, where classic narratives of western history are exposed not only as unrepresentative, but also the cause of exclusion and displacement in the U.S-Mexico borderlands. While McCarthy’s work critiques traditional conceptions of the West, it is important to note that his narrative in many ways fulfils the classic criteria of a western story. It features a young cowboy who goes on a journey of self-discovery as he seeks a sense of purpose and inclusion, while facing irrelevance in changing times. In one of the few interviews Cormac McCarthy has given, he once stated that, “The ugly fact is books are made out of books. (…) The novel depends for its life on the novels that have been written.”\textsuperscript{220} Here McCarthy recognises the enduring nature of literature; that both his literary style and subject are only afforded significance due to the stories that have come before.

There is no \textit{The Crossing} without \textit{The Virginian}. However, unlike Owen Wister’s cowboy who finds a purpose and acceptance in twentieth-century America, McCarthy’s cowboy is left at the end of the novel alone and in complete despair. Following the popularity of \textit{The Virginian}, Wister received many requests to write a sequel. However, G. Edward White notes that the time had passed.\textsuperscript{221} Wister wrote to his friend Theodore Roosevelt about

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\textsuperscript{218} Parrish, \textit{PostModern History and American Fiction}, 6.
\textsuperscript{219} Parrish, \textit{PostModern History and American Fiction}, 6.
\textsuperscript{221} G. Edward White, \textit{The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience}, 144.
\end{flushright}
“the tragedy of the cowpuncher who survives his own era and cannot adjust himself to the (one) which succeeds it.” Writing in the 1990s, this is the story McCarthy chose to tell.

In 1994, the same year that *The Crossing* was published, Canada, Mexico, and the United States signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The agreement would reduce barriers to trade and investment between the countries, creating economic wealth and employment across the continent. It signalled the beginning of a new relationship between the United States and Mexico for the twenty-first century based on deep economic integration. However, the agreement was not without controversy, particularly on the U.S.-Mexico border, where fears of labour exploitation, compromises to Mexican national sovereignty, and environmental destruction were prominent.

Many of these fears proved to be valid, as the following years saw unemployment rates along the border rise drastically, while heavy border industrialisation increased the population with less access to basic services like water and sanitation.

An especially crucial product of the international agreement was the post-NAFTA rise in *colonias*; unincorporated rural communities that appeared along the border, largely populated by U.S. citizens. These communities suffer living conditions similar to those in third-world countries, lacking adequate housing, sewage, electricity, and clean water. Such standards are starkly different to those of wider America, but notably, are comparable to the living conditions of many Mexican citizens. To the reader of McCarthy’s Southwestern fiction, these *colonias* are reminiscent of the communities he portrays on both sides of the

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222 G. Edward White, *The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience*, 144.
border some sixty years in the past. Writing in the period leading up to NAFTA’s adoption, McCarthy’s situation of his narrative on the eve of the Second World War highlights the similar sense of powerlessness and displacement suffered on the border in both eras. Many of the problems created by NAFTA had been predicted. However, a speech by President Bill Clinton in 1993 dismissed such fears, stating,

When I affix my signature to the NAFTA legislation a few moments from now, I do so with this pledge: To the men and women of our country who were afraid of these changes and found their opposition to NAFTA an expression of that fear, (…) the gains from this agreement will be your gains too.228

Clinton goes on to say that “there is no turning back from the world of today and tomorrow. (…) America is where it should be, in the lead.”229 There are clear parallels between this sentiment and that of the U.S. on the eve of World War Two, with both cases presenting an America looking forward, at the expense of marginalised border communities.

McCarthy’s exploration of inequality, powerlessness and displacement in the late 1930s and early 1940s cannot be detached from these events in the 1990s. Both events would bring huge economic growth to the borderlands, but also significant challenges to its local communities. As such, the former era provides a powerful environment in which to expose issues of exploitation and a mythologised past, ahead of the border’s next stage of transformation. This thesis has shown how McCarthy turned to the borderland region of the late 1930s and early 1940s to reveal an environment of great displacement and inequality. His use of history, myth and memory in his narrative opens up this region to new historical understandings that can also serve to enlighten more contemporary issues on the border.

From the popularisation of American western mythology to engrained colonial perspectives of the borderlands and wider Mexico, the stories that shape memories and
actions in this region are powerful. Chapter one of this thesis explored how historical narrative of the West was produced, controlled and understood at the turn of the century, through to The Crossing’s early World War Two era. The solidification of the classic western image by key individuals Theodore Roosevelt and Owen Wister served to ease tensions in an America that experienced unsettling changes with the onset of industrialisation and new approaches to foreign policy. Studying these developments through the lens of The Crossing invited an exploration of how the myths propounded by mainstream history, literature and popular culture obscured real experiences of the West, such as the wagelabourers analysed by Carlos A. Schwantes and the homosexual lifestyles brought to light by Peter Boag. The chapter concluded with a discussion on the powerful function of storytelling in the history of the U.S. West, noting that The Crossing is set during an important revival in local folklore, thriving in response to the helplessness many communities suffered in the Great Depression.

Theodore Roosevelt’s use of frontier mythology to present his international exploits in a less contentious manner to fellow Americans, as shown by the imagery and language used to depict the Rough Riders in Cuba, is apparent in chapter two’s discussion of national narratives regarding the United States’ historic presence on the U.S-Mexico border. The exploitative activities of U.S. businesses in the region combined with simplified American perceptions of the borderlands and wider Mexico, to instil conceptions of borderlands history that marginalised locals at the expense of mainstream national objectives. The exploits of prominent businessman William Randolph Hearst across the border in Chihuahua effectively demonstrate these issues. Not only did the Hearst family obtain their land through close ties to Mexican dictator Porfirio Díaz, displaying little compassion for the Mexicans treated so poorly under Díaz’s regime, but W. R. Hearst’s repeated interjections regarding the Mexican Revolution betrayed his sketchy understanding of Mexican politics and history, switching opinions on the conflict as it benefited his own stake in the struggle’s outcome.
General Pancho Villa’s portrayal both in Hearst’s newspapers and the wider American media exemplifies how the Mexican Revolution was framed in tropes of the American West to render the conflict more understandable to U.S. citizens. In McCarthy’s narrative, these reduced conceptions of the conflict leave his American characters unable to understand this event which still pervades border history in the 1930s. It is just one in a number of ways in which *The Crossing* reveals displacement on the borderland on the eve of the Second World War.

The final chapter of this thesis showed how the issues covered in chapters one and two effectively culminated in multi-faceted dislocation on the border, as America turned its attention to new challenges and advances with the Second World War. Changing conceptions of citizenship induced by the Great Depression and accelerated with participation in the war had an ambiguous impact on communities in south New Mexico, who were physically and socially remote from this new form of belonging in America. However, through the use of local folklore and powerful novels such as McCarthy’s, new knowledge and understandings of borderlands history, and thus new ways of belonging, can be forged.

By the Second World War, relations between the United States and Mexico were inextricably linked to business and economic interests, necessitating compromises and a renegotiation of historical memory to best facilitate cooperation. From a predominantly rural environment containing small-scale ranching and mining industries, to a post-WWII boom in capital-intensive agriculture, by the 1940s Mexico’s most modern, commercial, and export-orientated states were in the border region. Indeed, David E. Lorey suggests that the Second World War can be seen as the point at which a true border economy emerged.230

In the era in which McCarthy wrote *The Crossing*, this border economy underwent yet another development that would once again pose major challenges to local communities in

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the region. President Bill Clinton’s disregard for the ways in which NAFTA would negatively affect life on the border betrays the legacy of disregard the tides of American progress had for peoples and ways of life in the borderlands that did not fit prevailing narratives. In *The Crossing*, Billy meets an old Yaqui Indian who warns him about the purpose and value of belonging in this land:

> He said that the world could only be known as it existed in men’s hearts. For while it seemed a place which contained men it was in reality a place contained within them and therefore to know it one must look there and come to know those hearts and to do this one must live with men and not simply pass among them.\(^{231}\)

For readers temporally and personally removed from these spaces of contention and displacement, McCarthy’s work provides a window into the hearts, unlocking deeper insight and understanding of this place.

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\(^{231}\) McCarthy, *The Crossing*, 442.
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