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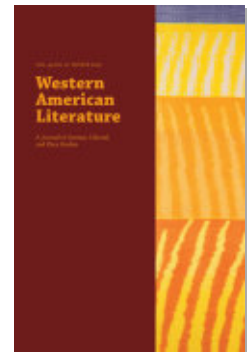
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**All the Pretty Mexican Girls: Whiteness and Racial Desire  
in Cormac McCarthy's All the Pretty Horses and Cities  
of the Plain**

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Alfredo de Batuc, assisted by Arutyun Arutyunian, Johanna Coleman, Arlen Guterrez, and James Stubbs. *DOLORES DEL RÍO*. 1990. Acrylic. Detail from a 24'x14' mural. Photograph: Ali Pearl. The mural is located on the east side of Hudson Avenue just north of Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles.

AP

Born in Mexico in 1906 to a wealthy family who lost its money during the revolution, del Río moved to Hollywood in 1921 with her husband to start a film career. She rose to fame as an exotic beauty, a female version of the “Latin lover,” Rudolph Valentino, as the “face of Mexico.” While she made many successful films, including the 1928 version of *Ramona*, she was increasingly cast in stereotypical and sexualized ethnic roles. After the end of a tumultuous four-year affair with Orson Welles during the filming of *Citizen Kane*, del Río moved to Mexico City, where she escaped typecasting and made many of her best films during the “Golden Age of Mexican Cinema,” becoming an international star. Friends with Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo and politically active, she was instrumental in starting the group “Rosa Mexicano” to protect children and female artists. She died in 1983.

ALL THE PRETTY MEXICAN GIRLS:  
WHITENESS AND RACIAL DESIRE IN  
CORMAC MCCARTHY'S  
*ALL THE PRETTY HORSES*  
AND *CITIES OF THE PLAIN*

JENNIFER A. REIMER

Despite the commercial success of Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy and subsequent novels (*No Country for Old Men*, 2005; *The Road*, 2006) and the increased critical attention paid to McCarthy by literary critics, current scholarship remains woefully inattentive to issues of race, gender, and the operations of power. Given the Border Trilogy's setting along the US-Mexico border in the middle of the twentieth century, the numerous international border crossings made by the characters and their interactions with a whole host of Mexican peoples and places, the untranslated Spanish spoken by McCarthy's heroes, and John Grady Cole's propensity to fall in love with Mexican women, this neglect seems puzzling. Yet even a cursory glance at the major edited anthologies of Cormac McCarthy scholarship prove how marginal analyses of race, gender, and their intersections remain.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay, I will address this gap in the scholarship by grounding my reading in a critical analysis of race and gender to critique McCarthy's stereotypical and often violent representation of Mexican women. I focus on the first and third novels in the trilogy, *All the Pretty Horses* (1992) and *Cities of the Plain* (1998), to read the relationships between McCarthy's young cowboy hero, John Grady Cole, and his two adolescent Mexicana love interests: the high-class Alejandra and Magdalena, the whore with a heart of gold. While much criticism applauds McCarthy's "revisionist" western history and examines how his unique prose style self-consciously revises the Western genre, I draw on Rosa Linda Fregoso's important work on the history of the visibility and invisibility of Mexicana bodies in borderlands culture to argue that Cole's relationships with Alejandra and Magdalena reify stereotypes about the availability and hypersexualization of Mexican women on the US-Mexico border in service of constructing a dominant, if ambivalent, white masculinity.

In focusing on the *ambivalent* qualities of McCarthy's border encounters, I'm responding in particular to readings such as José Limón's

in *American Encounters* (1998), which celebrate John Grady Cole (and McCarthy) as an example of a progressive white masculinity that is also culturally “fluent” south of the border. I acknowledge the ways in which McCarthy’s white, male American characters do depart from some classic Western stereotypes, especially in their Spanish-speaking abilities and capacity for deep and lasting empathy with non-white people, while also highlighting how McCarthy’s problematic portrayal of Mexican women implicates his work in a larger and longer history of commodification and sexualization of women’s bodies along the border.

The critical concerns this essay addresses seek to resituate McCarthy within a more nuanced series of border encounters that locate his representations of the US-Mexico border within the larger transnational transactions that interact in order to make available certain identities and modes of representation. Exposing the links between McCarthy’s representations and real-world material realities are crucial to this analysis because they reveal how McCarthy accounts for and disavows the operations of power and history on the US-Mexico border. McCarthy’s border novels represent an in-between space where western history and the Western genre can be self-consciously invoked and revised, but only to a certain extent. John Grady Cole may be more compassionate and “politically correct” than John Wayne ever was, better suited for the age of multiculturalism, yet McCarthy’s West is still a man’s world where women are fickle, absent, or dead. The violence, sexual and otherwise, perpetrated on the bodies of brown women in the Border Trilogy reminds us how much McCarthy’s white masculinities rely on such object bodies in order to fashion their own ambivalent agency.

The world of McCarthy scholarship, like so many of his fictional worlds, often seems to be a world hostile to outsiders. For instance, in response to Daniel Cooper Alarcón’s excellent article on McCarthy’s Mexican representations, “All the Pretty Mexicos” (2002), in which he identifies how McCarthy’s representation of Mexico upholds certain Manichean stereotypes found throughout US American literature about Mexico, J. Douglas Canfield counters Alarcón’s observation that McCarthy’s Mexico is nostalgic, romanticized, and provincial by claiming, “I am willing to accept the trilogy’s locating of the spiritual in the people of Mexico, who, as anyone who has ever interacted with them knows, are a genuinely spiritual people” (266). Unfortunately, such problematic and thoughtless generalizations appear throughout the critical canon.

Perhaps this scholarly hostility is one reason why so few scholars of ethnic studies, Chicano/a studies, borderlands studies, or critical race studies have bothered with McCarthy’s novels.<sup>2</sup> When it comes to discussing the role of Mexico in McCarthy, Alarcón’s article remains iconic, although John Wegner’s analysis of the role of the Mexican Revolution in the novels is also strong.<sup>3</sup> In general, McCarthy scholarship abstracts

Mexico and the borderlands into metaphors for literary strategies or, in the case of John Blair, argues that Mexico exists simply as a foil for Western (i.e., white, American male) identity.<sup>4</sup> Discussions of Mexican characters, including Alejandra and Magdalena, tend to focus solely on their functional roles in the various narratives and/or their significance to John Grady Cole and do not include a critical analysis of the difference race makes in their representations within the texts. Scholars of gender have gradually come to pay more attention to McCarthy's novels, particularly *Blood Meridian* (1985) and the Border Trilogy. In her persuasive essay "Boys Will Be Boys and Girls Will Be Gone: The Circuit of Male Desire in Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy," Nell Sullivan demonstrates how the absence of women in the novels (either because they have abandoned their men or died) makes it possible for the male characters to perform feminine roles themselves, rendering females unnecessary within the world of McCarthy's novels. Unfortunately, little attention is paid to the (albeit limited and stereotypical) roles that women *do* play in the novels, and by suggesting that female roles exist solely to be appropriated by men, Sullivan's article is no different than other articles that are ultimately all about men. In contrast, articles by Megan Riley McGilchrist and Molly McBride identify how land and the female body both function as territories that must be violently conquered by McCarthy's heroes.<sup>5</sup> Yet McGilchrist's article doesn't consider the intersection of race *and* gender, and McBride argues that by portraying John Grady Cole as a conquering "marauder," McCarthy actually critiques cycles of imperial conquest. By shifting our critical focus away from John Grady Cole and placing Alejandra and Magdalena at the center, rather than the periphery, of our reading, we see how McCarthy's representation of Mexican women contributes to, rather than critiques, the cycles of imperial violence.



Alejandra de Rocha y Villareal is the teenage daughter of Don Héctor, the patrón on the Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción, the paradisiacal ranch where young John Grady Cole finds himself employed after he has fled his hometown in San Angelo, Texas, with his good buddy Lacy Rawlins.<sup>6</sup> Like a vision or apparition, Alejandra makes her entrance into the narrative when she suddenly appears on horseback on a road near where Cole and the other vaqueros are herding cattle. McCarthy describes her as a "young girl" in English riding gear, astride "a black Arabian saddlehorse" that had recently been wading in water. Alejandra sports a "flatcrowned hat of black felt with a wide brim and her black hair was loose under it and fell halfway to her waist" (*APH* 94). The repetition of "black" emphasizes Alejandra's exotic beauty—her dark otherness—while also linking the young girl to the wet stal-

lion she rides. The emphasis on blackness in this passage recalls Toni Morrison's arguments in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) that such metaphorical allusions to darkness represent a crucial Africanist presence in American literature. The Africanist presence is often an unconscious, metaphysical staging of various racial attitudes that constitute the American literary imagination and an American identity based on the repression, suppression, and fear of black people and racial others. These attitudes emerge through a variety of stylistic devices; an emphasis on color, particularly whiteness and darkness, is one such device. Building on Morrison's interpretation of darkness, one could read McCarthy's emphasis on Alejandra's blackness as representing a repressed fear of her racial otherness and the threat her race poses for the stability of a white, masculine identity. Thus, the narrative chaos her presence introduces mirrors the racial disturbance and destabilization her potential union with John Grady might create.

Alejandra makes her second appearance when she encounters the men on horseback on the grounds of the estate. She turns "her fine-boned face" to look "full at" Cole, who observes her "blue eyes" beneath the ubiquitous "black hat" and her "long black hair" (109). McCarthy describes how "she sat the horse more than well, riding erect with her broad shoulders" (109). Later, when Cole meets her in town for a dance, McCarthy describes how she "wore a blue dress and her mouth was red. ... Her black hair done up in a blue ribbon and the nape of her neck pale as porcelain" (123). In these passages, McCarthy describes Alejandra in terms of her physical traits—her clothing, appearance—and by the horse she rides and how she rides it. In nearly every scene in which she appears, McCarthy mentions her "black hair." He contrasts her dark hair with her "blue eyes" and "pale" neck, as if to reassure us that Alejandra is dark enough to be exotic, but white enough to dispel any fears of miscegenation that might arise from a sexual encounter with Cole. In these early passages, she doesn't speak, but she doesn't need to because her body language conveys more tensile sexuality than any words could. Voiceless and rendered into the narrative entirely through an objectifying male gaze, Alejandra is virginal yet sexually open, dark yet blue-eyed, innocent yet an experienced horsewoman, aristocratic and "fineboned" yet reckless enough to ride unaccompanied and smile and stare at her father's workers. A perfect object of male desire.

Later, she joins Cole after he's just finished breeding the patrón's prized stallion with one of the mares:

Coming out of the barn with his bare heels under the horse's barrel and the horse lathered and dripping and half crazed and pounding up the ciénaga road riding with just a rope hackamore and the sweat of the horse and the smell of the mare on him and the veins pulsing under the wet hide and him leaning

low along the horse's neck talking to him softly and obscenely. It was in this condition that all unexpectedly one evening he came upon her returning on the black Arabian down the ciénaga road. (129)

The sexual overtones in the passage are blatant. The prized stallion's robust libido mirrors Cole's lust for Alejandra—when he dismounts the stallion at Alejandra's command, "the insides of his trouserlegs were hot and wet" (130). McCarthy tempers the intense masculine sexuality with Alejandra's impulsive and coquettish behavior when she demands to



Gladys Roldan-de-Moras. *L'ULTIMA CANZONE*. 2013. Oil on linen. 48"×36". All images by Gladys Roldan-de-Moras are reprinted with permission.

ride the half-broke, saddleless stallion back to the barn, forcing Cole to return with her black Arabian and raising the suspicions of the vaqueros. If Cole is the prized stud stallion, bursting with barely checked sexuality, Alejandra is one of the wild “trembling” mares, “standing with her legs spread and her head down and the breath rifling in and out of her” (129). Despite Alejandra’s willful disobedience and blatant disregard for propriety (as evidenced in her solo rides through the campo, her unchaperoned encounters with Cole, and, later, her nightly visits to his room even when her aunt has forbidden their relationship), such passages invite readers to think of her as simply another one of the dark and wild mares that Cole will tame.

Perhaps because of the way McCarthy’s descriptions collapse the difference between Alejandra and the horse she rides, or perhaps because many scholars link Cole’s desire for Alejandra with his unspoken desire to inherit the ranch, critical treatment of Alejandra often replicates the same problematic dehumanizing.<sup>7</sup> In the two passages in Limón’s work where he mentions Alejandra, she becomes collapsed into greater material (animal) possessions of the hacienda. Limón writes: “Even as he [Cole] is beginning to imagine the full extent of his desire for her [Alejandra], for the *hacienda*’s prize stallion (purchased in Kentucky), and for the material possibilities of the estate ...” (197). Here Alejandra is nothing more than an item in a list of material possessions that Cole might have designs upon; her agency and humanity dissolve as she becomes little more than another symbol of the hacienda’s economic and biological fertility. Later, after referring to Alejandra as one of “the beautiful women who comes with [the estate],” Limón claims that McCarthy “confound[s]” the expectations of the Western genre, “because save for some momentary fulfillment of his sexual desire and the correlated also momentary proximity to fine horse flesh, Cole gets nothing” (200). After marginalizing Alejandra as little more than an accessory to the larger Rocha y Villareal estate, Limón essentially refers to her as “fine horse flesh.” Limón’s replication of this dehumanizing metaphor doesn’t question the racial and gendered power dynamics that make such comparisons available. Similarly, Gail Moore Morrison, one of the most well-known and well-respected McCarthy scholars, also contributes to this violence in her article “*All the Pretty Horses*: John Grady Cole’s Expulsion from Paradise.” In this frequently cited piece, Morrison notes: “Like the native mares, Alejandra is described as being small and slight” (181). She accepts the comparison at face value, going on to write (about Alejandra): “Ultimately, she is as wild and passionate as the native mares, a creature of the lake and lagoons, of the night and darkness, dark-haired and dark-horsed” (181). In this passage, Morrison exoticizes Alejandra as a racial other—“a creature” whose darkness affiliates her with animals and landscape, thus dehumanizing her. In describing her as “wild and passionate,” Morrison invokes the common



stereotype of Mexican and Latina women as fiery, emotional, and hypersexual. This stereotype that has its roots in racist and sexist ideologies that define the limits of normative (white) female behavior and sexuality by representing non-white women as oversexed. In other words, representations of Alejandra's sexuality, as for all women of color, signify her racialization within a world system that *must* mark the limits of the nation and the race through a violent process of racial and gendered othering and exploitation. Finally, James D. Lilley, another well-known McCarthy critic, also argues, "Alejandra is an undeveloped character because for John Grady she becomes, like the broken mares, a mirror in which he can watch his own Symbolic power growing" ("Hands" 277). Unquestioned and unexamined even by the most astute of critics, these examples demonstrate the power behind representations of Alejandra as dark, pleasing, and available.

The power behind the comparison comes from a long and complex history of race and gender relations on the US-Mexico border and in the asymmetrical power relations between the United States and Mexico. As Fregoso notes in *meXicana Encounters: The Making of Social Identities on the Borderlands* (2003), the bodies of brown women and the roles they play in culture have long been a part of establishing the boundaries of the nation-state and the boundaries of white male and female sexuality. In the process of colonization, sexuality has long been one field where large concerns about national and racial power play out. As Anne McClintock writes in *Imperial Leather* (1995), "sexuality as a trope for other power relations was certainly an abiding aspect of imperial power" (14). Often this trope appears as metaphors that link women's bodies to land/territory and nation (i.e., the idea of a "mother country" or "virgin territory"). The equation of land or territory with the female body has long had roots in the gendering of the nation as female (the site where citizens are reproduced). Within these cycles of representations, geographic and ideological spaces, such as the nation-state are feminized and women's bodies take on the symbolic role of land, territory, and nation, becoming sites through which colonial power can exert itself—what McClintock calls "the erotics of imperial conquest" (24). It is through the sexual conquest of Mexican or Mexican American women that white men on the US-Mexico border have symbolically conquered and claimed the territory they believe is their right. This old story combines belief in racial and gender superiority with colonial and imperial desire to mark the limits of white masculinity and the white US nation-state through the bodies of women who are seen as available and pleasing. Thus McCarthy's emphasis on Alejandra's sexuality draws from a history of representation that characterizes Mexican women as either sexually deviant and promiscuous (and in need of white men who will tame and conquer them) or innocent and chaste (thus theirs for the taking). In *Borderlands/"La Frontera"* (1987), Gloria Anzaldúa



Gladys Roldan-de-Moras. *LIGHT*. 2012. Oil on linen. 16"×20".

argues that this history has particular resonances along the US-Mexico border, where the ongoing penetration of the international boundary is mapped on the bodies of Chicanas and Mexican women in violent ways. For Anzaldúa, the border is a “wound” that “splits” her (24), as it has wounded generations of indigenous and brown women since the first Spanish colonizers arrived in the sixteenth century (27).

As Cole and Alejandra come closer and closer to consummating their illicit relationship, Alejandra is increasingly described as part of the natural landscape of the hacienda. When Cole sees her before she leaves for a visit to her mother in Mexico City (the next time he sees her, they will make love):

She was coming down out of the mountains riding very stately and erect out of a rainsquall building to the north and the dark clouds towering above her. She rode with her hat pulled down in the front and fastened under her chin with a drawtie and as she rode her black hair twisted and blew about her shoulders and the lightning fell silently through the black clouds behind her and she rode all seeming unaware ... riding erect and stately until the rain caught her up and shrouded her figure away in that wild summer landscape: real horse, real rider, real land and sky and yet a dream withal. (*APH* 131–32)

Alejandra becomes part of the “wild summer landscape” itself, part of the “dark clouds” and the rain that “shroud[s]” her. She’s linked to the darkening world with her “black hair twisted” around her. With her hat pulled down in front, her face is invisible, further emphasizing her lack of humanity and her shadowy presence. She is not a woman or a girl, she is a neutral “rider,” a label that depends on the animal ridden, the horse, for its significance. Again, we apprehend her through a metonymic male gaze, which constantly renders her in parts—horse, hair, hat—until she



Gladys Roldan-de-Moras. *SONG FROM A SECRET GARDEN II*. 2013. Oil. 16" x 12".

herself becomes one more element in the large and looming landscape. Because of its dreamlike quality, Cole must reassure himself that the tableau he sees is real. He seems unable to make a place for Alejandra outside the lusty world (the word “erect” is repeated twice in the passage) of horses, dreams, and metaphors.

The scene where John Grady Cole and Alejandra finally consummate their forbidden passion seems itself like something out of a dream. One night, they ride to the lake and Cole strips naked and wades in:

The water was black and warm and he turned in the lake and spread his arms in the water and the water was so dark and so silky and he watched across the still black surface to where she stood on the shore with the horse and he watched where she stepped from her pooled clothing so pale, so pale, like a chrysalis emerging, and walked into the water. (*APH* 141)

The repetition of “black” and the emphasis on the “dark” water recalls the earlier descriptions of Alejandra’s dark hair, dark horse, the darkening stormy landscape, and the repressed racial anxieties her “Africanist presence” creates. Here the darkness threatens to consume Cole, and particularly Alejandra as she wades out to meet him, her paleness swallowed up by the dark water: “Her black hair floating on the water about her, falling and floating on the water.” We see her through Cole’s eyes as she walks toward him, “trembling in the water and not from the cold for there was none.” Her “trembling” invokes McCarthy’s description of the “trembling” mare after she’s been mounted by the stud, a comparison that would come naturally to Cole, who’s always thinking about horses. Cole watches her body carefully as she approaches (without being summoned). He notices how she’s “so pale in the lake she seemed to be burning. Like foxfire in a darkened wood. ... Like the moon that burned cold” (141). On the one hand, Alejandra’s dark hair threatens to subsume her completely into the dark water and the night, yet Cole’s emphasis on her pale body emphasizes the contrast between her whiteness and the surrounding darkness. The tension between Alejandra’s darkness and whiteness the passage so gracefully illuminates reveals the racial tensions that surround her presence in the narrative. “Pale” appears three times within seven sentences, a repetition that perhaps reveals Cole’s desire to “whiten” Alejandra before he has sex with her, alleviating any racial anxieties about their union. In any case, in describing Alejandra’s pale body, Cole turns to the natural world for his similes, once again inscribing Alejandra within the landscape. She asks Cole, in Spanish, if he loves her. He says yes: “He said her name. God yes, he said” (141). Although Cole names Alejandra as they make love, it’s curious that McCarthy does not. Even though Cole has uttered it, her name remains largely unspoken through the entire narrative. McCarthy does not call her “Alejandra”—she is referred to only as “she” in all the narrative’s

descriptions and dialogue tags. Perhaps we are meant to infer that from Cole's point of view, there is no other "she" in the world and that the female pronoun automatically applies to Alejandra, but the effect within the text is a persistent dehumanization of Alejandra into nothing more substantial than a "she"—interchangeable with any other dark-haired girl, a suspicion that turns out to be true by the time we meet John Grady Cole again in *Cities of the Plain*.

Predictably, John Grady and Alejandra's love isn't meant to be. Alejandra leaves the narrative as suddenly as she entered it. Although Cole has good intentions (he begs Alejandra to marry him and she refuses), his failure to ultimately win the girl doesn't mean that his imperial project has failed or that his failure to acquire land, material wealth, or a woman should be read as McCarthy's denouncement of imperial conquest, as McBride argues. Such a reading focuses entirely on Cole as the lens through which to gauge the extent of McCarthy's imperializing project. While Cole may be an immensely sympathetic and likeable character, his journey into Mexico is made possible only by a long history of US imperial interests in Mexico—in its many economic, political, and cultural forms—that legitimates the way he imagines and desires Mexico (including Alejandra).<sup>8</sup> While Cole may return to the United States and, eventually, even return to Mexico, Alejandra must return to her father's home as used goods, a "fallen woman" whose reputation has been publicly damaged. Within the tightly regulated patriarchal and class-based system of traditional Mexican culture, her options are few. It is likely she will become like her iconic aunt, the stately Dueña Alfonso, who was also crossed in love and remains an unmarried spinster, stuck on her brother's hacienda until she dies. Cole will be fully incorporated back into US society, even be publically exonerated in a court of law by a judge for his adventures in Mexico. He will find honest work and fall in love with another Mexican girl in Juárez. Such freedoms are unavailable to Alejandra, who has sacrificed her own desires for her family, according to the strict codes that dictate "good" female behavior (even if it might be too little too late). Her class position and gender limit her opportunities while these same restrictions do not apply to Cole. Thus, reading the story of their failed romance from Cole's point of view may paint a rosier picture, but from Alejandra's perspective, it's a raw deal all round. Placing Alejandra at the center, rather than the periphery of a reading of *All the Pretty Horses*, exposes the limits of McCarthy's "revisionary" Western genre. Although his cowboy hero may be culturally miscegenated as a result of his close affiliations with Mexican Americans in Texas and while his journey into Mexico results in no measurable personal or political gain, McCarthy's representation of Alejandra ultimately reaffirms stereotypes about Mexican women and Latinas in the same way that classic Westerns have marginalized and sexualized brown women's bodies in service of consolidating and legitimating a white, masculine authority.

Poor John Grady Cole, so successful in every other endeavor, is doomed to fall tragically in love with Mexican girls. We encounter him again in El Paso, Texas, in the trilogy's third and final installment, *Cities of the Plain*.<sup>9</sup> The year is 1952, and John Grady Cole, referred to on the first page as the "all-american cowboy," is still struggling to survive in a post-WWII world where cattle ranches are being bought up by the government for nuclear testing sites (3). The book opens with Cole and his fellow vaqueros at a whorehouse across the US-Mexico border in Ciudad Juárez. The boys exchange some ribald banter at the expense of the whores while knocking back a few whiskeys, some good, old-fashioned male bonding that places us squarely within the familiar landscape of the "yee-haw" genre. In a scene so cinematic that it seems almost clichéd, Cole first spies Magdalena in the mirror behind the bar:

A young girl of no more than seventeen and perhaps younger was sitting on the arm of the sofa with her hands cupped in her lap and her eyes cast down. She fussed with the hem of her gaudy dress like a schoolgirl. She looked up and looked toward them. Her long black hair fell across her shoulder and she swept it slowly away with the back of her hand. (6)

The description invokes the ghost of Alejandra, but this is Magdalena, the whore with a heart of gold.<sup>10</sup> The similarities between Alejandra and Magdalena are already obvious. Both are described as adolescents with that intoxicating combination of innocence and experience. Her hands demurely "cupped" in her lap and her eyes downcast, Magdalena's innocent appearance clearly sets her apart from the other whores in the bar, who aggressively approach the cowboys, tugging at them and persuading them to go upstairs. In fact, the simile comparing her to a "school-girl" is almost unnecessary because her appearance otherwise already calls into mind a catalogue of stock images of the sweet whore who will transcend her profession. Just like Alejandra, Magdalena is marked throughout the novel by the mention of her "long black hair," until it becomes a metonymic device, standing in not only for Magdalena or Alejandra, but for Mexican women in general.<sup>11</sup>

In some ways, Magdalena is a more substantial character than Alejandra. Certainly, she takes up more narrative space than Alejandra, although, as Sullivan points out, from the beginning she doesn't seem to belong to the land of the living and is doomed to be "contained, reduced, and ultimately relegated to the margins" of the story (233). When all goes tragically awry, Magdalena ends up dead, her throat cut and her body dumped along the banks of the Rio Grande. Cole, grief-stricken, challenges her pimp, Eduardo, to a knife-fight and ultimately defeats him, but not without sustaining a mortal wound. Cole dies in his buddy Billy's arms—and Billy curses: "Goddamn whores" (261).

Although the story doesn't end with this curse, his indictment of Magdalena, and women in general, speaks to the violence perpetrated on Magdalena within the narrative. From the beginning, Magdalena's profession invokes a history of perceived sexual excess on the border between the United States and Mexico and a corresponding cultural tradition that represents Mexican women on the border as prostitutes. Fregoso documents the history of this representation, showing how early white colonizers perceived differences in sexual customs and bodily behavior by Mexican women to be signs of racial inferiority (142-43). By the nineteenth century, "Mexican woman" was synonymous with "prostitute" (143). As a crucial part of the ongoing process of racial formation during the twentieth century, such associations were widely disseminated in culture, especially popular forms which often portrayed Mexican women as prostitutes or otherwise sexually deviant (for example, wearing revealing clothing or engaging in flirtatious behavior). Of course, these representations didn't (and don't) just reflect prevailing ideologies but also helped to shape and consolidate them: "The racial and sexual othering of Mexicans in cinematic space was part of a system of representation obsessed with regulating white women's sexuality, identities, and desires in the early twentieth century" (Fregoso 147). In this system, representing Mexican women as racial and sexual others was crucial to the stabilization and control of white femininity and, by extension, the boundaries of the nation. As part of the nation-building process, the United States has historically expressed anxieties over policing and containing the international border and the threats (real or perceived) that its proximity creates for US citizens. Since the Prohibition era, during which gambling halls, saloons, and prostitution blossomed along Mexican border towns, the US-Mexico border has become synonymous with excesses and vices that were seen as threats to the United States because they might "spill over" from Mexico and contaminate the nation. As Joseph Nevins points out in *Operation Gatekeeper* (2002), "probably the greatest perceived threats from Tijuana and, by extension, Mexico were those relating to vices" (57). Thus, processes of racial formation, based on notions of racial and gender inferiority, went hand in hand with socioeconomic changes along the international boundary, which contributed to associations that linked the border with vice and excess (especially sexual) and Mexican women as prostitutes.

McCarthy's narrative does little to disavow or challenge such stereotypes. Even though we are told some of Magdalena's past, her story still hinges on her sexual slavery. She's the fragile epileptic and the tragic whore, both roles that are given meaning only when Cole shows up and tries to rescue her from them. McCarthy's narrative follows other patterns of representing relationships between white men and Mexican

women that Fregoso identifies in her survey of Mexican women in film. She argues that when cross-racial relationships are represented positively, their plots fall into one of two categories: "(1) rescue fantasy, where the white male protagonist saves the Mexican female from the excesses of her culture (embodied in either a possessive father or degenerate lover); and (2) romantic conquest of a Mexicana, involving the white male triumphant over one or more Mexican males" (139).

Cole and Magdalena's relationship fits both categories. Eduardo, the pimp, fits the stereotype of the degenerate Mexican lover. He's described as a flashy dresser, fastidious, who smokes cigars, speaks elegantly and elliptically, and moves languidly through the scenery with an effeminacy that contrasts sharply with the gruff and taciturn cowboy masculinity of Cole and Rawlins. He represents the worst excess of Mexican border culture and degenerate Mexican masculinity, which must be removed and contained by the conquering hero. In arranging for Magdalena's flight from the whorehouse, Cole is rescuing her from a culture of excess—"a world of adornment only," as Eduardo describes Mexico during their final knife fight (253). And, as a rival lover who has considerable control over Magdalena, Cole triumphs in securing her affections, falling into the second category. In both cases, the Mexican woman stands in for her inferior culture, and her rescue or conquest by a white man represents a larger assertion of cultural and political authority.

As a character who must be rescued *and* conquered, Magdalena creates narrative disorder, a related trope in the representation of Mexican women that Fregoso identifies. Very similar to Morrison's Africanist presence, the Mexicana presence in a narrative, Fregoso argues, is often used to create disorder or chaos in "the worlds of both the white nation (the world of culture) and the native nation (the world of nature). Her role in the plot is purely instrumental, serving to consolidate the white nation's authority on the frontier as well as its claims to property in the West" (130). On the one hand, Magdalena's role in the narrative is most certainly marginalized to being simply the agent of Cole's demise, thus fulfilling a variety of stereotypical roles, as we've seen. Yet, Cole does not ride off into the sunset, as he would in a traditional Western. He dies on the streets of Juárez, and the remaining thirty pages of the novel are devoted to Billy (who, unable to find ranching work during the second half of the twentieth century, ends up as an extra in cowboy movies). In this sense, it's true that Cole's Mexican lovers do not absolutely consolidate his authority, raising intriguing questions about what McCarthy's novels suggest about the construction of white masculinity. For instance, as critic Katherine Sugg suggestively asks, why does this interrogation of whiteness and masculinity "play out" on the US-Mexico border (147)? In her essay on the Border Trilogy and the popular film *Lone Star* (1996), Sugg reads Cole's failure as McCarthy's rejection of the



classic “nostalgic or regressively racist representations of white masculinity” of the genre Fregoso investigates (147). While Cole’s cross-racial romances might be read by some as a recognition of the need for new social relations—a multicultural future to replace the bounded and sterile world of homosocial cowboy relations—McCarthy doesn’t give this future a chance because Cole and Magdalena are both dead at the end of the trilogy and Billy Parham wanders the blasted southwestern landscape alone. If McCarthy’s border novels are, as Sugg suggests, a response to revisionist histories and the political culture of multiculturalism that attempts to find a place for white masculinities, the location of that identity remains profoundly ambivalent. Therefore, from Cole’s point of view, it’s easy to read any imperializing project as ultimately futile, abandoned on the mean streets of Juárez when Cole dies.

But, again, if we shift our focus from Cole to Magdalena, things are much less ambivalent. When we read the extent to which race, gender, nation, and power operate within the texts through the perspectives of Alejandra and Magdalena, it’s clear how both women fall victim to a racialized and gendered violence that roots itself in the asymmetrical relations between the United States and Mexico. For instance, Magdalena’s gruesome death is perhaps one of the most powerful moments in the entire trilogy:

The girl to whom he’d sworn his love forever lay on the last table. She lay as the rushcutters had found her that morning in the shallows under the shore willows with the mist rising off the river. Her hair damp and matted. So black. Hung with strands of dead brown weed. Her face so pale. The severed throat gaping bloodlessly. Her good blue dress was twisted about on her body and her stockings were torn. She’d lost her shoes. (229)

The images in this passage invoke many things: *Hamlet’s* Ophelia and, in the contrast between her black hair and pale skin, the scene where Cole and Alejandra consummate their love. But, given the setting in Ciudad Juárez and the time in which the novel was written, it’s also impossible to read this description of Magdalena’s death without invoking the specter of contemporary femicide in Juárez. Magdalena’s brutally murdered (and certainly sexually abused) body, shoeless and abandoned, recalls the bodies of the hundreds, possibly more, brown women who have been violently murdered and whose bodies have been dumped in the desert and other areas surrounding the city since the early 1990s. The women targeted in these killings share common traits: they are “poor, slender women with long dark hair” and are often light-skinned (Biemann 114). This incredible violence against Mexican and indigenous women in Juárez is accompanied by public and private discourses that accuse the dead and missing women of leading “loose” lives or of being prostitutes outright.<sup>12</sup> In actuality, the majority of the Juárez victims are employed

at the transnational assembly plants, or *maquilas*. The industrialization of the US-Mexico border in general and the growing presence of *maquilas* in particular has much to do with decades of US pressure on Mexico to open and liberalize its economy so that the United States might benefit from lowered tariffs and access to cheap labor while ostensibly opening Mexico's markets to increased foreign investment, a supposedly positive change.<sup>13</sup> Yet, these changes have come at great cost—a cost paid by Mexico's poor, indigenous, working classes, and women. As a woman of color and as a prostitute, Magdalena, like the contemporary bodies of the *maquila* workers who work the assembly lines, is seen as disposable. Feminist scholars such as Fregoso and Biemann agree that feminicide in Juárez is inextricably linked to larger processes of global and national domination and control. As Fregoso writes, "feminicide in Juárez makes evident the reality of overlapping power relations on gendered and racialized bodies as much as it clarifies the degree to which violence against women has been naturalized as a method of social control" (2). By locating the cause of the violence in power relations, Fregoso exposes the numerous ways in which different groups operate to marginalize women of color: transnational corporations and the circuits of global capitalism, states, the rich and elite, whites, men, and a corresponding national culture of patriarchy. In this equation, Magdalena was doomed from the get-go. Like the Juárez victims, she is set against a patriarchal national culture that limits the roles and opportunities for women, and she is caught between an imperializing nation and the object of its imperial desire, both of which depend on the marginalization, exploitation and/or elimination, and containment of women's bodies to succeed. Magdalena is caught in a transnational web of power relations that do not accommodate her presence.

When we read the Cole/Magdalena love story from Magdalena's perspective and remove her from the margins of the narrative, we can more clearly see how forces of domination and control are working in ways that are neither ambivalent nor vexed. In McCarthy's representation of Alejandra and Magdalena, both women's roles are constricted by violent stereotypes that dehumanize, marginalize, racialize, and ultimately eliminate them. These stereotypes draw on powerful histories of the relationships between men and women, whites and non-whites, and the United States and Mexico along the border. They help to contain women of color in the service of consolidating power—racial, gender, national, and transnational. While the status of white masculinity might be up for grabs in McCarthy's world, he has done nothing radical or revisionary in his representations of Mexican women. Alejandra and Magdalena's stories demonstrate the extent to which women of color must be abjected in service of constructing larger stories about masculine desire in the borderlands. Reading the Border Trilogy through the

eyes of Cole's Mexican lovers illuminates how both characters depend on a complicated web of real-world transactions that limit their roles and opportunities. A truly revisionist and decolonizing Western would recuperate the lost and silenced histories, voices, and experiences of heterosexual and queer Mexican women and Latinas—a process that Chicana historian Emma Pérez calls “the decolonial imaginary”—exposing the limits of white masculine and imperial desires while placing such alternative identities at the center, as opposed to the margins, of our narratives.



Despite Limón's claim that McCarthy has entered a “different moral and political place” with the publication of *All the Pretty Horses*, a critical reading that situates itself in the important transactions between race, gender, and power reveals the profound limitations of McCarthy's revisionist Western project (206). Although McCarthy clearly plays with the conventions of the genre and self-consciously evokes stereotypes and motifs from the Western genre occasionally in order to challenge, revise, or poke fun at them, his Border Trilogy ultimately does not offer a satisfying revisionist vision of US western and US-Mexico borderlands history, which would acknowledge the violence of conquest and link violence to power across the intersecting axes of race and gender. When we shift our critical focus away from the white, male heroes and toward the trilogy's abject Mexican women, we expose the violent and imperializing projects still at work in the novels. John Grady Cole's most profound encounters with Mexico and the US-Mexico border occur through his relationships with Mexican women, demonstrating the extent to which his white masculinity still relies on encounters with racial and sexual difference and desires in order to assert its ambivalence. Even though Cole fails to secure happiness with Alejandra or Magdalena and dies at the hands of a jealous Mexican pimp, he still succeeds in “conquering” the two women and destroying or dooming them in the process. Cole's relationships with Alejandra and Magdalena are linked to a history of social relations and cultural representations that fix US racial and political hegemony by portraying Mexicans as inferior and Mexican women as sexually available and disposable. McCarthy's novels illustrate how the coloniality of power works through intimate and sexual relationships in order to consolidate identities and positions of power. To read the Border Trilogy through the lens of power relations means exposing the complex web of transactions that make possible the various identities that are tested, redefined, or eliminated within the violent world of McCarthy's borderlands.

## NOTES

1. For example, in all six of the major edited anthologies of McCarthy criticism to date, less than five articles discuss gender or mention Cole's two Mexican female lovers—and only in passing.

2. Limón's brief section on *All the Pretty Horses* in *American Encounters* is one of the most significant discussions of McCarthy by any ethnic studies, borderlands, or Chicano/a studies scholar (Cooper Alarcón's is another).

3. See "México para los Mexicanos" in *Myth, Legend, Dust*, ed. by Rick Wallach.

4. See also Mark Busby and Isabel Soto. Additionally, Mark A. Eaton's "Dis(re)membered Bodies: Cormac McCarthy's Border Fiction" reads McCarthy more positively as a "post-national" and "hybrid" contact zone, but is overly enthusiastic about McCarthy's ability to transcend the old traps of the Western genre.

5. See McBride, "From Mutilation to Penetration: Cycles of Conquest in *Blood Meridian* and *All the Pretty Horses*" and McGilchrist, "The Adversarial Feminine in McCarthy's Western Landscapes."

6. It's not too surprising that Cole chooses Mexico as his destination; aside from all the romantic and nostalgic representations of Mexico in the United States that Cole would more than likely have been exposed to, he also speaks Spanish fluently, has been practically raised by the old Mexican housekeeper he lovingly calls *abuela* (grandmother), and seems to be part of the close-knit Mexican and Mexican American community of ranch hands on his grandfather's ranch.

7. See Dianne C. Luce's "'When You Wake': John Grady Cole's Heroism in *All the Pretty Horses*."

8. For a thorough account of the history of US imperial activities in Mexico and their corresponding cultures (including how imperialism shaped the representation of Mexico and Mexicans in the US cultural imagination), see Gilbert G. González, *Culture of Empire: American Writers, Mexico, & Mexican Immigrants, 1880–1930*.

9. The second novel, *The Crossing* (1994), introduces the character of Billy Parham, who will reappear as Cole's best bud in *Cities of the Plain*. The novel follows Billy's adolescent adventures as he crosses and recrosses the US-Mexico border on a series of quests. Women, of any kind, are essentially absent from this narrative.

10. Her name is clearly meant to invoke Mary Magdalene, the New Testament prostitute who reforms and becomes a close follower of Jesus Christ and was the first to discover him risen after the crucifixion. Interestingly, when Cole and Magdalena first converse, he assumes that "Magdalena" is her "nombre profesional" (professional name), but Magdalena assures him that it's her "nombre propio" (real name) (COP 67).

11. When Cole and Magdalena spend their first night together, McCarthy writes how Cole “gathered her black hair in his hand and spread it across his chest like a blessing” (70).
12. See Fregoso 10–15. See also Biemann.
13. For more on the history of Mexico’s turn to neoliberalism, which culminated in the NAFTA agreement, the role of the United States, and its effect on the border region, see chapter 1 of Jeff Faux’s *The Global Class War* (2006).

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