

【연구논문】

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

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

Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing*, as the title suggests, is about three border-crossings between the Southwestern US and Mexico made by the protagonist Billy Parham, who, during the process of three journeys, realizes the bare existential truth of life. The novel depicts the difficulty of drawing a line between humanity/alterity, contingency/necessity, and place/space. Among the many lessons Billy's border-crossings imply, I am especially interested in the dynamics between place and space that begin to emerge as Billy is led to live a nomadic life back and forth across the borders, which I believe plays a primary role in dispelling the American Western myths.

Geographically speaking, McCarthy has decidedly eluded a clear-cut regionalist nomination, straddling on the Southwestern borderland. As Dana Phillips has pointed out, Southern readers tend to align McCarthy with the Southern genealogy, conceiving him as “the heir of William Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor” (434).<sup>1)</sup> A majority of non-Southern readers, on the other hand, consider his works primarily as Western fiction, associating his works with Owen Wister’s novel *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains*, or Richard Slotkin’s frontier thesis of “regeneration through violence.”<sup>2)</sup> To call McCarthy “a Western novelist” would not strictly be a misnomer although such a simplistic appellation requires further elaboration.

Many critics, such as Barclay Owens and George Guillemin among others, have associated McCarthy’s Border Trilogy with Western myths or the American pastoral, focusing on such themes as “the dispossessed yeoman and Jeffersonian agrarianism, the last cowboy and the frontier, the New Adam and rugged individualism” (Guillemin 107).<sup>3)</sup> Shifting a focus away from these obviously discernible Western

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1) Vince Brewton, too, keenly observes the presence of Southern literary tradition in McCarthy’s Border Trilogy. See Vince Brewton, “The Changing Landscape of Violence in Cormac McCarthy’s Early Novels and the Border Trilogy,” *The Southern Literary Journal* 37.1 (Fall, 2004): 121-143.

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

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

genre tropes on the surface, other scholars, including Andrew Nelson, Dana Phillips, and Vince Brewton, have claimed that McCarthy's works actually attempt to critique and then demystify "Manifest Destiny," often associated with the American West, by depicting the borderland frontier with brutal violence and injustice without any sense of redemption.<sup>4)</sup>

In sum, the scholarship on McCarthy's works has tended to revolve around either the American West or the demystification of it, especially delving into the American frontier psychology often described with Manifest Destiny.<sup>5)</sup> To classify McCarthy as a bona fide Western novelist is to greatly neglect the subversive force latent in his texts, which is much insinuated yet pervasive, rather than

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roles" (64). Observing that "Old Mexico has always been viewed as a badlands, an empty space, a rough place of bandits and criminals and the evil, foreign Other" (65), Owen argues that McCarthy depicts Mexico as the symbolic place of wilderness for American Western myths. In other words, as Owen observes, McCarthy is deploying "the Adamic icon" in the wilderness of Mexico, which in turn "becomes a purgatory of loneliness, in which the primitive hero must purge his soul and ready himself for mythic battle" (67).

- 4) Andrew Nelson, for instance, proposes that *Blood Meridian* is "a book which finally dislocates the reader from the adventure of Manifest Destiny" (qtd. in Brewton 123). Dana Phillips, on the one hand, observes that *Blood Meridian* complicates the Western genre with its magnitude and intensity of aesthetic prowess and moral territories (434). Vince Brewton takes a step further and contends that such male characters as the kid and Billy, who enter the borderland into Mexico in *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy, are "a kind of allegory of American involvement in Southeast Asia" during the Vietnam War (123).
- 5) The phrase of "Manifest Destiny" was first coined by John L. O'Sullivan who in his 1839 essay "The Great Nation of Futurity" wrote that America was to "manifest to mankind the excellence of divine principles; to establish the noblest temple ever dedicated to the worship of the Most High - the Sacred and the True" (qtd. in Shin 70-71). Lately, the very phrase has been criticized as the justification of American exceptionalism and expansionism.

conspicuously branded on the textual surface. The other line of claim that *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy are McCarthy's response to socio-political issues of the Vietnam War and hence critique of Manifest Destiny is also limited in that it equates the people of Southeast Asia with Native Americans or Mexicans on the Southwest borderland, presumably on the ground that all of them are "barbarians," and, most importantly, in that it runs the risk of reducing aesthetic space provided by fictional works to a mere political propaganda.

Mindful of the two opposing views and their merits and limitations, I aim to diverge from reading *The Crossing* either as a romanticized Western myth, provoking nostalgic sentiments about the lifestyle of cowboys on the Western frontier, or the author's sociopolitical commentary on the involvement of the US in the global warfare. Instead, I will foreground and further elaborate on McCarthy's unique vision of the borderland of the Southwest, which is a bioregionally imagined construct beyond the national states of the US and Mexico. The association of Billy with a Western hero, or the Southwestern borderland with the American pastoral, nevertheless, is a significantly compelling one and thus requires a more thorough analysis. All in all, my aim is not so much to resist any juxtaposition between the Border Trilogy and American Western fiction but to show how McCarthy revisits American West and builds upon the conventional pastoral vision to formulate his own.

According to Owen, one can subdivide the American Western myths into two types: the progress myth and the primitive-pastoral myth. In the progress myth, the hero fights for the Anglo-American national state, whereas in the primitive-pastoral myth, the hero fights

against “oppressive authority” and finds solace in “a pastoral Edenic garden” (68). In other words, in the primitive-pastoral myth, the wilderness becomes a romanticized middle ground for an American male, who, in defiance of civilization, voluntarily chooses to be “an ascetic,” or a stoic warrior whose goal then becomes the taming of the wilderness (69).

The idea of “wilderness” as a symbolic place testing one’s gallantry, self-reliance, and moral-integrity is certainly emblematic of the American Western myths, and Billy seems to resemble an ascetic protagonist in the primitive-pastoral myth to some degrees. Unlike a conventional heroic figure from the Western myths, however, Billy does not take control over the Southwest wilderness through his heroic acts or moral superiority and does not evince any interest in opposing the progress of civilization by voluntarily becoming an ascetic solitary hero. I would rather propose that Billy’s naïve character, combined with his ecological consciousness toward the biotic community and environment of the Southwest borderland, requires a more ecologically informed approach to the understanding of the novel.

In this essay, I will attempt to show and contend that one can parse out McCarthy’s bioregional vision of the Southwest through 1) closely following the trajectory of Billy’s nomadic border-crossings, first and foremost spurred by his affection for the shewolf caught in the trap, which will gradually materialize into Billy’s xerophilia, or the love of arid land and the biotic community of it,<sup>6</sup> 2) focusing

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6) Tom Lynch defines the concept of xerophilia as “a human affection for arid places and for the biotic community that comprises and inhabits such places” (13).

on a new sense of place that is tied to mobility or nomadic flow, which McCarthy showcases with Billy's irresistible pull toward the nomadic existence on the Southwest borderland, and 3) fathoming the impact of the explosion of a nuclear bomb on the Southwest desert at the end of the novel, which most dramatically dispels the Western myths and anticipates the post-apocalyptic world, in which not only the political borderlines but the national states as such will have been rendered obsolete.

## **II. *Toward Bioregional Reinhabitation of the West: Billy's Emerging Xerophia***

Billy's three journeys across the Southwest borderland, first with a shewolf, next with his brother Boyd, and finally Billy alone, end with further loss on the part of Billy, whose abject, defeated, and impoverished existence makes him more of an anti-hero, rather than a robust, triumphant hero from Cooperian frontier romance. Some of the conventional tropes commonly found in the Western frontier narratives pervade *The Crossing*, to be sure, such as a stoic, masculine protagonist who is on a quest into an unknown territory among the wilderness with the vile "Others," such as Indians and Mexicans, lurking inside. Only, in case of Billy, his motive to embark on three border-crossings is mostly influenced by his affection for the wolf, family horses, and his sole remaining family member, Boyd.

Billy's first trip over the border has been caused by his encounter with the shewolf in the trap, upon which he decides to return the

wolf to her homeland, thereby signaling the arduous journey back home by the wolf, which ends with Billy's shooting a bullet into the wolf to end her agony and pain. The narrative has closely followed the life trajectories of Billy and the wolf, which begin to converge from that moment on. We learn that Billy's family has migrated from Grant County to the plain of Hidalgo, where Billy evinces from early on his fascination with wolves, as the impressive first scene of his witness of wolves running on the plain suggests. Moving "on knees and elbows," Billy would vigilantly follow the movements of the wolves, seeing "their almond eyes in the moonlight," hearing their breath, and feeling "the presence of their knowing that was electric in the air" (4).

Besides the delicately depicted accurate physical features and movements of the wolves on Hidalgo, McCarthy shows that both Billy and wolves become aware of each other(s)'s presence. The primary memory of the wolves on Hidalgo prepares Billy for his upcoming encounter with the shewolf, who "crossed international boundary line" after "her mate had bitten her two weeks before ... because she would not leave him" (24). The narrator explains that "[s]he was moving out of the country not because the game was gone but because the wolves were and she needed them" (25). In other words, the political border does not matter so much to the wolf as does finding her biotic community. After the wolf is seized as contraband near the river to the high Pilares, Billy argues that "the wolf knew nothing of boundaries" (119). The episode of the shewolf suggests that the biotic community in the Southwest borderlands has occupied the place with their own protocols, even longer than the

political border drawn by men.

In perhaps one of the most favorably quoted utterances in *The Crossing*, an old trapper tells Billy that “the wolf is a being of great order ... there is no order in the world save that which death has put there ... Between their acts and their ceremonies lies the world and in this world the storms blow and the trees twist in the wind and all the animals that God has made go to and fro yet this world men do not see” (45). At first glance, McCarthy seems to reiterate the idea of “great chain of being,” in which “man is the creature who occupies the middle link” between “the lower and higher, animal and intellectual forms of being” (Marx 100). Although this metaphor immediately suggests an anthropocentric hierarchy, McCarthy subverts it with the affective ties between Billy and the wolf, which can be explained with the concept of biophilia, or “the innately emotional affiliation of human beings to other living organisms” (Wilson 31). Using one of his signature carnivalesque renderings, McCarthy depicts Billy tasting the blood oozing from the carcass of the wolf that “tasted no different than his own” (125), the very act of which, I think, suggests that Billy’s journey with the wolf has begun to thaw the boundary between humanity and alterity, the supposedly two different orders of the world.

Biophilia that Billy evinces for the wolf attests that the first stroke across the Southwest borderline drawn by him is greatly influenced by the love of arid land and its biotic community, or xerophilia. The genuine sense of land and affection for its biotic community pervade the novel, differentiating it from other traditional Western fiction, which usually perceives the frontier as a battleground for conquest

and subjugation. The bioregionally drawn concept of xerophilia, or the love of arid place defined by natural boundaries, is central to an ecologically informed approach to the Border Trilogy, and George Guillemin's *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy* is one of the earliest works to have noticed that. In this work, Guillemin parses out McCarthy's use of "ecopastoralism" and "eco-hero" in the Border Trilogy.<sup>7)</sup> Even though Guillemin still reads the ecopastoralism of McCarthy's Border Trilogy in the tradition of Western myths or the American pastoral, he effectually deconstructs such conventional views more than he is aware.

Ecopastoralism, as Guillemin observes, differs from the American pastoral, which Leo Marx has famously defined in terms of "middle landscape" in *Machine in the Garden*.<sup>8)</sup> Guillemin, I think, touches on some of the most salient characteristics of *The Crossing* that distinguish it from other conventional Western novels. For instance, he underscores that the Border Trilogy "redefine[s] literary pastoralism along ... optimistically ecopastoral lines" (109), highlighting

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7) As Guillemin notes, "ecopastoral" and "eco-hero" have been introduced by Tim Poland in his article, "'A Relative to All That Is': The Eco-Hero in Western American Literature." In this essay, Poland introduces "ecosophy," which is somewhat consonant with "deep ecology" (Guillemin 130). Although the eco-hero still aligns itself with a traditional mythical hero, it calls for "bioregional autonomy" (Guillemin 131). In other words, it is a paradigm shift from "man the conqueror" of nature to "man the biotic citizen of it" (Guillemin 131).

8) Greg Garrard also observes that the American pastoral has been defined in terms of "middle landscape" between civilization and true wilderness (55). In a traditional American pastoral narrative, Garrard observes, "the protagonist leaves civilization for an encounter with non-human nature, then returns having experienced epiphany and renewal" (54). Similarly, Leo Marx delineates the "three spatial stages" of American fables: a corrupt city, a raw wilderness, and a return to the same city with a hope of promise for reform (71).

“an ecopastoral alternative to traditional pastoralism” (120) represented in the Border Trilogy, which calls for “a lifestyle closely associated with the Southwestern wilderness” (109), rather than transforming it into a middle landscape. In the words of Guillemin, McCarthy substitutes the “idea of the garden” with a “biocentric land ethic” (120). Following Guillemin, one could conclude that the Border Trilogy significantly begins to diverge from the traditional Western myth.<sup>9)</sup>

Building on Guillemin’s observation, I would take a step further and argue that Billy’s nomadic border-crossings destabilize the national borders and fulfill the demystification of Western myths or the American pastoral. As I noted earlier, xerophilia that Billy begins to show during his three journeys is a bioregionally drawn concept, rather than by political borders. Tom Lynch’s discussion of the central role of a bioregion in xerophilia in his book entitled *Xerophilia: Ecocritical Explorations in Southwestern Literature* is especially pertinent to my proposition.

Phenomenologically considered, bioregions are more fully real than political regions. Nations, states, and counties are disembodied notions; ... Bioregionalism has some intriguing implications for literary studies in general, and in particular for such studies in the American West... Furthermore, bioregionalism suggests that the common regional designations such as “West,” “Southwest,” and “Northwest” are flawed and should be replaced.... [B]ioregions are internally coherent rather than externally defined by their relationship to a distant urban reference point. (21-22).

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9) For instance, Guillemin distinguishes Billy from other Western myth heroes in that “Billy’s experiment with pastoral escape fails to produce anything as idyllic ... but marks the beginning of a nomadic lifestyle” (124).

As the narrative unfolds, Billy's xerophilia grows stronger, evincing a pull toward the arid landscape of the Southwest borderlands and their biotic community. As Lynch points out, xerophilia not only suggests a human preference for an arid bioregion but also implies a lifestyle driven by "ethical commitment" (Lynch 13). In other words, xerophilia is a bioregional way of life directed by affection and ethical responsibility for an arid land and its biotic community. Billy's extraordinary dedication to the shewolf, indeed, attests to this.

Since bioregionalism effectively erases political boundaries for "environmentally determined" ones (Lynch 17), reading Billy's border-crossings in terms of xerophilia can displace the American pastoral reading of *The Crossing*, thereby diverging from traditional Western myths. It is worth noting that as Billy's xerophilia grows stronger, his position between the two nations, the US and Mexico, becomes more and more precarious and undistinguishable, to the point where it almost seems as if Billy were even nation-less. In other words, Billy's ambiguous position as to his nationality makes him a misfit protagonist for American national myths.

When Billy crosses the border the second time with his brother Boyd to find their stolen horses, they meet an old man who draws to them "a portrait of the country they said they wished to visit" (184). The way the old man draws a map, however, differs from more conventional cartography; it is more close to what one might aptly call "bioregional cartography," the guiding principle of which is centered around the biotic community and contour of the Southwest desert area, such as "the dust streams and promontories and pueblos and mountain ranges" (184). What is more interesting, though, is the

comment from the other man on the bench, who has been watching the old man draw a map on the dirt.

He said that what they beheld was but a decoration. He said that anyway it was not so much a question of a correct map but of any map at all. He said 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. Besides, he said, when had that old man last journeyed to those mountains? Or journeyed anywhere at all? His map was after all not really so much a map as a picture of a voyage. And what voyage was that? And when?

Un dibujo de un viaje, he said. Un viaje pasado, un viaje antiguo.

(A drawing of a journey, he said. A past journey, an ancient journey.) (185)

The idea of drawing a map as “a drawing of a journey” or “to know the country itself” about its ecological, geological reality can be more appropriately explained by bioregionalism. A bioregionally drawn map, thus, drastically differs from the ideology behind the cartography of European or American Imperialism, which sees “the grid as an organizing principle for settlement of towns and cities, then outward into the control, possession, and acculturation of nature itself” (Campbell 9).

Far from depicting a romanticized pastoral Edenic garden or a middle landscape more commonly found in the Western myths, McCarthy features the desolate, solitary desert filled with acts of violence, injustice, and outlaws on the landscape of the Southwest borderlands. When Billy embarks on his third journey to Mexico, what awaits him there is Boyd’s dead body, whose existence has become a legend transformed into a song about “a youth who sought justice” (375). Billy’s clinging to the idea of bringing the remains of

his brother to “his own country” (387) seems futile and meaningless. Rather, it seems that Boyd is more alive in the song people sing in Mexico than in his “bones ... held together only by the dry outer covering of hide and by their integuments” (398). It is crossing the border with the residue of Boyd that matters, rather than the actual retrieval of his bones and burying them in a cemetery in the US. Similarly, during his second border-crossing with Boyd, they cross the “line yonder where the color changes” (177), not so much to retrieve the stolen horses as to stay with each other after their parents have been murdered by Indian horse thieves, as Billy realizes during his third journey that “I dont think he even cared about the horses, but I was too dumb to see it” (387).

As Quijda, who gave Billy and Boyd their horses back, aptly puts it, “[Boyd] is in that place which the world has chosen for him. He is where he is supposed to be. And yet the place he has found is also of his own choosing” (388), which further underscores the futility of a political borderline by aligning the place identity of Boyd with Mexico. As for Billy, a place for him to dwell remains a more complicated construct to the end of the narrative. Quite contrary to typical Western heroes, Billy does not return to the civilized society, having become a wiser man after his journey into the “wilderness,” nor does he transform the Southwest borderlands into a romanticized pastoral Edenic garden or a middle landscape. Billy’s nomadic existence continues without a promise for the restoration of loss.

The ominous last scene of the novel that ends with the explosion of a nuclear bomb on the Southwestern desert, which emotionally shakes Billy who has witnessed one of the symptoms of the post-

apocalyptic world that McCarthy would later depict in *The Road*, is, no doubt, the most dramatic maneuver made by McCarthy to deconstruct the Western myths, for the pre-apocalyptic ending is completely out of sync with Manifest Destiny. Pierre Lagayette's study on McCarthy's Border Trilogy and *The Road* also underscores the atypical character of Billy in terms of the Western myth hero. For instance, Lagayette locates the implications of Billy's nomadic border crossings in "the advent of the nuclear age" (88) and the ensuing destruction of the national borders by arguing that "[t]here are no more borders to define territories or nations; only the thin line of the road materializes a delusive security. The atomic age and the Cold War signified the end of security for the United States" (89). In the post-apocalyptic era, indeed, there will be no political borders that demarcate different national states. Such borders will have most efficiently been erased, and in the wholly de-territorialized world, the nomadic flow of human beings that resembles Billy's nomadic border crossings will become the norm.

In this context, I believe that Billy's border-crossings reveal to us a new sense of place tied to mobility or nomadic flow, which I will attempt to elaborate on and relate to bioregionalism below. In doing so, I aim to argue that McCarthy debunks a conventional concept of place as a sense of rootedness in a specific location, as well as the American Western myths. It is my contention that a new sense of place constructed by McCarthy suggests to us that bioregionalism, or a life-place defined by natural boundaries, is not necessarily confined to a specific geography within fixed boundaries. I will further explain the new sense of place tied to mobility and predicated upon

bioregionalism formulated by McCarthy below.

### **III. *Beyond the Borderlines: Bioregionalism and Xerophilia in Light of Nomadic Flow***

*The Crossing* is as much about dwelling in a place as about the demystification of Western myths. The idea of place that McCarthy configures in the novel is a curious one because it eludes the more conventional conceptualization of place and space dyad, such as the one proposed by Yi-Fu Tuan in *Space and Place* (1977), in which he differentiates space from place on the ground that “‘space’ is more abstract than ‘place’” and contends that “[w]hat begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value” (6). For Tuan, space and place are complementary concepts which “require each other for definition” (6).

As Ashley Bourne keenly point out, *The Crossing* reveals to us “the central paradox of the construction of space and place” (109), in which “one longs for stability, a fixed sense of place and self, but that one is also compelled to perpetual motion, seeking out those spaces where place and self will stabilize” (109). She observes that “McCarthy’s landscapes create a praxis of space and place, combining particular topographical details with human movement and activity to continually destabilize the much-desired secure sense of place” (111). She finally posits that by sending the central characters, whenever their identities are at stake, into “space, open country where they have no sense of rootedness” (121), McCarthy constructs the landscape

in which “identity and place are always in a state of becoming” (123).

I agree with Bourne’s proposition that McCarthy destabilizes the conceptual boundary between place and space by depicting the Southwest borderland primarily as “the fluidity of place” in which “the wanderers feel an attachment to landscapes that are inevitably changing” (114). Both Heideggerian “dwelling” and Casey’s idea of “event” are instrumental to the understanding of McCarthy’s rendering of the borderlands, in which place, space, and identity interact with one another, permeating through and beyond the conceptual boundaries. The idea of eternally changing place also resonates with Libby Robin’s nomadic bioregionalism and Neil Campbell’s theorization of the rhizomatic West, which I will in turn examine and parse out below.

In his essay titled, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” Heidegger argues that “Dwelling is the manner in which mortals are on the earth” (148). He defines a “boundary” as “not that at which something stops” but “from which something *begins its presencing*” (154). To Heidegger, a “boundary” does not necessarily mean a confined, limited place. Human beings dwell on earth, “building” their own places, and from his perspective, “a location” means opening up a horizon “by which a space is provided for” (154). Following Heidegger, Casey also attempts to explain the relation between space and place with the idea of “event” in his essay titled, “How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time.” He argues that an “event” is “the spatiotemporalization of a place” (37), with the mediation of which a place becomes capable of “co-locating” space and time, or “gathering-with” (38). He further articulates this concept,

maintaining that the “eventmental” character of place is not found in a “configured place or region” but “occurs by virtue of the very power of emplacement to bring space and time together in the event” (38).

One of the moments in which McCarthy articulates his idea of dwelling in a place seems to occur during Billy’s conversation with an old indian man in the sierras, whom Billy encounters on his way back to America after burying the wolf. The old man warns Billy that “he must cease his wanderings and make for himself some place in the world” (134). There is a paradoxical twist in the old man’s remarks, though, as he also tells Billy that “while it [the world] 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” (134). In short, “the world could only be known as it existed in men’s hearts” (134). Here, what the old man implies has not so much to do with a conventional view of place as a fixed, confined location but what Heidegger calls “dwelling” or Casey’s idea of “event,” which disrupts the place/space dyad.

To summarize, the idea of place suggested by Heidegger, Casey, and the old indian man resonates with one another, for all of them posit a place experienced by human beings, pointing to a more phenomenological conceptualization of place. It does not mean, however, that they are reducing the actual physicality of place to a merely ideological construct. Rather, they all highlight the importance of active involvement of human beings with their environment. In this sense, Billy is ironically fulfilling the old man’s admonition to

“make for himself some place in the world” (134), albeit with loss and violence.

The fluidity of place is, to be sure, crucial to McCarthy’s demystification of the Western myths. Tim Cresswell’s statement fairly sums up what Heidegger, Casey, and the old man have tried to show us about the elusiveness of place. In *Place: A Short Introduction*, Cresswell affirms that “[p]laces are never finished but always the result of processes and practices” (37). This performability of place is instrumental to the understanding of new cartography drawn by Billy’s nomadic existence during his border-crossings. Once we accept the fluidity or performability of place as the quintessential nature of human dwelling, as Cresswell nicely puts it, “[p]lace as an event is marked by openness and change rather than boundedness and permanence” (49).

Libby Robin’s essay titled, “Seasons and Nomads: Reflections on Bioregionalism in Australia” is very illuminating in that it reveals to us the possible way of rethinking bioregionalism especially in such an arid area as the Southwest desert. What is most noteworthy in her essay is that she attempts to re-conceptualize bioregionalism, which is tied to mobility or nomadism. As Robin tells us, in certain areas which are not seasonal, “dwelling in place paradoxically demands mobility” (288). In this geography, nomadism is almost homogeneous with topophilia, or “human being’s affective ties with the material environment” (Tuan, *Topophilia* 93). It is a lifestyle adjusted to one’s environment, and Robin confirms that “[d]welling beyond places of comfortable, reliable seasons and rich soils” should be reconsidered as “*high* culture” (289). From her perspective, Billy’s restless border-

crossings show his nomadic bioregionalism, guided by his adept skills in adjusting to the material environment as new contingency or necessity arises.

Neil Campbell also provides us with some insights into the idea of “the fluidity of place” in his theorization of the rhizomatic West.<sup>10</sup> Observing some ideological myths about the West, such as Ronald Reagan’s political rhetoric, the Turner thesis, and the Western novels, Campbell keenly observes that mobility and migration have been subsumed under the “desire for fixity, belonging, and integration” (1), which is conducive to building a solidarity of people for “the foundation of national identity” (2). By contrast, Campbell calls attention to the reality that “the West has always had a global dimension as a geographical, cultural, and economic crossroads defined by complex connectivity, multidimensionality, and imagination” (3). He proposes that “[r]ather than the assumption that ‘roots always precede routes’ in the definition of culture, one might rethink ‘any local, national, or regional domain,’ such as the West, as an interactive process of constitutive contacts and mobilities” (4).

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10) In theorizing the rhizomatic West, as the very terminology suggests, Campbell relies on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s ideas. Campbell especially applies a “rhizome,” or multiplicity which “ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti* 7) to the understanding of cultural space or geographical cartography. The aim of the rhizomatic West is “[to dispel] the official, mythic images [of the West]” (Campbell 7) and instead “to view it as unfinished, multiple” (Campbell 9), ultimately to produce “a different and more sophisticated ‘diagram’ of the West” (Campbell 7). Naturally, Campbell relates the project of making a new “diagram” of the West with drawing a new map, or new cartography: “a map that is not the ‘tracing’ of anything prior, but which serves instead to indicate ‘zones of indistinction’ from which becomings may arise” (8).

Campbell's attempt to theorize the rhizomatic West against the Western myths is apt, for Deleuze and Guattari also propose the subversive potential of nomadology or rhizomatic flow to "deterritorialize" and "reterritorialize" the borderlines of the nation states in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Deterritorializing the borderlines via nomadic flow becomes an interesting construct, especially in reading *The Crossing*, for Billy's journeys across the border bring forth a new sense of place, which I believe is more aptly defined by nomadic bioregionalism, as Billy's emerging xerophilia suggests. What complicates Billy's xerophilia toward the Southwest borderlands, though, is the fact that each of his journeys across the border ends with an event which often results in loss, almost always preceded or followed by prophetic figures who recount to Billy their own share of loss and teach him how to cope with such tragic events arising from pure contingency.

One of the most vitriolic and poignant revelations of the existential truth of life is delivered by the blind revolutionary who has suffered one of the most intolerable injustices and loss, and when he reveals it, he speaks it in Spanish, the language of Mexico.

Somos dolientes en la oscuridad. Todos nosotros. Me entiendes? Los que pueden ver, los que no pueden.... Lo que debemos entender, said the blind man, es que ultimamente todo es polvo. Todo lo que podemos tocar. Todo lo que podemos ver. En esto tenemos la evidencia mas profunda de la justicia, de la misericordia. En esto vemos la bendicion mas grande de Dios. (293)

We are mourners in the darkness. All of us. Do you understand me? Those who can see, those who cannot.... What we should understand, said the blind man, is that finally everything is dust. All we can touch. All we can see. In this we have evidence more profound than justice, than mercy. In this we see the greatest blessing of God.

To make one of the prophetic characters say such a profound revelation of the truth in Spanish, without English translation is, I think, McCarthy's another textual gesture. Although the message delivered by the blind revolutionary is nothing like Manifest Destiny or the frontier thesis, it nonetheless contains the truth of the world and shapes Billy's understanding of it. In other words, the Southwest borderlands become a "taking-place" for Billy to learn to cope with the contingency/necessity of the world, which is nothing "but a seeming."

Given that Billy's three border-crossings are wrought with a series of misfortunes and painful loss – his parents, their horses, the shewolf, and Boyd – without rational explanations or justification, one could legitimately ask if *The Crossing* is about xerophilia or xerophobia. Further, one could argue that McCarthy has not gotten away from the Western myth tradition – especially that of the primitive-pastoral myth with an ascetic hero in it. One could also perceive the representation of the Southwest desert area as a landscape of "existential wasteland" which reveals to the reader "an existential void" (Lynch 92), thereby reinforcing "the view that the desert is an appropriate place to blow up big bombs and to dump radioactive waste" (Lynch 93), about which McCarthy seems to have provided his own commentary by ending the novel with the explosion of a nuclear bomb.

Indeed, in the traditional Western myths, Mexico is often symbolized as the wilderness for vile racial Others to inhabit. I would argue, however, that the Southwestern borderland that McCarthy depicts is distinctively a bioregionally imagined one,

foregrounding the emergence of xerophilia through Billy's border-crossings, however tragic or painful each of his journeys may have been. As Lynch observes, "the contingent and transitional nature of bioregional borders promotes a flexible place-conscious sense of identity, and encourages - indeed necessitates - a tolerance for the ambiguous and fuzzy realities of the world" (24). The trajectory of Billy's border-crossings similarly develops a place-consciousness and tolerance for ambiguity and contingency of the world surrounding him, for the most profound lessons about the existential truth of life are revealed to him in the Southwestern borderlands.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Billy's nomadic existence and his identity, which is being reformulated by constant movements and the lucidity of place, begin to draw new cartography on the Southwest borderlands, as I have hitherto attempted to show and relate to McCarthy's demystification of Western myths. I would like to conclude that Billy's nomadic border-crossings provide us with several implications for the bioregional reinhabitation of a place. First, his sense of place is constructed around bioregions and their biotic community, rather than political borders drawn by men. The nomadic flow across the Southwest borderland has gradually erased a political borderline, instead encouraging a bioregionally driven sensitivity to the natural contours of one's lived place. Next, his journeys across the Southwest borderland, equally paved by loss and lessons about life, underscore

the importance of raising one's tolerance for pure contingency of life, which is by definition inexplicable with any logic or necessity. Last but not least, Billy's affection for the wolf and others whom he encounters during his journeys, exemplifies one's commitment to the biotic community with the sense of ethical responsibility.

As Lynch points out, "an emerging bioregional consciousness" in the Southwest borderland area brings forth "a more subtle form of identity" which is "mutable and malleable, willing to explore ways of being that may at times be ornery but are nevertheless generous to both their human and their natural neighbors in a common landscape" (138). What Billy learns from his three border-crossings are invaluable lessons about loss and life amidst pain. Billy's nomadic border-crossings, closely tied to bioregionalism, or xerophilia, urge readers to change the prejudice about the Southwest borderland as "wilderness" or "wasteland" and instead see it as a placid bioregion for a life-place where its biotic community exists and thrives albeit among despairs and loss.

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**Abstract**

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

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In this essay, I critically reexamine the scholarly works on Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing*, most of which have hitherto revolved around either the American West or the demystification of it, especially delving into the American frontier psychology often described with Manifest Destiny, and aim to formulate my own proposition that McCarthy attempts to demystify the American Western myths through the protagonist Billy Parham's nomadic border-crossings across the Southwest borderline between the US and Mexico. It is my contention that the trajectory of Billy's three border-crossings suggests to us the emergence of his bioregionalism, or a way of life directed by human affection and ethical responsibility for the biotic community of a life place, which gradually erases the politically designated borderline and instead substitutes it with a more ecologically-drawn cartography.

The demystification of American West that *The Crossing* fulfills is also predicated upon McCarthy's conceptualization of place and space, which eludes a more conventional dyad famously proposed by Yi-Fu Tuan in *Space and Place*. McCarthy renders the Southwest borderland a conceptually fluid one in which place, space, and identity interact with one another, permeating through and beyond the conceptual boundaries among them. To explicate the concept of a fluid place depicted by McCarthy, I refer to such concepts as Heideggerian "dwelling," Casey's idea of "event," the nomadic bioregionalism, and the rhizomatic West, among others. In so doing, I aim to show how

McCarthy destabilizes not only the political borderline but also the common dyads of humanity/alterity, contingency/ necessity, and place/space.

**Key Words**

Cormac McCarthy, *The Crossing*, Bioregionalism, Xerophilia, American Western Myths, Southwest borderlands