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# The West/ern and Frontier Mythology in *No Country for Old Men*<sup>1</sup>

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*No Country for Old Men* is a work whose genre is difficult to pin down. Sara Spurgeon recalls in her introduction to *Cormac McCarthy* that the novel has been alternately read as “urban Western, detective fiction, hard-boiled, noir, and even horror”.<sup>2</sup> The film too has elicited various responses as to its generic identity (for instance, the comments of the cast and crew in the DVD bonus material which include horror, crime, Western, noir, or comedy). This generic hybridity invites critics and audiences to what Lynnea Chapman King calls a “search for genre”,<sup>3</sup> compelling readers and viewers to actively engage with a definition of what the novel and film are or can be. This hybridity present in the novel finds a perfect match in the Coen brothers’ approach to genre, which “epitomiz[es] genre as ‘a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy [...] a sort of participation without belonging’”.<sup>4</sup> In discussions on the generic identity of *No Country*, two genres seem to prevail: the Western and the hard-boiled crime.<sup>5</sup> If these genres are generally quite different in terms of setting and period, they frequently converge and overlap in their reliance on, and exploration of, frontier mythology.<sup>6</sup> Keeping in mind that, when it comes to genre, hybridity trumps identity in *No Country*, this chapter focuses on the mobilization and rewritings of the Western genre and frontier mythology in both novel and film. Some of these rewritings come from the hybridization of the Western with hard-boiled crime fiction, while others question the Western and frontier myth from within. I first discuss the debt of *No Country* to the Western genre and how the text and its filmic adaptation draw on the genre’s conventions and

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<sup>1</sup> References to pages in the novel are indicated in parentheses, while references to timing in the film are indicated in brackets.

<sup>2</sup> Sara L. Spurgeon, “Introduction,” in Sara L. Spurgeon (ed.), *Cormac McCarthy: All the Pretty Horses, No Country for Old Men, The Road* (London: Continuum, 2011) 2.

<sup>3</sup> Lynnea Chapman King, “Preface,” in Lynnea Chapman King (ed.), *From Novel to Film: No Country for Old Men*, (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2009) vii.

<sup>4</sup> Neil Campbell, *Post-Westerns: Cinema, Region, West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013) 332. Campbell quotes Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genre,” *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980): 59.

<sup>5</sup> John Cant, “Oedipus Rests: Mimesis and Allegory in *No Country for Old Men*”, in Lynnea Chapman King (ed.), *From Novel to Film: No Country for Old Men*, (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2009) 56.

<sup>6</sup> See Richard Slotkin, “The Hard-Boiled Detective Story: From the Open Range to the Mean Streets,” in Barbara A. Rader and Howard G. Zettler (eds.), *The Sleuth and the Scholar: Origins, Evolution, and Current Trends in Detective Fiction* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988).

characteristic features. I then focus on the ways in which *No Country* mobilizes frontier mythology and projects its ideological underpinnings onto the US-Mexico border and the confrontation between the main characters. And finally, I look at the way both novel and film develop reflexive strategies to support their commentary on, and redefinition of, the Western genre and frontier mythology.

## **The West/ern in *No Country***

Writing about *No Country* upon the release of the film adaptation in 2007, Western author Larry McMurtry said that the film is “a darkly beautiful border Western that breaks all the rules of the genre.”<sup>7</sup> Ethan Coen voiced the same contradiction in even fewer words, saying that “*No Country for Old Men* is sort of a western and sort of not”.<sup>8</sup> If *No Country* can break the rules of the Western, it is first because it establishes an intimate connection with it.<sup>9</sup> I will focus on two major aspects of this connection: *No Country*’s use of the Western landscape and its historical perspective on violence in the US American West.

### **The Western landscape**

The first and most conspicuous element of westernness in *No Country* is the landscape. It is introduced early and present mostly in the first quarter of the narrative, later superseded by night scenes and interior shots that bring *No Country* closer to the noir film.<sup>10</sup> Yet its establishing presence functions as a principle to be bent and broken. The novel is set in West Texas where the Southwestern desert – the most typical setting of Western films – starts in the United States, and McCarthy pays close attention to its natural specificities. A precise vocabulary is used that sets a very particular scene and suggests the characters’ – especially Moss and Bell’s – knowledge of the terrain. As in Westerns, the land does not simply serve as a background for the action but is itself imbued with agency. It is hot, dry, vast, and rugged; it requires large 4x4 vehicles with “big all-terrain tires” (11) or a horse to be travelled and it hurts Moss’s feet after he lost his socks (33) or shoes [20:44] to the river. The harsh conditions make the desert a force to be reckoned with. Its geological characteristics also determine the course of the action, a high ridge giving vantage point (11, [07:16]), a rock or tree providing shade (15-16, [11:22]), a river offering an escape route (30, [19:21]).

At times an obstacle or a force shaping human endeavor, the desert also appears empty and unconcerned. Describing the landscape to the south while tracking the antelope and then the last man standing, Moss uses several times the word “nothing” (13; 15; 26). This emptiness does not appeal filling, as in the myth of the Virgin Land, but is rather foreboding, an indication that there is nothing for men in this wilderness. *No Country* here draws on a Puritan strain of the Western genre that associates the natural expanses of the West to a “waste and

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<sup>7</sup> Larry McMurtry, “A River Runs through It,” *Newsweek*, October 27, 2007. Quoted in Neil Campbell, *Post-Westerns: Cinema, Region, West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013) 332.

<sup>8</sup> Lynn Hirschberg, “Coen Brothers Country,” *New York Times*, November 11, 2007. Quoted in Neil Campbell, *Post-Westerns: Cinema, Region, West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013) 328.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the ways in which *No Country* fits into the neo-/post-/modern subgenre of the Western, and how it is influenced by the Italian Western, see Julie Assouly, *L’Amérique des frères Coen* (Paris : CNRS Éditions, 2015) 395-402.

<sup>10</sup> “Certainly, the horizontality of the opening sequence (as of the classic Western) is largely abandoned in favor of the constraining signature features of film noir.” Lee Clark Mitchell, “Dismantling the Western: Film Noir’s Defiance of Genre in *No Country for Old Men*.” *Genre* 47. 3 (2014): 340.

howling wilderness”<sup>11</sup> rather than to the sacred place of revelation.<sup>12</sup> The West is not so much a regenerative space where pioneers, stripped of their worldly trappings and in communion with God, can erect a new Garden and advance Manifest Destiny. Rather, the desert is the territory of “hellish fiends and brutish men”, harsh and unforgiving, that colonizes men’s minds sooner than they can civilize it. “This country is hard on people” says Ellis (271, [107:06]) and certainly it seems to resist law, order, and civilization as the bodies pile up in the desert and small towns of rural West Texas.

Here, *No Country* bears the traces of a previous Western set in Texas in which the country is blamed for the inability of settlers to civilize it, and in which the main protagonist has been turned mad by the violence of Indian wars. In *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956), following the death of their son at the hands of Indians, Mr Jorgensen says “it’s this country that killed my boy”, to which the more educated Mrs. Jorgensen replies: “It just so happens we’d be Texicans. A Texican is nothing but a human man way out on a limb. This year and next... Maybe for a hundred more. But I don’t think it will be forever. Some day this country’s gonna be a fine good place to be. Maybe it needs our bones in the ground before that time can come” [*The Searchers*, 47:26-47:53]. In *No Country*, the post-colonial setting of 1980 erases any hope of the country becoming a “fine good place to be” with the advent of civilization, but the desert is still there breaking men. There is no beauty in the description of its landscapes. Rather, it either appears coldly material in the calculating gaze of the hunter, its features mixed with descriptions of the weapons used to kill its creatures (8-10). Or, when it is surveyed by the pondering gaze of the sheriff, it briefly swells to apocalyptic proportions (“that god lives in silence who has scoured the following land with salt and ash”, 45). The Protestant God has long retreated and left no sign, and the desert is bent only on watching men fail.

The film adaptation does retain the importance of the Western landscape and even foregrounds it from its first shots. In the novel, the West Texas landscape only comes in with Moss hunting antelope (8). Before that, there are signs of westernness – the language, a sheriff, officers wearing hats, and maybe Huntsville, although it could be Huntsville, Alabama – but there is no clear indication of a Western setting before the Southwestern landscape comes into view, along with guns, hunting, and human savagery. In the film, the eleven opening shots [00:38-01:52] are still long shots of Western landscapes at dawn progressively lit by the rising sun, supporting Bell’s opening – and single – voice over. The only soundtrack is the diegetic sound of the wind blowing. The absence of extradiegetic score – a feature of the entire film – can here be interpreted as a filmic equivalent to McCarthy’s precise vocabulary: an aesthetic choice that draws attention to the material quality of the setting and gives the desert scope, texture and tactility. While the poles, fences, and windmills present in these shots, iconic markers of white settlement, confirm a visual connection with the Western, main themes of the genre are laid out in Bell’s voice over (a contraction of the character’s first five italicized monologues in the novel): the existence of savagery in the form of inhuman

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<sup>11</sup> « Beyond the great Atlantick flood/ There is a region vast,/ A country where no English foot/ In former ages past:/ A waste and howling wilderness,/ Where none inhabited/ But hellish fiends, and brutish men/ That Devils worshiped » Michael Wigglesworth, “God’s Controversy with New England,” 1662.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1036&context=etas>.

Consulted 05/25/2021.

<sup>12</sup> Julie Assouly, *L’Amérique des frères Coen* (Paris : CNRS Éditions, 2015) 29.

men, sheriffs using force to uphold the law, comparison with the “old timers” [1:22] in a changing West, and masculine filiation.

The Puritan strain of the Western is suggested in these opening shots by the absence of human figures (a requirement spelled out in the screenplay<sup>13</sup>), the drained color palette (emphasizing harsh color contrast in the first shots, then progressing towards a monochrome grey/brown which will characterize subsequent day scenes in the desert), and the identification of these desert landscapes with a narrative of violence through the voice over. The presence of poles, fences, and windmills signals human attempts to survey and order this wilderness, as they provide structure and emphasize perspective in the frame composition. But their very isolation within humanless vistas suggests such attempts are futile. The ominous potential of the landscape is further signaled through the last shot of the desert, a pan left from the wilderness to Chigurh as the voice over reflexively states “the crime you see now it’s hard to even take its measure” [02:06]. The cold-blooded killer and ghostlike figure of evil is visually associated with the wilderness, appearing as an emanation of it – Wigglesworth’s “hellish fiend” – much more clearly than in the novel, in which the character is first introduced at the police station (5).

### **A history of violence in the US American West**

Along with the landscape, *No Country* also draws from the Western in its exploration of a history of violence associated with US colonization. The narrative is post-colonial, as the first coin-toss scene indirectly sets the clock at 1980 (56; [24:20]). Such period does not fit the conventional historical setting of Westerns in the post-Civil War 19<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, like Westerns, it is still set in the past by 25 (novel) or 27 (film) years. The history of the West is then layered in a more oblique way than in Westerns, as readers and viewers are offered an early 21<sup>st</sup>-century representation of the 1980 West that bears the traces and memories of the partly imagined, but still quite present, old West.<sup>14</sup> The history of US imperial violence pervades *No Country*, the narrative peeling off its layers from Moss’s formative killings in Vietnam, Bell’s private memory as a World War II veteran and postwar Texan sheriff, and Ellis’s public memory of Terrell County going as far back as the murder of Uncle Mac by Indians in 1879<sup>15</sup> (270, [106:15]). All of these layers are created and received in the mid-2000s when the US was at war against terror, hunting a barbaric enemy in Afghan caves,<sup>16</sup> and an invading force in Iraq. The early confusion as to the time setting of the narrative, which could possibly be contemporary until revealed otherwise, invites our receiving the narrative within the context of its production. These layers of historical violence in *No Country* suggest a continuum in US American imperial policies that was the subject of many

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<sup>13</sup> “We dissolve through more landscapes, bringing us to full day. None of them show people or human habitation.”

Joel and Ethan Coen, “No Country for Old Men, Adapted Screenplay” 1. [http://www.raindance.co.uk/site/picture/upload/image/scripts/No\\_Country%20\(Shooting\).pdf](http://www.raindance.co.uk/site/picture/upload/image/scripts/No_Country%20(Shooting).pdf). Consulted 05/25/2021.

<sup>14</sup> McCarthy wrote a first version of the novel as a screenplay in the early 1980s.

<sup>15</sup> The film displaces this event to 1909, stretching Native American violence beyond the end of the colonial wars in 1886 and bringing the indigenous threat closer to the present.

<sup>16</sup> “We’re facing a new kind of enemy, somebody so barbaric that they would fly airplanes into buildings full of innocent people. [...] We haven’t seen this kind of barbarism in a long period of time. [...] right now we’re facing people who hit and run. They hide in caves. We’ll get them out.” George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President Upon Arrival, South Lawn”, September 16, 2001. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html>. Consulted 05/25/2021.

critical assessments of the War on Terror in the 2000s (and Vietnam in 1970s), Iraq being cast as a new Vietnam, being cast as an extension of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian wars.<sup>17</sup> As Jun-Suk Hwang notes, quoting Bell in the novel, “America has never been a country for old men, because the country has ‘a strange kind of history and a damned bloody one too’ and has not ‘had a time of peace much of any length at all’” (284, 307).<sup>18</sup>

Yet, *No Country* does not dwell on the US responsibility for colonial violence as a revisionist Western of the 1970s might have done. Instead, in keeping with Westerns of a more classical variety and with the rhetoric of the war on terror, it locates the responsibility for US violence in the factual existence of savagery. Bell’s description of colonial Texas is one of savage violence suffered by the settlers who saw their “wife and children killed and scalped and gutted like fish”, which would justify their being “irritable” and maybe using excessive violence in return (195). His words here as elsewhere recall Theodore Roosevelt’s imperialist account of US colonization in *The Winning of the West*.<sup>19</sup> In that and other aspects, Bell’s jeremiad tends to victimize white US American manhood<sup>20</sup> rather than atone for its historical tally. This absence of recognition of a US American responsibility in colonial violence is confirmed in the convenient erasure of Native Americans, who are reduced to nameless characters in tales of gruesome murder (Uncle Mac shot down in his porch) or traces of a culture whose people are vanished (the pictographs on desert rocks “perhaps a thousand years old. The men who drew them hunters like himself. Of them there was no other trace”, 11, not in the film). This denial of US colonial aggression and its consequences, when the narrative is set in a region that was, and remains, shaped by it, participates in a form of “erasure of indigenous peoples from the representation of US history and popular culture” that ultimately perpetuates the violence of US colonization.<sup>21</sup>

In its opposition of the old West and the new, *No Country* is heir to a late strand of Westerns epitomized by Sam Peckinpah – an avowed influence on cinematographer Roger Deakins – that regularly pictured old, anachronistic cowboys struggling in a modern West.<sup>22</sup> It also evokes the neo- or post-Westerns of the 1950s and 1960s, these films set in the contemporary West that explore the legacy of colonization and of the Western myth in US society and

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<sup>17</sup> See Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present* (Malden: Blackwell, 2004) for the 21<sup>st</sup> century context and Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building* (Minneapolis: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980) for the connections between the Vietnam War and the colonial wars against Native Americans.

<sup>18</sup> Jung-Suk Hwang, “The Wild West, 9/11, and Mexicans in Cormac McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men*,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 60. 3 (2018): 353. Hwang quotes Bell in the novel.

<sup>19</sup> “The excesses so often committed by the whites, when, after many checks and failures, they at last grasped victory, are causes for shame and regret; yet it is only fair to keep in mind the terrible provocations they had endured. [Almost every frontiersman] had bitter personal wrongs to avenge. He was not taking part in a war against a civilized foe; he was fighting in a contest where women and children suffered the fate of the strong men [...] Again and again on the frontier we hear of some such unfortunate who has devoted all the remainder of his wretched life to the one object of taking vengeance on the whole race of the men who had darkened his days forever.” Theodore Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West* (New York: The Current Literature, 1905).

<sup>20</sup> Jung-Suk Hwang, “The Wild West, 9/11, and Mexicans in Cormac McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men*,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 60. 3 (2018): 362.

<sup>21</sup> Maria J. Saldaña-Portillo, “‘No Country for Old Mexicans’: The Collision of Empires on the Texas Frontier.” *Interventions* 13. 1 (2011): 76.

<sup>22</sup> In Westerns such as *Ride the High Country* (1962), *The Wild Bunch* (1969) or *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* (1970), or contemporary westerns such as *Bring me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* (1972), an important reference for the film.

culture.<sup>23</sup> Such references include *Bad Day at Black Rock* (John Sturges, 1955), in which past racial violence in a small Western town is unearthed and accounted for, or *Lonely Are the Brave* (David Miller, 1962), in which a modern-day cowboy is caught up by the law in the Western desert, his horse no match for helicopters. *No Country* shares with these films a sense of nostalgia for the old, dying, mythic West through the voice of old sheriff Ed Tom Bell who laments the loss of good manners and rise in criminality.<sup>24</sup> In keeping with these films, the novel at times blames the destructive effect of civilization on a Golden Age of natural freedom (for instance, the killing of a redtail hawk by a truck that leaves Bell pensive, 44; or Moss and Chigurh shooting at wild animals with modern technology, 10; 99; [05:40; 41:44]<sup>25</sup>).

Yet, *No Country* is different from most of these 1960s and 1970s post-Westerns in that the main reason for the Fall is not so much located in the excesses of civilization as it is in a surge in senseless savagery. The need for lawmen to carry guns (63, [00:59]), change in school reports of violence (196), and repeated mentions of horrific crimes in the news (for instance, 124, [86:42]), serve to establish a swelling in inhuman behavior, what Roscoe identifies as the “dismal tide” in the film [98:15]. Even though there is a sense of historical continuity for the presence of violence in the West, the entrance of Chigurh into this small-town West Texas county introduces a radical, irreversible disruption (“This country has not had a unsolved homicide in forty-one years. Now we got nine of em in one week”, 276), which the film graphically expresses in Chigurh’s introduction (as something that cannot be “measur[ed]” [02:06], the first good view of him a close-up of a distorted face as he strangles the deputy [03:26]). Here, *No Country* is closer to the hard-boiled urban crime drama of the 1970s than to the Western or post-Western of the same period: it deplores the loss of morals and rise in criminal violence in a narrative setting that calls upon strong, Dirty Harry-type lawmen to restore order.<sup>26</sup> The explicit labelling of Chigurh as a “psychopathic killer” (141, [54:15]), a staple character of those 1970s urban crime films, confirms that lineage.<sup>27</sup>

Both the novel and film question the declinist, reactionary discourse of sheriff Bell in several respects. First, the historical perspective on violence in the West undercuts Bell’s jeremiad about rising violence. His family history serves as a reminder that even though lawmen did not carry firearms in the old times, there never was a West without bloodshed. Another twist on the declinist discourse is to set the narrative in 1980, which greatly affects the potency of

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<sup>23</sup> “Post-Westerns are concerned with the afterlife of the classic Western and regional mythos and with their consequences and reverberations within the contemporary world.” Neil Campbell, *Post-Westerns: Cinema, Region, West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013) 332.

<sup>24</sup> This led some critics to compare the film with Fred Zinnemann’s *High Noon* (1952) and its old-school sheriff in times of declining morality.

<sup>25</sup> The fact that both these animals are digitally created in the film answers to practical constraints, but also suggests that the natural freedom they may symbolize does not exist in this filmic world, and is ultimately a social construct.

<sup>26</sup> Discussing the migration of the frontier myth to the hard-boiled urban crime film in the 1970s, Richard Slotkin notes that films like *Dirty Harry* (Don Siegel, 1971) or *Death Wish* (Michael Winner, 1974) uphold that “our world is out of control, pervaded by an evil against which we feel helpless [...]. [They] invert the Myth of the Frontier that had informed the Western. The borders their heroes confront are impermeable to the forces of progress and civilized enlightenment; if anything, the flow of power runs in the opposite direction, with the civilized world threatened with subjugation to or colonization by the forces of darkness.” Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Minneapolis: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998) 635.

<sup>27</sup> The absence of moral coordinates also recalls the Italian western or US American films such as Monte Hellman’s *The Shooting* (1966).

prophetic statements and exposes such discourse as an ahistorical litany. Distance with this discourse is also introduced through elements of structure and narration. In the novel, the clear typographical separation of Bell's monologues from the narrative serves to visualize the possible mismatch of events and their interpretation. In the film, the narration becomes ironic most conspicuously in the coffee shop conversation of Roscoe (Rodger Boyce) and Bell when they discuss changing times. Roscoe blames "kids with green hair and bones in their noses" and the "dismal tide", Bell concurs that "when you quit hearin' sir and mam, the rest is soon to follow", and they eventually both opine that "it's not the one thing" [97:53-98:16].<sup>28</sup> If the scene, as Neil Campbell notes, references previous post-Western jeremiads about the New West,<sup>29</sup> this particular moment in the film feels cliché and almost parodic. The writing (two old white men in a coffee shop blaming hippies and manners for the evil in the world), staging (Western costumes and drawling accents), and editing (the shot/reverse shot structure emphasizing their mutually reinforcing clichés), at a crucial narrative point when viewers seek meaning for Moss's death, all contribute to characterize such discourse as lacking and comical. Yet, as seen earlier, savagery does exist in *No Country*, and it does disrupt the small-town community of Terrell County, West Texas, which ultimately validates Bell's reactionary perspective. Something has indeed gone down the drain.

### **No Country and frontier mythology**

As Julie Assouly notes in *L'Amérique des frères Coen*, "les manifestations de la frontière prennent une part active aux schémas narratifs" in *No Country*.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, several elements in *No Country* derive from the structures and themes of frontier mythology and come to define its narrative possibilities. The dichotomy between US American victims of criminality and Mexican drug-related violence is shaped after the binary opposition of civilization and savagery. The characters of Bell, Moss, and Chigurh evoke archetypal figures of frontier heroism and villainy. And the centrality of white masculinity in a narrative of violent confrontation with otherness reproduces the dominant perspective of classic frontier stories. Some elements of frontier mythology are approached in *No Country* through the generic conventions of the Western – the genre most frontally identified with such mythology – while other elements are derived from the hard-boiled urban crime version of frontier mythology as it developed in films at the turn of the 1970s. In this part I will discuss how *No Country* appropriates the binary opposition of civilization and savagery and reproduces its racist and imperialist underpinnings, but also how both novel and film hybridize the representations of savagery and deconstruct the identification of masculinity and violence with power and regeneration.

### **Frontier mythology and the US-Mexico border**

The frontier myth was the central political mythology of the United States from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the late 1960s and, as *No Country* and numerous other texts demonstrate, its

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<sup>28</sup> In the novel, these points are voiced by Bell in his monologues (295; 304).

<sup>29</sup> See Campbell's discussion of Joan Didion's 1968 book *Slouching toward Bethlehem* in connection with several post-western films: Nicholas Ray's *The Lusty Men* (67-68), John Huston's *Fat City* (184-186 and 193), and *No Country for Old Men* (338-39 and 347). In Neil Campbell, *Post-Westerns: Cinema, Region, West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013).

<sup>30</sup> Julie Assouly, *L'Amérique des frères Coen* (Paris : CNRS Éditions, 2015) 26.

cultural influence remains quite important into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>31</sup> Although most visible in the Western genre, the frontier myth provided a common cultural metaphor for arguably all of US American culture's adventure and action genres – especially science-fiction, war narratives, and hard-boiled detective novels – as they developed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>32</sup> A simple definition of the frontier myth would be the belief that the United States – its national identity, democracy, and capitalism – was born on the frontier, in the historical experience of colonization of the North American continent.<sup>33</sup> Historically, this myth has served as a justification of US American imperial violence in North America and beyond in a manner similar to the French civilizing mission or the British three Cs of Christianity, Commerce and Civilization.

The frontier myth centers on the concept of the frontier, which is a cultural metaphor that was developed from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century onward by European colonizers and their descendants to capture their experience of contact with the indigenous populations of North America. Its most famous definition was coined by late 19<sup>th</sup>-century historian Frederick Jackson Turner, who described the frontier as “the meeting point between savagery and civilization.”<sup>34</sup> The frontier is not a political border between nation states but a racial, cultural, and symbolic space where a civilized, superior “us” (white Anglos) and a savage, inferior “them” (racialized others) cross and collide. It does not designate a specific place and time, but has rather moved around in the US American imaginary with the contingencies of colonization and imperial policies, its latest incarnation being the frontier of the War on Terror pitting western civilization against terrorist barbarity. In its more progressive, liberal version, the frontier is imagined as a *frontera*,<sup>35</sup> a contact zone,<sup>36</sup> a middle ground,<sup>37</sup> an unequal space of encounter where races and cultures meet, exchange, and acculturate. In its most conservative and racist version, it is a line separating white America from savagery that must be guarded at all cost, otherwise civilization will corrupt and collapse. In projecting the frontier and its racial/cultural/symbolic divide onto the political line of the US-Mexico border, *No Country* explores – and does not exactly emancipate from – this latter conservative imaginary.

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<sup>31</sup> In *Guerre sauvage & empire de la liberté* (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2021), I analyze how the frontier myth migrated from the Western to other genres of Hollywood cinema at the turn of the 1970s and how this migration ensured its resilience as a central narrative framework in US American cultural productions.

<sup>32</sup> “The influence of the Myth [of the Frontier] is such that its characteristic conventions have strongly influenced nearly every genre of adventure story in the lexicon of mass culture production, particularly science fiction and detective stories.” Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Minneapolis: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998) 25.

<sup>33</sup> “According to [the Myth of the Frontier], the conquest of the wilderness and the subjugation or displacement of the Native Americans who originally inhabited it have been the means to our achievement of a national identity, a democratic polity, an ever-expanding economy, and a phenomenally dynamic and ‘progressive’ civilization.”

Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Minneapolis: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998) 10.

<sup>34</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Rinehart and Winston, 1962) 3.

<sup>35</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: the New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987).

<sup>36</sup> The contact zone defined by Mary Louise Pratt is “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, racial inequality, and intractable conflict.” Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992) 6.

<sup>37</sup> Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

In the novel, the borderland is described by the El Paso sheriff Marvin as a “goddam war zone” (240), while Bell laments about the rise of narcotics coming from Mexico (the “Mexican brown dope” 73, [31:05]) and how Satan could not have invented anything better “to bring the human race to its knees” (218). Even though Bell acknowledges at one point the complicit corruption of US law enforcement (216) and the fact that Mexican drugs need US American buyers (304), criminality seems to be often associated in his mind with an otherness coming from beyond the border.<sup>38</sup> Such encroachment, bringing about war and threatening the human race, takes on apocalyptic proportions that recall the “savage war” motif of the frontier myth, an expression that designated colonial wars in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and took on ideological meaning.<sup>39</sup> The ideological set up of *No Country* thus constructs a paranoid, reactionary imaginary of a world in which the perforation of the line keeping savagery at bay irredeemably leads to the downfall of civilization. As the narrative progresses, such frontier dissolves in the recognition of increased and organizing violence from US American psychopathic killers and corporate bosses. The narrative therefore takes the savage war motif of the frontier myth as the initial groundwork to gradually dissolve it into the grey shades of noir film.

As in the frontier myth, both the novel and film distribute humanity unequally across the US-Mexico border. The sympathetic characters are overwhelmingly white and US American while criminals and criminality are overwhelmingly associated with Mexicans.<sup>40</sup> Although Moss and Bell are problematic characters in many ways, identification and empathy are directed towards them much more than towards Chigurh or any Mexican. Exchanges between white US Americans and Mexicans are limited to violent confrontation or class exploitation (the Mexican hotel clerk 109, the street sweeper in Mexico 118). Communication is sparse and made difficult by the poor knowledge of foreign language on both sides (although Bell in the film asks someone to call the police in Spanish). During Moss’s stay in a Mexican hospital, the Mexican staff is completely absent and Moss converses only with the white US American, Wells (Woody Harrelson). This does not account for the socio-cultural reality of the borderlands in 1980, nor for the long-term history of the region, that were characterized by transnational linguistic, cultural and racial exchanges.<sup>41</sup> As Hwang argues, comparing the original 1980s screenplay version of the novel and its 2005 printed version, McCarthy emphasized the cultural and racial divide in his later version in the ideological context of the War on Terror and mid-2000s anti-immigration policies.<sup>42</sup> The film further emphasizes such

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<sup>38</sup> Jung-Suk Hwang, “The Wild West, 9/11, and Mexicans in Cormac McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men*,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 60. 3 (2018): 362.

<sup>39</sup> “The premise of ‘savage war’ is that ineluctable political and social differences – rooted in some combination of ‘blood’ and culture – make coexistence between primitive natives and civilized Europeans impossible on any basis other than that of subjugation. [...] the myth of ‘savage war’ became a basic ideological convention of a culture that was itself increasingly devoted to the extermination or expropriation of the Indians and the kidnapping and enslavement of black Africans.” Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Minneapolis: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998) 12-13.

<sup>40</sup> This is Jung-Suk Hwang’s main argument. Most of the ideas in this paragraph are borrowed from his article “The Wild West, 9/11, and Mexicans in Cormac McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men*,” (*Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 60. 3, 2018).

<sup>41</sup> See Gloria Anzaldúa’s account of the region in *Borderlands/La Frontera: the New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987). For a long-term perspective on cultural hybridity in the region, see Maria J. Saldaña-Portillo, “‘No Country for Old Mexicans’: The Collision of Empires on the Texas Frontier.” *Interventions* 13. 1 (2011): 67–84.

<sup>42</sup> Jung-Suk Hwang, “The Wild West, 9/11, and Mexicans in Cormac McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men*,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 60. 3 (2018): 347.

divide in whitewashing the secondary characters (for instance the Eagle Hotel clerk [55:26]) and racializing Chigurh (the casting of Spanish actor Javier Bardem, Mediterranean looking and speaking with a Spanish accent, brings the character closer to a Hispanic identity than its blue-eyed counterpart in the novel, 56). Yet, the directors' choice of replacing the Mexican street sweeper by a Mariachi band ([68:34-68:55]) could be a reflexive nod on the film's own racism in its stereotypical representations of Mexicans. The irony in such unequal distribution of humanity in *No Country* is that it is Moss's impulse to bring water to a dying man that precipitates his fall, signaling humanity – the capacity for empathy and solidarity – to be a weakness in a world ruled by Darwinian principles of survival and capitalist principles of accumulation. Here, such racial reading of the narrative reaches its limits as US American capitalism ultimately appears as inhuman as Mexican criminals, and Chigurh indiscriminately kills both whites and Mexicans alike. The racial frontier shifts into an opposition of innocents and criminals, itself melting into moral confusion.

### **Chigurh as savage hybrid**

In addition to its relatively binary structure, *No Country* also draws from frontier mythology in the characterization of the enemy. As seen earlier, Chigurh (Javier Bardem) is the figure of a radically disruptive and inhuman form of violence that associates him with “the savage force representing the myth's figurative wilderness” beyond the frontier.<sup>43</sup> An alien and otherworldly figure, labelled a ghost by Bell (248, 299; [98:32]), Chigurh also defies human comprehension: Bell cannot “measure” [02:06] his type of crime and the sheriff's “linear” [29:20] reading of his actions is immediately thrown off course by signs of more violence (“Yes Sir; but then there is this other.” [29:25]). The strict external focalization on Chigurh in the novel – as opposed to Bell's monologues or cursory access to Moss's thoughts in free indirect speech – refuses the reader any insight on his thoughts, reducing him to a physical force whose motives are unclear. The film heightens the irrationality of the character by eliding a late scene in which Chigurh returns the stolen money to a US American corporate crime boss and asks for a job (250-53). The deletion of this scene confuses the rationale of Chigurh's actions, confirming his characterization as a “loose cannon” (140, [53:41]). Even though *No Country* acknowledges a surge in violence that reaches beyond Chigurh, his status as main protagonist – sharing approximately equal narrative space with Bell and Moss – and his characterization as alien – of origin unknown, wearing “some foreign cologne” (111) or speaking with a foreign accent in the film – make him stand out as a primary and external cause for the violence plaguing this fictional world. Chigurh's inhumanity, the senselessness of his actions, and his alien identity, contribute to establish him as a modern-day savage.

But Chigurh has a code and principles that humanize him, and his methods are less instinctive and chaotic than methodical and mechanical. Chigurh believes in the value of his own words (“I gave my word”, 255 [109:11]), in moral accountability (“Somewhere you made a choice. All followed to this. The accounting is scrupulous.” 259), and in character determinism (“the shape of your path was visible from the beginning.” 259).<sup>44</sup> These principles do not make for a coherent conception of the world, and Chigurh may emphasize one or the other to serve his

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<sup>43</sup> Matthew Carter, *Myth of the Western: New Perspectives on Hollywood's Frontier Narrative* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014) 204.

<sup>44</sup> Chigurh's belief in determinism and his musings on people's life trajectories being drawn out in neat cause-and-effect succession invite audiences to reflect upon character development and make him a reflexive character both in the novel and film.

own ends,<sup>45</sup> yet they are principles and he strives to formulate his actions in rational terms. He is also able to put his own beliefs to the test and open his victims' fate to chance (the coin toss), although in the novel he does not really believe chance to exist ("I had no belief in your ability to move a coin to your bidding." 259). Here again, the film further confuses Chigurh's principles by eliding most of his conversation with Carla Jean. In his methods as well, Chigurh is more human than beast, as he operates with rational precision and mechanical impetus – for instance when he "[t]akes] the measure of the room" in the Del Rio Regal Motel to prepare his attack (103, [47:05-47:20]). The way he can dehumanize his victims by slaughtering them with a cattle gun – as he does with his second, roadside victim, "the pneumatic hiss and click of the plunger soud[ing] like a door closing" (7), [05:04] – puts him closer to Nazi-like forms of rationalized killing than to the scalp-taking movie Indian.<sup>46</sup> The mechanics of his murders are beautifully adapted in the film with the use of sound design on his first kill [03:04-03:41], when an extradiegetic crescendo of metallic sawing and train running on tracks supports Chigurh's murder of the deputy.<sup>47</sup> Chigurh is thus a hybrid figure of violence, associated with the wilderness in his introductory shot in the film (the pan from the desert to the police car, [02:06]) and with a senseless, otherworldly violence in the eyes of Bell (supported by adaptation choices in the film), yet he is also the figure of an *ubermensch* of deadly accuracy, an embodiment of logic and industry pushed to their most horrific conclusions.

### **Failed white masculinity on the frontier**

In the frontier myth, the imaginary place of the frontier is a transformative space that turns a culture of European extraction into something that is specifically and exceptionally American. Such transformative experience is encapsulated in the character arc of the frontier hero, a white man of European descent who, upon crossing the frontier, is immersed in the wilderness, compelled for survival to regress to savagery, and subsequently regenerated as a synthesis of both the civilized and the savage, a white man who knows Indians.<sup>48</sup> In narratives that imagine the frontier as a dividing line, regeneration is understood as a regeneration of white American masculinity performed in the savage war against racialized Others.<sup>49</sup> In *No*

<sup>45</sup> See especially the exchange of Carla Jean and Chigurh in which Chigurh expresses contradictory ideas ("None of this was your fault." 257; "Somewhere you made a choice." 259; "When I came into your life your life was over." 260).

<sup>46</sup> The rational aspect of Chigurh's *modus operandi* is also visible in his ability to control events and people against his opponents' claims. The deputy is killed immediately after uttering "I got it covered" 5 ("I got it under control" [03:04]); in the film, Chigurh is able to get a victim to "hold still" [05:00] while Moss cannot get his prey to "hold still" [5:32] and misses the shot. For a discussion of the relation between masculinity and control in *No Country*, see Stacey Peebles, "'Hold still': Models of Masculinity in *No Country for Old Men*." In Lynnea Chapman King (ed.), *From Novel to Film: No Country for Old Men*, (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2009) 124–38.

<sup>47</sup> The aural association of Chigurh with a train is repeated after Moss wounds him and he has disappeared in the night, the sound making his presence felt even if he is not in the shot [64:42-64:58].

<sup>48</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Minneapolis: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998) 14.

<sup>49</sup> This narrative is best exemplified in Theodore Roosevelt's account of the history of colonization in *The Winning of the West*: "Roosevelt depicts the violence of this frontier race war as the mechanism which forges the various groups of white European immigrants into one powerful, unified American race. [...] Thus, in the violence of race war, the manly American race was born." Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) 180. Roosevelt had a paramount influence in shaping the representations of the frontier in US American culture (Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* 61) and the ideology of his frontier tales was revived in the aftermath of 9/11: "the conservative traditions of extreme masculinity and heroic individualism that have informed much of the Rooseveltian brand of the myth have increasingly gained sociopolitical currency." Matthew Carter, *Myth of*

*Country*, the binary narrative structure invites such regeneration through violence for a white male frontier hero, except one is too old, the other not savage enough, and male violence only leads to loss.

According to Matthew Carter, the “issue of individual identity and the mythic mode of its expression” is the most important Western trope in *No Country*.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, all the white male protagonists are fashioned after the figure of the cowboy.<sup>51</sup> The cowboy is the immediate Western equivalent of the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century frontiersman, his knowledge of the wilderness and the Indians making him best qualified to lead the way for civilization. Both Bell (Tommy Lee Jones) and Moss (Josh Brolin) resonate with the cowboy, but also draw from more specific figures of frontier heroism. The sheriff is a typical character of the Western genre, in which he upholds a feeble law when civilization is in its infancy. Yet, the “Indians” he knows are the wild outlaws and criminals peopling the frontier, which explains his smooth transition to a contemporary urban setting in crime films at the turn of the 1970s (*Coogan’s Bluff*, Don Siegel, 1968; *Dirty Harry*, Don Siegel, 1971). The Vietnam veteran is another figure of the frontier hero which emerged with the Vietnam War and experienced waning popularity. Celebrated in the 1960s as the fighting vanguard of Kennedy’s New Frontier,<sup>52</sup> he was pictured as a psychopathic killer in the early 1970s<sup>53</sup> and was rehabilitated by the early 1980s<sup>54</sup> to become the epitome of a new generation of frontier heroes, for whom Vietnam was the formative frontier. Llewelyn Moss is one of those, whose knowledge of violence and manhunts in hostile environments was acquired in killing Vietnamese people in the jungle. Characterizing Llewelyn Moss first as a hunter<sup>55</sup> is also a way to establish him in line with archetypal frontier heroes of the Daniel Boone or Hawkeye variety, as well as previous Vietnam veteran hunters like Michael (Robert De Niro) in *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1979). So Bell is the Western sheriff fighting modern outlaws in the crime film, and Moss is a figure of both the archetypal frontier hero and its most recent (as of 1980) version in US American culture.

Although the white male protagonists in *No Country* are fashioned by a cultural history of frontier heroism, they fail at taming the wilderness and restoring civilization. As Neil

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*the Western: New Perspectives on Hollywood’s Frontier Narrative* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014) 212.

<sup>50</sup> Matthew Carter, *Myth of the Western: New Perspectives on Hollywood’s Frontier Narrative* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014) 204.

<sup>51</sup> The film reinforces such association of white masculinity with the cowboy ethos in its costuming of Carson Wells with a cowboy hat [53:03] absent in the novel.

<sup>52</sup> For instance, in John Wayne’s *The Green Berets* (1968), which represents the Vietnam War mobilizing the filmic tropes of the Indian war, and inaugurates the articulation of Vietnam War films with the Western genre. Even as it came out, *The Green Berets* was an anachronistic celebration of the modern frontier hero since public opinion started tipping against the war in 1968 and revisionist western films took on the responsibility of criticizing the Vietnam War in films.

<sup>53</sup> For instance, the character of Scorpio (Andie Robinson), the Vietnam veteran turned rapist and murderer in *Dirty Harry* (Don Siegel, 1971).

<sup>54</sup> The *Rambo* franchise was instrumental in that rehabilitation, along with the lesser known *Missing in Action* films starring Chuck Norris and *Uncommon Valor* (1983). For additional information on the Vietnam veteran as a character of US American popular culture, see Laurent Tessier, *Le Vietnam, un cinéma de l’apocalypse* (Paris: Cerf-Corlet, 2009).

<sup>55</sup> Hunting is a formative activity for the frontier hero as it provides knowledge of the wilderness and training in killing, both of which are needed to hunt Indians or criminals. For a discussion of hunting in relation with frontier mythology, see Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1973).

Campbell notes, “the mythic frontier West was predicated on control, on taming the wild nature of its place and people and bringing into the western lands the new sense of settlement and authority of nation building.”<sup>56</sup> Yet, far from controlling the new surge of savagery along the border, the aging sheriff Bell confesses his inadequacy as early as the opening monologue (“I don’t know what to make of that, I surely don’t” 3, [01:59]) and eventually declares he has encountered a thing he “may very well not be equal to” (299) or feels “overmatched” [104:46]. In addition to being bested, Bell also has a tendency to avoid danger that runs counter to prevalent notions of male heroism. In the novel, World War II soldier Bell abandoned his platoon to save himself (when his platoon was already lost, 276). In the film, he gives his wife’s pony to Wendell (Garrett Dillahunt) because “anything happens to Loretta’s horse out here I can tell you right now I don’t wanna be the party that was aboard” [29:35]. With Bell’s character, “the traditional Western’s man of action has become static, cautious, and passive, much more of a ponderer and, ultimately in the film, I would argue, a doubter and thinker who realizes he does not choose to “be part of this world” of violence and misery.”<sup>57</sup> Although Bell embodies classic frontier masculinity, he also seems to have grown out of it: he can recognize his own limitations and engage only when his actions have a practical, as opposed to symbolic, meaning. Along these lines, his refusal to enter the world of Chigurh destabilizes the cultural construct of white frontier masculinity, but it preserves his humanity.<sup>58</sup>

With his weapon and tracking skills, working-class identity and masculine bravado, Moss is certainly a more conventional embodiment of white US American masculinity. The filmic adaptation supports this characterization with frequent low-angle shots on Moss (for instance, as he arrives on the drug deal crime scene [07:42-07:56]). Moss also embodies a traditional association of (predatory male) vision with (violently established) power. He is introduced with scopic instruments designed to locate and kill (the binoculars and telescopic gun sight) and frequently described in the novel as “scan[ning]” (14), “stud[ying]” or “watch[ing]” (16) the surrounding country for orientation or safety. The film emphasizes such connection of the male gaze with power and violence by introducing the character through his eyesight, reflexively underlined by the crosshairs of his telescopic gun sight closing in on the antelope he has chosen for prey [05:11]. Yet, as the camera continues tracking Moss’s eyesight in shot/reverse shots that embrace his (limited) point of view, such perspective eventually appears constricted and insufficient compared to Chigurh’s greater freedom in relation to the frame.<sup>59</sup> Such limitation in his ability to see the greater picture is confirmed first with the transponder he discovers too late, then with his death he does not see coming, and which readers and viewers won’t see either.<sup>60</sup>

Although Moss is the only character to face Chigurh and come out alive, which would initially seem to validate the equation of frontier masculinity with success against savagery,

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<sup>56</sup> Neil Campbell, *Post-Westerns: Cinema, Region, West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013) 336.

<sup>57</sup> Neil Campbell, *Post-Westerns: Cinema, Region, West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013) 340.

<sup>58</sup> “I always knew [...] I won’t do that.” 4; “I always knew [...] part of this world.” [02:14-02:42].

<sup>59</sup> Chigurh is introduced in a fluid relation with the frame, able to move in and out of shots and from background to foreground (for instance when he kills the deputy in the sheriff’s station [02:45-03:05], when he washes the blood off his wrists [03:44-03:53], or when he retrieves the cattle gun [03:54:04:03]). This is a way for the narration to give him greater offscreen presence, heightening the sense of threat associated with his character, but it also seemingly gives his movements a relative autonomy from the frame.

<sup>60</sup> Wells confirms Moss’s short-sightedness at the hospital when he says it took him three hours without transponder to find him.

he eventually fails miserably. Not only does he get killed, but he is also responsible for the death of his wife, two hotel clerks (one in the film), a driver in front of the Eagle Hotel (in the film), and a woman (the hitchhiker / motel customer), in addition to numerous Mexican men that were sent to kill him (four in the film; at least twice that number in the novel). *No Country*'s commentary on frontier masculinity is laid bare in its elliptical (236) and offscreen [95:30] treatment of Moss's death. Such choice deprives readers and viewers<sup>61</sup> of the spectacle of violent masculinity provided in the conventional Western showdown, and undercuts any claim of a regeneration through violence for white masculinity on the frontier. Instead, *No Country* recognizes such white frontier masculinity as a cultural construction and brutally exposes the destructive consequences when one persists in performing it.<sup>62</sup>

*No Country*'s masculine world does support a critical reevaluation of culturally-constructed masculinity and its social consequences, yet male centrality does not entirely emancipate from patriarchy. In this world of male power and masculine transmission (male Bells have been sheriffs for two generations – three in the film with the father as well), there are only two significant female characters (not counting the hitchhiker elided in the film) and we relate to them mostly through their husbands' perspective. This is especially true of Bell's wife, Loretta (Tess Harper), who is characterized as an embodiment of virtue (90, 159) and the Old West – associated with the home in the desert [28:08] and, in the novel, horse riding at sunset (300) – and who has most her scenes erased in the film. Yet, both these characters serve as focal points from which to gauge white frontier masculinity. This is especially true in the film, whose narration embraces the wives' point of view on their husbands in domestic scenes (when Moss returns home with the money, the narration embraces Carla Jean's perspective on him from the living room couch [14:18-15:13]; when Bell narrates his dreams in the ending scene, the narration follows Loretta's perspective on him from the kitchen to the dinner table and in several reaction shots, including the penultimate shot of the film [114:08-116:27]). And although Carla Jean (Kelly Macdonald) is introduced at home as Moss's wife, she is singled out as the last of Chigurh's victims in chapter IX and in the penultimate sequence of the film, and she gains narrative presence and heroic stature as the only character able to face her death (contrary to Bell who avoids trouble), recognize her defeat (contrary to Moss who fights to no avail), confound Chigurh in his beliefs ("The coin didn't have no say. It's just you" 258, [110:42]), and die in sadness but without fear (as opposed to Wells who tries "to fend away what could not be fended away", 178, and is startled when the phone starts ringing [83:43]). When one adds the fact that she is ultimately a victim of her husband's bad decisions, there is a case to be made that Carla Jean is the most heroic of all characters in *No Country*. Maybe she appears to be so precisely because she does not model her behavior after frontier heroism.<sup>63</sup>

## **Rewriting the Western and Frontier myth**

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<sup>61</sup> Here viewers may be even more frustrated than readers, since the novel at least has the shootout narrated by a witness (237).

<sup>62</sup> That such frontier masculinity is a performance is suggested in the encounter of Moss and Wells at the hospital in Mexico, in which both characters perform their masculinity by playing up their strength, courage and killing skills (148-157; [74:55-78:04]).

<sup>63</sup> Although she is the one uttering Ethan Edwards's (John Wayne) famous catchphrase in *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956), "That'll be the day", when Moss tells her the satchel is full of money.

If *No Country* draws from Western genre conventions and the narrative structures of frontier mythology, it also rewrites them in crucial ways. Some of these rewritings come from the hybridization of genre, especially the articulation of Western and noir conventions that allows *No Country* to confront opposite worldviews (a sense of optimism and a bleak realism)<sup>64</sup> and highlight the way “genres dictate understanding”.<sup>65</sup> Other rewritings I have already indicated earlier: problematizing the sense of nostalgia for the old West; hybridizing the figure of the frontier savage; deconstructing white frontier masculinity. I would like to focus now on two additional ways in which the Western and frontier myth are redefined – a focus on time, and narrative circularity. All these instances of genre bending and hybridization are performed in a narrative context of heightened reflexivity, in which attention is drawn to the artifice of the text/image and their status as fictional constructs, engaging readers/viewers to reflect upon cultural history and generic construction. So I will start by briefly discussing the question of reflexivity in *No Country*.

### **Reflexivity in *No Country***

*No Country* develops a narrative context that invites readers and viewers to actively engage with the text and reflect upon fictional creation and genre conventions. In the novel, in addition to the absence of quotation marks which forces readers to decide on the status of characters’ expressions (direct or indirect speech) and negatively exposes speech-writing conventions, a central strategy is to undermine the established narrative structure. At first, each chapter distinguishes between the opening italicized monologues of Bell, which offer the thoughts of an aging lawman about his job and historical change, and the novel’s narrative separating character arcs by a page break. Then, once all three main characters have visited the drug deal crime scene, character arcs are brought closer by the replacement of page breaks with line breaks in the middle of Chapter III (79). Then, once Moss is killed in Chapter VIII, the italicized monologues start shifting in tone and relation to the narrative, first announcing plot developments that did not yet take place (the murder of Carla Jean in the opening to Chapter IX, 248), then commenting upon, and expanding, scenes in the main narrative (the conversation with Ellis in the opening to Chapter X), then narrating scenes that are absent from the main narrative (the conversations with Moss’s father, a Mexican prisoner on death row, and his lawyer at the beginning of Chapter XI). All the while, the ratio of monologues to main narrative tips in favor of the former (5 to 6 pages in Chapter X, 6 to 2 in Chapter XI, 2 to 2 in Chapter XII, and finally only 2 pages of monologue composing Chapter XIII). As the distinction between monologues and main narrative gradually collapses, Bell’s voice becomes a reflection of the author, writing scenes in place of the main narrative in the opening to Chapter XI. Bell here composes dialogues (293-94; 298-99) in the manner of the main narrative, with no quotation marks, for scenes that complete the main narrative but only exist in his monologue. Such exhibition of the act of writing and of the novel’s own typographical conventions serve to expose the constructed nature of literary narration, inviting readers to adopt a reflective position on novel writing, genre, and cultural clichés.

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<sup>64</sup> “In short, both novel and film resist the generic suasions they seem to invite in refusing the Western’s broad turn to landscape, its Turner-esque notion of frontier progress, its perpetual promise of Americanizing self-transformation in preference for a bleak concession to the corrosive forces that make any civilizing gesture seem futile.” Lee Clark Mitchell, “Dismantling the Western: Film Noir’s Defiance of Genre in *No Country for Old Men*.” *Genre* 47. 3 (2014): 351.

<sup>65</sup> Lee Clark Mitchell, “Dismantling the Western: Film Noir’s Defiance of Genre in *No Country for Old Men*.” *Genre* 47. 3 (2014): 353.

The film adapts this reflexive dimension of the novel by pointing even more explicitly to its nature as a visual fiction and its own position within the Western genre. First, aesthetic choices such as the extradiegetic metallic soundtrack on Chigurh's first kill introduce a tension within the otherwise strictly diegetic use of sound, indicating the latter's constructed nature.<sup>66</sup> Second, the TV in Moss's trailer is used reflectively when Carla Jean watches *Flight to Tangier* (Charles Warren, 1953) as Moss comes home with the satchel and Jack Palance says to Joan Fontaine her apartment is not the best hiding spot for stolen money ("My place is wrong?" [14:17]). As Lee Mitchell notes, "the structure of the Coens' film is mirrored in Charles Warren's *Flight to Tangier*" in terms of landscape, unreadable characters, and plot.<sup>67</sup> The 1953 film becomes a cultural hypotext that frames *No Country*'s narrative and locates it within a history of filmic representations. The TV is used again, this time not as a cultural medium but as a reflective surface, to frame both the reflection and cast shadow of Western sheriff Bell and his cowboy hat, in a shot suggesting the waning of the Western genre in US culture [36:49].<sup>68</sup> But no moment is as powerfully reflexive as Bell's return to Moss's crime scene in the motel room. In the novel, Chigurh is in a parked car in the parking lot when Bell is searching the room, and then he has disappeared when Bell goes out to confront him. A sense of confusion is created by the narrative shifting focalization within a sequence (no line break, 243), and by ambiguously exploiting the absence of quotation marks to open the possibility that Bell is dialoguing with Chigurh (244). The film goes further into reflexive territory by placing Chigurh *in* the motel room before Bell enters it, a cross-cutting of Bell opening the door and Chigurh hiding behind it sealing the expectation of a confrontation. The viewer is thus taken aback when Chigurh is *not* behind the door in the next shot. This radical disruption in narrative continuity exposes the expressive power of cross-cutting and the manipulative potential in editing choices.

In addition to these reflexive choices in the narration, explicit references to the Western are also added in the film when deputy Wendell compares the drug deal crime scene to O.K. Corral [30:09] and then comments: "I think we're looking at more than one fracas. Execution here. Wild West over there" [30:58]. That line serves to distinguish between the white and Mexican bodies at the crime scene, associating the latter with a more chaotic form of violence. But it also exposes the generic tension at the heart of the film between the crime film and the Western, and their relations to different imaginaries of violence. Further visual signs of the Western genre are exploited quite consciously, Moss selecting a pair of cowboy boots in a general store [39:52] and still having them on when he returns in the same shop in a hospital gown [88:45], then shopping in a Western gun shop decorated with a large-sized cardboard six-gun [43:03], or Bell and Wendell going to the drug deal crime scene on horseback when the Mexicans, Moss, and Chigurh all used cars (70, [29:41]).

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<sup>66</sup> A similar effect is produced when Moss leaves the drug deal crime scene to look for the last man standing: the sudden, unnatural amplification of the wind blowing indicates a shift from naturalistic to expressionistic use of sound [10:37-10:46]. And when Moss returns to his truck with the satchel: the sound of thunder bridges two narratively non-contiguous shots of Moss leaving the dead Mexican and Moss arriving at his truck [13:30-13:40]. In these two instances, the diegetic soundtrack becomes an extradiegetic score commenting on the narrative, and the hybridization of diegetic and extradiegetic sound points to the artificiality of naturalistic sound effects.

<sup>67</sup> Lee Clark Mitchell, "Dismantling the Western: Film Noir's Defiance of Genre in *No Country for Old Men*." *Genre* 47. 3 (2014): 345.

<sup>68</sup> The shot also reprises an earlier one of Chigurh's reflection in the TV [33:17], a filmic strategy that serves to associate and contrast the main characters, much like the repetition of "hold still" associated and contrasted Chigurh and Moss. Bell's split shadow is reprised when he opens the door to Moss's motel room crime scene.

Finally the omnipresence of Western visual art – Western painting or photography – in the Sanderson coffee shop [41:57], Del Rio sporting goods store [43:14], Regal motel room 38 [44:34], Eagle Hotel lobby [55:28-56:03] and room [56:56], and sheriff Bell’s office [73:09], serves to acknowledge the cultural history of representations of the West in which the film becomes consciously situated.<sup>69</sup> This Western art is exclusively associated with the most cowboyish characters of the film – Moss (repeatedly framed against such artworks in hotel room 38 and the Eagle Hotel lobby and room) and to a lesser extent Bell (in his office, and coffee shop) – and concentrated around the mid-section of the film when they take over the actual Western landscapes that have receded from view. Lastly, a photograph of a road trailing off in the Western desert is hanging on the wall behind Bell when he sits at his dinner table in the ending scene [114:07-114:18], harking back to the opening scene when the deputy’s car drives Chigurh down a similar road to the sheriff station [02:33-02:44]. Yet, the vertical framing of the photograph and diagonal trajectory of the road interrupted by a large mountain in the background offers much less perspective. From the filmic image of Western landscapes to a *mise-en-abîme* of their artistic representation to their eventual disappearance, the film comments on the transformation of the historical West into a cultural myth and its gradual fade out from the national imaginary – or gradual inadequacy to make sense of the contemporary United States.

### **Time passing and characters’ unreadability**

The reflexive dimension of both novel and film frames and supports the rewritings of genre and myth in *No Country*. One important departure from Western genre conventions is the film’s shift of focus from action to reflection, space to time, and from a form of action that reveals character psychology – associated with the Western – to one that refuses access to interiority. “Time,” as Neil Campbell notes, “is pronounced in the film, in slow scenes that dwell on time passing” rather than action and movement.<sup>70</sup> This expansion of time is highlighted both in novel and film by the choice of structure, killing off the main protagonist page 236 out of 309, and at [95:35] out of a 122-minute running time, which leaves ample room to direct the narrative towards contemplation. In the novel, Bell’s monologues become more frequent and intertwined with the narrative starting with Chapter IX, while in the film, a series of conversations ensues with Bell and Roscoe, Bell and Ellis, Chigurh and Carla Jean, and Bell and his wife. The element of time is foregrounded in the film from its introduction. In the opening shots, the stillness of the frame and slow pace of the editing (shots ranging from 4 to 12 seconds in length, with an average of 6 to 7 seconds), supporting a voice over that reflects on human nature and changing times, invite the viewer to ponder and contemplate, introducing time and its passing as a key theme of the film reprised in its ending (the clock ticking beyond the ending cut to black [116:33]). Time here supersedes space as the dominant element, at times bringing the film closer to Deleuze’s time-image than movement-image, the typical aesthetic regime of classical Hollywood films of which the Western genre is the epitome.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> “The once grand hotels built for cattle dealers are now crumbling, grandiose, [and] cheap reproductions of romantic paintings of frontier life, and its landscape decorate the walls of anonymous motel rooms.” Philip French, “No Country for Old Men,” *The Guardian*, January 20, 2008. Quoted in Neil Campbell, *Post-Westerns: Cinema, Region, West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013) 336.

<sup>70</sup> Neil Campbell, *Post-Westerns: Cinema, Region, West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013) 337.

<sup>71</sup> Neil Campbell, *Post-Westerns: Cinema, Region, West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013) 337-38.

Although *No Country* performs a shift within the Western genre from action to reflection, it does not bring readers and viewers closer to understanding its characters' interiority. Both in novel and film, characters are "unfathomable" and "unrevealing" in a way that departs from traditional Western conventions: "This again seems a distinctive feature of film noir, especially in contrast with Westerns, where character itself is so frequently obvious as to seem all but allegorical."<sup>72</sup> The very explicit access to interiority in the monologues or voice-over of Bell, whose adequacy to the narrative is sketchy at best, is opposed to the almost exclusively external focalization on Moss and Chigurh. These choices in the novel are amplified in the film by tight framings on the actors' faces – seemingly enclosing them in their own, isolated worlds<sup>73</sup> – and slanted angles – emphasizing their disconnectedness from their surroundings. Such framings "kee[p] the viewer visually off balance, even as they link the three main characters via common, repeated associations of angles, perspectives, and body parts" and "reinfor[ce] our sense of human character as unknowable, somehow slant."<sup>74</sup> This unreadability of the characters confuses their moral standing and readers/viewers' ability to make sense of the narrative along moral coordinates. The clear-cut morality that allegedly supports meaning in classical Westerns is absent here, pointing to the inadequacy of the Western formula in articulating contemporary contexts in meaningful ways.

### **Narrative circularity**

Another central element of the Western genre and frontier mythology that is bent and broken in *No Country* is the linearity and teleological progression of the narrative. As in John Ford's *The Searchers*, the narrative of *No Country* goes about in circle, revisiting the same locations – the Mexican shootout in the desert, Moss's trailer, the Del Rio motel, the Eagle Pass hotel – with different characters that chase one another. Belying Bell's "linear" account of the events [29:20], the narrative of the novel and film does not progress towards a resolution – which is explicitly denied – but constantly returns to the same themes, places, and situations (Moss just a step ahead of Chigurh, Bell always a step late). Such repetition establishes a circular pattern of hunter and prey that necessarily ends in death. Both the film and novel here explode the imperialist teleology of the Western and frontier myth – a linear, progressive narrative from savagery to civilization – and expose the genre and its mythology as cyclical reenactments of violent encounters. As Ellis makes it plain "all the time you spend tryin' to get back what's been took from you more is goin' out the door. After a while, you just have to try to get a tourniquet on it." (267; [104:19]). Activating the codes of the Western genre and frontier narratives therefore does not provide direction nor purpose for the characters, but rather sends them down a fatal spiral of loss. What is at stake eventually is not the ability of the characters to live up to the myth but rather their ability to escape it. Of the characters facing Chigurh, only Bell survives, precisely because he refuses to engage him and to be "part of this world" of violence [02:41]. If *No Country* were to offer some meaningful perspective, it would be through Bell's ambiguous position of recognizing the reality of evil yet refusing to engage it, in an attempt to free US American culture from the circular violence of frontier mythology.

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<sup>72</sup> Lee Clark Mitchell, "Dismantling the Western: Film Noir's Defiance of Genre in *No Country for Old Men*." *Genre* 47. 3 (2014): 346-47.

<sup>73</sup> The characters in the novel and film never once meet.

<sup>74</sup> Lee Clark Mitchell, "Dismantling the Western: Film Noir's Defiance of Genre in *No Country for Old Men*." *Genre* 47. 3 (2014): 350.

Matthew Carter sees in such ambiguous ending a possible resonance with, and commentary on, the larger ideological context of the War on Terror: “Bell has refused the mythic route of violent resolution, perhaps because he realizes all too well that such confrontations do not resolve anything, and that to engage in such an endeavour he would have to ‘put his soul at hazard’ and risk becoming as Chigurh is – a killer with no apparent soul of his own.”<sup>75</sup> By refusing to engage savagery on its own terms, Bell refuses the US American impulse to fight terror with terror that imperils its claim to civilization. For Stacey Peebles, such ending also invites an “alternative mode of engaging with the world, one that doesn’t rely on the need to take control [but that is] based on renunciation and the surrender to those forces that are beyond one’s control”.<sup>76</sup> *No Country* thus encourages readers and viewers to relinquish the controlling and rationalizing impulse of frontier mythology, and reimagine masculinity in connection with inaction and passivity. Finally, Neil Campbell (quoting Rushton in *Cinema after Deleuze*) gives yet another insight on the film’s ending, not as an abandonment, but rather as a redefinition of frontier mythology: “What Ellis’s counterstories, his ‘holding to account’ entails is the rejection of a West based on such action-resolution, instead proposing the gentle assertion of a new politics that remembers loss and stays with grief incorporated into the ‘body’ of the region and its people, not to make them ‘passive and powerless,’ as is often claimed, but rather to remind them of ‘human vulnerability’ and our ‘collective responsibility for the physical lives of others.’”<sup>77</sup> The eventual emancipation from the circle of frontier violence therefore serves to write loss, grief, and vulnerability into the myth, as a new political basis for relating to things, people, and history. Here *No Country* performs what cultural historian Richard Slotkin “describes as incorporation into the myth of Anglo-America’s ‘experience of defeat and disappointment, [an] acquired sense of limitation’, which he feels essential to the very survival of a viable and functioning mythology.”<sup>78</sup> We can then understand how the unsettling ending of *No Country* in terms of genre conventions – the absence of moral and narrative resolution – does not simply serve to frustrate readers’ and viewers’ expectations but is key to opening up the Western genre and frontier myth towards new political avenues. The Western genre is not abandoned, but rather laid bare in the mythical appeal but practical insufficiency of its “nostalgic allure”<sup>79</sup> while the frontier myth is redefined – by white men and for white men – in more humane ways.

## **Conclusion**

*No Country*, both novel and film, thus draws on, and partially rewrites both the Western genre and frontier mythology. Although generically hybrid, both texts draw generously on the Western, most directly in their characterization and use of landscape, and in their exploration of a history of colonial and post-colonial violence. They also draw on the frontier myth in

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<sup>75</sup> Matthew Carter, *Myth of the Western: New Perspectives on Hollywood’s Frontier Narrative* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014) 211.

<sup>76</sup> Stacey Peebles, “‘Hold still’: Models of Masculinity in *No Country for Old Men*.” In Lynnea Chapman King (ed.), *From Novel to Film: No Country for Old Men*, (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2009) 125.

<sup>77</sup> Neil Campbell, *Post-Westerns: Cinema, Region, West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013) 343-44.

<sup>78</sup> Matthew Carter, *Myth of the Western: New Perspectives on Hollywood’s Frontier Narrative* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014) 215. Carter quotes Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Minneapolis: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998) 655.

<sup>79</sup> Lee Clark Mitchell, “Dismantling the Western: Film Noir’s Defiance of Genre in *No Country for Old Men*.” *Genre* 47. 3 (2014): 353.

their imagining of the US-Mexico border as a racial/cultural/symbolic divide and the unraveling of civilization when that divide is bridged. As such, novel and film appropriate the more conservative imaginary of the frontier. They partially dissociate from it in their hybrid characterization of the villain as both savage and a horrific offshoot of civilization, and in the anti-heroic characterization of their white male frontier heroes and the refusal of the logic of regeneration through violence. By reflexively engaging with the literary and filmic means of expression, by emphasizing the passing of time rather than action-directed narrative, by framing the frontier myth as a spiral of violence and offering alternative ways to relate to the world, *No Country* signals the inadequacy of classical frontier narratives to make sense of present circumstances and purports to emancipate the US American imaginary from its obsession with the redemptive effects of imperial violence.

Yet, inhumanity still exists in the world of *No Country*, which raises ethical questions as to what it means to let it win, and why maintain the reality of its existence when a more informed historical perspective and socio-political context might have cast it in a different light. Since *No Country* ultimately persists in seeing the world along binary distinctions of humanity and inhumanity, it could very well be perceived as validating the equally Manichean terms with which immigration, crime, terrorism, and other real social problems are pictured by right-wing politicians and the media. And yet still, if the rewritings of frontier mythology and the Western in *No Country* entail a renewed conscience of loss, grief, and human vulnerability, they do not include the recognition of a US American historical responsibility in inflicting such loss and grief. Violence seems to stem from Mexican criminal tendencies rather than US capitalism, and Native Americans are simply absent from the picture, vanished except in the form of paintings on rocks and characters in tales of savage violence. The conscience of human vulnerability integrated in a revamped frontier mythology is then only a conscience of white Anglo male vulnerability, focusing on the descendants of those who colonized the West and still control its narrative.

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