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**Blood Meridian, *The Brutalist Aesthetic*, and *History***

by

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***Chapter 1: The Brutalist Aesthetic, Twenty-First Century Culture, and History***

No matter how readers react to Cormac McCarthy's 1985 novel *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West*, it makes a definite aesthetic statement, though there has never been a critical consensus regarding what to draw from the novel as a whole. McCarthy's virtuosic prose describes a scalping expedition in the 1850's American West, a novelistic journey that has no protagonist in the conventional sense, but manages to contain instances of outlandish violence at every turn. Harold Bloom, instrumental in bringing *Blood Meridian* to critical acceptance almost a decade after it was published, notes that his "first two attempts to read through *Blood Meridian* failed, because [he] flinched from the overwhelming carnage that McCarthy portrays."<sup>1</sup> In fact, *Blood Meridian* is a book that deals with brutality fundamentally, though in a very specific, mythical-historical setting of the American West. Thus, the notion of history-in-literature looms large as the reader experiences innumerable discrete instances of violence in a land that is uncannily familiar. In the midst of this violence, it becomes impossible to derive an objective or specific, localized history in a mythic landscape, but it is equally impossible to discount history as connected to the real places and events the novel describes. What becomes clear is that the text's particular brand of brutality—what I call the "brutalist aesthetic," a purified form of representational violence that is ensconced in ritual, yet one that elicits little sympathy for its agent or receptor, and in turn appears to be almost *subjectless* in its depiction—is something alien to our existing theoretical frameworks. Such traditional literary-aesthetic systems, specifically those that stem from the lineage of Lukács and Benjamin, inform our conceptions of the unnamable,

unreachable linguistic aspect of a trauma that only leaves its psychological subjects with “traces” of the original event. Acting in contrast to those systems, the brutalist aesthetic of *Blood Meridian* may be the crux of a new, alternative approach to history, one that may be in opposition to most theory of the postmodern novel. And only now, twenty-plus years after the novel’s initial release, do we have the appropriate cultural framework for addressing the question of history in McCarthy’s text.

It is significant, then, that at a point in 2005, the legacy of Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* started to be felt in an entirely foreign field up to that time. This development was signaled in part by the critically acclaimed rock band Earth’s release of *Hex: Or, Printing in the Infernal Method*, an album devised as accompaniment to the novel in the first half of the year (each song title quoted from *Blood Meridian*, and the album cover’s art was culled from early photos of the American West). Part of the creative team behind the album’s concept and artwork was Stephen O’Malley. O’Malley, one of the most visible faces in avant-garde music and sound-design in the last five years, has made a name for himself as both a musician for heavy metal outfit SunnO))) (pronounced “sun”; the name comes from a now-defunct amplifier company) and as a graphic designer par excellence for many experimental and avant-garde album sleeves (though he is probably, and bizarrely, most recognizable to the average citizen as the designer for the *Da Vinci Code* press campaign design). The New York Times profiled his band SunnO))) in an article titled “Heavy Metal Gets an M.F.A.,”<sup>2</sup> in the fall of 2005, in an attempt to show that so-called heavy metal music had become more intelligent and “literary.”

By early 2006, O'Malley started to enter the high-art lexicon, getting coverage in Artforum for his work with SunnO)))<sup>3</sup>, shortly before he collaborated with the similarly aesthetically-minded, and similarly high-cache, Banks Violette. In a 2006 *New York Times Magazine* profile of SunnO))), John Wray notes that,

Perhaps no collaboration better illustrates SunnO)))'s distance from traditional metal, and its proximity to the avant-garde, than the band's current project with a 32-year-old metal fanatic named Banks Violette. Violette is not, strictly speaking, a musician at all (though he's covered in tattoos, keeps a drum kit in his apartment and claims that metal is more important to him than art), but a sculptor and an installation artist. O'Malley, who now lives in New York, has written music for two of Violette's pieces, the first of which, "Bleed," is now in the collection of the Guggenheim Museum.<sup>4</sup>

The importance of the notoriety coming from the Guggenheim Museum exhibition cannot be overstated; it certainly signals O'Malley's "arrival" as an artistic (or commercial) force. But rather than focusing on the aesthetic value of O'Malley's contributions to the art world in the middle 2000s, it is perhaps more important to look at the effects of O'Malley's penetration into the literary realm. That is, O'Malley has never been reticent in exclaiming his love for McCarthy's work, or for *Blood Meridian* in particular. In the Washington, D.C. alt-weekly *Washington City Paper*, Brent Burton penned an article, "High Pain Drifters," subtitled, "Move over, Alistair Crowley: Cormac McCarthy is the new patron saint of heavy metal."<sup>5</sup> In it, the author quotes O'Malley as saying it was McCarthy's "long-form descriptive writing and lack of punctuation [that led O'Malley to] try other [musical] structures."<sup>6</sup>

Burton thus points out a link in aesthetic between McCarthy and O'Malley (though it should be noted that the "long-form" can hardly be said to originate with McCarthy), but leaves out any discussion of what may be the most fascinating

connection between the two artists: their representations of brutality and death. The rise of Stephen O'Malley and the subsequent resuscitation of *Blood Meridian* as Cormac McCarthy's masterpiece may therefore be approached as a signal event for a specific time and place. That is, the aesthetic that brought Stephen O'Malley his esoteric success from 2005 to the present may finally, and only now, give us cause to understand exactly how McCarthy's novel is operating and why.

In the fall of 2005, Stephen O'Malley's SunnO))) released an album titled *Black One*. While O'Malley's contemporary, Dylan Carlson, released the previously mentioned Earth album *Hex: Or, Printing in the Infernal Method* earlier in the year as a direct corollary/companion piece to *Blood Meridian*, it is *Black One* that offers a more distinct clue to the zeitgeist that would allow for the flourishing of what I have called the brutalist aesthetic. *Black One* is a gestural album that uses the generic tools of a subcultural music category (so-called "Black Metal") to push the SunnO))) aesthetic in a new direction than was previously explored by the group. The essence of SunnO))) is two men (O'Malley and Greg Anderson) playing incredibly loud, long, sustained, overdriven tones on their guitars, while wearing so-called "grimm robes" that reference any number of different occult images, from that of monks to druids to the more esoteric realm of Satanism and magic. The band makes music of attrition, in a sense, in that it demands much from the audience member (both in its formal length and its incredibly loud volume) and occasionally will be too much for the listener to make it through an entire performance. Aesthetically, though, SunnO))) is unabashedly self-referential; it is aware of the pomposity of heavy metal in the post-*Spinal Tap* sense, but plays with the image of metal in much the same way that the

famous parodic film did in 1984. O'Malley notes in the *New York Times Magazine* feature that “[the duo] is really serious about what we do, and I think it's completely honest, but a part of that honesty is the fact that Greg and I have a good sense of humor about the whole thing. We're having fun with these clichés and stereotypes of metal.”<sup>7</sup> The incorporation of Black Metal into the SunnO))) aesthetic is significant, though, not for its comic self-referentiality, but because it knowingly embraces a form known for its extremity, its sworn offense against genteel values, and for its wholesale embrace of violence as an essential characteristic of contemporary humankind—this is the brutalist aesthetic embodied in music.

It is significant to realize that the aesthetic of “Black Metal” had its birth in the 1980s, crossing continents and garnering much news coverage in its notoriety. The most notorious of all bands was Norway’s Mayhem, a group which started a trend of church-burning, suicide (its second singer shot himself in the head; a photograph of the scene would decorate one of the bands succeeding album covers), and murder (bass player Varg Vikernes killed guitarist Euronymous in the early 90s, and also was said to have attempted arson against various churches, spurring copycat incidents worldwide and causing massive media attention).<sup>8</sup> It is not insignificant that this aesthetic of extreme brutality arose at the same time that McCarthy penned *Blood Meridian*; it is even more interesting that the incorporation of “Black Metal” into the high-art mode by SunnO))) (achieved, coincidentally enough, through guest appearances by Attila Csihar, the vocalist of Mayhem) would come at the same time that *Blood Meridian* would reach a new level of critical acclaim and find a young male readership. It should also be noted that the early 1990s saw an influx of

violence in the “gangsta rap” scene with which most Americans are probably more familiar, with similar copycat acts of violence and execution as both a means of publicity and as an aesthetic signifier.

What these contemporary means of aesthetic signification suggest here is that there has been some kind of historical movement within the last decade that has made overt brutality acceptable in a way far separate from what we would typically consider to be the “traces” of violence associated with the postmodern movement. McCarthy, writing in the early 1980s, was working at a moment in time where the “postmodern” was being formulated by various theorists in all aesthetic fields, but his lack of academic acceptance suggests that *Blood Meridian* was still an outsider text as compared to *Gravity’s Rainbow* or *White Noise*. Central to this tension of McCarthy versus the establishment is the theory of history that is inherent within in *Blood Meridian*; it is in understanding history through McCarthy’s brutalist aesthetic that we may be able to understand *Blood Meridian* as a whole, as well as its rise to prominence in the last decade.

Though I have suggested an aesthetic affinity between avant-metal duo SunnO))) and *Blood Meridian*, there may appear to be a logical problem with my argument; namely the claim that the simultaneous rise in stature of both SunnO))) and *Blood Meridian* reflect some kind of epistemic symptom that connects the two, rather than resulting from pure chance. If one recalls SunnO)))’s Stephen O’Malley’s reverence for the novel, that is probably enough to suggest a cross-pollination of his own consciousness as an artist, but perhaps not enough to explain the historical

circumstances (and market forces) that have thrust both SunnO))) and *Blood Meridian* into a popular consciousness. What I am now proposing is that the brutalist aesthetic found in both *Blood Meridian* and SunnO))) are functioning in some way that serves the culture at this present moment in time. I will also suggest that this aesthetic has roots in what I will call *purified form*—an aesthetic that does *not* seek to deny the historical connections inherent in its cultural productions, but which instead complicates or hollows out history in a way that denies a *present subject* as a historical actor within a text. In short, this is an art that is without any stable protagonist, while what remains in the artists' texts is organized around post-historical violence, and a concentration on ritual and ceremony as a referent to a new conception of historical time. In terms of *Blood Meridian*, we can see this *purified form* through the textual manifestation its characters' travails, flattened to lines like, "he kicked the man in the jaw. The man went down and got up again. He said: I'm goin to kill you" (9). There is no interiority assigned to either of the characters in this altercation, and little rhetorical affectation to suggest any meaning beyond the encounter itself. The violence exhibited between the two parties is essentially left subject-less—in short, *feeling* is elided in favor of the formal elements of the sentence.

To expand on and clarify this argument, one must acknowledge its roots in Derrida's "Hauntology," as described in *Spectres of Marx*<sup>9</sup> in 1993. Without getting into the vicissitudes of the text, it is perhaps enough to say that Derrida's concern is with history reaching the realm of post-historicity, which, according to Ernesto Laclau, means:

What Derrida is finally saying is that isolated demands, grievances, injustices, and so forth are not empirical residues of a historical stage which has-in all essentials-been superseded, that they are, on the contrary, the symptoms of a fundamental deadlock of contemporary societies that pushes isolated demands to some kind of phantasmatic articulation which will result in new forms of political reaggregation. ... Any advance in formulating a theory of political reaggregation crucially depends on how the transition between the general structure of experience—the promise—and the contents of the classical emancipatory project is conceived.<sup>10</sup>

That is to say that history as the “classical emancipatory project” of a teleological history is fundamentally failing because of its ignorance of the “phantasmic articulation,” which itself stems from a disconnect between the individual Being and the appearance of the world. Subjectivity, then, is complicated because of one’s own ignorance of the ghosts of the past, which puts the present and future in a precarious position. Derrida’s concern with the political would seem to complicate the aesthetic realm of which I am now primarily concerned, but turning to one of the primary realms of expertise on hauntology, Mark Fischer’s infamous k-punk blog,<sup>11</sup> there is an important elucidation to be understood in the context of the SunnO))) aesthetic:

Structurally, the real hauntologists/doom-gazers are SunnO))), their last album (Black One) liberally quoting (but in almost unrecognizable, expanded forms) classic black metal riffs, their live show almost a crystallization of the ghost of metal (in its most evil/ceremonial forms and equally its camp ludicrousness)... but a metal reduced, boiled down, vaporised in some hellish longhair's bong—a single gesture remaining, (a raised satanic salute, as a guitar chord drones on and on...) Whilst they have begun to quote from black metal (whose hallmark is tinny atmosphere, and in its modern non-fascist form, depressive nihilism, let us remember) the form remains distinctly that of doom metal (hallmark: massive tritone drone) but again a doom metal divested of its "rockingness" (i.e. - rhythm and blues, percussion, climax) and purified into a form which has almost nothing to do with metal at all, for all its signifiers and quotations...<sup>12</sup>

This analysis provides the boundaries for the aesthetic domain of SunnO)))’s hauntological conception of performance, the reference back to what was historically real as a form, *but only* in form. The idea of being “reduced, boiled down, vaporized” tells us that the past referents for the current performance are spectral, without a substantive signifier through which we can trace a teleological lineage of the art form, whether it be through genre conventions or from cultural memory. This purification into a specific form corresponds to O’Malley’s own claims regarding SunnO))) as an artistic venture with Banks Violette, as *The New York Times Magazine* notes that

The band will perform at [Banks Violette’s opening at the Maureen Paley gallery in London], playing at its customary bone-rattling volume, but the audience won’t be able to see the musicians: they’ll be in a closed-off room one floor below the exhibition space. ‘The idea is absence, nonparticipation, missing the event,’ O’Malley told me, clearly excited by the concept. ‘On the second floor, where the piece is showing, you’ll just have the residual sound, the ghost of the actual performance.’<sup>13</sup>

The “ghost of the actual performance” surely resonates with Derrida’s Hauntology, but to what end? If we return to the k-punk blog, Matthew Jones attempts to alter the conception of purified haunting to that which exists in the realm of ritual, albeit an empty one:

Sunn-O’s [sic] sound, and fundamentally their philosophy, is one of ecclesiastical nihilism. It goes deeper than ‘reveling in the jouissance of the terminal’ (the words ‘revel’ and ‘jouissance’ themselves suggest a level of indulgence and frivolity absent in their sound), but to some sort of religious ecstasy induced through distortion and sub bass. And it is PURE, in a way their peers could never hope to be. [Greg] Anderson and O’Malley don’t refer to their live shows as “sub-sonic rituals” and didn’t call the last tour ‘autumnal bass communion’ for nothing.<sup>14</sup>

The truth of “ecclesiastical nihilism” is dubious, in that “nihilism” is both too strong and too loaded a term to describe a ritual without a religious referent. A more

important juncture to be explored in this tract is between the “haunting” of the historical/aesthetic past and the appearance of a merely *performative* ritual within the musical performance. For nothing suggests that SunnO)))’s music is devotional, or “ecclesiastical” in actuality; rather, the “sub-sonic rituals” distinction has an obvious camp value of a mock-ritual, and the realm of the mock ritual is what is at issue in *Blood Meridian*.

What I am suggesting is that the coming look at *Blood Meridian* connects to a reading of SunnO)))’s aesthetic signifiers outside of the realm of genre, and instead posits a historical position for the contemporary spectator. Since none of the discussions of SunnO)))’s Hauntology take into account one specific form of “haunting” within the music—the spectre of the ultra-violent Black Metal subgenre of the 1980s—there is a fundamental lack in understanding history as a relevant force within the aesthetic realm. There is a danger, then, in dismissing the “mock ritual” aspect of the performance as a throwaway concern, when instead there should be great care and attention given to what we consider ritualistic.

McCarthy elucidates this true concern over mock rituals, which is articulated by the novel’s most memorable character, the elusive judge Holden, as he claims, “a ritual includes the letting of blood. Rituals which fail in this requirement are but mock rituals. Here every man knows the false at once. Never doubt it. That feeling in the breast that evokes a child’s memory of loneliness such as when the others have gone and only the game is left with its solitary participant” (329).<sup>15</sup> The judge is ultimately describing, with the “child’s memory of loneliness,” the very “haunting” that I believe Derrida was getting at: a reference to a past history that lacks any solid

foundation, a past without a knowable referent, and ultimately, a lack that is both recognizable and, for the spectator or reader privy to the experience of the mock ritual, lamentable. This “mock ritual” may be precisely what occurs in a SunnO))) performance—yet with SunnO))), as opposed to McCarthy, there is no question of its mockery, and no apologies, as we can understand from O’Malley’s own comments regarding his contribution to Banks Violette’s exhibition, that of “residual sound” and the “ghost of the performance.” In essence, there is a similarity of means between SunnO))) and McCarthy, but they work toward very different ends.

Where the concern over mock ritual becomes relevant, historically and aesthetically, is in *Blood Meridian*’s role as a “historical novel”—that is, as a work whose diagetic time precedes the contemporary, it is possible to see *Blood Meridian* as a meaningful precursor for the future that we, as readers, now inhabit. Thus, the judge laments, “as war becomes dishonored and its nobility called into question those honorable men who recognize the sanctity of blood will become excluded from the dance, which is the warriors right, and thereby will the dance become a false dance and the dancers false dancers” (331), which is to suggest that this “false dance” has been actualized in our contemporary world. Ultimately, the false dance is the result of our own disconnect from historicity and meaningful actions—it the reason that Americans are able to “tune out” a war while simultaneously voting for an administration that is pro-“defense.” The endgame is a culture that does not recognize what it really is: a violent one, indeed. In the case of *Blood Meridian*, this false dance explains why the amount of violence in the novel appears to be so shocking to some—the reader’s removal from it ultimately signifies a world that

wrongfully attributes meaning to certain habitual rituals, and forgets about its own continual acts of violence.

As I have suggested, two of the “false dancers” may be the men of SunnO))), but their falsity is self-conscious, their rituals relegated to the realm of “high art” and genre-play. This is in no way a criticism, but in fact sets up an interesting paradox where two similar aesthetic concerns from two different artists can articulate historical concerns in different ways. The haunting of the past that results in *purified form* for SunnO))) is not lamentable, while for McCarthy, there is a conscious effort to use the purified form of prose-constructed violence to revive the ghosts, to see how history has resulted in a kind of post-historical/post-anthropocentric look at the violent forces or impulses that have shaped humanity (at least in America). McCarthy will achieve this affect through a narrative construction that elides any concerns over the “interiority” of character; this can be best understood if we remember, again, that *Blood Meridian* has *no stable protagonist*.

What is a novel, if it evades any kind of heroic monomyth? For the reader, there is little choice but to understand any novel as a function of its precursors; if we accept that a novel consists of a protagonist’s journey, in *Blood Meridian* we are forced to look throughout the text for its own modification of that formula only to find that nothing fulfills our expectations. What results is a similar “haunting” from the conventions of the novel itself, where the reader’s understanding of the material hinges on a spectral sense of expectation rather than on the substance of the material at hand. If one understands that there is a kind of similarity in these cultural productions of SunnO))) and McCarthy (in their concerns with haunting, or their use

of generic forms in a way that is somehow hollowed-out), the question remains, how did the market forces of the last five years result in both *Blood Meridian*'s and SunnO)))'s highest levels of prominence?

There is no easy way to understand what causes a commodity to become marketable when it is still, in the grand scheme, esoteric. Thus, the success of *Blood Meridian* in infiltrating a specific brand of youth culture by the recommendation of SunnO))), and the subsequent embrace for the SunnO))) aesthetic by the music-business complex (review websites, blogs, etc., which in turn will continue to mention *Blood Meridian* as proof of the high-mindedness of heavy metal in general), is not easy to analyze. But what is possible is a comparison of the major aesthetic markers of *Blood Meridian* as compared to other contemporary novels, as well as other contemporary popular-cultural productions at large.

The differences between *Blood Meridian* and the quintessential postmodern novels of DeLillo, Roth, and Pynchon consist primarily in *Blood Meridian*'s treatment of violence as *separate* from historical trauma. In *Blood Meridian*, there is never a historical meta-event on which the novel is founded, no response to overarching crisis. For McCarthy, what exists instead is the brutalist aesthetic, where its characters are rarely attributed the interiority necessary for historical awareness.

This is evidenced in a typical passage of *Blood Meridian*, where

[Glanton] pointed with his left hand and she turned to follow his hand with her gaze and he put the pistol to her head and fired.

The explosion filled all that sad little park. Some of the horses shied and stepped. A fistsized hole erupted out of the far side of the woman's head in a great vomit of gore and she pitched over and lay slain in her blood without remedy...

He took a skinning knife from his belt and stepped to where the old woman lay and took up her hair and twisted it about his wrist and passed the blade of the knife about her skull and ripped away the scalp.  
(98)

This is not about a trace of violence, of a remembered “bad thing,” but instead is *the* bad thing, happening over and over again. For some readers, this method of representation may seem perverse, or wholly foreign in its conception. Yet, in concert with that concern, consider the review of the 2008 film, *Rambo*, as printed in the *Chicago Sun-Times*:

Title: “Brutality, Thy Name is Rambo”

Beheadings, disembowelment, exploding bodies, decomposing bodies, raping, torturing, hanging -- you name the most depraved level of man's inhumanity to man (and woman and children), and it's most likely represented onscreen...

For as it turns out, Rambo does care about something: killing. Everyone has some sort of skill or talent, and homicidal rampages are what he does best. ‘You know what you are, you know what you're made of,’ he tells himself. ‘War is in your blood.’

‘Rambo’ has its share of such slap-you-upside-the-head proclamations. Then again, dialogue is hardly the focus here. In much the same way that it serves to break up sex scenes in pornography, the lines are mostly just exposition and filler. You might even say ‘Rambo’ is violence porn. Well-shot and well-edited violence porn, but violence porn, nonetheless.<sup>16</sup>

“War is in your blood” should resonate instantly, to the devoted *Blood Meridian* reader, as a direct recollection of judge Holden himself. In fact, *Rambo* could be fairly called the filmic embodiment of the brutalist aesthetic, with the caveat that its status as a corporately funded and distributed film puts its emphasis on killing within the bounds of good and evil (for example, John Rambo uses violence to help a group of missionaries escape a Burmese prison camp, which suggests a framework of moral action, despite the film’s completely flat depiction of subject-less violence during

much of its screen time). An exploration of the substance of *Blood Meridian* should thus show how this brutalist aesthetic is employed, and how it moves beyond the traditional framework of good and evil into a more esoteric, yet equally important realm of aesthetic and cultural representation.

In short, this project hinges on

1. the novel's lack of a stable protagonist,
2. its virtuosic prose constructions centering around violence and blood, and
3. its new and alternative construction of history, which necessitates a new model of reading. While this new model may puzzle or offend some of its readers, it may also perfectly suite the current cultural climate more perfectly than the majority of the canon of postmodern literature.

### ***Writing Blood Meridian; The Substance of the Novel***

Before *Blood Meridian*'s resuscitation of 2005, McCarthy was primarily known for his novel *All the Pretty Horses*, which won the National Book Award in 1992 and was made into a feature film later in the 1990s. Prior to that, McCarthy worked in anonymous toil, a novelist almost as reclusive as Pynchon, but without Pynchon's academic cache. In McCarthy's only significant print interview, the *New York Times* tells us that, in 1992 (prior to *All the Pretty Horses*' release), "none of his novels have sold more than 5,000 copies in hardcover. For most of his career, he did not even have an agent."<sup>17</sup> We learn that, before receiving a MacArthur Fellowship (also known as a "Genius Grant") in 1981,

he was living in a motel in Knoxville, Tenn. Such accommodations have been his home so routinely that he has learned to travel with a high-watt light bulb in a lens case to assure better illumination for reading and writing. In 1982 he bought a tiny, whitewashed stone cottage behind a shopping center in El Paso. But he wouldn't take me inside. Renovation, which began a few years ago, has stopped for lack of funds. 'It's barely habitable,' he says. He cuts his own hair, eats his meals off a hot plate or in cafeterias and does his wash at the Laundromat.<sup>18</sup>

Before the MacArthur Fellowship, McCarthy's oeuvre consisted of four major novels, *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), *Outer Dark* (1968), *Child of God* (1974), and *Suttree* (1979). None of his prior work can be said to anticipate *Blood Meridian* in a logical sense; most notably, *Suttree* is a comic novel, with a stable, erudite protagonist that navigates through a maze of misfits in subcultural Knoxville, while undergoing a fallen-family drama that heavily echoes Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*

The next work after *Suttree*, *Blood Meridian* was released 1985 to little popular fanfare (as we recall that it sold less than 5,000 copies in hardcover) and mixed reviews. The *New York Times Book Review* called it "hard to get through [but] harder to ignore,"<sup>19</sup> before saying that it is "ultimately a failure, [though] an ambitious, sophisticated one."<sup>20</sup> Little other critical attention was paid to the book upon its release; none from *The New York Review of Books*, *The New Yorker*, or *Harper's*. While this is certainly not unusual for many authors, the fact that McCarthy was coming off a "genius grant" makes his overlooking loom significantly.

In fact, the primary interest in *Blood Meridian* as a work of eminence must be acknowledged to have come from Harold Bloom. By the mid 1990s, Professor Bloom was teaching a class at Yale University called "How to Read and Why,"

which featured *Blood Meridian* as the last book on the reading list. Bloom writes in the introduction to the Modern Library edition of *Blood Meridian* that,

no other living American novelist, not even Pynchon, has given us a book as strong and memorable as *Blood Meridian*, much as I appreciate Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, Philip Roth's *Zuckerman Bound*, *Sabbath's Theater*, and *American Pastoral*, and Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon*. McCarthy himself... has not matched *Blood Meridian*, but it is the ultimate Western, not to be surpassed.<sup>21</sup>

Bloom's words resonate strongly as polemic; the notion of a book more "strong and memorable" than Pynchon may be truly flabbergasting to some. Despite what I will later contend may be misreadings in Bloom's interpretation of the novel, the power of his endorsement should not be understated. Moreover, as we may recall, he grants a caveat to the reader, claiming that he was unable to finish reading the novel despite two tries because of the brutality it depicts.<sup>22</sup> It is perhaps this "flinch" that kept critics and readers alike from McCarthy's masterpiece; it may be the willingness to move beyond this timidity—a maneuver that has major historical and aesthetic ramifications, as it pertains to the brutalist aesthetic—that explains the resuscitation of *Blood Meridian* in 2005.

It is important not to forget, though, that Cormac McCarthy most likely wrote the bulk of *Blood Meridian* in the period after his 1981 MacArthur Fellowship. Any cultural correlations to make between McCarthy's authorship and the events of that period are speculative, but nonetheless important. One could first point out that McCarthy wrote and published his text in the rise of the Reagan administration, or that *Blood Meridian* could now be considered one of the first great post-Vietnam works of fiction (in a temporal sense), though in each case those claims cannot be

definitive. One might also recall that Elaine Scarry published *The Body in Pain* in 1985, the same year that saw *Blood Meridian*'s arrival in stores, which suggests an affinity to exploring brutality, at least on the level of title. Yet, while Scarry's book is a theoretical work exploring violence's role in "fiction of power,"<sup>23</sup> McCarthy eschews "power" in the Foucauldian sense of the power-knowledge hierarchy of individual subjectivity, and instead focuses solely on a more visceral ideal.

To call *Blood Meridian*'s visceral depictions exhibitionist or fetishistic, though, would be missing the point. What is certainly true is that for a work of "literary" value, *Blood Meridian* represents a high point for descriptions of brutal violence, and posits a new, relentless form of writing that has scarcely been replicated (especially in respect to the high level of McCarthy's virtuosic prose). Examples of that which could make the reader flinch, while also being taken aback by the skill of McCarthy's prosaic descriptions, can be found peppering almost every page of *Blood Meridian*. McCarthy's narrator describes the scene of a massacre in a Mexican tabernacle: "the murdered lay in a great pool of their communal blood. It had set up a sort of pudding crossed everywhere with the tracks of wolves or dogs and along the edges it had dried and cracked into a burgundy ceramic" (60). A few pages before, McCarthy has two of his travelers come "to a bush that was hung with dead babies. They stopped side by side, reeling in the heat. These small victims, seven, eight of them, had holes punched in their underjaws and were hung so by their throats from the broken stobs of a mesquite to stare eyeless at the naked sky. Bald and pale and bloated, larval to some unreckonable being" (57). What should start to become clear is that this is a violence that is both blatant and without concern for its causal agents

or subjects; it is a violence that exists in a form that is beyond good and evil, a feature of the land and of existence itself.

How the reader initially addresses the novel's offerings is therefore of the utmost importance; the expectations for a reader must be shaped in some way to prepare himself contextually to construct a reading of all of this violence. With that in mind, Vintage International prints a series of statements on the back of the paperback version of *Blood Meridian*, claiming that it is an "epic novel of violence and depravity" and that it is "based on historical events." It is said that the "novel... traces the fortunes of the Kid," which already attributes a proper-noun status to the character that is never to be found in the text itself. As I have claimed, there is never a stable protagonist—the kid acts as a focal point for the narrative, but is not developed psychologically—and never a chain of events that are easily explained as a trajectory, and really, no characters with any identifiable interiority at all. There is a narrator, who tells the reader of various events, starting with the birth of the kid during the Leonid meteor shower, his departure from Tennessee, his wounding by gunshot as he navigates through the pastoral between-space of city and country, and finally his joining up with some filibusters in what appears to be the 1850s. But his character is never delineated in any psychological sense; we merely see him from the outside. The kid ultimately ends the filibuster journey and joins up with Joel Glanton's scalp-hunters (as sponsored by local Mexican governments), and while money appears to be a motivator, it is very unclear if anyone ever gets paid, or if it would even matter.

In Glanton's gang, the singular figure, Holden, referred to as "the judge," exists as equal parts philosopher and brute, though it is tremendously unclear as to how he should be read—the narrator never offers any real distance or judgments on who this man is, or why he acts how he does. The judge is extremely large, hairless, has small hands, and speaks many languages. He catalogues all of nature into journals. He appears, at times, to be a sort of Enlightenment ideal, the master over nature. At others, he takes on a more religious persona as the master of sacrifice or the leader of rituals. Further, he is the most blatant proponent of brutal violence in the book, expounding with aphorisms about the nature of agency and blood in the world. For example, near the text's conclusion, he will claim that "this desert upon which so many have been broken is vast and calls for largeness of heart but it is also ultimately empty. It is hard, it is barren. Its very nature is stone" (330). The judge will make similar statements throughout the book regarding the emptiness of the landscape, and will always buttress these claims with a qualification over what he will claim as right action. If we recall the judge's concern expressed over mock rituals, we see that the ritual itself, the "dance" of time, is by its very nature connected to violence. He claims, "Only that man who has offered up himself entire to the blood of war, who has been to the floor of the pit and seen horror in the round and learned at last that it speaks to his inmost heart, only that man can dance" (331). The reader is forced to see "war" as a tenet of the "inmost heart," an ideal only because it speaks to a kind of hunger for horror, rather than any romantic notion of brotherhood in combat.

When relating any of the judge's philosophic tenets to action within the text, all the reader can know is what is presented by a narrator whose interest seems to be split equally between the land and humans. Much criticism has focused on what the narrator calls "optical democracy," (247) a term that suggests that the land itself can "swallow up" men "beyond all ransom or reprieve" (138). The primacy of "optical democracy" suggests that we read the endless combat in which the human characters are engaged as simply mirroring a larger force endowed in the land, which would lead the reader to see that the combat is in itself meaningless in the grandest sense, rendered impossibly small in terms of a significance so much grander than that bounded by human bodies. That is, violence is embedded into rock itself, and all notions of moral judgments regarding violence are rendered utterly meaningless. The kid, possibly (though not definitively) murdered by the judge, thus elicits little sympathy by the book's conclusion, for there is never a foundation of care elicited from the reader—the kid, too, is a murderer, he is solitary, and he neither offers nor adheres to any moral system that would offset the brutality described over and over again. After the action of the text concludes, an epilogue describes, in evasive terms, what appears to be the fencing-in of the West, and there is little critical consensus as to what to make of the book as a totality.

To deal with the facet of the book that I have claimed is at issue, its intense descriptions of violence, is thus extremely difficult. Most post-WWII theory tends to privilege the "end of history" as an anthropocentric concept (that man can no longer achieve historical tasks, that annihilation is the endgame, etc.). McCarthy seems to be reducing history to the rocks that comprise his landscape, where perpetual combat

is enacted on a giant, meaningless slate, and meaning made only through bloody ritual. The important thing to notice, I think, is that none of the violence is what could properly be considered “war” as we think of it; there is no end-game, no real purpose, no motivator beyond what the reader is told is the kid’s (and in fact most of the novel’s agents’) “taste for mindless violence” (3). To be sure, money would theoretically change hands for Native American scalps, but it is never really made clear that any men will collect, or that the currency would be meaningful.

If money is rendered worthless in the context of the violent tasks that McCarthy sets his characters out to complete, one could understand the book to be dealing with a reassessment of currency, of money as a meaningless distraction over the “real thing,” of the “taste” for violence as an organizing principle (and by extension, one could understand this taste encompassing humanity and the land simultaneously, as the “optical democracy” would suggest). But perhaps even that would be a flawed assessment. It is never clear how McCarthy wants us to feel about the events he describes, though maybe working through existing “structures of feeling,” to use Raymond Williams’ term, is not what is at issue here. Instead, it is possible to examine *Blood Meridian* on its own aesthetic terms, as emblematic of its specific time and place (a piece of fiction from the 1980s), which then begs the question as to how the book’s organizing principle of violence is indicative of a new, meaningful aesthetic that relates directly back onto representational history.

***Chapter 2: The Brutalist Aesthetic on Postmodern Frontiers***

***A Theory of the Postmodern and History: Fredric Jameson's Postmodernism***

To begin to parse the meaning of McCarthy's violence-in-history, Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism* lays out a now-infamous touchstone for analysis of the postmodern historical novel, and one which was published at a similar time (1991) to McCarthy's novel. Jameson posits some major points on what we, as readers, may consider "history," claiming that, in representing the past,

the past is thereby itself modified: what was once, in the historical novel as Lukacs defines it, the organic genealogy of the bourgeois collective project—what is still, for the redemptive historiography of an E. P. Thompson or of American 'oral history,' for the resurrection of the dead of anonymous and silenced generations, the retrospective dimension indispensable to any vital reorientation of our collective future—has meanwhile itself become a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum.<sup>24</sup>

Jameson sees a failure on the part of the novelist, or the artist in general, to "strike through the mask,"<sup>25</sup> to use Melville's term—a failure to perhaps "get at the real thing," as if there were something genuinely true to be gleaned from this thing we refer to as history. This is all in contrast to the Modernist movement, in which the so-called "collective project" still had some kind of meaningful *telos* in mind. Thus, when Jameson claims that "All historical novels, beginning with those of Sir Walter Scott himself, no doubt in one way or another involve a mobilization of previous historical knowledge... thereafter instituting a narrative dialectic between what we already 'know' about The Pretender, say, and what he is then seen to be concretely in the pages of the novel,"<sup>26</sup> we have to see some kind of tension where "what we already 'know'" is already suspect, and where what is on the page is almost spectral

(recall the “haunting” by the past in Derrida’s Hauntological schema)—the simulacra of the historical thing, without any kind of true referent.

Thus, Jameson claims outright that

This historical novel can no longer set out to represent the historical past; it can only "represent" our ideas and stereotypes about that past (which thereby at once becomes "pop history")... If there is any realism left here, it is a "realism" that is meant to derive from the shock of grasping that confinement and of slowly becoming aware of a new and original historical situation in which we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach.<sup>27</sup>

This is most certainly true for the novel Jameson addresses head-on (Doctorow’s *Ragtime*), but what of *Blood Meridian*? To that, I would suggest this alternative: that perhaps McCarthy’s concerns about the postmodern condition are strikingly similar to Jameson’s, in the same way that perhaps Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* has similar concerns to the disciplinary society that Foucault renders in *Discipline and Punish*.

The primary reason that this connection can be shown lies, I think, in both writers’ concerns with signifying practice. In the time and space of what Jameson calls postmodernism, he warns that

If we are unable to unify the past, present, and future of the sentence, then we are similarly unable to unify the past, present, and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life. With the breakdown of the signifying chain, therefore, the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time.<sup>28</sup>

What Jameson is referring to is a lack of a stable signifying identity being linked to a world where, because simulacra has overextended its connection to reality, history is always considered a part of purely material signification rather than anything unifying or meaningful.

In *Blood Meridian*, the process of meaning-making is called into question in a twofold manner, similar to Jameson's schema. First of all, we are presented with a "historical" fiction that, until John Emil Sepich's essay on the novel, "What Kind of Indians Was Them,"<sup>29</sup> had little indication of being based on "real" history, let alone a history known by the average reader. The historical precedence for the novel itself (namely the Chihuahuan scalp trade of the 1850s) does not fall into the same category as Doctorow's *Ragtime*; McCarthy's characters are not familiar, and their connection to any kind of unified history that we may know is tangential at best. Much has been made of why, exactly, McCarthy culled from sources that were by their very nature un-believable; perhaps this was to show the fallibility of the idea of history as something "knowable" at all.<sup>30</sup> It follows that if the idea of historical accounting will not grant any kind of meaning-making (as Jameson suggests), then there must be some kind of semiotic, or "historical" unifier of the past to the present that will give us meaning. Otherwise, one would have to suggest, as does Sepich, that "if its historical base is overlooked, *Blood Meridian* might appear as nothing more than three hundred pages of circumstantial evidence (all gory) to assert judge Holden's claim of war's dominance as a metaphor in the lives of men."<sup>31</sup>

Sepich's view, I think, must be interrogated for two reasons: 1. the setting of "the West" is already endowed with meaning on the level of mythos, and thus its generalities and genre concerns have to be read differently than one would read a strictly "historical novel," and 2. beyond myth, the novel offers two alternative currencies by which its characters seek to create meaning outside of a historically postmodern framework of "simulacra"; these currencies are first, and most obviously

blood (or, the struggle between living and dying), and second, the desire to create meaning itself (the desire not to wallow in nihilism) through the creation of a transcendental signifier.

The currency of blood in *Blood Meridian* works in a twofold manner; it reflects on the society in which it was written (the analogue would be Slotkin's reading of late 60s film Westerns, i.e. *The Wild Bunch*, where the film reflects imagery familiar to its audience via the media coverage of the Vietnam War),<sup>32</sup> and secondly, it gets at something larger than its contemporary circumstances. Critic Roger Hodge writes in *Harper's* that, for McCarthy,

War is also the name for what civilization does to wildness, to autonomous life, whether it be human or not. *The freedom of the birds is an insult. There is room on the stage for one beast and one alone.* The American West, for McCarthy, is a place where the truth of history declares itself with unambiguous and ferocious candor. Men kill men for gold and glory. Women and children will be killed if there's money to be made or good sport to be had.<sup>33</sup>

So, if *Blood Meridian* shows history declaring itself, truly striking through the mask to redefine “war” as Hodge sees it, it follows that the contemporary violence that the novel simultaneously points toward (on the news, on television in general, in film, photography, etc.) is, itself, somehow acting still in the form of the simulacra, an image that has no meaning or that cannot be connected to this world in which we (Americans) live on a day-to-day basis.

It seems like no mistake, then, that the New York Times would write, “[McCarthy’s] list of those whom he calls the ‘good writers’—Melville, Dostoyevsky, Faulkner—precludes anyone who doesn't ‘deal with issues of life and death.’ Proust and Henry James don't make the cut. ‘I don’t understand them,’ he

says. ‘To me, that's not literature. A lot of writers who are considered good I consider strange.’”<sup>34</sup> Life and death are what give *Blood Meridian* much of its meaning, but “*dealing with issues of life and death*” also implies an analysis of a more transcendental, or mystical, element which postmodernism, in general, relegates to forms of pastiche or material-level ritual. In that sense, the act of the kid carrying a bible that he cannot read, wondering “if there’s other worlds like this...Or if this is the only one” (317) seems particularly relevant. That is, the task of asking metaphysical questions, or the search for making a coherent meaning of the world, is presented in *Blood Meridian* as a relevant concern, rather than a postmodern disavowal of meaning itself.

In interrogating the search for meaning in the novel, we can recall Jameson’s previously cited notion of “pure material signifiers” and relate it back to what I have called McCarthy’s “purified form”—but there needs to be a modification added to Jameson’s thinking as it relates to *Blood Meridian*. Namely, that the form of the novel, for all of its evasive meaning and subject-less action, necessitates that the reader navigate through the structures of signifiers to understand his role *against* that of the kid, who is himself placed in a situation where meaning is never easily elucidated. This struggle of signification is what governs the kid’s actions, and might explain both his descent into extreme violence as well as his ultimate metaphysical question over the issue of life and death. Near the opening of the novel, we know that the kid leaves his home in Tennessee, fights, gets shot, heals, runs from the person who helps him, and takes a boat to Texas. Here, McCarthy writes, “Only now is the child finally divested of all that he has been. His origins are become remote as is his

destiny and not again in all the world's turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay" (4-5). McCarthy seems to be addressing a problem not only of "man's will," but also of subjectivity itself. The problem of how "the stuff of creation may be shaped" must really refer to the creation of signifiers, "shaping" as a form of art, with the final result being a method of comprehension or of complete disavowal of meaning altogether. Thus, it could be said that we know what the coming journey is about, but there is a question as to where it takes us as readers.

That question need not be answered now (if it can be answered at all), but I believe the important thing to see at this point is a concern common to both McCarthy's and Jameson's writing—that there is an epidemic of free-floating, meaningless signifiers in the world, and that this condition has to be explored. It is important to note, however, that the means of tackling this concern, and the final prognosis from each author is markedly different. McCarthy's famous parable of the harnessmaker makes this much clear.

**"Then he told them another story and it was this story."**

The judge narrates the story of the harnessmaker, which is a highly significant detail to remember as a reader. In his telling, the Glanton gang is made aware of a traveler stopping at a somewhat insane harnessmaker's house in the wilderness, where the traveler will be confronted repeatedly over his coins at a dinner with the harnessmaker's wife and son—the harnessmaker wants some, and then wants more,

and the traveler sermonizes about how the old madman is “a loss to God and man alike and would remain so until he took his brother into his heart as he would take himself in...” (143). Ultimately the traveler will be taken into the woods and killed by this harnessmaker. The harnessmaker will craft a story that they were attacked, and his wife will consider the traveler’s bones those of her own son. The harnessmaker will finally confess on his deathbed, and the story appears to end when we learn that the harnessmaker’s actual son, who was just a boy at the time of the traveler’s murder, “was not sorry for he was jealous of the dead man and before he went away he visited that place and cast away the rocks and dug up the bones and scattered them in the forest and then he went away. He went away to the west he and himself became a killer of men” (145). At this point, there is a suggestion that we, as readers, should understand *Blood Meridian* in those terms offered thus far, the most striking being that the boy was “jealous” of a dead man—presumably jealous that he has to continue living in the world with his madman father, jealous that another’s existence ends while his still carries on in a world he finds miserable. Essentially, this seems to be a tale of nihilism, of a breakdown between the Christian values of the traveler versus the greed of the harnessmaker, that will result in a broken son.

But this is a trick on McCarthy’s behalf wherein we, as readers, are aligned with the Glanton gang, expecting the story to be over and always-already making judgments on it. The judge then cleverly attaches a “rider to the tale,” (145) which may be one of the most important passages in the book. In it, he claims that

there was a young bride waiting for that traveler with whose bones we are acquainted and she bore a child in her womb that was the traveler’s son. Now this son whose father’s existence in the world is *historical and speculative even before the son has entered it is in a bad way*. All

his life he carries before him the idol of a perfection to which he can never attain. The father dead has euchered the son out of his patrimony. *For it is the death of the father to which the son is entitled and to which he is heir, more so than his goods.* He will not hear of the small mean ways that tempered the man in life. He will not see him struggling in follies of his own devising. No. The world which he inherits bears him false witness. He is broken before a frozen god and he will never find his way. (145, all italics mine)

For the judge, an historical existence naturally includes the idea of speculation and skepticism; ultimately, it is clear that historical “knowledge” is either not real, or cannot be truly accessed. This casts an interesting light on Sepich’s claims about the historicity in the novel, wherein he feels that history must be accessed and understood as a source material for *Blood Meridian*. Here, we perhaps see that the recitation of an event and the readings constructed by those involved (the harnessmaker’s son and wife, specifically), are always contestable and subject to differences based on each character’s relation to the story itself. Thus, the construction of readings related to specific events can be seen not as a marker of new knowledge, but as that which *deprives* mankind of knowledge, creating a world that bears itself false witness.

And yet the fact remains that this is the judge’s story. The judge is, as we have seen, essentially superhuman in his capabilities and, moreover, wholly devoted to mastery. He claims that, “only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth... A suzerain rules even where there are other rulers. His authority countermands local judgments” (198). In this, we cannot, I think, accept the judge’s tenets as wholly sympathetic (at least not right away). In essence his project is tyrannical, harkening back to a kind of Ahabian monomania of dominance over his compatriots. Thus, the judge’s view of history, and his lesson in

the parable of the harnessmaker, has to be called into question, or at least further interrogated.

As an alternate version of the judge's historical schema, we have recourse to the kid's tale at the novel's opening. With his running away from home and ultimate arrival on a boat going to Texas, we recall that, "Only now is the child finally divested of all that he as been. His origins are become remote as is his destiny" (4). In this instance, it is the kid's own actions, and own choices, that separate him from his historical past. Rather than being euchered out of his father's patrimony, the kid is embarking on a journey that is not as simple as killing and not-killing; this is evidenced by his "bible that he'd found at the mining camps and he carried this book with him no word of which could he read" (312). At this point, we are to see, possibly, that the "issues of life and death" go beyond the judge's view of historicity and mastery, to a transcendental signifier by which the kid creates meaning. While the kid may not be able to read, he sees his bible as significant, for reasons that we, as readers, never know. The significance of the sign that signals the existence of a world beyond the material one makes us have to see a split between the kid and the judge in their worldviews.

Thus, when we recall Jameson's statement, "if there is any realism left here, it is a 'realism' that is meant to derive from the shock of grasping that confinement and of slowly becoming aware of a new and original historical situation in which we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach,"<sup>35</sup> I think we can see parallels in the judge's view; the idea that history has become unknowable and ungraspable is a

commonality between the two texts. Where McCarthy's project seems to differ is in its quest to still find meaning in the world despite the waning of historicity; this includes showing the progressive destruction of the land ("We ransacked the country. Six weeks. Finally found a herd of eight animals [buffalo] and we killed them and come in. They're gone. Ever one of them that God ever made is gone as if they'd never been at all" (317)) and the country's final fencing-in that we see in the text's epilogue. For McCarthy (as opposed to the judge), history is literally a "meridian" line between the knowable and the unknowable that we construct, and the anchor that gives this history meaning is undeniably the bloody violence that has existed, in McCarthy's view, for all time. If we examine one of McCarthy's quotes from his *New York Times* interview, "There's no such thing as life without bloodshed... I think the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea. Those who are afflicted with this notion are the first ones to give up their souls, their freedom. Your desire that it be that way will enslave you and make your life vacuous,"<sup>36</sup> there is little doubt that McCarthy is attached to this violence in a way that gives humanity a true meaning, a definition by which its actions can be explained, through which history is created and maintained by an endless cycle of violent actions on a violent land.

### ***Blood Meridian and the Metahistorical Romance***

Human history, and history in general, is placed in a precarious position in *Blood Meridian*, for the likelihood that humankind is an annihilator, one that could annihilate itself, is left open as a possibility. Bearing that in mind, critic Amy Elias has devised a particularly useful theory of the postmodern novel (in many ways

synthesizing ideas from Lukács' *Theory of the Novel* and Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*) to address a notion of "history" that is always-already "in crisis."<sup>37</sup> She catalogues certain conceptions of history over time (the Annales school, the Scottish School), and ultimately posits that the novels that we consider "postmodern" more often than not are, what she calls, "the metahistorical romance."<sup>38</sup> That is, to Elias, we must address the postmodern historical novel "signals a longing for the past—not a longing for a past simpler time or a past simpler culture, but for *the past itself* as a situating, grounding foundation for knowledge and truth."<sup>39</sup>

What Elias is really aiming for is an elucidation of Lyotard's concept of the historical sublime. In her reading, "for Lyotard, the postmodern is always entwined with and inhabiting the modern as the event unspoken within discursive representation,"<sup>40</sup> and as such, when we consider history, there is always some kind of unknowable impetus for a shift in historical perspective (which, as Elias points out, accounts for the Foucauldian notion of the epistemic shift, for similar reasons that are unclear or unknowable). So for Lyotard, what is at issue is the "unpresentable" moment.<sup>41</sup> This moment becomes known as the "sublime"—specifically, this is the moment "when the imagination can conceive of an Idea but not of a presentation of that idea, a way to make that Idea visible."<sup>42</sup>

Already at this point, we can understand that Elias' philosophical concept, especially in literature, will either address literature-as-*form* (i.e., that a representation of history-as-unpresentable will take on certain evasive formal traits), or will treat literature as part of a historical project that seeks to lament this unpresentability. But to treat this problem more simply, we can understand that the issue in metahistorical

romance may really be addressing a “problem” of history by either saying 1. That history is fundamentally unknowable, at least in a conventional sense, or 2. That the more poststructural attempt at ordering history (“that...tends not to elegize a specific institution or phase of culture from the past”<sup>43</sup>) becomes the ordering principle for historical fiction itself. To simplify this even further, we could perhaps just say that at issue is whether or not history can be known, and how, or whether, this position can be presented and understood through literature.

Elias finally arrives at a notion of history-in-fiction that claims,

Through its operation of deferral [of seeking the unrepresentable], the metahistorical romance can invert the notion of margin and center: the margin of history, the border, is what defines the center, History itself. In the context of metahistorical postmodernism, History is the marginalized center, always deferred in the operation at the hermeneutical border....

In other words, the postmodernism of the metahistorical romance thus is located in its resuscitation of the notion of the sublime (in the form of the historical sublime) precisely in the political and ethical contexts that the sublime and the discourse about the aesthetic traditionally have avoided, subsumed, or repressed—i.e., in the context of the political. That is, in the face of traumatic twentieth-century history, secular postmodernists turn to the historical sublime to attempt reconnection with ethical meaning and creative Being in the absence of the Word.<sup>44</sup>

In many ways, this statement recalls what is at stake when the kid is carrying his bible that he cannot read; what this poststructuralist notion is really trying to elucidate is that history is some kind of calculated pursuit within the metahistorical romance: that it may be addressed through both form and content, and that it is never apolitical. For the kid, the “political” is relegated to his own concerns for survival and for meaning-making, pursuing the sublimity of the biblical heaven despite his incomprehension of the words that he carries with him.

While Elias is trying to explore the border of history and fiction in the realm of the unknowable and the unrepresentable, we are still to understand that history is *addressed* in a meaningful way (most notably as a lack) that is both inside- and outside-of history (what has been thus defined as metahistorical). Elias uses *Gravity's Rainbow* as a case study, claiming that “in *GR* the uncanny Zone where Slothrop dances with a ghost girl is the borderland of the historical sublime, the deferred border of History out of real time”<sup>45</sup>—by that, we are to understand that there is some kind of point to this meandering inside and outside of history, which is finally that “recognizing the space of the excluded middle might give one the opportunity to stop time and avoid the apocalyptic ending of millennial history without resorting to pre-Enlightenment religiosity.”<sup>46</sup> But the real problem, then, is how to address this theory in the context of *Blood Meridian*.

*Blood Meridian* may do some of what Elias is describing, but its notion of history is so complex that it is difficult to pin down in her postmodern framework. As John Emil Sepich famously notes, *Blood Meridian* does address documented history, but the source material is so obscure that to consider the novel in the same manner as Elias does with *Gravity's Rainbow* seems hopeless, or at least complicated. If we address the component notions of “history” as presented by McCarthy’s novel, we can understand why this might be the case. First, we know the landscape where the novel’s action occurs to be genre-specific, and to extend on that, we know that the West has a “historical” location in the realm of American myth. Secondly, we know that the action of the novel is based on documented historical accounts (those that Sepich discusses), which are suspect in their believability. Thirdly, we know that the

novel in some way addresses history directly as a subject of inquiry, and indirectly, through the philosophizing of the judge—and we must parse out what the meaning of that “history” could be.

To address the first point, that historical material that comprises the setting of the novel is “mythic” or “generic,” we have recourse to the legacy of the Western novel and film as a distinct form. Any discussion as such would have to include James Fenimore Cooper’s *Last of the Mohicans* as the foundation of generic concerns via Richard Slotkin’s famous analyses of Western films from *Hell’s Hinges* through *The Wild Bunch*; while this discussion will take place in more depth later, for now the primary point to make is that the landscape that we see in *Blood Meridian* has a referent that is “historical” in a very strange sense—we “recognize” it inasmuch as we have seen it in print or on film, but its existence as a real place is hardly of primary significance. The term “imaginary landscape,” as cliché as it may be, is probably the most relevant way to describe what we see; thus, realism as such is never a concern, but fulfilling or denying genre expectations most certainly is.

Looking again to Elias, we see that there are specific differences between what she calls the “historical romance” (the post Walter Scott model) and the “metahistorical romance,” and the specific distinctions may well be important for parsing out *Blood Meridian*. The four main tenets of the historical romance, says Elias, are:

1. It assumes the ontology of history; 2. It assumes that history, as the shaping force of culture, can be identified and assessed (particularly in economic structures) by an unmotivated, neutral human observer who, using inductive scientific method, can extrapolate a developmental pattern in history itself; 3. It assumes and upholds notions of cultural and personal *value* derived largely from Western bourgeois

economies; 4. It assumes the shape of history to be linear and the motivation of history to be progress.”<sup>47</sup>

The “imaginary landscape” of *Blood Meridian* could thus be seen as part of the fabulist formulation of that very doctrine, but of course, this is probably *not* the case. If we take a cursory look at the epilogue to the novel, we know that the “man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground” (337) is probably a man with a post-hole digger, most likely making a fence.<sup>48</sup> This is an instance of historical facts intruding into the novel in the most basic sense, and further, could be read as an indictment of the ethos of progress. We may also remember McCarthy’s “old hunter” describing, near the novel’s conclusion, how “we ransacked the country” (317), annihilating the buffalo as a species.

This description of the dying-out buffalo is particularly interesting in that it is simultaneously fulfilling a genre convention, the “anti-progressive Western” (*Jesse James*, or *The Wild Bunch* are similar manifestations regarding the notions of “progress”), which necessarily also strives against the traditional ethos of the historical romance (that history has an end point, that progress is in fact worthwhile). Thus, we must turn to Elias’ tenets for the metahistorical romance to see if it contains any answers:

Metahistorical romance: 1. Assumes the cultural construction of history; 2. Allows that the past may shape the present, but asserts that all we can know are its traces, and that all attempts to construct historical narrative are culturally contaminated. History is sublime, impossible to articulate, outside of representation, and as such leads to ethical action in the present; 3. Radically questions the notion of cultural and personal value in any form, particularly those derived from Western capitalist economies; 4. Conceptualizes history as planar, and replaces the notion of historical progress with the operation of deferral.<sup>49</sup>

Here, we can most probably see a set of notions that shapes the anti-progressive Western as a genre itself, but applying this framework to *Blood Meridian* is still difficult. For example, it would be perhaps easy to say that the novel deals with a “sublime” approach to history, where none of the events need to be believed so much as they need to be seen in the context of our contemporary setting to shape “ethical action.”

But, of course, the events in the setting of the story in the 1850s are “real,” in that we have recourse to historical sources that tell us that a scalp trade did exist in the Mexican region of North America; further, we know that much of the characterization in the novel comes from “historical” sources, such as Samuel Chamberlain’s *My Confession* (which, as Sepich shows, provided the impetus for the creation of the judge, Holden). What should be noticed is that the actions in the story are founded on some kind of historical record (deaths, scalps). Specific details are merely founded on eyewitness accounts that are themselves suspect. If we add in how obscure the historical scalp trade should be to the average reader, there is little choice but to wonder how, exactly, we are to read this novel—there is a history that has a visceral effect (the brutal violence, based on true body counts), that is totally obscure (both *My Confession* and the history of the scalp trade are not “common knowledge,” and are not deployed in the same way that novels such as Doctorow’s *Ragtime* use towering historical figures), and is somehow totally believable to the reader—and that seems to defy any kind of easy interpretation.

In the background of this struggle to interpret the meaning of history in the text *in toto*, there is the utterly fascinating and confounding problem that is presented in the character of the judge, who is himself a philosopher of history. In the judge's parable of the harnessmaker, the story is taken by the judge's compatriots as "historical"—it has a referent in the past, they think, as evidenced by their claims that, "he was no harnessmaker he was a shoemaker and he was cleared of them charges" and, "he never lived in no wilderness place, he had a shop dead in the center of Cumberland Maryland," (145) and so on. Already, we can see that McCarthy is playing with the idea of the storyteller as the teller of history versus the teller of parable. This tract continues as the judge adds his "rider to the tale," and claims that the entire story of the murdered traveler truly holds its meaning in the orphaned son.

Thus, the conclusion of the judge's story appears to be a lesson about the importance, or unimportance, of knowing the actuality of history itself. The orphan son is "broken" because the world deprives him access of the "historical and speculative" existence of his own father. Simply put, the judge is seemingly advocating that the "death of the father" is the real currency in the world, and the rest is somehow a distraction from the real thing—without the death, the son is left with a world that "bears false witness" and does not serve his needs at all. This seems totally in line with Elias' view of the sublime: the judge is trying to show how the search for the real thing, the death moment, that which is "unpresentable" is what will grant meaning to the world..

But again, we must remember that this is the judge speaking—the totalitarian, the suzerain over autonomous life who would have all birds kept in zoos (199), whose

ubiquity rivals that of the white whale and whose viciousness is rivaled by none. We may understand that the judge is ultimately correct in his aim for his parable, or perhaps that he is the pure exhibition of not only the enlightenment ideal (the overlord over nature). We know already that the judge is a man of the Enlightenment in as much as he records, in a book, a catalogue of nature, because “whatever in creation exists without [his] knowledge exists without [his] consent” (198). As the overlord of nature, he pontificates, “the man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear. Superstition will drag him down...but that man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate” (199). This idea of mastery is indelibly tied to progress, a progression that will kill off all the buffalo and lead to the fencing in of the west in the epilogue. In that way, the judge is profoundly a negative character.

However, an alternative tract is perhaps to say that the judge, contrary to most critical opinions thus far, is not a villain at all, but is the ideal that we have been living in our postmodern era. He is an overlord, yes, but his attempts at domination mirror the advancements of the American project as a historical force (military and technical domination, for example). Most importantly, he sees that the real currency of the world is blood, and that a history without dealing with the issues of life and death is ultimately meaningless. If he believes in total war, perhaps we are to see that he is not only right to do so, but that we ourselves do, and have lived in a state of mystification for not admitting it. In this way, the judge is actually more of a prophet,

or the supreme Gnostic master, who privileges individual knowledge as a means to freedom.

As preposterous as this claim might seem, the fencing in of the West at the novel's epilogue almost necessitates that we consider it as a possibility. Elias' third and fourth tenets of the metahistorical novel (that it radically questions the values derived from capitalism and that it posits history as that which is constantly deferred, or "sublime") seem relevant in this context. The derivation of value from Western capitalism is what is at stake for the judge when he tells his parable—he claims that the death of the father is what is owed the son "more than his goods"—and thus, we are to see that money is what allows for the constant deferral of meaning in the world, that which leads to the building of a fence for civilization but which deprives us of the "real thing" which we should seek. The judge is positing the metahistorical deferral of history, then, where the orphan son is left without the currency that really matters. A good reader should thus have a difficult time dismissing the judge's philosophy.

Yet, when we return to the second tenet of Elias' metahistorical romance criteria, that it allow or necessitate ethical action in the present based on our "trace" knowledge of the past, the conflict over the judge becomes more intense. We know that for the judge, the ultimate goal, or perhaps *telos*, is total war (recall his saying, "only that man who has offered himself entire to the blood of war...only that man can dance" (331). If we consider, even in the most cursory sense, the ethos of the American people in the time of McCarthy's authorship, "total war" is perhaps not so far off as a descriptor (both in foreign conflict and in domestic conflict between citizens). Thus, one reading of the fencing-off of the west in the epilogue is that the

movement of history may “fence in” civilization, but it defers the total war elsewhere (Vietnam, Iraq) or to our own urban interiors. The “ethical action” is then difficult to parse in the traditional sense—either embrace total war, or look to an alternative that McCarthy may be offering within his text.

The alternative to the judge is most clearly the kid, though he is never a clear-cut foil. In fact, we know very little about the kid at all. We know from the book's first pages that he has left his home, and that he never experiences the death of his father. But for some reason, “in him already broods a taste for mindless violence” (3). If we contrast this to the kid as an older man, carrying a bible that he cannot read, we must assume that something has happened where the need for a transcendental signifier has overshadowed the judge's command for total war as an organizing principle.

The framework for ethical action within and without *Blood Meridian* is thus highly complicated, perhaps as much so as its stance on history. Through Elias' framework for the metahistorical romance, we can parse out skepticism toward progress and see a blueprint for skepticism toward “history” in general, but it is incredibly difficult to say what it can really tell us about *Blood Meridian*. While the book is certainly about how one should comport himself toward the world (with the judge offering blood-as-currency, and the kid offering some kind of passive wandering by the end), the architecture of the story offers no clear options for a mode of living. It is as if there is a trace of an ethos somewhere, a shadow of explanation that goes beyond the postmodern novel into something else entirely. Perhaps to simply acknowledge our uncanny, horrifying familiarity to the ethos of total war, as embodied in the novel by the brutalist aesthetic, is enough.

### ***Chapter 3: McCarthy, the Melvillean Precursor, and Metaphysics***

Many critics have compared *Blood Meridian* to *Moby-Dick* in highly various ways; some point to stylistic similarities between Melville and McCarthy's prose, others claim that *Blood Meridian* is essentially a re-imagining of *Moby-Dick* in some form, and some just see similarities on the level of character, i.e., Ahab and Ishmael as precursors for *Blood Meridian*'s kid, judge, and Glanton, among others. The *New York Times* interview with McCarthy claims that “*Blood Meridian* has distinct echoes of *Moby-Dick*, McCarthy's favorite book.”<sup>50</sup> The fact of the “favorite book” has probably necessitated much of the comparison between the two tomes; while there is undeniable evidence that supports the comparison on many levels, there is an overlooked correlation between one of Melville's lesser-known works, *The Confidence Man*, and *Blood Meridian* that helps elucidate the latter's aesthetic and theory of history.

*The Confidence Man* is one of the more anomalous works of American literature, in that it very clearly anticipates many elements of modern and post-modern literature, most obviously in its lack of a stable protagonist and its aversion to a linear (or at least a traceable) plot. For that, many would consider it a work “ahead of its time,” though that is perhaps too loaded a term. The book features a character (of sorts) that may or may not be the devil, assuming multiple avatars in multiple confidence schemes aboard a riverboat called the *Fidele*. The notion of the avatar, the shapeshifter that exists in multiple forms, can be compared to judge Holden in *Blood Meridian* fairly directly. Holden is very clearly ubiquitous, a man of so many skills and languages that he himself could be considered an avatar, though he is not so clearly Satanic as the shapeshifter in Melville's work.

Aside from the notion of the avatar, there is reason to return to *The Confidence Man* as a paradigm for historicity in the novel, as well as a distinct narrative precursor to *Blood Meridian*. Specifically, Melville's chapter “The Metaphysics of Indian Hating”

is significant for its use of so-called “historic” materials, stemming from Rousseau’s own philosophy of the “noble savage” and from various essays and tracts on the subject (James Hall’s writing on “Indian Hating” and Charles Wilkins Webber’s writing on the “Metaphysics of Bear Hunting”).<sup>51</sup> Perhaps not insignificant is the fact that the chapter is narrated by a character called “the judge;” in it, the reader is given a kind of philosophical treatise offsetting the so-called “backwoodsman” with “the Indian.” “The instinct of antipathy against an Indian grows in the backwoodsman with the sense of good and bad, right and wrong. In one breath he learns that a brother is to be loved, and an Indian to be hated,” (*TCM*, 151).<sup>52</sup>

What can be taken from this chapter (which is in itself a kind of interjection in the novel), is essentially that it re-tells a historical document in a way familiar to Melville (in *Benito Cereno*, this is also the case), while modifying it in a way to both comment on the historical source and exhibit its fallibility in some way. That is, in revisiting James Hall’s historical document, “Indian Hating.—Some of the Sources of This Animosity.—Brief Account of Col. Moredock” of 1835 (*The Confidence Man* dates from 1857), one sees an apologia for Indian hating (or really, killing), as an act of revenge performed by otherwise “sane” or even upstanding individuals (here, John Moredock). In Melville’s work, the sentiments expressed are very similar, but recontextualized in a way that must be seen as somewhat deconstructive. That is, the version of “Indian Hating” placed in Melville’s novel no longer has the meaning of its historical-source precursor, which was seen as distasteful by Melville himself. Norton Edition Editor Herschel Parker writes on critic Elizabeth S. Foster’s work on *TCM*, “she understood that Melville was not out merely to retell a tale recently retold by Hall [on Moredock] but instead to transform the tale from frontier history to something that contained allegorical significance.”<sup>53</sup>

But what significance can be gleaned from this “allegory” must be read contextually in Melville’s work, and thus there is a tension between the literal meaning

of the chapter itself and its place in the rest of the novel. This seems precisely in line with what is at stake in *Blood Meridian*, when one considers that many of its actors (particularly, the judge) come from similarly esoteric “historical” sources that have been placed in the context of a novel. Here one has recourse, again, to the debate surrounding the role of esoteric historical sources that first began with John Emil Sepich’s article, “What kind of Indians was them?”

Sepich’s article argues that understanding the real, historically documented existences of Judge Holden, Joel Glanton, and the Chihuahan government’s scalp trade is absolutely essential to effectively read *Blood Meridian*. Sepich’s argument, that the historical sources are important, is well-founded, but his implementation of the idea contradicts the process of reading that *Blood Meridian* makes available to us. That is, we have no recourse to knowing the source material without our own secondary research, and nothing within the text suggests that we should. If we set aside that argument for a moment and look to the content of Sepich’s investigation, the historical basis for McCarthy’s text is wholly convincing.

Sepich shows that Joel Glanton is a character in Jeremiah Clemens’ *Bernard Lile* (1856) and in Samuel Chamberlain’s “long-lost personal narrative of the late 1840s, *My Confession*.”<sup>54</sup> Glanton’s historical existence is shown to parallel his existence in *Blood Meridian*, wherein he is a scalp hunter whose “tale is unsettling, his misfit excess horrifying.”<sup>55</sup> Perhaps of greater interest is judge Holden’s historical existence, one that includes many of the mystical aspects found in *Blood Meridian*. The judge, of Chamberlain’s *My Confession*, as in *Blood Meridian*, is said to be “six feet six in his moccasins, had a large fleshy frame, a dull tallow colored

face destitute of hair and all expression.<sup>56</sup> Further, Chamberlain claims that the judge, like McCarthy's,

was by far the best educated man in northern Mexico; he conversed with all in their own language, spoke in several Indian lingos... would take the harp or guitar from the hands of the musicians and charm all with his wonderful performance, and out-waltz any *poblana* of the ball. He was 'plum centre' with rifle and revolver, a daring horseman, acquainted with the nature of all the strange plants and their botanical names...<sup>57</sup>

Sepich will go on to show how the real judge was a child molester, like the fictional counterpart, and will then cite an instance where the real Holden, like the fictional, privileged geographical knowledge over scriptural, claiming “*millions* of years had witnessed the operation producing the result around us.”<sup>58</sup> As with Glanton, the historical similarity to McCarthy's judge simply cannot be denied.

But the ramifications of these facts are open to debate. If we go back to Sepich's claim, that without historical understanding, the book becomes a body of “circumstantial evidence” about the “dominance of war,”<sup>59</sup> there is an implicit argument that history *can* be adequately understood as it exists in the written source texts. Sepich gives due attention to the fact that McCarthy's fictional “observers, arriving by separate routes, are essential to the novel” and that “McCarthy has gone out of his way to lock a great deal of *Blood Meridian* [to actual historical observations].”<sup>60</sup> Whereas Sepich is privileging the act of historically witnessing, a valid counterargument is that McCarthy is exploiting the fantastical, unknowable mysteries behind these same accounts. Consider Sepich's claim that “an under-informed reading of *Blood Meridian* is comparable to the kid's question to Sproule... 'what kind of Indians was them? In some ways, the assailant's name

hardly matters.”<sup>61</sup> While Sepich claims, from this point onward, that it is better for the reader to know the “the assailant’s name,” it is just as possible to understand *Blood Meridian* from the opposite perspective; that the historical outsider has access to knowledge that the insider—the writing observer—only confuses and makes false.

It is here that one might return back to Melville and the problem of context. One has to consider the fact that the source for Melville’s chapter is not commonly known (especially in terms of Twenty-First Century readership) in the same way that Samuel Chamberlain’s writing would very likely not be known to the readership of *Blood Meridian*. Thus, representing “history” can take diverging paths at any given moment—either the reader sees a “mythic” approach where facts are subservient to the mythological retelling, or one accepts that “history” is meta-historical, always being grasped-at as that which is sublime.

### ***Moby-Dick and Secondary Criticism***

As I have suggested, the comparison between *Blood Meridian* and *Moby-Dick* has been subject to scholarly contestation; most works of scholarship look for parallels to Ahab and Ishmael within McCarthy’s text, or are content to call *Blood Meridian* another American epic, qualifying it as akin in subject to Melville’s great work. There is much at stake within the comparison between the two novels. Essentially, this is because the body of criticism surrounding Melville’s work is sufficiently large and refined that the average scholar can reach some kind of consensus as to what that novel is “about” in some way; while no such consensus exists for McCarthy’s text, the comparison between novels is highly various and

evasive to many readers. In particular, the crux of the critical problem stems from a conception of history and its accompanying system of meaning-making that has become well-elucidated in *Moby-Dick*, but less-so in *Blood Meridian*. A look at some of the secondary criticism of *Blood Meridian* as it relates to *Moby-Dick* helps to illustrate this point.

Critic Dana Phillips explores and compares *Blood Meridian*'s "philosophy of composition" versus its "implied philosophy of history" in his essay "History and the Ugly Facts of *Blood Meridian*."<sup>62</sup> Specifically, Phillips seeks to draw a distinction between what Lukács describes as "narration versus description" and posits the following, crucial point: that "McCarthy's novel does not attempt to engage history, to explore the psyches of the characters and explain the meaning of the events it describes in the explicit, consciously critical way that Lukács requires."<sup>63</sup> In this, Phillips is absolutely correct to posit an entirely separate narratological model for McCarthy than what Lukács would describe in the era of Modernism. But it is important to note also that McCarthy's model, for Phillips, is not an extension beyond Modernism into the postmodern era, but an engagement with the narrative model provided by Melville's *Moby-Dick*.

What Phillips is essentially claiming is an affinity between the two authors by way of their treatment of "violence and death;" he writes that "Melville had begun to suspect that violence and death (as opposed, say, to liberty and justice) defined American history."<sup>64</sup> He sees McCarthy as a confirmation of this fact, claiming "violence and death, it would seem, are the more or less objective truths of all human experience."<sup>65</sup> There is a danger here in claiming that there is ever an "objective truth

of human experience,” the repercussion being a denial of the actual materiality of historical circumstance, which *prima-facie* undercuts Phillips’ argument. But for Phillips, the very concept of such historical circumstance is one where the human construction of metanarratives is put into question. While he sees Melville as exploring the ever-present darkness of death and violence through his characters, McCarthy is claimed to “re-[write] character as something else—character not as self but as language, as a suggestive artifact or trace of the human, like the Anasazi potsherds Judge Holden collects.”<sup>66</sup>

This post-human perspective allows Phillips to see *Blood Meridian* as a reduced, streamlined version of *Moby-Dick*, one where the reader may have trace-recollections of Ishmael in the kid or Ahab in Glanton or the judge. This claim is particularly interesting, in that Phillips is suggesting an affinity between the two authors on the level of historical concern (or, the dominance of violence and death as the organizing principle of the world), while also claiming a stark divergence between the two on the level of character. For *Moby-Dick* certainly has “characters”—Ahab and Ishmael first and foremost—and ardently reaffirms its reader’s relationship with its characters specifically through the narrative voice of Ishmael and the rhetoric of Ahab. By contrast, Phillips writes of *Blood Meridian*:

The novel’s narration is omniscient, but there seems to be no knower providing us with the knowledge it imparts. And this knowledge does not really develop; it merely accrues. The most often repeated sentence in *Blood Meridian* is “They rode on.” So the plot moves, but it does not thicken. Because all of the novel’s complexities are fully present from the first page, it can scarcely be said to have been “composed” at all in the Lukácsian sense. The novel does not seek to resolve “conflicts” that trouble its characters, much less its narrator or author. It is not really a narrative, then, but a description—and some would say it is not really a novel either.<sup>67</sup>

Phillips is making some polemical claims, to be sure, and is willing to admit that “judge Holden appears to be an exception to the rule defining character in [*Blood Meridian*]... His voice seems to be in implicit dialogue with the impersonal, highly detailed, and verbally ingenious narration”.<sup>68</sup> But by claiming such a post-humanist perspective for McCarthy, one has to say that *Blood Meridian* is a response to *Moby-Dick* inasmuch as it is just a starting point through which McCarthy will work through his own specific schema of history.

This historical scheme is, Phillips says, part of a new discourse that “might capture within its net religion, ethics, psychology, politics, and nihilism, too, a discourse that limns the outlines of the arena in which humans—priests, jurists, therapists, kings, and philosophers—contend without any vested interest in the outcome.”<sup>69</sup> Meaning, for McCarthy, is thus elucidated “on a scale of time and space that we can only dimly perceive, marked by the scraping of rock upon rock... The meaning of these scrapings is not connected to human value. *Blood Meridian* does not wholly reject the notion of value, but the values it describes are not ones for which we have ready terms. For McCarthy, the history of the West is natural history.”<sup>70</sup> It is difficult to readily argue against Phillips’ claim that McCarthy conceives history with primacy given to the natural world—there is certainly a flatness to McCarthy’s characters that would allow the reader to consider a landscape that is timeless, only home to violence and death in a continuum that evades historical temporality. But such an argument is essentialist in its very nature, giving primacy to objective truths of existence and looking over historical particularities in the novel. There is a singular tract in *Blood Meridian* that complicates such a conception, and one that is

certainly not foreign to *Moby-Dick*, which is the role that myth and ritual play in the novel, as they relate to its human figures.

Thus, I want to propose a better reading of the novel that exists in the interstices between Phillips and Sepich's historical sources, one that takes into account the notion of generic myth, the actual history on which *Blood Meridian* is based, the primacy of the natural world, and the perpetuity of war: a reading that inhabits the zone between timelessness and particularities. Like Phillips, I agree that the route to understanding this "meridian" line between history and ritual-mythos is through *Moby-Dick*, but in a different manner than he suggests.

The primary master of ritual in *Moby-Dick* is certainly Ahab, the ungodly-Godlike man. F.O. Matthiessen notes that for Ahab, there is a trespass into the mythic and divine via "the separation between perception and feeling."<sup>71</sup> Ahab, characterized by Peleg as "ha[ving] his humanities" (*MD*, 79)<sup>72</sup> has somehow fractured himself from that earlier characterization after his encounter with the white whale, so that "His resolve to take it upon himself to seek out the source of malignity is god-like, for it represents human effort in its highest reach. But as he himself declares, it is likewise 'demoniac,' the sanity of a controlled madness."<sup>73</sup> It is this separation that likens *Moby-Dick* to *Blood Meridian*; the judge is very obviously ungodly and Godlike in his mastery, but he, unlike Ahab, does *not* have his humanities. The judge does not lament his fate, as does Ahab, who will decry, "forty years of continual whaling! Forty years of privation, and peril, and storm-time! Forty years on the pitiless sea! For forty years has Ahab forsaken the peaceful land, for

forty years to make war on the horrors of the deep” (*MD*, 405). In that context, a comparison of Ahab and the judge seems especially telling, for in *Blood Meridian* we see that the land is anything but peaceful, and all the while the judge is making war on the horrors of the country, not the sea, but with nary a regret. Thus, the only way to find any Ahab in the judge is to see the latter as the purified, malignant version of the captain that Melville would likely balk at with horror and disbelief.

The distinction between land and sea is similar between *Blood Meridian* and *Moby-Dick*, where McCarthy will have the kid arrive to the West Coast to see the ocean, “out there past men’s knowing, where the stars are drowning and whales ferry their vast souls through the black and seamless sea” (304). Thus, while Ahab sees the land as estranged from himself, the ocean acts as a cloud of incomprehension for the kid. Remembering that the *New York Times* interview claims *Moby-Dick* as McCarthy’s favorite book makes it almost impossible to see even a mention of a whale as anything other than an allusion to the White Whale, which in turn suggests that the same sentience and horror associated with the land in *Blood Meridian* is naturally echoed with the darkness of the water. In short, it is a planet invested with darkness, imbued with the blankness of violence and death; yet, the actions of the humans that inhabit the planet should not be seen as ahistorical or without cause to examine material reality. Part of this examination of materiality necessitates a look at the conceptions of metaphysics as it relates to history in *Blood Meridian*.

### ***Ideals of Mastery and The Mystery of Ritual***

Here, it must be noted that both the prose style and several thematic elements of *Blood Meridian* are highly echoic of the Bible, in such a way that to discount

religiosity as somehow *outside* the novel would overlook the sacred text's role in shaping *Blood Meridian* itself. In particular, the ritualistic nature of brutality, and the importance of spilled blood, espoused by the judge both in philosophy and action (and described by a narrator in a manner that often recalls the King James Bible) finds much of its roots in the Old Testament. But the meaning of this connection has to be explored.

Much writing on the judge's connection to religiosity or spiritualism posits him as a parodic or antagonistic figure in relation to the moral center at the core of the Judeo-Christian religion. Rick Wallach develops a Derridean reading in "Judge Holden, *Blood Meridian*'s Evil Archon,"<sup>74</sup> wherein the judge is seen as a "massive yet flickering artifice in the margins of reality,"<sup>75</sup> who is the embodiment of the obfuscation of meaning. In that regard, Wallach states that "we should be wary of the judge's pronouncements; the real hostility operates...on the metatextual level"<sup>76</sup>; one should thus see the judge's rhetoric as without any center at all, and any ritual would be meaningless—he would thus be the "evil" archon as Wallach describes, the being that exists to embody the "resistance to closure."<sup>77</sup>

It is that resistance to closure that would make the judge's scientific pronouncements, and his categorical denial of mystery in the world ("Your heart's desire is to be told some mystery. The mystery is that there is no mystery" (252)) that allows the reader to consider that the judge is either, as critic Sara Spurgeon writes, "[the] high priest [of the myth of science],"<sup>78</sup> or as Wallach notes, the evil archon who seeks to deceive without purpose beyond a certain doom. By contrast, Leo Daugherty writes of the judge in the context of Gnosticism, in which one can read

him as an Archon in the more overtly mystical sense: that he is the Anaretic Archon who seeks—and in fact has—dominion over the Earth itself. This reading is perhaps excessively complex (Gnosticism is, very literally, esoteric in nature), but it at least acknowledges a lineage from devotional texts and practices, and casts the judge in a different light than as a deferrer of meaning (as is the case with Wallach) or as Spurgeon’s Enlightenment-ideal man of science, whose role is to represent the particular ideology of scientific progress.

Part of the judge’s role as a rhetorician in *Blood Meridian* is to acknowledge the supremacy of knowledge (“Whatever exists in creation without my knowledge exists without my consent” (198)) and to further the ritual of war (“the sanctity of blood will become excluded from the dance, which is the warrior’s right” (331)). From just these two brief quotes, though, one can see the evocation of “creation” and “sanctity,” which suggests a thematic far removed from rationalism or meaningless deferral; rather, the judge seems to conflate his high-priest status of the myths of science and religion into something unfamiliar. But what is it that the judge achieves, then, on the level of character?

On that note, Wallach notes that the judge and the kid are connected, claiming “infantile imagery pervades this novel in unexpected, unsettling ways” and further states that “many of the judge’s features actually complement those of the kid.”<sup>79</sup> While this is certainly true, it is not insignificant that these creatures of the same flock are given names that are anything but complimentary: while Holden is “the judge,” the kid is just “the kid,” the unnamed child of god or man. One must recall that a “kid” is also a baby goat, a symbol which harkens to Satanism, though this particular

kid will also be the object of sacrifice, depending on one's reading of the novel's conclusion. The most relevant point here is that the notion of sacrifice and the sanctity of blood are alien to science and rationalism but are highly significant in the realm of the Judeo-Christian Bible. The kid, one also must remember, is born during an astronomical event (the Leonids meteor shower): "Night of your birth. Thirty-three. The Leonids they were called. God how the stars did fall. I looked for blackness, holes in the heavens. The Dipper stove" (3). Thirty-three, the age of Christ at his death, the signal stars, and the mysterious "I" in this early passage of *Blood Meridian* suggest a parochialism that may be difficult to interpret. What this passage really suggests is a metaphysical implication best explained through the encounter the kid has with an old man at a cantina, when the old man claims, "Blood...This country is give much blood. This Mexico. This is a thirsty country. The blood of a thousand Christs. Nothing" (102). The combination of a meaningful metaphysics on a *specific* land that is steeped in blood sets the stage for the judge, who will interact with both the land and the ritualistic bloodletting; if one accepts that, calling the judge a villain, or evil, seems less correct than may be intuitive.

In regard to the metaphysics of a specific setting, one has to acknowledge that the contemporary American experience is temporally connected to the past via the still-identifiable landscape that bounds the country. On that note, Critic Bruce Brewton writes that "[*Blood Meridian*] takes us further historically from our time than any of McCarthy's other novels while ironically carrying us closest to the heart of darkness that was the American experience in Vietnam."<sup>80</sup> There seems to be little that is actually ironic about this fact, given how strange it would actually be were the

novel to correspond only to a century-old historical event and not to its author's own time. What seems more ironic is that it was John Emil Sepich, the critic who has done the most to point out the historical "facts" in the novel, that first pointed out *Blood Meridian's* connection to Vietnam. As Brewton writes, "the connection between the band's scalphunting and the military policy of the 'body count' in Vietnam was first made by Sepich, who does so only to propose a comparison in kind of atrocities. Glanton and his men lay claim to nominal success in the reckoning of scalps, but their conflict, as in Vietnam, is endless, the dogs of war not to be appeased with the offering of a few hundred scalps."<sup>81</sup> Brewton's reading relies on Richard Slotkin's account of American film Westerns, as he cites Slotkin's reading of Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* as "mirror[ing] contemporary history in its depiction of a struggle between democracy and tyranny that miscarries and becomes instead an orgy of bloodshed directly suggestive of the carnage in Vietnam."<sup>82</sup> The danger there is in equating *The Wild Bunch* and *Blood Meridian* in the terms specific to filmic westerns; while applying Slotkin's reading is certainly useful, it is not the endgame of analysis, for the glaring fact that *The Wild Bunch* contains archetypal heroes and villains (or, at the very least, characters), while *Blood Meridian* is much more willing to evade this kind of generic analysis because of its extreme lack, or reduction, of "characters."

What is so seductive to Brewton, I think, in aligning *Blood Meridian* with the Slotkinian reading of *The Wild Bunch*, is really an issue surrounding myth, history, and aesthetics—both are works that take place in a mythological "old West," both purport to have some root in recorded history (an "actuality" that is verifiable by

historical sources in some capacity, making the myth rooted in actions that we consider to be “non-fiction”) and both rely on the brutalist aesthetic (though to differing ends). In each case, I would argue that what is really at issue is the representation of the subject in fiction; while *The Wild Bunch* has its subjects acting ostensibly within the bounds of good and evil (even in the famous last shootout with the gattling gun, there is undeniably a move to favor the Americans as “right actors” in their representation by Peckinpah, as developed through their numerous side-plots and back-stories), in *Blood Meridian* there is little sympathy to be elicited, and no truly developed subjects acting upon other subjects so much as shells acting upon shells, a discourse of violence that is flattened to bar our thinking of events as “atrocities.”

To put it simply, *Blood Meridian* toes a meridian line between history, myth, and the aesthetic that elides the traditional heroic monomyth, while *The Wild Bunch* is much more traditional in its construction of heroes at the center of its plot. When speaking of *Blood Meridian*, then, the primary distinction to be made is one of the reader’s *sympathy* versus one his own *speculation*; we may see an extraordinary amount of violence in the book, but we rarely, or perhaps never, are invested in any fictional person on the receiving end of that violence. Take, for example, the contextualization given for Glanton’s murder and scalping of an old woman, which we recall from the earlier discussion of the brutalist aesthetic in Chapter One: “He pointed with his left hand and she turned to follow his hand with her gaze and he put the pistol to her head and fired” (98). After a “vomit of gore” (98) from the woman’s head, Glanton “took the dripping trophy from McGill and turned it in the sun the way

a man might qualify the pelt of an animal” (99). The human-animal distinction here is important, for it sets up how one can essentially read the rest of the novel as another kind of meridian line, one where the flatness of the landscape, people, and animals are conflated in a way that makes interiority and subjectivity obscured and obtuse, if not eliminated altogether. We learn on the novel’s second page that the kid sees, in St. Louis, “all races, all breeds. Men whose speech sounds like the grunting of apes” (4). Further, there is a cameo made by a bear, who kills two of the Glanton gang’s Delaware scouts: “The bear had carried off their kinsman like some fabled storybook beast and the *land had swallowed them up beyond all ransom or reprieve*” (137-8, [italics mine]). There is little distinction to be made between earth, animal, and man, and within this leveling-down of possibilities, the reader’s conception of *Blood Meridian* historical and aesthetic schema must be affected.

Brewton seems to elaborate on the flatness of history when he cites Steven Shaviro’s now-famous “The Very Life of Darkness: A reading of *Blood Meridian*.”<sup>83</sup> He gives attention to Shaviro’s claim that “*Blood Meridian* is.... A euphoric and exhilarating book... Once we have started to dance, once we have been swept up in the game, there is no pulling back.”<sup>84</sup> Shaviro sees the experience of reading, and the complicity with the euphoria of a flattened, agentless violence, as a corollary to the experience of combat in Vietnam. Shaviro’s point, though, seems more to refer to his reading of Georges Bataille’s “*nonproductive expenditure*: prodigality, play, waste, recklessness, empty display and unmotivated violence... [The riders] have nor spirit of seriousness or of enterprise; they unwittingly pursue self-ruin rather than advantage.”<sup>85</sup> Shaviro will finally claim that “*Blood Meridian* performs the violent,

sacrificial, self-consuming ritual upon which our civilization is founded. Or better, it traumatically re-enacts this ritual, for foundations are never set in place once and for all.”<sup>86</sup>

The unwitting pursuit of self-ruin rather than advantage has a precursor, of course, in *Moby-Dick*. Shaviro even claims that “in the entire range of American literature, only *Moby-Dick* bears comparison to *Blood Meridian*. Both novels are epic in scope, cosmically resonant, obsessed with open space and with language, exploring vast uncharted distances with a fanatically patient minuteness.”<sup>87</sup> This is absolutely true, though there has to be a balance struck between the overarching nihilism implied in the “euphoria” of reading the violence in *Blood Meridian* and the meaning behind the “cosmically resonant” elements of the book, and further, I would add, the importance of ritual.

### ***Ritual and Modernity***

I believe that it is only from this point that one can truly consider the implications of modernity that the novel addresses. The last chapter of the novel takes place after an ellipsis of twenty-odd years in 1878. The kid talks to a hunter about how the buffalo are gone, and references “how many hides reached the railhead” (317). There is little doubt that we are to see that times have changed since the 1850s; technology has emerged, and the land is left with nothing but bone: “the plains were sere and burntlooking and the small trees black and misshapen and haunted by ravens and everywhere the ragged packs of jackal wolves and the crazed and sunchalked bones of the vanished herds” (317).

From there, the kid meets up with the judge at a bar, for one last encounter that most probably leads to the kid's murder (though his fate is ultimately unclear). Sara Spurgeon develops a convincing reading of this last section, where she says that the judge is ultimately claiming, "everyone now is a participant in the dance of war, either as hunter or as prey. All in the gang have been baptized into a new myth, have partaken in its ceremonies of cannibalism and rape. Only the kid finally attempts to renounce the dance and to assert a will independent of the judge and his anti-myth."<sup>88</sup> The kid is thus a representative of a bygone era, which, as Spurgeon cites, is the significance of his holding onto a bible that he cannot read. What we are meant to see, then, is the outmoded existence of the kid, his incomprehension of events, giving way to both the mechanized system of the railroad and the overarching, violent, and ritualistic knowledge system represented by the judge.

Aside from the judge's commitment to violence, there is an implicit connection to be made with his role in modernity. I refer to the judge's role as scientist (that is not separate from his role as master of ritual), as a kind of enlightenment-ideal Linnaeus who catalogues all of visible nature into a notebook. Recall, in this context, how "only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth" (198). The judge has an ethos of dominance predicated on knowledge, one that disdains *hidden* truths: "the man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear. Superstition will drag him down. The rain will erode the deeds of his life" (199). What we are supposed to see here is a similarity to modern science, especially in the context of the

judge's ignorant (and soon to be outmoded) colleagues. Knowing this information makes the kid's carrying a bible even more significant, as it represents a significant barrier between himself and the judge on the level of knowledge versus the impossibility of knowledge.

If we return to *Moby-Dick*, we can see that mastery of ritual and mastery of science are not at odds, as these skills are attributed to Ahab time and again. While I have stated that Ahab has his humanities in opposition to the judge, their rhetorical maneuvers are oddly similar. In "The Candles," Ahab famously rallies the whale-hunters of the Pequod, picking up a lightning-struck harpoon and saying, "All your oaths to hunt the White Whale are as binding as mine; and heart, soul, and body, lungs and life, old Ahab is bound. And that ye may know to what tune this heart beats; look ye here; thus I blow out the last fear!" (Melville 383). This action replicates a baptism, or a solidification of the task, to which all of the crew is bound. No such wholesale baptism occurs in *Blood Meridian*, but the judge nonetheless makes his pronouncements over the heavens as does Ahab. "The question was then put as to whether there were on Mars or other planets in the void men or creatures like them and at this the judge...said that there were not and that there were no men anywhere in the universe save those upon the earth. All listened as he spoke, those who had turned to watch him and those who would not" (245). The judge, like Ahab, is thus a kind of totalitarian transfixer, one who garners the attention and faith of those under him.

Nowhere is the comparison between the judge and Ahab more clear, though, than in each character's use of a coin as a signifier for meaning. For Ahab, this is the doubloon, nailed to the mast of the *Pequod*, to which he ascribes the following: "There's something ever egotistical in mountain-tops and towers, and all other grand and lofty things; look here,—three peaks as proud as Lucifer. The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab...this round gold is but the image of the rounder globe, which, like a magician's glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self" (Melville, 332). By contrast, the judge uses a gold coin as a means of deception and mystery, which does not mirror back any mysterious selves, but instead obfuscates meaning entirely: "The judge swung his hand and the coin winked overhead in the firelight. It must have been fastened to some subtle lead, horsehair perhaps, for it circled the fire and returned to the judge and he caught it in his hand and smiled" (245). The narrator's inability to perceive the trick as just-a-trick gives the judge a mystical power that aligns him more with the status of a magus like Shakespeare's Prospero more than Ahab with his "humanities." Thus, the power that each man enacts over his respective group is wielded differently; while Ahab needs to baptize his crew to reach a meaningful goal (meaningful to him, at least), the judge deals in obfuscation and without regard to any teleological goal.

This is the crux of *Blood Meridian* as it relates to *Moby-Dick*; both novels use a similar totalitarian character that presides over the bloody rituals of his crew, yet *Blood Meridian* lacks any kind of easily-understood goal beyond a general ominous tone of total violence. While each book attempts to address a meaningful metaphysics (through Ahab we see a grasping for meaning, as with the doubloon, at

all times; the judge answers metaphysical questions regarding other planets as though to deny unanswerable metaphysical questions), in the end there is only more questions as to where the journey leaves us as readers. For Melville, the lone survival of Ishmael suggests a general failure for the chase to be truly meaningful, while for McCarthy, there is a sense that the riders' journey was part of a history that was impenetrable to the characters at issue, the blank violence of the brutalist aesthetic leading only to a kind of incomprehensibility regarding existence itself.



**Chapter 4: Faulknerian Precursors and the American Pastoral**

**Two Hunters: Faulkner's "The Bear" as a precursor of note**

*Blood Meridian's* construction of history, especially in the bounds of metahistorical romance, should somewhat naturally provoke an examination of the work of William Faulkner. Faulkner often concerns himself with a literature of historical trauma, of a constant referral to a past that is simultaneously inaccessible and profoundly vital (and perhaps even fatal) to his characters. One need only consider Faulkner's Quentin Compson to understand how, in both *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, there is little doubt that it is a *weight* of consequence tied to historical forces that cannot be grasped once a generation has removed itself from overarching historical events. In this, I am referring to Quentin's absolute obsession over the defeat of the South in the Civil War, a thing that will ultimately lead him to his suicide at the bed of the Charles River. Faulkner will revisit the same concern of history and its weight after-the-event in his chapter of *Go Down, Moses*, "The Bear," a story that seems of no small influence to McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. In it, Faulkner shows Ike McCaslin at separate phases in the life of a consummate hunter, a man who has shunned the Southern plantocracy after the Reconstruction to instead model a life after the mixed-blood, part-Native American Sam Fathers. The bear at issue is Old Ben, a mythic beast that is sure to connote a relation to Melville's, though Old Ben will ultimately be slain, signaling the end of an era. *Blood Meridian*, too, features a bear—at the text's conclusion, it is part of a tabernacle show, domesticated and trained to dance. What becomes clear in these parallel stories of hunters and bears is that this "end of an era" will lead to some kind of historical

deferral of interest and consequence, though McCarthy's resultant history sets him apart for reasons that will be explored.

Before looking at the substantive qualities between the historical conceptions in each text, it is worth remarking on the fact that McCarthy's prose has often been characterized as "Faulknerian." Harold Bloom notes that McCarthy's "language, like Melville's and Faulkner's, is deliberately archaic,"<sup>89</sup> a distinction that he says "so contextualizes the sentence that the amazing contrast between its high gestures and the murderous thugs who evoke the splendor is not ironic but tragic."<sup>90</sup> The *New York Times* interview with McCarthy also cites the Faulknerian inheritance of the author, claiming, "McCarthy's style owes much to Faulkner's—in its recondite vocabulary, punctuation, portentous rhetoric, use of dialect and concrete sense of the world—a debt McCarthy doesn't dispute. 'The ugly fact is books are made out of books,' he says. 'The novel depends for its life on the novels that have been written.'"<sup>91</sup> The distinction that McCarthy himself makes—that "books are made out of books"—can be read as either excessively simple or exceedingly complex. While Bloom's comment points toward how McCarthy's prose activates his characters in a certain contextual space, McCarthy may be claiming that his prose derives itself from the same *concerns* as those of Faulkner, too—concerns that have everything to do with a conception of history.

Thus, when one reads Faulkner's tale of the hunter in "The Bear" as compared to McCarthy's, there is more at stake than style. Consider Faulkner's presentation of the hunters, and of the mythic landscape. He writes, "it was of the men...hunters, with the will and hardihood to endure and the humility and skill to survive, and the

dogs and the bear and deer juxtaposed against it, ordered and compelled by and within the wilderness in the ancient and unremitting contest according to the ancient and immitigable rules which voided all regrets and brooked not quarter” (*TB*, 140).<sup>92</sup> This excerpt begins on the first page of “The Bear,” and by no means is to be taken at face value (that is, the hunters are not to be seen as entirely noble by the story’s conclusion). Faulkner’s concern here is to categorize the hunters first and foremost as *men*, which thereby eliminates the possibility of familial production, and sets his hunter characters—Ike McCaslin and Sam Fathers—as men that will never create the kinship that one would find in a domestic space. Thus, the space of civilization and domesticity in the wilderness, the men’s hunting camp, is offset by Sam Father’s decision to base himself elsewhere: “Sam departed. He would not live in the camp; he had built himself a little hut...on the bayou a quarter-mile away, and a stout log crib where he stored a little corn for the shoat he raised each year” (*TB*, 157). Sam’s hut therefore solidifies a boundary between wilderness and civilization in direct contrast to the men who make their living by farming (plantocrats like Major de Spain and Colonel Sartoris); thus, there is a proposition to be made that the story is basically about the inflated value of hunting versus the solidification of family through farming, which thereby defines what is really at stake when Ike grows up only to refuse to live on his familial farm. The story’s conclusion presents a particularly unflattering view of Ike, where he comes upon the burial places of his former dog Lion and his part-Native American mentor Sam Fathers only to find the lowly Boon Hogganbeck poaching squirrels in the midst of a decimated wilderness. The squirrel

is notably a poor substitute for a bear; further, there is little question that nature, in the grand sense, is somehow reduced, or fenced in, at the story's conclusion.

This reduction of nature is symbolized by the infiltration of a train whose use grows more nefarious over time. "It had been harmless then. They would hear the passing log-train sometimes from the camp; sometimes, because nobody bothered to listen for it or not" (*TB*, 237), writes Faulkner, attributing this past memory of harmlessness to the then-twelve-year-old Ike McCaslin. Years later in the life of Ike McCaslin, Faulkner writes,

But it was different now. It was the same train, engine cars and caboose, even the same enginemen brakemen and conductor...yet this time it was as though the train (and not only the train but himself, not only his vision which had seen it and his memory which remembered it but his clothes too, as garments carry back into the clean edgeless blowing of air the lingering effluvium of a sick-room or of death) had brought with it into the doomed wilderness even before the actual axe the shadow and portent of the new mill not even finished yet and the rails and ties which were not even laid. (*TB*, 238)

The death of the outdoors, and of Sam and Ike's way of life, is thus threatened by a portent with a foregone conclusion. These outdoors, and the life of a man as an independent hunter outside of the structure of civilization, are bounded and doomed forever. It is for this reason that the death of Old Ben is hardly the climax of the story; the bear is slain and left as a legend to be forgotten over time. The death of Old Ben simply necessitates that Ike "go back to school Monday" (*TB*, 184) and re-enter the civilization that is progressively inscribing itself into the wilderness.

Where this leaves the reader in relation to *Blood Meridian* is problematical. In *Blood Meridian*, first and foremost, the hunters are men (as in "The Bear"), but paradoxically, so is the prey. The relation of hunting and farming is complicated,

because there is never really an option for refusing the hunt—the kid, lacking the interiority associated with refined knowledge, “can neither read nor write” while “in him broods already a taste for mindless violence,” (3) moving the hunt into the register of dumb combat instead of sport. Ultimately, McCarthy will employ his own bear in a way that makes a grotesque out of Faulkner’s already-suspect mythic beast. When the kid meets the judge in a dancehall for what will become the novel’s conclusion, he sees “a bear in a crinoline twirled strangely upon a board stage defined by a row of tallow candles that dripped and sputtered in their pools of grease” (324). This dancing bear achieves two things: it represents a tamed, domesticated, indoor version of Old Ben, while at the same time, in its dancing, it recalls the judge himself (who is a legendary dancer, among his many other talents).

McCarthy’s placement of dancing, and his treatment of the bear, activates a ritualistic register in his text that moves beyond the wilderness-civilization dynamic presented by Faulkner. While this bear is haphazardly killed, shot through the stomach and the heart, before he “began to totter and to cry like a child and he took a few last steps, dancing, and crashed to the boards” (326), the judge has already assigned it meaning: despite the scene seeming utterly pathetic, he refers to it as “ceremony” and “ritual,” claiming that,

as the dance is the thing with which we are concerned and contains complete within itself its own arrangement and history and finale there is no necessity that the dancers contain these things within themselves as well. In any event the history of all is not the history of each nor indeed the sum of those histories and none here can finally comprehend the reason for his presence for he has no way of knowing even in what the event consists.... (329)

The judge will finally make the distinction that “a ritual includes the letting of blood. Rituals which fail in this requirement are but mock rituals” (329). His concern with the individual subject’s incomprehension of history, wherein one must only be present for the letting of blood as an “arranging” force of history, is particularly provocative in relation to Faulkner. For while the conclusion of “The Bear” suggests that Ike McCaslin does not understand how his relation to the wilderness as a hunter has deprived him of human kinship, McCarthy’s conception of the hunter-wilderness dynamic, at least as exhibited through the judge, is far different: essentially, there is no taming of this beast called man, and he will always be among us.

Yet in *Blood Meridian*, as in the work of Faulkner, there is an undeniable tract of ecological awareness and historical change. McCarthy mirrors Faulkner’s concerns over the dwindling wilderness of Yoknapatawpha County and the pathetic rage that Ike will direct at Boon over his squirrels; this is achieved when he has the kid undergo a narrative ellipsis, landing him in 1878 as a full-grown man. There, we can recall the “ransacked country” where the buffalo were killed, “ever one of them that God ever made is gone as if they’d never been at all” (317). Further, the anomalous epilogue suggests, with its “man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground” which “enkindles the stone in the hole with his steel” (337), that a post-hole digger is striking fire in the ground to fence in the American West. The question that the judge raises when he speaks of ritual in the incomprehension of history as a totality is that these ecological and cultural developments which come from social upheaval are *not* of primary importance, as he sees it—rather, there is something of greater concern that is the motor of history, that

which transcends the individual's own knowledge and exists on another plane. There is no reason to think that this fencing-in is the end of the brutal violence that the judge advocates and practices.

For the judge, the force of history could only be the “taste for mindless violence” (3) embodied by bloody ritual—in short, the all-time devotion to violence in a sanctified form (sanctified by the judge, that is). The brutalist aesthetic of *Blood Meridian* is thus the very means of elaborating the Faulknerian *hunter* into the McCarthian *warrior*. Recall how the judge states, “as war becomes dishonored and its nobility called into question those honorable men who recognize the *sanctity of blood* will become excluded from the dance, which is the warriors right, and thereby will the dance become a false dance and the dancers false dancers” (331, italics mine). One is then to understand that there is no alternative—the debate is not over hunting versus farming, as it is with Faulkner, but with the insatiable, perpetual hunt that will continue to motor throughout historical time.

What McCarthy's epilogue may suggest, then, especially in relation to Faulkner's debate over the inadequacy of McCaslin's choice of solitary hunting, is that history has allowed the West to be enclosed to the inconvenience of the “warriors”—there may no longer be any lawless, open country which, through the Nineteenth Century, had seen so much blood. While Faulkner may have been imagining a society somehow strengthened by kinship through the decline of the hunter/wilderness dynamic, one reading of *Blood Meridian* suggests a society that is, in fact, *post-historical*, incapable of moving beyond its taste for mindless violence but willing to look to a new frontier to enact its ritual. A ritual, whether understood by its

actors or not, according to the judge's logic, reaffirms death as a source of meaning—he states, “What is death if not an agency?” (329). It follows that in McCarthy's historical West, there is an essentially different form of subjectivity, one bounded by the brutalist aesthetic. While Faulkner's writing suggests that subjectivity be shaped by the familial bonds that Ike McCaslin seeks to deny, here we are shown that death is the ultimate endgame, survival being granted only to those willing to commit themselves to a life of brutality and merciless bloodshed.

McCarthy's conception of subjectivity is also inextricably linked to his depiction of the historical landscape, and *Blood Meridian's* connection to Faulkner in its depiction of the land itself should not be understated. Harold Bloom claims that McCarthy's description of the landscape is “indebted...to Darl Bundren's visions of the landscape in *As I Lay Dying*.”<sup>93</sup> Bloom is most likely talking in stylistic terms (it is unclear that he is interested in any other terms otherwise), but the historical resonance of this comparison is fascinating. If we very briefly look to *As I Lay Dying*, we know that Darl “sits at the supper table with his eyes gone further than the food and the lamp, full of the land dug out of his skull and the holes filled with distance beyond the land” (*AILD*, 26-7).<sup>94</sup> What we might notice is that Darl has a problematic relationship to the land that influences his very perception, and we can trace that relationship to his own removal from the world of farming in order to fight in World War I. “The land dug out of his skull,” is signaling to us that Darl has had the very sediment of his home in Frenchman's Bend forever removed from memory as he had once conceived it, in direct contrast to the way that the rest of the living Bundrens are almost permanently locked into, and defined by, their hill farm.

In *Blood Meridian* there is a similar ethos at work, wherein we can read the human relationship to the land in the same way; McCarthy's description of "the neuter austerity of that terrain [where] all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality...[where in] the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships" (247) really amounts to characters whose land has been "dug out of their skulls" as they go into the desert—there is a strangeness of this landscape that evades any kind of pastoral idyll, and makes the rider's seem more like foreign invaders than rustic cowboys. McCarthy writes, "all day they crouched like owls under the niggard acacia shade and peered out upon that cooking world. Dustdevils stood on the horizon like the smoke of distant fires but of living thing there was none" (152), as if to show some kind of horrifying, antagonistic, and mysterious relationship between human and land, which can be seen in the same light as Darl Bundren's traumatized perspective (though in *Blood Meridian*, the traumatic war is still happening in the grandest sense, not bounded by countries or competing armies, and thus it is not a memory as it is for Darl). Thus, the portrayal of the land has a historical element that is always implicitly built in, which in turn shows McCarthy's indebtedness to Faulkner has more depth than style alone. While this reading is at odds with an easily discernable conception of subjectivity as it relates to history, the indebtedness of McCarthy to Faulkner is helpful in understanding the cultural production of a concern over history itself.

***Problematic Relations to the Land: The Pastoral***

If we take McCarthy's modification of Faulkner's concern over the land to its logical conclusion, the main point of divergence is in McCarthy's exposure of the fallibility of a *telos*, where the reader can hardly see any progressive tenets or values being exposed by the progress of the riders, and thus can hardly see the means to a hopeful or progressive future. While Faulkner seems to have shown the value of kinship through Ike McCaslin's refusal of domesticity and his subsequent depressing solitude, McCarthy's text hardly sheds light on any sort of similar value system. With that said, one cannot ignore the fact that McCarthy, moreso than Faulkner, is using a stage that is one of the most heavily-loaded in terms of American *myth*. The landscape of the West is tied up with the formation of American art almost from the beginning of American literature. As Sara L. Spurgeon notes, by way of Annette Kolodny, "the American Pastoral was structured around the yeoman farmer responding to the female landscape [such as Jefferson and Crevecoeur],"<sup>95</sup> while over time, the yeoman myth would give way to a myth of the hunter, who was more romantic and identifiably heroic (one thinks of Daniel Boone first in this regard).<sup>96</sup> Perhaps, then, it is best to approach the novel through the archetype of the Western hero, one which, as Richard Slotkin writes, "stands between the opposed worlds of savagery and civilization, acting sometimes as mediator or interpreter between races...[but] in its most extreme development, takes the form of the 'Indian-hater,' whose suffering at savage hands has made him correspondingly savage, an avenger determined at all costs to 'exterminate the brutes.'"<sup>97</sup> I think it is possible to see a similar ideology at work here, with the notable difference that the "suffering at savage

hands” never really occurs, and the primary motivation for killing is ostensibly money, or more probably, in the words of the judge, because of a pervading notion of perpetual war, “because young men love it and old men love it in them” (249). How this manifests itself on the land must be explored.

As Georg Guillemín notes in his study, *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy*, one way to see the kid’s journey is through the different stages of the classic American idyll. That is, “like a true pastoral protagonist, he passes first through an agrarian landscape—his native Tennessee”<sup>98</sup> and then onto New Orleans, where he “experience[s] the decadence associated in pastoral fiction with city life.”<sup>99</sup> From there, the kid proceeds to Texas where, according to Guillemín, the kid is in “a purgatorial frontier”<sup>100</sup> before he enters the true howling wilderness of the Western desert. By Guillemín’s analysis, one has to consider the land to be within the realm of the fictive, imaginary landscape, the same mythic realm of experience that one finds in Western films. Thus, the historical tension of real places (Nacogdoches, or San Diego) can be discarded.

Guillemín is right in identifying the pastoral progress of the kid, but I think one has to consider that progression in very general terms, and one has to question what role pastoralism is playing here. Guillemín has a well-developed theory that he bases off of *Blood Meridian*’s aforementioned quote on “optical democracy,” which boils down to a reading of the novel that presents its reader with a “post-humanist, ‘optically democratic’ representation of wilderness...imagin[ing] nature in its sheer materiality, beyond anthropocentric terms.”<sup>101</sup> The desert is an utterly totalizing force that reflects the novel’s own “indifference toward individual biography and human

sensibility.”<sup>102</sup> Guillemin concludes that “the absolute indifference of the natural environment and the absolute license of the social environment combine,”<sup>103</sup> and this combination, Guillemin says, one can understand that the book is something like *Moby-Dick*, in that it “negotiates the meaning of human history...within a meaningful nature.”<sup>104</sup> That is, one is to understand that the only link between humanity and the overwhelming presence of nature is the certainty of death, and within that understanding, one can grasp the futility of human history in general.

The end result, as Guillemin describes it, is a novel that shows “an invitation to balance [human] pastoral melancholia (over the fact that everything is equally worthless) with [natural] ecopastoral elation (over the fact that everything has equal value).”<sup>105</sup> Guillemin’s analysis claims, as I have argued, that the idea of history itself is a dubious one as presented by the novel. But I believe that Guillemin’s analysis of the role of land leaves some more room for elaboration. If one accepts that the novel has certain elements that defy the notion of anthropocentrism (the most obvious, I would say, being the lack of any real protagonist with any motives worthy of historical consideration), there is still a way to understand the role of land as something other than pure indifference.

The primary concern with Guillemin’s reading of the novel is that it actually succumbs to exactly what Sepich is so concerned about with the de-historicizing of *Blood Meridian*. One has to be careful in considering the novel as about “human history in general” versus the more persuasive idea that the novel is *about a localized history of the United States*. To clarify, *Blood Meridian* may use a mythic stage to show the fallibility of recorded history, as Guillemin suggests; but to add to his

concern, I would say that the novel has to be read as a commentary about the trajectory of human progress and historical change, both in its fictive diagetical time of the 1840s-50s and in the time contemporaneous with McCarthy.

What this ultimately means is that we have to see the problematic relations between the humans and the land as part of a schema that has an implicit relationship to our real, contemporary world. For example, critic Jay Ellis takes as his thesis that the novel can be seen as a purveyor of specific notions of space versus place.<sup>106</sup> Ellis points out that we should read the novel as one of transformation, where the move “from space to place occurs in a movement parallel to a collapse of philosophy into history.”<sup>107</sup> By that, we are to synthesize greater moral concepts like the role of violence in mankind in general (coming from the freedom of the country as space), with the role of history at large (the country becoming a Nation, a bounded place that still exists today). Ellis’ point is summarized when he claims, “the judge may go on dancing, but the rest of us are left to clean up the mess, mourn the dead, and tend fences.”<sup>108</sup>

Thus, for Ellis, the idea of an “open” country is one that must be explored. Ellis makes an important note that the hovering around the Mexico-U.S. border by the Glanton gang reveals “a serious lack of historical knowledge on the part of those gringos.”<sup>109</sup> Thus, just because history (here referring to the end of the Mexican-American War) has no effect on the characters themselves, then one has to be careful not to take their view, and see the West only as a mythic “other” landscape. Ellis’ main point, I think, is to develop the idea that the “country” actually runs out by the end of the novel, circumscribed by boundaries and finally, by the law (as when the

kid finds himself in prison, and when other members of the Glanton gang are hanged). Thus, the tension of human a-historical action (represented by the freedom of the gang, and their freedom from the law) is ultimately roped in by historical forces, meaning there has to be some kind of reconciliation of the two. This contrasts with well-known McCarthy scholar Steven Shaviro's thought that "it is impossible to transgress when there is no Law to violate, and when there is no final accumulation of goods or knowledge to be gathered together and no ultimate boundary to be attained. We cannot deplete the world, we cannot reach the sunset."<sup>110</sup> If Ellis is to be believed, we most certainly will reach a fence, eventually.

The question as to the role that the land actively plays, especially as it pertains to character action, is left relatively unexplored in these critical analyses. Guillemin's analysis of "optical democracy" really only suggests that man and nature have some sort of connection, *not* that they are to be thought of in the same terms. If we look to McCarthy's text, there are several instances where the land may not be a passive stage for action nor a simple "place" for country, so much as it is some kind of active, hellish space. For example, recall that the Glanton gang's Delaware scouts look to a "wild and stony country to the north" where a "bear had carried off their kinsman like some fabled storybook beast and *the land had swallowed them up* beyond all ransom or reprieve" (137, italics mine). It is actually the land itself and its animals that have some kind of agency, "swallowing" humans as it is presented in McCarthy's language. While this should naturally conjure a memory of Faulkner's Old Ben, this bear has no mythic status, no applied subjectivity, and no mythos surrounding it—it is simply a fact, among others.

Furthermore, when Glanton gang member and ex-priest Tobin tells his story of fighting Indians with the judge, he connects a picture of hell to the land itself: “Where for aught any man knows lies the locality of hell. For the earth is a globe in the void and truth there’s no up nor down to it and there’s men in this company besides myself seen little cloven hoofprints in the stone clever as a little doe in her going but what little doe ever trod melted rock?” (130). Thus, far from Guillemin’s view of “optical democracy,” I think we are supposed to see that to these characters, the land has qualities that are anything but democratic or passive. McCarthy brings back similar imagery when he writes

Under the hooves of the horses the alabaster sand shaped itself in whorls strangely symmetric like iron filings in a field and these shapes flared and drew back again, resonating upon that harmonic ground and then turning to swirl away over the playa. As if the very sediment of things contained yet some residue of sentience. As if in the transit of those riders were a thing so profoundly terrible as to register even to the uttermost granulation of reality (247).

The idea that “the very sediment of things” is attributed with “sentience” suggests not only that the riders have an effect on the land, but also that the land somehow responds (or is aware). McCarthy also refers to the land as a “terra damnata” (61) as if we are always to be aware that the riders are in some form of hell, an active landscape that is acting for a mysterious, unknowable (if not greater) purpose. The “optical democracy” is only democratic because the land mirrors and reciprocates the violence of humanity; if we were shown morally “good” characters, the landscape would inevitably exist within a binary, and called hostile, if not “evil.”

Critic Barclay Owens sees this view of the land as a form of anti-pastoralism, where “man reflects the violent character of a brutal environment. For all of man’s

improvements and curious wanderlust, he is still apish, ready to kill upon the least provocation.”<sup>111</sup> For all its simplicity, this analysis seems completely true given what we see in the text itself. But it leaves all sorts of unanswered questions, namely, what is the meaning of the violence on a violent land outside of the judge’s own philosophy, and on what moral footing, if any, does McCarthy rest his depictions of man and nature? Furthermore, what does this issue of morality tell us about the historical issues that the novel proposes?

### ***Morality and Nature***

Owens goes on to present a thesis in which he claims that McCarthy “draws on contemporary images of violence from the news media and popular films” and “is indeed part of the continuing reassessment of violence in American culture.”<sup>112</sup> By that analysis we are to understand that the violence in *Blood Meridian*, while shocking, should be completely believable to a modern reader. Thus, Owens’ analysis, like many others’, contrasts with Sepich’s claim that we need to know the history from whence the novel may have come—perhaps because the “history” is more closely related to a history of which we are a part. I believe Owens’ analysis is correct in this regard, and would place McCarthy within the bounds of Richard Slotkin’s analyses of post-Vietnam film Westerns. By way of example, Slotkin sees Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch* as a film that visually plays out familiar atrocities from the Vietnam War, “making manifest and graphic the hidden evil [and] making us aware of the errors into which our myths have led us.”<sup>113</sup> If McCarthy (writing in the early 1980s, and a contemporary of Slotkin) is involved in a similar project, his

verbal descriptions of violence do, I think, act in the same manner. McCarthy describes the Glanton gang riding into a camp of Gileños, complete with women and children, with the expressed idea to “kill ever nigger here” (155). McCarthy goes on to write, “within that first minute the slaughter had become general” (155) and describes, in gruesome detail, the murder of men, women, and (perhaps most grotesquely), infants. What both Owens, and Slotkin before him, point toward is an idea that this kind of violence is wholly understandable to the reader without any knowledge that it may have been historically true. Thus, the book reflects a history that we, as readers, both know and are actively involved in.

But where McCarthy differs from Peckinpah in this context (outside of the previously discussed issues of psychological interiority and the bounds of good and evil) is in his conception of a landscape that is neither passive nor a blank slate. The country is hard, to say the least. It is through this lens that the issue of history, and perhaps even more importantly, modernity finally come into focus. Sara L. Spurgeon takes on a different aspect of the Slotkinian reading of McCarthy’s novel, claiming that the book uses a traditional western framework of the “eucharist” character, the one who “Slotkin says, is itself a sublimation of the myth of the sacred marriage that enacts a sexual union between the hunter and the body of nature.”<sup>114</sup> The judge, she says, “both exalts the natural world and strives to contain and destroy it, to usurp its power for his own ends.”<sup>115</sup> The end result, for Spurgeon, is that the judge “will turn the old myth on its head, pervert it and cannibalize it.”<sup>116</sup> In this, Spurgeon seems exactly right, as the actual foundations of the Western myth seem to be being shaken, and shown to be of a somehow dubious nature, relating back to both a morally

dubious character in the judge and a deeply unfriendly landscape. If we see the judge as a replacement for Daniel Boone, then the ramifications of the changing myth seem readily apparent, and terrifying—the new myth would reflect a culture sufficient to reflect it, which would be a violent one indeed. Here, we can remember the rise of SunnO))) and *Blood Meridian* in the last few years as a brutalist aesthetic marker of that very culture.

With these reflections of myth in mind, Sara Spurgeon argues in another essay, “The Sacred Hunter and the Eucharist of the Wilderness,”<sup>117</sup> that what is really at stake is not the exploration of the flatness of history (or the history of violence) but the *primacy* of myth in the human world. She claims that it is not that “there is no meaning or symbolism in the world of *Blood Meridian*” but rather that we are being told a story where “we already know the outcome.”<sup>118</sup> For Spurgeon, what the reader should be taking from *Blood Meridian* is a story where the myth of religion is contrasted with the “myth of science, with the judge as its sacred high priest” which is again contrasted with the “earlier myth of nature served by the sacred hunter.”<sup>119</sup> Most pointedly, Spurgeon successfully argues that if one understands that McCarthy has set up mythic constructs against one another, the reader can then understand that “for all its echoes of universality and timelessness, in *Blood Meridian* McCarthy is interested in the *specific* ways in which the ancient myths of the sacred hunter and the eucharist of the wilderness have been played out upon the *particular* landscape and within the *particular historical context of the southwestern borderlands*” [italics mine].<sup>120</sup>

This new telling of the sacred hunter/eucharist revolves around the judge's conception of the relationship between man and nature, which Spurgeon argues has shifted to become a narrative about the relationship between "man and man in the form of sacred war"<sup>121</sup> (this would be because the hunter and prey are now both human). Taking another cue from Richard Slotkin, Spurgeon will claim that

Regeneration depends on ritual, but, as the judge explains, 'A ritual includes the letting of blood. Rituals that fail in this requirement are but mock rituals' (329). The myth of science, therefore, is not enough. It must be enacted through the more ancient ritual of war. Because all generations following this one have been euchred of the patrimony of nature, invalidating the blood of bears or deer as sources of regeneration, the prey must now become humanity itself. The new version of the myth demands human blood, for now no other will suffice, and therefore the holiest of all acts is war.<sup>122</sup>

Thus, there is, in the characterization of the judge, an epistemic shift away from a foundational myth specific to the U.S. (that of Daniel Boone, or the Leatherstocking Tales, etc.) to a more nightmarish, hero-less myth that accounts for McCarthy's contemporary's society's devotion to total war. It is inevitable that this analysis conjure the image of the Texan cowboy president, perpetually engaged in a "war on terror" that, in fact, is better served by its endlessness than by the promise of a progressive future. In fact, the conception of the end of the "war on terror" has never been offered as a possibility by the George W. Bush administration; perhaps the judge's new myth explains why.

Spurgeon calls this the "bloody tie binding the West's mythic past to its troubled present, here in this mythic dance is the violent birth of a national symbolic that has made heroes out of scalphunters and Indian killers and constructed the near extinction of the buffalo and massive deforestation as symbols of triumph and

mastery, the proud heritage of the modern American citizen.”<sup>123</sup> That reading solidifies *Blood Meridian* as a revisionist Western. But this claim is not without its problems. Namely, there is little in the text to support a reading that the judge’s claims are false in some way, beyond the reader’s possible horror at his acts or his appearance. There is little to suggest that the novel exists within the bounds of good and evil that are so often prevalent in myths; really, the book seems to suggest that this world was beyond good and evil before Nietzsche would coin the phrase and make it fashionable.

### *Conclusions*

As I have hinted in the previous chapter, both the actions and aesthetic of the cowboy presidency of George W. Bush point toward a similar mythos that McCarthy plumbs when conceiving his warriors—his purveyors of the brutalist aesthetic—via the judge. This elaboration of the warrior, the one who has “offered up himself entire to the blood of war” (331), resonates as a signal for the ultimate in posthistorical *telos*, the endgame of total war. Obviously, the notion of perpetual combat is not an innovation of the Bush presidency by any means, but the “war on terror,” as a boundless battle with no end ever envisioned, has special resonance to any reader invested in discovering what McCarthy is describing in his judge’s philosophy. Yet the primary difference between the current administration’s “warriors” and those of McCarthy is that of a rhetoric of good versus evil; while McCarthy’s text makes no such distinction, Bush makes the distinction repeatedly. The president, giving a speech at the National Endowment for Democracy in October 2005, claimed:

Recently, our country observed the fourth anniversary of a great evil and looked back on a great turning point in our history... Yet the evil of that morning has reappeared on other days in other places... And while the killers choose their victims indiscriminately, their attacks serve a clear and focused ideology, a set of beliefs and goals that are evil but not insane. Evil men obsessed with ambition and unburdened by conscience must be taken very seriously, and we must stop them before their crimes can multiply.<sup>124</sup>

The “evil but not insane” distinction is particularly fascinating. From McCarthy, we have learned, via the judge, that war “endures because young men love it and old men love it in them. Those that fought, those that did not” (249). An argument can be made that Mr. Bush has been able to proselytize his constituents with more weight

given to the love of war than that of the hatred of evil; the characterization of “evil but not insane” is purely a sanctifying device to enact war and keep it going, simply redefining the judge’s worldview to fit inside easily digestible rhetoric.

It is for this reason that *Blood Meridian* is helpful for understanding the current zeitgeist: McCarthy is ultimately suggesting, with his distinctions regarding war through the eyes of the judge, that a rational policy analysis (one that relies on material data and confirmed intelligence) will be impotent in trying to prevent a war. Simply put, the foundation of America, as McCarthy characterizes it in *Blood Meridian*, is built to sustain combat, but in different disguises. A world beyond good and evil, as is McCarthy’s West, and perhaps the current United States, can still be taken hostage by the rhetoric of simple binary distinction. The brutalist aesthetic strikes through the mask in that regard, to show the violent foundation of our cultural mythos that perpetuates itself through its new and horrifying mythic hero, the judge.

It should be no surprise, then, that other cultural productions, like that of SunnO))), have risen to elucidate that similar aesthetic of brutality and purified form in the midst of this world of perpetual combat. Particularly interesting is the rise of Cormac McCarthy as the author of public eminence in the past two years alone: in 2007 he received a Pulitzer Prize for his post-apocalyptic novel *The Road*; the same year saw the Coen brothers make a Best Picture Oscar winner out of his 2005 novel *No Country For Old Men*; 2008 will mark the completion of the film adaptation of *The Road*, and there is a scheduled release of Ridley Scott’s adaptation of *Blood Meridian* for 2009. McCarthy criticism is sure to increase significantly in this period, marking a specific cultural moment where his work, and *Blood Meridian* in

particular, can finally be given an appropriate critical context that eluded the novel's release in 1985.

Whether or not the public will understand what is at stake with the brutalist aesthetic and the subsequent theory of history in *Blood Meridian*, particularly in regard to this nation's attachment to warlike ritual and bloodshed, will have to be seen. More pressingly, the awareness to our long adherence to the brutalist aesthetic in terms of public policy begs us all to question whether a devotion to unending war is really in the nature of mankind or just a symptom of a specific zeitgeist. If this symptom were ever to be properly diagnosed, the importance of *Blood Meridian* in forming a concern over this brutality-and-history could not be understated. If addressing this problem is a generational task, then the rise of the brutalist aesthetic in cultural productions, like the work of SunnO))), and the increasing interest in *Blood Meridian* as a current novel of eminence, should act as a signal of *awareness*, one that is anything but pessimistic.

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- <sup>1</sup> Harold Bloom. Introduction to: Cormac McCarthy. *Blood Meridian, Or the Evening Redness in the West*. New York: Modern Library Edition. 2001. v. (Reprinted from Harold Bloom. *How to Read and Why*. New York: Scribner. 2001.)
- <sup>2</sup> Jon Caramanica. "Heavy Metal Gets an M.F.A." *New York Times*. September 18, 2005. Stable URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/18/arts/music/18cara.html>
- <sup>3</sup> Jan Tumlir. "Primal Dirge." *Artforum*. April 2006. Stable URL: <http://artforum.com/inprint/id=10627>
- <sup>4</sup> John Wray. "Heady Metal." *New York Times Sunday Magazine*. May 28, 2006. Stable URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/28/magazine/28artmetal.html?pagewanted=all>
- <sup>5</sup> Brent Burton. "High Pain Drifters." *Washington City Paper*. February 6, 2007. Stable URL: <http://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/display.php?id=380>
- <sup>6</sup> Burton, "High Pain Drifters."
- <sup>7</sup> John Wray. "Heady Metal."
- <sup>8</sup> For more on the strange case of Black Metal, refer to Moynihan & Söderlind's excellent *Lords of Chaos: the Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground*. Los Angeles: Feral House. 1998.
- <sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida. *Specters of Marx: the state of the debt, the work of mourning, and the new international*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York, London: Routledge. 1994.
- <sup>10</sup> Ernesto Laclau. "The Time is Out of Joint." *Diacritics*, Vol. 25, No. 2. Summer, 1995. 85-96. Stable URL: <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0300-7162%28199522%2925%3A2%3C85%3A%22TIOOJ%3E2.0.CO%3B2-B>
- <sup>11</sup> k-punk has become the source of note for explorations on hauntology in its various forms. For more information on k-punk or its moderator, Mark Fischer, refer to <http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org>.
- <sup>12</sup> Alex Williams. *K-Punk*. Stable URL: <http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/009081.html>
- <sup>13</sup> Wray, "Heady Metal."
- <sup>14</sup> Matthew Jones. *K-punk*. Stable URL: <http://kpunk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/009089.html>

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<sup>15</sup> Parenthetical citations refer to Cormac McCarthy. *Blood Meridian Or the Evening Redness in the West*. New York: Vintage International. 1985.

<sup>16</sup> Mike Thomas. "Brutality, thy name is 'Rambo'; Ultimate warrior goes on a shockingly gory killing spree" *Chicago Sun-Times*. January 25, 2008. 39.

<sup>17</sup> Richard B. Woodward. "Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction." *New York Times*. April 19, 1992. [http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/05/17/specials/mccarthy-venom.html?\\_r=1&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/05/17/specials/mccarthy-venom.html?_r=1&oref=slogin)

\**All the Pretty Horses* would grant McCarthy mainstream success, selling 190,000 copies in hardcover within 6 months (source:

<http://www.cormacmccarthy.com/Biography.htm>)

<sup>18</sup> Woodward, "Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction."

<sup>19</sup> Caryn James. "Is Everybody Dead Around Here?" *New York Times Book Review*. April 28, 1985. Stable URL:

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9805E7DB1F38F93BA15757C0A963948260&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=1>

<sup>20</sup> James, "Is Everybody Dead Around Here?"

<sup>21</sup> Bloom, v.

<sup>22</sup> Bloom, v.

<sup>23</sup> Elaine Scarry. *The Body in Pain: the Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1985. 27.

<sup>24</sup> Frederic Jameson. *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press. 1991. 18.

<sup>25</sup> Herman Melville. *Moby-Dick, Second Norton Critical Edition*. Ed. Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. 2002. 140.

<sup>26</sup> Jameson, 23

<sup>27</sup> Jameson, 25

<sup>28</sup> Jameson, 26-27

<sup>29</sup> John Emil Sepich, " 'What Kind of Indians Was Them?' : Some Historical Sources in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*" In *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*. Ed. Arnold and Luce. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. 1993. 121-141.

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<sup>30</sup> For a further discussion of the vicissitudes of Sepich's sources, refer to Chapter 3 of this thesis.

<sup>31</sup> Sepich, 135

<sup>32</sup> Please see Richard Slotkin's *Gunfighter Nation*. New York: Atheneum. 1992.

<sup>33</sup> Roger D. Hodge. "Blood and Time: Cormac McCarthy and the Twilight of the West." *Harper's Magazine*. February 2006. Stable URL:  
<http://www.harpers.org/archive/2006/02/0080935>

<sup>34</sup> Woodward, "Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction."

<sup>35</sup> Jameson 25

<sup>36</sup> Woodward, "Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction." \*It also must be said that McCarthy's interview came about in circumstances that should lead a careful reader to be aware of his possible performativity, or cultivation of a specific persona. Whether or not McCarthy is being provocative, we must take his words to have some meaning, or performative value at the very least.

<sup>37</sup> Amy Elias. *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 2001. 4.

<sup>38</sup> Elias, 22

<sup>39</sup> Elias, 22-23

<sup>40</sup> Elias, 25

<sup>41</sup> Elias, 27

<sup>42</sup> Elias, 27

<sup>43</sup> Elias, 45

<sup>44</sup> Elias, 60-61

<sup>45</sup> Elias, 95

<sup>46</sup> Elias, 95

<sup>47</sup> Elias, 97

<sup>48</sup> This reading is a topic of contestation among many scholars; see Harold Bloom's reading in his introduction to the Modern Library edition of *BLOOD MERIDIAN* for an alternative reading.

<sup>49</sup> Elias, 97

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<sup>50</sup> Woodward, “Cormac McCarthy’s Venomous Fiction.”

<sup>51</sup> Refer to “Indian Hating in *The Confidence Man*.” Headnote by Hershel Parker. In Herman Melville. *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade, Norton Critical Edition*. Ed. Hershel Parker and Mark Niemeyer. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. 2006. 453.

<sup>52</sup> Parenthetical citations refer to Herman Melville. *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade, Norton Critical Edition*. Ed. Hershel Parker and Mark Niemeyer. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. 2006.

<sup>53</sup> Hershel Parker. “The Politics of Allegorizing Indian Hating.” In Herman Melville. *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade, Norton Critical Edition*. Ed. Hershel Parker and Mark Niemeyer. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. 2006. 469.

<sup>54</sup> Sepich, 122

<sup>55</sup> Sepich, 122

<sup>56</sup> Sepich, 125 (quotes Chamberlain)

<sup>57</sup> Sepich, 126 (quotes Chamberlain)

<sup>58</sup> Sepich, 128 (quotes Chamberlain)

<sup>59</sup> Sepich, 135

<sup>60</sup> Sepich, 135

<sup>61</sup> Sepich, 121

<sup>62</sup> Dana Phillips. “History and the Ugly Facts of *Blood Meridian*.” In *Cormac McCarthy: New Directions*. Ed. James D. Lilley. Albuquerque: University of Mexico Press. 2002. 17-46.

<sup>63</sup> Phillips, 23

<sup>64</sup> Phillips, 24

<sup>65</sup> Phillips, 24

<sup>66</sup> Phillips, 25

<sup>67</sup> Phillips, 28

<sup>68</sup> Phillips, 26

<sup>69</sup> Phillips, 39

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<sup>70</sup> Phillips, 39

<sup>71</sup> F.O. Matthiessen. *The Fate of the Ungodly God-Like Man. Ahab*. New York: Chelsea House. Ed. Harold Bloom. 1991. 71.

<sup>72</sup> Parenthetical citations refer to Herman Melville. *Moby-Dick, Second Norton Critical Edition*. Ed. Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. 2002.

<sup>73</sup> Matthiessen, 71

<sup>74</sup> Rick Wallach. "Judge Holden, *Blood Meridian's* Evil Archon." In *Sacred Violence, Volume 2: Cormac McCarthy's Western Novels*. Ed. Wade Hall and Rick Wallach. 2002. 1-13.

<sup>75</sup> Wallach, 11

<sup>76</sup> Wallach, 10

<sup>77</sup> Wallach, 11

<sup>78</sup> Sara L. Spurgeon. "The Sacred Hunter and the Eucharist of the Wilderness." In *Cormac McCarthy: New Directions*. Ed. James D. Lilley. Albuquerque: University of Mexico Press. 2002. 82.

<sup>79</sup> Wallach, 2

<sup>80</sup> Bruce Brewton. "The Changing Landscape of Violence in Cormac McCarthy's Early Novels and the Border Trilogy." *The Southern Literary Journal*. 37.1. 2004. Accessed via Project MUSE, Stable URL:

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<sup>81</sup> Brewton, 130

<sup>82</sup> Brewton, 123-4

<sup>83</sup> Steven Shaviro. "'The Very Life of Darkness': A Reading of *Blood Meridian*." *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*. Ed. Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce. Jackson: UP of Mississippi. 1993. 143-156.

<sup>84</sup> Shaviro, 154

<sup>85</sup> Shaviro, 154

<sup>86</sup> Shaviro, 155

<sup>87</sup> Shaviro, 144

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- <sup>88</sup> Sara L. Spurgeon. *Exploding the Western: Myths of Empire on the Postmodern Frontier*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press. 2005. 36.
- <sup>89</sup> Bloom, xi
- <sup>90</sup> Bloom, xi
- <sup>91</sup> Woodward, "Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction."
- <sup>92</sup> Parenthetical citations refer to William Faulkner. "The Bear." In *Go Down Moses*. From Library of America's *Faulkner, Novels 1942-1954*. New York: Library Classics of the United States, Inc. 1994.
- <sup>93</sup> Peter Josyph. "Tragic Ecstasy: A Conversation About McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*." In *Sacred Violence, Volume 2: Cormac McCarthy's Western Novels*. Ed. Wade Hall and Rick Wallach. 2002. 211.
- <sup>94</sup> William Faulkner. *As I Lay Dying*. New York: Vintage International. 1990. 26-27.
- <sup>95</sup> Spurgeon, *Exploding the Western*, 21
- <sup>96</sup> Spurgeon, *Exploding the Western*, 21
- <sup>97</sup> Richard Slotkin. *Gunfighter Nation*. (New York: Atheneum, 1992). 16.
- <sup>98</sup> Georg Guillemín. *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press. 2004. 74.
- <sup>99</sup> Guillemín, 75
- <sup>100</sup> Guillemín, 75
- <sup>101</sup> Guillemín, 81
- <sup>102</sup> Guillemín, 83
- <sup>103</sup> Guillemín, 100
- <sup>104</sup> Guillemín, 100
- <sup>105</sup> Guillemín, 101
- <sup>106</sup> Jay Ellis. *No Place for Home: Spatial Constraint and Character Flight in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy*. New York; London: Routledge. 2006.
- <sup>107</sup> Ellis, 170
- <sup>108</sup> Ellis, 171
- <sup>109</sup> Ellis, 181

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- <sup>110</sup> Shaviro, 147
- <sup>111</sup> Barclay Owens. *Cormac McCarthy's Western Novels*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press. 2000. 7.
- <sup>112</sup> Owens, 10
- <sup>113</sup> Slotkin 613
- <sup>114</sup> Spurgeon, *Exploding the Western*, 21
- <sup>115</sup> Spurgeon, *Exploding the Western*, 23
- <sup>116</sup> Spurgeon, *Exploding the Western*, 27
- <sup>117</sup> Spurgeon. "The Sacred Hunter and the Eucharist of the Wilderness." 75-101
- <sup>118</sup> Spurgeon "The Sacred Hunter and the Eucharist of the Wilderness." 81
- <sup>119</sup> Spurgeon "The Sacred Hunter and the Eucharist of the Wilderness." 82
- <sup>120</sup> Spurgeon "The Sacred Hunter and the Eucharist of the Wilderness." 84
- <sup>121</sup> Spurgeon "The Sacred Hunter and the Eucharist of the Wilderness." 93
- <sup>122</sup><sup>122</sup> Spurgeon "The Sacred Hunter and the Eucharist of the Wilderness." 93
- <sup>123</sup> Spurgeon "The Sacred Hunter and the Eucharist of the Wilderness." 98
- <sup>124</sup> Source: White House speech database, Speech Delivered Oct. 6, 2005. Stable URL: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/10/20051006-3.html>

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