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Another Kind of Clay: A Reading of Blood Meridian

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Presented to:
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Professor Robert Miller
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Another Kind of Clay: A Reading of Blood Meridian

And God said, "Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be for lights in the firmament of the heavens to give light upon the earth.
Genesis 1:14-15

And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground,
and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.
Genesis 2:7

The desert country of the southwestern United States has little similarity to the landscape described in the creation story as we read it in Genesis – it is undoubtedly even harsher than the land to the east of Eden to which Adam and Eve are driven by God. The plains between the sharp, volcanic mountains are almost unnaturally flat. The plant life that exists is sparse, spiny and tough. Its animal life has adapted to survival in a place of shortages and extremity. And yet it is the perfect setting for Cormac McCarthy's Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West (1985), a novel which raises questions about human will, the relationship between humans and the natural world, and God's involvement in human society. Set in the American West of the middle 19th century, the novel traces a gang of American scalphunters as they cross the borderlands of the Southwest in 1849, killing and scalping Indians for profit. Nominally led by John Joel Glanton, the gang is psychologically under the influence of Judge Holden, a larger than life and arguably satanic character who seems to be working on the men's souls. The novel is based on historical

events and personalities engaged in bounty hunting for scalps under contracts arranged by Governor Trias of the Mexican state of Chihuahua.[1]

McCarthy introduces us to the gang as his character, known only as "the kid," joins the group as a last resort, seeking primarily a saddle and a meal. The novel follows the men as they cross the Rio Grande into the deserts of northern Mexico and wander generally west until they recross the river and travel to Tucson and, ultimately, to San Diego. Apparently naïve and indifferent, the kid observes and participates in the atrocities of the gang. He becomes acquainted with Tobin, described as an "ex-priest" who acts as a foil to the judge's philosophy of nihilism. Throughout the novel, the kid's soul seems to be balanced between orbiting around the satanic judge and spinning away on his own--balanced between destiny and agency, and balanced between earth and sky. This testing of the kid is introduced on the second page of the novel as 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)

The kid is alone and is entering, after crossing the Mississippi into Texas, the landscape that will test (try) him. This trial will determine whether the kid is able to exercise his will over "the stuff of creation", or whether his heart is "just" another kind of clay. The question reminds us of the injunction presented to Adam in Genesis to subdue the earth and have dominion over every living thing. When man became "a living soul", formed of the dust of the ground, was he anything other than one of God's creatures, anything other than animate

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[1] The violent journeys of the Glanton gang have been well documented, and the historical basis for the novel established, most notably, by John Sepich in Notes on Blood Meridian.

clay and dust? Furthermore, what is the human role in the larger ecological scheme? Is it to shape the stuff of creation to human will? The testing of the kid becomes a test for the reader of Blood Meridian, as well, who must confront the nature of the human heart. Throughout the novel, McCarthy presents us with evidence that might lead us to agree with the advice of the old man who shelters the kid early in the narrative: "Best not to look in there. It aint the heart of a creature that is bound in the way that God has set for it" (19). In spite of the violent chaos that we witness within the dramatic physical landscape of the novel, however, overhead there is always the enormous sheltering sky, and it is the tension between the landscape and the skyscape that provides the focus for my reading of this complex novel. In many ways, the land and sky become the protagonists of Blood Meridian, ubiquitous and powerfully present.

It is often noted that the strength of McCarthy's writing lies, to a great extent, in his rhetoric, especially his diction and style. It has been described as biblical and lyrical, even when the subjects of his passages are shockingly violent. (Schopen, Shaviro, et al.) The biblical quality of his language shows up in certain archaic usages, for example:

> The night sky lies so sprent with stars that there is scarcely space of black at all and they fall all night in bitter arcs and it is so that their numbers are no less. (15)

or

> The dust the party raised was quickly dispersed and lost in the immensity of that landscape and there was no dust other for the pale sutler who pursued them drives unseen and his lean horse and his lean cart leave no track upon such ground or any ground. (44)

This language gives the reader a sense of seriousness and gravity. It is particularly effective as a way of presenting the content (occasionally consisting of spectacular, even breathtaking violence) in a way that the reader considers it carefully. Communicating the message in this

Old Testament diction (e.g. "it is so that their numbers are no less" and "there was no dust other") also suggests that the content has an ancient, almost religious or mythical significance.

In addition to these archaic usages, McCarthy includes references that come directly out of the Bible, for example, "His folk are known for hewers of wood and drawers of water" (3), a reference to the kid's social class that comes from Joshua 9:21. Other critics have noted a kind of flat neutrality, a strictly mimetic style in the prose which creates an objective, non-judgmental attitude toward the evils which are being described (Donoghue, 409). McCarthy seems to avoid distinguishing between what we might typically find horrifying and what we would consider simple description, leaving it to the reader to sort out the status of the things described.

It is McCarthy's very thoughtful and detailed description of landscapes, however, that interests me for the purpose of this paper. His emphasis on the terrain within which his novels take place is unusually powerful, especially when compared to other contemporary American writers who take the west as the environment for their work. As I reviewed my favorite literature of the west, I sensed a real difference in both the quantity and quality of the representations of the land. I looked again at Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony, Larry McMurtry's Lonesome Dove, Richard Ford's collection of stories Rock Springs, and James Welch's Winter in the Blood and Fool's Crow. These books all treat important issues of western life and history – the politics, the sociology, the economics, and the relations between native people and immigrants. But while I noted that the landscape is present in all the works, it is more of a framework or a backdrop, and less central than it is in Blood Meridian. Nonfiction writers Gretel Ehrlich (The Solace of Open Spaces) and Edward

Abbey (Desert Solitaire) are writing about the land itself and provide helpful material to anyone interested in the western landscape, even one who is studying the representation of landscape in fiction. Ehrlich, for example, notes that "To live and work in this kind of open country, with its hundred mile views, is to lose the distinction between background and foreground" (2), an observation that the reader of Blood Meridian would understand. But neither of these writers takes on the task of creating a work of literature within the western landscape as a novelist does. Among the writers I reviewed, it was Willa Cather who came closest to McCarthy in her representation of a land that was, in itself, all-encompassing and mysterious enough to be its own story. In Death Comes for the Archbishop, for example, we see Father LaTour lost in the New Mexican desert (at about the same time that McCarthy's novel takes place), completely disoriented by the landscape:

> The difficulty was that the country in which he found himself was so featureless – or rather, that it was crowded with features, all exactly alike. As far as he could see, on every side, the landscape was heaped up into monotonous red sand-hills, not much larger than haycocks, and very much the shape of haycocks. One could not have believed that in the number of square miles a man is able to sweep with the eye there could be so many uniform red hills…They were so exactly like one another that he seemed to be wandering in some geometrical nightmare… (17)

Cather also appreciates the relationship between the land and the human spirit – the effect that the western landscape has on those who attempt to create a life within its vast space. In O Pioneers!, she writes:

> But the great fact was the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its sombre wastes. It was from facing this vast hardness that the boy's mouth had become so bitter; because he felt that men were too weak to make any mark here, that the land wanted to be let alone, to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar, savage kind of beauty, its uninterrupted mournfulness. (10)

It is Cormac McCarthy, though, who keeps us within the landscape and under the sky on every page, who explores the complex relationship between humans and the rest of creation in the greatest detail and richness.

If it is true, as Northrop Frye has said, that "every poet has his private mythology" (680) McCarthy's would probably be one based on the human journey through the natural world, a world composed of living, sentient stones and trees. [2] In turn, the reader of Blood Meridian should not see the landscapes only as scenery, or as a backdrop to the story. Close descriptions of the terrain, the sky, vegetation, wildlife, and celestial activities occur on almost every page. McCarthy's prose style, with its concrete and detail-rich language, situates the reader in a place; we are not in some abstraction of desert, we are in the real desert, feeling the wind and sun and the grainy sand under our feet:

> They [rode] up through a country where the rocks would cook the flesh from your hand and where other than rock nothing was. They rode in a narrow enfilade along a trail strewn with the dry round turds of goats and they rode with their faces averted from the rock wall and the bake-oven air which it rebated, the slant black shapes of the mounted men stenciled across the stone with a definition austere and implacable like shapes capable of violating their covenant with the flesh that authored them… (139)

> By noon the day following they had begun to come again upon abandoned gear from the caravans, cast shoes and pieces of harness and bones and the dried carcasses of mules with the alparejas still buckled about. They trod the faint arc of an ancient lakeshore where broken shells lay like bits of pottery frail and ribbed among the sands… (287)

His prose is based on the principle that, as Bell has said, "experience is primarily not universal, but particular, and that we live not in an outline but a place" (4). In Blood Meridian, the plot consists primarily of a series of violent encounters wrapped entirely in the

landscape. The sun memorializes the violence as it sets in its "redness in the west" while the sand and wind immediately begin to erase the physical evidence and results of the chaos (174). The stars are always present overhead burning with "lidless fixity" for eternity. It seems almost as though the plot and the action take place in the spaces between the descriptions of the land and that the reader might get a good sense of the story by studying the representation of landscapes alone. There is, that is to say, the same sort of ambiguity in the landscape that there is in the human story – the natural world is both beautiful and ugly, life-giving and lethal at the same time, just as human society is.

In The Spell of the Sensuous, David Abram has explored the significance of place in storytelling, particularly in traditionally oral cultures (for example, the indigenous cultures of the American southwest) and has noted a strong relationship between the telling of stories and, as he puts it, "the more-than-human terrain." Furthermore, he suggests that human language itself grows out of our connection to the natural world. He considers the telling of stories to be "an almost ceremonial act, an ancient and necessary mode of speech that tends to the earthly rootedness of human language." The association between storytelling and landscape

> resides in the encompassing, enveloping wholeness of a story in relation to the characters that act and move within it. A story envelops its protagonists much as we ourselves are enveloped by the terrain. In other words, we are situated in the land in much the same way that characters are situated in a story. Indeed, for the members of a deeply oral culture this relation may be experienced as something more than a mere analogy: along with the other animals, the stones, the trees, and the clouds, we ourselves are characters

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[2] McCarthy's last four novels, including Blood Meridian and the "Border Trilogy" all concern young men travelling in the border country of the southwestern U.S., re-enacting, in many ways, the archetypal journey as described by Joseph Campbell in The Hero with a Thousand Faces.

> within a huge story that is visibly unfolding all around us, participants within the vast imagination, or Dreaming, of the world. (163)[3]

According to Abram, characters cannot be conceived or represented outside of the landscape in which they live and act.

McCarthy seems to place this same kind of value on place and the natural world in his work. His reader is always present in the setting in which the story is happening – the mountains are blue and are north or south, in the distance lies a dry lake, to the east is a gypsum desert, overhead the stars are swinging to the west, the "pilgrims" locate their way by the stars, and they cross a river while the sky is the color of blood. Often, the description seems to be of a void, a waste, a howling wilderness, empty, hollow and terrible, more typically a hell than a heaven. McCarthy's terrain is no pastoral. This representation of the landscape provides more than a contrast to some romantic notion of a virgin land waiting to be escaped to, settled, tamed and farmed. Rather, in the tradition of Melville, he recognizes the complexity of wilderness. As Henry Nash Smith has suggested, Melville understood that "it [nature] was not more certainly good than bad, yet in either case it was terrible and magnificent" (78). Just as McCarthy is revising the classic western novel, he is rethinking traditional American approaches to nature – it is neither an Edenic garden nor a place of evil waiting to be subdued, and it is certainly not a world separate from human society.

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<u>Blood Meridian</u> can be divided into three sections. The first (roughly the first six chapters) takes the kid from birth to the point at which he joins the Glanton gang. The

[3] Abram argues that just as we now commonly accept the notion of nature as a vast and intricate, interconnected web, we should consider Merleau-Ponty's description of a "sensuous reality", a sentient natural world which includes the human body as an equal member, and from which springs human language. "Language, writes Merleau-Ponty, 'is the very voice of the trees, the waves, and the forests.'" (Abram, 86)

longest section, the next thirteen chapters, follows the gang as it wanders through the deserts and mountains of northern Mexico. Finally, in the last four chapters, after most of the gang is massacred at the Yuma camp on the Colorado River, we follow the kid as he continues to the ocean at San Diego and then wanders through the southwest until his death in Griffin, Texas at the age of 45. The westward movement of the story matches the course of American movement in the 19th century, and the grim circumstances of the gang's wanderings also mirror the bloody history of the American expansion. The kid's meandering after his achievement of the western coast seems to suggest a kind of uncertainty – where is there to go now that we have managed to get to the farthest boundary and have faced the ocean and turned back?

In the initial section of the book, the kid leaves Tennessee, traveling down the Mississippi to New Orleans, then west across Texas. He leaves behind "a flat and pastoral landscape," the smells of salt and lumber, birds ("gray seabirds," "flights of pelicans," "egrets in their rookeries as white as candles among the moss.") "He's left behind the pinewood country and the evening sun declines before him beyond an endless swale and dark falls here like a thunderclap and a cold wind sets the weeds to gnashing" (15). The thunder seems to help introduce the terrain that the kid is entering, described by the hermit he shares a meal with in the desert as a place that isn't "made to suit everbody" (19). The kid is in a space variously described as a "howling wilderness" (42), all "changed and strange" (43), a place where the ground is "pure pumice where there grew no shrub as far as the eye could see" (44), a "cratered void" (46), and a place where "death seemed the most prevalent feature of the landscape" (48). There are few mentions of wildlife in this section other than the remark that "nothing moved in that purgatorial waste save carnivorous birds" (63).

This transition from the southern landscape to the southwestern desert is a movement and a crossing from the familiar to the strange, from the comforting to the challenging. In contrast to these ubiquitous descriptions of desolation, however, are many references to the sky, particularly the night sky. McCarthy's celestial references become common in these early chapters and describe a sky in which much is happening. The passage of time is marked by the movement of the stars, sun, and moon, all of which seem to be the silent observers of the chaos beneath them. As the filibusters camp on the foreign side of the river, they go to sleep "under the selfsame stars", as though the night sky might be a source of comfort and a connection to the familiar (43). The men watched the stars arcing across the firmament and came to "know the nightskies well" (46). They use the stars to chart their way and "followed the trail through the desert by starlight, the Pleides straight overhead and very small and the great Bear walking the mountains to the north" (61). As the kid is carted into town after surviving the Comanche attack and massacre, he notices, of all things, "starlight in a mud street" (68). While the day sky might be as empty and immense and forbidding as the land about them, the night sky seems to be the place where the men look for familiar sights and directional signs. The day presents a horizon "as flat and true as a spirit level" (42), and rather threatening, as the "sky and earth closed in a razorous plane" while the night seems to draw their eyes upward to the warm starlight and moonlight.

The first section of the novel introduces the reader to McCarthy's manner of focusing our attention on the western land and sky. While there is a good deal happening in this portion of the narrative--the kid travels a great distance, joins the filibustered army, survives a terrifying battle with Comanches, sees his former Captain's severed head in a jar and is thrown into jail, then bailed out--in many ways, the land becomes the center of our

attention. We are continually placed back in the landscape and reminded where we are; we see the sun rising in the east "pulsing and malevolent" and "wild horses racing on the plain…leaving in the moonlight a vaporous dust like the palest stain of their passing" (46). It is impossible to read these pages without being aware of a couple of things--the vast, apparently limitless land and sky which surround the "pilgrims" and the emptiness that they see in that landscape. Their perceptions seem to consist of fear and insecurity in the face of this immensity; they seem to be threatened and occasionally fooled by it. We see the first of the mirages that McCarthy will describe, introducing a recurring concept--that the men are travelling through not only a void, but an "hallucinatory void." The first mirage gave them the impression that they were before a huge lake with a city distant against the shady blue mountains, but in the morning they woke to find "no city and no trees and no lake only a barren dusty plain" (62). The fading of the vision seems to intensify the emptiness that surrounds them.

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The second and longest section of the book takes us deeper into the terrain of Blood Meridian. This portion of the novel follows the kid and the Glanton gang as they wander through the deserts and wilderness of northern Mexico. The desert itself is a symbolically rich, and deceptively simple, landscape. It is an ancient place for the meditative or ascetic religious soul. It is the place of trials and initiation, a place where the individual seeks self-knowledge. It may also be a place where one might attempt to expiate sins—a kind of purgatory. According to the Encyclopedia of Religion, as "a terrain of struggle, the desert leads to the discovery of one's own being and, thereby, to the affirmation of the individual. At a more evolved stage of religious thought, it is the privileged place of divine revelation," a

place where the air is "pure and light" (304). Once its visitor gets beyond the initial fear that it inspires, its vastness, silence, and spiritual tradition can bring him closer to God.

Ironically, the terrain the men travel through also evokes a kind of intimacy with the natural landscape. They "lay in that ground", so close to the earth, so connected to the dust, that they can hear what is happening below the surface:

> In the evening they entrained upon a hollow ground that rang so roundly under the horses' hooves that they stepped and sidled and rolled their eyes like circus animals and that night as they lay in that ground each heard, all heard, the dull boom of rock falling somewhere far below them in the awful darkness inside the world. (111)

McCarthy's special gift is to be able to describe the "world" through which these men travel as both frighteningly vast and intriguingly close and present. Steven Shaviro in "'The Very Life of Darkness': A Reading of Blood Meridian" has suggested that McCarthy is not providing an interpretation or symbolization of the land, but rather "an *erotics* of landscape, moving easily between the degree zero of 'desert absolute' and the specific articulations of water, mud, sand, sky and mountains" (154). By this, I think he means that these descriptions of the landscape focus on the real and the concrete rather than the abstract in the same way that erotic writing has as its focus the sensuous body rather than the more transcendent articulation of love. An erotics of landscape, it seems, would treat the earth in some ways as body—an interesting notion, since there is also a strong message in Blood Meridian of the equality of kinship between humans and the "more-than-human" world. McCarthy is presenting us with the realities of nature, rather than shallow descriptions—as Shaviro says: "Blood Meridian refuses to acknowledge any gap or opposition between words and things" (154). This results in a lack of distance between the description of the land and the land itself. That closeness and intimacy also might suggest an *erotics* of landscape, rather

than a travel guide description of the region. We are in the land, rather than reading about it, we are touching it and holding it; more than just a symbol of something else, it is the thing itself. The Delaware scouts are said to understand the limitlessness of the world and yet it is "not alien none of it more than were their own hearts alien within them" (138). The world is both as close and as mysterious as the men's hearts themselves and the sky is as red as the blood which runs in the men's veins and is spilled on the ground in their murderous encounters. The initial question posed to the reader of the novel--is the human heart another kind of clay--keeps us focused on both the clay and sand over which the gang travels and the mysteries and makeup of their souls.

Perhaps a closer look at the landscape in this section will help to illustrate this point. From the tiniest details to the most grand, everything is included in our vision: "the smallest stones lay like pencil lines across the sand" (45), "drops of rain the size of grapeshot fell upon them…they could smell wet stone" (48), "small gray birds flew crying softly after the fled sun" (105), "the leaves shifted as a million spangles down the pale corridors" (136), "along the nearby ridge the white blooms of flowering yuccas moved on the wind" (148), "dried desert chaff passed along with the seething migrant sands" (210) "the myriads of icicles among the conifers glistened blood red" (212) and so on. These are the particularities that make McCarthy's landscape more than simply a background and which place the reader in such proximity to the natural world.

At the same time, at the other end of the cosmos, there is the constant presence of the sky and the movement of the sun, moon and stars. The sky in this part of the country dominates both the day and the night, perhaps because the landscape is relatively free of

landmarks, but more likely because of the quality and intensity of the light. The heat of the desert is one aspect of this intensity, but in addition there is a searing brightness in the sun's light that, even when the air is cooler, gives one the impression of being cooked from above by the sun. McCarthy recognizes this luminosity which seems to come from the entire sky rather than the sun alone. And yet it is the sun and moon that one notices when in the desert. We see the sun rising and catching

> the moon in the west so that they lay opposed to each other across the earth, the sun whitehot and the moon a pale replica as if they were the ends of a common bore beyond whose terminals burned worlds past all reckoning. (86)

The men sometimes hide from the sun during the day ("They eyed the sun in its circus and at dusk they rode out upon the cooling plain where the western sky was the color of blood…) (152) but are always aware of what is going on in the sky:

> The sun to the west lay in a holocaust… (105)
>
> All the sky seemed troubled and night came quickly over the evening land (105)
>
> By noon the sun was a pale blur overhead (210)
>
> the stars swung counterclockwise (212)
>
> The stars burned with a lidless fixity…stars lay awash at his feet and migratory spalls of burning matter crossed constantly about him on their chartless reckonings (213)
>
> A pale green meteor came up the valley floor behind them and passed overhead and vanished silently in the void. (227)
>
> The moon sat in a ring overhead and in that ring lay a mock moon with its own cold gray and nacre seas (244)

The sky provides more than a ceiling for the landscape. It is the constant over-arching firmament, limitless and immense, but hardly empty or desolate. This is a sky in which something seems always to be happening, often something of beauty or usefulness, as the travelers note the condition and color of the sunset and guide themselves at night by the stars. They are familiar with the sky and it is hard to imagine them not being somewhat comforted when they see "the Great Bear turn and the Pleiades wink in the very roof of the vault" (212). The constellations are almost like characters: "Cancer, Virgo, Leo raced the ecliptic down the southern night and to the north the constellation of Cassiopeia burned like a witch's signature on the black face of the firmament" (256). In this sense, the stars and planets do seem to be like a kind of literature in the sense that Abram has suggested, a language of signifiers and something for the men to read and study. The stars and constellations are a kind of record of human activity, stories that have circulated for generations. Even the year of the kid's birth, during the Leonid meteor showers, seems to have significance. His father recalls: "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). It is a wonderful example of the way McCarthy's characters relate to the physical world – and recalls the beautiful line from All the Pretty Horses, the novel which follows Blood Meridian:

> …they rode out on the round dais of the earth which alone was dark and no light to it and which carried their figures and bore them up into the swarming stars so that they rode not under but among them… (Horses, 30)

The stars and the sky provide a steady presence overhead, under which the actions of men take place. It is as if the stars, moon and sun both illuminate and observe the

wandering and the chaos and the loss which is occurring below. Even the distance between men and stars is sometimes eliminated and there is a merging of the terrestial and the celestial, a crossing of the boundaries between earth and sky:

> The stars burned with a lidless fixity and they drew nearer in the night until toward dawn he was stumbling among the whinstones of the uttermost ridge to heaven, a barren range of rock so enfolded in that gaudy house that stars lay awash at his feet and migratory spalls of burning matter crossed constantly about him on their chartless reckonings. (213)

The image of stars awash at the kid's feet suggests that he is among them and encompassed by them in the same way the characters in All the Pretty Horses were, giving him a kind of prominence and importance relative to the other creatures/characters. It is as though the world these characters live in is sky rather than sandy desert. It is a rather spiritual notion, and gives hints of a heavenly quality to the scene. It allows us to momentarily disengage from the desolation and cruelty on the earth, and even gives the kid a kind of blessing as he receives "first of any creature in that country the warmth of the sun's ascending" (213).

The stars also provide a map for the pilgrims, giving them coordinates in the sky for the "incoordinate waste" below. The men do their reckoning by the sun and stars – using the sky to guide them to safety. Although the stars often fall, "swarm" and burn, the heavens seem in many ways to be the part of their world that is constant, reliable, familiar and safe.

The judge becomes a central character in this second part of the novel. His presence and declarations hover over the action, provocative and menacing. He is a rationalist who is determined to understand nature by dissecting it, in his effort to exert control as suzerain ("a

keeper or overlord" as he defines the word) over creation. "Whatever exists without my knowledge, exists without my consent," he asserts (198). The judge insists on absolute and ultimate control over nature and its continued existence. His philosophy slips beyond the simple suggestion that man should dominate the rest of creation. With the judge it seems as if he, personally, is in charge of all creation. ("The judge placed his hands on the ground…This is my claim, he said." (199)) Still, he is complicated--some of his pronouncements have the ring of truth. When the less-well-read men in the gang note the inconsistencies between the judge's scientific "ordering up of eons" and their own familiarity with the history of the earth according to the Bible, he replies: "Books lie." But God doesn't lie, respond the men.

> No, said the judge. He does not. And these are his words.
>
> He held up a chunk of rock.
>
> He speaks in stones and trees, the bones of things. (116)

Are we to take this to mean the judge is a pantheist, believing that God exists in all of nature? Not likely, given his disrespect for life, his powerful desire to control the natural world, and his understanding of his human position as lord and master. In fact, it would be easy to argue that the judges' words suggest that he views himself as a kind of God. But how to understand his comment? If God does speak in stones and trees, the bones of things, what is He saying? It is particularly interesting to ponder this passage while keeping in mind that an author is creating it--if books lie, what about this book? McCarthy has chosen these words – "stones," "trees," "the bones of things." Stones have always been

considered to be dead, and the landscapes that McCarthy has described to this point have a good deal in them to suggest that they are lifeless. Are stones and trees the bones of things, that is, are they some kind of skeletal structure of a dead nature? Is the earth a skeleton that God has hung out for us to inhabit? Could McCarthy's vision be that grim? Some critics certainly have seen it as such.[4] Or is he actually recognizing that stones and trees are the bones, the body of the earth and that we must be able to read or listen to this body as it speaks to us, and as we live with it? Human life, according to Abram and other environmentalists, is inextricably connected to the natural world, all part of the vast story that is being spun out (in the voice of God?) The comfort and connection the men have with the night sky seems to suggest an awareness of their place in this system, however helpless they may be in this terrain. They have an appreciation that there is beauty and maybe some order in the cosmos – even John Joel Glanton recognizes it, as he notes the perfection of a golden leaf he catches as the men ride through an aspen wood (136). At the same time, the men have a tendency to describe the landscape in hellish terms. Tobin relates to the kid the experience of riding through a "malpais" where the men had "seen little cloven hoofprints in the stone…Somewhere in the scheme of things this world must touch the other" (129). In other words, the scheme of things seems to be that the gang lies somewhere between heaven and hell, perhaps more often closer to the latter. Yet, at night, they can at least see the other world from where they lie.

The judge, however much a scientist, isn't an environmentalist, and doesn't subscribe to any notion of the connectedness of life in the natural world. He is, in fact, offended by

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[4] Most reviewers note a strong nihilism in McCarthy's writing, notably Vereen Bell in The Achievement of

what he perceives to be "autonomous" life--life that exists outside his control or understanding. He exhibits a kind of paranoia that is familiar to readers of Moby-Dick. Captain Ahab's hatred for the white whale was based on a very similar fear. In his conversation with Starbuck after announcing to the crew that the gold piece nailed to the masthead would go to the first man who spied Moby-Dick, Ahab explains:

> He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him…. I'd strike the sun if it insulted me (144)

In fact, if we subscribe to an ecological view of the world, in which all life is connected to and supportive of all other life, both Ahab and the judge would understand that there is no autonomous life. Again, if McCarthy's "private mythology" has nature as its core, as I believe it does, this notion of community should perhaps be considered in ecological terms.

The word ecology was coined in the 1860's by Ernst Haeckel, a "disciple" of Darwin and a frequent creator of neologisms.

> In the broadest sense, it was to be the study of all the environmental conditions of existence, or as his translator later, put it, 'the science of the relations of living organisms to the external world, their habitat, customs, energies, parasites, etc.' (Worster 192)

The word derives from "economy"--in its ancient meaning, the management of a household, including the relationships between the members of the household and the systems that support and maintain the household. The notion of ecology takes this sense of economy to the scale of the relationships between the organisms that make up the natural world – looking at the natural world as a system in which individuals interact, collaborate, cooperate

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Cormac McCarthy.

and serve to support the entire system. A fully functioning ecosystem is one in which "all members are present at the assembly" as Gary Snyder has written (12). In Blood Meridian, one might view this "economy" which Haeckel considered so important as part of the natural world to be one which must exist as well between the natural world and the human soul, that is, between the external world and the inner world. The proper relation between nature and the human spirit would form the basis for an ecology of the soul. McCarthy seems to be exploring this relationship and is, in my view, considering it in ecological terms, if we can understand ecology in this larger sense, which might encompass the spiritual "economy" as well as the economy of the physical world. The notion of "autonomous" life is profoundly anti-ecological, as is any suggestion that human society does not naturally fit into the larger scheme of the natural world. McCarthy uses the landscape in which Blood Meridian takes place to constantly recenter the human participants in the larger natural world and to remind us of the proper order.

The proper order is one of community, and a kind of community does seem to exist in Blood Meridian as McCarthy's language continually places the natural, other-than-human world on a level plane with the world of men. Vereen Bell in The Acheivement of Cormac McCarthy has noted the way that nature and human activity compete for the reader's attention throughout the novel (129):

> The human beings constitute one protagonist and the natural world another. Narrative and description collaborate with each other in conventional ways, but what is ultimately important is that, even ontologically, they compete. (133)

This equivalence in some ways provides evidence for the judge's notions of man's proper place in nature. "These anonymous creatures, he said, may seem little or nothing in the world. Yet the smallest crumb can devour us. Any smallest thing beneath yon rock out of men's knowing. Only nature can enslave man…" (198) The judge's paranoia, in other words, is based on his fear that in spite of his scientific approach to the natural world, it will remain, to some extent, inscrutable. The human evil, so ubiquitous in the novel, can be matched by the indiscriminate and inexplicable cruelty of the desert:

> Far out on the desert to the north dustpouts rose wobbling and augered the earth and some said they'd heard of pilgrims borne aloft like dervishes in those mindless coils to be dropped broken and bleeding upon the desert again… (111)

At the same time, there are moments when men seem to be bonded, not so much with their human partners, as with the elements of the natural world through which they travel. When the kid is separated from the gang and has to travel alone in an effort to reconnect with it, he has an odd communal experience. He comes down, freezing, out of the snowy mountains to see a fire on the plain. He approaches it cautiously, not knowing whether it would be friend or enemy who sits near it. But it turns out to be not a fire started by men at all:

> It was a lone tree burning on the desert. A heraldic tree that the passing storm had left afire. The solitary pilgrim drawn up before it had traveled far to be here and he knelt in the hot sand and held his numbed hands out while all about in that circle attended companies of lesser auxiliaries routed forth into the inordinate day, small owls that crouched silently and stood from foot to foot and tarantulas and solpugas and vinegarroons and the vicious mygale spiders and beaded lizards with mouths black as a chowdog's, deadly to man, and the little desert basilisks that jet blood from their eyes and the small sandvipers like seemly gods, silent and the same, in Jeda, in Babylon. A constellation of ignited eyes that edged the ring of light all bound in a

> precarious truce before this torch whose brightness had set back the stars in their sockets. (215)

This is a scene which calls to mind the Biblical image of the lion lying down with the lamb (or, in this case, the "kid.") This is a peaceable kingdom (at least temporarily) of God's creatures, held together and warmed by the grace of a miracle fire, a fire which is set apart even from the fire of stars, perhaps by the fact of the living, breathing community which surrounds it.

This notion of the connectedness of all things is beautifully described by McCarthy at another key moment in the narrative. The gang is crossing a dry lake and the overwhelming sensation is one of dryness and desiccation, even the volcanoes which surround the plain are apparently dead. The sand under the horse's hooves swirls "as if the very sediment of things contained yet some residue of sentience." The earth rolls beneath the horses and men and the winds scour everything to a smooth whiteness. It appears that it is a certain quality of the light which creates this sense of equality, as if the sun itself had ordered this observation. In this place, McCarthy writes:

> In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence…here was nothing more enshadowed and in the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships. (247)

This is a community in which human society is in no position of superiority over the natural world. It contradicts the judge's assertion (as well as the Genesis command to subdue the earth) that man is suzerain over creation. It begs us to consider the relationship between humans and the rest of nature, as "characters within the vast imagination of the world." I

also see a kind of community among the men. Even the judge notes, "each man is tabernacled in every other and he in exchange and so on in an endless complexity of being and witness to the uttermost edge of the world" (141) although I would argue that this comment is more of a cynical assertion that men are all alike (equally evil) than that they have common interests.[5] The group itself, we are told, has a "communal soul" within which "were wastes hardly reckonable more than those whited regions on old maps where monsters do live and where there is nothing other of the known world save conjectural winds" (152). There is a Jungian flavor to this image of the communal soul and it brings to mind Jung's description of the primordial images of the collective unconscious that are the common heritage of mankind:

> In each of these images there is a little piece of human psychology and human fate, a remnant of the joys and sorrows that have been repeated countless times in our ancestral history, and on the average follow ever the same course. It is like a deeply graven river-bed in the psyche, in which waters of life, instead of flowing along as before in a broad but shallow stream, suddenly swell into a mighty river. (665)

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The final section of the novel begins as the gang reaches the Colorado River at the location of a Yuma camp. They take control of the ferry and begin terrorizing and robbing travelers who intend to cross the river. After an uncomfortable relationship with the Yumas, the Indians attack and massacre the gang, and only the kid, Tobin and the judge manage to escape. These three continue to travel, now by foot, across the desert towards San Diego. They wander west through what is perhaps the harshest land so far encountered. They

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[5] McCarthy includes three epigraphs for the novel, one of which is a note from the *Yuma Daily Sun* of June 13, 1982 indicating that a recently uncovered 300,000-year-old skull "shows evidence of being scalped" seeming to

stumble through the debris of previous parties, the abandoned gear and mummified remains of unlucky pilgrims. At night, they shiver in "the barren desert wind coming out of whatever godless quadrant cold and sterile and bearing news of nothing at all" (293). These are men who have encountered the monsters who live in the empty and mysterious places in the human soul and who now find themselves in the same kind of a place in the geographical landscape. They have been through the moral wilderness and now find themselves in "desert absolute" (294), a place where they had not even the companionship suggested by wild animals crying in the night, where the silence was such that "they listened to their breathing in the dark and the cold and they listened to the systole of the rubymeated hearts that hung within them" (281).

It is in the silence of this desert wilderness that the kid is forced not only to listen to his heart beating but to be tested again, and to look again into his heart. And yet, even as the opportunity to assassinate the judge presents itself, contrary to the urging of the ex-priest Tobin, the kid cannot fire his pistol. It is another perplexing moment in the novel. Presumably, the kid has participated in the violent acts of the gang to this point. Why this demonstration of mercy, particularly for the judge? Perhaps the hermit was wrong about the human heart, or perhaps we do not know the kid all that well.

It is the last time the judge and the kid meet in the desert. Tobin and the kid are rescued by friendly Indians at the western edge of the frontier, Indians who look to the east wondering what horrible savage thing ("armies or plague or pestilence or something altogether unspeakable") that would "drive men to such plight" that they would cross the

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suggest that atrocities committed by humans are nothing new, and perhaps are part of human nature.

desert (300). The two men, restored by the kindness of the Indians, proceed into a "highland park forested with joshua trees and rimmed about by bald granite peaks" (302). As they travel closer to the sea, they enter a new kind of wilderness, one that is rich with wildlife - eagles soaring above and grizzly bears shambling through the trees. It is a landscape that is described in sharp contrast to the desert terrains they have traveled through for most of the book. There is abundant water from mountain streams and deer to hunt. They cross through a pass and finally see the ocean in the distance, "blue and serene under clouds" (303). As they enter San Diego, they part and the kid continues to wander west through the streets and down to the beach. He is now alone and has traveled as far as he can – he now truly has "run plumb out of country" (285). He observes a horse standing in the surf, staring out to sea, just as the kid is. They both watch "out there past men's knowing, where the stars are drowning and whales ferry their vast souls through the black and seamless sea" (304). It is another moment that suggests that a kind of spiritual connection exists among humans, animals and stars all occupying the same mysterious world.

The kid has reached the place where the sun and the stars die. He is alone and has journeyed under the watchful sky and has survived to arrive at this terminus. The story is mostly over. All that remains is to understand that the kid turns and wanders with apparent aimlessness (in "country he'd never seen" (313, 317)) carrying a Bible "no word of which he could read" and with no news or tidings for any other travelers "as if the doings of the world were too slanderous for him to truck with, or perhaps too trivial" (312). Finally, at age 45, the kid/man is back in Texas, now truly a landscape of death, following the slaughter of the

buffalo with their skeletons in piles ten feet high and hundreds of feet long, and "the sour smell of bones everywhere" (318). This is now not just a landscape created in desolation, but ransacked by man, at "night a horror of snarling and feeding with the wolves half crazed and wallowing in the carrion (317). Still the stars shine on the man as he and an old hunter wonder if there are "other worlds like this, or if this is the only one (317).

Shortly before he meets his death, he looks to the sky again. In a reprise of the important line from the beginning of the novel ("His origins are become remote as is his destiny…"(4), he sees that

> Stars were falling across the sky myriad and random, speeding along brief vectors from their origins in night to their destinies in dust and nothingness. (333)

The kid's destiny, it seems, is inextricably woven together with the terrain and the stars, his journey between the land and the sky influenced by each as much as it is by the humans with whom he travels. The test, we were told in the beginning, was to see whether the stuff of creation could be shaped to man's will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay. What would the kid have concluded in the last days of his life, spent in the sour boneyard of the buffalo wastes? In thirty years living among the stuff of creation, he has witnessed a good deal of inhumanity. Would he agree with the judge that the truth about the world is that "anything is possible"? That it is a "hat trick in a medicine show, a fevered dream…a migratory tentshow whose ultimate destination after many a pitch in many a mudded field is unspeakable and calamitous beyond reckoning"? (245) There among the bones and ghosts of the great buffalo herds, with the stars burning for eternity overhead, it must have seemed as though humans were indeed another kind of clay--that, as the old desert hermit noted,

"when God made man the devil was at his elbow" (19). And yet it is hard to forget the kid/man's effort to reach out to the old woman he discovered at yet another scene of a massacre. She kneeled in a small niche in the canyon wall and he went to her and told her that he had no family and that he had "seen many things" and that he would take care of her (315). Her shawl is covered with stars and quartermoons, and as he touches her, he realizes that she is dead, and has been for many years and is only a dried shell. This is a shocking moment, but also one of grace and generosity as we see the kid express both his loneliness and concern for another human being. He seems to have been able to survive without falling completely under the influence of the judge, has "alone reserved in [his] soul some corner of clemency for the heathen" (299). The scene keeps alive the possibility that the empty nihilism of the judge's philosophy has not entirely taken over the kid's belief, that although man is created out of the dust of the earth, he has a living soul and exists as more than just another kind of clay.

Blood Meridian is increasingly being viewed as Cormac McCarthy's masterpiece. The growing (but still small) body of criticism of this complex novel analyzes its diction and style (Schopen, Bingham), its politics and history (Campbell, Masters) and its religious/philosophical footings (Arnold, Daugherty.) My reading of the novel, however, leads me to believe that the power and intensity of the book's central message comes directly out of its confrontation with the real, physical world. The landscape of the places we inhabit, the terrain, the stones, the trees, the "bones of things" contain sufficient mystery for humans to ponder. The natural world is the forum in which we must be listening for the

voice of God and it is a world in which much is possible, including that which is beautiful and redemptive: starlight, sunlight on spangled leaves and the songs of birds.

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