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AMORAL ANTAGONISTS: INTERROGATING THE MYTH  
OF THE WEST IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S FICTION

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A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of Arts and Humanities

University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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by

John T. Arthur

June 2017

Advisor: Dr. Billy J. Stratton

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Title: AMORAL ANTAGONISTS: INTERROGATING THE MYTH OF THE WEST  
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### **Abstract**

The history of the American West, of conquering the frontier, forms the very backbone of national identity in the United States. Cormac McCarthy's southwestern works probe the Western mythic: *Blood Meridian*, *No Country for Old Men*, and his screenplay *The Counselor* offer an alternative to the romantic, antiseptic Western American tradition, exposing the necessary complexity of a realm that cannot be encapsulated in the binary dualism that has so long defined it.

The amoral nature of Cormac McCarthy's antagonists demonstrates that the story of expansion is more complex than is/has been typically understood, both by scholars and the public. McCarthy is offering a different lens through which to examine a foundational period for the nation – one characterized not simply by the traditionally recognized ethos of rugged determinism, but also by depravity and bloodshed. This work seeks to reveal that lens, in an effort to demonstrate the importance of reconceptualizing American identity.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Introduction**

### *The Western Mythic*

At the root of the history of the American West, both in terms of its role in the creation of the genre of literature/film/art that bears its name, and in the genre's tendency to reinforce that history, is the importance of a traditionally binary morality. That is, decision-making is undertaken with both an implicit and explicit understanding that the questions of the world, of existence, can be categorized (reductively) into dualistic, oppositional camps: good versus evil, civil versus savage, Anglo versus any/everyone else. In the case of Cormac McCarthy's novels *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West* and *No Country for Old Men*, as well as his screenplay *The Counselor*, numerous characters, but especially those who embody antagonistic roles, a departure from the traditionally binary morality demonstrates an attempt by the author to complicate the Western American mythic. That mythic is the foundational but largely erroneous understanding of the conquest of the American frontier in a sanitized discourse – the acceptance that colonization was legitimate, inevitable, and if not bloodless, that the brutality of the frontier was a justifiable necessity of conquest. McCarthy's works move beyond the long-accepted understanding of colonization in the American West: a sanitized and reductive conceptualization of colonization as a legitimate endeavor undertaken by hardworking, moral, even heroic individuals seeking an existence both

deserved and well-earned in a land that was domesticated by the nature of its uninhabitedness or as a consequence of legitimized force.

The chronology of the three pieces (a work of historical fiction set in the mid-nineteenth century, a novel set in 1980, and a screenplay set in the early 2000s), as well as the historical underpinnings of *Blood Meridian*, reveals that McCarthy's prose complicates not only of the creative Western genre, but also acts as a clarifying agent for the region's *actual* history.

McCarthy problematizes traditionally dualistic interpretations of the West through his objective, uncommon portrayals of characters/character types, and, to a great extent, of the setting/landscape. Objectivity in this sense means simply that McCarthy's prose does not adhere to the definitive tropes of the Western genre, nor to the binary separations that have become central to the mythic history of the region. Dichotomous separations are characteristic of the traditional Western: physical differences including skin color are a demonstrative ethnic indicator of hierarchy (Native peoples being distinctly identifiable in comparison to whites), as is attire and accoutrement (morally sound characters wearing white hats and riding white horses, villainous characters in black and on dark steeds). To be certain additional tropes are definitive for the genre, particularly as they relate to characters' moral positions, and will be discussed in greater detail later in this analysis.

As an example, this sort of portrayal is regularly apparent in *Blood Meridian*, as both Euro-American and non-white characters are demonstrated to be capable of depravity and acts of pragmatism/kindness in equal parts – a departure from the

traditional dichotomy privileging white characters (settlers, pioneers, colonists) and relegating characters of other ethnicities to reduced or villainous roles, Native peoples in particular.

The western landscape is of central importance to both the history of the region and to the creative genre, and, similarly, has been traditionally portrayed in terms of dualistic, oppositional binaries. Nature (used here to encompass the landscape, flora, and fauna, as well as weather and potentially less tangible natural elements like sunlight, starlight, moonlight, etc.) has been traditionally portrayed as either a positive, saving element to be discovered and harnessed (streams, oases, game, etc.), or a negative, harmful element to be overcome (deserts, mountains, storms, etc.). In both cases, a broader, more universal binary exists: the tacit understanding that humanity is superior to nature, that the landscape and its non-human inhabitants/aspects are challenges to be faced and, inevitably, bested. Often, this process involved the elimination of an aspect of nature, regularly with the perception that such elimination resulted in a benefit to humanity. Two examples include the hunting (trapping, poisoning, etc.) to near extinction of the American bison and the wolf, the former for its valuable skin and to free grassland for grazing cattle, and the latter to remove predatory threats to those cattle.

It is important to note that this conquering spirit was deeply paternalistic. In her seminal work on the gendering of landscape in the American West, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*, Annette Kolodny points to the colonial essence of overcoming landscape, and the shaping effect that mindset had on the lands beyond the hundredth meridian: “The human, and decidedly

feminine, impact of the landscape became a staple in the early promotional tracts, inviting prospective settlers to inhabit . . .,” and to experience, “. . . the New World landscape, not merely as an object of domination and exploitation, but as a maternal ‘garden,’ receiving and nurturing human children . . .” (4-5). The seemingly benign maternal metaphor for landscape shifts dramatically as colonists move west of the Mississippi and onto the prairies and beyond, however. In pressing westward from the initial colonies of the eastern seaboard and onto the frontier, “the new nation had entered its adolescence, leaving behind . . . the configuration of the Mother and making the landscape, instead, a field for exercising sexual mastery and assertive independence . . .” (133). Employing a gendered interpretive lens to landscape not only provided colonists another supposedly legitimizing proof of their actions, it deeply seeded the patriarchal, exceptionalist mentality that has long clouded recognition of the violent, genocidal means by which the Western land was “won.”

The colonization of the American West, to a great extent, stemmed from the supposedly legitimizing force of European religion, specifically Christianity. Traditional portrayals of the West adhere to the binaries inherent in the Christian faith: good and evil exist at opposing ends of existence, the consequences of sin extending beyond even the corporeal world. Similar to the portrayal of nature in the traditional Western, Christianity represents a second, more universal binary in addition to the dichotomous nature of its dogma: the opposition of Christian to non-Christian. Historically, colonizers of the American West employed religion as a tool by which to facilitate and legitimize the usurpation of land and culture, to control those who could/would be converted, and to

eliminate (displace or kill) those that would not. Within the scope of McCarthy's work, however, Christianity (and by extension the simplistic, dualist morality upon which the religion is hinged) is presented as ambiguous (displaying characteristics that either do not adhere to the moral binary, or that directly oppose it – a former priest turned scalp hunter, for example), or impotent (the presence of religion as having no apparent impact on the characters, helpful or otherwise). This is most explicitly apparent in *Blood Meridian*, but, by extension of the moral base of Christianity, examples are apparent in *No Country for Old Men* and *The Counselor* as well.

The traditional Western genre, alongside the mythic historical discourse of colonization in the region, is dominated by power dynamics originating from binary opposition – good versus evil, civil versus savage, Christian versus non-Christian, etc. The deeply entrenched nature of that discourse has facilitated a mythic understanding of history in the American West, a history that McCarthy's works serve to at least critically reexamine and, in the process, I would claim detotalize. One of the most critical aspects of the myth-making discourse is the presence and portrayal of racialized and ethnic identities within the Western space, specifically as manifested through the othering of Native peoples, but also as related to any non-Euro-American inhabitants. Racism served as a powerful tool for colonization, allowing (and supposedly legitimizing) what in many cases must be called genocide. It is of great importance to note that racism and racially legitimized violence served as effective *means* for colonizers, rather than being ends in themselves. Othering non-Whites provided a vehicle by which to take land and resources: racism was a vessel for the capitalist machinations of conquest. Within the scope of the

works examined here, racial binaries are disassembled, leading to both a more complex reading of the historical period of colonization, and to its resultant future. Specifically within the scope of McCarthy's amoral antagonists, a chronology of both ethnic and gender shifts is demonstrated: in *Blood Meridian*, set in the mid-nineteenth century, the primary antagonist is a white male, one described by his contemporaries as particularly intelligent and strangely timeless, in *No Country for Old Men* the antagonist is again male, but described in exotic terms that demonstrate he may be a non-Anglo person, while in *The Counselor*, antagonist Malkina is female with Brazilian heritage, and clearly a woman of the world. In this evolution of his antagonists seemingly McCarthy comes closest to remaining within the borders of binary discourse, reinforcing conventional interactions between white and non-white characters, but, in opposition to the traditional Western mythic, removing the privilege from Euro-American conquest.

The history of the American West, of the conquest of the frontier, serves as a vital backbone of national identity in the United States. Cormac McCarthy's southwestern works probe the Western mythic, if not dismantle it altogether. *Blood Meridian*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *The Counselor* offer a particularly valuable alternative to the romantic, antiseptic Western tradition, exposing the necessary complexity of a realm that cannot be encapsulated in the binary dualism that has so long defined it.

### *Historical Context*

The discourse of history in the American West is fraught with contention and misunderstanding, particularly in that it has long been colored by an idealized

characterization of precisely how it came into being. Notions of the frontier are deeply imbedded in that discourse, and their rhetorical and literal genesis can be found long before the colonization of the American West, among the first Puritanical colonists along North America's eastern seaboard. Early Euro-American colonialism along the east coast of North America (and subsequently beyond) was characterized by the tenets of Puritanical ideology and dogma as well – notions of exceptionalism, transcendence, and divine providence were germs for a uniquely American identity, and provided a scaffold upon which writers of the nineteenth century could build rhetoric of the frontier mentality.

The binary discourse definitive for the expansion of Anglo settlement west of the Mississippi River and into the Great Plains, central mountains, and west coast of the continent, can trace its roots to Puritan forebears, though its nineteenth century rhetorical genesis arguably comes from the writing of men like historian Frederick Jackson Turner and columnist John L. O'Sullivan. Turner's 1893 Frontier Thesis became a rallying cry for the frontier, a cultural manifesto legitimizing colonization. Turner writes of the frontier as "the meeting place between savagery and civilization," and repeatedly of "winning a wilderness" comprised of "an area of free land" (2). Turner's words echo the sentiments of much of westward expansion, and provide a foundation for the mythology that has characterized it since.

Though more obscure than Turner, O'Sullivan's 1845 article "Annexation" includes the first use of the now infamous term "manifest destiny", one employed since its inception as a patriarchal, evangelical legitimization of colonization and genocide (6).

O'Sullivan's article is fraught with the notion of the so-called civilized advance of progress upon the American West, though couched in militaristic terms. O'Sullivan writes: "Already the advance guard of the irresistible army of the Anglo-Saxon emigration has begun to pour down upon [California], armed with the plough and the rifle, and marking its trail with schools and colleges, courts and representative halls, mills and meeting-houses" (8). Plainly these writers played a role in the creation of the mythic Western discourse.

An explicit binary is present in the writing of both Turner and O'Sullivan: civilized versus savage, settlers versus natives, Christian versus pagan, good versus evil, etc. The promise of westward expansion is predicated upon these binaries, and as such the words of Turner and O'Sullivan (among others) evolved from the dogma of expansion to its myth.

#### *Overview of the Works*

Though many will be familiar with the works to be discussed in this examination, it is helpful to have a basic understanding of the narrative of each of the pieces of writing. A synopsis of *Blood Meridian*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *The Counselor* will provide readers the context necessary to engage with the critical analysis that follows.

McCarthy's 1985 novel *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West* was the first published among the pieces discussed here. The novel follows the misadventures of the anonymous "kid," a teenager whose experiences with the Glanton Gang make up the bulk of the prose. The group's leader, former military captain John Joel Glanton,

leads a rag tag group of scalp-hunting mercenaries along the Texas/Mexico border between 1849 and 1850, massacring Natives and others, initially in the employ of local Mexican governors, though eventually out of some sort of barbaric pleasure or habit. Another member of the gang slowly fills the role of amoral antagonist; Judge Holden is a nearly seven-foot-tall, completely hairless polymath, one in no way immune to the gang's propensity for brutality. After many months of devastatingly violent acts together, a raiding party of Native Americans forcefully disbands the gang. The novel concludes many years later, when the kid and Judge encounter one another again in a saloon.

Published in 2007, *No Country for Old Men* is set in a similar south Texas landscape, though some 130 years after the action of *Blood Meridian*. The novel is focalized through the actions of Llewelyn Moss, a veteran of the Vietnam War and unemployed welder who discovers a suitcase containing \$2 million at the site of a desert drug deal gone wrong. It is intimated that Mexican dealers orchestrated the botched exchange, and both sides begin to pursue Moss shortly after he attempts to abscond with the purloined loot. Additionally, a mysteriously affiliated assassin, Anton Chigurh, makes Moss (and the money) his primary target. The novel is almost completely devoted to this pursuit. Throughout the work, aging local Sheriff Ed Tom Bell attempts fruitlessly to locate Moss and Chigurh, unable to save or arrest either, respectively. A party with undisclosed affiliations to the drug deal at one point in the novel hires a counter-assassin, Carson Wells, with the intention of dispatching Chigurh and collecting the missing funds. Ultimately Wells, like Moss, is unable to escape the inevitability of destruction, and is killed by Chigurh. As the novel closes, Moss is murdered by one of the rival drug gangs,

Wells is dispatched by Chigurh (who collects the secreted case of cash), and Bell retires from his duties, defeated.

The final work discussed in this examination is McCarthy's 2013 screenplay, *The Counselor*. Though not explicitly stated, the narrative is a contemporary one, set in the twenty-first century. It involves the again anonymous, titular counselor and his decision to engage in the facilitation of a large-scale drug sale. The exact details of his involvement are not readily available, but in cooperation with his associate Reiner, he stands to make several million dollars from the exchange. Early in the screenplay, the counselor becomes engaged to a woman named Laura, and their relationship becomes a point of importance to the narrative, both in terms of his revelation of the criminal acts, and of the resultant collateral damage. In addition to Reiner, the counselor is advised by a third party named Westray, a man who seems well aware of the dangerous nature of the drug trade. Reiner's lover Malkina is central to the narrative, at first as a seemingly innocuous observer, but later revealed to be the source of a double cross that costs Reiner, Westray, and Laura their lives, and the counselor his potential fortune. The screenplay concludes with Malkina's escape abroad with many millions of dollars in profit from the deal she upends.

To be certain each of these pieces from McCarthy are considerably more complex than outlined above. However, in order to effectively engage in critical discourse with the novels and screenplay, a meaningful contextualization of the works is warranted. As will be demonstrated, the actions of the antagonists in each of the pieces will be revealed as amoral, specifically within the binary moral ethos of the traditional Western.

## **Chapter Two: That Which Exists Without My Knowledge**

### **Exists Without My Consent**

#### *A Review of Existing Scholarship*

The amoral nature of Cormac McCarthy's antagonists, specifically in his works of Western fiction, demonstrates that the story of westward expansion is more complex than is/has been typically understood. Further, these works, while not necessarily suggesting a counter narrative to the mythic discourse, demand that the narrative of expansion undergo additional scrutiny for a more complete understanding. McCarthy is not offering a revisionist approach per se, but rather a different lens through which to examine a foundational period for the country – a time characterized not simply by the traditionally recognized ethos of rugged determinism, but also by depravity and bloodshed.

A critical examination of the morality of McCarthy's western antagonists is relevant for a number of reasons. A significant amount of criticism on McCarthy's work exists, including but not limited to thoughtful analysis of the objectivity of the author's fiction. That is, objectivity in the sense that McCarthy's prose stands at a remove from traditional Westerns by not privileging specific characters or settings based on traditionally oppositional discourses that supposedly demonstrated merit. Critics like Sara Spurgeon and Dana Phillips have written convincingly and at length on the objective representations of landscape and violence in McCarthy's 1985 novel, *Blood Meridian*. In spite of the corpus of criticism, adequate examination of the *morality* of McCarthy's

characters, particularly in relation to their representation versus that of the traditional Western and/or the romantic Western mythic, is lacking. Further, existing criticism does not engage in a comparison between multiple McCarthy works (specifically his Western fiction), each of which is separated by several years, and, studied together, that have the potential to demonstrate through their chronology a significant evolution highlighting the degree to which the Western mythic has or has not perpetuated, both historically and in literature. Ultimately, this examination will reinforce the critical argument that McCarthy's prose offers an interrogation of the Western mythic, and possibly the suggestion of a counter-narrative. The possibility of a counter-narrative is an important consideration here, in particular because such a narrative would likely involve the realignment of long-held beliefs about the history of the American West, and a perhaps distressing or otherwise ignominious focus of the violence that took place in the region, often with the supposedly legitimizing factors of a Christian belief system and its supporting institutions, and the frontier genesis of American exceptionalism.

As indicated, a close reading of the existing scholarship on McCarthy's western works reveals several questions remaining to be answered, aside from the primary query: whether or not McCarthy's amoral villains offer a more complex view of the American West. I argue that McCarthy's amoral characterizations form a significant thread between the various works, and, related to that claim; the chronology of the pieces impacts the nature of the antagonists and their morality. Second, this chronology indicates that the romantic mythic of the West persists. Do any of these notions indicate the need for a

counter narrative to the traditional Western – is the simplistic binary morality of the traditional narrative inappropriately sanitized? The answer is almost certainly. The participants of American colonial expansion, both the colonists who undertook the endeavor of their own volition and the Native Peoples and others upon whom the expansion of Anglo settlement into the West was exacted, deserve a more complex and complete narrative.

The history of expansion in the American West is a contentious one, fraught with injustice and bloodshed, but also romanticized as a formative period of national identity. In order to interrogate this period, specifically through a critical analysis of amoral characterizations in McCarthy's fiction, it is necessary first to examine definitive works of the West, those that established or perpetuated a romantic view of expansion. Critical responses to those formative works, initially operating within the simplistic binary of the traditional Western genre (good versus evil, civil versus savage, etc.), then evolving into revisionist perspectives, contextualize scholarship itself historically. Finally, much contemporary criticism attempts to employ revisionist perspectives to critically categorize McCarthy. Contemplation of this complex topic demands an understanding of the historical foundation of and response to the Western myth, as well as the critical conversation surrounding McCarthy's work.

At its heart, the mythologized history of the American West rests in a simplified, binary morality – one that stems from historical works and that bled into (and defined) the creative Western genre. Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 Frontier Thesis is the

foundational idea for this view, galvanizing settlers and policy makers with its adoption and expansion of the notion of manifest destiny, and serving as both rallying cry and legitimization for colonial action in the American West. According to Michael Marsden, that this idea of the West as the nexus of good versus evil found its way into the Western genre is neither accidental nor surprising, and while potentially sanitized or reductive, the Western novel remains a rich source of cultural information, providing insight into Western history, as well as its contemporary imagining (204). It seems not just possible but likely that the unsurprising nature of this sanitization stems from the privileging of Western culture, specifically as it exists within literary discourse. As Janet Walker writes, the binary morality (the notion that Anglo settlers were superior to Native Americans, that good and evil, civil and savage, were and remain clearly defined, oppositional forces in the region) has transformed the Western genre into a kind of history itself – an instance of mythopoesis that reinforces a romantic view of colonization (38). The Western genre is home to both historical and historiographical works that profoundly influence audiences' understanding of conquest and the frontier.

The creative Western genre has a long history and myriad examples, beginning with the legacy of early 19<sup>th</sup> century works like those of James Fennimore Cooper, and extending alongside colonization itself westward. It is useful here to refer again to Turner, specifically his emphasis on frontier, of a shifting boundary, as an implication that there is a shifting or instability that constitutes the West. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the genre had transitioned away from the long form novel and into pulp

fiction, namely in the genres of penny dreadfuls and dime novels, before more traditional works emerged alongside authors like Zane Grey. By the 1950s and 60s the genre was peaking with several well-received and widely distributed films, among them *Stagecoach* (1939), *High Noon* (1952), and *Shane* (1953). Louis L'Amour's traditional western novels surged in popularity in the 1970s, but by then the American consumer was largely disinterested in the genre. Subgenres began to emerge, at least partly in response to this disinterest, and *Blood Meridian* (1985) can be seen as a forerunner for a shifting understanding of and appetite for Western fiction, as well as exemplary of some aspects of the Neo-Western – a genre in which contemporary values or conceptions are explored through traditional storytelling conventions. That said, neat classification of McCarthy's works is problematic at best, and likely impossible. The propensity of popular media to move away from the traditional Western (films directed by John Ford, Anthony Mann, and Howard Hawks, for example) was perhaps most apparent in cinema, with revisionist films and Neo-Westerns (among other subgenres like Western Noir, Contemporary Western, etc.) emerging with some regularity. Peckinpah's 1969 *The Wild Bunch* is an early example, followed by Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992), and the Coen brothers' adaptation of *No Country for Old Men* (2007), among many others.

As scholars recognized the Western as a vehicle by which a sanitized or normalized historical affect was perpetuated, criticism working toward an understanding of the romantic West emerged. Typically referred to as New West critics or as New Historicism, these scholars often worked to undo the antiseptic traditional view by

reversing it – that is, the criticism is often grounded in the same sorts of binaries that define the traditional, but reversed: instead of heroic conquerors, the colonists are usurpers and thugs. This sort of discourse initially ignored the considerable complexity inherent to the subject, and therefore evolved in an attempt to better contextualize both the historical period and the creative works that stem from and are set in the West. To that end, an historical contextualization of Turner’s thesis as a product of its time suggests that the erasure and willful forgetting of violence is an acceptable corollary to expansion, a perhaps minimal but demonstrative element of New West criticism, and of New Historicism (Limerick). This potentially myopic interpretation bears additional scrutiny, and I question whether or not being historically apologetic might preserve a mythically inaccurate portrayal of the region – excusing the manner in which colonization was orchestrated could strengthen the existing, false presentation of the endeavor, specifically as seen in the Western genre. Rooted in an oppositional dualism, conflict in the West was regularly addressed with violence. Exploring the capitalist incorporation of the region, Richard Maxwell Brown writes in an attempt to move beyond the mythic tradition to the transformation of gunfighters into agents either for or against incorporation, while also stressing the intra-societal and national aspects of such conflicts. Remaining within the binary space, Brown ignores the broader conflict of expansion (between Anglo settlers and Natives), leaving open the possibility of a more complex, nuanced understanding of the interactions that characterized colonization. In a review of McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*, Caryn James begins to enter this more complex

space, writing of the novel's violence as neither an exercise in style nor a study of evil, but an affirmation of its "inexplicable reality," an act that compels the reader from complacency (1). James claims that *Blood Meridian* distances us not only from the historical past, but also from revisionist theories, effectively objectifying the characters and their actions. She concludes that there are no answers to McCarthy's life-and-death issues, but "more rigorous, coherent ways to frame the questions" (1). This objective reading of McCarthy not only places the impetus of interpretation firmly upon the reader, but also suggests the complexity of the subject matter and the possibility of multiple valid perspectives – moving far beyond the traditional binary understanding of the Western.

Employing this more objective approach, criticism of McCarthy's western work shifted away from both the traditional mythic reading, and from the upended binary discourse of revisionists. Sara Spurgeon examines McCarthy's Western fiction, claiming that his engagement with the Western mythic both challenges and accommodates the traditionally binary discourse of the region. She goes on to argue that the postmodern challenge offered by McCarthy is one not of creating a politically correct West, but an interrogation of the consequences of accepting an heroic western history. This challenge is a particularly postmodern one in the sense that McCarthy's work is defined by an apparent skepticism toward grand narratives, and is reinforced through the author's repeated presentations of morality as a constructed, contextual ethical position. Like Spurgeon, Dana Phillips writes about the ethical ambiguity of *Blood Meridian*, employing examples from throughout the novel to demonstrate the degree to which it

deconstructs the traditional good/evil binary. Phillips believes history itself in this setting to be less important than the reader might anticipate – simply a stage upon which universal acts take place (universal in the sense that events like life and death happen, eventually, always, everywhere, to all). Violence and death, he writes, are more or less unavoidable facts of life. These objectivist readings of McCarthy move toward an understanding of his work not as embodying the traditional Western myth, nor offering a counter-myth, but as vehicles through which to problematize and examine the West. Moving toward this reading, the criticism here leaves open room for a closer examination of morality as a key factor in that interrogation, specifically in the amoral presentation of McCarthy's antagonists.

Much of the critical analysis of McCarthy's work is, appropriately, situated within the scope of existing critical literary theory. The most readily applicable theoretical grounding stems not just from the New Historicism/New West approach mentioned previously, but also from considering McCarthy within the scope of post-colonial theory. Edward Said writes that "[post-colonial literatures] asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre" (2). Similarly, McCarthy's prose seeks to detotalize traditional conceptions of Western history and myth. That McCarthy's works also heavily feature notions of place and identity demonstrates further post-colonial contextualization. Said writes:

The dialectic of place and displacement is always a feature of post-colonial societies whether these have been created by a process of settlement, intervention,

or a mixture of the two. Beyond their historical and cultural differences, place, displacement, and a pervasive concern with the myths of identity and authenticity are a feature common to all post-colonial literatures (9).

Speaking in terms of critical literary theory, as in terms of genre assignment, it is fruitful to conceptualize McCarthy's Western works within the scope of a particular school of thinking – in this case post-colonial discourse – though it is problematic to label him a post-colonial author, just as it is problematic to consider his novels in specific, limited terms. Ashcroft reminds readers that “. . . authors are, I believe, very much in the history of their societies, shaping and shaped by that history and their social experience in different measure. Culture and the aesthetic forms it contains derive from historical experience . . .” (xxii). Understanding that McCarthy's own authorial aesthetic is shaped by the post-colonial history of the country in which he resides and about which he writes is an important factor in contextualizing his works, both in terms of their position within existing critical analyses and within the broader framework of literary theory.

A great deal of contemporary McCarthy criticism seeks to neatly categorize the his work, while scholars who argue that McCarthy's prose offers an objective perspective of the West find neat categorization all but impossible. Much of this attempted categorical criticism stems from reading McCarthy within a specific moral or ethical framework, and while it tends to move away from the mythic traditional Western, the binary dogma of religion (the clearly defined dualism of right and wrong, specifically in Christianity – sin and non-sin being poles, rather than points on a spectrum) factors heavily. Lydia Cooper argues that McCarthy's characters, dark and demented as they

may seem, still exhibit attempts at operating within an ethical framework. Her argument is situated within the scope of narrative interiority, as presented in McCarthy's novels, and heavily features aspects of Christian guilt. Deriving in part from McCarthy's Catholic upbringing, Cooper ultimately offers a more optimistic reading of the author than is common. Similarly, Christopher Douglas claims that the resurgence in conservative Christian values in the 1970s caused a shift in cultural and literary expression, a necessary response from critics and artists to the changing demographics of the faithful and the concomitant social capital their expansion afforded. For Douglas then, *Blood Meridian* is a product of this demanding social capital – a religiously rooted novel brought into existence to satisfy the literary needs of a burgeoning Christian population. In Douglas's reading, *Blood Meridian* is a work of theodicy – a confirmation of the presence of a deity in the face of evil. In making this claim, Douglas argues against other criticism that categorizes the novel as a Gnostic work. Attempts at this sort of neat classification suggest a return to the simplified dualism of traditional Westerns, disregarding the complexities of McCarthy's work and the period itself. Furthermore, it is important to note that in both of these religious readings of McCarthy, Cooper and Douglas ignore the factual basis for many of *Blood Meridian's* characters, and for much of the novel's plot. Neither the author's upbringing nor the possibility of a 1970s Christian revival deliver criticism that acknowledges Samuel Chamberlain's diary, the historical document upon which the novel is, in part, loosely based.

Considerable critical scholarship exists on Cormac McCarthy's fiction, including some important, thoughtful writing on the objective nature of his work, and the degree to which that objectivity offers a means by which to interrogate the mythic history of the American West. Through my critical analysis, I intend to further interrogate and formulate McCarthy criticism via a careful examination of his morally ambiguous characterizations. Analysis of the separation of McCarthy's amoral antagonists from the oppositional moral binary of the mythic West indicates the author's works as potentially demythologized lenses through which to interrogate the history of American expansion.

### **Chapter Three: Slain and Scalped in the Chancel Floor**

#### *Obscenity and Religious Impotence in the New West*

The large forces at work in McCarthy's works (the natural realm and God, in the example of *Blood Meridian*, and other comparisons involving religion in *No Country for Old Men* and *The Counselor*) are both wholly indifferent. This objective indifference manifests in that neither has a vested interest in the fate of the characters – nature and the divine are equally apathetic about the lives of humans. God and nature are both equally powerful in this formulation, and also powerless: each is, in equal parts, apathetic toward the characters' joy, suffering, pain, and death. A comparison of the efficacy of religion, specifically as opposed to the natural realm, is most readily apparent in *Blood Meridian*, and for the purposes of this examination the very specific juxtaposition of the night sky to the religious is informative. That this example is most obvious, and most significantly explored here is not an indication that examples are not readily apparent in *No Country for Old Men* and *The Counselor* as well. In the two latter works God/religion is more implicitly ineffectual – amoral, deviant, and deplorable acts still occur to religious/non-religious characters – demonstrating both the objectivity of the interactions between characters and religion, as well as the detotalization of the simplistic dualistic binaries that define the traditional Western.

This distinction may sound minor, but is significant in the context of the profane West – that is, a Western mode in which the creation of the divine is also a source of destruction for divinity. Recently the Western Language Association has explored notions of profanity in the American West, specifically the possibility of instances within the Western literary space in which one element (nature) profanes another (God) insofar as the first element can be conceived of as both a possible creation of the second and as an agent of its destruction. This is a perhaps convoluted method by which the simplified, often sanitized dualisms of the traditional Western can be demonstrated as deficiently explanatory for the true nature of the region. God is assumed in the traditional Western to be the ultimate force in the region (the omnipotent, omniscient creator of Biblical myth, bestower of manifest destiny, and legitimizer of colonization), but McCarthy's narrative places the creator and his creation on a level plane. With God and nature (a term I employ broadly to encompass all aspects of the landscape in the novel – including the night sky), operating as equals, the primacy of religion is inherently questioned. Even if nature's ability to aid the characters of the novel is questionable (which it must be as nature is also an objective force), the equanimity afforded it profanes God and religion. Ultimately, with this equality of potency in mind, the night sky, as a part of nature, is more useful to *Blood Meridian's* motley cast than the crumbling vestiges of Christianity they encounter (abandoned/ruined churches, characters who have lost or abandoned their faith, etc.). What is more, McCarthy's is profanity with a purpose: calling into question a supposedly

legitimizing force for Spanish and American colonization, the author suggests the need for a reexamination of the mythic history of westward expansion in America.

McCarthy's juxtaposition of the physical celestial bodies of the night sky with the metaphysical demonstrates the role of the stars and moon as the necessary complement to the sacred, a force that both defines and erodes religion. References to Christianity abound in *Blood Meridian*, indicative of the evangelical tone that characterized (and supposedly legitimized) westward colonization. Religion was a potent force for colonialism, pointedly related to the control of knowledge and central to the notion of manifest destiny. This potency stems from some of the earliest colonization efforts in North America, specifically from the Puritan traditions of providence and transcendence. McCarthy's portrayal of nature alongside God, as a supreme, objective force in the West, is suggestive of the possibility that nature not only predates but *supersedes* myth (religion), as well as the advent of man. As Dana Phillips puts it: "The American West in McCarthy's fiction is not the New World but a very old world, the reality of which is bedrock. We might periodize him ... as a writer not of the 'modern' or 'postmodern' eras but of the Holocene" (452). The profanity of this vision lies in the idea that the stars, the moon, the night sky (indeed all of nature) are both assumed to be creations of God, and agents of his destruction: the physical inhabitants of the vault define and erode divinity in McCarthy's West.

The history of colonization is a contentious one, fraught with violence and plagued by the need for meaningful contextualization. The lasting myth of that history,

through the sanitized explanation of a binary discourse (Native versus non-Native, Christian versus pagan, civilized versus savage, etc.), beleaguers the region. The myth of expansion and colonization traces its roots to the first European settlers in the Americas, hundreds of years before the historical events upon which McCarthy's novel is loosely based. The rhetorical genesis of that myth, however, can be seen in the writing of men like historian Frederick Jackson Turner and columnist John L. O'Sullivan.

If not overtly a counter narrative to Manifest Destiny, *Blood Meridian's* depictions of nature and religion offer readers at the very least the idea that a counter narrative should be considered. McCarthy's potential secondary discourse is apparent most simply in a comparison of the descriptions of the religiously affiliated with those of the night sky. Within this context it is also important to mention the relationship of Native Americans to the natural world. Characterized almost exclusively by a particularly close relationship with nature/landscape/flora/fauna, Native peoples both enjoyed and respected the world around them as a powerful and useful entity. Within the context of McCarthy's works (and in *Blood Meridian* specifically), this relationship suggests that the author finds the Native relationship to nature (as opposed to dogmatic, monotheistic religion), superior to the belief systems of colonizers. Further, the prose suggests a proximity to the natural realm for *all* peoples – a potential reinforcement that Native ideology was more correct than that of colonists (if still not wholly perfect) and that the attempt by colonizers to employ Christianity as a stand in was both unfavorable and

ultimately a failure. In this case the possibility of God as a stand in for the natural, a personification of nature, seems both incorrect and unnecessary.

*Blood Meridian's* religious characters are absurd at best and wholly counter their affiliations at worst. In the opening pages, the Reverend Green's tent revival is dismantled and thrown into violent mayhem on account of ridiculous and apparently baseless accusations. Some excerpted dialogue from the scene, as spoken by *Blood Meridian's* amoral antagonist, Judge Holden. The Judge, who gradually assumes the role of antagonist as the novel progresses, is an enormous, mysterious man, he is exceptionally well educated and talented, and like many members of the gang, brutally violent.

Ladies and gentlemen I feel it my duty to inform you that the man holding this revival is an imposter. He holds no papers of divinity from any institution recognized or improvised. He is altogether devoid of the least qualification to the office he has usurped and has only committed to memory a few passages from the good book for the purposes of lending to his fraudulent sermons some faint flavor of the piety he despises. In truth, the gentleman standing here before you posing as a minister of the Lord is not only totally illiterate but is also wanted by the law in the states of Tennessee, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Arkansas . . . not three weeks before this he was run out of Fort Smith Arkansas for having congress with a goat. Yes lady, that is what I said. Goat (6-7).

Aside from the subsequently revealed fact that Holden never previously met Green, and was simply inciting chaos, what is telling about the scene, and further demonstrates the tenuous nature of religion in the region/era, is the fact that the crowd gathered to hear Reverend Green speak considers the accusations plausible – a fact that clearly points to the lawlessness and lack of faith (specifically in religious institutions, but in organization generally) that pervaded the period.

Tobin, a member of the Glanton Gang, is a former priest turned murderous scalp-hunter: the so-called “frockless one” (122). The novel’s anonymous protagonist’s attempts to redeem his life of violence toward the conclusion of the narrative are accompanied by religious and literal illiteracy. Countless other examples abound. Moving away from the characters, the lands the characters traverse are referred to (among other things) as “bloodslaked,” “godless,” and “godforsook,” while churches in *Blood Meridian* are found abandoned, almost exclusively in ruins, and often inhabited by corpses and/or scavenging animals. In at least two instances in the novel, a church is the site for a mass killing, one of which is carried out by the Glanton Gang itself and wherein the denizens of the sacked town are “... slain and scalped in the chancel floor” (181).

Armed with these descriptions, a reader can reasonably form an idea of God in this setting as an ambivalent creator at best, and more likely a wholly apathetic or simply nonexistent one. The deity in this realm is neither omnipotent nor omniscient, merely an observer. During one of his fireside pontifications, the Judge questions the former priest: “If God meant to interfere in the degeneracy of mankind would he have not done so by now?” (146). No clearer example from the text highlights (or at least questions) the objectivity of an apparently absentee creator.

Comparing the descriptions of the religiously affiliated to those of the night skies is telling. While churches in *Blood Meridian* are ruinous and filled with the dead, and religious persons and practices are absurd and impotent, McCarthy’s descriptions of the physical heavens are filled with awe and purpose. Regularly throughout the novel

characters employ the stars as navigational aids, with at least eleven constellations mentioned by name (the dawnstar, the Dipper, the Great Bear, the Pleiades, Cancer, Virgo, Leo, Cassiopeia, Sirius, Cetus, Orion, Betelgeuse). Early in the novel, McCarthy writes: "...the starsprent reaches of the galaxies hung in a vast aura above the riders' heads" (154). And later, as the kid wanders in the mountains after getting separated from the group in a snowstorm: (he stumbles along) "... 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). These passages are important in demonstrating first that McCarthy is placing enough importance on the stars to provide explicit mentions of their names, and in so doing demonstrating the importance of those names as points of navigational reference. Second, the manner in which he employs descriptive language of scenes involving stars or of the stars themselves is considerably more colorful and vibrant than when scenes involve religious references or institutions.

It is obvious in comparing these descriptions that nature (the night sky) is treated by McCarthy with greater reverence than religion. The wonder with which he describes the goings on in the heavens is considerably greater than that which he affords "a rude Christ," "a poor Judas," or a "godless charivari" (190, 263). Importantly, it is also plain that the stars care no more for the characters of *Blood Meridian* than does God.

They are also wholly objective, apathetic observers. *However*, the night sky does offer to the characters some tangible form of assistance – more than can be said for religion in my

estimation. Whether through their ability to guide them or hide them, the physical heavens are more impactful to *Blood Meridian's* fragile cast – and thusly nature profanes God. Indeed, as McCarthy writes of his characters: “They came to know the night skies well” (46), and in so doing, reinforced the import of the physical bodies of nature over their supposed creator.

*Blood Meridian* is a work of historical fiction that consistently, pointedly denies classification. The novel combines unimaginable brutality and desperate beauty, ingenuity and ignorance, crass and grace. The morality of the novel, however, the ambiguity of its ethics, is perhaps the factor that makes it most difficult to pigeonhole what is often considered McCarthy's finest work. Examples of this ambiguity exist throughout the novel, but the juxtaposition of nature and God is a powerful indicator of the author's ability to craft a narrative that transcends the traditionally binary discourse of the American West. For the characters of *Blood Meridian*, the stars, the moon, and the night sky are more important factors for existence than their supposed creator. As such, the deity's creation has profaned him – nature has become both the necessary complement to God, and a force for his destruction. In so crafting this discourse, McCarthy offers the careful reader a purpose for his profanity. The good/evil binary upon which the mythicized colonization of the American West is predicated, is, if not imploded, certainly called into question by such an ambiguous approach. The religious legitimization of brutality is upended, and the objectivity (the apathy) of both God and nature in the usurpation of space is revealed. Narration from *Blood Meridian* perhaps

sums the situation most appropriately: “Stars were falling across the sky myriad and random, speeding along brief vectors from their origins in night to their destinies in death and nothingness” (333).

*Blood Meridian*'s historical setting makes religion more thematically prominent, but examples of religiously constructed or informed morality exist in *No Country for Old Men* and *The Counselor* as well. In *No Country*, and specifically focalized through Sheriff Bell's commentary, the lasting and dichotomous nature of Christianity in the American West is clear. At one point in the novel, Bell and a deputy sheriff named Torbert are discussing the method by which antagonist Anton Chigurh murdered a man and stole his car (Chigurh used a pneumatic piston operated with a hand held air compressor – a device typically used to slaughter cattle), and are both surprised by the increasing barbarity of crime in the region.

Who the hell are these people? he said. I don't know. I used to say they were the same ones we've always had to deal with. Same ones my granddaddy had to deal with. Back then they was rustlin cattle. Now they're runnin dope. But I don't know as that's true no more. I'm like you. I ain't sure we've seen these people before. Their kind. I don't know what to do about em even. If you killed em all they'd have to build and annex on to hell. (79)

The statement demonstrates several things: first, the othering that pervades the area (“they,” “these people,” “their kind”), second, the binary morality that separates people like Bell and Torbert from those committing the crimes and murders about which they are speaking, and third, the Judeo-Christian underpinnings of that morality via the mention of hell (particularly as the end place for the people committing the crimes). The sheriff's morality is tied up in his Judeo-Christian understanding of the world. Later in the novel,

Bell is recounting a conversation in which he tells an acquaintance that narcotics are something Satan may have dreamt up to destroy humanity:

. . . they asked me if I believed in Satan. I said well that ain't the point. And they said I know but do you? I had to think about that. I guess as a boy I did. Come the middle years my belief I reckon had waned somewhat. Now I'm startin to lean back the other way. He explains a lot of things that otherwise don't have no explanation. Or not to me they don't. (218)

It is important and necessary to again point out that the occasion of religious references is less frequent in the two later McCarthy works than in *Blood Meridian*. This is, at least in part, likely a result of the later works' setting in a *post*-colonial space, as opposed to the colonial period in which *Blood Meridian* is set (a period during which religion was a much more important and potent tool, rather than the 20<sup>th</sup> century setting of the latter works wherein religion's impact became more residual than active). I am not suggesting that the more frequent references to religion legitimizes religious ideas, only that religious motifs are more pronounced in *Blood Meridian* than in the later works because religion was a more pronounced aspect of everyday life in the mid-nineteenth century than in the mid-twentieth century. With that said, the presence of religious motifs, alongside the demonstration of Christianity's dogmatic binaries as impotent in *No Country for Old Men* and *The Counselor*, is, if more subtle, important in making clear McCarthy's implication that the Western region transcends simplistic explanation and understanding – as well as in a chronological perpetuation of profanity in the region.

At one point in McCarthy's screenplay, *The Counselor*, there is a long exchange between Malkina and the counselor's fiancé Laura regarding religion generally, but the

Catholic practice of confession specifically. The two women are lounging poolside, and though it is never stated explicitly in the text, are assumed to be acquainted as a result of the relationship between the counselor and Reiner, Malkina's partner/lover. Laura, who is a practicing Catholic, explains the process of confession to Malkina, who it is intimated through the exchange, is both ignorant of religious practice, and somewhat disdainful of it. At the end of the exchange Malkina determines that Laura is becoming uncomfortable, and deigns to change the subject:

MALKINA: We'll talk about *my* sex life.

LAURA: (Looking up) You're teasing.

MALKINA: Just rattling your cage. What a world.

LAURA: You think the world is strange.

MALKINA: I meant yours. (49)

Malkina's playful, almost arrogant admission that she finds the simplicity of Laura's religiously-informed sexuality strange is telling, namely in the sense that such an admission reveals a character operating outside the sphere of a world view predicated upon an oppositional understanding of actions that are acceptable or not acceptable (a modern evolution of the civil versus savage mentality of the old west – and yet another incident revealing the chronological connection between each of the three McCarthy works explored in this analysis). In a later scene, Malkina visits a church in order to experiment with the act of confession. She has a conversation with the priest, inquiring after further details of the process:

PRIEST: I couldn't give you absolution. Even if you did. Confess. You couldn't be forgiven.

MALKINA: I know. I just wanted to tell someone what I'd done and I thought why not go to a professional.

PRIEST: Have you thought about taking instructions?  
MALKINA: That's not something I do very well.  
PRIEST: I mean in order to become a Catholic. You take what are called instructions. You learn about the faith. What it means. Then you could confess and you would be forgiven for your sins.  
MALKINA: How do you know?  
PRIEST: Excuse me?  
MALKINA: What if they're unforgivable?  
PRIEST: Nothing is unforgivable.  
MALKINA: Yeah? What's the worst thing anyone ever told you?  
PRIEST: I wouldn't be at liberty to tell you a thing like that. The priest can never reveal anything from the confessional.  
MALKINA: That bad, huh? Well I haven't killed anybody. But I've been pretty bad. I think. I don't really know because I'm not all that sure about the rules. (82-83)

What arises from these examples is an overriding question about the purpose of an apparently apathetic and impotent deity in the American West. Religion served during the colonial period as a means by which knowledge could be controlled; both redirected in a colonially beneficial manner and limited in terms of its dissemination to a privileged class. This control was the evolutionary product of the Puritanical roots of European religion in North American colonization: notions of transcendence, and especially of divine providence, fueled beliefs about legitimacy in the conquest of the continent. Additionally, Christian ideology (most notably paternalism and a call to reform) provided the linchpin in establishing manifest destiny as an ideology on the frontier. The amorality of McCarthy's antagonists repeatedly demonstrates that religion, traditionally employed as a vehicle for legitimizing colonization and controlling both colonizers and colonized, was and is, in reality inappropriately portrayed as such. That is, religious impotence

manifests itself through the oversimplification of a binary morality, and further, as an ultimately indifferent force, is ill equipped to legitimize conquest.

## Chapter Four: The World is no Narrow Thing

### *Myth Breaking, Myth Making in Blood Meridian and Beyond*

There is no shortage of scholarship on Cormac McCarthy's 1985 opus, *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West*. In the more than thirty years since its publication, the novel has been lauded by scholars and critics as both a canonical example of the traditional Western narrative, and a rebuke of that tradition. I argue that *Blood Meridian* belongs to the latter camp, though perhaps not in the explicit sense that many critics claim. McCarthy's novel is an unflinching and objective description of the American West, the characters of which act and interact, often ambiguously, in roles separate from those established for them in the discourse of traditional Western mythology. That is, Euro-American characters are not unilaterally portrayed as rugged individuals with a legitimate and purposeful claim to the West, nor are they simply murderers and usurpers. Similarly, Native peoples (among others) are represented neither as savages nor as victims without agency. Significantly, while the novel acknowledges the existence of a flawed mythology, it does not assert any specific moral commentary. That is, McCarthy portrays historical events not previously addressed by historians in *Blood Meridian* in a strictly objective, descriptive manner, one intended neither as a condemnation nor justification. Here is the novel's true objectivism: it seeks to neither condemn nor to justify the actions it presents, only to bring them out of the recesses of

the forgotten and display them for our collective consideration. Finally, the novel engages in what Tolkien termed “mythopoesis”: the creation of a new mythology in prose through the integration of traditional mythological themes or archetypes. *Blood Meridian* occupies this mythic space by symbolically building on history – McCarthy invites his reader to consider a past not part or product of the traditional myth of the West. Through his acknowledgment of a Western myth, his ambiguous, objective portrayal of an historical period central to that myth, and in his engagement of mythopoesis, McCarthy abandons the oppositional binaries of the past and dismantles the sanitized discourse of westward expansion – he delivers in *Blood Meridian* an invitation to examine, and reconsider, the often depraved history of North American colonization.

In order to appropriately analyze the extent to which McCarthy dismantles the mythology of westward expansion in *Blood Meridian*, it is first necessary to explore the definition and origin of that myth, as well as some scholarship that attempts to address it. Within that examination a definitive, binary discourse will be revealed which is absent from the novel. *Blood Meridian*, then, will be seen to exist outside of such a dualistic definition, acting instead as a descriptive, objective agent for dismantling the outdated discourse of the American West.

For the sake of paying due diligence to the forefathers of this mythology, it is appropriate to mention that contemporary New West scholars have moved toward less accusatory framing, at least, of the writing of Frederick Jackson Turner (and others). Patricia Limerick writes in “Turnerians All” of the binding nature of the period in which

Turner wrote, and that he could not point out “...the short-sightedness and mistaken preoccupations of established authority in American history...” or “...frankly discuss the flaws of the 1893 essay because it formed the foundation of his career...” (703).

Limerick writes that Turner was well aware of these shortcomings but chose not to pursue them – a decision she claims from which the study of history has yet to recover. So it is perhaps disingenuous to claim that Turner and O’Sullivan are at fault for the creation of the myth of the West, instead working to extend ideology that had been present from the very outset of American colonization, but certainly their writings are elements in which the spark of the myth can be seen. (And that spark certainly found a fruitful home in the capitalist tinderbox that underpinned American colonization.) It is in the acceptance of the discourse, through the language of omission that stifled questioning the veracity of their writing, and through the willful forgetting of the violence that was wrought with the approval of a binary morality, that their words *became* myth.

Scholars other than Limerick have written in an attempt to elucidate the nature of Western mythology. Richard Maxwell Brown dissects regional violence in the West by examining the aspects of its composition, specifically the binary structure and misconstrued values that define it. Richard Brown’s essay “Western Violence: Structure, Values, Myth” provides some interesting insight into the realm of late nineteenth and early twentieth century violence in the American West. Brown dissects regional violence by examining three aspects of its composition, the most important of which for this examination is his approach to myth. Brown argues that the “supreme mythic moment” of

Western violence is governed by “the principle of no duty to retreat” and “hip pocket ethics” (18). Brown writes that scholarship on Western popular culture “dramatizes a deep formula in which the gunfighting hero mediates between civilization and savagery, culture and nature, order and chaos,” that the hero employs violence “reluctantly, but necessarily” to bring order to a chaotic realm (19). Brown attempts to break down this binary of civilized versus savage by suggesting that “the reality of [the West] ... produced a conflict – a cognitive split – in the mythology of the western hero” (20). Brown suggests this split produced two opposing mythic heroes: one a conservative, pro-incorporation gunslinger, the other a dissident bandit. He argues that the conservative hero is slightly more dominant as a result of a nationalist fear of anarchy, but that the bandit hero retains a popular mystique as a representation of American ambivalence surrounding established power – an echo of the scene in *Blood Meridian* with Reverend Green’s disastrous tent revival. Brown’s analysis falls short because it, like the broader myth of civilized versus savage as an accurate or appropriate consideration of westward expansion, continues to operate within a binary space. Though his binary is somewhat different from that of the traditional western myth, his examination still relies on a dichotomous relationship between civil and savage. *Blood Meridian* deconstructs the binary set forth broadly by the myth of westward expansion and Manifest Destiny, as well as the specific mythic suggestions put forth by Brown.

One of the most powerful ways in which McCarthy’s prose addresses and then dispels the mythic history of the West is by first acknowledging that such a history exists.

Throughout *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy does so most effectively in an indirect way, never offering a judgment, moral or otherwise, as to the primacy of the existing myth, or of some other discourse. This is seen most typically through his depraved polymath, the quasi-protagonist Judge Holden. Through the actions, and especially the language of the Judge, McCarthy demonstrates an understanding of the mythology of westward expansion. The Judge then begins to embody the role of historian; he acts as keeper, or *suzerain*, of knowledge. Within this role Holden himself embodies the mythic aspect of expansion, and repeatedly demonstrates in *Blood Meridian* his ability and desire for control of a narrative outside his own. Though there are many examples of this in the novel, two are of particular importance because of the Judge's self-reflection about *why* he desires control of his world:

The Judge all day had made small forays among the rock of the gorge through which they'd passed and now at the fire he spread part of a wagon sheet on the ground and was sorting out his finds ... he took up each piece, flint or potsherd or tool of bone, and deftly sketched it into the book. ... when he had done ... he gathered up the other artifacts and cast them also into the fire ... A Tennessean named Webster had been watching him and he asked the Judge what he aimed to do with those notes and sketches and the Judge smiled and said that it was his intention to expunge them from the memory of man. (140)

The Judge ... carried his rifle loaded with the small hard seeds of the nopal fruit and in the evening he would dress expertly the colorful birds he'd shot ... packing them away in his wallets ... Toadvine sat watching him as he made his notations in the ledger ... and asked him what was his purpose in all this ... The Judge wrote on and then he folded the ledger shut and laid it to one side ... Whatever exists, he said. Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent. (198)

The Judge becomes the vessel of knowledge not available to others, and in his destruction of a thing, he also becomes its creator and owner. He reflects the fluid nature of the time

and place in which the novel is set: a physical borderland that is echoed in the border within the Judge between the physical violence and the violence toward language that he affects or actualizes. The characterization of the Judge is a microcosm of the novel as a whole, serving not as a counter narrative to the decontaminated rhetoric of the Western myth (the erasure of colonial brutality, the willed forgetting of history that implicates what must be called genocide), but as an examination of that deleterious history that might demand a counter narrative. Shawn Jasinski appropriately points out that the Judge's awareness of his role amplifies his embodiment of violence, and that his actions of documentation and destruction are manifestations of his understanding of the significance of controlling the narrative (2).

Jasinski writes that *Blood Meridian* presents a narrative diversion from the traditional, broader mythology of westward expansion, debunking an anesthetized version of its genocidal origins. He claims that the physical violence of manifest destiny is echoed by violence present in the *discourse* of Western mythology. Jasinski reminds us of Michel Foucault's assertion that violence in language causes us to "recognize the negative activity of the cutting out and rarefaction of discourse" and to "conceive of discourse as a violence that we do to things" (Foucault, qtd. in Jasinski, 3). The point here is that the physical violence and brutality of the period are made visible in McCarthy's novel – a clear separation from the willed forgetting facilitated by the discourse of western mythology, and further acknowledgement that such a mythology exists. As Jasinski points out, the problem with this myth is not that it is more palatable than reality,

but rather that it becomes blind to its amnesiac identity. The trouble is not that the myth is false, but that it is accepted as *truth* – the language of omission has stifled probing its veracity. The myth is strong.

Objectivity and ambiguity characterize much of *Blood Meridian*, and by describing character, action, and setting in this way, McCarthy disrupts the oppositional duality of the western myth. Nowhere is the removal of that binary more evident than in a comparison of the descriptions of a Comanche war party encountered by the kid and Captain White's filibusters (a remnant company of American soldiers the kid joins early in the novel; White plans to continue the Mexican-American War in spite of a signed treaty ending the conflict), to one of the kid's first encounter with the Glanton Gang a few days later. The description of the Comanche is horrifying:

A legion of horribles, hundreds in number, half naked or clad in costumes attic or biblical or wardrobed out of a fevered dream with the skins of animals and silk finery and pieces of uniform still tracked with the blood of prior owners, coats of slain dragoons, frogged and braided cavalry jackets, one in a stovepipe hat and one with an umbrella and one in white stockings and a bloodstained weddingveil ... and their horses' ears and tails worked with bits of brightly colored cloth and one whose horse's whole head was painted crimson red and all the horsemen's faces gaudy and grotesque ... riding down upon them like a horde from a hell more horrible yet than the brimstone land of Christian reckoning... (52-53).

Yet by comparison, the supposedly civilized members of the Glanton Gang sound surprisingly similar, arguably more savage than the natives:

...they saw one day a pack of viciouslooking humans mounted on unshod indian ponies riding half drunk through the streets, bearded, barbarous, clad in the skins of animals stitched up with the thews and armed with weapons of every description, revolvers of enormous weight and bowieknives the size of claymores and short twobarreled rifles with bores you could stick your thumbs in and the trappings of their horses fashioned out of human skin and their bridles woven up

from human hair and decorated with human teeth and the riders wearing scapulars or necklaces of dried and blackened human ears ... the whole like a visitation from some heathen land where they and others like them fed on human flesh (78).

This comparison encapsulates to some extent what McCarthy Society writer Rich Wallach describes as a “dismantling of the politically correct myth of aboriginal victimization – rendering the victims and their antagonizers indistinguishable” (n.p.). However, Wallach’s claim is questionable, as ascribing each group a similar appearance in no way mitigates the brutal treatment to which Native peoples were subjected, an issue McCarthy seems deeply concerned about. Further evidence of an erosion of the binary of western myth can be found in the gang itself, the members of which include whites, a black, a Mexican, natives, illiterates, the multi-lingual Judge, an ex-priest, and felons – all led by a wanted former military captain – John Joel Glanton. That these characters can inhabit the same space is incredible – at least when considered through the established mythic lens. That they can operate as a largely cohesive unit is largely unheard of within the context of the traditional Western. Perhaps what binds these characters is further indicative of the myopia of the binaries set forth by Brown. Neither strictly incorporationist, nor dissident bandits, the gang are driven by distinctly capitalist desires to work (read: murder and mutilate) at the behest of local governors, yet they obey no laws, sacking and killing at will. They fight against the presumed savagery of the natives, simultaneously perpetuating their own particular brand of barbarity and anarchy. Glanton and his men fit neatly into neither Brown’s simplistic mythic molds, nor into the broader tropes definitive for the traditional Western genre. The existence of these characters in a

(somewhat) cohesive group would be impossible in the simplistic binary of the traditional western mythology. Ambiguity within (or the explicit removal of) the binaries surrounding human characteristics and behavior in the traditional myth is one means by which McCarthy dismantles the privileged discourse. Demonstrating the objective, ambiguous character of the setting – especially the landscape of the west – is another.

Another instance of McCarthy's acknowledgement of an existing western mythology (and an uncharacteristically direct commentary on the fallacy of such a mythology) comes in the character of Captain White and the doomed filibusters with whom the kid takes up early in the novel. White's spiel to the kid includes a description of Mexicans (who White continues to pursue in spite of the end of the Mexican-American War) as "A mongrel race ... manifestly incapable of governing themselves" (34). The kid is persuaded to join Captain White's company, only to encounter a band of Comanche Indians on the plains who slaughter every man in the company – save the kid and one other. Surviving the desert in which he is marauded, the kid is arrested upon entering a small town, and eventually shown the head of former Captain White in a jar of mescal. The kid's reaction to being shown the head is both humorous and overtly telling: "In this container with hair afloat and eyes turned upward in a pale face sat a human head . . . It was Captain White . . . the kid looked . . . and he spat and wiped his mouth. He aint no kin to me, he said" (69-70). When asked about the late captain's head by a former compatriot, the kid further demonstrates the narrator's awareness of the existing myth:

“Somebody ought to have pickled it a long time ago. By rights they ought to pickle mine. For ever takin up with such a fool” (70).

McCarthy acknowledges the mythic history of the west, particularly the violence (both in the physical violence and in the willful forgetting so central to the regional discourse) that is essential to it and a critical aspect of both the creation and perpetuation of that myth. In so doing the author is able both to dismantle the particularities of the moral binaries that characterized (and supposedly legitimized) expansion, and to offer an ambiguous, objective description of a potential historical reality – one that invites readers of *Blood Meridian* to reconsider that history.

As evidenced in the writing of Frederick Turner and John O’Sullivan, the land of the west was of particular importance in framing the notion of western mythology. Land was a prize to be won, a challenge to overcome, a commodity for the taking. In *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy demonstrates through careful description a landscape that is at once beautiful and deadly – and one that retains a great deal of agency with regard to those that might “win” it. The landscape of *Blood Meridian* is at once a place of incredible toil, and of terrible beauty – and it cares not for those that tread upon it. As Natasha Mayne explains, the western myth, in terms of landscape, resonates within a “masculine, magisterial gaze”, one that “places the viewer in the position of detached surveyor and the object of this look as passive and devoid of agency” (5). She goes on to write of the visual ambiguity in *Blood Meridian*, a novel where “even animals and inanimate entities such as the landscape are accorded a kind of visual agency” (5). Her point is well

meaning, but Mayne's word choice reveals the deep grasp of the traditional myth – by describing *even* animals, etc., she indicates (subtly) that those entities might not be entitled to the agency that they hold in the novel – that is, “even” in this sense is a sort of pejorative. Dana Phillips summarizes the notion of natural objectivity in the novel well, writing: “*Blood Meridian* treats darkness, violence, sudden death, and all other calamities as natural occurrences – like the weather . . . the world of nature and the world of men are parts of the same world, and both are equally violent and indifferent to the other” (439, 447).

Phillips writes convincingly and at length about the importance of nature and the landscape in *Blood Meridian*; that the ambiguity of one particular passage:

...reinforces the lack of precedence, of referential order, in the natural world and helps make apparent the ‘unguessed kinships’ between objects as diverse as goat turds, the sun, men, and gods. This kinship, however, neither ennoble the turds nor debases the gods but merely makes them equal in that both are putatively factual (445).

Nothing is privileged in the non-binary dynamic of McCarthy's novel, a stark contrast to the traditional western myth. Phillips writes with the assumption that a deity is generally assumed to be real, that assumption positioning the physical and metaphysical on the same plane. As Phillips goes on to point out, even the characters of the novel seem to have a subtle, equanimous awareness of their position in this natural world: “For McCarthy, description and the natural world as categories contain both narrative and human beings”, and are “parts of the same continuum . . . if a grizzly bear eats one of

Glanton's Delaware scouts or a wild bull gores one of their horses, its business as usual ... they ride on" (446).

The indifference of landscape is present in *No Country for Old Men* and *The Counselor* as well, though perhaps less dramatically than in *Blood Meridian*, or at least less obviously. In the two later works, landscape as an important factor in setting is intertwined with violent acts, intimating that violence can and does happen everywhere, to anyone. In *No Country*, a fleeing Moss is pursued across southern Texas in scrub countryside, across streams, in hotels, and across sleepy city streets. He crosses into Mexico but remains unable to escape. In the novel landscape and setting become to at least some extent synonymous, insofar as the setting in which the focalizing character of Llewelyn Moss is indifferent to his plight. Additionally, and reinforced by the violence perpetrated by amoral antagonist Chigurh, his ability to commit violent acts in a wide variety of settings further indicates that landscape/setting in *No Country* is a stage upon which fate is a byproduct of chance, rather than the linear, teleological construction of the traditionally binary Western mode.

Similarly in *The Counselor*, violence occurs in several countries (Mexico, the U.S., and an unnamed "world city"), demonstrating again that landscape as setting is not privileged above the antipathy of universal acts. Notions of universality work against the traditional Western mythic insofar as they move away from an antiseptic idealization of the Western space, and in that these notions push against the supposition of Western cultural dominance or benevolence.

Through his acknowledgment of an existing mythic western history, and in his objective, ambiguous depiction of that history in *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy begins to engage in his own myth making. Tolkien, master storyteller, called the inclusion of mythic tropes in fiction *mythopoesis*, a term taken from a poem Tolkien wrote called “Mythopoeia,” in which he defends mythology and myth-making as an important creative act that works to define and narrative universal truths. The manner in which McCarthy describes the events of this novel can be understood to operate within that definition. Jay Ellis writes that “We need not choose between historical and mythic readings of McCarthy: he works in both areas, and the links between things that have indeed happened . . . and the older stories echoing in McCarthy’s imagery simply add to the power . . . it is regularly McCarthy’s practice to build onto history stories whose meanings reach a mythic level” (91). *Blood Meridian* is loosely based on history, and is set in an historical period. The novel transcends that narrow scope however, offering for readers a scenario of timeless interaction, and furthermore dismantling the traditional genre and mythic.

Brian Edwards writes that “In *Blood Meridian*, history’s *real* is reprocessed in terms of the surreal, the fabulous and the symbolic, those forms of the other always at play within the formations of identity and truth, even when they are denied, that constitute the processes of mythopoesis” (31). The myth making that McCarthy engages serves to further the novel’s objective portrayal of events and existence. Edwards continues by writing of mythopoesis that “. . . landscape, character, event, history, and

literature ... are reinvested with other symbolic possibilities; their reception and interpretation are inherently comparative, part of a deliberately invitational text and a continuing process of connection and exploration” (33). This gets to the core of *Blood Meridian* – it is an invitation to readers to explore an aspect of narrative that has long been clouded in untruth. Edwards continues: “. . . history and its imaginings are never lost . . . they are recycled in the displaced forms of allusion, metaphor, symbol and myth, this elaborate and changing palimpsest upon which new inscriptions are made and have their meanings” (34).

Many scholars have claimed that *Blood Meridian* is a counter narrative. Sara Spurgeon argues that the novel “. . . presents a counter-memory, a sort of anti-myth of the West, illuminating especially the roots of the modern American relationships between Anglos and non-Anglos and between humans and the natural world” (20). While I agree with her commentary generally, I believe McCarthy demonstrates a greater nuance than simply putting forth an antithesis to the western mythology – his writing is too dense, too violent, too ambiguous to be read that way. My argument here is not that McCarthy is creating a counter- or anti-myth – *Blood Meridian* neither condemns nor condones the false myth of expansion, merely describes events that invite the reader to reconsider the established narrative. Mythopoesis in that sense becomes a tool, a means by which the author can endow his work with the hefty clout of age, history, and perhaps, wisdom.

In fact the mythic elements of the novel work alongside its objectivity, its ambiguity, its ambivalence, to provide only a *description* of events – likely this portrayal

*feels* like a counter narrative strictly because of the strength of the existing myth, both in the historical and creative spaces. The sanitizing, amnesiac power of the original myth has so skewed readers' ability of appraisal that an objective view feels antithetical to the so well known mythic "truth." Simple description, rather than narrative with moral or historical/political commentary, colors much of the novel. In this way the ambiguity of the violence that is seen throughout *Blood Meridian* can be viewed as events unfolding upon an open, undefined space, rather than within the confines of a particularly western American discourse. One must consider, however, the faith McCarthy invests in his readers to interpret the events presented in his works for themselves – not necessarily value neutral, but certainly in deferment of the longstanding associations of obvious judgement. The brutality of McCarthy's work appears timeless, contributing to its mythic nature. Phillips writes that, within the novel, "Violence and death . . . are more or less the objective truths of all human experience" (439).

*Blood Meridian* is an objective glimpse at an historical period in American history that has long been muddied by the simplistic morality of a western mythology rooted in oppositional binaries. The novel acknowledges the myth of the west, then dismantles it. In so doing however, McCarthy's creation does not pass judgment, merely encourages examination. Jay Ellis may say it best when he writes that the epilogue of *Blood Meridian* reminds us that "the golden time . . . – if it ever existed – was purchased with the blood of thousands of people and animals, and at the price of inscribing across the vast spaces of the American West the rectilinear constraints that only civilized humans could dream up,

and that only barbarous humans could enforce” (86). The myth of the American west is an ardent one, one not easily abandoned or forgotten. McCarthy, and *Blood Meridian*, invite us to delve into the darkness of that memory, possibly to find and confront a place inside ourselves, and our history, we might prefer to forget, or worse still, never even know.

## Chapter Five: Truth Has No Temperature

### *Welcome to the New West: No Country for Old Genres*

Cormac McCarthy's work regularly defies traditional classification. *Blood Meridian*, for example, is a Western and an anti-Western, a work of historical fiction and a treatise on history's fallacy. The author's novel *No Country for Old Men* and its adaptation to film by fraternal directorial duo Joel and Ethan Coen provide additional examples of works for which genre classification is difficult, while McCarthy's most recent screenplay *The Counselor* can be classified similarly. The complexities of these works have resulted in hybridized classifications (Western/Thriller or Western/Noir, for example). Though pigeonholing McCarthy (and the Coens) is possibly reductive, I believe the author's work has transcended hybridization, instead residing somewhere within the relatively novel genre: the Neo-Western.

An examination of the writing of film scholars Robert Warshow and William Devlin demonstrates a particular, direct morality in which the traditional Western takes place. Within that moral framework, hero and villain characters operate in well-defined roles and undertake specific social positions, thereby defining the genre. A close analysis of the action and characters of *No Country* illustrates that neither the film nor novel adhere to the defining characteristics set forth by Warshow and Devlin. Instead, both novel and film leave behind the traditional tropes and focus rather on the new reality of a

transformative American West. While the examination presented here centralizes its focus primarily on *No Country for Old Men*, it is important to understand that the critical analysis is applicable to both *Blood Meridian* and *The Counselor* as well, especially in consideration of where the works differ (specifically the novel/screenplay and their associated films), and in the possible reasons for those divergences.

The emergence of an amoral antagonist in Anton Chigurh and the aging hero Sheriff Bell's inability to comprehend his opponent are chief among the redefining characteristics of *No Country*. Additionally, the presence of a reordering of racial hierarchy and a fatalistic conclusion are indicative that neither the novel nor film can be classified by the tropes of the traditional Western. Though the Coens' film adaptation is laudably faithful to McCarthy's novel, a major departure is apparent in the absence of the regular monologues of the aged hero. Sheriff Bell's commentary (Bell's monologues are central in establishing him as a traditionally moral character, and can be employed to further demonstrate Chigurh's amorality by comparison) at the outset of each of McCarthy's chapters serves as a series of touchstones for the novel, an overt acknowledgement of the changes wrought by the passage of time, presented by one to whom the changes are occurring. Although the removal of Bell's addresses from the film is not complete, their absence diminishes somewhat the overt impact of McCarthy's message about the difficult and painful nature of transition.

Robert Warshow defines the Western as a tale of the frontier, a tragedy in which a virtuous hero seeks "not to extend his dominion but only to assert his personal value" (460). The beneficial lens of historical context indicates that this definition is a bit too generous. The traditional Western is typified by Anglo invaders exacting their will upon savagely portrayed Natives of the American West, violently and dramatically seeking to extend their dominion with the explicit approval of a monochromatic morality. This endeavor is understood as both historically accurate and acceptable, vis-à-vis the Western mythic. The expectation of, and entitlement to, moral superiority has been replaced in the Neo-Western by either a less ethnocentric view, or perhaps more dangerously, the complete detachment from morality. Historical accuracy aside, the traditional depiction of Western characters was of individuals regularly pursuing the extension of colonial dominion within a binary morality. Elements of Warshow's definition are important in establishing a precedent for the Western genre, however, especially the idea of a frontier tragedy. It is important to note the extent to which McCarthy's broader concerns and aims are represented within the scope of the Neo-Western, as the elements definitive for the genre are present not just in *No Country for Old Men*, but also in the author's other works described in this analysis. The presence of these thematic elements throughout McCarthy's Western oeuvre demonstrates their importance to the cultural milieu of the West, to the deeply rooted and historically significant nature of the Western mythic, and finally to the author's intention to interrogate, disrupt, and problematize the wide acceptance of a sanitized discourse of Western history and colonization.

William Devlin defines the traditional Western more broadly as one including "a hero, a villain, and a narrative confrontation between them" (8). Devlin's hero is defined by actions "motivated by . . . moral obligations," whereas his villain is one whose actions are "immoral in the sense that they are rooted in self-interest" (8-9). This definition is particularly interesting when considered within the moral sphere: McCarthy's characters, unlike those that Devlin writes of as defining the Western, are less villains than antagonists – they are only immoral if/when they are conceived of within the scope of the binary. By Devlin's definition, when the narrative confrontation concludes, it allows the hero to "save the day so that the moral dilemma is finally resolved and all is set right in the Western country" (9). Devlin's definition is particularly effective in developing the concept of an essential morality in the traditional Western, a morality that is absent from McCarthy's novels and the Coens' (and Scott's) film(s), but what is most important to note from the critic's definition of the genre is the *absence* of resolution in each of McCarthy's works discussed here. The traditional Western genre is dependent upon tidy resolution, both as a tenet of its existence and as a harbinger of moral correctness – if the work's conflict is resolved the positive pole of the binary has been justified. The mythic history of the West is also hinged upon tidy resolution: the notion that the winning of the frontier was both an orderly and legitimate enterprise.

Near the conclusion of the novel *No Country for Old Men*, after Moss and Wells have been killed, after the money has been recovered by Chigurh and returned to its owner, Chigurh goes to the home where Moss's widow Carla Jean is living to kill her. He

tells Carla Jean that he has come to kill her because he gave his word to her late husband that he would do so. After he and Carla have a short exchange, during which he explains the situation amid her protestations, he obliges to give her a chance:

He watched her, his chin in his hand. All right, he said. This is the best I can do. He straightened out his leg and reached into his pocket and drew out a few coins and took one and held it up. He turned it. For her to see the justice of it. He held it between his thumb and forefinger and weighted it and then flipped it spinning in the air and caught it and slapped it down on his wrist. Call it, he said. She looked at him, at his outheld wrist. What? She said.

CHIGURH: Call it.

CARLA JEAN: I won't do it.

CHIGURH: Yes you will. Call it.

CARLA JEAN: God would not want me to do that.

CHIGURH: Of course he would. You should try to save yourself. Call it. This is your last chance.

Heads, she said.

He lifted his hand away. The coin was tails.

CHIGURH: I'm sorry. (258)

After another short exchange, he kills her. While this scene once again demonstrates Anton Chigurh's ruthlessness, his adherence to an amoral code of ethics, it is also significant in its departure from the traditional Western trope of tidy conclusion and neat resolution. Neither happens here in the traditional sense. The antagonist escapes legal justice, the traditional hero Bell retires in defeat, and the picaresque Moss and his innocent wife are both murdered. What is interesting in terms of the antagonist is that immediately following this scene, as he is leaving Carla Jean's home, Chigurh is involved in a car accident (totally by chance), and is fairly seriously injured. He is able to walk away, but he is cut and suffers a compound fracture of the arm. The objectivity of the narrative extends to *all* its characters.

In the final scene of the screenplay *The Counselor*, Malkina and an unnamed man are at a restaurant. It has been revealed that she orchestrated the double cross of Reiner and the titular counselor, that she has lost the two cheetahs she and Reiner owned together, and that she has fled the country. Malkina has the stolen drugs, Reiner and the counselor's associate Westray have been killed, and the counselor has received a film of his innocent fiancé being murdered. Malkina has explained to her date that she plans to leave the country, possibly for China, and is unquestionably without remorse for the events that she has perpetrated. She and the man are talking about the cheetahs before ordering dinner, and he has asked if she found watching the animals hunt to be sexual:

MALKINA: Of course. A thing like that is always sexual. But grace. Freedom. The hunter has a purity of heart that exists nowhere else. I think he is not defined so much by what he has come to be as by all that he has escaped being. You can make no distinction between what he is and what he does. And what he does is kill. We of course are another matter. I suspect that we are ill-formed for the path that we have chosen. Ill-formed and ill-prepared. We would like to draw a veil over all that blood and terror. That have brought us to this place. It is our faintness of heart that would close our eyes to all that, but in so doing it makes of it our destiny. Perhaps you would not agree. I don't know. But nothing is crueller than a coward, and the slaughter to come is probably beyond our imagining. Should we think about ordering? I'm famished. (183-184)

Once again the conclusion is completely without resolution in the traditional sense. The antagonist has escaped, again, essentially unscathed, while many (most) of the other major characters have been killed. Reiner is dead, as is Westray, and while the counselor still lives, his bride to be has been kidnapped and murdered. Malkina explicitly describes her stance on morality in the screenplay's conclusion as well, again highlighting the

complexity of the Western space, and pointing to an acceptance (or at least recognition) of the violence that defines it.

Finally, there exists no traditional, ultimate confrontation in *No Country*. Bell pursues Chigurh throughout (just as Chigurh pursues Moss), but there is no showdown. Chigurh escapes (essentially) unscathed after Moss is dispatched and the money recovered, and Bell retires in defeat. Devlin explains that the absence of these defining elements (a hero, villain, and a narrative confrontation between them) is evidence that *No Country* is not a Western in the traditional sense: "By eliminating the three central ingredients of the Western film, *No Country for Old Men* shatters both the moral framework and the stability that Westerns have provided us" (10). Devlin's analysis is readily applicable to McCarthy's novel as well as the film, and it is clear that without the stabilizing structure of his definition, both works cease to be traditional Westerns and must be critically examined accordingly.

Change (unwanted or happening to the unwilling) is a thematic backbone of *No Country for Old Men*. Nowhere is the pace of change more evident than in the actions of Llewelyn Moss, an unsuspecting dupe who becomes the point of contention between hero and villain. When Moss finds \$2 million in the south Texas desert from a drug deal gone wrong, his outdated morality betrays him: he returns to the scene of a shootout to aid a dying man, only to be discovered by pursuers of the lost cash. Moss's determination to return to the scene demonstrates a number of important, traditional traits of the Western hero, only the most notable of which is his simplistic, binary understanding of actions

that are good or evil. Additionally, his decision points to the traditional Western tropes of rugged individualism, a frontier code of honor, and so-called cowboy ethics. Further evidence of Moss's naïveté comes from his ignorance of technology (the tracking device in the drug money reveals him to his pursuers on multiple occasions), and his inexcusable underestimation of his adversaries. In McCarthy's novel, Moss ponders his chances of success upon finally finding the tracking device: "He thought about a lot of things but the thing that stayed with him was that at some point he was going to have to quit running on luck" (108). Moss has to this point in the novel and film depended upon chance. His existence is a product of chance, but chance exterior to his morality – the antithesis to the chance that the pursuant Chigurh embraces. Moss's ultimately fatal underestimation of his pursuers (as well as his overestimation of his own masculine prowess) reveals a critical component of the Neo-Western; the heretofore-triumphal Anglo of the American West is not matchless, and the redistribution of racial capital in the genre will put an end to the explicit privileging of Euro-Americans. Western inhabitants of all races and ethnicities in this understanding suffer an equal propensity toward the possibility of failure or success, life or death. McCarthy's prose suggests that the reality of the Neo-Western is the balancing of karmic scales to a position of objectivity – the absence of a binary discourse of morality and existence. *No Country* repeatedly reveals the inchoate man for what he is: a bygone redneck far out of his league. Moss becomes a gross representation of the obsolescence of the traditional Western's simple morality.

Both the novel and film versions of *No Country for Old Men* present an evolution of the Western genre, often and most obviously via the actions of their characters. The aging hero Bell is a man constrained by the morality of an erstwhile age, struggling and failing to cope with his rapidly changing environment. Meanwhile, the Western space is constantly presented as unchanging or permanent – the irreconcilable juxtaposition of these two temporal realities further entangles Bell in the web of the Neo-Western, and presents yet another binary opposition within the halls of tradition. Sheriff Bell's concepts of right and wrong are dependent upon his ability to quantify what is in a perpetrator's personal interest versus what is in the interest of his constituents. When situations exceed that simplistic framework, Bell's comparatively sophomoric morality implodes.

The hero of the Neo-Western is defined by his past, so must the villain be redefined by his present. In *No Country*, Anton Chigurh transcends the traditional villain (as do *Blood Meridian's* Judge Holden and *The Counselor's* Malkina), operating beyond the scope of personal interest and instead within some ultimate, nihilistic game of chance. In addition to Carla Jean's murder, likely the most apparent example of this chance is a scene early in the novel in which Chigurh interacts with a gas station attendant, forcing the man to flip a coin to decide (unbeknownst to the attendant) that he is calling heads or tails for his life:

CHIGURH: I said what's the most you ever saw lost on a coin toss?  
GAS STATION ATTENDANT: Coin toss?

CHIGURH: Coin toss.  
 GAS STATION ATTENDANT: I don't know. Folks don't generally bet on a coin toss. It's usually more like just to settle somethin.  
 CHIGURH: What's the biggest thing you ever saw settled?  
 GAS STATION ATTENDANT: I don't know.  
 Chigurh took a twenty-five cent piece from his pocket and flipped it spinning into the bluish glare of the fluorescent lights overhead. He caught it and slapped it onto the back of his forearm just above the bloody wrappings. Call it, he said.  
 GAS STATION ATTENDANT: Call it?  
 CHIGURH: Yes.  
 GAS STATION ATTENDANT: For what?  
 CHIGURH: Just call it.  
 GAS STATION ATTENDANT: Well I need to know what it is we're callin here.  
 CHIGURH: How would that change anything?  
 GAS STATION ATTENDANT: I didn't put nothin up.  
 CHIGURH: Yes you did. You've been putting it up your whole life. You just didn't know it. You know what date is on this coin?  
 GAS STATION ATTENDANT: No sir.  
 CHIGURH: It's nineteen fifty-eight. It's been traveling twenty-two years to get here. And now it's here. And I'm here. And I've got my hand over it. And it's either heads or tails. And you have to say. Call it.  
 GAS STATION ATTENDANT: I don't know what it is I stand to win.  
 In the blue light the man's face was thinly beaded with sweat. He licked his upper lip.  
 CHIGURH: You stand to win everything. Everything.  
 GAS STATION ATTENDANT: You aint makin any sense mister.  
 CHIGURH: Call it.  
 GAS STATION ATTENDANT: Heads then.  
 Chigurh uncovered the coin. He turned his arm slightly for the man to see. Well done, he said.  
 . . . The proprietor watched him go. Watched him get into the car. The car started and pulled off from the gravel apron onto the highway south. The lights never did come on. He laid the coin on the counter and looked at it. He put both hands on the counter and just stood leaning there with his head bowed. (55-57)

The scene demonstrates the profundity of chance as a matter of life and death in the New West: the ultimate in objectivity, privileging none. Chigurh has only just met the man in the gas station, and yet as a result the attendant's very life hangs on a coin toss. The distinct separation between the morality of the traditional western and Chigurh's cold

rationalism is further demonstrated by the character Carson Wells, a mercenary who has been hired to track down Chigurh and the missing money. Wells describes the assassin to his employer in the novel:

MAN WHO HIRES WELLS: I'd just like to know your opinion of him. In general. The invincible Mr. Chigurh. ... Just how dangerous is he?  
WELLS: Compared to what? The bubonic plague? He's bad enough that you called me. He's a psychopathic killer but so what? (141)

Later, as Moss recovers in a Mexican hospital from gunshot wounds sustained in a shoot out with Chigurh, Wells visits and attempts to elucidate Moss's would-be killer's morality:

You can't make a deal with him. Let me say it again. Even if you gave him the money he'd still kill you. There's no one alive on this planet that's ever had even a cross word with him. They're all dead. These are not good odds. He's a peculiar man. You could even say that he has principles. Principles that transcend money or drugs or anything like that. (153)

Chigurh operates with an exacting, almost robotic lethality – something far beyond the scope of the traditional Western morality. Significantly, he also affects a kind of exotic, foreign air, an aspect of the novel and film that underscores an alteration of the traditional frontier cultural hierarchy and becomes definitive for the new genre. It is helpful once again to consider the three works presented in my broader analysis in evolutionary terms: the ways in which each of the antagonists are portrayed reflects an evolution of gender and ethnic norms in the genre. The Judge is a giant, hairless, polymath, but also a white man. Chigurh is a ruthless, relentless killer, but in a novel set more than a century after *Blood Meridian*, also has an exotic, non-Anglo affect. Finally, in *The Counselor*, amoral

antagonist Malkina is a non-American, worldly woman – the evolution not only of the genre and the West, but also of those who inhabit the realm's complex, non-binary-bound spaces.

In addition to retaining numerous characteristics of the traditional Western, McCarthy's novel and the Coens' film also contain elements of suspense and pursuit that are traditionally aspects of a thriller. Within the Neo-Western, these elements work to highlight the pace at which change occurs. For the protagonist of the Neo-Western, chief among his difficulties is reconciling himself amid an environment that is rapidly evolving around him. The genre explores the phenomenon of change as an exponential evolution: the forces that impact Bell and Moss increase in frequency and intensity with the passage of time. The successful pursuit of Moss by Chigurh and the unsuccessful pursuit of Chigurh by Bell indicate the extent and pace at which the new is outdistancing the old. The changes which have made the strange new world in which Bell and Moss find themselves so terrifying are reinforced and exacerbated by the speed with which they have taken place. This change, and its pace, is rooted in morality – a morality both centered in and central to the Western illusion of fixity and permanence, both in terms of the Western space itself, and in the manner of its conquest and the maintenance by its supposed holders.

The overarching theme of McCarthy's novel and the Coens' film is the desperation of an aging man who finds himself unknowingly and unwillingly part of a rapidly

changing world. Bell's recalcitrance in his dealings not only with the nature of an amoral foe he cannot contemplate, but within the larger scope of a modern Texas (and world at large) he does not recognize, again points to a denial of reality and to a blindness predicated upon the existence of a deeply held and longstanding myth about the manner in which the West operates. The traditional Western demonstrated the inevitability of change, but change wrought by white settlers bound by a simplistic moral code and operating with the understanding that the promise of their future was everlasting. The Neo-Western illustrates that fixity is an illusion in the American West (and in the broader world), and that the inevitable change can and will be exacted upon all.

## **Conclusion**

### *Moving Toward a More Complete Understanding of the West*

The colonization of the American West is a quintessential period in the establishment of the American psyche, of the understanding of American history, and in the ways in which a variety of American inhabitants are conceived. The colonization of the continent began in the early seventeenth century, but the folklore that became canonical for the Western mythic focuses primarily on the frontier west of the Mississippi River in the nineteenth century. Men of the period, like Frederick Jackson Turner, saw westward expansion as being rooted in optimism, self-determination, and individualism – romanticizing conquest and ignoring or sanitizing violence. In the more than a century that has passed since the admission of the last Western territories into statehood, the frontier itself has passed into history. In that same time, however, fiction and film have further romanticized the Western mythic, and in so doing have allowed America’s self-determined and iconic image to take deep root at home and abroad. As David Murdoch writes, “No other nation has taken a time and place from its past and produced a construct of the imagination equal to America’s creation of the West” (vii).

In the twentieth century, historians, authors, and filmmakers (among others) began to become more acutely aware of the need to reexamine the history of the frontier. Through his works of southwestern fiction and screenwriting, Cormac McCarthy has

done just that – moving his readers away from the traditionally sanitized Western space in a number of ways, but pointedly through his amoral characterizations of antagonists in *Blood Meridian*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *The Counselor*. Critical examination of these works is important for a number of reasons.

First, and perhaps most importantly, is the very foundational and formative nature of the time and place in which the works are set, with respect to the extensive and lasting impact the frontier has had in American history. By moving away from the dichotomous underpinnings of colonial discourse, McCarthy's prose offers a lens through which to examine not only America's violent past, but also the country's present with respect to the treatment of various ethnic groups and the use of land, among much else. That the author approaches these broad and important topics through popular media extends the population to which the examination can be disseminated.

Second, by understanding the complexities of American history, of accepting the reality of violence and depravity in the creation of the country, we may be better equipped to address the inequities of the present, and to move toward a space in which totalized, binary-rooted conceptions of existence are if not abandoned, at least called into question.

Finally, the importance of accurate historical contextualization cannot be overestimated. As a global center of power in a globalizing and largely post-colonial world, it has never been more important for the United States to recognize and address its colonial past, both in domestic and international terms. Understanding the mythic

underpinnings of American ideology and the long held belief in national exceptionalism may prove critical to global wellbeing in the future.

It is important to note that the analysis offered here is far from exhaustive. Even looking only to McCarthy's other Western works presents potential for expansion. The *Border Trilogy* (*All the Pretty Horses* [1992], *The Crossing* [1994], and *Cities of the Plain* [1998]) has the potential to provide additional weight to the importance of chronological evolution in the author's Western works, being published between *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men*, and set between those novels as well. Additional study of Neo-Western and/or Revisionist Western films would also be fruitful, both in the critical engagement of popular media for popular audiences, and in a comparative study with the literatures of the same genres.

Cormac McCarthy's Western works probe the myths that have characterized American expansion and defined American ideals for well more than one hundred years. The author's seminal writing offers readers a view of history that is crystal clear in its depictions of the objective truths of existence, while simultaneously muddying the absolutes upon which the Western mythic is founded. His works move beyond the binaries of good and evil, civil and savage, particularly through the focalizing characterizations of his antagonists, and in the process allow readers the possibility of formulating their own conceptions of expansion, and of the American West itself. What is true of these works is perhaps true of the Western genre and region itself: resolutions are seldom tidy, and change, while inevitable, is not guaranteed to be favorable.

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