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# "If there be such space:" Haunted Landscapes and Crises of Sonhood in Cormac McCarthy's Westerns

Kayla M. Armstrong  
*College of William and Mary*

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“If there be such space:” Haunted Landscapes and Crises of Sonhood in Cormac  
McCarthy’s Westerns

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from  
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by

Kayla Michelle Armstrong

Accepted for \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Professor Rich Lowry, Director

\_\_\_\_\_  
Professor Colleen Kennedy

\_\_\_\_\_  
Professor Kara Thompson

\_\_\_\_\_  
Professor Tim Barnard

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“They stood in no proprietary relationship to anything, scarcely to the space they occupied. Out of their anterior lives they had arrived at the same understanding as their fathers before them.”

--Cormac McCarthy, *The Crossing*

After going forty-one years without an unsolved homicide in his county, Sheriff Ed Tom Bell suddenly finds himself looking at nine dead bodies. In Cormac McCarthy's most recent western, *No Country for Old Men* (2005), Bell ponders his own inadequacy as he investigates a drug deal gone wrong. "I used to say they were the same ones we've always had to deal with. Same ones my granddaddy had to deal with," he says. "Back then they was rustlin cattle. Now they're runnin dope. But I dont know as that's true no more...I aint sure we've seen these people before. Their kind. I dont know what to do about em even" (79). He becomes convinced that times must have changed since his youth, when he became a sheriff alongside his granddaddy, Jack. "I think he was pretty proud of that," Bell reflects. "I know I was" (90). As a young sheriff Bell had to break up fist fights, but now his job involves trying to stop dope dealers from throwing hand grenades out of helicopters. He goes through a personal crisis: what, he asks, has gone wrong? Why are things today so violent? His anxieties grow out of a historical disjunction, a certainty that his grandfather's West was nothing like the mayhem Bell must live with.

It is as if, to borrow a phrase McCarthy uses often throughout the book, Bell lives "in another country." Many of the male characters use this phrase to refer to atrocities that happen during wartime in other places. For instance, Llewelyn Moss returns from the Vietnam War with a great deal of survivor's guilt and then one day finds a bag full of millions of dollars of drug money. Worried that the rightful owner of the money will return for it, Moss "studied the blue floodplain out there in the silence. A vast and breathless amphitheatre. Waiting. He'd had this feeling before. In another country. He never thought he'd have it again" (30). Just as in Vietnam, the silence points to imminent

violence. As the arrogant hitman Carson Wells anticipates his own murder, he envisions “the faces of men as they died on their knees before him. The body of a child dead in a roadside ravine in another country” (178). These horrors happened in Vietnam, but now Moss and Bell face this kind of violence in Texas. Bell is desperate to find something—Mexicans, money, narcotics—to blame the crime in his county on. Maybe, he begins to wonder, something about the country itself precipitates this violence.

He talks to his uncle Ellis, who says that “you can say that the country is just the country, it dont actively do nothing, but that dont mean much... This country will kill you in a heartbeat and still people love it” (271). Ellis speaks like many of McCarthy’s inarticulate male characters, several of whom try to engage in philosophical discussions of profound concepts that are beyond the grasp of their vocabulary. But his words catch Bell’s attention, who muses when he returns to the crime scene once more: “I still keep thinkin maybe it is somethin about the country. Sort of the way Ellis said... it just seemed to me that this country got a strange kind of history and a damned bloody one too. About anywhere you care to look” (285). If history is attached to the land—rather than to the people who inhabit it—then in Bell’s mind the past is “another country.” Maybe the past of his grandfather, or of his childhood, was not as innocent as he thought. Maybe Bell lives in the same country.

All through the narrative, Bell wrestles with this historical dilemma: he does not want to accept that the West has always been this violent. He recalls a survey sent out to identify major problems in schools. Forty years ago, the findings pointed to things like chewing gum or cheating on homework. Now the problems are rape, arson, murder, drugs, and suicide. Whenever people tell Bell that he is just getting old, he tells himself

that “anybody that cant tell the difference between rapin and murderin people and chewin gum has got a whole bigger of a problem than what I’ve got.” (196)

For Bell, there is more to the relationship between the present and the past than his country’s crime statistics. It is personal, especially when he thinks about his grandfather. Bell tells Ellis about how he earned a medal during WWII by abandoning his comrades. He has kept the truth a secret for years, worried about what his grandfather would have thought of him. If his grandfather Jack had been in the same situation, Bell tells his uncle, Jack would not have run away. Ellis responds, “But then I might say that he lived in different times. Had Jack of been born fifty years later he might have had a different view of things” (279). Ellis suggests that history is relative, and that Jack would probably understand some of Bell’s struggles because he may have experienced similar dilemmas. Bell listens to his uncle, but he wants to protect his grandfather’s reputation. Rather than facing the possibility that Jack might have dealt with the same struggles, Bell prefers to idealize his grandfather and the “simpler times” he lived in.

Bell’s perception of these “simpler times” reflects many historical and mythologized assumptions about the West. In the famous 1893 Frontier Thesis, for example, Frederick Jackson Turner suggests that the frontier fundamentally shaped American democracy and individualism. Richard Slotkin claims that this myth of the West allowed Americans to disguise the role of slavery, class oppression, and industrialism in forging American character. Instead, Americans could believe that the frontier was a driving force of economic development (*The Fatal Environment* 44). As Henry Nash Smith argues in *Virgin Land* (1950), politicians and writers often framed the West as a moralizing agent that improved the virtue of individuals and society. He notes

how in the nineteenth century William Gilpin voiced his belief that the physical landscape of America predestined its people for harmony and unity. Nash also points to how Walt Whitman's poetry framed westward expansion as the signal of a new era in history during which people would unite and man's balance with nature would be restored. Nash argues that "the positive doctrine that untouched nature is a source of strength, truth, and virtue [occurs] sporadically in writing about the Wild West far into the nineteenth century" (71).

Adopting some of these myths, Bell subscribes to a simpler West of white individualism. At the very end of the book, Bell discusses a dream he had about his father soon after his father passed away: "It was like we was both back in older times and I was on horseback goin through the mountains of a night...He just rode on past and he had this blanket wrapped around him and he had his head down and when he rode past I seen he was carryin fire in a horn the way people used to do" (309). Bell associates his father—and, by extension, his grandfather—with an old-fashioned and welcoming landscape. Unsure of how to be the man he wants to be, Bell wants to retreat into these "simpler times."

Bell's tendency to idealize his grandfather points to one of the most pervasive themes in McCarthy's works: the importance sons ascribe to their fathers' history when trying to define manhood. Throughout his westerns, McCarthy investigates the various crises of sonhood that men experience in the absence of their fathers and grandfathers. In the words of John Dudley, all of McCarthy's men grapple "with a masculine code that they perceive to be vanishing or devolving, but which might be more accurately understood as inherently flawed or dangerously inadequate" (177). McCarthy begins to

probe these inadequacies in his first western, *Blood Meridian* (1985), which exposes the “damned bloody” history of the old West that Bell puzzles over. Then McCarthy turns to *The Border Trilogy*, which features two separate fatherless boys who struggle to find a cohesive masculine code that will help them to navigate their confusing and threatening surroundings. In these fictions, McCarthy engages the myth of the West to diagnose what he sees as a persistent struggle with masculinity: the inability for men both to come to grips with the past and escape the burdens of sonhood. In looking to and for their fathers, sons also face questions about what country they inhabit—as a geography, as a region, and as a nation—and how to negotiate the profound alienation and dislocation they feel. This question is a matter of both identity and survival; the fact that so few of the characters succeed in their efforts attests to McCarthy’s understanding of how men bring about their own struggles.

\* \* \*

For readers of Cormac McCarthy, the bloody mayhem of *No Country for Old Men* may seem like a contemporary reenactment of his earlier novel, *Blood Meridian*, which tells the story of a young man from Tennessee—known only as “the kid”—who travels west and joins a crazed, murderous gang of scalphunters. Set in 1849 against a hellish backdrop of violent westward expansion, the narrative landscape of *Blood Meridian* does not even remotely resemble the “simpler times” that Sheriff Bell longs for. Many critics have focused on the ways in which the novel repudiates the myth of the American West, but in fact the book is more concerned with the violent nature of mankind (or, more specifically, “man-kind”) and expressions of evil than with an accurate portrayal of any specific historical reality. As Robert H. Brinkmeyer Jr. points out in *Remapping*



*Southern Literature*, “Because of McCarthy’s focus on the elemental nature of humanity, characters who roam about in his West often are described as creatures from primitive, if not prehistoric times; they are manifestations of our forebears, humanity in its original state” (39). For McCarthy, human history is a small and barely significant component of much longer paleontological, geological, and cosmic scales of time.

Timothy Parrish examines how these scales of time relate to constructions of violence, arguing that McCarthy’s westerns “include or imply the entire history of humans on this planet: one eon overlaps with another on a stage of cosmic enterprise” (74). McCarthy is not necessarily concerned with the history of the 19<sup>th</sup> century American West, but rather with how this historical moment allows for the exploration of the larger history of mankind. Parrish claims that “McCarthy’s novels assume that history in both its broadest and most minute sense informs the actions of his characters, but the precise knowledge of that history is never as important as the characters’ immediate perception of their own individual fates” (68). This history operates on several different scales of time, including personal, generational, and national scales. In all of its forms, the past exerts a persistent and threatening power over the present, burdening men and laying the foundation for their violent lives.

The driving force of violence in *Blood Meridian* is the manipulative Judge Holden, who asserts a god-like authority over his fellow men by convincing them that he possesses comprehensive knowledge of the past, dating all the way back to the formation of the earth. The judge is not a psychologically real character, and he seems to exist outside of both time and space, looming larger than the novel itself. After the judge assumes control of Glanton’s gang, the company abandons its lucrative pursuit of scalps

and descends into a senseless killing spree. Defying the authority of the Bible, the judge claims that “war is the truest form of divination” (261) and that violence is the purest expression of manhood. He says that war “endures because young men love it and old men love it in them” (260), alluding to the intersection between violence and sonhood.

Exploiting the kid’s absent-father crisis, the judge tells him the story of a harnessmaker who invites a traveler into his home and then murders him. The harnessmaker keeps the killing a secret until years later, when he lies on his deathbed. “And as he lay dying he called the son to him and told him what he had done. And the son said that he forgave him if it was his to do so and the old man said that it was his to do so and then he died” (151). The harnessmaker gives his son the power to validate the murder by asking for forgiveness, perhaps also hoping that the son will be proud of his violence. The revelation of this history instead becomes a burden for the son, who goes “away to the west and he himself became a killer of men” (151).

Knowing that his mother often visits the murdered traveler’s grave, the harnessmaker’s son digs up the traveler’s bones and scatters them before leaving home. Maybe he envies the affection that his mother bestows on the dead man, or maybe he envies the role that the dead man played in establishing the harnessmaker’s violent expression of manhood. Burdened by jealousy, he feels displaced from his role as a son, and he responds to this crisis with violence. The judge claims this cycle of violence is often repeated. It plays out “with other people, with other sons” (153). It is archetypal and inescapable. At this point in the story, the judge pauses and then reveals that the murdered traveler left behind an unborn child. This child never grows up to see his father’s flaws or struggles. “All his life he carries before him the idol of a perfection to

which he can never attain. The father dead has euchered the son out of his patrimony” (152). With the judge’s parable, McCarthy connects patrilineal guilt to violence while also exposing two distinct responses to the crisis of an absent father. Men like the traveler’s son or Sheriff Bell idealize their father figures, and they are never able to live up to the standards of manhood that they believe their fathers have set for them. Men like the harnessmaker’s son or the kid, on the other hand, rebel against their fathers or try to surpass their fathers’ violence.

The story of the harnessmaker plays out in the novel (and through much of McCarthy’s work) on a larger narrative level. In order to explore this act of rebellion across generational and national time scales, McCarthy associates the kid’s father with a dark, unknowable history in the South which presumably is connected to slavery, referencing “blacks in the fields, lank and stooped, their fingers spiderlike among the bolls of cotton” (4). The kid is burdened by this history, but he is unable to understand its source. The first fourteen years of his life are characterized by threatening, yet elusive, references to the past. His mother dies on the night of his birth, but the kid does not even know her name because his father refuses to speak it. The father quotes “poets whose names are now lost” (3), emphasizing his connection to the past as well as his lack of understanding of it. McCarthy writes that the kid “can neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence. All history present in that visage, the child the father of the man” (3). The kid is bound both by his forefathers’ past—which he embodies in his physical characteristics—and by predestination of his future, which is doomed to be violent and senseless.

Burning with hatred for his alcoholic father, the kid runs away and begins moving westward, eventually boarding a boat headed to Texas. “Only now is the child finally divested of all that he has been,” McCarthy writes. “His origins are become remote as is his destiny and not again in all the world’s turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man’s will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay” (5). Robert H. Brinkmeyer Jr. argues that movements from the South to the West usually represent an attempt to escape the burdens of community, history, and stasis in favor of independence and change. For characters who leave the South, he argues, “the West is ‘the end of History’; that is, space unburdened by history, space where a person can begin anew, leaving the past behind” (*Remapping Southern Literature* 16). Upon arriving in the West, these characters can step into the myth of regeneration and individuality that Bell sees in his grandfather’s past.

As the kid arrives in Texas, “he sees a parricide hanged in a crossroads hamlet” (5), reinforcing the kid’s movement westward as an act of rebellion against his father. He wants to abandon the burdens of sonhood and shape his own destiny, but McCarthy implies that this vision of opportunity is hollow and unattainable, especially because the burdens of slavery are inescapable. Soon after arriving in Texas, the kid walks “the sand roads of the southern night alone, his hands balled in the cotton pockets of his cheap coat” (5). The reference to cotton suggests that he is physically and metaphorically carrying the legacy of slavery with him into the West. The image of his hands balled in his pocket echoes the earlier image of the slaves grasping at cotton bolls, suggesting that the kid is still in bondage to the South.

After the kid joins Glanton's gang, McCarthy evokes the narrative's earlier allusions to slavery by staging a ritualistic showdown between the two John Jacksons, a white man and a black man who share the same name. "Bad blood lay between them" (85), and the black Jackson repeatedly tries to distance himself from the white Jackson: "As if the white man were in violation of his person, had stumbled onto some ritual dormant in his dark blood or in his dark soul" (85). The suggestion of "ritual" extends this interpersonal conflict to a greater history of racialized violence and oppression. The phrase "bad blood" suggests that this animosity is inherited, something that is played out again and again over the course of generations.

A few weeks later, the white Jackson refuses to let the black Jackson sit at his fire, telling him to join the Mexicans and Native Americans at the other fire instead. When the black Jackson refuses to leave, the white Jackson threatens to shoot. "The black stepped out of the darkness bearing a bowieknife in both hands like some instrument of ceremony...and with a single stroke swapt off his head" (111). Even though this conflict is not explicitly framed in the context of slavery, the references to "instrument of ceremony" and the Biblical phrasing confirm the ritualized deep history of racial conflict this scene demonstrates. At the same time, McCarthy implies that this conflict is unique neither to these individuals nor to these racial groups. He tends to frame historical conflict in terms of atavistic ritual, suggesting that the violence in *Blood Meridian* is a continuation of male conflict that has characterized the human race since its inception.

In this sense, the kid cannot escape the burdensome history of his forebears because their violence was never confined to the South to begin with. The violence of mankind may take different forms—inhabiting the history of slavery or the history of

white westward expansion—but it is all part of a larger pattern of violent contact. As Timothy Parrish argues, McCarthy’s westerns “are not revisionist histories in the way the term is normally understood. They accept violence as a condition of being alive and they are not simply (and easily) critiquing a cartoonish version of an exceptionalist American history” (71). Similar to the harnessmaker’s son, the kid essentially exchanges one mode of violence for another. He unsuccessfully tries to leave behind the burdens of his biological father’s history, only to find a demonic surrogate father in Judge Holden, who in turn burdens the kid with the violent history of the West.

After most of the gang is killed in the Yuma massacre, the kid tries to escape from the judge’s bloodlust, only to find himself in jail, where the judge discovers him and says, “Dont you know that I’d have loved you like a son?” (319) He toys with the kid, malevolently playing with a father’s need to be validated by his son. The judge wants to subdue and destroy the kid, so he makes the kid feel guilty about his involvement with the gang. “There’s a flawed place in the fabric of your heart,” he says. “Do you think I could not know? You alone were mutinous. You alone reserved in your soul some corner of the clemency for the heathen” (312). With this rebuke, the judge says that the kid’s lack of loyalty weakened the collective power of the group. He implies that the kid was never violent enough to reach the true expression of manhood.

This insult also reminds the kid of his limited participation in the violence perpetrated by Glanton’s gang, which haunts the kid for the remainder of his life. “In his cell [the kid] began to speak with a strange urgency of things that few men have seen in a lifetime and his jailers said that his mind had come uncottered by the acts of blood in which he had participated” (317). He feels so guilty that others think he is mad. Near the

end of the book, the kid tries to make amends for his violence by assisting an old Mexican woman who is resting near the scene of a massacre. When he touches her, he discovers that it is far too late to help her. “She was just a dried shell and she had been dead in that place for years” (328). He carries with him the burdensome history of the West until he dies at the murderous hands of the judge.

The kid is ultimately unable to discover the freedom or promise of individuality that he associates with the West. McCarthy deliberately reacts against the trope of a virgin land, demonstrating that the West has never been as empty as men would like to believe. In a landscape consumed by centuries of violent conflict, the desire to escape the burdens of history is simply unattainable. In fact, the West is so suffused with violence that McCarthy often describes the sky itself as if it is drenched in blood. For instance, he writes, “...to the west lay reefs of bloodred clouds up out of which rose little desert nighthawks like fugitives from some great fire at earth’s end” (23). Similar descriptions of the landscape refer to “the western sky” as “the color of blood” (158) and “the sun to the west” as if it “lay in a holocaust” (110). He also writes of icicles that “glistened blood red in the reflected light of the sunset spread across the prairie to the west” (221). As bloodlust drives the gang into madness near the end of the book, McCarthy explains how they “turned their tragic mounts to the west and they rode infatuate and half found toward the red demise of that day” (193).

In this sense, the land is not responsible for the bloody history of the West—as Bell tries to claim in *No Country for Old Men*—but rather functions as a reflection and an implicit record of violence. The landscape becomes the theater in which the shorter histories of men and mankind are shown to be inadequate. Expounding upon the

“degeneracy of mankind” (153), the judge contrasts the short, violent lives of men with longer patterns in the natural world. The world of plants and animals, he argues, is defined by cycles, but men exist outside of this cyclical pattern. “The way of the world is to bloom and to flower and die but in the affairs of men there is no waning and the noon of his expression signals the onset of night” (153). Connecting back to the association between blood and the sky, the judge constructs the violence of men in terms of the passage of the sun. “His spirit is exhausted at the peak of its achievement. His meridian is at once his darkening and the evening of his day” (153), a statement that echoes the novel’s title, *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West*. In the judge’s mind, the purest expression of manhood is violence, which disrupts the typical cycle that other living creatures follow. Because of their bloodlust, men are struck down in their prime and thrown into the dark void of death. The judge’s analogy is both spatial and temporal, encouraging the reader to consider the ways in which men focus on the landscape or the past when trying to navigate issues of masculinity.

As Jane Tompkins argues in *West of Everything*, in western literature and film the landscape typically is essential for defining modes of masculinity, “a tabula rasa on which man can write, as if for the first time, the story he wants to live” (74). McCarthy clearly rejects the idea of a “tabula rasa” in his westerns, but his landscape is still important for defining masculinity. It functions as a witness to the behavior of men, assuming the burdens of their violence. “Sparse on the mesa,” McCarthy writes, “the dry weeds lashed in the wind like the earth’s long echo of lance and spear in old encounters forever unrecorded” (111). Even though human history may not have a record of these conflicts, the memory is preserved by the land, outside of human perception. The judge



talks about the “old people” of whom “there is no memory...The old ones are gone like phantoms and the savages wander these canyons to the sound of an ancient laughter” (152). He emphasizes that the echo reverberates through the landscape, even if human memory of these people is missing. “So,” he says, “Here are the dead fathers. Their spirit is entombed in the stone” (152). The memory of the “old people” becomes integrated into the land itself.

Burdened by this often bloody history, the land assumes a cursed quality. The mountains, “black and livid like a land of some other order out there whose true geology was not stone but fear” (49), embed feelings of fear and despair into the land itself. The landscape is also referred to as “terra damnata” (63) and “purgatorial waste” (66). The association between the West and Hell is strengthened through the mention of demons and otherworldly enemies. The skirmish between Glanton’s gang and the Apaches is particularly hellish. The Apaches “rode out of that vanished sea like burnt phantoms with the legs of the animals kicking up the spume that was not real and they were lost in the sun and lost in the lake and they shimmered and slurred together...and there began to appear above them in the dawn-broached sky a hellish likeness of their ranks riding huge and inverted...” (115). A visual distortion makes it appear as if the Apaches are riding both on the ground and in the air, and the tension between what is real and what is not real emphasizes the warriors’ otherworldliness. Of course, it also objectifies them, aligning them closely with the earth. McCarthy may be embracing this objectification, but he does so to suggest that contact with whites has provoked hellish retaliation. Their screams resemble “the cries of souls broke through some misweave in the weft of things into the world below” (115). McCarthy’s imagery suggests that the landscape is riven,

open to penetration from the realms of Hell. The desert is a place where damned souls can sometimes travel back and forth from Hell to the physical world of Texas and the Southwest.

McCarthy expands upon the idea of a misweave between the desert and Hell later in the novel when the expriest tells the story of how the judge joined Glanton's company. After finding the judge sitting naked in the middle of the desert, he leads the group "dead west" (135) into a complex maplais of lava beds. Then the expriest reflects:

I'd not go behind scripture but it may be that there has been sinners so notorious evil that the fires coughed em up again and I could well see in the long ago how it was little devils with their pitchforks had traversed that fiery vomit for to salvage back those souls that by misadventure had spewed up from their damnation onto the outer shelves of the world...But someplace in the scheme of things this world must touch the other." (136)

The expriest apparently thinks this place—the landscape of the Southwest—is one of the places in which demons and sinners can sometimes break through the barriers between the worlds. In fact, as Glanton's gang becomes more and more violent and bloodthirsty, they begin to resemble demons or otherworldly beings to the people they come into contact with. As the inhabitants of Carrizal watch Glanton's company enter the town, they think, "Those riders seemed journeyed from a legendary world and they left behind a strange tainture like an afterimage on the eye and the air they disturbed was altered and electric" (182). The idea of curses comes up again when McCarthy describes the group as "a patrol condemned to ride out some ancient curse" (157). Later in the book, the gang maneuvers through "those badlands of dark amber glass like the remnants of some

dim legion scabbling out of a land accursed” (262), which echoes the expriest’s image of sinners climbing out of Hell.

Moreover, certain scenes from *Blood Meridian* seem to closely parallel images from Dante’s *Inferno* of the seventh circle of Hell, which is reserved for violent sinners. Murderers in the seventh circle of Hell stand in a boiling, red stream as centaurs fire arrows at them. Likewise in *Blood Meridian*, the first person to die when attacked by the Yuma is shot with an arrow as he stands near the river. His body falls into the water and colors it red. In a similar way, the gang’s incessant wandering through the desert seems to resemble the fate of sodomites, who are confined to the third ring of the seventh circle of Hell. In “Sodomy in Dante’s *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*,” Joseph Pequigney explains that for Dante sodomy is a form of violence against God, a blasphemy of nature, because it cannot lead to reproduction. This sterility is emphasized through the desert landscape. The judge’s molestation and murder of children could be construed as an attack on nature, and these implicit connections to *Inferno* stress the hellish characterization of the landscape.

The West, then, does not offer the chance to escape the burdens of national history or the struggles of sonhood. McCarthy offers a critique of the mythologized narrative of white westward expansion, but it is far more important to him to explore the violence of mankind than to engage with the historical realities of the 19<sup>th</sup> century American West. He frames the landscape as a witness to this violence, creating a haunted space through which John Grady Cole and Billy Parham will roam in *The Border Trilogy*. In the absence of their fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers, they experience their own crises of sonhood, searching for simple codes of masculinity in a

mythologized view of the West that shows no resemblance to the intense violence and madness of *Blood Meridian*. This legacy of violence and damnation remains embedded and remembered in the landscape, even as McCarthy sets his next western almost one hundred years in the future.

\* \* \*

After deconstructing the mythological narrative of the West in *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy essentially adopts the structure and tropes of a traditional western in the first novel of The Border Trilogy, *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), which takes place in the U.S.—Mexican borderlands a few years after the end of WWII. As John Dudley argues in an essay about McCarthy's construction of masculinity, *All the Pretty Horses* at first seems to be a “kind of archetypal initiation narrative, rife with allusions to chivalric romance, primitive masculinity, and violent struggle” (176). At the center of this archetypal quest for manhood is John Grady Cole, a 16-year-old boy who fears that he will have to abandon life as a cowboy when his grandfather dies and his mother decides to sell the family ranch. He retreats to Mexico, where he believes he will be able to step into a mythic history of cattle ranching and property ownership.

When Mexican authorities arrest John Grady and his friends on the suspicion that they have stolen a horse, however, John Grady must suddenly deal with his journey's unexpected consequences. The authorities execute one of his friends and then throw John Grady into prison, where he is forced to kill a man in order to survive. In the face of this violence, John Grady still clings to the hollow promise of the mythic West, unable to understand what has gone wrong. In this way, McCarthy revises and moves past the issues of sons and fathers in *Blood Meridian*: John Grady is burdened not by the violent

history of his forefathers, but rather by a mythologized history that does not prepare him to deal with the realities of violence and death.

John Grady's problems begin when he draws upon the myth of the West to interpret his family history and, in turn, to construct a code of masculinity. As Richard Slotkin explains in *The Fatal Environment*, a myth metaphorically equates a historical experience with the present, using a representation of the past—whether accurate or not—as a natural law to guide current values and actions (24). John Grady imagines a past in which men could prove their worth by confronting a dangerous environment, pointing to the fact that many of the men in his family did not meet a natural death. They were consumed by fires or lost by drowning; they were shot, they disappeared, or they died working with horses. In fact, since the construction of the house in 1872, John Grady's "grandfather was still the first man to die in it" (6). John Grady wants to be a man of action, like the men who died away from home. At the same time, though, he also seems to want to die in bed like his grandfather, as the patriarch owner of his own house and land. Failing to recognize the incompatibility of these desires, John Grady sets out to find a proving ground for his manhood.

At first he tries to prevent his mother from selling the ranch by asking his father to reason with her. The father refuses to help, saying that he has never been able to control his ex-wife. Robbed of his land and disappointed in his father, John Grady decides to leave his parents behind. He talks to his cousin, Lacey Rawlins, about running off together, but they do not know where they can go. Rawlins can only imagine following the same westward route as the kid in *Blood Meridian*. "I could understand if you was from Alabama you'd have ever reason in the world to run off to Texas," he tells John

Grady, “But if you’re already in Texas. I don’t know” (27). The problem with Texas for John Grady, as he realizes while riding horses with his father, is that the countryside is littered with signs of industrialization and dilapidated reminders of the decline of the ranching way of life. They pass by “the ruins of an old ranch” and “crippled fenceposts propped among the rocks that carried remnants of a wire not seen in that country for years” (23), as well as “an ancient pickethouse” and “the wreckage of an old wooden windmill” (23). The country will never be the same, his father tells John Grady, “people dont feel safe no more. We’re like the Comanches was two hundred years ago. We dont know what’s goin to show up here come daylight. We dont even know what color they’ll be” (26). Drawing a comparison with the Comanches’ loss of land, he believes that his claim to territory is vulnerable to the next invasion, whether it comes in the form of modernization, the military’s growing presence, or something else. John Grady worries that the life of the American cowboy is just as vulnerable to being swept away, so he decides to look for this life somewhere else.

Reflecting some of the historical disjunction that Bell experiences in *No Country for Old Men*, John Grady begins to envision the national border between the U.S. and Mexico as a temporal border that will allow him to access the mythic West. He runs away with Rawlins to Mexico, where he hopes not only to find work as a cowboy, but also a sense of land ownership and permanence. After picking up a young runaway named Jimmy Blevins, the three boys approach the Rio Grande, undress, and then ride naked across the river, undergoing a baptism that ends with their gazing “back at the country they’d left” (45). Nicholas Monk points out that John Grady flees “from a modern, technologically frenzied, eco-destructive United States—the ‘real world’—to the

romantic ‘unreality of Mexico which, in turn, engenders from John Grady’s fantasy a darker, brutal, reality of its own’ (122). The “unreality” John Grady briefly finds seems to fulfill the mythic promise of true cowboy life.

After becoming separated from Blevins, John Grady and Rawlins begin working as ranch hands at the Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción. Here John Grady believes that he has finally found a place where he can demonstrate his manhood. As Thomas Strychacz argues in *Hemingway’s Theaters of Masculinity*, manhood is not a stable identity characteristic, but rather a performance and a negotiation between the actors involved. Trying to imitate his grandfather, John Grady adopts the behaviors and values that are typical of men in westerns, and then he “performs” them for other men: he is good with horses, he is bad at dancing, and he never speaks more words than he has to. Strychacz notes that Hemingway’s men often gravitate toward ritualized performance spaces such as the bullfighting ring, and John Grady finds a similar performance space in the corral. As he begins breaking wild horses, a crowd of vaqueros gathers around the corral and watches in admiration. After taking a break for dinner, John Grady comes back to find “twenty people standing about looking at the horses—women, children, young girls and men—and all waiting for [him] to return” (105).

During the horse-breaking, John Grady and Rawlins exchange such movie-clichéd dialogue that they almost seem to be pretending for one another. As Rawlins starts sending the horses in, he says, “I take it you dont give a particular damn what order they come in” (103). John Grady replies: “You take it correctly, cousin” (103). Rawlins says that they should break all of the horses twice because he “never saw one that completely believed it the first time or ever doubted it the second” (103), and John Grady smiles and

says: "I'll make em believe" (103). Their humorous banter—mixing understatement with supreme confidence—sounds like something straight out of a western film, maybe even mimicking the scene in *Red River* (1948) when Cherry watches Matt's shooting and then says: "You're as good as they say you are. Maybe even as good as me." John Grady relishes this homosocial environment, firmly believing that the bonds between men have the "power to protect and to confer honor and to strengthen resolve and [the] power to heal men and bring them to safety long after all resources were exhausted" (219).

This code of masculinity works well for John Grady at first, but it begins to come under pressure when he initiates an ultimately disastrous love affair with the hacendado's daughter, Alejandra. This romance is a way for John Grady to seek the permanent land ownership that he associates with his grandfather and to react against his father's inability to possess a woman. Through John Grady's romantic possession of Alejandra, he defies the wishes of her father—someone he perceives as a surrogate father—and subconsciously tries to displace him as the owner of the ranch. Alejandra's aunt warns John Grady that his lack of wealth and social standing will make any relationship with her niece impossible. She shares her own story of how she was nearly destroyed by love in her youth, telling him: "I grew up in a world of men. I thought this would have prepared me to live in a world of men but it did not" (136). Having watched all of the men she loved and respected die in the Mexican Revolution, she tries to explain to John Grady that women must live with the burden of men's actions, even after men have forgotten about them or died. Ignoring this warning, John Grady consummates his relationship with Alejandra and briefly finds the fulfillment of the myth of the West that he has been looking for at the hacienda: romance, the respect of the vaqueros, and free



access to horses and land. He loses all of these things when Alejandra betrays the secret of the romance to her father, who then turns John Grady and Rawlins away from the protection of the hacienda and over to the police. John Grady cannot handle the guilt he feels for deceiving the hacendado, desperately wishing that he had “come to ruin no man’s house. No man’s daughter” (255).

When John Grady is thrown in jail he comes face-to-face with another dilemma: how to live through this upheaval like a man and deal with the sudden violence he witnesses and perpetrates in prison. His understanding of the myth of the West includes violent conflict, but it is limited to the ways in which men can use violence to protect their loved ones. At the beginning of the novel he rides out to an old Comanche trail, envisioning the ghosts of the Comanche men traveling to war not only with their male companions, but also with their “women and children and women with children at their breasts all of them pledged in blood and redeemable in blood only” (5). After murdering someone in prison, though, the blood of his victim serves as a reminder of his guilt, rather than as a mark of the bonds between men and their families. John Grady’s “clothes sagged with the weight of the blood” (201), emphasizing the burden of violence that he must now carry with him. His mythologized view of the past cannot account for the guilt that he feels. Alejandra’s aunt bails him out of prison and John Grady journeys back to the United States, desperately seeking out someone who can help him to process the murder. Sensing that his father has died since he left for Mexico, John Grady crosses the border into Texas thinking “about his father who was dead in that country and he sat the horse naked in the falling rain and wept” (286). Once again naked, John Grady crosses

the river having failed in his search for a substitute patrimony, burdened with guilt, and with no surviving male family members to guide him.

The absence of male family members leaves John Grady entirely lost and bereft at this point in the novel, as is suggested by a quick look at western films, in which codes of masculinity tend to be passed down explicitly from one generation to the next. In *Red River* (1948), Thomas Dunson takes a young orphan named Matt under his wing. “Don’t ever trust anybody until you know ‘em,” Dunson says after taking away the young orphan’s gun. Matt replies, “I won’t—after this. Thanks for telling me.” At the end of the film—after Matt rebels against his father and the two reconcile during a staged physical fight—Dunson looks at the retreating figure of Tess Milay and says, “You better marry that girl, Matt.” Matt begins to agree, but then asks, “hold on, when are you going to stop telling people what to do?” Dunson says, “Right now,” and then adjusts the ranch’s brand to include the letter M, emphasizing Matt’s initiation into manhood.

*Shane* (1953) narrates a similar father-son dynamic: a young man moves in with a homesteading family and serves as a father figure to a boy named Joey. In the film’s famous climactic scene, Shane tells Joey: “You go home to your mother and your father and grow up to be strong and straight.” He explicitly shares a set of values that he believes will help Joey to grow up to be a good man, even in Shane’s absence. In *The Searchers* (1956), an orphaned teenager accompanies ex-Confederate soldier Ethan Edwards on a years-long quest to rescue Ethan’s niece from a Comanche tribe. These years serve as a sort of apprenticeship, during which Martin learns from Ethan how to be a man and also how to challenge a role model who is in the wrong. The direct transfer of

masculine codes in westerns can be summed up pretty well with one line from the opening song of *El Dorado* (1967): “My Daddy once told me what a man ought to be.”

Back in the United States, John Grady seeks out a father-figure who will help him deal with violence, turning to a sympathetic judge for comfort and validation. “Son,” the judge says after hearing John Grady’s story, “you strike me as somebody that maybe tends to be a little hard on themselves” (291). He says that John Grady did the best he could to survive and that he should try to put the whole thing behind him: “My daddy used to tell me not to chew on somethin that was eatin you” (291). According to the judge, then, all that a man can do is learn to live with his guilt, even if, as the metaphor suggests, it will ultimately consume you. *All the Pretty Horses* ends with a blood-drenched description of the landscape, echoing the language of *Blood Meridian*, summoning its account of violence, and confirming that forgetting is only a partial solution. McCarthy points to “the red wind blowing out of the west across the evening land” and the “bloodred dust” (302) blowing down from the sun in order to give a final post-apocalyptic vision of John Grady riding into the sunset: “Horse and rider and horse passed on and their long shadows passed in tandem like the shadow of a single being. Passed and paled into the darkening land, the world to come” (302).

John Grady steps into the violent history of the West, but he continues to cling to his mythologized and inadequate masculine code in *Cities of the Plain* (1998), the final volume of The Border Trilogy. Set three years later in 1952, the novel begins with John Grady once again working on a ranch in the borderlands. His horse-whispering skills impress not only the owner of the ranch, but also the other cowboys and his new friend, Billy Parham. Lacking the reflective insight to change any of his behavior, John Grady

becomes determined to simultaneously reenact and bury everything that went wrong during his first journey to Mexico. Once again he falls in love with a girl, this time striking up a romance with a beautiful prostitute named Magdalena. He tries to steal her away from Eduardo, her pimp, just as he had tried to steal Alejandra away from her father. In the process he once again disregards multiple warnings about the futility of pursuing this relationship. He builds a house for Magdalena, reenacting his domestic fantasy in which he can become a property-owner, like his grandfather.

In addition to the narrative parallels between John Grady's pursuit of Alejandra and Magdalena, these two love affairs share striking color motifs, suggesting that John Grady is trying to replace Alejandra with Magdalena in order to move past his history of feminine betrayal. In *All the Pretty Horses*, John Grady and Alejandra first talk to each other at a dance that is decorated with red, green, and blue crepe paper bags hung over electric lightbulbs. After he loses Alejandra, he watches children decorate for a wedding. "They were wet from the rain and they were throwing the spools of crepe over the wires and catching them again and the dye was coming off the paper so that their hands were red and green and blue" (283). His love story begins with these colors, and it ends with the same colors being used for someone else's wedding. In *Cities of the Plain*, John Grady has a dream about some type of dramatic enactment that involves "a young girl in a white gauze dress who lay upon a palletboard like a sacrificial virgin" (104). She is surrounded by an ensemble of sinister performers, including "painted whores...a priest, a procuress, a goat with gilded horns and hooves" (103-104). This girl is presumably Magdalena, especially because this dream occurs almost immediately following a meeting with her. The stage is lit by "floodlights covered each in cellophanes of red and

green and blue” (103), which mirrors the colors that characterize John Grady’s relationship with Alejandra even as it transforms the image into one of foreboding, perhaps foreshadowing Magdalena’s violent death.

Another example of this doubling occurs when Alejandra undresses and follows John Grady into a lake, where they begin a passionate encounter. As they have sex several times over the following weeks, John Grady tries to stifle Alejandra’s cries of passion. “Drawing blood with her teeth where he held the heel of his hand against her mouth that she not cry out” (*All the Pretty Horses* 142). In *Cities of the Plain*, John Grady and Magdalena talk to each other near the banks of a river. Magdalena wades out into the shallows. “Her dress gathered about her brown thighs. He tried to smile back but his throat caught and he looked away” (138). Even though this scene is less erotic than the scene with the lake in *All the Pretty Horses*, the image of the water frames this interaction with Magdalena as a reenactment of his past with Alejandra. Magdalena joins John Grady on the banks of the river and tells him of her history, which is filled with abuse and rape. “He put his hand over her mouth. She took it away...She would tell him more but again he placed his fingers against her mouth” (140). Once again, John Grady’s interaction with Magdalena is more emotional and less erotic than his encounter with Alejandra, but he silences both women with his hand, suggesting a parallel between his past and present. Each relationship seems to be suffused with an incipient violence that later becomes explicit with Magdalena’s murder; both women suffer as a direct result of their romantic relationship. It is clear when John Grady pursues Magdalena that he has not learned anything from his past, which emphasizes his inability to adapt his masculine code of behavior when it fails to help him.

Equipped with inadequate codes, John Grady never achieves the expression of masculinity he is aiming for. Instead, he is caught in a perpetual boyhood, as McCarthy makes clear by frequently associating him with children, such as the ones hanging crepe paper at the wedding in *All the Pretty Horses*. Beyond that, John Grady often reaches out to children, such as when he convinces two young girls to bring him a cigarette while he is on his way to prison. He also talks to children on the train when he goes to see Alejandra for the last time. When he travels back to the hacienda to talk to Alejandra's aunt, he shares his lunch with five children and tells them about his journey through Mexico. They even offer him advice on how to convince Alejandra to marry him. These interactions suggest that it is only by regressing into childhood that John Grady can step out of the performance of manhood, with its codes of behavior and mannered speech.

McCarthy once again associates John Grady with children in *Cities of the Plain*. After Eduardo orders Magdalena to be murdered, John Grady confronts him with desperate grief. John Grady kills Eduardo in a duel, but he is gravely injured, with his stomach spilling out of his body. He collapses in the street and wakes up to find a boy going through his pockets. John Grady tells the boy that "he was a great filero and that he had just killed an evil man and that he needed the boy's help" (256), rewriting his personal narrative in terms a child can understand. The boy helps John Grady stumble to the boy's clubhouse, where John Grady lays down. He struggles to stay alive in "the cold and the dark of that child's playhouse in that alien land where he lay in his blood" (257). His friend Billy Parham eventually finds him, only a few minutes before John Grady dies. Then Billy carries the body out of the playhouse: "the dead boy in his arms hung with his head back and those partly opened eyes beheld nothing at all" (261). After John Grady's

archetypal search for the mythic West ends with his death in a child's playhouse in Mexico, he is only a "dead boy" (261) in Billy's arms. John Grady's crises of sonhood ultimately destroy him. The simplistic code of masculinity he adopts turns out to be inadequate for navigating events in the present, just as the mythic past he associates with his grandfather turns out to be incomplete and insufficient.

\* \* \*

Many years before Billy Parham salvages the lifeless body of John Grady from the child's playhouse in Mexico, Billy faces his own unique crisis of sonhood after his father's death in *The Crossing*. Billy's story begins in the late 1930's, when he leaves behind his home in Hidalgo County, New Mexico and embarks on a journey to return a captive she-wolf to Mexico, which he believes to be her home. His quixotic mission ends in failure when he has to shoot her in order to spare her from more abuse, humiliation, and captivity. Over the next several years, Billy makes two more crossings into Mexico. In one of these journeys, he tries to recapture horses that were stolen from his murdered parents, and in the other journey he returns to Mexico to try to find the bones of his dead brother, Boyd. Neither of these trips end well either; on all three of them Billy wanders without a clear sense of why he is there at all. This confusion may in fact lie at the heart of his motives for crossing: his trips begin during time of uncertainty or emotional trauma. Billy crosses the border when he feels lost or unsure of what to do.

Unlike the protagonists in McCarthy's other westerns, Billy struggles to define himself in connection to his male forebears. Bell, for instance, knows what kind of man he is because he is the sheriff. Much like his grandfather before him, he preserves law and order in his county by pitting himself against Mexican drug-dealers. John Grady also

strongly identifies with a specific masculine role. He is a cowboy, rooted in the mythic West that he associates with his grandfather. Whereas Bell and John Grady have a connection—albeit an illusory one—to the past, Billy has no sense of his father’s history. Billy struggles to see himself in connection to his father or to make meaning out of this relationship. Rather than setting him free, this lack of history leaves him rootless, mapless, and in a sense blind.

Perpetually adrift in a world that lacks meaningful boundaries, Billy searches for someone to help him navigate his confusing and threatening environment. In the absence of his father, he turns to several older men that he meets on his travels, all of whom seem eager to offer guidance or impart wisdom to the wandering, orphaned boy. However, most of these oracular men convey worldviews that tend to compete with and invalidate the perspectives of other men. Many of them are in fact dealing with their own absent-father crises, generally expressed with anxiety about the uncertain relationship between God, men, and the rest of the world. Billy cannot discover a sufficient masculine code to guide his actions, at least in part because the men he encounter only possess broken fragments of the code.

The first oracular man that Billy turns to is an old hunter, whom Billy consults about trapping a wolf that has been attacking cattle on nearby ranches. Along with giving Billy a bottle of scent to attract the wolf, the hunter offers metaphysical advice about the ignorance of man. He says the wolf is a true hunter and “that it knows what men do not: that there is no order in the world save that which death has put there” (45). He defines the world in terms of the physical landscape, referencing the storms, trees, and animals of God’s creation. He says that men turn to “their acts and their ceremonies” (46) to impose



order on their physical surroundings, but he warns that these ritualistic actions—whatever they may be— are ultimately meaningless: men can “see the acts of their own hands or they see that which they name and call out to one another but the world between them is invisible to them” (46). In fact, he argues, it is dangerous for men to try to find meaning in their actions, for it blinds them to the way things really are in “the world.”

Billy’s father is only interested in “the world” in which wolves attack his cattle, and he spends most of his time at the beginning of the novel making wolf-traps. But as McCarthy’s description suggests, work in this world has larger ramifications:

Crouched in the broken shadow with the sun at his back and holding the trap at eyelevel against the morning sky he looked to be truing some older, some subtler instrument. Astrolabe or sextant. Like a man bent at fixing himself in the world. Bent on trying by arc or chord the space between his being and the world that was. If there be such space. If it be knowable. (22)

In this context, “the world” encompasses not only the physical landscape, but also the metaphysical space in which men try to assign meaning to their actions. In this world of meaning, he uses the trap to fix himself in the world and define his role in it: hunter, rancher, and protector of his property and family. He helps Billy learn how to make the traps, suggesting that he wants to show Billy how to fix himself in the world as well.

Billy’s father holds the trap at eyelevel like a sextant, implying that a relationship exists between sight and knowledge of the world. McCarthy’s only physical description of Billy’s father concentrates on his eyes, which are “very blue and very beautiful half hid away in the leathery seams of his face. As if there were something there that the hardness of the country had not been able to touch” (16). Later, Billy has a dream about

his father's eyes that probably coincides with the time of his father's death. "His father's eyes searched the coming of the night in the deepening redness beyond the rim of the world and those eyes seemed to contemplate with a terrible equanimity the cold and the dark and the silence that moved upon him and then all was dark and all was swallowed up and in the silence he heard a solitary bell that tolled and ceased and then he woke" (112). The images of redness and darkness recall the judge's metaphor from *Blood Meridian* about the rapid and violent life cycles of men, signaling the father's murder. If Billy's father is truly able to "see the world," then he should be able to anticipate this type of violence, which is repeatedly enacted in the "world" of McCarthy's westerns. Instead, he is blindsided by the attack on his property. According to the sheriff who investigates the crime, Billy's father probably heard the dog bark when intruders approached the house, but then he went back to sleep and was killed in bed. In this sense, Billy turns to his father for guidance on how to see the world, but his father ultimately fails to see the world as it is.

McCarthy continues to explore this issue of "seeing the world" during Billy's journeys, implying that Billy loses a metaphorical sense of sight at some point during his first crossing to Mexico. Remembering one of his favorite experiences from childhood, Billy vividly recalls watching a pack of wolves "dancing" and "loping and twisting" (4) on a winter night; he is so close to them that "he could see their almond eyes in the moonlight" (4). In contrast to the rich visual world of his youth, the world of Billy's adulthood is barely discernible. During his first crossing he dreams that "a messenger had come in off the plains from the south with something writ upon a ledgerscrap but he could not read it. He looked at the messenger but that face was obscured in the shadow

and featureless” (83), a sign that he struggles both to see and decipher information from his surroundings. Later, when Billy returns home after losing the wolf—only to find that his parents have been murdered—he cannot see what happened because his parents’ bed obscures his view of a massive bloodstain on the floor. And when he returns to Mexico to search for his father’s horses, he cannot identify any of them on a register that has visual descriptions of all of the animals.

In yet another example linking blindness with incomprehension, Billy attends a play with his brother Boyd during their prolonged search for the horses. “He looked for Boyd but could not see him...He watched the play with interest but could make little of it” (219). Billy often struggles to see his physical surroundings, but he more often struggles to interpret what he sees. This figurative blindness seems to originate with his traumatic experiences, specifically the death of the she-wolf and the murder of Billy’s parents. McCarthy pays extraordinary attention to blindness in his westerns, particularly when it intersects with issues of sonhood or violence. In *Blood Meridian*, he introduces the images of children leading “a blind man on a string to a place of vantage” (94) and a blindfolded fortuneteller who sits “like that blind interlocutrix between Boaz and Joachin...false prophetess for all” (99). For the temporarily blinded fortuneteller, however, physical blindness is supplanted by a kind of second sight that allows her to accurately predict the death of many members of Glanton’s gang at the hands of the Yuma tribe. This vision echoes some of the more metaphysical pronouncements of the old hunter, and anticipates the knowledge that the blind figures Billy meets in *The Crossing* lay claim to.

Billy's most important encounter with a blind seer comes after Boyd is shot during the search for the horses, when Billy meets a man who literally lost his eyes while a prisoner during the Mexican Revolution. Since then, he has navigated his surroundings "by the sounds of the countryside. The coolness of the night, the damp. By the calls of the birds and by the first warmth of the rumored light upon his skin" (278). He possesses a sightless knowledge of place that he tells Billy sighted people lack: "men with eyes may select what they wish to see but for the blind the world appears of its own will... To move is to abut against the world" (291). This phrase echoes the old wolf hunter's earlier discussion of how men can try to impose order on the world, "but yet this world men do not see" (46).

Both men contrast lack of sight with a blindness in which men willfully choose to ignore information that does not agree with their understanding of the world, a behavior that most recalls John Grady. The most pointed allusion to this blindness comes in *All the Pretty Horses* while John Grady is trapped in the hellish Mexican prison. There one of the wealthiest and most influential prisoners explains that this type of blindness is typical of a white man: "His picture of the world is incomplete. In this rare way. He looks only where he wishes to see" (192). In his stubborn pursuit of myth, John Grady sees only what he wishes to see, ignoring the warnings of everyone who disagrees with him. In *Cities of the Plain*, John Grady repeatedly seeks guidance from a blind maestro, who tells him that "those who cannot see must rely upon what has gone before. If I do not wish to appear so foolish as to drink from an empty glass I must remember whether I have drained it or not" (195). John Grady, then, acts like a fool because he relies on a past that has never existed.

White men with eyes live with willful blinders, McCarthy suggests, while men who are physically blind generally possess unique insight about how to survive in such a fatal and unpredictable environment. Recalling once more the judge's metaphor about violence in *Blood Meridian*, the blind exist in a world of darkness rather than redness. The blind do not participate in the typical brief, violent cycles of manhood; they are outside observers of this fatal history. As the maestro makes clear to John Grady, and as the blind man implies with his copious memory of the Mexican Revolution, the blind possess a special relationship with the past. The maestro exists in a unique space in which the present and the past overlap, frequenting The Moderno, a "very old place" in which musicians listen to old music and dance an "antique waltz" (87). For the maestro, his memory of the past is a necessity. In order to survive, blind men must locate or map themselves in "the world" very carefully. They move through their environment with the thing that Billy most lacks: a sense of direction and purpose that grows out of confidence in knowing where they came from and where they are.

Looking for this sense of direction, Billy becomes obsessed with pinpointing his location on a map. During his second crossing, when Billy and Boyd are searching for the horses, Billy pays a man to draw a map on the ground for them. A couple of onlookers point to the map and call it "un fantasma" (184). Billy tries to figure out which aspects of the map are incorrect, but the men explain that no map provides enough information to understand the countryside. They tell him "that in the country were fires and earthquakes and floods and that one needed to know the country itself and not simply the landmarks therein" (185). A map, then, is useless unless a man already understands the environment that he journeys through. Billy lacks this understanding, so any map he

finds might lead him astray. “In any case a bad map was worse than no map at all,” the men say. “To follow a false map is to invite disaster” (185).

Billy ultimately does meet with disaster in Mexico, suggesting that the men may be right. After searching for his father’s horses, he gives up and leaves behind his brother in Mexico. During his absence, Boyd is murdered. Billy crosses into Mexico a third time, this time to search for his brother, only to find out that he is dead. When Billy tells a ranch manager named Quijada that he wants to bury the body in the U.S., he once again receives a lesson in the futility of worrying about maps. Quijada explains that it should not matter which country Boyd is buried in:

The names of the cerros and the sierras and the deserts exist only on maps. We name them that we do not lose our way. Yet it is because the way was lost to us already that we have made those names. The world cannot be lost. We are the ones. And it is because these names and these coordinates are our own naming that they cannot save us. That they cannot find for us the way again. (387)

For Quijada, names and coordinates are mere artifice, a point that echoes the old wolf hunter’s opinion about the meaninglessness of borders. Map-making, Quijada tells Billy, is a way for men who do not know where they are to disguise how lost they feel. Billy’s wandering may reflect the confusion of someone without family or roots; it may also point to the futility of trying to map a journey with no clear purpose.

Billy is unable to figure out where he is meant to be, which probably stems from his compulsive desire to reconstruct his home life after the murder of his parents. Early in his second crossing to Mexico, he meets a ganadero who warns Billy that his search for the horses will lead him astray. “A man can be lost,” the ganadero says. “You are far

from home. Let me advise you. I feel the obligation. Return to your home” (201). He explains that “the past cannot be mended” (202) and that the brothers’ journey may have horrible, unforeseeable consequences. “I am no gypsy fortuneteller,” the ganadero says, “But I see great trouble in store” (202). Billy receives yet another warning about the horses from a primadonna whose caravan is stranded on the side of the road. She says that the brothers cannot anticipate the cost of their journey: “Listen to the corridos of the country. They will tell you. Then you will see in your own life what is the cost of things. Perhaps it is true that nothing is hidden. Yet many do not wish to see what lies before them in plain sight” (230). She tries to warn Billy that in searching for the horses, he risks losing the only family he has left: his brother. Ignoring these warnings, Billy pursues his goals with the willful blindness that is so characteristic of John Grady.

Just as John Grady crosses the national border in an attempt to access the mythic past, Billy moves through physical space when he wants to rewrite a traumatic event from his personal history. For instance, Billy retreats into a remote mountain range after he shoots the wolf, wishing “to become again the child he never was” (129). He wants not only to revisit the past, but also to change it. The effort is so disorienting that nature itself seems thrown off balance: the “river was running backwards. That or the sun was setting in the east behind him” (130). Billy runs backwards like the river as his travels take him into increasingly distant historical spaces, passing by abandoned towns associated with specific dates from the past. He encounters a Mormon man who tells a story about the earthquake of 1887. Then Billy passes through a town which was destroyed by Apaches in 1758, before eventually traveling by a settlement which was

founded in 1642. These ruined traces of deep history serve as a frame for the destination that seems always to be in the back of his mind: his own past.

As he continues his journey through the mountains, Billy finds more traces of deep history: “old pictographs of men and animals and suns and moons as well as other representations that seemed to have no referent in the world although they once may have” (*The Crossing* 135). The pictographs harbinger knowledge from the past, but Billy cannot decipher them. McCarthy includes similar representations of petroglyphs in his other westerns, pointing to how the characters often try to seek continuity between the past and the present. While hunting for a mountain lion, the ranch hands in *Cities of the Plain* sit under “petroglyphs carved there by other hunters a thousand years before” (87) and pass “under pictographs upon the rimland boulders that bore images of hunter and shaman and meeting fires and desert sheep all picked into the rock a thousand years and more” (165). In another example of men searching for continuity, Llewelyn Moss gazes upon “rocks there were etched with pictographs perhaps a thousand years old. The men who drew them hunters like himself” (*No Country for Old Men* 11).

Billy searches for this continuity between the past and the present because he wants to go back in time and fix everything in his life that has gone wrong. He does not realize that the past is inaccessible once it’s gone, even when a gypsy that he meets on the road near the end of the novel tries to warn Billy about this problem. The gypsy tells Billy a story about a collection of old photographs that the gypsy’s father kept in their caravan. As a child, the gypsy “took them for a cautionary tale and he would search those sepia faces for some secret thing they might divulge to him from the days of their



mortality” (412). Much like Billy or John Grady, the child turns to a relic of the past in order to discover some secret, unknown truth.

Then the gypsy realizes that “in those faces that shall now be forever nameless among their outworn chattels there is writ a message that can never be spoken because time would always slay the messenger before he could ever arrive” (413). In short, his father’s photographs can tell him nothing about the past, much less about his own time. Unlike the gypsy, Billy never comes to terms with this distance between past and present. Before running into the gypsy, he visits his old neighbor, Mr. Sanders, and searches for a warning from the past among the faces of the man’s old photographs. Billy observes “the wary or haunted cast to their eyes. Like people photographed at gunpoint” (344). Just as Billy fixates on his father’s eyes when first trying to “see the world,” he looks for direction in the eyes of strangers from the distant past.

Similar to John Grady, then, Billy falls into the trap of chasing after the past. The difference between the two wandering cowboys is that John Grady stubbornly pursues his quest whereas Billy often gives up on his search halfway through his journey. By the time Billy crosses to Mexico for the third time, he feels completely alienated from the past: “He seemed to himself a person with no prior life. As if he had died in some way years ago and was ever after some other being who had no history, who had no ponderable life to come” (382). He feels completely lost, disconnected from his identity, and deprived of a personal past. Yet this sense of alienation ultimately helps Billy to survive in the dangerous environment of the West. Unlike the kid, John Grady, or Llewelyn Moss, Billy lives to be an old man. His inability to “see the world”—the defining crisis of sonhood for this novel—sets Billy adrift, but it also seems to remove

him from the cyclical patterns of masculine violence that destroy so many of the other characters.

\* \* \*

In fact, Billy lives far into old age, surviving for many decades after the death of his father, his brother, and John Grady. He has slim hopes of dying in bed, though, for by the end of *The Border Trilogy*, Billy is 78 years old and homeless. In the epilogue of *Cities of the Plain*, he spends the night under a concrete overpass in Arizona, wondering how it is possible that “in everything that he’d ever thought about the world and about his life in it he’d been wrong” (266). He wakes up the next morning and sees the figure of a solitary man, whom Billy at first mistakes for Death. After discovering that the man is just another wanderer like himself, Billy offers to share his crackers with the stranger.

As they share this food together, the stranger says that when he was in the middle of his life he drew a map of all the places that he had ever been and tried to trace his journey on it—just the sort of gesture Billy himself had struggled with. “I tried,” the stranger says, “to see the pattern that it made upon the earth because I thought that if I could see that pattern and identify the form of it then I would know better how to continue” (268). He goes on, having captured Billy’s attention: “I would know what my path must be. I would see into the future of my life” (268). When Billy asks whether or not the map revealed anything, the stranger says he was surprised to find that “it looked like different things. There were different perspectives one could take” (269). His map, then, could not offer a single answer, because any interpretation of it would depend on how its maker “sees the world.”

The stranger has come to understand the urge to fix one's place in time and space, as well as its futility: "it is difficult," he says, "to stand outside of one's desires and see things of their own volition" (269). This issue with perspective persists with all of the male protagonists of McCarthy's westerns. Bell struggles to understand the crime in his county because he is blinded by his idealization of his grandfather. The kid is so desperate to escape the burdensome history of his father that he fails to see the violence that his western vision of independence leads to. John Grady stubbornly searches for a mythic past and the promise of his family fantasy, blind to the fatal outcomes of his actions. Billy never learns how to see the world objectively, even in his old age. When he tells the stranger, "I think you just see whatever's in front of you" (269), he still holds onto a belief that direct seeing leads to direct action. The stranger disagrees, but instead of arguing he decides to tell Billy the story of a dream he once had that he believes is critically important for understanding the shared, violent history of men. Throughout his narrative of the dream, the stranger delivers increasingly frantic warnings about the dangers of forgetting the past, insisting that "the ancient world holds us to account. The world of our fathers resides within us. Ten thousand generations and more. What has no past can have no future" (281).

Billy cannot understand the hidden and cryptic message the stranger is trying to communicate, so after a protracted conversation about this dream, Billy simply says: "I got to get on" (289). Unlike earlier in the narrative, when Billy frequently sought out metaphysical advice from other men, he seems to have finally accepted that no man will ever be able to reveal the secrets of the world to him. Most of the oracular figures in McCarthy's westerns are essentially dealing with their own feelings of alienation by

clinging to the one thing that they believe makes their lives meaningful: their stories. Just like the larger narratives of McCarthy's male protagonists, the stories of these oracular figures are deeply personal accounts of loss, doubt, and inadequacy. McCarthy deliberately makes these stories obscure and contradictory; rather than constructing his own philosophy or worldview from them, he uses the stories to point to the unanswered questions that men must grapple with in an incomprehensible world.

In fact, as McCarthy emphasizes in the final scene of the epilogue, most men are too burdened by trauma, violence, and their attitude toward the past to articulate or even understand what has happened to them. The characters who do seem to have perspective on the struggles of manhood are the ones who exist outside of its violent cycles: the blind, many of the women, and the occasional aimless wanderer. McCarthy points to this outsider's perspective when Billy, after decades of roaming through the Southwest, finally discovers the family and the home that he has been longing for since his parents were murdered. Taken in by an affectionate maternal figure, Billy sleeps in a room "that was much like the room he'd slept in as a boy" (290) and tells the family's children "about horses and cattle and the old days. Sometimes he'd tell them about Mexico" (290).

One night, he has a nightmare that Boyd is in the room but will not speak to him. "When he woke the woman was sitting on his bed with her hand on his shoulder" (291). She pats his hand, which is "gnarled, ropescarred, speckled from the sun and the years of it. The ropy veins that bound them to his heart. There was map enough for men to read. There God's plenty of signs and wonders to make a landscape. To make a world" (291). Billy has been obsessed with maps for almost his entire life, always feeling lost and

confused about his identity. McCarthy implies that the map Billy wanted was always in front of him, if only he could have figured out how to interpret it. Billy needed to learn how to accept the past—and his own disastrous actions—without trying to mend what went wrong.

He apologizes to the woman, saying, “I’m not what you think I am. I aint nothin. I dont know why you put up with me” (292). She replies: “Well, Mr Parham, I know who you are. And I do know why” (292). She is not simply telling him that she knows why she lets him live with her family, implying instead that she understands his burdens and how they have impacted him. She stands as a witness to the behaviors of men, just as other women in McCarthy’s westerns function as witnesses while men struggle to define manhood. Alejandra’s aunt, for instance, tells John Grady that during the Mexican Revolution she saw with her own eyes the destructive cycle of masculine violence and its consequences. Both the blind man in *The Crossing* and the blind maestro in *Cities of the Plain* rely on a younger woman as they tell their stories. These women rarely speak, but they stand as witnesses to everything that happens, sometimes offering affirmation or support. Just as the physically blind men rely on women, Billy finally discovers a woman who can help him understand his traumatic experiences and heal from them.

Instead of asking what was wrong with the country, then, maybe Bell should have asked what was wrong with the men who lived and died in it. McCarthy seems to suggest that manhood is a fundamentally traumatic experience, often resulting in alienation and dislocation. This seems to be why the drama of sonhood is so important to him. The men in his westerns must constantly grapple with the burdens of violence in their personal lives, even as peripheral signs of conflict—the Mexican Revolution, World

War II, the atomic bomb, the Vietnam War—threaten to destabilize their homes, families, and identities. These burdens leave most of the male characters either dead or fundamentally damaged. The ones who make it out alive—such as Billy or Bell—usually survive only because they acknowledge their inadequacies or give up on their search for manhood. In McCarthy's westerns, then, not only is there "no country for old men," but there is no country for any man who tries to escape the burdens of sonhood and find his own, independent sense of meaning and purpose.

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