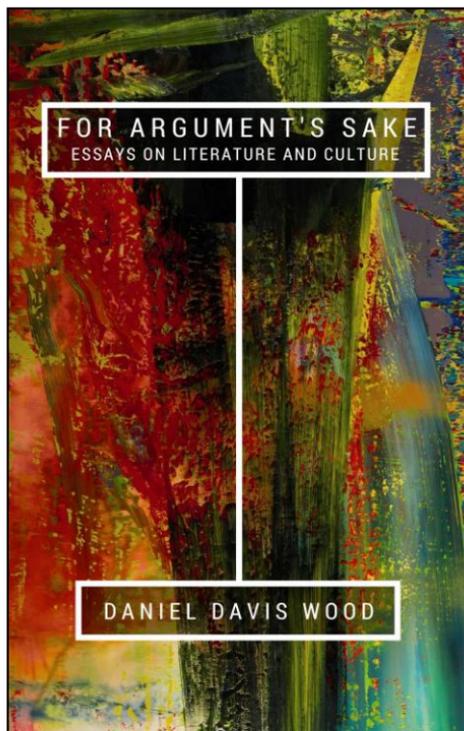


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BLOOD MERIDIAN AND ITS ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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WITH *BLOOD MERIDIAN*, HIS FIFTH NOVEL, CORMAC MCCARTHY departed from the lush mountains of the Appalachian South which had provided the setting for his earlier work and instead turned to the merciless deserts of the American Southwest in the wake of the Mexican-American War. Based on actual events in 1848 and 1849, *Blood Meridian* chronicles the reign of terror of the Glanton Gang, a *posse* of bounty hunters which repeatedly clashed with the Apache and Comanche marauders who razed fledgling settlements along the new U.S.-Mexico border. Given its subject matter, the novel tends to be read, unsurprisingly, as an indictment of American expansionism and its ideological rationalisation: “the definitive statement on Manifest Destiny” (Kollin 558) or even “a counter-narrative to the overly santized rhetoric of Manifest Destiny” (Eaton 160). More surprising, however, is how much the articulation of its indictment depends on its development of an environmental consciousness — and not only a human consciousness *of* the environment, but the environment’s *own* consciousness of its exploitation by human hands.

Territorial expansion is driven, at bottom, by the political imperative to possess and control access to valuable natural resources, and the American expansion into what was formerly the northeast of Mexico was driven by the imperative to mine and cultivate the rich Californian soil. But the expansionist mindset is not content to simply own the land: it must ensure that the land is occupied and its occupants subdued in order to demonstrate dominance over them. *Blood Meridian* incarnates and literalises this mindset in the form of the monstrous Judge Holden. As the *de facto* leader of the Glanton Gang, the Judge is a seven-foot-tall albino with an overpowering intellect, an unquenchable thirst for violence, and a chillingly totalitarian worldview that posits environmental exploitation as a means of assuring one’s social superiority:

Whatever exists, he said. Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent. ... [A]nonymous creatures,

he said, may seem little or nothing in the world. Yet the smallest crumb can devour us. Any smallest thing beneath yon rock out of men's knowing. Only nature can enslave man and only when the existencē of each last [natural] entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth. ... The Judge placed his hands on the ground. ... This is my daim, he said. And yet everywhere upon it are pockets of autonomous life. Autonomous. In order for it to be mine nothing must be permitted to occur upon it save by my dispensation. ... The freedom of birds is an insult to me. I'd have them all in zoos. (198-199)

The problem, however, is that the Mexican deserts annexed by the United States are so hostile to human habitation that the settlers who enter them are rendered "half crazed with the enormity of their own presence in that immense and bloodslaked waste" (7). The environment itself disdains the human presence and so, with its human occupants already antagonising one another in their race to lay claim to the land, it furnishes them with the means to turn their antagonism into carnage. "[O]ur mother the earth," the Judge declares, "contain[s] all good things within her" (130). So the "broken stobs of a mesquite" offer limbs from which to hang the dead (57) while the dust offers enough saltpetre, nitre, and charcoal for the Judge to concoct gunpowder (130). Throughout *Blood Meridian*, tensions among men erupt into slaughter when an environment hostile to human beings offees them the very instruments they need for bloodshed. Human self-destruction is aided and accelerated by a natural world that wants human beings to destroy themselves so that it may be purged of their presence.

Crucially, this investment of the environment with a sort of consciousness is one of the novel's most carefully-constructed and prominent features. The narrator of *Blood Meridian* — whoever or whatever that may be — explicitly construes the environment as a vast conscious entity that observes, largely antipathetically, the various creatures and objects it contains:

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

Moreover, the 'optical democracy' mentioned in this passage is not merely a subject for the narrator to remark upon but is the very basis of the narrator's own observational practices. In other words, *Blood Meridian* refuses the notion that human beings hold a position in the environment over and above that of anything else they exist alongside and thus, as David Holloway writes, the novel "diminish[es] language as an agency of human cognition, binding [its] aesthetic ever more tightly to a phenomenal world upon which language might otherwise go to work" ('Modernism' 192). As such, the narrator of *Blood Meridian* emerges as a consciousness that is at least empathetic to the conscious environment it observes and perhaps even *is* the environment itself. Mimicking what is described above as the environment's equalisation of everything it contains, the narrator registers "[m]inute details and impalpable qualities [so precisely] that the prejudices of anthropocentric perceptions are disqualified," and instead offers "a kind of perception before or beyond the human. This is not a perspective *upon* the world... but an immanent perspective that already *is* the world" (Shaviro 153-154).

In effect, then, *Blood Meridian* depicts the environment's view of its own exploitation by human beings whose purpose in exploiting it is ultimately to brutalise one another; and to the extent that the novel advances an indictment of American expansionism, environmental exploitation is fundamental to that indictment. Finally, however, McCarthy concedes that the nineteenth century was essentially defined by the institutionalisation of such exploitation when he concludes *Blood Meridian* with an epilogue set several decades after the end of the Glanton Gang's narrative. In this epilogue, a man with a post-hole digger proceeds across an open field to mark the

trajectory of what will eventually become a fence (337). Fencing, of course, suggests the formal segmentation and occupation of the land and the socio-political legitimisation of its exploitation, and by raising these suggestions on its final page *Blood Meridian* anticipates the opening pages of its successor, *All the Pretty Horses*, the first volume in Cormac McCarthy's acclaimed *Border Trilogy*. That novel finds its protagonist, John Grady Cole, disgusted by the ubiquitous fencing of the Southwest and compelled to retreat to Mexico on "a quest for reconnection with some undefined but older, notionally purer or more authentic landscape" (Holloway, *Late Modernism* 61). In the shadow of *Blood Meridian*, however, his quest is doomed to futility since *Blood Meridian* demonstrates, at bottom, that absolute environmental purity is unattainable for human beings insofar as the source of impurity is humankind.

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