
“What happens to country” in *Blood Meridian*

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“You wouldnt think that a man would run
plumb out of country out here, would ye?”
—Toadvine, *Blood Meridian* (285)

“I dont know what happens to country.”
—John Grady Cole, *All the Pretty Horses* (299)

Twenty years after its appearance, Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* inscribes an enduring delineation in his work of now nine novels. The fifth book’s title, and its dense Epilogue contributing to the rich ambiguities of “meridian,” now resonate against a new novel, *No Country for Old Men*. McCarthy’s latest book begins as a West Texas noir, boiling with enough violence to remind the reader of milder passages from *Blood Meridian*. But ultimately, the new book simmers down into the bitterness of an old man’s jeremiad: the good days of riding and justice are gone, and violence seems a thing of youth.

This is ironic, though, as most of *Blood Meridian* describes a space devoid of law and morality, and it tests the reader, and its protagonist, with the severity of its violence. Early on, the narrator divulges the book’s central problem: “not again in all the world’s turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man’s will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay” (4-5). Toward the novel’s end, one answer to this problem is given by judge Holden: “If war is not holy man is nothing but antic clay” (307). Holden’s position—indeed, the preponderance of the novel’s structure and force—demands a space for unbridled war, for violence unconstrained by pity. One definition of the book’s “meridian,” then, might be this: the line in history before which the problem of the human heart’s will was tried in the fire of pure war. Beyond that line, history takes over: the possibilities of the heart are indeed become molded like clay, fired in killing, and now cracked in guilt. In the Epilogue of *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy ultimately renders space into place through enigmatic yet historical details, describ-

ing the coterminous lines of three salient events in the West: the nearly complete genocide of a people, the nearly complete extermination of an animal, and the realization (in carefully mechanical enlightenment terms) of an abstraction bringing space into the order of place.

The nostalgic last image of *No Country for Old Men*, of a father carrying fire in a horn and riding into the darkness of the past, then, seems less Jungian and more recent. Heroic as this image may seem within that book, the terrain of this dream image remains startlingly safe compared to any of the country in *Blood Meridian*. Located firmly this side of the blood meridian, then, this image of patriarchal authority more readily recalls the country just lost in the popular *All the Pretty Horses*, whose action begins fifty years after the time of *Blood Meridian*'s Epilogue. The ideal Western myth has always been hard to pin down inside of a range of some ten years of historical reality that barely occurred. A return to *Blood Meridian*'s Epilogue will remind us that the golden time longed for at the end of McCarthy's latest book—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.

This does not mean, of course, that McCarthy's best work can be reduced to the level of suasion. Along with an absence of families, nothing is so persistent in all McCarthy's books as the idea that violence is timeless. But the wistfulness and regret that color McCarthy's later novels, as well as the temptation to nostalgia—even as his best writing always indicates the inefficacy of that nostalgia—only heighten our sense, since *Blood Meridian*, that something has happened to country, and that whatever has happened is more complex than the mere loss of some better time. Widely read as an antinomian revel, *Blood Meridian* rather eventually describes a shift in time; although most of its story details the lawless violence of a roaming gang, the book includes the story of their inevitable constraint and defeat (with the notable exception of the judge, dancing forever). Beyond the line indicated by the book's title, something indeed happens to country: antinomian space becomes historical place. And with that shift comes the burden of memory, loss, and even the sentimentality that overtakes McCarthy's latest novel.

That sentimentality usually remains at the convincing level of buried sentiment, and it is easiest to see in two relations: one between the son and the father (and this has been usually so deeply buried, yet so acrimonious, as to seem like anything but sentiment); the other between McCarthy's heroes and their physical settings. Because the second is the most obvious, McCarthy's more widely-noted achievement is to capture that feeling for space in terms that resonate with readers beyond those

caught up in mere cowboy mythology, or in the earlier versions of male wandering that attract many young male readers. This second relation, between his heroes and their “natural” surroundings, is universally powerful enough in McCarthy’s work to have attracted a much broader audience, and increasing scholarship. He catches us trying to have our spaces without them turning into other people’s places. We want, each of us alone, to have our “country” as a field of movement that is nonetheless secure, our own place within unlimited possible space. McCarthy avoids direct psychology, and his characters live at the opposite end of the conscious/self-conscious spectrum from those characters of, for instance, Henry James. Nonetheless, reasonable inferences about McCarthy’s young men (always men), assure us that they assume those aspects of “country” suggesting limitless possibility at best, antinomian bloodbaths at worst.

This transformation of “country,” from space to place, enacts a parallel movement in the book from philosophy to history. That central question about the human heart’s ability to transform “the stuff of creation” cannot be fully answered in the affirmative if history is to have any say at all at the end of the experiment; indeed, such an experiment would necessarily continue indefinitely, and so it is that the judge has his answer in music, in dance, in eternity. Yet, even a partial answer that yes, that heart has that power, will present itself on one level in not only the vague terms of myth, but also in the particular terms of history. So it is that the Epilogue demands both a mythic, and a historical, interpretation. The judge may go on dancing, but the rest of us are left to clean up the mess and mourn the dead.

Blood Meridian’s plot hangs on history: the novel follows a character named “the kid” alongside the Glanton Gang, scalp hunters for hire to Mexican principalities in 1849. In this sense, the novel is true to a generic trope of the Western: lawless men (or lawful men in a lawless space) enact the violent subjugation of space until it becomes a place so constrained that it can no longer tolerate their inclusion. The Glanton Gang is based on historical figures indiscriminate in whom they scalped (their victims often included mestizo peasants), yet who were part of the official attempt to eradicate Native American Indians for the sake of Mexican townships. McCarthy makes it clear that we should not read this story merely as the specific history of manifest destiny in the American West and Mexican North; among the novel’s epigraphs, after all, he includes that *Yuma Daily Sun* item describing anthropological evidence of scalping in what is now Ethiopia—300,000 years ago. Nonetheless, *Blood Meridian* ends at a line in history beyond which the ageless violence of the gang will no longer be possible on the scale at which we find it.

In many ways, the central figure of the novel is less the kid than Holden, the mysterious “judge” in name and in practice an immortal force of darkness rivaling

both Ahab and the whale. Of what he is a judge, and by what authority beyond his own, we must puzzle over. Holden wants the kid under his wing, and he argues by a darker line Krishna's position with Arjuna, that if the kid failed full participation in war, he failed his proper nature in a universe whose meaning is illusional. Holden spouts Nietzsche before Nietzsche's time, insisting on the creative regeneration of human identity through bloodshed. This giant, an altogether hairless (like a malevolent outsized infant) enlightenment polymath who molests and murders children and drowns puppies, sits in judgment on the kid: "You sat in judgement on your own deeds. You put in your own allowances before the judgements of history and you broke with the body of which you were pledged a part and poisoned it in all its enterprise. Hear me, man. I spoke in the desert for you and you only and you turned a deaf ear to me. If war is not holy man is nothing but antic clay" (307).

The judge's use of the word "history" is larger than mine, of course: he means that passage of time comprehensible only at the scale of wheeling stellar bodies—and his immortal dancing form. What he certainly does not indicate is that constantly revised human attempt to agree on what happened, and why—let alone as part of some moral project. In fact, the latter is what the judge is accusing the kid of doing. Yet, for all the philosophical force embodied by the judge, he is based on a historical account of a "judge Holden" in Samuel Chamberlain's *My Confessions*, a memoir that includes a stint with the real Glanton gang. Like the rest of the book, then, we must read him simultaneously in historical and ahistorical terms.

The gang, the kid, and the judge are therefore the perfect historical test for the country in *Blood Meridian*—perhaps apart from whatever we might make of their common philosophical problem. The book is too violent to be boiled down to revisionist history, yet too complex to be, as one particularly ideological scholar would have it, a Reaganesque romp in American colonial killing (Beck). No matter how we read it, on moral matters, it remains thick and dark. But on what happens to country, we may get clearer as the end of the book's main action gives way to the Epilogue.

In the culmination of that action, the Glanton Gang is indeed run to ground, after much time and blood. Having avoided settling down but tracked by the forces of the very governments that once hired them, they uncharacteristically take over a fort, only to suffer a quick massacre by Yuma Indians. Those gang members that survive end up on the run, with less room to run in. It is then that a member of the gang named Toadvine is asked where he might go, and he complains, "You wouldnt think that a man would run plumb out of country out here, would ye?" (285).

A similar complaint ends McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*. A hundred years after the Glanton Gang runs amok, John Grady Cole returns from his own violent trip to Mexico. Though his errands are remarkably less bloody and primitive than those

of the previous book, they depend no less on his assumption of an open “country.” Like Toadvine and “the kid” he might be speaking for, John Grady depends on a sense of “country” as possibility. When his friend Lacey Rawlins suggests that, having come back with his dreams turned into nightmares, he might stay with him in Texas and get a job on an oilrig, his reaction indicates the persistence of the myth of Western space. With that hundred years passed since the Gang’s fenceless homicidal wandering, John Grady is no less possessed of that horse culture sense of limitless space in which to roam, even as he is puzzled by the limits he keeps seeing in it. His friend argues, “This is still good country.” John Grady replies, “Yeah. I know it is. But it aint my country.” Asked, “Where is your country?” John Grady can only reply, “I dont know.... I dont know where it is. I dont know what happens to country” (299).

What do Toadvine and John Grady mean by “country”? One definition, the *American Heritage*, particularly suits McCarthy characters: “[a] region, territory, or large tract of land distinguishable by features of topography, biology, or culture.” This order is evident in these novels, though the last feature is initially marginal, at best: as *Blood Meridian*’s Judge Holden would have it, culture exists only as a flim-flam, as biology manifested in blood. To Holden, the more salient aspect of the country is a sense of space before it is rendered into “place”—before it can circumscribe what the heart might “try.” It is therefore necessary that McCarthy’s frequent and now famous descriptions of the country they cross indicate something apart from human comprehension, let alone human control. *Blood Meridian*’s gang traverses a mute cinder of a planet, something we hardly have language for. Even the mere “topo” in the above definition reflects our need to make spaces into places. As we see in the Epilogue, the enigmatic ending of *Blood Meridian* concerns itself with just this activity in the country.

Comparing another repetition between these fifth and sixth novels, we add to our sense of “what happens to country.” Traveling across the desert in *Blood Meridian*, the kid finds human babies “hung [by Indians] from the broken stobs of a mesquite” tree (57). A hundred years later, John Grady rides across what could be the same territory and finds birds, impaled by the wind on the thorns of “roadside cholla” (73). From babies to birds: the violence is still there, but stepped down a few notches. We may continue to theorize “frontera,” and indeed see the continuing flux of claims and mix of cultures across the American West and Mexican North. But the contests are not so bloody there, not now, as they had been. Country, then, means the same thing across these novels in terms of potential space rendered into limiting places. Yet, the degree of violent freedom in that country has narrowed.

So what has happened to effect this change? John Wegner points to war; the

meanderings of McCarthy's characters back and forth across the border between the United States and Mexico imply serious lack of historical knowledge on the part of those gringos ("Whose Story"; *Overcoming*). The sheer military force of our country—as a nation-state—effected much change in the more general "country" of McCarthy's characters. (In his weaker moments, McCarthy gives us Mexican lecturers on this throughout *The Border Trilogy*.) Finally, however, *Blood Meridian's* enigmatic Epilogue deepens our understanding of "what happens to country" to include a larger war against space and the freedom of all its inhabitants.

The Epilogue is only half a page long. It begins, "In the dawn there is a man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground. He uses an implement with two handles and he chucks it into the hole and he enkindles the stone in the hole with his steel hole by hole striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there" (337). Harold Bloom reads the fire in this mysterious Epilogue as Promethean. Prompted by Peter Josyph to consider this action as "a process of digging holes, of setting dynamite to build a fence: the closing in of the West," Bloom responds:

No, no, no, that's a very bad interpretation. That two-handed implement is, as I say, doing one thing and one thing only: it is striking fire which has been put into the rock, clearly a Promethean motif, and he is clearly contrasted with creatures who are either goulish [sic] human beings, if they *are* human beings, or already are, in fact, shades, looking for bones for whatever nourishment that might bring about.... I cannot see that as any kind of allegory of anything that has happened to the American West. (qtd. in Josyph 14-15)

But the tool must be a post-hole digger, as McCarthy, or any reader acquainted with manual labor must recognize. And given the dual trajectories of the philosophical question of the heart's will (particularly given the judge's answer to it) and the historical movement that both informs the plot and is described by it, I see no reason not to read this passage in both mythic, and historical, terms. What Bloom is objecting to is the hitching of this Epilogue to a political plow; he rightfully sees that the sharpest edges of books are sullied and dulled by such treatment. Yet, claiming a mythic meaning for a passage does not preclude one from simultaneously, or at least alternatively, finding a historical moment that informs that passage—especially if the cumulative weight of that moment only adds to the larger significance of what is represented.

The first part of Bloom's interpretation derives soundly from the phrase "the fire out of the rock *which God has put there*" (337; my emphasis). That is fine, but a reader who has wielded a post-hole digger—which is a two-handed implement for digging holes—for more than a few minutes could not fail to connect this description

of McCarthy’s with the simple act of digging holes for fence posts, or some other placement, such as a marker. (Sensibility, that ultimate requirement for good close reading, does not suffer from physical experience.) We need not choose between historical and mythical readings of McCarthy: he works in both areas, and the links between things that have indeed “happened to the American West” and the older stories echoing in McCarthy’s imagery simply add to the power, to the fullness and scope, of his achievement. It is regularly McCarthy’s practice to build onto history stories whose meanings reach a mythic level. Until some speeches in *The Crossing* hit the reader over the head a few times with their historical foundations, however, they usually reveal themselves in sufficiently opaque language that it would be ridiculous to then rule out mythic or other symbolic readings. We may return to the passage, then, with an eye toward both levels of meaning.

The historical references in this passage are nothing if not Promethean, even as their evidence adds to Wegner’s point that history exerts unseen forces in McCarthy’s work. The activity described in the Epilogue refers to historical aftermath, however—to the culmination of years of violence, especially around ten years leading up to 1883 (although the Glanton Gang will have started much of it earlier). Because of the rapid temporal movement in the end of the main narrative, and details in the cryptic Epilogue itself, we can reasonably infer that the action of the Epilogue itself—the movement of its figures—takes place around 1883. That would be fifty years following the birth of “the kid,” and fifty before the birth of John Grady Cole. This Epilogue, then, hangs over all McCarthy’s work as a significant historical “meridian.” Before it, the Glanton Gang has wandered on horseback unconstrained by fences, across a largely pre-nomian space not even altered enough to warrant the cultural baggage of the term “wilderness.” The Gang’s massacres of peaceful Tigua Indians, as well as their assaults on small Mexican towns, certainly gives evidence of scattered forms of civilization. Indeed, in these acts the Gang performs an antinomian function. But Judge Holden’s regular arguments, quoting Nietzsche right and left, as well as the ease with which the Gang wanders, suggests that Gang’s movements constitute a last hurrah in this territory for blood unshaken by even the most primitive codes of conduct.

Other figures follow this man across the ground. They are “the wanderers in search of bones and those who do not search”—two groups behind the man digging holes. The first group is easily identified as gatherers of buffalo bones. The kid’s (or as the book calls him this late, “the man’s”) recent encounter with “bonepickers” (317) bolsters this identification. Indeed, Elrod, the doppelgänger whom the kid kills just before he finds the judge (and his death) in Griffin, is among these bonepickers. These “wanderers” (bonepickers) constitute the first group.

The second group are either running new fence lines, or surveying the landscape. If fencing, they are working with fence posts enabled by the man digging; if surveying, they are placing some similar posts as markers. Either way, they accomplish this through the work of the first figure's hole digging. (It is unnecessary to narrow our interpretation to fencing or surveying or even both; both have their evidence and both contribute to the same implications.) As for fencing, the meridian of the American West—in the sense of its division by fencing—occurred too chronologically close to the killing off of most of the American bison not to associate the two actions. As for surveying, that can enable fencing.

In any case, this second group (“those who do not search”) has gone altogether missing in Bloom's otherwise insightful reading. These men

move haltingly in the light like mechanisms whose movements are monitored with escapement and pallet so that they appear restrained by a prudence or reflectiveness which has no inner reality and they cross in their progress one by one that track of holes that runs to the rim of the visible ground and which seems less the pursuit of some continuance than the verification of a principle, a validation of sequence and causality as if each round and perfect hole owed its existence to the one before it there on that prairie upon which are the bones and the gatherers of bones and those who do not gather. (337)

Could these not then be surveyors? Whether they are leaving behind a visible demarcation across the land is debatable, though likely. A post-hole digger wrings a substantial amount of sweat from a man merely putting down markers, so a fence—something permanent to show for that labor—is more likely. As should become clear soon, though, such fencing may be running just apace of actual land grants and deeds; certainly it would be done according to a plan (or plat) and even something more conceptually important than the mere realization of a plat: “the verification of a principle.”

Beneath the mythic meridian that is indeed quite compelling—of a Promethean figure stealing God's fire—lies the bloodier meridian realized through historical operations: the gathering of the bones of exterminated buffalo, and the reckoning of the plats first imagined in the Land Ordinance of 1785, with a man now marking off the land. Whether through fencing or not, space is being turned into place.

The first appearance of barbed wire in the West led to an astonishingly rapid change, not only in ranching practices, but in conflicts between large and small ranchers, ranchers and sheep herders, and ranchers and farmers (Milner 264-265; cf. McCallum, Webb). Partitioning off the land certainly could take place more easily after the elimination of animals that, in a fast-moving herd unaccustomed to being constrained in their movements, might wreck such fencing. Railroads

paid for buffalo killing, and the government subsidized the killing of this animal so crucial to the lives of Plains Indians. Partitioning the land, however, is crucial to everyone attempting to take it from those Indians. Some hundred years earlier, a "West" divided into six-square mile portions of land was no longer confined to the imaginations of Eastern politicians; ranges and townships across the West were quickly set up along the plans imagined in the Land Ordinance of 1785.¹

Indeed, those "who do not gather" proceed behind the hole-digger in "less the pursuit of some continuance than the verification of a principle, a validation of sequence and causality as if each round and perfect hole owed its existence to the one before it" (337). What "validat[es]" this "sequence and causality"? The regular spacing of the holes. What "principle" is here "verifi[ed]"? That the space of the America West can indeed be transformed from the "embarrassment" referred to in one resolution by the Continental Congress, into a demarcated set of places.²

The setting here is simply noted as "the plain." That is not a desert, but more likely some place in the space of grassy plains extending from Canada all the way South toward the Texas Gulf: grass all along this area, with wells dug into the Ogallala Aquifer (which runs from North Texas to South Dakota), allowed cattlemen the food and water necessary for herds and farmers the water necessary for crops. This was the land settled most of all by fencing, and it was the first of the "frontier" to be planned out in the principled imagination of the Land Ordinance.

The language of the Ordinance even suggests the mechanistic metaphors of McCarthy's Epilogue, with its attention to temporal and spatial order. Here is the description in 1785 of the process by which marking off the land must attempt an accord with the theoretical division of that land by meridians and base lines:

The lines shall be measured with a chain; shall be plainly marked by chaps on the trees and exactly described on a plat; whereon shall be noted by the surveyor, at their proper distances, all mines, salt springs, salt licks and mill seats, that shall come to his knowledge, and all water courses, mountains and other remarkable and permanent things, over and near which such lines shall pass, and also the quality of the lands. (Indiana Historical Bureau)

In the description of the Epilogue, there are no trees to "chap," nor any "mountains" to interrupt the progress of these workers. This would make it all the more likely that the work of surveyors would proceed with a delicate reckoning between sight and imagination, between the "principle" and the actual holes being dug in the ground. Whether or not the holes being dug will be filled with fence posts, the only way to mark a landscape bereft of trees with any reliable "lines" is to put holes in it. In the most open land, little in the way of "remarkable and permanent" variations could "come to [the] knowledge" of a surveyor; rather, the surveyor is freer to bring

his “knowledge”—his false ordering of nature—to the ground. Would not Judge Holden be pleased at this?

The killing of the American bison by private hunters and those contracted by the railroads resulted in their near extinction by 1883 (Milner 152).

If a roof had been built over the southern plains in the early 1870’s, the American zoologist William Hornaday wrote, it would have been “one vast charnel-house.” During the fall of 1873 the corpses, stinking and rotting in the sun, *lay in a line* for forty miles along the north bank of the Arkansas River. William Blackmore, an English traveler, counted sixty-seven bodies in a space not covering four acres. The bodies were those of bison. (White 237; my emphasis)

The year before the introduction of barbed wire, a buffalo hunter named George Reighard killed, on average, one hundred buffalo every day of his employment with an outfit hired for this purpose. This hunting trip took place in the Texas panhandle, in 1872: “Asked, years later, whether he felt pity for the animals as day after day he dropped his hundred, he replied no, he did not. ‘It was a business with me. I had my money invested in that outfit. . . . I killed all that I could’” (White 237).

Recording this point of view in his chronicle of the slaughter, “Animals and Enterprise,” Richard White is understandably unable to avoid imposing just the kind of retrospection of regret that McCarthy generally avoids:

Money and pity, these are the words that mark *a great divide* in the history of the American West. Reighard stood at a point where animals were only dollars on a hoof; those who later asked him about pity regarded animals as being worthy of concern within a human moral universe. (237; my emphasis)

White’s “divide” suggests a line has been crossed, a meridian between what we like to think of as our more subtle moral order, and a more primitive one behind us.

White also reminds us that another line existed in 1872, one less temporal than spatial, between two peoples: one people to whom animals are commodities, and another people to whom animals were equals. The Plains Indians, as well as the animals they depended on, were driven to near extinction within a decade of 1872. Much of the work toward this eradication was accomplished in the American Southwest well before the remains of Northwestern Lakota Sioux were rounded up into reservations such as Pine Ridge, South Dakota: the site of the Wounded Knee massacre. The intentional large-scale killing in the Southwest had begun almost half a century earlier, with the Glanton gang notable in the enterprise.

It would be a mistake to suggest here that McCarthy’s novel is intended to evoke “pity,” to use Richard White’s word, over these events. Yet the realization of the imagined grid organizing the frontier, the advent of barbed wire to enclose portions of that grid, and the eradication (sometimes undifferentiated in the execution and

more so in the results) of both the American bison and the American Indians, are coeval, as suggested by McCarthy’s language.

Joseph Farwell Glidden patented barbed wire on October 27, 1873. By 1876—only three years after its introduction—2.84 million pounds of the stuff had been produced, and within four more years, that production had been dwarfed by 80.5 million pounds. “With barbed wire *and* the railroads, the cowboy’s days were numbered” (*New Encyclopedia of the American West* 80). Not only to cowboys still accustomed to open range ranching, but presumably more so to anyone on horseback riding in attempted disregard for the new order being set out on the land, barbed wire became known as “the Devil’s Rope” (Evan 72).

Where, then, and when, do we locate the blood meridian—this singular circumscription presiding over McCarthy’s book? I have attempted to position several meridians, lines both philosophical and historical, abstract and visible, as likely referents: like suspects in a line-up, they seem to me to have had suspicious contact with one another. And I have also suggested that a chronological division operates here as well, dividing McCarthy’s books, and indeed significant moments in American history. What happens to country in *Blood Meridian* echoes in the books to follow, and in this country.

What happens to country is that history constrains both its violence and its freedom. Perhaps this is why McCarthy, in one of only two interviews, sounds a bit like he’s complaining:

There’s no such thing as life without bloodshed.... I think the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea. Those who are afflicted with this notion are the first ones to give up their souls, their freedom. Your desire that it be that way will enslave you and make your life vacuous. (Woodward 31)

The kid in *Blood Meridian* is born in 1833, John Grady Cole (and Cormac McCarthy) in 1933. The kid seems, at first, able to roam where he pleases, until the massacre of the filibusterers. From that point on, the Glanton gang rides on and on through a free arc of antinomian violence, until the external pressures of enclosing civilized authority, the natural boundaries even of the wide open west, and their own ironically persistent human tendency toward settling down lead them to “run plumb out of country” (285). Key coeval developments in fencing, plotting, extermination, and eventual settlement (or conquest) of the Southwest cluster around the ten years leading up to 1883—fifty years between the births of the kid and his much milder twentieth-century cousin, John Grady Cole.

Perhaps, then, McCarthy closes his *Blood Meridian* at a line of division between a world without pity and a world consumed in it, yet nonetheless persistently cruel.

Still, a more proper closing is less ambitious in its false orders, more poetic, and mysterious; McCarthy's image alone: "He strikes fire in the hole and draws out his steel. Then they all move on again" (337). ✱

Notes

¹ The Land Ordinance of 1785 was signed into law eleven years later, by George Washington, as the Land Act of 1796. As Rod Squires argues, "The Ordinance of 1785 has, rightly, been given importance as the first piece of legislation that addressed the question of how should a nation proceed to subdivide the land surface. But the provisions of the Ordinance were very limited, in terms of the area it affected and in terms of many of the characteristics so familiar to land surveyors. When a new government was established the Ordinance had no legal effect. The public land surveys were continued only after Congress enacted a Land Act in 1796, legislation that should be accorded more attention." In the spirit of abstraction that caused those insisting on "ideal lines" no "embarrassment," I will nonetheless refer to the original Ordinance. My point is that geometry ruled the geography. As McCarthy's practice also sets up striking chronological divisions, it seems fitting—because ironic—that by merely fudging a couple of years, I can here point to the Land Ordinance as preceding McCarthy's Epilogue by *some* hundred years.

² While the revolution was still in progress, wrangling over western lands persisted, as states that had extensive grants from Great Britain wanted to keep them, while states such as Maryland lacked such grants and therefore wanted a more equitable division through the new Federal government. Maryland's reluctance to sign the Articles of Confederation led the Continental Congress to a resolution urging these states to remove the "embarrassment respecting the western country." That "embarrassment" has everything to do with the move in 1785, and more forcefully in 1796, away from the vicissitudes of land ownership according to precedents and grants arising without a larger organizing feature: divide things up neatly ahead of time and you might expect less wrangling over the spoils (September 6, 1780 resolution qtd. in Goble).

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