BORDER WARS AND ARMAGEDDON: CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERARY NATURALISM IN CORMAC McCARTHY’S WESTERN NOVELS.

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts
in English

By

James M. Cameron, B.A.

Washington, DC
April 20, 2011
Copyright 2011 by James M. Cameron
All Rights Reserved
American literary naturalism is a genre often confined by critics to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, Eric Carl Link, Paul Civello, and Donald Pizer extend the genre historically to encompass not only new time periods but also to include elements of other genres and literary modes such as romanticism and transcendentalism. Cormac McCarthy, the most prominent naturalist writing today, repurposes American literary naturalism by implementing a form of naturalism that is, to varying degrees, influenced by romanticism and metaphysics in his contemporary Western novels. McCarthy’s naturalism underscores his strongly humanistic vision, which can only be seen in relation to grimly naturalistic settings. McCarthy’s placement of pastoral and supernatural romanticism alongside naturalism emphasizes his deep humanism, which is represented in his texts by resistance to violence, protection of the environment, placement of value in pastoral ranching and farming, and maintenance of morality in the face of unfathomable naturalistic horrors. This project is the first to consider McCarthy’s key Western novels as part of a naturalistic continuum within his oeuvre. Further, it is the first to tie in McCarthy’s status as a contemporary naturalist with his nascent romanticism as they relate to his profound humanism.

The first chapter examines how McCarthy uses naturalism to address the terror of never-ending violence and to question the mythologizing of manifest destiny. The second chapter
explores how McCarthy's Border Trilogy—consisting of *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*,
and *Cities of the Plain*—utilizes naturalism to lament the slow death of the pastoral ranching
lifestyle and of the unfettered wilderness as results of industrialization and human destruction of
the natural world. Finally, I dissect McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel *The Road*. In this novel,
McCarty implements naturalism in a manner that speaks to the novel as a way of questioning
human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism, as well as using naturalism as a means of making a
cautionary statement about humanity's disregard for the natural world. Examination of
McCarthy's significant contemporary novels makes it clear that naturalism is a highly fluid genre
that continues to be utilized by contemporary novelists such as McCarthy.
I would like to dedicate my thesis to my parents, who have been my source of support throughout my academic career and who, in demonstrating to me since childhood that they would be proud of me no matter what path I took, freed me to pursue my dreams. I would also like to give a special thanks to Chris Shinn for going above and beyond the call of duty in advising me throughout the thesis-writing process.

James M. Cameron
# Table of Contents

Introduction: A Brief Literary History of Naturalism.................................................................1

Chapter I: “wolves cull themselves, man”:  
American Literary Naturalism Re-purposed  
in Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* .................................................................................8

Chapter II: "the world cannot lose it": Naturalism,  
Romanticism, and the Melancholy Western in  
Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy .........................................................................................36

Chapter III: "degraded prisoners": Post-Apocalyptic  
Naturalism in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* ..........................................................................57

Epilogue ........................................................................................................................................76

Works Cited ................................................................................................................................81
INTRODUCTION

He walked out into the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of an intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it.

-Cormac McCarthy, The Road

The nameless protagonist of Cormac McCarthy's The Road (2006) reaches an epiphany in which he divines the true nature of the post-apocalyptic world in which he and his son are attempting to survive. The quote above reads like a textbook example of turn-of-the-century American literary naturalism, yet the novel was published in the twenty-first century. Furthermore, the novel's premise is based on elements of speculative fiction: the concept of a post-apocalyptic world populated by roving bands of cannibals is a science fiction trope enacted in works such as the Fallout series of video games and the Mad Max films. Such science fiction elements are at odds with one of the identifying elements of literary naturalism, which Barcley Owens describes as "realism in speech and action, using regional dialects and historical details" (46). Indeed, this same tension is present in all of McCarthy's recent novels since the publication of Blood Meridian (1985). How does the reader reconcile the apparent ontological dissonance between the clear textual evidence of literary naturalism present in McCarthy's novels and the relatively rigid generic structure of American literary naturalism as constructed by prominent naturalist scholars such as Donald Pizer and Mary E. Papke? I argue that the elements of naturalism present in McCarthy's work indicate the need to re-evaluate the strict periodization and generic categorization of American literary naturalism in favor of a definition of the genre
congruent to the textual evidence presented in his novels. Further, McCarthy modifies the genre to include elements from the quintessentially American mythology of the Western frontier; science fiction elements; and aspects of romanticism, transcendentalism, and metaphysics.

American literary naturalism follows a continuum of American novelists that stretches to encompass a variety of time periods. This broader definition challenges a more narrow temporal classification of American naturalism, which posits that the genre encompasses only a small cadre of writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, specifically such authors as Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Jack London, and Ambrose Bierce. Donald Pizer, Louis J. Budd, and Richard Lehan concede that the genre extends several decades into the twentieth century but still argue that naturalism describes pessimistic, deterministic, urban novels, written based on the scientific and philosophical principles specific to the time in which they are written.

To grapple with the themes of determinism, overwhelmingly powerful forces beyond human comprehension, and material causation that emerge in naturalistic novels from the genre's origins to the present day, it is critical to understand the cultural and literary environment in which the "classic" naturalists emerged as writers. It would be rash to presume direct causality between external historical factors, such as industrialization, and the naturalistic thematic content of the novels of Crane, Norris, and their naturalist contemporaries. Rather, the climate in which these first naturalistic novels were generated should be understood as providing context and potential explanation for why the genre rapidly came into being in the late nineteenth century.

Although it has its roots in traditions of American romanticism and transcendentalism, American literary naturalism as a coherent genre came about because of social and economic factors created in part as a result of the Civil War. The violence of the Civil War was
unprecedented for many Americans, but more important to naturalism is the rapid growth of industrial capitalism in the North as a result of the war effort. As Louis J. Budd notes, "The Civil War, we now recognize, ended in victory for Northern capitalism and its centralizing bureaucracy, its network of railroads, and—most important at the time—its factories" (33). Writers felt the need to document these unprecedented "new social contexts" as well as rapid technological shifts (Budd 32). Budd makes the point that "the naturalists were the first cohort to consider without surprise the processes the Civil War had made dominant. They recognized that industrialism and urbanism, now clearly irreversible, were accelerating" (42). For the naturalists, the consequences of the unstoppable forward momentum of this urban capitalism needed to be addressed. In the thirty years that bridge the end of the Civil War and the origins of classical American literary naturalism in the 1890s, ideas such as Charles Darwin’s theories of natural selection and the writings of Émile Zola emerged which would exercise significant influence upon Norris, Crane, and their contemporaries.

Writers who experimented with naturalism in this time period also were influenced by the scientific rhetoric of the day, particularly the writings of Darwin. Naturalistic writers saw a number of parallels between Darwin's theory of evolution and how contemporary society was unfolding before them. Natural selection gave writers a means by which they could express the condition of the poor in capitalist America. Those born into the underclass were seen as being naturally selected for an early death through a genetic predilection for alcoholism, prostitution, and other vices. Alternatively, the poor classes essentially were being "outcompeted" by the upper class, which had all of the advantages that wealth and social position could afford them. As Richard Lehan observes, "Darwin created a context that made naturalism—with its emphasis
upon theories of heredity and environment—a convincing way to explain the nature of reality for the late nineteenth century" (47).

The way in which naturalistic writers implement scientific theories also provides with them with a strategy through which they can root their narratives in material causation, rather than in such ephemeral concepts as God or the supernatural. As Paul Civello correctly notes, writers root their narratives in scientific theories as "a means of anchoring literature in the realm of the known" (24). However, Civello also adds that "it restrains literature from metaphysical speculation, from dabbling in the uncertainties of philosophy and religion" (24). As will be seen below, naturalists in fact frequently invoked metaphysical and speculative philosophical concepts in their writing. Further, although Darwin and other scientists of the day certainly influenced naturalist writers, it is important not to overstate their impact, given that few naturalistic narratives are centered explicitly around a particular scientific theory. For example, while Frank Norris’s *McTeague* grapples with humanity’s animal origins, it does not openly invoke Darwin’s theories of evolution, nor does it frame the characters’ base instincts in scientific terms.

The other significant (but overstated) influence on naturalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are the writings of Émile Zola. Indeed, Zola is perhaps the most commonly cited influence on the genesis of American literary naturalism. Donald Pizer asserts that "the work of Crane, Norris, and Dreiser in the 1890s has many of the obvious characteristics of Zolaesque naturalism" (5), while Richard Lehan writes that "Zola's influence on his contemporaries was pronounced, perhaps more so in America than in Europe" (49). While nearly every scholar of naturalism recognizes that Zola's *le roman experimental* (1880) influenced the
genre, the extent of that influence is debatable. Eric Carl Link, in his book, *The Vast And Terrible Drama: American Literary Naturalism in the Late Nineteenth Century* (2004), writes that "to define literary naturalism for American authors in the 1890s on the basis of Zola’s theory and literary circle is to skew any historically accurate treatment one wishes to give American naturalistic narrative" (6). Link makes the point that, although it is possible that Norris read *le roman experimental* in French, it was not published in English until 1894, at which point both Crane and Norris already had published their early novels. While other prominent naturalists such as Jack London published after Zola’s book became available in English, Link's point is that we must be cautious not to overvalue Zola as an influence on American literary naturalism. As Link concludes, "In general, the connection between American naturalism and French naturalism is there, but it is blurry, primarily indirect, and needs to be treated as such” (6). It is with Link's more inclusive definition of naturalism that my examination of McCarthy's Western novels will primarily be concerned.

In the first chapter of this study, “‘wolves cull themselves, man’: American Literary Naturalism Re-purposed in Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian,*” I examine McCarthy’s seminal novel from a naturalistic perspective. In it, McCarthy explores the naturalistic implications of extreme violence within the generic trappings of the American frontier Western. I use this chapter to formulate an interpretation of American literary naturalism that allows for the novel's frequent forays into the metaphysical, romantic, and supernatural, elements which normally would call the novel's naturalism into question, but which I argue serve to enhance the novel's naturalistic impact. I also incorporate the writings of French Philosopher René Girard and cultural historian Richard Slotkin to address the novel's overwhelming violence and Western
setting, as well as the way in which McCarthy calls into question the positive mythologizing of Manifest Destiny. McCarthy ultimately resists the directionless violence enacted within the text, moving toward a humanistic rejection of war and Manifest Destiny.

Chapter two, “‘the world cannot lose it: Naturalism, Romanticism, and the Melancholy Western in Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy,” is concerned with the Trilogy of novels, which is composed of All the Pretty Horses, The Crossing, and Cities of the Plain. I assert that these novels are defined by a subtextual tension between naturalism and romanticism. The novels' protagonists struggle to reconcile their desire for an idealistic pastoral lifestyle with the reality that naturalistic forces are arrayed against them, making that dream unattainable. Their struggle with this realization creates the pastoral melancholy embedded in the narrative. Despite this melancholic sense, the Trilogy’s romanticism gestures toward a humanistic concern with humanity’s relationship with the environment and an endorsement of a pastoral lifestyle in harmony with the land. In addition to incorporating critical pieces on naturalism and pastoralism, I also utilize Julia Kristeva's Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia to understand the way in which melancholy functions in the novel and, more important, to argue that depression and mental illness function as naturalistic forces within the Trilogy.

The final chapter of this study, “‘degraded prisoners’: Post-Apocalyptic Naturalism in Cormac McCarthy's The Road,” addresses McCarthy's recent Pulitzer Prize-winning post-apocalyptic novel. In many ways, The Road’s post-apocalyptic setting constitutes the ideal medium for conveying American literary naturalism. The burned landscape of the novel enacts naturalism openly, creating Norris's "vast and terrible dramas." I examine the novel's science fiction premise from a naturalistic standpoint, arguing that it is the perfect narrative
strategy for conveying the extremity of a purely naturalistic world. Despite its unrelenting
naturalism, the novel gestures toward reading it as a brutally naturalistic cautionary tale about
humanity's relationship with the natural world.
Chapter I: “wolves cull themselves, man.”: American Literary Naturalism Re-purposed in Cormac McCarthy’s Blood Meridian

In Cormac McCarthy’s seminal novel, Blood Meridian (1985), the demonic figure of the judge frequently serves as the novel’s philosophical voice.\(^1\) Echoing an ethos of Darwinist scientific naturalism, he preaches: “If God meant to interfere in the degeneracy of mankind would he have not done so by now? Wolves cull themselves, man. What other creature could? And is the race of men not more predacious yet?” (McCarthy BM 147). The judge and the narrator both uphold what are ostensibly expressions of scientific naturalism, a form of naturalism in which scientific principles such as evolution govern the narrative. Hence, the only current critical treatment of naturalism in Blood Meridian, Barcley Owens’s “Blood Meridian and Literary Naturalism” from his book, Cormac McCarthy’s Western Novels (2000), explores the novel almost entirely from the perspective of scientific naturalism. Owens’s examination of naturalism in the novel is symptomatic of a larger trend in contemporary naturalism studies identified by Eric Carl Link, wherein American literary naturalism is defined “through too close a connection with scientific naturalism” in a manner that “does not accurately describe the fiction itself” (14).

There are several hallmarks of American literary naturalism typically cited as necessarily present in a literary work for it to be considered naturalistic. Barcley Owens succinctly summarizes these elements based on the writings of the pre-eminent scholar of naturalism studies, Donald Pizer. These characteristics include an essentially Darwinian outlook, with an emphasis on a world governed by the survival of the fittest in hostile environments, as well as by chance and accident (Owns 45). Other key aspects of the genre are “realism in speech and

\(^1\) This capitalization of the judge’s name is McCarthy’s own.
action” and “a prevailing mood of pessimistic determinism…[or] a sense of pessimistic uncertainty” (Owens 46). Additionally, other critics of naturalism such as Louis K. Budd have cited documentary realism and a fidelity to natural laws based on the theories of Émile Zola as characteristic of naturalism. As Eric Carl Link points out, most critics see naturalism as coming out of the mode of American realism rather than from works in the romantic and transcendentalist traditions (107). The sum of these elements is an anchoring of American literary naturalism in a configuration of the genre specific to particular writers in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America and posits a uniformity that, as Link notes, is not present even in the works of archetypical naturalists such as Frank Norris and Stephen Crane. While acknowledging the value of historicizing American literary naturalism, it is important to note that the genre has not outlived its productive life. Contemporary writers such as McCarthy continue to draw upon a naturalistic tradition even as they make it legible to modern concerns, such as the nature of violence and the questionable morality of Manifest Destiny.

Very little has been written on American literary naturalism in Blood Meridian. In the only scholarly treatment of the subject to date, “Blood Meridian and Literary Naturalism,” Barcley Owens uses Donald Pizer’s theories of naturalism as a basis for his argument. Pizer's theories are the foundation that has enabled critics to begin to move naturalism beyond its traditional temporal constraints, but they do not go far enough. Similarly, while Owens moves beyond Pizer’s theories, his reading of Blood Meridian is still rather restrictive. Owens reads the novel as a textual rendering of Darwinian scientific naturalism, which is scientific naturalism based on Darwin’s theories of natural selection, and combines it with hard determinism, despite the elements of the novel that contradict his reading. In particular, the novel’s romantic and
supernatural elements, which have little or no causation rooted in natural laws, challenge the secular scientific naturalist reading of the novel. Furthermore, Owens writes that he is adhering to Pizer’s classification of naturalism as containing “realism in speech and action, using regional dialects and historical details” (46), yet the judge, the ex-priest Tobin, and even poor, uneducated Mexican farmers discourse on complicated philosophical and theological concepts.

Furthermore, Owens’s use of Darwin’s theories is not reinforced by the latter’s own writings. As Paul Civello notes, Darwin sought to diminish the harshness of his own theories by investing in nature the mysticism that previously had been attributed to God. Civello quotes Darwin, who writes, “When we reflect on [natural selection], we may console ourselves with the full belief, that the war of nature is not incessant, that no fear is felt, that death is generally prompt, and that the vigorous, the healthy, and the happy survive and multiply” (10). Such a view clearly is not borne out in *Blood Meridian*. In the novel, war is constant, fear is pervasive, and while death is often swift, the healthy and vigorous are just as likely to die as the weak and infirm.

Given the relative absence of scholarship on naturalism in *Blood Meridian*, and given what I see as common critical misinterpretations of how a theory of naturalism is enacted in literature—such as an overemphasis on strict realism and pessimism,—we might do well to examine *Blood Meridian* as a contemporary instance of American literary naturalism. I use naturalism primarily as defined by Eric Carl Link in his book, *The Vast and Terrible Drama: American Literary Naturalism in the Late Nineteenth Century* (2004). I will use this work as a basis for a study of how naturalism functions in the novel. Although Link focuses on nineteenth-
century American naturalists, such as Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Jack London, he provides a flexible and useful schema that can readily be used to examine McCarthy’s novel.

As mentioned earlier, Link’s theories of naturalism from *The Vast and Terrible Drama* provide the most useful definition of naturalism as a genre, allowing for a more inclusive definition of what works can be classified as naturalistic. I place this definition in opposition to earlier “traditional” examinations of naturalism that do not accurately describe how naturalistic narratives actually function, especially as the genre moves into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. However, as Mary E. Papke writes in her preface to *Twisted from the Ordinary*, a collection of essays on naturalism, it is important to be mindful of the “slippery nature of any such taxonomic gesture and the equally suspicious concreteness of genre categorizations” (vi). Link provides a more flexible model of naturalism that can be transposed productively across barriers of time and place because he allows for the possibility that the genre extends into the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well acknowledging that naturalistic works are not uniform or strictly realistic. The theories of many mainstream critics, such as those represented in *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism*, remain grounded in a configuration of naturalism bound to a particular period and narrow generic classification. The ease with which theories of literary naturalism can be applied to a contemporary novel such as *Blood Meridian* further calls into question such strict periodization and canonization, emphasizing the broader usefulness and expansion of the genre.

Papke’s preface to *Twisted from the Ordinary* reveals the problematic assumptions that long have plagued critical examinations of American literary naturalism. She writes, “The curious evolution and essential difference of naturalism from early nationalist and
transcendentalist literature is something that we recognize almost intuitively from the most cursory glance at the literature in question” (vi). As noted by Link, this “cursory glance” overlooks the current of romanticism that flows beneath many key works of naturalism and reveals the sort of unchallenged assumptions that have dominated twentieth- and twenty-first century discourse on American literary naturalism. I intend to highlight the other key misconceptions about the genre so as to lay a framework for the discussion of Link’s contemporary re-evaluation.

Donald Pizer is generally considered the “preeminent critic of American literary naturalism” (Papke xiv). In my research into this subject, Pizer’s name never failed to emerge; indeed, he is cited in every text on the genre that I have read. It is thus not a stretch to claim that his work is representative of the dominant academic views on American literary naturalism. Despite his willingness to consider the genre outside of its traditional periodization, however, Pizer still subscribes to a problematically limited configuration of the genre. In his essay, “Is American Literary Naturalism Dead? : A Further Inquiry” from Twisted from the Ordinary, Pizer responds to the notion that naturalism as a genre is dead: “It indeed is…[in the twentieth century] we find neither the sensationalistic exploitation of themes derived from contemporary scientism nor the detailed documentation of nineteenth century American literary naturalism” (391).

Pizer establishes the notion that naturalism restricts itself to depicting urban environments with documentary accuracy and the thematic exploration of scientific theories. Link would agree that naturalism as Pizer describes it certainly is dead. He notes that “the American literary naturalism that is seen as realism infused with a deterministic philosophy and a pessimistic view of society is indeed a diminished, and unsustainable, literary movement” (26).
However, Link points out that these narrow categorizations do not hold up in an examination of actual nineteenth-century American literary naturalist texts, the very period upon which Pizer bases his analysis. Link writes, “To view literary naturalism as the transference into literary form of the assumptions of philosophical naturalism or of the experimental, observational practices of scientific naturalism is to define American literary naturalism in a way that does not accurately reflect the concerns of the texts themselves” (xvi). Link further observes that, while naturalistic texts may thematically explore scientific concepts (particularly Darwinism), they definitely do not deal with these ideas pedagogically, as a means to explain theories of naturalism in narrative form. Neither do the authors’ entire methodologies center around scientific naturalism, which explains events through the lens of scientific causes and natural laws, or philosophical naturalism, which rejects the operation of the supernatural in favor of “the notion that all phenomena… can be explained in terms of material causation” (Link 11). It is more accurate to say that naturalistic texts provide fertile ground in which to test how such theories might operate in a fictional world, and how characters interact with the narrative enactment of those theories, but the novels’ scope of thematic exploration is by no means restricted by the theories they explore.

Émile Zola’s writings, particularly in *Le roman experimental*, often are said to form the basis of all naturalistic fiction in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Paul Civello expresses this belief in *American Literary Naturalism and its Twentieth-Century Transformations*. He writes, “Charles Walcutt has called Émile Zola the ‘fountainhead’ of literary naturalism, and such an appellation is certainly warranted…he was also the single most
influential novelist on the American literary naturalists” (23); This assumption merits further examination.

This passage in fact represents an assertion that is challenged by an examination of American naturalist novels. As Link points out, only Frank Norris studied Zola to any great extent, and both he and Stephen Crane had published fiction before *Le roman experimental* became available in English in the United States (Link 9). Further, naturalistic texts often display wildly imaginative and implausible scenarios for the purpose of exploring naturalistic themes, as in Frank Norris’s *Vandover and the Brute* (which portrays a lycanthropic transformation in a naturalistic setting) and Crane’s poetry (which contains literal depictions of naturalistic demons), whereas Zola’s “strict rejection of romanticism, his call for purely objective scientific documentation and observation, and his positivism do not characterize much naturalistic narrative, especially in America” (Link 7). Link concludes that there is a connection between Zola and the American literary naturalists, but a hazy and primarily indirect one. Indeed, Link perceptively observes that Zola’s writings appear to advocate an American realism as represented by the writings of William Dean Howells and Henry James, rather than the literary naturalism of Stephen Crane and Frank Norris.

I want to outline how Link categorizes American literary naturalism and, more important, why Link’s theories provide solid ground for an examination of *Blood Meridian*’s naturalism. What Link observes is that, rather than being an extreme deviation from the aforementioned literary realism, American literary naturalism has its roots in earlier traditions of American romanticism and transcendentalism (23). Instead of being seen as something that the American naturalists reject, romanticism is more accurately read as a way of “integrating naturalist theory
into a narrative” (Link 25). As a means of exploring and critiquing nineteenth-century theories of philosophical and scientific naturalism, American naturalists often introduced a mythical scope, such that the incorporation of romanticism into the narratives is necessary. Link observes that the naturalists explore “the often abstract and hidden forces that naturalist theory revealed operating in nature. To do so they necessarily turned toward symbol, allegory, myth, and other narrative modes common to the American romance. Thus, in American literary naturalism, naturalist theory is elevated to the status of myth” (67). Link’s establishment of a connection between romanticism and naturalism precisely describes how naturalism functions in Blood Meridian. Such romantic elements often are obscured, however, by the novel’s extreme violence.

There is significant narrative tension in Blood Meridian between romanticism and brutal violence, which can be clarified by briefly examining the role of the Western genre as an ideal naturalistic setting. In Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America, cultural historian Richard Slotkin explores how the Western genre evolves in response to shifts in the prevailing American cultural narrative. Slotkin makes the point that, although the Western frontier encapsulates what is simultaneously the most ideologically powerful and optimistic American mythology, there runs beneath it a current of violence that belies its colorful exterior (3). In fact, violence always has been integral to the genre. As Slotkin points out, what is important "is not necessarily the amount or kind of violence that characterizes our history but the mythic significance we have assigned to the kinds of violence we have actually experienced, the forms of symbolic violence we imagine or invent" (13). As Alan Bourassa observes, McCarthy aestheticizes violence. Blood Meridian's brutality, far from being repellant, is exhilarating and beautifully rendered, romanticizing what should be unsettling.
Literary naturalists such as Stephen Crane have long expressed the corruption and violence underlying the myth of American progress, of which the Western is so representative. The Western, with its lawlessness and racial tensions superimposed on a backdrop of optimism, thus constitutes the perfect genre through which to express a naturalistic narrative. As Slotkin writes, “The mythic tales and polemics [of the Western] are rife with visions of border wars that turn overnight into preludes to Armageddon and with proposals for genocide and wars of extermination” (13). With its cyclical movement of apocalyptic violence, *Blood Meridian* clearly represents a continuation of this facet of the Western genre. Further, the way in which Slotkin portrays how the violence of the Western is enacted incorporates naturalistic themes and language. Slotkin describes how the stereotypical "cowboys and Indians" trope is manifested in naturalistic terms:

> Native resistance to European settlement therefore takes the form of a fight for survival; and because of the 'savage' and bloodthirsty propensity of the natives, such struggles inevitable become ‘wars of extermination’ in which one side or the other attempts to destroy its enemy root and branch...in a savage war one side or the other must perish, whether by limitless murder or by the degrading experience of subjugation and torture (12).

The major narrative movements in *Blood Meridian* indeed are framed by microcosms of such "root and branch" bloodbaths. The kid joins the Glanton gang because his previous band, led by Captain White, was massacred by Comanche Indians. In turn, the Glanton party slaughters entire tribes and villages of Indians and Mexicans until it is itself destroyed by the Yuma tribe.
Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of *Blood Meridian* is its unrelenting violence. The novel portrays constant bloodshed from its opening pages, which introduce the novel’s protagonist, the kid, through to its conclusion.  

McCarthy’s narrator says of the kid that “he can neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence” (BM 3). Soon after, the kid is shot twice in the chest during a purposeless barroom brawl. Events of even greater brutality pervade the novel as the kid joins a band of filibusters who carve a bloody swath across the Mexican desert and are slaughtered in turn by the very Indians they had victimized. However, as Alan Bourassa notes in “The Moral Singularity: Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian,*” such violence seems an essential part of the fabric of the novel’s world. In what I read as a particularly naturalistic notion (although he never uses this terminology), Bourassa writes “even the most overwhelming acts of violence seem beyond the scope of the moral judgment that would try to contain them” (BM 118). A common thread in American literary naturalism is the inability of humankind to fully comprehend or morally evaluate their determined circumstances (Civello 10), just as *Blood Meridian*’s characters cannot escape the narrative’s never-ending slaughter.

*Blood Meridian*’s violence is a self-sustaining part of the naturalistic laws of the novel’s world. French philosopher René Girard writes in his book *Violence and the Sacred* that violence spins out of control because, by committing an act of violence through murder, the murderer becomes locked in a closed system in which he must continue to kill in a cycle escalating to the level of massacre so as to ensure that no survivors remain to exact revenge (54). Violence in *Blood Meridian* is clearly a “locked system” (Girard 54), but the novel’s violence is self-

---

2 This spelling of the kid’s name is again McCarthy’s own.
perpetuating rather than constantly regenerated through the fear of revenge. Whereas we often think of violent acts as occurring between innocent and guilty parties, Girard argues that an examination of cycles of violence necessarily “does away with this moral distinction” (54) in the same way that Blood Meridian does.

Further, Girard's point of how violence seeks a "surrogate victim" is well taken in the context of McCarthy's novel. Girard writes of how, when the original victim of violence is eliminated or otherwise out of reach, rather than being appeased, those caught up in the violent impulse will seek out a replacement on which to vent that bloodlust (3). Girard writes that "when unappeased, violence seeks and always finds a surrogate victim. The creature that excited its fury is abruptly replaced by another, chosen only because it is vulnerable and close at hand" (2). In Blood Meridian, Glanton's gang completes its original objective of slaughtering entire villages of native Indians at the behest of the regional Mexican government. However, when the gang is invited to the city of Chihuahua by its governor, it becomes clear that the cycle of violence has only begun. The gang begins to rampage through the city, looting, killing, and raping. McCarthy writes that the governor "was much like the sorcerer's apprentice who could indeed provoke the imp to do his will but he could in no way make him cease again" (BM 171). For the duration of the novel, Glanton's gang cuts a bloody swath across Mexico, killing Mexicans and Indians indiscriminately. Girard's evaluation of the chaotic nature of surrogate violence is borne out by the way in which it is enacted in the novel's naturalistic world.

It is plausible, then, to read the novel in the same way that Link reads other works of American literary naturalism: they essentially test or explore naturalistic principles through their thematics without necessarily embracing naturalistic theories. Further, Girard uses language
reminiscent of naturalism to describe the way in which violence can spiral out of control by framing it in medical terminology, in much the same way that the American literary naturalists incorporate scientific and material causation into their novels. Girard writes of violence that “neither primitive nor modern man has yet succeeded in identifying the microbe responsible for the dread disease of violence” and thus it is liable to spread in epidemic fashion in societies insufficiently prepared for it (33), as can be seen in Blood Meridian’s portrayal of the essentially lawless liminal space of the nineteenth-century Mexican-American border.

The novel’s naturalistic violence may best be understood through an examination of the inscrutable and terrifying figure of the judge, who simultaneously symbolizes and articulates the novel’s anarchic violence. The judge at times serves as a philosophical voice, frequently speaking on issues closely related to naturalism and war. The novel’s narrator portrays the judge through the use of mysterious, often supernatural language, implying that the novel’s naturalism goes beyond mere hard scientific naturalism and leaving the reader to determine the judge’s true nature and motives.

In Blood Meridian, the judge speaks of war as a holy undertaking, as humankind’s one true vocation in the novel’s naturalistic world. He says, “War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god” (McCarthy BM 249). He asserts that victory in violent conflict, the slaying of one’s opponents, is the only true law in a naturalistic world, and that moral law is a complete fabrication. Indeed, morality and moral opposition to war are blasphemous in a world in which war is sacred:

Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak. Historical law subverts it at every turn. A moral view can never be
proven right or wrong by any ultimate test. A man falling dead in a duel is not thought thereby to be proven in error as to his views. His very involvement in such a trial gives evidence of a new and broader view (McCarthy BM 250).

This goes back to the concept that morality is irrelevant in a naturalistic world. The judge’s “broader view” follows the essentially Darwinian notion that only victory in a violent conflict is germane, not the moral correctness of one side or the other. In the judge’s view, war is the only way of life that lends meaning to humanity’s existence in such a world. As he says to the kid as the latter sits in a Mexican prison, “If war is not holy man is nothing but antic clay” (McCarthy BM 307).

The judge frequently poses questions and assertions in naturalistic terms, often closely related to formal scientific naturalism. Toward the middle of the novel, the ex-priest Tobin asks the judge, “So what is the way of raising a child?” (McCarthy BM 146). The judge responds with a speech advocating brutally Darwinian naturalism: “They should be put in a pit with wild dogs. They should be set to puzzle out from their proper clues one of three doors that does not harbor wild lions. They should be made to run naked in the desert” (McCarthy BM 146). In Blood Meridian, human existence basically has reached this point. The members of the Glanton gang, of which the judge and the kid are a part, essentially are left to their own devices in a world of tremendous and sudden violence, just as the judge suggests in the previous passage. The judge frequently refers to humankind as the supreme predator, the ultimate practitioner of war. He suggests that humankind’s God-given duty is to become the supreme “suzerain…a suzerain rules even where there are other rulers. His authority countermands local judgments” (McCarthy BM 198). The judge seems to suggest that this is the only way for humankind to conquer fate in a
naturalistic world. He says, “The man who believes the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear. Superstition will drag him down” (McCarthy BM 199). For humanity to live without the fear of the unknown, the judge indicates that humans must uncover and destroy all that is autonomous on the earth: “in order for [the earth] to be mine nothing must be permitted to occur upon it save by my dispensation” (BM 199).

Despite his aversion to life outside of the bounds of his knowledge, the judge’s own origins are themselves shrouded in mystery. His very nature is kept ambiguous by the novel’s narrator. Indeed, McCarthy’s narrator seems to deny the possibility of any categorization of the character. The narrator says of the judge that

whatever his antecedents he was something wholly other than their sum, nor was there system by which to divide him back into his origins for he would not go. Whoever would seek out his history through what unraveling of loins and ledgerbooks must stand at last darkened and dumb at the shore of a void without terminus or origin and whatever science he might bring to bear upon the dusty primal matter blowing down out of the millennia will discover no trace of any ultimate atavistic egg by which to reckon his commencing (McCarthy BM 310).

As mentioned earlier, the judge’s nature is something beyond the realism purported to be the domain of literary naturalism. His origins outside of genetics and history, despite their metaphysical suggestions, fall firmly within the purview of naturalism. Literary naturalism always has featured forces outside of the knowledge or control of human beings, and the judge’s portrayal is indicative of this fact.
Furthermore, the way in which McCarthy describes the judge suggests the supernatural, romantic elements that Link asserts are actually more important to naturalism than the writings of Zola or the American realists. Link writes that such metaphysical or supernatural elements are attempts by the American literary naturalists “to peer into the mysteries of nature, those gaps in knowledge that characterize much of their art. Their ultimate inability to see clearly into these same mysteries, to view the whole of nature’s design, is what forms the foundation for their ‘negative’ romanticism” (107). Throughout Blood Meridian, the judge’s portrayal is demonic, satanic, or djinn-like. He is seven feet tall, monstrously strong, completely hairless, apparently ageless, and is a master tracker, shooter, rider, musician, draftsman, and dancer. He speaks numerous languages fluently; is well-versed in philosophy, science, and history; and seems to foretell events with disturbing accuracy. Despite the fact that the judge is based on an actual historical figure, as John Emile Sepich points out in Notes on Blood Meridian, it seems clear that he cannot be understood as human in the context of the novel.³

The imagery associated with the judge further suggests the metaphysical. Early in the novel, McCarthy’s narrator describes him as “a great ponderous djinn stepped through the fire and the flames delivered him up as if he were in some way native to their element” (BM 96). Later, the narrator recounts that “someone had reported the judge naked atop the walls, immense and pale in the revelations of lightning, striding the perimeter up there and declaiming in the old epic mode” (McCarthy BM 118). As the novel progresses, it becomes increasingly difficult to conceive of the judge in convincingly human terms. True to McCarthy’s description, he becomes

---
³ According to Sepich, the judge is based on “Judge” Holden of Texas from Samuel Chamberlin’s historical account My Confession. For more on the judge and the novel’s historical bases, see Notes on Blood Meridian by John Sepich.
something wholly other than the sum of his history. It is clear, though, that encountering the judge ultimately is fatal. Tobin notes that “every man in the company claims to have encountered that sooty souled rascal in some other place” (McCarthy BM 124). Later, the narrator says of the judge that “his eyes were slots…so like an icon was he in his sitting that they grew cautious and spoke with circumspection among themselves as if they would not waken something that had better been left sleeping” (McCarthy BM 147). It is important to keep these descriptions in mind when considering the novel’s romantic underpinnings, which for Link are so characteristic of American literary naturalism.

René Girard’s theories provide a useful way in which to map the judge’s role in the novel. In his chapter, "From Mimetic Desire to the Monstrous Double," Girard discusses what occurs when gods and supernatural (read: naturalistic) powers directly intervene in human affairs. He writes that "the intervention of the god coincides with the loss of generative unanimity and the inevitable slide into reciprocal violence" (Girard 143). In light of this quote, it is significant that the worst acts of the novel seem to stem from the judge's influence, and that every member of the Glanton gang recalls encountering the judge before the events in the novel. Girard continues, "the god who has appeared malleable and complaisant, a willing servant of mankind, always manages to slip away at the last moment, leaving destruction in his wake. Then the men who sought to bend him to their uses turn on one another with murderous intent" (143). The judge oversees both the novel's genocidal violence and the eventual destruction of the Glanton gang, suggesting his role as Girard's sacrificial deity. Indeed, the judge personally kills the novel's atypical naturalistic protagonist, the kid.
In *Blood Meridian*, the kid in some ways functions uniquely among works of literary naturalism because he possesses a moral center that appears grounded outside of the novel’s naturalistic universe and because he is both physically and mentally capable of coping with its violence and dehumanization. However, like many naturalistic protagonists, such as the correspondent from Stephen Crane’s short story, “The Open Boat,” he is buffeted back and forth by naturalistic forces and seems to allow his own subjectivity to be subsumed into the collective identity of the Glanton gang. Yet beneath this apparent subjugation to the gang’s violence, the kid retains a spark of agency despite the bloody genocide in which he participates.

From the novel’s outset, the kid’s fate appears to be foreordained. On the first page, McCarthy’s narrator says that the kid “can neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence” (BM 3). The kid’s father constantly lies drunk in his bed and his mother died giving birth to him. McCarthy’s narrator notes that the kid does not know her name. Even at a young age, the kid already has been predisposed by circumstances to be violent, to lack human connection. At age fourteen, he runs away, and by the time he is fifteen is living in a tavern, where he fights in barroom brawls until he is shot twice. As McCarthy’s narrator explains:

Only now is the child finally divested of all that he has been. His origins are become remote as is his destiny and not again in all the world’s turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man’s will or whether his heart is not another kind of clay (BM 4-5).

Despite the kid’s apparently prescribed destiny, this passage reveals the uncertainty inherent in a naturalistic narrative. As Link emphasizes, naturalistic works are not always starkly
deterministic, nor do American naturalist authors necessarily attempt to adhere strictly to theories of scientific or philosophical naturalism (104). The kid also appears to lack agency for most of the novel. The Glanton gang absorbs the kid’s identity, such that his actions are rarely differentiated from those of the rest of the gang. Furthermore, based on some textual evidence, the kid is by far the novel’s most “moral” character, although his morality is almost never expressed externally.

Both Dennis Sansom and Alan Bourassa have suggested that the kid can be read as Blood Meridian’s sole moral voice. As mentioned earlier, the kid seems not to participate maliciously or actively in the horrendous acts of violence perpetrated by the Glanton gang. Rather, he seems to be swept up and propelled forward by naturalistic forces outside of himself. Indeed, as the novel reaches its conclusion, we are given hints of a moral center within him. He refuses to kill the judge cold-bloodedly, to which the judge responds “no assassin, called the judge. And no partisan either. There’s a flawed place in the fabric of your heart” (McCarthy BM 299). To the judge, the kid’s mercy is a flaw, and in the context of the harshly naturalistic world of the novel, this is true because, as we have seen, victory in a violent conflict sublimates all other moral concerns. The judge elaborates on the kid’s “flaw”: “Do you think I could not know? You alone were mutinous. You alone reserved in your soul some corner of clemency for the heathen” (BM 299).

McCarthy suggests an inner morality not reflected in the kid’s actions. We see no hint of such clemency in the text, but neither are we given any reason to doubt the judge’s assertion. As Alan Bourassa notes, however, the kid’s purported morality falls far short of any traditional moral code. His sole claim to a moral stance is in refusing to kill at certain points in the novel.
and reserving an internal resistance to the genocidal acts in which he participates (129). Bourassa writes that, if anything, the kid is “blank…affectless in a world of violent affect” and that “he is neither participant nor observer. He is, if anything, a hesitation in the novel’s world” (129). This seems to suggest that one’s moral scope is limited by the relative harshness of a particular naturalistic world. The world of Blood Meridian, which is uncommonly brutal even by naturalistic standards, thus limits the kid to being a “traumatic caesura” (Bourassa 131) in the novel’s overwhelmingly violent catharsis.

In his essay, “Learning from Art: Cormac McCarthy’s Blood Meridian as a Critique of Divine Determinism,” Dennis Sansom suggests that, because the kid has the ability to resist internally the dehumanization of Blood Meridian’s world, and God in the context of the novel dictates that war and violence are holy, the kid is anathema and must be destroyed. Sansom writes of the novel’s world that “any form of pacifism or moral questioning of war has to be eliminated…the kid subconsciously keeps part of his soul’s passion away from the destruction of war. The judge, being the power of not only death but of God in such a violent world, cannot endure such heresy…the kid is a heretic” (8). Sansom’s point aligns with Bourassa’s assertion that the kid is not of the novel’s world.

The judge and the kid, despite their obvious oppositions, are strangely linked throughout the narrative. They alone share McCarthy's un-capitalized proper noun nomenclature, and they likewise seem to have independent thought and agency. Their fates are also tied together. They meet at the beginning of the novel, meet again in Glanton's gang, and are ultimately the only survivors of its massacre. Despite their physical differences, the judge and the kid constitute what Girard calls the phenomenon of the "monstrous double." The judge is clearly a monstrous
figure, with his oppressive strangeness, massive bulk, hairlessness, and abject brutality. What Girard says is that the "extraordinary strangeness of the world" and its "hallucinatory aspects" are expressed through the monstrous double (160). He asserts that, indeed, "the double and the monster are one and the same being" (Girard 160).

The judge's opposition to the kid also can be understood through Girard's terms. He notes that the mimetic pairing—the doubles—have rejected any relationship because of the grotesque, obscene nature of the monstrous double. The judge's assertion to the kid "don't you know I'd have loved you like a son" (306) further reinforces their mimesis. Girard's writings explain the judge's naturalistic power and the kid's inability to resist him. Girard writes of the “good” double that “horrified, he finds himself the victim of a double assault to which he cannot respond. Indeed, how can one defend oneself against an enemy who blithely ignores all barriers between inside and outside?” (165). We see throughout Blood Meridian how the judge calls into question the kid's subjective resistance to the novel's naturalistic violence, and how he finally physically destroys the kid at the novel's conclusion.

Just as the kid’s dissonance with the external world threatens and ultimately silences his inner subjectivity, so too does the novel’s landscape exert a powerful influence on the narrative and the novel’s characters. Blood Meridian’s action takes place primarily in the uncharted wilderness of Mexico, and particularly in the desert. The desert long has had a place in American literary naturalism as a sort of prototypical naturalistic environment, uncommonly harsh and unforgiving even for such a world. The eponymous protagonist of Frank Norris’s novel McTeague finds himself drawn through some instinct to California’s Death Valley, where the novel’s penultimate scenes take place. We see the same sort of primal quality in the physical
landscape of *Blood Meridian*. As the novel’s narrative progresses, the kid passes through a desert described in terms both metaphysical and fatalistic. Intermittently, he also finds himself in scenes of pastoral beauty that seem surrounded by the naturalism of the desert. The desert is first described in sweeping, cosmic terms, which suggest the fatal nature of the land, with the narrator noting that the sky was “a deeper run of color like blood” and that “where the earth drained up into the sky at the edge of creation the top of the sun rose out of nothing like the head of a great red phallus until it cleared the unseen rim and sat squat and pulsing and malevolent behind them” (McCarthy 45). This quote is significant on two levels. It denotes both the self-contained nature of the desert, with its borders described as “the edge of creation” and the sun on the horizon rising out of “nothingness,” and also demonstrates the oppressive hostility of the naturalistic environment. Bourassa also notes that the desert seems to erase individuality and functions as a contained space. Using Gilles Deleuze’s terminology of spatial movement and flight, Bourassa describes the land as “a world in which movements are ontological rather than personal, cosmic rather than individual, a world in which ungridded desert functions as a universe” (123).

Throughout the kid’s travels, we also see the effect of the desert upon the agency and individuality of the mercenaries with whom he travels. Early on, the kid and the party of filibusters to which he is attached are described as sleeping “with their alien hearts beating in the sand like pilgrims exhausted upon the face of the planet Anareta, clutched to a namelessness wheeling in the night” (McCarthy 46). Such alienation is typical in a naturalistic world. We see the kid in particular described through his alienation from the world in which he lives; as suggested by Bourassa, he is not truly a part of the novel’s naturalistic universe. After the gang of filibusters to which the kid is attached is slaughtered by Indians, the kid finds himself
“wounded in an enemy country far from home and although his eyes took in the alien stones about yet the greater void beyond seemed to swallow up his soul” (McCarthy 65). This language is as purely naturalistic as anything written by Norris or Crane. It is especially notable that this passage occurs not when the kid is alone but rather in the company of others, further emphasizing his lack of connection to humanity as it is depicted in the novel. Later, the narrator suggests that the characters are both of and dictated by the landscape, with McCarthy’s narrator noting that they were like “beings provoked out of the absolute rock and set nameless and at no remove from their own loomings to wonder ravenous and doomed and mute as gorgons shambling the brutal wastes of Gondwanaland in a time before nomenclature was and each was all” (172). Again, an erasure or reduction of identity occurs in the text. As the dust of the landscape covers the members of the Glanton gang, they essentially become part of it, such that their destinies can be read in the landscape as though from a book. This concept is crucial to understanding how McCarthy enacts naturalism in Blood Meridian. All of the novel’s naturalistic violence, blood, and landscapes combine to dilute the agency and subjectivity of its characters to the point at which they are no longer human. They have become as intrinsic a part of the landscape as the desert itself.

Just as the desert landscape naturally erodes the subjectivities of the Glanton gang, the primordial nature of mankind also is gradually brought to the forefront through McCarthy's depiction of humanity's savage nature. As several critics, including Barclay Owens and John Sepich, have noted, McCarthy depicts the Glanton gang as having nascent ape-like instincts which are resurrected by the novel's violence. In the novel's opening pages, McCarthy's narrator describes "men whose speech sounds like the grunting of apes. Men from lands so far and queer
that standing over them where they lie bleeding in the mud [the kid] feels mankind itself vindicated" (4). It becomes clear, however, that neither the Glanton gang nor the rest of humanity are different from the anonymous men with whom the kid fights in the first chapter. Later, the gang sits in the desert "without fire or bread or camaraderie any more than banded apes. They crouched in silence eating raw meat" (148). Much like the protagonist of Frank Norris's *McTeague*, the gang's conscious minds have atrophied to a point at which they are following a purely instinctual, survival-based set of impulses. As Barcley Owens points out, even the judge's vast education and precise elocution "masks a primal nature" (48).

Indeed, the judge's apocalyptic sermons on savage Darwinism ultimately come to be embodied by the novel's narrative trajectory. As Owens notes, the characters in the novel represent the nadir of the judge's ethic of natural selection. Owens writes that mankind "as a consequence of successful competition, has reached an obsessive, crazed pinnacle of savagery. He is a clever genetic strain—a predator species run amok" (48). Logically, then, the kid's resistance to the novel's naturalistic violence and disinclination to kill in cold blood is a negative trait that must be culled. The kid is "naturally selected" by the judge for death because of this flaw.

Similarly, McCarthy creates an association between humans and their fellow apex predator, the wolf. Indeed, the text is rife with mentions of wolves. The judge makes this connection explicit, saying "wolves cull themselves, man. What other creature could? And is the race of men not more predacious yet?" (147). As John Sepich notes, "[T]he gang's two Jacksons demonstrate this trait in the human sphere" when the African American Jackson kills his white counterpart (155). At several points, Glanton orders the deaths of his wounded gang members.
The wolves represent a pure expression of Darwinian scientific naturalism and serve as an ominous reminder to the reader of how humankind in the novel slowly is descending to a purely bestial state. Indeed, McCarthy's narrator describes how "at night the wolves in the dark forests of the world below called to them as if they were friends to man" (188).

By the same token, the very landscape of the novel threatens conscious human subjectivity. In the essay “Optical Democracy: Biocentrism in Blood Meridian” from his book *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy*, Georg Guillemin notes that “the novel’s narrative thrust ultimately renders the desert hostile to human signification altogether” (81). Guillemin reads *Blood Meridian*’s landscape through the twinned lenses of ecocriticism and land ethics, but what he describes in the novel is essentially naturalism by another name, as he describes how the novel’s naturalistic world attributes to humankind no preferential treatment over the landscape or other forms of life. Whatever the terminology, Guillemin provides a very perceptive reading of *Blood Meridian*.

Guillemin asserts that what McCarthy does is undermine humankind’s anthropocentrism in favor of a biocentric land ethic in which human beings are of no greater value than the landscape or any other organism. Guillemin writes, “The technique underlying the novel’s egalitarian aesthetic is to elevate nature…to an existential rank equal to that of human beings” through what he calls “aesthetic leveling” (79). This is an essentially naturalistic principle, that humankind ultimately is part of the naturalistic universe, which accords humans no special treatment because of their intelligence or an assumed morality, attributes that have no function in naturalism. Guillemin sees McCarthy’s aesthetic leveling as achieved through the characters’
absorption into the desert landscape, one in which “the absolute lawlessness of the characters matches the absolute wilderness of the setting” (73).

What Guillemin calls the novel’s “ecopastoral land ethic” (78) is really a form of Darwinian scientific naturalism. This is revealed in how Guillemin describes ecopastoralism, in which “the survival instinct substitutes for virtue” (82). The reason Guillemin’s assessment is so useful is that he does not claim Darwinian theory as Blood Meridian’s central theme, but rather its landscape, which offers a significantly more flexible schema for examining the novel. As will be seen later, staking the claim of scientific naturalism as the unifying element of Blood Meridian is problematic in Barcley Owens’s essay. The novel’s landscape is romantic as well as brutally naturalistic and possesses mystical elements that do not belong in scientific naturalism. However, the novel’s action takes place primarily within the naturalistic wilderness, and so humankind’s fate is naturalistically determined as well.

In The Vast and Terrible Drama, Link provides a useful frame for an examination of how determinism functions in a naturalistic novel. Link argues that, like other key thematic elements of literary naturalism, determinism is not “monologically incorporated…[literary naturalists] created narratives that dialogically interacted with deterministic ideologies. They used their fiction not to preach determinism, but to engage in a struggle with determinism” (104). It is, however, a key thematic element that American literary naturalists tend to explore in their fiction, and Cormac McCarthy is no exception. For the sake of brevity, I will explain Link’s writings on determinism in literary naturalism only as they apply to Blood Meridian.

First, it is important to establish which general type of determinism is implemented in Blood Meridian. Link asserts that there are two broad categories of determinism. The first is
providential determinism, which “is largely characterized by the positing of a transcendent and omniscient supernatural force that directs or predestines the course of events” (Link 107). The second is secular or philosophically naturalistic determinism, which “removes God as an active agent in the universe and puts in God’s place a set of natural laws that govern the universe and determine all action” (Link 107). Blood Meridian should be classified primarily as providentially deterministic because, throughout the novel, McCarthy depicts the judge as a malicious and quite possibly supernatural being who ultimately guides the Glanton gang to its demise. The novel’s providential determinism is reinforced if we subscribe to Sansom’s theory that the judge is the prophet of a God for whom war is holy. The novel is rife with textual references to mysterious “other powers” of fate and chance that actively seek to lay humankind low.

The novel is also primarily providentially deterministic because, as Barclay Owens points out, there are textual indications of a Darwinist naturalistic order, which would suggest that the text veers toward a secular determinism. Although elements of philosophical naturalism and secular determinism do exist in the novel, a truly secularly deterministic novel would not permit the romantic and supernatural elements that occur in the narrative. By contrast, in a providentially deterministic novel, the existence of a deterministic higher being and the manifestation of elements of scientific and philosophical naturalism are not mutually exclusive.

More specifically, Blood Meridian’s providential determinism falls under what Link calls “soft determinism.” He classifies this as based on the Bergsonian principle that, while the body is subject to the deterministic forces of the outside world, the mind remains free of deterministic influence because thoughts exist outside of linear time (Link 121). This notion clearly applies to the kid, who harbors an inner resistance to the dehumanization and violence of the novel’s
naturalistic universe even as he partakes of the violence and bloodshed. Soft determinism applies directly in *Blood Meridian* because of the novel’s preoccupation with notions of fate determined by chance. Chance effectively “softens” a novel’s determinism because in hard determinism everything is governed by causal relationships and natural laws, and so random chance has no role to play. In this sense, the novel also incorporates elements of fatalism, wherein events are affected by what Link calls the “directing stick of destiny upon which man has no power to act” (113). In a fatalistic universe, circumstances are not the result of a causal chain of occurrences but rather occur for reasons inscrutable to the novel’s characters.

The way in which McCarthy implements soft determinism in *Blood Meridian* suggests a rejection or questioning of humankind’s violent and bestial nature as depicted in the novel. As Link notes, the American literary naturalists in the nineteenth century often used naturalism as a way to explore and test the concept of philosophical naturalism. Dennis Sansom also makes the point that novels historically have been used as a way to test the validity of certain philosophical theories. He writes that “once we artistically render a philosophical idea into a narrative plot in which we can imagine ourselves experiencing its movement guided by its teleology, would we want it?” (Sansom 4). He suggests that McCarthy rejects providential determinism (which Sansom terms theo-determinism). In such a world, everything is determined by God and so even the bloodiest acts of war and unthinkable atrocities must be considered holy. Thus, the judge’s assertion that “war is god” is borne out. However, the kid’s internal subjectivity can be read as a rebellion against a providentially deterministic order. Sansom writes that the kid’s “subjectivity is out of sync with the objectivity of the blood meridian. His internally troubled state is the first step toward finally rejecting the blood meridian” (15). In this way, the novel’s never-ending
violence and the kid’s resistance to it can be read as McCarthy’s desire to oppose a world order in which violence reaches a kind of dread apotheosis. McCarthy is expressing what, for Girard, inevitably occurs "in the final stages of a sacrificial crisis" in which "the very viability of human society is put in question" (67).

As Link observes, it is not enough to make the assumption that, based on previous theories of naturalism, all naturalistic texts are purely pessimistic or entirely deterministic. It is important that the texts are evaluated based on all of their elements, not merely the themes concurrent with past scholarship on naturalism. Despite its metaphysical, romantic, and supernatural elements, Cormac McCarthy’s Blood Meridian should be considered a worthy contemporary “neo-naturalistic” addition to the canon of American literary naturalism. Contrary to Pizer’s assertion, naturalism cannot be considered “dead” simply because it does not adhere to the specificities of nineteenth-century American literary naturalism. As shown in my examination of the novel, Blood Meridian possesses many commonalities with the works of canonical naturalists such as Frank Norris and Stephen Crane but also introduces even more sweeping metaphysical and supernatural elements to accompany the violence of America’s westward expansion. With novels such as Blood Meridian having been written in the past twenty-five years, American literary naturalism appears to be very much alive.
Chapter II: "the world cannot lose it": Naturalism, Romanticism, and the Melancholy Western in Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy

Traditionally, American literary naturalism has featured protagonists with little or no awareness of the naturalistic forces arrayed against them. In Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy—composed of All the Pretty Horses, The Crossing, and Cities of the Plain—the protagonists and the narrator both possess a deep-seated melancholy rooted in an understanding of the way in which their fates are naturalistically determined. The protagonists’ awareness of their increasingly prescribed destinies develops over the course of the individual novels in the trilogy. In All the Pretty Horses, the first novel, the narrator describes John Grady Cole's father as he views the pastoral landscape, "looking over the country with those sunken eyes as if the world out there had been altered or made suspect by what he'd seen of it elsewhere. As if he might never see it right again. Or worse did see it right at last. See it as it had always been, would forever be" (McCarthy ATPH 23). This quote demonstrates the cognizance of both the narrator and the father of the immutable circumstances of the world. While not expressed in explicitly naturalistic terms, this instance manifests the deep melancholia which pervades the trilogy. Despite the Trilogy’s overt naturalistic elements married to the novels’ melancholy, Stephen Frye's "Cormac McCarthy's 'World in Its Making': Romantic Naturalism in The Crossing" remains the only critical treatment of the trilogy as distinctly naturalistic works.

As I note in my first chapter, naturalism and romanticism often have been cited by critics as inherently incompatible. However, Stephen Frye points out that what makes a text naturalistic is a complicated matter, and to interpret naturalistic works as strictly realistic is to ignore the
exaggerations and sweeping, epic language that have been present in the genre since its inception (48). He writes that "[C]ritics who view naturalism conventionally, as realism informed by a thoroughgoing mechanistic determinism, tend to downplay McCarthy's debt to the naturalists" (48). As in Blood Meridian, naturalism in The Crossing is informed strongly by supernatural and romantic elements. Frye notes that the novel “evokes a tension between the real and the surreal, the materially tangible and yet mysterious and terrifying, and thus is largely an instance of what has come to be called romantic naturalism” (48). As Eric Carl Link posits, naturalism has been rooted in traditions of American romanticism and transcendentalism from its inception. The Border Trilogy represents a seamless fusion of brutal American literary naturalism in the tradition of Stephen Crane and a romanticism rooted in an idealization of both the pastoral ranching lifestyle and the novels’ uncharted wilderness. Indeed, rather than being naturalistic with romantic elements, the novels within the Trilogy are romantic and naturalistic simultaneously. The novels’ romanticism exists despite their evocation of an undeniably bleak naturalistic world. I argue that the way in which the Trilogy’s protagonists embrace the pastoral and the natural world gestures toward an underlying optimistic humanism in the novels.

A key element of Frye's argument is that, despite displaying a brutal, violent reality that manifests elements of philosophical naturalism as well as Darwinian scientific naturalism, the novels of the Border Trilogy ultimately are informed by "an underlying unity in [the] characters' lives" (52). For Frye, this is McCarthy's version of Hegel's "World-Spirit." As Frye notes, Hegel posited that "history is a poetic narrative" in which mankind triumphs in a series of positive developments (55). While The Crossing's naturalism tempers this optimistic worldview, Frye implies that the "World-Spirit" is the source of the novel's romanticism. I assert, however, that
there is no underlying spirituality external to the characters in either *The Crossing* or in the Border Trilogy as a whole. Frye’s Hegelian trajectory, while arguably based on textual evidence, is never fully realized in *The Crossing* (nor, as Frye points out, is it challenged). While there is indeed an underlying matrix that connects events and characters in a manner which penetrates and tempers the novel's otherwise bleakly naturalistic landscape, I argue that this interconnectedness is grounded in the corporeal world of human relationships, both to each other and to the natural world, as will be demonstrated later in this chapter.

John Grady Cole and Billy Parham, the protagonists of *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing*, respectively, have their humanity and individual subjectivity continually buffeted by naturalistic forces. Despite their hardships, McCarthy denies his protagonists the bloody path taken by the kid in *Blood Meridian* by portraying humankind not as pernicious and animalistic, but as largely generous and accommodating to strangers. Although John Grady and Billy commit violent acts, they retain an overt moral center, in contrast to the kid's implied (and questionable) morality, thanks in large part to humankind's fraternal instincts. In *All the Pretty Horses*, having witnessed Jimmy Blevins's death and killing a young Mexican in prison, John Grady Cole finds solace in the simple companionship of ordinary Mexican citizens. McCarthy's narrator notes that after and for a long time to come he'd have reason to evoke the recollection of those smiles and to reflect upon the good will which provoked them for it had the power to protect and to confer honor and to strengthen resolve and it had the power to heal men and to bring them to safety long after all other resources were exhausted (ATPH 219).

---

4 Although, as I note in the introduction, naturalism does not preclude the existence of deterministic supernatural forces.
McCarthy describes the good will of these anonymous men in the reverent tones of Scripture, suggesting that if there is a transcendent reality in the Trilogy, an important element of it is the beneficence of human beings. Throughout their separate wanderings in Mexico, John Grady and Billy are fed, clothed, and given medical aid and shelter by complete strangers.

In *The Crossing* and *Cities of the Plain*, human contact and socialization counterbalance Billy Parham’s nomadic instincts and are crucial to his development as a character operating within a naturalistic context. Billy turns his back on humanity in *The Crossing* in favor of the romantic idyll represented by the wolf, a venture which ends, in naturalistic fashion, with the death of the wolf and of Billy's parents. The trajectory of Billy's narrative, however, is based on the tension between the ultimately futile desire for a pure romantic connection to nature and an attainable connection with humankind. In *The Crossing*, Billy encounters a village of Indians following the death of the wolf. Their elder cautions Billy not to abandon human connections:

> he told the boy that although he was huérfano ⁵ still he must cease his wanderings and make for himself some place in the world because to wander in this way would become for him a passion and by this passion he would become estranged from men and so ultimately from himself. He said that the world could only be known as it existed in men's hearts...one must look there and come to know those hearts and to do this one must live with men and not simply pass among them (McCarthy TC 134).

Billy is happiest when he is with his family in *The Crossing* and living on the ranch in *Cities of the Plain*. It is only when these meaningful human relationships are wrenched from him that Billy adopts an ascetic, nomadic lifestyle, during which he has no human connection to

---

⁵ *Huérfano* is Spanish for orphan.
ameliorate the hardships he experiences. Indeed, at the Trilogy's conclusion, a seventy-eight-year-old Billy finally begins to grasp the need for companionship, seeing "a row of figures struggling and clamoring silently in the wind...He called to them but his shout was carried away on the wind and in any case they were too far to hear him" but when he awakes, Billy realizes that "in the new day's light were only rags of plastic wrapping hanging from a fence" (McCarthy COTP 289). Further, even at his age, Billy still longs for his dead brother, whom "I'd give about anything to see him one more time" (McCarthy COTP 291). Cities of the Plain ends with Billy being taken in by a young family that sees him as a grandfather figure. Despite Billy's protestations to the mother that "I'm not who you think I am. I aint nothin. I dont know why you put up with me," McCarthy affirms the trilogy's humanistic undercurrent through the mother's response: "Well, Mr Parham, I know who you are. And I do know why" (COTP 292).

Despite the implicit optimism of the Trilogy's conclusion, a bleakly naturalistic world undergirds the novels' network of positive human bonds. This naturalism is at best held at bay by these connections. At times, the novels read like archetypal examples of American literary naturalism, such that their naturalism becomes impossible to ignore. In All the Pretty Horses, McCarthy's narrator describes the prison into which John Grady is thrown as a self-contained naturalistic universe which is itself merely a microcosm of the world as a whole. The narrator says that the prison was like a village in which constant bartering and commerce occurred, but that "underpinning it all like the fiscal standard in commercial societies lay a bedrock of depravity and violence where in an egalitarian absolute every man was judged by a single standard and that was his readiness to kill" (McCarthy ATPH 182). Indeed, the fact that John Grady leaves the prison only after he has killed another prisoner in single combat is indicative of
his abilities as a naturalistic survivor in such a society. That McCarthy foregrounds the prison's naturalism in a world of commerce indicates that he is referring to the outside world in this scene just as much as he is referring to the prison.

McCarthey also draws on the language of *Blood Meridian* in how he describes humankind's role as an ultimate predator. In *The Crossing*, McCarthy's narrator describes humanity as "that malignant lesser god come pale and naked and alien to slaughter all its clan and kin and rout them from their house. A god insatiable whom no ceding could appease nor any measure of blood" (TC 17). McCarthy suggests that mankind has supplanted God as the purveyor of death and judgment. Passages such as this undermine Frye's notion of an underlying Hegelian unity based on a benevolent deity or World-Spirit. Indeed, as other passages indicate, humanity's supremacy over the natural world has allowed humans to create rules and strictures that bind nature.

Humankind’s dominance over the natural world also slowly destroys the possibility of a pastoral life for the Border Trilogy’s protagonists. Because their fates are tied to the fate of the land, the protagonists become subject to the same naturalistic laws. When John Grady meets with the Duena Alfonsa after she pays to get him out of prison, she discourses on fate as beyond the ability of humankind to influence. She says, “the world has always been more of a puppet show. But when one looks behind the curtain and traces the strings upward he finds they terminate in the hands of yet other puppets, themselves with their own strings which trace upward in turn, and so on” (McCarthy ATPH 231). Fate in naturalistic novels is immutable and frequently inscrutable, as the Duena indicates in this passage. Perhaps individuals are manipulated by others higher up on the social “food chain,” but they themselves are controlled by even more powerful
overarching forces. McCarthy suggests that because naturalistic forces ultimately govern the fate of all, the world can be described as an egalitarian system. As the Duena notes, “I’ve no sympathy with people to whom things happen. It may be that their luck is bad, but is that to count in their favor?” (McCarthy ATPH 240). Within such a system, moral considerations such as “deserving” and “personal worth” are moot. Indeed, “men with wicked histories often enjoyed lives of comfort and…they died in peace and were buried with honor. He said that it was a mistake to expect too much justice of this world” (McCarthy TC 288). McCarthy further reinforces the impassiveness of the novels’ naturalistic world in how he portrays naturalism through the figure of the wolf in The Crossing.

McCarthy often writes in a mode that expresses archetypical scientific naturalism when he discusses the strict rules to which wild animals are subjected. His narrator writes of the wolf in The Crossing that "she would not return to a kill. She would not cross a road or a rail line in daylight. She would not cross under a wire fence twice in the same place. These were the new protocols. Strictures that had not existed before. Now they did" (TC 25). As Frye correctly points out, "In recording how changes in the environment affect a creature with a particular hereditary makeup, it might also be said to apply the scientific method in a manner reminiscent of Zola" (49). McCarthy grounds much of the novel’s naturalistic philosophy in the symbolism of the wolf as a pure predator without malice and, conversely, without any concept of mercy. When Billy approaches the aging Don Arnulfo for aid in capturing the wolf, Arnulfo instead tells Billy about the true nature of the creature. He says that “the wolf is a being of great order and… it knows what men do not: that there is no order in the world save that which death has put there” (McCarthy TC 45). This passage gets at the core of naturalistic philosophy, in which people of
great potential are laid low indiscriminately by death, the great equalizer. McCarthy uses the wolf as the locus for his naturalistic interest in the laws of the wild because, as Frye notes, the wolf is an “icon for naturalism’s deterministic world, where identity constitutes itself through the survival impulse and free will evaporates in a dry atmosphere defined by instinct” (49).

However, while on the surface the wolf appears to be unambiguously naturalistic, it also embodies the Trilogy’s conflicted relationship between naturalism and romanticism. In one sense, it is inseparably part of the naturalistic cycle of predator and prey, but in another sense, it is the subject of romantic idealization on the part of Billy Parham.

Indeed, the wolf constitutes the center of some of the most romantic passages in the Trilogy. A sense of naturalistic determinism further tethers these passages to the wolf. When the wolf inevitably dies, McCarthy describes its death in one of the most beautifully romantic passages in these novels:

he could see her running in the mountains, running in the starlight where the grass was wet and the sun’s coming as yet had not undone the rich matrix of creatures passed in the night before her…what we may well believe has the power to cut and shape and hollow out the dark form of the world surely if wind can, if rain can. But which cannot be held never be held and is no flower but is swift and a huntress and the wind itself is in terror of it and the world cannot lose it (TC 127).

This entire sequence is evocative of the difficult balancing act that McCarthy achieves between the poles of romanticism and naturalism. This passage is lushly romantic, describing nature in reverent, spiritual terms, yet the circumstances leading to the wolf’s death are clearly naturalistic. McCarthy writes of the wolf’s death that “doomed enterprises divide lives forever into the then
and now…the little wolves in her belly felt the cold draw all about them and they cried out
mutely in the dark and he buried them all” (TC 129). McCarthy implies that Billy’s attempt to
return the wolf to the wild in Mexico was fated to fail from its inception, yet the epiphanic
structure of Billy’s romantic reverence for the wolf suggests a redemptive quality to the quest:
the wolf is dead but, as the narrator notes, “the world cannot lose it.”

Like the wolf, the American Indian forms a critical symbol of the hybrid relationship
between naturalism and romanticism in the Trilogy. As much as the wolf, American Indians in
the Border Trilogy embody both a spiritual connection to the land on the one hand, and violence
and naturalistic doom at the hands of white settlers on the other hand. At the beginning of All the
Pretty Horses, John Grady rides along an old road once used by Comanche Indians, which for
him conjures up visions of “that lost nation come down out of the north with their faces chalked
and their long hair plaited and each armed for war which was their life and the women and
children and women with children at their breasts all pledged in blood and redeemable in blood
only” (McCarthy ATPH 5). Like the wolf, the Comanche are described in terms of organic
processes (blood), but they possess humankind’s reckless, orderless love of war. However,
McCarthy also portrays in elegiac fashion the romanticism that counterbalances the Comanches’
naturalistic violence, saying that they are “nation and ghost of nation passing in a soft chorale
across the mineral waste to darkness bearing lost to all history and all remembrance like a grail
the sum of their secular and transitory and violent lives” (ATPH 5). Although McCarthy is
referring explicitly to the Comanche in this passage, their “secular and transitory and violent
lives” easily could apply to any race and any nation, including white Americans such as John
Grady.
American Indians in the Trilogy embody a romantic-naturalistic duality also borne out in the genre of the American frontier Western to which the Trilogy belongs. These tensions are implicit in the genre, in which ontological movements are mapped based on the protagonists’ physical travels between civilization and wilderness. As Richard Slotkin notes in *Gunfighter Nation*, “[T]he Frontier Myth is divided by significant borders…the American must cross the border into ‘Indian Country’ and experience a ‘regression’ to a more primitive and natural condition of life so that the false values of the ‘metropolis’ can be purged and a new, purified social contract enacted” (14). However, this romantic version of the Western is tempered by the introduction of naturalism. In the Border Trilogy, the protagonists’ travels into the “wilderness” of Mexico only confirm the Trilogy’s realization that the pastoral ideal promoted by the Western is no longer possible. There is no new social contract: idealists such as John Grady and Billy face the prospect of an early death or a slow decline in the face of encroaching industrialization. Despite this bleak vision of the American Western, redemption is still focalized in the genre’s core elements: human companionship, the beauty of the land, and the romantic bond between nature and the Western protagonist. McCarthy’s modification of the genre enables him to address modern uncertainty through this central American mythology.

As he does with naturalism, McCarthy forces the Western to morph into a form that addresses his concerns about the problems of modernity. In his essay, “Riders of the Virtual Sage: Zane Grey, Cormac McCarthy, and the Transformation of the Popular Western,” Alan Bourassa applies a Deleuzian reading to McCarthy’s transfiguration of the Western in *The Crossing*, noting that McCarthy “makes popular elements undergo a kind of ratifying
problematic mutation, a transformation that must be characterized as ‘virtual’” (170), a term referring to the way in which strange or artificial elements are treated as real.

Certainly, the Trilogy possesses familiar Western archetypes—gunfights, ranching, horse theft—but these elements are problematized and made strange by the metaphysical romantic and naturalistic elements that McCarthy incorporates into the novels’ narratives. In All the Pretty Horses, McCarthy introduces the character of Jimmy Blevins, a mysterious young boy possessing incredible accuracy with a revolver and a fear that he will be killed by lightning like all of the men in his family. This is a figure common to Westerns: a mysterious stranger with no prior history who has mythical abilities and affiliations. However, McCarthy makes this familiar element strange by introducing naturalism into the equation. Despite Blevins’s remarkable abilities, Mexican vigilantes execute him in the wilderness: “John Grady watched the small ragged figure vanish limping among the trees with his keepers. There seemed insufficient substance to him to be the object of men’s wrath” (177). What is common in naturalistic narratives—the downfall of a man of great potential in the face of naturalistic forces—is fused with what is common in the Western—an extraordinary, mysterious gunman—to create something new, something “virtual.” McCarthy calls into question the normally impervious optimism of the Western by introducing it into a naturalistic world. In doing so, he expresses modern uncertainty about the ways in which contemporary society enacts technological and social changes.

While naturalism colors McCarthy’s alchemical transfiguration of the myth of the American West, there are also passages in the novel that are overtly romantic and reinforce some of the core values of the Western genre. McCarthy frequently waxes romantic when describing
the natural beauty of Texas and Mexico. When John Grady rides through the still-untamed reaches of the hacienda at which he works, he witnesses scenes of romantic beauty: “the sun rose riding up flights of ducks out of the shallows or geese or mergansers that would beat away over the water scattering the haze and rising up would turn to birds of gold in a sun not yet visible from the bolson floor” (McCarthy ATPH 128). Throughout the Trilogy, McCarthy depicts nature and the wild landscape with a certain reverence that Frye posits as evidence of an underlying spiritual unity in the The Crossing’s events. However, the way in which such descriptions often are framed and sometimes undermined by naturalistic events calls into question Frye’s Hegelian perspective.

The most clearly romantic aspect of the Border Trilogy is the seemingly supernatural connection that John Grady and Billy possess to certain animals, a bond that is a microcosm of the novels’ subtextual tension between naturalism and romanticism. We already have seen the way in which Billy is connected on a spiritual level to the wolf. However, this connection is diluted somewhat by the wolf’s status as a naturalistic predator with little regard for humankind. John Grady, on the other hand, possesses an unambiguously romantic spiritual bond with horses. Early in All the Pretty Horses, McCarthy’s narrator describes John Grady riding his horse, saying that “the boy who rode on slightly before him sat a horse not only as if he’d been born to it which he was but as if were he begot by malice or mischance into some queer land where horses never were he would have found them anyway” (ATPH 23). Throughout the novel, John Grady talks to his horses, not as he might talk to a pet, but as equals. McCarthy emphasizes the fact that John Grady tells his horses exactly what he intends to do and that he never lies to them. In a purely naturalistic world, this sort of anthropomorphism is, of course, absurd and melodramatic,
but in the context of the Trilogy’s nascent romanticism, it becomes entirely plausible. Again, this symbiotic relationship between animal and human is implicitly redemptive. In a moment of unadulterated romantic bliss, John Grady dreams of an Elysian field of horses:

he dreamt of horses in a field on a high plain where the spring rains had brought up the grass and the wildflowers out of the ground…in the dream he was among the horses running and in the dream he himself could run with the horses…and there was nothing else in all that high world and they moved all of them in a resonance that was like a music among them and they were none of them afraid horse nor colt nor mare and they ran in that resonance which is the world itself and which cannot be spoken but only praised (McCarthy ATPH 163).

John Grady’s celebratory dream denies both the incursion of naturalism and any cynicism that might be brought to bear upon it because it stems from his internal subjectivity. As Link points out, under soft determinism, an individual can retain internal agency even as his body is determined and governed by naturalistic forces. Ironically, it is this internal fount of idealism that creates the pastoral melancholy that pervades the Trilogy.

The humanistic and romantic aspects of the Border Trilogy, which should create a narrative space in which an optimistic view of the novels might flourish, instead are undermined by an overriding sense of pastoral melancholy. The tension between naturalism and romanticism in the Trilogy, as manifested by the slow decline of the pastoral ranching lifestyle to which John Grady and Billy are wedded, is what births the novels’ pastoral melancholy. In his essay, “‘Some Site Where Life Had Not Succeeded’: Ecopastoralism in the Border Trilogy” from his book *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy*, Georg Guillemin asserts that this melancholia actually
predates the events in the narrative. While John Grady and Billy both experience horrific events and losses which certainly would justify their abiding abjection, Guillemin makes the point that “the melancholia felt by the protagonists actually seems to precede these hardships and contribute to bringing them about through a sense of premonition, like a self-fulfilling prophecy” (110). However, the sense of premonition Guillemin to which refers stems from the slow death of the pastoral lifestyle that defines the way in which the protagonists view the world.

Instances of technology encroaching on the pastoral landscape frame the Trilogy’s overarching narrative. At the start of the first novel, *All the Pretty Horses*, John Grady Cole witnesses a train, described in negative naturalistic terms, blasting across the plains of Texas: “[I]t came boring out of the east like some ribald satellite of the coming sun howling and bellowing in the distance…mile on mile into the darkness after where the boilersmoke disbanded slowly” (McCarthy ATPH 4). The train represents technological progress and the way in which it inevitably rolls forward with blind disregard for the chaos it creates as it does so. Guillemin asserts that the train is a classic symbol of technology; indeed, he points out that it is the symbol Leo Marx uses in his classic work, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (110).

*The Crossing* contains a much grimmer symbol of technological progress. Toward the end of the novel, Billy Parham witnesses what is implied to be (as interpreted by Frye) the detonation of an atomic bomb in Mexico by the United States: “[T]he red sun that burned in the broad gap of the mountains before him sloughed out of its form and was slowly sucked away to light all the sky in a deep red afterflash” (McCarthy TC 383). Occurring as it does toward the end of the narrative, the nuclear detonation is the death knell for Billy’s pastoral aspirations, all
future prospects for that lifestyle vanishing in the face of a form of destruction steeped in implications of scientific naturalism. The judge’s assertion in Blood Meridian that humanity is the ultimate practitioner of war is borne out in the Border Trilogy, as Billy witnesses the testing of a weapon with the potential to wipe the human race off the face of the earth.

McCarthy implies that humanity’s own predaciousness and relentless forward momentum is the cause of the death of pastoral lifestyles such as ranching and hunting. In The Crossing, McCarthy’s narrator describes Billy’s impressions of Mr. Echols’s hunting shack, “a strange basilica dedicated to a practice as soon to be extinct among the trades of men as the beast to whom it owed its being” (TC 17). Humanity’s naturalistic drive to outcompete all other predatory species ironically will destroy the ancient art of hunting, a practice that McCarthy describes in religious terms. McCarthy manifests a deep skepticism for progress at the expense of pastoral livelihoods.

Similarly, the decline of ranching backgrounds the narrative thrust of Cities of the Plain. Beneath the surface melodrama of John Grady Cole’s fatal infatuation with a Mexican prostitute flows a narrative of how the pastoral ranching lifestyle similarly is destined to perish. Indeed, McCarthy suggests that the ranchers are holding out against the encroachment of drought, the United States government’s desire to buy the ranch for military purposes, and the reality that ranching as they know it is in its death throes. McCarthy’s narrator describes Mac’s recognition of his ranch’s end in naturalistic terms, saying, “[P]eople imagined that if you got through a drought you could expect a few good years to try and get caught up but it was just like the seven on a pair of dice. The drought didn’t know when the last one was and nobody knew when the next one was coming” (COTP 116). Mac has a sense of resignation rooted in a deep feeling of
melancholy for the passing of the only life he has ever known. Similarly, Mr. Johnson, who at
times functions as a mouthpiece for the narrator’s pastoral nostalgia, recalls his youth as a
cowboy, saying, “I miss the old range life. I went up the trail four times. Best times of my life.
The best. Bein out. Seein new country. There’s nothing like it in the world. There never will be”
(McCarthy COTP 187). Johnson encapsulates the allure of the pastoral lifestyle but recognizes
that there will never be anything like it again. This growing realization creates the novels’
pastoral melancholy.

Further, John Grady’s and Billy’s growing cognizance of the pastoral life’s decline
reflects the sense of estrangement and alienation manifested in the novels’ language. In All the
Pretty Horses, John Grady struggles against the perceived indifference of the world, with the
narrator noting that he holds out his hands “perhaps as if to slow the world that was rushing away
and seemed to care nothing for the old or young or rich or poor or dark or pale or he or she.
Nothing for their struggles, nothing for their names. Nothing for the living or the dead”
(McCarthy ATPH 301). This passage is evocative of the leveling effect of a naturalistic world.
Everyone is equally threatened by a world hostile to individuals and indifferent to their struggles.
In The Crossing, a blind man whom Billy encounters in Mexico relates to him the experience of
being newly blind, noting that “his thoughts were that other than wind or rain nothing would ever
come again to touch him out of that estrangement that was the world. Not in love, not in enmity.
The bonds that fixed him in the world had become rigid” (McCarthy TC 279). The blind man
conveys his despair by his dread of the rigidity of the novels’ naturalistic world. What John
Grady fears is that his life is being left behind by unstoppable forward progress. These twinned
passages evoke the melancholy that pervades the Trilogy’s language.
It often is difficult to determine how much of the texts’ melancholy can be attributed to the protagonists, and if the narrator is “reading” this depression into his characters. As Guillemin notes, “the narrator’s underlying melancholia is stylizing the narrative events into parables of fate” (110). Indeed, events such as the death of the wolf in *The Crossing*, which would not be granted narrative significance in more conventional novels, instead become touchpoints in the trajectory of the stories, impacting the protagonists’ mental states in profound ways. Witness, for example, the profundity of Billy’s melancholy following the she-wolf’s death, which becomes such that “His home had come to seem remote and dreamlike. There were times he could not call to mind his father’s face” (McCarthy TC 135). The protagonists’ sense of depression becomes so great that at times it deeply affects their perceptions of the world.

As I noted earlier, events in the novels are interpreted through a lens of abiding melancholy. Moments in the text are described with a sense of abjection outside the factuality of the narrative. For example, in *The Crossing*, Billy recognizes that the wolf is going to die. The narrator describes this realization, noting that Billy looks the wolf in the eyes and that “in them was no despair but only that same recklessness deep of loneliness that cored the world to its heart” (105). Billy is melodramatically projecting his own sense of loneliness and despair onto the wolf, a creature that does not experience emotions in human terms. The Trilogy’s narrator and protagonists are apt to attribute conventional (albeit tragic) circumstances to supernatural forces or entities over which they have no control. After coming to the realization that he and Alejandra can never be together, John Grady drifts into pensive melancholy, imagining “the pain of the world to be like some formless parasitic being seeking out the warmth of human souls wherein to incubate and he thought he knew what made one liable to its visitations” (McCarthy TC 257).
Although the narrator frames this passage as emanating from the mind of John Grady, as Guillemin notes, the narrator’s voice and those of the protagonists can be difficult to distinguish. Indeed, this indeterminism between protagonist and narrator calls into question the notion that such a sophisticated and wildly imaginative concept of human suffering can realistically be said to be the product of an unschooled teenage ranch hand. Such passages are indicative of a sense of melancholy embodied not only in the actions and thoughts of the protagonists, but in the very fabric of the narrative.

Given the deep-seated melancholy embedded in the Trilogy’s narratives, and that events often are understood in naturalistic terms, mental illness and depression can be said to constitute powerful naturalistic forces deserving of deeper consideration. As we have seen, McCarthy updates naturalism to encompass modern concerns, such as environmental destruction, technological progress, and the decline of traditional pastoral subsistence; McCarthy also addresses the power of clinical depression to shape narrative trajectory and determine the fate of his characters. Guillemin notes that “some instances reflecting the protagonists’ alienation read like the clinical symptoms of melancholia” (111) but does not explore the far-reaching naturalistic implications of depression, which is how McCarthy has adapted scientific naturalism to address this modern problem.

Julia Kristeva’s *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* provides a useful model that can be used to understand how melancholia operates in the Border Trilogy. Kristeva says of the melancholic that they “disavow the negation: they cancel it out, suspend it, and nostalgically fall back on the real object (The Thing) of their loss, which is just what they do not manage to lose, to which they remain painfully riveted” (43). This paradoxical inability to regain or escape the
object of loss and desire explains why John Grady Cole and Billy Parham both make choices that seemingly go against self-interest. After the loss of Alejandra, John Grady falls desperately in love with the Mexican prostitute Magdelena, who is physically akin to Alejandra and likewise unobtainable. In both cases, John Grady’s closest friends warn that he is setting himself up for a fall, but his melancholia has stripped him of agency, as John Grady himself recognizes: “I feel some way like I didn’t have nothing to do with it. Like it’s just the way it is. Like it always was this way” (COTP 121). Kristeva would say that John Grady is welded to the ephemeral object of his original loss and is trying to fill that void with Magdelena. At his core, John Grady possesses a self-destructive idealism that fuels his depression. As the pimp Eduardo observes to Billy, “[John Grady] is in the grip of an irrational passion…men have in their minds a picture of how the world will be. How they will be in that world. The world may be many different ways for them but there is one world that will never be and that is the world they dream of” (McCarthy COTP 134).

Kristeva’s Black Sun also provides a means through which Billy’s nomadic lifestyle can be understood. The Indians Bill encounters caution him not to turn from human society, yet he continually does so, seeking to regain the romantic vision originally embodied by the she-wolf. Kristeva notes that the depressive is "disinherited… the depressed person wanders in pursuit of continuously disappointing adventures and loves; or else retreats, disconsolate and aphasic, alone with the unnamed Thing—an imagined sun, bright and black at the same time" (13). Billy clearly takes the latter path—he wanders nomadically, “days of the world. Years of the world. Till he was old” (McCarthy COTP 265). Despite the passing of years, Billy still carries with him a deep yearning for that which can never be regained. McCarthy’s narrator notes that Billy “dreamt of
his sister dead seventy years and buried near Fort Sumner. He saw her so clearly. Nothing had changed, nothing faded” (COTP 265). This is indeed Kristeva’s “black sun.” The remembered glow of an idealized world that never was sustains Billy, and he simultaneously is brought low as he attempts to find that world again. Thus, the sun is at the same time “bright and black.”

Melancholy profoundly determines the destinies of the Trilogy’s two protagonists. Its inescapability gestures toward reading melancholia as a powerful naturalistic force in McCarthy’s writing. Depression also has a hereditary component that aligns it with Darwinian scientific naturalism. In All the Pretty Horses, John Grady Cole’s father is described as having a depressed outlook that has been transferred in some form to John Grady. McCarthy writes that John Grady’s father “[looked] over the country with those sunken eyes as if the world out there had been altered or made suspect by what he’d seen of it elsewhere” (ATPH 23). Melancholia clearly governs the actions of the Trilogy’s protagonists and weakens their agency and ability to make practical choices. What makes this phenomenon naturalistic is that, as we have seen, neither character appears to have much choice in the matter. A naturalistic world effaces human signification, and melancholia appears to perform the same action in the Border Trilogy.

The Border Trilogy's naturalism is undeniable but complicated by the novels' equally clear romanticism. The project of this chapter has been to grapple with the strain between these two opposing thematic threads. The Trilogy contains an ultimately naturalistic aesthetic, but one that stems from the destruction of the novels' romantic, pastoral elements and the protagonists' disillusionment with their place in this naturalistic universe. Instead of the unrelenting bleakness and pessimism of Blood Meridian, McCarthy portrays a harsh naturalistic world in the Border Trilogy but gestures toward human bonds of companionship as well as the unassailable sanctity
of nature with the "power to resonate against the void which threatened hourly to devour it" (TC 74).
Chapter III: "degraded prisoners"\(^6\): Post-Apocalyptic Naturalism in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

Cormac McCarthy's 2006 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Road* is in many ways McCarthy's most overtly naturalistic novel. Unlike the Border Trilogy, the elements of this genre are not paired with romantic imagery of the natural world, nor is *The Road*’s naturalism grand or metaphysical, as in *Blood Meridian*. The novel instead supports a Darwinist survival ethic and adherence to natural laws that appear to be drawn directly from the works of Frank Norris and Stephen Crane. McCarthy portrays the anonymous man’s romantic nostalgia for nature and the pre-apocalyptic world but makes it clear that such idealization of a dead world is perilous in the novel’s naturalistic context. Indeed, the novel diverges significantly from the romantic naturalism seen in the Border Trilogy. Again, the novel’s naturalism is similar to that of such classic naturalists as Norris and Crane. It is surprising, then, that to date no critic has considered this work as a continuation of American literary naturalism. McCarthy scholarship and the study of American literary naturalism both can benefit from reading *The Road* as naturalistic.

However, despite its distinct differences from *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy, *The Road* builds on McCarthy’s underlying valuation of humanity and concern for its well-being as expressed through its concern for the human consequences of environmental catastrophe.

*The Road*’s post-apocalyptic setting deserves significant attention, for the novel derives much of its naturalism from the scorched apocalyptic landscape in which the nameless father and son find themselves. Although McCarthy keeps the circumstances of the apocalypse vague, it is clear that some catastrophe occurred that scorched the land and killed most of humanity and

---

\(^6\) This quote comes from line 52 of William Carlos Williams's poem "To Elsie."
nearly every animal. Save for a few isolated pockets of the population, such as the protagonists, humankind has been reduced to roving bands of cannibals. As McCarthy's narrator puts it, after the disaster the earth was "soon to be populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes" as well as "blackened looters...crawled from the rubble white of tooth and eye carrying charred and anonymous tins of food in nylon nets like shoppers in the commissaries of hell" (TR 181). In true naturalistic fashion, the dominant survivors are those willing to do anything, including cannibalism, to survive. Those that did not "sank down and fell over and died and the bleak and shrouded earth went trundling past the sun and returned again as trackless and unremarked as the path of any nameless sisterworld in the ancient dark beyond" (TR 181).

Indeed, McCarthy's text resists an anthropocentric reading in which the demise of humankind is given the cast of tragedy. As the previous quote illustrates, the apocalypse simply leaves planet Earth as it was millions of years ago: as lifeless and "unremarked" as any planet in the solar system. McCarthy espouses a similarly egalitarian naturalistic ethos in the final lines of *The Crossing*, in which he notes that the "sun did rise, once again, for all and without distinction" (TC 426). Naturalism forces what Georg Guillemin calls “aesthetic leveling” (79) in which the thematic elements of naturalism that McCarthy brings to bear on his protagonists forces a biocentric equality with all other forms of life. The naturalistic circumstances of the narrative embody this egalitarianism and are independent of the viewpoint of the narrator.

Humanity’s circumstances in *The Road* parallel those of animals. This is a particularly naturalistic notion, as under the precepts of scientific naturalism humankind’s intrinsic value is no greater than that of any other species. The man comes to the realization that cows are extinct: "[W]as that true? There could be a cow somewhere being fed and cared for. Could there? Fed
what? Saved for what?" (McCarthy TR 120). This passage presumes that cows have no function but to provide humankind with sustenance, that their value is predicated on their relationship to humanity. The reality of the novel, however, is that humanity will soon be as extinct as cows, and that their passing will be just as "unremarked as the path of any nameless sisterworld" (McCarthy 181). Already, it is clear that the novel's naturalism manifests itself in a manner divergent from what traditionally would be expected in American literary naturalism.

McCarthy's narrator conveys the novel's naturalism in a very different manner from the narrators in the Border Trilogy. In the Trilogy, the narrators' portrayal of events is colored by a pervading pastoral melancholy. While melancholy certainly is evident in the text of The Road, the narrator's seemingly pessimistic outlook should be read as coldly realistic, given the post-apocalyptic setting. Indeed, in one of the novel's most purely naturalistic passages, McCarthy's narrator says that the nameless father and primary protagonist

saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it (TR 130).

This passage contains many of the elements of classical American literary naturalism as described by Donald Pizer in Twentieth-Century American Literary Naturalism: An Interpretation. Pizer notes that the "ideological core of American naturalism" is that imposing forces outside of humanity’s purview circumscribe individuals (6). This sense of circumscription is clearly evident in the way in which this passage invokes the myriad layers of naturalistic
influence that the novel's post-apocalyptic world imposes upon its protagonists: the coldness of the earth, the dimness of the sun, and the "crushing black vacuum" of outer space. Further, the classic naturalistic trope of human subjectivity reduced to animalistic instinct is enacted in the protagonists' reaction to the world's bleakness: they are merely "hunted animals." Barclay Owens's assertion that naturalistic novels convey a "prevailing mood of pessimistic determinism" (46) is borne out in The Road.⁷

The way in which the majority of humankind reacts to the catastrophe encapsulates the novel's purely naturalistic perspective. As the narrator notes, after the disaster the world was "soon to be largely populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes" (McCarthy TR 81) out of a perverted Darwinist necessity. The protagonists' encounter with a cannibal reinforces this manifestation of scientific naturalism. The narrator notes of the man that "this was the first human being other than the boy that he'd spoken to in more than a year. My brother at last. The reptilian calculations in those cold and shifting eyes...who has made of the world a lie every word" (TR 75). In the context of the novel, this man's cannibalism is transfigured from one of the most unimaginable acts to one born out of pure logic, "reptilian calculations." Indeed, the protagonists' moral choice not to stoop to the same level runs counter to a Darwinian survival imperative. The novel's rampant cannibalism is part of its extreme scientific naturalism.

Fate and survival in the novel also are described in terms of scientific naturalism. As Rune Graulund argues in "Fulcrums and Borderlands: A Desert Reading of Cormac McCarthy's The Road," the novel's universe is "entirely at the mercy of the Second Law of Thermodynamics

---

⁷ However, numerous exceptions exist. See Chapter 3.
(also known as the Law of Entropy), according to which... all energy will in time disperse and fizzle out. As the nameless man ponders near the conclusion of *The Road*, [it is] a world governed by regression" (60). As McCarthy's narrator speculates, in earth's return to primal lifelessness, perhaps "it would be possible at last to see how it was made. Oceans, mountains. The ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be. The sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular. The silence" (TR 274). Again, here is the clinical, detached language of scientific naturalism, "coldly secular" and thus impermeable to notions of providential determinism.

Barcley Owens asserts that one of the chief characteristics of American literary naturalism is "realism in speech and action, using regional dialects and historical details" (46), yet *The Road*, for all of its overtly naturalistic elements, would seem to refute Owens's assertion. After all, the novel's roots its very premise in what essentially is speculative science fiction, and the post-apocalyptic novel has long had a place in the science fiction aesthetic, as evidenced by such works as Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) and Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* (1957). Historical details are virtually nonexistent: McCarthy denies the reader a sense of either time or concrete place. Owens might question whether the novel is truly naturalistic on this basis. However, upon closer examination, the novel's science fiction elements actually complement its naturalism by providing McCarthy with the post-apocalyptic premise through which he expresses the novel’s naturalism.

Indeed, naturalistic writers long have utilized unfeasible or unrealistic scenarios as vehicles for naturalism. As Eric Carl Link points out, "It is not entirely accurate to claim that the American literary naturalists rejected the ‘excesses’ of romanticism...as Norris argues, in one sense it is the ‘excesses’ of romanticism that appeal to the naturalistic author the most. These
‘excesses’ allow for the building of ‘vast and terrible dramas’” (66). McCarthy's narrative strategy in *The Road* is similar to what Norris implements in his naturalistic works. Can a burned post-apocalyptic world be a more ideal setting for a naturalistic novel? In *The Road*, the catastrophic events that precede the novel's plot blow away the chaff of social niceties, of government, and economy, baring the most primal central issues of American literary naturalism. We see survival of the fittest taken to an extreme in the novel's rampant cannibalism, and the claustrophobic sense of humankind circumscribed by instinct and vast forces beyond their control cannot be more evident than in the aftermath of Armageddon. What Norris and the classic turn-of-the-century naturalists understood is that, as the novelist Junot Díaz observed in a recent speech at Georgetown University on April 5, 2011, documentary realism ultimately is a poor strategy for conveying the extremes of the human experience (Diaz). As McCarthy's narrator notes, the apocalypse facilitates revelation: "the frailty of everything revealed at last. Old and troubling issues resolved into nothingness and night. The last instance of a thing takes the class with it. Turns out the light and is gone" (TR 28). By invoking a science fiction post-apocalyptic mode, McCarthy is able to construct a naturalistic "petri dish" in which he condenses the genre's most central elements. These include the core themes of naturalistic drama, such as the fall of the individual of great potential, the inability of successful individuals to adapt to naturalistic circumstances, and the problem of knowledge in a naturalistic world.

*The Road* adheres to what Donald Pizer describes as the tenets of naturalistic tragedy. In *Twentieth-Century American Literary Naturalism: An Interpretation*, Pizer observes that

---

8 Diaz’s speech took place at The 2011 Lannan Spring Literary Symposium and Festival: Writing Dangerously in Immigrant America—Violence Politics, Diaspora Histories and the Poetics of Survival on April 5, 2011 at Georgetown University.
naturalistic novels often observe the rules of classic Aristotelian drama but warps them to fit the thematics of naturalism (NI 6). The first of these tenets is also the one most evident in *The Road*. Pizer writes that "the naturalistic tragic hero is a figure whose potential for growth is evident but who fails to develop because of the circumstances of his life" (NI 6). The text embodies the nameless father in a way that emphasizes this first element. The father is intelligent, resourceful, moral, and deeply philosophical, but these qualities are insufficient to lift him and his son out of the burning wreckage of the novel's naturalistic world. Eventually, the man dies of what is presumably tuberculosis, his potential ultimately spent by the bleakness of his existence.

Just as the “hero” of a naturalistic work ultimately succumbs to the brutality of a naturalistic universe, so too do comparatively successful individuals fail to adapt to the "shifting, uncertain world" of naturalism (NI 7). It is difficult to trace particularly "successful" individuals in *The Road* because of humanity’s destruction. Highly successful before the apocalypse, humanity's inability to adapt to the overwhelmingly brutal naturalistic circumstances that come about following the catastrophe bears out the notion of its fatal inadaptability.

For both the individual of great potential and the successful but inflexible masses, there arises "the problem of knowledge" (NI 7). In an Aristotelian tragedy, the tragic hero may be unaware of the circumstances leading up to his fall, but ultimately experiences an epiphany that allows him to understand his tragic fate (NI 7). In a naturalistic novel, however, there is no guarantee of understanding. *The Road*'s protagonists do not know what caused the end of the world, only that there was "a long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" (TR 52). The "problem of knowledge" in *The Road* is that the man and his son are forced into dehumanizing circumstances of which their understanding is limited, but the man constantly
searches for understanding within himself to give depth to the vague world in which he and his son walk. As Pizer notes, in a naturalistic world "knowledge is now elusive, shifting, and perhaps even non-existent, except for solipsistic 'certainties,' but man's tragic fate is still to yearn for it" (NI 7). As we see in The Road, the man frequently addresses God and rages against his inability to understand his post-apocalyptic circumstances. He asks of God, “Are you there? he whispered. Will I see you at last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart?” (McCarthy TR 12).

Indeed, the protagonists ultimately are unable to comprehend the reasons behind their bleak existence. Rune Graulund observes that the novel embeds its narrative in "landscape whose meaning is [un]stable" (57). Indeed, the novel's gray, vague, washed-out landscape appears to resist definition. McCarthy frequently describes the man's surroundings in philosophical terms rather than in physical ones, saying "bedrock, this. The cold and the silence. The ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void...Everything uncoupled from its shoring. Unsupported in the ashen air. Sustained by a breath, trembling and brief” (TR 11). Here we are given a sense of the purposeless, aimless existence in the emptiness of the "late world," rather than a concrete description of the landscape. Where the landscape is described, it is as a palette of grays and browns. What color exists is present only in the man's recollections. This vague, washed-out aspect is deepened by the complete lack of place names and other locators. However, as we have seen from the novel's scientific naturalism, although McCarthy denies the reader convenient referents and obscures the work’s setting, the impact of the world on the protagonists is direct and inescapable.
Despite *The Road*'s desolation, beneath its narrative runs a current of romanticism. Graulund asserts that in the novel there is “no space for romanticism of any kind” (64), but in fact romanticism does exist in *The Road* through the dreams of the protagonists, although no romantic elements are evident in their physical world. Rather, they manifest themselves in the form of the dreams and memories of the father, particularly in his idealization of his childhood, and so *The Road*'s romantic subtext stands in stark contrast to the brutality of the novel’s corporeal world. McCarthy's portrayal of romanticism thus diverges significantly from that of the Border Trilogy. The Trilogy grounds such elements in physical reality, although often interpreted idealistically by the narrator and protagonists. Further, the Trilogy's romanticism often serves to temper the novels' otherwise brutally naturalistic universe. *The Road*'s naturalism, by contrast, refuses any such alleviation. In the context of an unadulterated Darwinist ethic, wistful memories can serve only to distract from the business of survival by making dwelling in the world of dreams seem like a desirable alternative to reality.

McCarthy’s narrator periodically interrupts *The Road*'s chronology with the father’s recollections and dreams of the bygone world. Very early on, McCarthy establishes the man's powerful nostalgia, as he daydreams of a scene from his boyhood:

There was a lake a mile from his uncle's farm where he and his uncle used to go for firewood...yellow leaves. They left their shoes on the warm painted boards and dragged the boat up onto the beach...the lake dark glass and windowlights coming on along the shore. A radio somewhere. Neither of them had spoken a word. This was the perfect day of his childhood. This is the day to shape the days upon (TR 12-13).
The warmth and color present in this scene is startling, given the desolation that bookends it. The man's dreams are equally vivid, painting a picture of a world that will never be again: "In the nights sometimes now he'd wake in the black and freezing waste out of softly colored worlds of human love, the songs of birds, the sun" (272). At the same time, the man recognizes that he dreams of these are "things that he'd no longer any way to think about at all" (McCarthy TR 129-130). Indeed, in a naturalistic context, the lushness of his dreams must be viewed as suspicious.

The man recognizes that such dreams ultimately dull the mind and beguile the senses under naturalistic circumstances that require undivided attention. For the man, "[T]he right dreams...were dreams of peril and all else was the call of languor and death...but he was learning to wake himself from just such siren worlds. Lying there in the dark with the uncanny taste of a peach from some phantom orchard fading in his mouth" (McCarthy TR18). These romantic specters are detrimental because they encourage the man to dwell in perfumed fantasy worlds rather than in the cold, unyielding factuality of a naturalistic universe. As the man tells his son, "When your dreams are of some world that never was or of some world that never will be and you are happy again then you will have given up...and you cant give up" (TR 189). Even more perilous in the overwhelmingly hopeless milieu of the novel is the powerful longing for these nostalgic visions. If the protagonists allow the world of dreams to become more appealing than reality, survival becomes a burden rather than a necessity.

Dreams and nostalgia have no place within a Darwinian survival imperative such as the one that the protagonists follow in The Road. The narrator observes that the dreams the man experiences are "so rich in color. How else would death call you?" (McCarthy 21). The danger of such dreams is that they become more important than reality, at which point death becomes
paramount to life. In a naturalist survival of the fittest ethic, such hallucinations cannot be permitted. In one of the tensest scenes in the novel, the man and his son visit the man's childhood home. The pair enter the home and it becomes clear that the man is in danger of losing his grip on reality and sliding into the world of dreams. The man feels "the pinholes from tacks that held stockings forty years ago...The boy watched him. Watched shapes claiming him that he could not see. We should go, Papa, he said. Yes, the man said. But he didn't" (McCarthy TR 26).

Fortunately, the man returns to reality for the sake of his son, but this scene is illustrative of the dangers of straying from the tangible in a naturalistic world.

As dangerous as these fantasies can be, McCarthy also suggests that they are necessary to give the boy something to hope for. Throughout the novel, the man continually reinforces the notion that he and his son are "the good guys" and are "carrying the fire," a decidedly romantic and sentimental notion which nonetheless serves to make survival a meaningful task for the pair rather than simply going through the motions of subsistence. When the man finds a flare gun on an abandoned ship, survival logic would dictate that they use it only as a matter of necessity. However, the man agrees to let the boy shoot the flare gun, "In the dark. It could be like a celebration. Like a celebration? Yes" (McCarthy TR 241). From a practical standpoint, shooting the flare gun at night would not only waste a flare but also potentially attract unwanted attention. However, to do so would be to deny the boy one of the few moments of innocent, genuine wonder that occur in the novel. As Graulund notes, "[T]he man also realises, however, if he does not allow his son to fire the gun, the outcome may in the long run be equally fatal" (74). If the boy cannot appreciate small wonders such as the beauty of an exploding flare, the man fears that "the boy will eventually not even be able to celebrate that greatest wonder of all, that of life
itself” (Graulund 74). As the man himself reiterates, his job is to protect the boy and ensure his long-term survival. If the boy wearies of life, then the man has failed in his task. By the same token, the man must establish moral guidelines for the pair in a fundamentally amoral world.

At first glance, *The Road* may seem out of place in a study that purports to examine naturalism in Cormac McCarthy's Western novels. *The Road* does indeed share many surface characteristics with the genre of speculative fiction rather than with the Western. The novel contains no cowboys, horses, or any of the other props of the classic frontier Western. Indeed, "neither the frontier nor that distinctly American nostalgia of ‘being on the road’ are particularly helpful categories to force onto The Road” (Graulund 67). However, despite its nontraditional setting, *The Road* can be considered a Western, albeit stripped down to its fundamental elements. Rune Graulund concurs, observing that "*The Road* can be read in terms of a prototypical Western, one whittled down to its pure essentials: a man and his boy, trying to make it across the frontier by fighting their way out of the claws of the bad guys, armed with just one gun but a set of morals firmer than any hero of the Old West” (65). That the protagonists' morality is so ironclad is perhaps the most redemptive aspect of the novel. Ashley Kunsa, on the other hand, asserts that "the father commits acts that, by our present standards, if not immoral and unethical, are at least reprehensible" (59). Kunsa indulges in a form of imaginative presentism; judging the characters by our present standards is futile because their experiences are vastly different from anything we could ever encounter. Indeed, despite the horrors they experience, the man, and particularly the boy, remain exceptionally moral by any standard. While the novel's circumstances are considerably more brutal than any Western since *Blood Meridian*, this study demonstrates how compatible its genre is with the themes of American literary naturalism.
Given the novel's status as a Western, it is important to address that prototypical Western setting: the desert. It is with this landscape that Graulund's article primarily is concerned. He asserts that the fact of absence defines the desert. Given that *The Road* encapsulates absences of life, of hope, of free will, Graulund's reading has significant merit. Further, as we have seen in *Blood Meridian*, the desert is an incredibly harsh environment that is highly conducive to naturalistic circumstances. As Graulund notes, the desert of the novel dictates the course the protagonists must take: "every choice the protagonists of The Road face...can in some way or other lead back to the ultimate question of *deserta*, of absence. The problem of the desert, in other words, is the barren ground upon which the central questions of the novel rest" (58). The desert is a space in which human free will and subjectivity are reduced to the choice between desperate subsistence or death. Any moral decision the pair make must be in the context of the novel's dead landscape. In this way, the desert acts as "a kind of fulcrum, a borderland" which leverages the narratives of both *The Road* and *Blood Meridian*.

Just as the monotonous desert landscape erases human signification in *The Road*, so too does the apocalypse precipitate a delexification, in which books, music, and names are effaced, perhaps permanently. In her article, "'Maps of the World in Its Becoming': Post-Apocalyptic Naming in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," Ashley Kunsa makes the point that, in biblical terms, the world is returning to a sort of Edenic namelessness. As McCarthy writes, "perhaps in the world's destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made" (TR 275). Whereas Kunsa reads this as a return to potentiality and to a chance to remake the world, McCarthy's abolition of names is actually a result of the narrator's nihilistic sense that there is no point in naming anything, for nothing will ever be as it once was.
Kunsa writes that, as a result of the catastrophe, language in the road "has been returned to its rudiments" (58). Indeed, McCarthy's protagonists speak mostly in monosyllables, only expanding their speech when their attention is arrested by subjects outside of the business of survival. As Kunsa notes, "The Road often relies on pronouns for character identification. Short by nature, pronouns allow McCarthy to emphasize the characters' deeds by drawing away as little attention as possible from action verbs" (61). Clipped dialogue and direct action verbs give the text a sense of immediacy broken up only by the man's melancholy recollections.

In a naturalistic world, art and knowledge outside of the purview of survival become useless. The man whittles his son a flute, with which the boy plays "a formless music for the age to come. Or perhaps the last music on earth called up from out of the ashes of its ruin" (McCarthy TR 77). The music created in the novel's dead world is just as insignificant as the music that came before. Ultimately, the boy finds little coherence or utility in the music he creates with the flute and throws it away, a move that the father accepts without question (McCarthy TR 159), acknowledging the futility of art in the novel.

More important to the novel is the way in which names and referents are erased by the novel's naturalistic, post-apocalyptic circumstances. As McCarthy's narrator chronicles,

[T]he world [is] shrinking down around a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever (McCarthy TR 88-89).
As the extinct elements of the late world fade from memory, so too does the utility of their names. Categories such as "colors" and "the names of birds" are not germane to the preservation of life in a world in which they no longer exist. Indeed, proper names as a whole no longer have utility in the context of the novel. The world is so sparsely populated and the essentials of survival so bare that only the most basic of referents are necessary for communication.

As I noted earlier, Kunsa makes the point that pronouns are used almost exclusively for the categorization of individuals within the text. Indeed, the protagonists are known only as "the boy," "the son," "the man," and "the father." The only character that possesses a proper name is an old man named Ely whom they encounter on the road. However, even Ely admits that his name is falsely given, and the narrator refers to him only as "the old man." As Kunsa notes, "All that the father knows for sure of this stranger is that he is an 'old man'; hence this is the most accurate and truthful thing to call him and the name that the narrative relies on" (60). Proper names are an affectation when the novel's naturalistic world limits individuality to raw factuality. Ely is an old man, the boy is a son, and the man is a father, and these are the only designations the characters (or the reader) need to know.

This reconfiguration of naming also extends to the way in which McCarthy deals with place names. Kunsa points out that, although we are given virtually no place names in the story, it is not as though the characters themselves do not know these names. Indeed, the man and the boy follow a tattered roadmap, and both understand their geographic location. Rather, "The narrative's strategy is actually one of withholding place names, a provocative rhetorical move that forces the reader to imagine new possibilities, to think not solely in terms of the world that was, but also of the world that will be" (Kunsa 62). While McCarthy does withhold names as a
rhetorical strategy, I assert that the "world that will be" in the context of the novel is not, as Kunsa argues, a new Eden ripe with new linguistic possibilities. McCarthy gives no hint that the state of the world will ever improve and offers no guarantee that the boy or the family that adopts him will survive far beyond the scope of the novel. Rather, naturalistic necessity eliminates the need for nostalgic, obsolete referents that have no bearing on the present struggle for survival. McCarthy limits descriptions of particular places to their relevance to basic human necessity. Kunsa notes that names are not necessary because "place is calculated by the characters and related to the reader in terms of food and warmth" (63). This is particularly true of constructions that were abstract human concepts to begin with: states, governments, economies. However, this is not to paint McCarthy as a nihilist. Meaning in a naturalistic world, and in The Road in particular, is based on the imperative of survival rather than on more ephemeral concepts, such as vocation or prosperity, which are no longer relevant. Kunsa notes that "as the past world itself becomes meaningless, The Road suggests, the names of the past become meaningless as well...the point here is that the nature of the meaning has changed: the method of naming McCarthy uses offers a refiguring of meaning in the language of the new, post-apocalyptic world" (63). Language has become purely communicative rather than expressive, as it is used by the protagonists to exchange pertinent information related to survival, rather than for creative self-expression. The man sums up the pointlessness of expression in such a world, asking himself, "What will you say? A living man spoke these lines? He sharpened a quill with his small pen knife to scribe these things in sloe or lampblack? At some reckonable and entabled moment? He is coming to steal my eyes. To seal my mouth with dirt" (McCarthy TR 261). There
will be no one left to read what the man writes, and with his inevitable death his thoughts will be effaced forever. Such, McCarthy argues, is the fate of human expression in a naturalistic world.

Similarly, McCarthy's narrator steers away from ascribing meaning to the aftermath of catastrophe. As I discuss earlier, McCarthy resists describing in any detail the causal nature of the disaster, noting that there was only "A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" (TR 52). However, upon closer examination, one can see the thread of environmental consciousness that underpins all of McCarthy's Western novels. In his article, "Borrowed Time, Borrowed World, and Borrowed Eyes: Care, Ruin and Vision in McCarthy's The Road and Harrison's Ecocriticism," Ben De Bruyn productively reads the novel in naturalistic terms, saying that The Road can be likened to "the post-industrial 'garden of ashes'" (778) rather than the burned Garden of Eden that Kunsa posits.

De Bruyn notes that The Road is distinct from other post-apocalyptic novels such as Mary Shelley's The Last Man, in which humanity is destroyed while nature eventually recovers, creating a new Garden of Eden. De Bruyn points out that in The Road, the devastation of nature is total, and even if life remained, the novel calls into question the real possibility of life following an Armageddon of such scope. Indeed, naturalistically, "the novel emphasizes that there is no other planet to replace it. Even if there were spaceships and people to help, the father tells the boy, escaping planets would not help...we are not only living in a 'borrowed world', in short, but also on a borrowed earth" (780). McCarthy indicates the necessity for humankind to care for a world which is, after all, not ours, but only borrowed.

Further, De Bruyn writes that in The Road, "[T]he devastation that destroyed the world has not simply returned to us an unkempt garden. The novel does not simply evoke the ruin of
human stewardship, but the ruin of nature itself” (778). Indeed, the unnamed disaster that devastates the planet reveals the way in which the catastrophe has merged the fate of man and nature. Humans, although still in existence, are functionally extinct. With no possibility of plant life or animals to sustain them, humanity inevitably will die out. As De Bruyn notes, human constructions such as skyscrapers have become undifferentiated from the landscape. McCarthy describes what De Bruyn calls the pastoral "middle landscape": "charred...trees stretching away on every side. Ash moving over the road...A burned house in a clearing and beyond that a reach of meadowlands stark and gray...Everything as it once had been save faded and weathered” (TR 7). McCarthy gives no preference or differentiation to human constructs over nature, or to nature over the artificial creations of humanity.

Although the novel gives no specifics about the nature of the disaster, De Bruyn suggests that humanity is to blame for the apocalypse. Despite the lack of specificity regarding what brought about this universal ruin, De Bruyn asserts that "the critique of mechanical consumption is nevertheless present, as the evocation of the industrial garden of ashes already indicated” (780). Indeed, several of the man's recollections seem to foreshadow the devastation to come. When he recalls "the perfect day of his childhood," he recounts that there was at "the edge of the lake a riprap of twisted stumps, gray and weathered" and "a dead perch lolling belly up in the clear water" (McCarthy TR 13), both of which could be ascribed to human influence on the environment.

Even the man’s pastoral nostalgia contains ominous undertones that preface the apocalypse. The man recalls how, at his son's age, he witnessed his older relatives burning out a den of snakes. The narrator says that "the man poured gasoline on them and burned them alive,
having no remedy for evil but only for the image of it as they conceived it to be...they were mute
there were no screams of pain and the men watched them burn and writhe and blacken in just
such silence themselves" (McCarthy TR 189). The imagery in this passage directly parallels
McCarthy's descriptions of the scorched, twisted corpses of human beings after the disaster,
"figures half mired in the blacktop, clutching themselves, mouths howling" (TR 190). This goes
back to Guillemin's concept of "aesthetic leveling," in which human beings are brought into
alignment with other forms of life. As De Bruyn notes, the men that burn the snakes, in some
sense, "are burning themselves. For humans and snakes are not that different, as their similar
'silence' demonstrates" (781). In this assertion, De Bruyn returns the novel to its core ethos of
American literary naturalism. The disaster eliminates the man-made construct of human
exceptionalism, as humans are scorched without anthropocentric preferentiality or prejudice.

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* is perhaps the most clearly naturalistic novel published in
recent years. This novel unifies many of the seemingly disparate generic elements in McCarthy's
Western novels and demonstrates how each of them contribute to McCarthy's naturalistic milieu.
It combines McCarthy's romanticism, his pessimism, his fascination with the Western genre, and
his nascent environmental consciousness into a tableau that undergirds and reinforces his
naturalistic themes. Like *Blood Meridian*, it serves as a dire warning of the devastation
humankind is capable of inflicting upon itself and the extent to which humans will obey the
Darwinist survival imperative in a naturalistic world.
Epilogue: Naturalism Lives

Donald Pizer asks, "Is naturalism dead?" in his essay, "Is Naturalism Dead? A Further Inquiry" (391). As my close reading of Cormac McCarthy's contemporary Western novels has demonstrated, American literary naturalism is present in contemporary literature and can be used as a means of expressing a humanistic ethos. Cormac McCarthy is among the world's most important living authors, and the fact that his works continually demonstrate the generic markers of naturalism indicates the genre’s continuing value as a means to understand the contemporary novel. Indeed, the way in which McCarthy is able to mold naturalism to address such modern problems as human destruction of the environment, the decline of farming and ranching, and the questionable morality of violent conflict speaks to the utility and richness of the genre as well as its flexibility, all the while maintaining its core philosophy of determinism and scientific elements, along with its ability to express the extremes of the human condition.

Although my study of American literary naturalism in McCarthy's Western novels has reached its terminus, my project suggests a number of critical avenues many scholars, including me, can take to expand an understanding of the genre, as well as its scope of application. Indeed, McCarthy's early novels all display aspects of American literary naturalism, particularly his novels *Suttree*, *Child of God*, and *Outer Dark*, which pair Southern Gothic tropes with aspects of American literary naturalism. McCarthy's first four novels have great scholarly potential for the study of naturalism today.

Naturalism typically has been confined by critics to a core of American white male writers at the turn of the twentieth century and, while McCarthy is himself a white American writer, the flexibility with which he applies the genre to his novels proves that naturalism need
not be restricted to its well-worn critical precincts. There are a plethora of writers to whose work a naturalistic reading may be applied productively, opening up fresh critical avenues in both naturalism studies and the critical corpus of these authors.

As I note throughout my thesis, Eric Carl Link advocates for the expansion of naturalism historically, extending to both the novels of the early nineteenth century and contemporaneous works. While some critical work has been done in nineteenth-century naturalism prior to the genre's traditional period of the decades leading up to the twentieth century, the period that extends from the early twentieth century to the present is relatively bare of productive criticism. Donald Pizer begins to bridge the critical gap in his *Twentieth-Century American Literary Naturalism: An Interpretation* by exploring several novels of the late 1940s and early 1950s, but even so, criticism in these periods remains sparse. Much work remains to be done in charting the genre's transformation from its infancy in the nineteenth century to its contemporary maturity in McCarthy's novels.

In many ways, Paul Civello picks up Pizer's torch, conducting examinations of novels outside of the traditional purview of American literary naturalism. In *American Literary Naturalism and Its Twentieth-Century Transformations: Frank Norris, Ernest Hemingway, Don DeLillo*, Civello does important scholarly work in moving naturalism from the novels of Frank Norris in the early twentieth century to DeLillo's modernist novels in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. While Civello's work is a crucial step in expanding naturalist discourse, the only novelist whom Civello studies between Norris and DeLillo is Ernest Hemingway. While applying naturalism to so central a figure as Hemingway has significant scholarly utility, neither Civello nor Pizer account for the thirty years between Hemingway and contemporary novelists.
such as DeLillo and McCarthy. Neither has significant critical space been allocated to studying the works of William Faulkner from the perspective of naturalism, although its elements are demonstrable within his novels. Further, the limited examinations of naturalism stretching from the Depression era to World War II lack depth when compared to the genre's "classic" turn-of-the-century period.

There is also important work to be done in mapping naturalism onto works by writers outside of the genre's traditional demographic of middle-class white American men. Several female contemporaries of the classic naturalists (Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, and Jack London) have been overlooked because of the perceived masculinity of the genre. These writers include Edith Wharton—whose novels Ethan Frome (1911) and The House of Mirth (1905) display both the pessimism and determinism that characterize much of American literary naturalism—and Kate Chopin, whose pessimistic realism in novels such as The Awakening borders on naturalism. The list certainly can be expanded to include numerous other women’s writing in the naturalistic mode, such as the works of Joyce Carol Oates.

I believe that the works of central figures in African American literature also will prove to be fertile ground for naturalistic readings. In particular, Toni Morrison's work displays characteristics of naturalism that entwine with her interest in African American femininity and masculinity. In Morrison's seminal novel, Beloved (1987), the African American protagonists are confronted by the psychological hold that slavery still has over them, as well as the way in which they were rendered powerless under slavery. Writers from the Harlem Renaissance, such as Richard Wright and Ann Petry, also write in a racially aware naturalistic mode.
Naturalism can be further "worlded" to include writers outside of America and Europe. While I refer to the genre specifically as American literary naturalism in the context of my examination of McCarthy's novels, a Caribbean literary naturalism can be conceptualized easily. Indeed, the omnipresent colonial powers’ lingering deterministic impact on those native to the Caribbean lends itself to a naturalistic reading. Even poets such as Kamau Brathwaite write of colonialism's negative, deterministic impact on language and culture and use poetry and prose as a means of breaking this hold.

As Civello notes, modernists such as Don DeLillo also merit critical attention from a naturalistic perspective. Although DeLillo is not as blatantly naturalistic as Cormac McCarthy, he similarly displays the often pernicious effects of technology on individual signification. In his novel *White Noise*, DeLillo depicts the way in which the protagonist, Jack Gladney, copes with his exposure to the "airborne toxic event" that eventually will kill him. The Event is an inescapable force created not by natural laws, but by human technology. Rather than placing an emphasis on natural laws, DeLillo examines the determinism inherent in the social and technological facets of modern American life.

It is clear that naturalism displays great scholarly potential. Strict periodization by critics, although important in terms of historicizing literary works, has nonetheless inhibited some of these critical investigations. As we have seen, Cormac McCarthy removes the genre from its traditional temporal and thematic restrictions and grafts it onto his contemporary Western novels as a means of addressing modern naturalistic forces such as technology, the death of the pastoral lifestyle, human destruction of the environment, and the tension between optimistic romanticism and pessimistic naturalism. Naturalism likewise can be applied productively to any number of
novelists in a variety of racial contexts and time periods. My study answers Pizer's question: “Is Naturalism Dead?” American literary naturalism's survival in the world of literary criticism holds great promise. Through the works of writers such as Cormac McCarthy, naturalism lives on.
Works Cited


De Bruyn, Ben. "Borrowed Time, Borrowed World and Borrowed Eyes: Care, Ruin and Vision in McCarthy's *The Road* and Harrison's *Ecocriticism*." *English Studies: A*


Norris, Frank and Donald Pizer, ed. *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco: An Authoritative


