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Matthew Dale Herman
The University of Montana

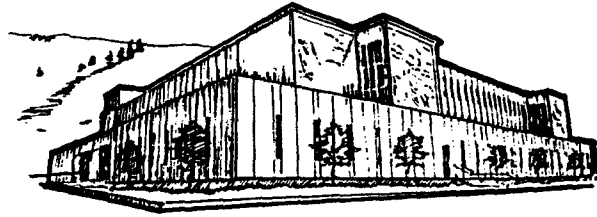
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THE "IGNIS FATUUS" OF AUTHENTICITY:
STEPHEN CRANE, CORMAC MCCARTHY, MICHAEL ONDAATJE
AND THE PROBLEM OF CAPTURING THE WEST

by

Matthew Dale Herman

B.A., University of Washington, 1990

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of English

University of Montana

1993

Approved by

Veronica Stewart
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Herman, Matthew Dale, M.A., December 1993 English

The "Ignis Fatuus" of Authenticity: Stephen Crane, Cormac McCarthy, Michael Ondaatje, and the Problem of Capturing the West

Director: Professor Veronica Stewart 

By examining texts of Stephen Crane, Cormac McCarthy, and Michael Ondaatje through close theoretical readings, this thesis concludes that capturing the "authentic" West is an irredeemably problematic endeavor. The "authentic" West, what is was and what it is, emerges from these texts as an absent entity, a deceptive and inapproachable goal.

The first chapter examines three Stephen Crane Western short stories with particular attention paid to the theories of Jean Baudrillard and Guy Debord. Through a reading that demonstrates the "hyperreal" and "spectacular" nature of Crane's vision of the West, the traditional approach to these stories as parodic subversions of the dime-novel is contested. Rather than revealing the West in and of itself, these stories show how the West and its dime-novel representations conflate and exist in a coextensive relation.

The second chapter discusses Cormac McCarthy's Western novel *Blood Meridian* as an example of what Linda Hutcheon terms "historiographic metafiction." Unlike the historical novel which endows the past with a high degree of specificity and verifiability, *Blood Meridian* problematizes such a project through a self-reflexive questioning of the positivism so endemic to traditional historiography. Through a reliance on the ideas of Peter Brooks and Hayden White, this essay examines the novel's threadbare plot to reveal a suspicion about what it means to narrativize and moralize the past.

The third chapter explores Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* by examining the tension that emerges from the ironic juxtaposition of appropriated documentary material and Ondaatje's own fictive embellishments of the Kid's past. The tension which informs the text stems from a scepticism about being conclusive about the past. Again drawing on the work of Hutcheon, this essay demonstrates how Ondaatje's text maneuvers between the possibility and impossibility of harnessing the past into a single, conclusive portrait. The "authentic" portrait of the Kid not only remains absent from the text, but "authenticity" itself becomes severely problematized as a goal capable of being reached.

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At a certain dry goods store in a certain Montana town, every purchase receipt is inscribed with the slogan, "Keeping the West Western." People come to this place to purchase authentic Western wear, to endow their appearances with a particularly Western flair. The slogan attests to the store's commitment to Westernness just as it more subtly reveals the desire of the store's clientele for the authentically Western "look." Yet the slogan raises a series of questions. What would happen if this store stopped "keeping the West Western?" Would the authentic West also cease to be? Would the West tragically spin away from its mooring in reality if the commodification of its authentic look were brought to a halt? These questions might affront out common-sense. Authenticity, we may say, is a cultural given. It is not something which must be maintained; it simply is. It springs from a region's particular conditions of life. This particular slogan, however, suggests otherwise. It implicitly expresses a concern that the West might become something other than Western. It expresses a concern for the malleability of the Western image, that the authentic West does not exist as a cultural given but emerges from and is perpetuated by the cunning of image-makers who produce and sell to the world what we take to be the real, the genuine, the authentic.

Scholars who write and think about the West express

these same concerns. Simply stated, they recognize the protean nature of the authentic as a problem, a problem with potentially dangerous implications. When something receives the stamp of "authenticity," it is immediately granted an authority that, like the power of a sacred word, cannot be questioned. The hegemony of the authentic object extends far into realms of political, economic, and ideological implication. Books are bought and sold, movies attended, restaurants patronized, and *Weltanschauungen* created and destroyed, just to mention a few possibilities, and much of what influences these transactions owes a debt to a general cultural belief that the genuinely authentic exists. Much stands to be gained and lost as a result of how and what a society thinks of the authentic. For those who feel firsthand the effects of how the world views the "real" West, the question of authenticity looms large. The real conditions of real peoples' lives remain tethered to the implications of how the West is represented and received as "authentic."

I offer these preliminary thoughts as a thin sketch to background the essays that follow, for they are the subject of a related but different study. Instead of probing the social implications resulting from the desire for and the belief in the absolute power that lies behind the stamp of authenticity, this thesis explores the problems that arise when authenticity is either sought or claimed. Neither a strict regional study nor a social analysis, this thesis takes up a theoretical discussion based on the difficulties

of portraying, that is locating and/or producing, the authentic in literature or narrative. The reason for placing this study in the West stems from a casual observation: representing the authentic West is not only big business today; it is a pursuit rigorously engaged by a large and growing community of regional writers and historians. The West has always fascinated our cultural imagination, and the fascination continues strongly today, where it very often takes the form of a revisionism based on the hopeful premise that the "real" West not only exists but stands to be revealed by scholarship and aesthetic practice. This thesis does not question these efforts; rather, it simply seeks to highlight some of the problems inherently connected with the project of studying the West through literature.

This study focuses on the Western writing of three authors--Stephen Crane, Cormac McCarthy, and Michael Ondaatje--all of whom take up the question of authenticity. Through close theoretical readings, this project studies the concern for "knowing" the authentic West that these authors write into their texts, a concern they all manifest as a problem. As these texts demonstrate, "knowing" the West--the real West--is indeed a problem, a problem predominantly epistemological in nature. In other words, these writers all express doubt about where and how to locate the authentic and, in some cases, whether or not the authentic can be located at all. The problem of authenticity undergoes a severe treatment by these writers who question the very

possibility of ever harnessing the real West in and of itself. To appropriate a phrase from Cormac McCarthy, the real West exists for these writers as a "shimmering surmise," a nascent possibility flickering on the horizon of epistemological certainty. This horizon surrounds all the texts treated in these essays, but as I hope to demonstrate, it nevertheless recedes upon approach. Harnessing the authentic West remains more a doubtful than hopeful enterprise for these writers.

The first chapter treats three Stephen Crane Western stories--"The Blue Hotel," "One Dash--Horses," and "A Man and Some Others"--stories that expose Crane's epistemological nihilism and his resistance to the notion of authenticity. This essay confronts and rejects a traditional field of Crane scholarship that posits a view of Crane as a literary parodist. Supporters of this view claim that Crane mocks the dime-novel Western in order to represent the real West as he saw it during his four-month excursion to the West and Mexico in 1895. Previous criticism tends to herald Crane as a Realist writer who debunks the myth of the West through parodic unworkings of "inaccurate" pulp fiction. This claim implicitly maintains Crane's belief in an authentic Western reality. Yet from the three stories treated in this essay, nothing like the "authentic" West emerges.

While I contend that Crane draws from the dime-novel, I assert that the result is anything but parody. Crane's West

emerges not as a real place distinct from its cultural representations but as a place intimately connected to such representations. In "One Dash--Horses," Crane fashions a high-speed chase across the desert which ends in the protagonist's chance-rescue by the Mexican calvary. Crane incorporates a stock chase-scene taken from the dime-novel and has his protagonist allude to the ironic intersection of his experience and a conventional dime-novel trope. More ironic yet, Crane bases this story largely on autobiographical detail. The chase and rescue really happened to Crane during his Western trip. Not a simple parody of the dime-novel then, "One Dash--Horses" marks a conflation of a dime-novel representation and a real experience.

A similar conflation emerges in Crane's famous story, "The Blue Hotel." My reading demonstrates how Crane complicates the possibility of assimilating the West, that is, getting to know the West in and of itself. The Swede, the story's protagonist and new-comer to the West, attempts to "fit in," but rather than assimilating (into) the culture, he shapes it in such a way that the town he visits becomes coextensive with the Wild West he expected to find there, the Wild West he read about in dime-novels. Crane's text again demonstrates how reality and its representation--no matter how hackneyed or "unreal"--nevertheless can overlap; the narrative testifies to the infinite mutability of place,

divesting the West of the level of authenticity the Swede sought to discover.

Drawing from Jean Baudrillard's essay "The Precession of Simulacra" (in *Simulations*), this essay posits that Crane's West exists as a "hyperreal" place, a place without origin or reality but one always already constructed according to the blueprints its previous representations impose upon it. As the example of the Swede demonstrates, Crane's stories show how the West lacks an indigenous or autonomous reality. Crane's West is always generated by what one expects, desires, or perceives it to be; it is in a word "hyperauthentic." For Crane, nothing inheres beneath the representations of the West, no truth or falseness. As Crane's narrator in "The Blue Hotel" suggests, the West can "change upon the instant."

In "A Man and Some Others," Crane's narrator enacts such a change. He shifts the story's desert landscape into a peculiarly histrionic setting. Crane renders the opening and closing scenes of this story in the form of a stage. Such a move shatters our willing suspension of disbelief; we attend to the representational quality of the story's events. Crane pushes us to read the story as if we were watching a play. I argue that this story marks Crane's penchant for "spectacularization," a term I borrow from Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*. Crane is not parodying the tendency to refer to the Western desert as a stage but playing it up as it were. By casting the whole text within

the frame of a symbolic curtain's rise and fall, Crane enacts a "moving away" from the West as a real place, divesting the events of the story of any firm grounding in reality by grounding them in the make-believe world of drama. I then go on to discuss the tendency of Crane's narrators to offer perceptions instead of knowledge. Crane's narrators perceive the West; they make no claim to "know" it. As readers we gain access to various images of the West, images tethered to the whims of a narrator's imagination, images that in no way approach the West in and of itself.

Of the authors treated in this thesis, Crane is the most sceptical regarding the possibility of authenticity. For him reality remains a cultural construct and enjoys no autonomy apart from that with which the imagination endows it; it remains "hyperreal" and "spectacular." In the second chapter of this study, I explore Cormac McCarthy's brand of scepticism as it emerges in his novel *Blood Meridian, Or the Evening Redness in the West*. In this novel McCarthy takes up the real past of real bounty-hunters operating along the Texas-Mexico border in the mid-nineteenth century. Through an incorporation of historical documents and first-hand accounts, McCarthy endows his narrative with an air of historical verifiability. Unlike Crane, McCarthy harkens to the reality of the West--of the real past of the West--as a verifiable possibility. Yet at the same time, McCarthy goes on to unwork this possibility.

In short, this essays seeks to expose the doubt McCarthy seems to hold concerning our capacity to harness an "authentic" account of the West's real past. As an example of what Linda Hutcheon terms "historiographic metafiction," *Blood Meridian* enacts a severe questioning of the positivism so endemic to the traditional historiographic enterprise. Unlike the historical novel which seeks to affirm the reality of the past, "historiographic metafiction" as described in Hutcheon's "Historiographic Metafiction: 'The Pastime of Past Time'" (in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*) works to question the verifiability of the real past through a simultaneous installation and ironic subversion of various intertexts, both fictional and historiographic. The nature of historiographic metafiction is essentially contradictory according to Hutcheon. It harkens to the authority traditionally claimed by historiography just as it questions this authority through a self-reflexive posturing of its own historiographic interests.

This essay posits that McCarthy manifests this suspicion about authenticity primarily in the very form he confers on the narrative, a form this is essentially plotless. Drawing on Peter Brooks' theory of plot as delineated in "Incredulous Narration: *Absalom, Absalom!*" (in *Reading for the Plot*) and Hayden White's theory of history writing as found in "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality" (in *The Content of the Form*), I conclude that McCarthy's narrator's refusal to plot and moralize the past reveals a

deep suspicion of the way history is written today. Though McCarthy is clearly writing fiction and not a serious history, his treatment of the past as an "ignus fatuus belated upon the ground" questions the hope that the "authentic" past stands to be revealed.

From Michael Ondaatje's long narrative poem, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, a similar suspicion emerges. By offering the past primarily through the Kid's point of view, Ondaatje pushes his reader to imagine that this text is Billy the Kid's autobiographical reflections of his own life and times. In addition, Ondaatje incorporates a variety of intertexts--first-hand reminiscences of the Kid's acquaintances, photographs, an excerpt from a comic-book portrayal, as well as his own fictive embellishments--that testify to the entire panoply of the Kid's career as an historical, mythic, and fictive presence in the cultural imagination. Just as with McCarthy, Ondaatje installs a degree of verifiability into his text. These documents and photographs and the framework of an (ostensible) autobiography call to degrees of authenticity and authority.

Yet (again, there is ever a "yet" with these writers) Ondaatje frequently unworks the authority assigned to these elements. Through self-reflexive gestures Ondaatje calls to the textuality of his own work. On the very last page of *The Collected Works* stands a photograph of a young Ondaatje clad in gunfighter regalia. This photograph harkens to Ondaatje's role as author of this ostensible Billy the Kid autobiography

just as it shows how the Kid's "Wild West" legend affected his own childhood experience. In a sense, Ondaatje authors the Kid just as the Kid authors Ondaatje; the process of interrogating the past emerges as a process of mutual involvement, a subjective rather than objective process.

My third chapter seeks to demonstrate how Ondaatje's text, like most postmodern writing (according to Hutcheon), treats writing about the past as a function of opening the past up to the present and to the subjectivity of the author. Part of this "opening up" involves unworking the authority claimed by former accounts. It involves rendering the past accessible to one's own sensibilities and interests, to one's own language. Ondaatje's text-ending portrait testifies to the textuality of his account; he admits his authorial role and the way he makes the past his own, in a sense his own autobiography. A tension arises between the possibility and impossibility of harnessing the "authentic" portrait of the Kid, a tension that problematizes our notion of the authority of the past.

The texts treated in this thesis are neither parodies nor serious attempts to revise history. They do not seek to debunk inaccurate representations of the West. They do not seek to separate the "accurate" from the "inaccurate," the "authentic" from the "inauthentic." Rather, they at once demonstrate and enact the collapse of these binarisms. What the West really is and really was remains a problematic

question, which none of these authors or their texts attempts to answer. Instead, they testify to an incapacity to be conclusive about questions of authenticity, an incapacity that places the "real" West on epistemologically shaky ground. The following essays stand as separate discussions on how three writers understand the problem of knowing the "real" West. Far from revealing the authentic West, the purpose of this study simply works toward revealing a set of suspicions that questions whether the "authentic" itself "really" exists. Rather than resolve the difficulties that have emerged in relation to authenticity in Western literature, my project complicates them further.

**The Parody of Parody?: Hyperreality, Spectacle, and
the Problem of Authenticity in Stephen Crane's Western
Stories**

Much of the published criticism on Stephen Crane's Western stories demonstrates the ways in which Crane debunks various myths of the West by parodying the dime-novel, and presenting a vision of the West liberated from the restrictions imposed by such hackneyed literary conventions. According to this view, Crane functions as a literary Realist whose parodies burn through layers of myth, cultural assumptions (mostly Eastern), and romanticized literary representations in order to expose the real West underneath, a West more commensurate with the one in which real people lead their lives, "a world," according to Michael J. Collins, "in short, like the one in which we live" ("Realism and Romance in the Western Stories of Stephen Crane" 142).¹ This critical stance assumes the reality of a time and place as an indigenous element which enjoys an autonomy apart from the representations a culture might confer upon it. More important, this approach suggests that some representations are more "true" or authentically based than others and hence more capable of capturing and imparting the essence of this autonomous reality. Heralded as a parodist, Crane has been interpreted as a realist whose fictions reveal the "true" West.

Yet this parodic approach seems altogether inappropriate when applied to Crane's Western stories, particularly "One Dash--Horses," "The Blue Hotel," and "A Man and Some Others."² Generally defined, parody mocks the material and manner of particular works and genres in order to expose the artificiality of certain features--cliché, trope, convention, and pretension. As such, parody saves what Jean Baudrillard terms "the reality principle," the comforting belief that an absolute level of reality exists to counter and correct "inaccurate representations" ("The Precession of Simulacra" 25). In effect, parody for Baudrillard works like a "deterrence machine," an operation producing illusions that conceal "the fact that the real is no longer real" (Baudrillard 25). Baudrillard's notion about "the impossibility of rediscovering an absolute level of the real" (38) renders parody itself problematic, if not impossible, since it shows parody to lack that very level of reality it seeks to serve. This notion also bolsters and allows us to regard anew Frank Bergon's nearly parenthetical point that "[i]t is difficult . . . to accept parody as the the main intention of [Crane's Western] stories" (*Stephen Crane's Artistry* 106).

While Crane's stories certainly rely on parody, of them all "One Dash--Horses" most explicitly complicates the issue of what this so-called parody is purported to accomplish. Of Stephen Crane's Western stories, "One Dash--Horses" draws most heavily from the actual events of Crane's four month

trip in 1895 to the American West and Mexico. According to Frank Bergon, "One Dash--Horses" is "the story most closely based on actual experience . . . the tale of his [Crane's] adventure with the Mexican bandit Ramon Colorado"

(102). The tale follows an American, Richardson, and his Mexican servant, José, through little more than a day's worth of experience on a Mexican mesquite plain. The apparently peaceful night they spend in a small Mexican village quickly becomes dangerous when a band of drunken bandits bent on robbing Richardson arrives. Immediate danger wanes, however, when the bandits become distracted by the village's booze, music, and women. Unsure of the bandits' location, Richardson and José slip away from the village at dawn, but it is not long before they notice the bandits in rapid pursuit behind them. The subsequent chase across the desert, itself a convention of the Western, ends with yet another standard dime-novel element as Richardson and José come upon the Mexican cavalry who force the bandits into retreat. Just before the chance-rescue occurs, the narrator imparts that Richardson "remembered all the tales of such races for life, and he thought them badly written" (22).

More than simply mocking "badly written" dime-novel stock situations, Richardson, as Crane's transparent stand-in protagonist, marks the ironic intersection of standardized literary tropes (the chase, the chance-rescue) and the actual events of Crane's own experience. Instead of just deflating "such races for life" by calling attention to the narrative

conventionality of the chance-rescue so common in popular Westerns, Crane transfers the "badly written" cliché from the realm of fiction to the realm of reality, confusing cliché and lived-experience as well as questioning their status in respect to the "genuine authentic West." Drawing on cliché to understand and order experience, Richardson fuses apparently distinct epistemologies, or, ways of knowing the West. That is, his utterance testifies to the badly written portrayals of such races for life, marking not only the overlapping of a narrative or cliché-driven representation of event and a representation of event historically- or experientially-bound³, but also suggesting that "knowing" the West can be a process intricately connected to, if not identical with, knowing its representations.

This suggestion exemplifies just one of the difficulties inherent to understanding Crane's Western stories primarily as parodies. Not only is parody rendered problematic as event and trope collapse into each other, but our desire to know the West in of itself also becomes problematized. If the conceptions we hold of the West remain dependent on and determined by the representations we encounter, then what becomes of "the absolute level of reality" that parody at least obliquely works to uncover? What for Crane results from the attempt to know the West in and of itself? In other words, can the West Crane portrays be assimilated apart from its representations, no matter how hackneyed or "inaccurate" they may seem?

Crane addresses these questions directly in "The Blue Hotel." At its thematic core, "The Blue Hotel" concerns the problem of assimilation, or what is involved in the attempt to comprehend and be absorbed into a culture or community. The story follows the exploits of the Swede, a tailor from the East and a newcomer to the West, as he negotiates his way through the unfamiliar territory of Fort Romper, Nebraska. He has been reading dime-novels and fears the worst will happen in this town that for him is nothing short of the fabled Wild West itself: "'I suppose I am going to be killed before I can leave this house,'" he nervously declares to the others in the Palace Hotel who look on in dazed disbelief (147). However, as the story progresses, the Swede's fear quickly transforms into a cantankerous confidence. His experiences in the Palace Hotel, particularly his victory in the fist-fight with Johnnie, the hotel proprietor's son, seem to signify to him that he has passed a Western initiation rite, that he has assimilated a Western code of conduct, in effect becoming a full-blooded Westerner, or more to the point, a full-blooded "Wild Westerner."

After leaving the hotel, his battered face stinging in the blowing snow, the Swede moves on to a saloon and orders whiskey: "'Pretty bad night,' remarked the bartender, indifferently" (165). In a hardy yet terse manner betokening the gruff Western hero, the Swede offers this retort: "'No

. . . this isn't too bad weather. It's good enough for me'" (166). At this point the Swede's transformation seems complete, yet what vision of the West has he assimilated?

It seems that rather than *assimilating* the West he finds in Romper, the Swede *simulates* a version of the West commensurate with those he knows from the dime-novel. This distinction between assimilation and simulation is an important one to keep in mind. The Swede's transformation is met not so much with his integration into the social fabric of Romper as it is his interpretation of a reality which he imposes onto the town. In this way one might convincingly argue that the Swede can be seen as the perfect practitioner of Baudrillardian simulation. Once again, reality for Baudrillard is not a quality indigenous to a specific time and/or place; rather, it obtains to its status as real through representation. In other words, reality is always already a product of simulation, a process entailing "the generation by models of a reality without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (2). As we watch the Swede engage the town of Fort Romper, Nebraska, we realize that he fails to come to know the town, and by extension the American West, on its own terms. Only through the expectations he imposes on Romper, expectations drawn directly from dime-novels, can he interrogate what he confronts. Stated simply, the Swede simulates, not assimilates, the American West.

To celebrate his earlier victory, the Swede offers whiskey to a table of gentlemen playing cards. The offer is

roundly denied, whereupon the Swede demands their compliance. Again, they deny him, which contradicts his expectations of behavior in a Western saloon, and the Swede grabs a man by the throat who quickly dispatches him with a knife. The Swede is dead, and at the hands of a gambler who "had a real wife and two real children in a neat cottage in a suburb, where he lead an exemplary home life" (167). In effect, two of the Swede's expectations have flared into being. First, he meets the death he earlier feared; and second, Romper has become coextensive with the fabled Wild West he anticipated: a West of saloons, gamblers, and violent death; a West momentarily divested of its "neat suburbs" and "exemplary home lives"; a West, in short, tightly overlapping dime-novel versions.

The instances recounted in this brief story-summary demonstrate how the Swede's dime-novel expectations become actualized and played out on the stage Romper provides. What these instances suggest is Crane's divestiture of any belief in an autonomous Western reality--the kind of reality we find heralded in the traditional parodic reading of Crane--for the Swede's attempts at assimilating Romper do not so much reveal what Romper is but rather what he makes it to be, which is, it seems, nothing short of a "hyperreal" Wild West. As the following example shows, it seems that for Crane what differentiates Romper from the fabled Wild West is of little moment in comparison to how these apparently different "Wests" can be shown to coincide.

At one point during the Swede's brief stay at the Palace Hotel, the Swede and Scully, the hotel proprietor, meet upstairs for a few private words which Scully hopes will assuage the Swede's fear. During their absence, the others in the hotel--the Easterner, the cowboy, and Johnnie--discuss the possible causes for the Swede's erratic behavior:

"Oh, I don't know, [said the Easterner] but it seems to me this man has been reading dime-novels, and he thinks he's right out in the middle of it--the shootin' and stabbin' and all."

"But," said the cowboy, deeply scandalized, "this ain't Wyoming, ner none of them places. This is Nebrasker."

"Yes," added Johnnie, "an' why don't he wait till he gets out West?"

The traveled Easterner laughed. "It isn't any different there even--not in these days. But he thinks he's right in the middle of hell." (152)

While the Easterner notes the lack of difference between Romper and the Wild out West Johnnie mentions, and while he seems to suggest that the Wild West is no longer "Wild," his utterance remains semantically unclear, and we are allowed to attend to the implications of the irony. Such semantic dissonance, permitting us to provisionally assume that perhaps Romper is the Wild West--"the middle of hell"--lends a touch of credibility to the Swede's apprehensions. Like Baudrillard's "mad cartographer" whose "project of an ideal

coextensivity between the map and the territory" (3) eradicates difference between place and its cartographic representation, the Easterner (at least obliquely) hints at such a possible coextensivity between Romper and the map-like, dime-novel expectations the Swede uses to negotiate his way through town.

In other words, the Easterner's irony points toward a simple observation, that for the Swede Romper *is* the Wild West. Yet as the story develops, Romper configures itself in a way commensurate with the Swede's expectations. After Scully and the Swede return, the hotel patrons sit down to a game of cards in which the Swede accuses Johnnie of cheating. At this point the narrator briefly intervenes to attest to the inherent mutability of environment:

Such scenes often prove that there can little of dramatic import in environment. Any room can present a tragic front; any room can be comic. This little den was now hideous as a torture chamber. The new faces of the men themselves had changed it upon the instant. (156)

Right before our eyes, "the boisterous hospitality" (143) of the Palace Hotel quickly becomes "the middle of hell." Not only does this narrative comment intensify the irony of the Easterner's earlier statement, but it testifies to the ontology governing Crane's Western world, a world where place remains chained to the determinations its inhabitants choose to impose upon it.

When Johnnie denies the Swede's accusation, takes offense, and the two square to fight, the mutability of Romper becomes apparent, for what is enacted in the ensuing fight can be seen as nothing other than an enactment of the conventional showdown particular to Western pulp fiction. Despite Scully's attempt to mediate the situation ["'Ah, be still can't you?' said Scully, coming between them" (157)], he allows the fight to commence:

A change had come over the Celtic visage of the old man. He now seemed all eagerness; his eyes glowed.

"We'll let them fight," he answered stalwartly. "I can't put up with it any longer. I've stood this damned Swede till I'm sick. We'll let them fight." (158)

By allowing the violence, Scully simultaneously permits the creation of a (hyper-)reality in total agreement with the Swede's dime-novel expectations, expectations that treat card-games as potentially violent affairs instead of simple amusement. Insofar as the Swede's thinking is dominated by a cultural pattern fostered in the dime-novel which suggests that cheating or other instances of repudiated honor warrant violent response, the Swede's actions are partly justified. He acts in accordance with the Wild West's violence-condoning code of honor, yet he does not act alone; the other characters participate as well, and together they endow the Palace Hotel with a hyperreality directly derived from dime-

novel conventions. In effect, a dime-novel trope is momentarily brought into being; it is not simply feigned, but produced, palpably manifested, to which Johnnie's bloody face--and eventually the Swede's corpse--testify.

Like the scene of the Swede's death in the saloon, the fist-fight scene serves to cast an ontological cloud over Romper. Fort Romper, Nebraska: the specificity of the place-name itself is belied by the simulated reality brought to bear on it. What is Romper, really, and what real form would its indigenous reality comprise beyond the dime-novel representations momentarily manifested there? Where could we locate it? The story undermines these questions at every turn, and while we might feel compelled to ask them, we are faced with a dearth of answers. Even Scully, an insider and long-time resident of Romper, reverts to culturally-determined notions of the West when forced to give an account of Romper. Here is an excerpt from Scully's earlier discussion with the Swede which he hoped would stop the latter's fears:

Scully banged his head impressively on the foot-board of the bed. "Why, man, we're goin' to have a line of ilictric street-cars in this town next spring."

"'A line of electric street-cars,'" repeated the Swede stupidly.

"And," said Scully, "there's a new railroad goin' to built down from Broken Arm to here. Not

to mention the four churches and the smashin' big brick school-house. Then there's the big factory, too. Why, in two years Romper'll be a met-tro-pol-is." (149-50)

Scully presents Romper as a place preparing to possess the trappings of the "civilized" Eastern city, and he hopes this fact will dispell the Eastern bourgeois fear of the "uncivilized" West that he believes the Swede suffers from. Although Scully freely expounds the virtues of the "civilized" East, the violent overture of his head-banging contradicts the meaning of his message. Like Romper, Scully also lacks what we might call a unified center of reality. Both can be alternately civil and violent, alternately Eastern and Wild Western, and both are shown to be caught up in the generative play of discourse.

In the case of Scully, his "speech was always a combination of Irish brogue and idiom, Western twang and idiom, and scraps of curiously formal diction taken from the story-books and newspapers" (154). As David S. Gross has demonstrated, passages such as these

make explicit [Crane's] belief in the priority of discourse, that the way we form our words about something is almost totally dominant and determining in what we think to be true about it. Thus Crane joins modern thought after Nietzsche and Saussure in its insistence on the shaping power of

culture--Levi Strauss' notion of the self as an "effect of structure," culture thinking us.

("The Western Stories of Stephen Crane" 18)

What Crane purports to show us then is not the West "as it really is"--some kind of transcendent, a priori Western essence--but rather what it and its inhabitants become in the wake of the imposition of culturally dominant discourses. Near the end of the story, this notion is demonstrated once again as the Easterner and the cowboy discuss the Swede's death and the fate of the gambler of who killed him. Of the gambler the Easterner offers this thought: "'We are all in it! The poor gambler isn't even a noun. He is a kind of adverb. Every sin is the result of a collaboration'" (170). This passage not only attests to the problems of fate and self-determination, but by linking self-hood to a grammatical function, Crane also attests to what Gross calls "the priority of discourse," that as articulators of discourse our role might be simply to provide adverbial adornment to what this discourse predicates, discourse thinking us.

This idea appears frequently in Crane's work, as we saw in "One Dash--Horses" with Richardson and his ordering of experience in terms of the "badly written race for life," but nowhere is it so explicitly stated than in the Swede whose actions are based on and determined by the culturally-dominant discourse of the dime-novel. In "The Blue Hotel" Crane pushes this notion to its logical extreme by demonstrating how a town, indeed an entire region, can

reflexively reposition itself according to the blueprints for a work of popular Western fiction. Reality here is not bound to an *a priori*, transcendent source; the "truth" about Fort Romper, Nebraska is not constant, nor is it deducible. "It can change upon the instant," as Crane's narrator remarks. It remains caught in the flux of discourses brought to bear on it, and it exists entirely in simulation.

The priority given to discourse's capacity to shape the thinking of Richardson, the Swede, and Scully can also traced to Crane's narrators who also display a similar dependence on the generative power of discourse. Consider the following passage taken once again from the fight scene between Johnnie and the Swede. There is a brief pause in the fight and

the Easterner's mind, like a film, took lasting impressions of three men--the iron-nerved master of ceremony; the Swede, pale, motionless, terrible; and Johnnie, serene yet ferocious, brutish yet heroic. The entire prelude had in it a tragedy greater than the tragedy of action, and this aspect was accentuated by the long mellow cry of the blizzard, as it sped the tumbling and wailing flakes into the black abyss of the south. (159)

Both the Easterner and the narrator seek to assimilate the scene, yet they actually create representations of it. The task of endowing the scene with meaning involves representing it, or framing it as the Easterner does within a series of lasting photograph-like impressions. For the narrator, the

scene has meaning as a result of his "epicizing" gesture, the way he translates raw event into the discursive, narrative forms of prelude and tragedy. The scene is unassimilable to both as raw event; it must be placed within frames or forms-- as something to be viewed or read--before it begins "to mean." Like modernist and postmodernist metafictional writings which "begin with the view that both the historical world and works of art are organized and perceived through such frames or structures or 'frames'" (Waugh 28), Crane's Western stories display a similar process of "framing."

One consequence of such framing entails what we might call Crane's priority of perception, an impressionistic narrative tendency manifested throughout Crane's oeuvre.⁴ In the passage quoted above, the significant action no longer involves the fight itself but rather the cognition of these "spectators" whom we watch in the process of endowing form and hence meaning onto the fight they observe. Such framing disallows the reader direct access to the narrated events. Instead, it foregrounds the narrator's or characters' attempts to understand the events they confront as is common to most metafiction⁵ and as a result, it marks the manner with which Crane conspicuously consigns us to the fact that the information we are provided about an event is always already second-hand in nature and highly subjectivized.

In the little-known "A Man and Some Others," Crane most explicitly exposes his dependence on such framing procedures. In short, he places this story, which concerns a gunfight

situated in a Western desert, between a symbolic curtain's rise and fall, in effect framing the events of the story as a playwright would fashion a dramatic production. Crane renders the initial scene of the story in a very "staged" manner. As the story begins, the narrator pans the horizon circumscribing the desert plain on which the story is set:

Dark mesquit [sic] spread from horizon to horizon. There was no house or horseman from which a mind could evolve a city or a crowd. The world was declared to be a desert and unpeopled. Sometimes, however, on days when no heat-mist arose, a blue shape, dim, of the substance of a specter's veil, appeared in the southwest, and a pondering shepherd might remember that there were mountains. (53)

The story doesn't simply begin; rather, it opens as a play might. The narrator presents the scene in a way that calls attention to its theatricality. Drawn in the likeness of a stage over which passed "unknown pageant[s]," the flat, unpeopled plain slowly becomes busy with the movements of the story's main character, Bill. The narrator's eye, as if providing the kind of stage directions common to Naturalist drama, first attends to the broader aspect of the stage and then gradually focuses on an actor and then another, at which point dialogue ensues: "'Hello!' shouted Bill" (53).

Yet this blank desert plain is not as "unpeopled" as the narrator might suggest. In addition to Bill and his

interlocutor, the story's initial scene reveals a scant population of absent perspectives--the "mind" that "could evolve a city or a crowd," the "pondering sheepherder"--another of Crane's narrative tendencies that is ably noted and defined by Bill Brown, which he terms "subjunctive focalization," "the appearance of [] hypothetical focal point[s]" ("Interlude: The Agony of Play in 'The Open Boat'" 36). The presence of these "hypothetical focal points" highlights what we might call the "spectacular" nature of this desert scene. Once again, we are reminded of the priority Crane attributes to the processes of perception which we saw exemplified earlier in the Easterner and the narrator and their observations of the fist-fight, for it seems the desert itself is not as important to Crane as are the eyes and minds of its potential spectators.

In a move that further intensifies the theatrical or spectacular nature of "A Man and Some Others," Crane "stages" the story's final scene, in effect completing the story's frame:

He [the stranger] had almost reached the thicket when he stopped, smitten with alarm. A body contorted, with one arm stiff in the air, lay in his path. Slowly and warily he moved around it, and in a moment the bushes, nodding and whispering, their *leaf faces toward the scene behind him, swung and swung [sic] again into stillness* and the peace of the wilderness. (my italics 67)

Likening the stranger's exit to a curtain fall establishes the narrator's and reader's spectatorial relation to event; and furthermore, it joins the "staged" aspect of the initial scene to structure the story within a highly theatrical frame. While the frame itself signals the narrator's and our distanced relation to the story--that we are observing "the world" through an imposed, artificial structure--the histrionic quality with which Crane endows the frame doubly intensifies this sense. We are before a kind of dramatic production.

This spectatorial role to which Crane consigns his narrators is an important aspect of Crane's narrative style. It implies a distance between the narrator and the narrated events--not a physical distance so much as an epistemological distance, what we might understand as the breach between an event and the perceptions of that event. In terms of epistemology, this breach is never fully closed in Crane's Western tales; Crane's narrators are constantly perceiving, never knowing, the world. What signals this tendency "is the predominance of verbs of perception. Things are constantly 'seen,' 'heard,' and 'felt': they become real through the act of perception" (Overland qtd. in Nagel 44). To return for a moment to "The Blue Hotel," the Swede is just as mysterious and unknowable to the narrator as he is to the citizens of Romper. As the narrator remarks, "[h]e [the Swede] *resembled* a badly frightened man" (my italics 144). We are rarely told anything explicitly about him; rather,

Crane provides information about how he is perceived. In this sense, resemblance marks the closest point of vantage either we or the narrator are allowed to occupy in relation to the Swede as well as the other characters and events Crane treats in his Western stories. Although things might seem real, as Overland suggests, because of their translation through a narrator's act of perception, we are not given any epistemological certitude regarding these "things" in and of themselves.

This discrepancy between preceiving and knowing is noted by Guy Debord in his definition of the "spectacle." According to Debord, the spectacle is "a *Weltanschauung* which has become actual, materially translated. It is a vision of the world which has become objectified" (*Society of the Spectacle* 5).⁶ Debord locates the origin of the spectacle within the existing mode of production: "The entire life of societies in which modern conditions of production reign announces itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation" (1). Debord's spectacle implies separation (a distance and a distancing not unlike what Crane's narrators enact through their acts of perception and framing) between "the directly lived" and those who live or observe it. This suggests that society's relation to itself is irrevocably spectatorial: "the tangible world is replaced by a selection of images which exist above it, and which at the same time are recognized as the tangible *par excellence*" (36). But for

Debord the tangibility of the spectacle always escapes our touch, our attempts to assimilate it. The spectacle is ever "an enormous unutterable and inaccessible actuality" always everywhere produced (12). In other words, "real life" in modern industrial societies (like Crane's) is presented to itself as a system of spectacular representations that are always perceived by us but never known.

With the narratological stance he adopts in "A Man and Some Others," Crane touches deeply on the implications of Debord's theory of the spectacle. Here, Crane can be seen to "spectacularize" the West in particularly Debordean terms. He replaces the Western desert where "A Man and Some Others" takes place with a theatricalized image of it, and by means of this particular separation of the image from the "real" desert we are then allowed some kind of access to it. This is to say that in all the stories treated here, we are never given a direct avenue to the real people and places Crane chronicles. Not only are we refused such access, but the reality or "tangibility" of the West does not simply remain for us to extrapolate from the images Crane creates. Crane does not put us in the role of archeologists or anthropologists. Like his narrators, we too are spectators. The images he creates are in a sense the final reality, or more accurately, the hyperreality of his vision of the West. As Baudrillard, Debord, and by extension, Crane suggest, nothing inheres beneath the image or the representation. Reality, insofar as this term conjures notions of

transcendence or absolutism, irrevocably moves away into hyperreal or spectacular representations. The simulations of the Swede, perhaps the best example Crane offers, lend powerful testimony to aspects of Crane's Western tales.

As much as we might wish to move beyond the image of the West to its ultimate referent, as the traditional parodic reading of Crane has sought to do, the West Crane presents in these tales emerges as an ontologically unstable world whose "reality" never proceeds but always precedes from the generative play of representation, discourse. If these texts present "a world, in short, like the one in which we live," then the reality of this world can be seen to be more commensurate with Baudrillard's and Debord's postmodern conceptions of it than with the conception of (absolute) reality mimetic critics have traditionally located in Crane's Western stories. More a region of the cultural mind than a "real" place, Crane's West exists for us as a "hyperreal" or "spectacular" territory precisely in the degree that it remains inextricably tethered to the constellations of representations, discourses, and images in orbit around it, not to any "absolute level of reality." Although Crane actually visited the places of his fiction, these tales expose a writer more concerned with the West as an idea than as a place; that is, Crane's texts expose a writer interested in how ideas about a place actually work to shape that place rather than the converse possibility argued so vehemently by traditional view of Crane. In short, these stories chart the

dislocation of place from any absolute claim to self-autonomy.

While Frank Bergon contends that Crane "was able to put aside his Eastern sensibilities and adopt the Westerner's point of view" (103), Crane's Western tales never clearly disclose what might define and involve such an absolute Western perspective. On the contrary, perhaps the most striking irony arising from these tales--at least in relation to the traditional parodic reading of Crane--concerns the "absence" or "decentering"⁷ of such an absolute Western perspective altogether. Richardson, the Swede, Scully, the Easterner, and Crane's narrators all occupy different ontological positions in regard to the West, and yet Crane somehow presents them all as ontologically valid, which suggests a belief that any vision of the West, no matter how hackneyed or clichéd, can at least obtain to some degree of "reality."

Despite a pervasive critical opinion that regards Crane as a literary parodist who sought to disengage the West from dime-novel tropes and conventions, Crane's texts suggest otherwise. Crane's tales certainly incorporate and expose the artifice behind dime-novel representations, but rather than eschewing such artifice, Crane exposes the generative force such representations exert on the production of (hyper-)reality. Crane seems precocious in his awareness of the immanent "reality," tangibility, and ostensible fictionality of cultural constructs.

Notes

¹ See also Eric Solomon's *Stephen Crane: From Parody to Realism* and Chester L. Wolford's "Classical Myth Versus Realism in Crane's 'The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky'" for other representative examples. My primary problem with these readings stems from my conception of Crane's highly unstable irony, an irony that precludes any confident distinction between the straight/parodic opposition. Charles Swann states the problem this way: "Imitation (even the ironic imitation of parody) can become a form of flattery. The ideological conflict implied by the gap between original and parody can disappear very easily" ("Stephen Crane and a Problem of Interpretation" 104). Claims maintaining Crane's parody as a mimetic tool that pulls the cover from the West as it really was or is ignore this pitfall so frequently lurking in Crane's Western tales.

² All references to Crane's work are from Fredson Bowers, volume 5. Subsequent references will be noted parenthetically, indicating page numbers only. One might wonder why I choose to exclude "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" from my discussion. To state my reason simply, I do not find this story particularly amenable to my purposes here. It is clearly the most overtly parodic of Crane's Western stories, and as such it stands as the exception to the rule I hope to establish in this essay. For a convincing argument that problematizes the traditional reading of this story, see

Jules Zanger's "Stephen Crane's 'Bride' as Countermyth of the West."

³ Swann notes the dialogic relation between cliché and history operating in Crane's texts: "For Crane, cliché is history: history is cliché" (119). Swann's observation augments my point that Crane's West exists as a world of representations that are hyperreal. To look beyond the representation, to locate the authentic West supposedly dwelling in Crane's texts is to stare into the face of absence. In the world Crane presents, nothing exists outside the tropes he borrows and creates to order (hyper-)reality. For Crane, creating "reality" is locating "reality."

⁴ For a detailed discussion of Crane's impressionistic techniques, see James Nagel's *Stephen Crane and Literary Impressionism*.

⁵ Crane has been variously treated as a writer of metafiction. See, for example, Michael Fried's *Realism, Writing, and Disfiguration: On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane* and Joseph Church's "Reading, Writing, and the Risk of Entanglement in Crane's 'Octopus.'" "

⁶ Since Debord's text is presented aphoristically with numbered paragraphs instead of numbered pages, all parenthetical notation refers to paragraph numbers.

⁷ I intend these terms in the Derridean sense. See his "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences."

**The "Ignis Fatuus" of History: Plot and its
Relation to the Historical Dimension in Cormac
McCarthy's *Blood Meridian***

As a few critics demonstrate, Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian, Or the Evening Redness in the West* is based on real historical events. In "'What kind of indians was them?': Some Historical Sources in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," John Emil Sepich notes that many of the novel's characters-- Captain White, Governor Trias, the scalphunter John Joel Glanton, and the bizarre Judge Holden just to name a few--are based on real people who were involved in the destruction of the Comanches in the early- to mid-nineteenth-century Southwest.¹ Situated in this historical setting, *Blood Meridian* chronicles the exploits of these people, specifically Glanton's band of renegade scalphunters who, contracted by the governors (Trias) of Northern Mexican states to protect their jurisdictions from Indian incursions, laid waste to Native American populations along the Texas-Mexico border for the money their scalps tendered. Sepich's study of the text's probable historical sources leads him to assert that "[t]he sense of McCarthy's novel is fully available . . . only with the recognition that the book is founded to a remarkable degree on the reports of first-hand observers traveling in the mid-nineteenth-century Southwest" (105). For Sepich, this "fully available sense of the novel"

directly correlates with his understanding of *Blood Meridian* as an historical novel. As he suggests, "readers of historical novels expect to know such names, to know background information and relationships" (93). Yet, Sepich refrains from offering a definition of this genre; and moreover, he neglects to demonstrate how *Blood Meridian* might fit into this category he ascribes to it. For Sepich, the simple fact of the novel's historical dimension seems enough for its qualification as an "historical novel."

In *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, Linda Hutcheon offers a useful definition of the historical novel: "[h]istorical fiction (pace Lukács) usually incorporates and assimilates these data [historical details] in order to lend a feeling of verifiability (or an air of dense specificity and particularity) to the fictional world" (114). McCarthy's presentation of historical details and "the air of dense specificity" McCarthy lends them seems to suggest that his text, at least in part, qualifies as historical fiction:

They fought them again at Encinillas and they fought them in the dry passes going toward El Sauz and beyond in the low foothills from which they could already see the churchspires of the city to the south. On the twenty-first of July in the year eighteen forty-nine they rode into the city of Chihuahua to a hero's welcome, driving the harlequin horses before them through the dust of

the streets in a pandemonium of teeth and whited eyes. Small boys ran among the hooves and the victors in their gory rags smiled through the filth and the dust and the caked blood as they bore on poles the desiccated heads of the enemy through that fantasy of music and flowers. (165)

McCarthy's use of dates and place-names gestures toward the historicity of his subject matter, and his attention to minute detail ("low foothills," "churchspires," "teeth and whited eyes", etc.) endows the scene with the kind of "dense specificity" mentioned by Hutcheon. Yet within this same passage, a tendency to unwork such historical realism emerges in McCarthy's descriptions.

Parceled throughout the earlier passage are bits of what Hutcheon would call "metafictional" discourse, words such as "harlequin," "pandemonium," and "fantasy" that disturb the kind of verisimilitude particular to historical fiction. McCarthy's language complicates his text's verifiability, for it harkens not to the "real," historical world but rather to a fantastic world marked and defined by the play of figurative language. Although "harlequin" can be understood as simply a way of referring to the horses' spotted hides, its also connotes comedy and pantomime. The heterogenous nature of this utterance² inherently refuses any one significance or interpretation of meaning. This tendency to enhance historical details with conspicuously surreal, non-academic, non-authoritative, even theatrical ("harlequin")

descriptions problematizes an available, authentic sense of the text that emerges strictly out of its historical dimension. Instead, such terms work as metafictional discourse, for they disrupt our suspension of disbelief by revealing McCarthy's manner of couching historical details within highly fictive, that is to say "unreal," scenes. We are thus asked to attend to more than just the novel's historical dimension; we also attend to how McCarthy's text assimilates its historical dimension--not into an historically verifiable form so much as into novelistic form.

The metafictional aspect of *Blood Meridian* becomes more apparent in the following passage. At a point near the end of the novel, the narrator pauses to reflect on the history of Judge Holden:

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 millenia will discover no trace of any atavistic egg by which to reckon his commencing. (310)

As Sepich points out, McCarthy did in fact "seek out" the history of Judge Holden, so this passage can be read as the author's self-reflexive testimony of frustration in the face of unobliging documents. The narrative gives voice to McCarthy's own scepticism about historical studies, a

scepticism that permeates the novel. Rather than being bolstered by the positivism so endemic to the discipline of history, McCarthy, unlike the writer of historical fiction, reveals a deep suspicion about the histories of the past we reconstruct.³ As a consequence, *Blood Meridian* can stand as a kind of allegory of the process of historiography, or, the inherent problems of trying to assimilate the past into the kind of finished narrative we know as history.

In this way, *Blood Meridian* extends beyond the generic boundaries imposed by Sepich. As McCarthy suggests with the (lacking) history of Judge Holden, when we approach the threshold of history, we walk upon "the shore of a void without terminus or origin." In its bold suspicion of historical verifiability then, *Blood Meridian* stands opposed to historical fiction. Rather than simply gather historical data into a narrative whole, rather than fill in the gaps in the historical record or adorn his text with the kind of verifiability to make it more believable, McCarthy emphasizes the problems of all such assimilations. In that sense McCarthy's narrative functions as an "historiographic metafiction" (114). According to Hutcheon, "historiographic metafiction" concerns "the problematizing of history by postmodernism" which results from the "problematic confrontation of history with metafiction" (xii). Furthermore, "[i]n problematizing almost everything the historical novel once took for granted, historiographic metafiction destabilizes received notions of both history and

fiction" (120). It moves toward this end by installing historical and fictional intertexts only to subvert their claims to verifiability. Understood as an example of historiographic metafiction, *Blood Meridian* reveals a narrative tension between McCarthy's apparent desire to author historical realism and a suspicion of the possibility of recreating the historically real. He installs certain aspects of the historical novel--the desire for verifiability, for example--and subsequently subverts the genre through a general suspicion of the positivism so common to it. Such installation and subversion generates a contradiction, the kind of contradiction Hutcheon insists lies at the very heart of historiographic metafiction--the paradox of being heavily implicated in that which is contested (106). Through this paradox McCarthy's text not only allows us to question history's capacity to render the past accurately, but it also allows us to become aware of and to question our desire to know the past, our need to understand the past in an empirical, totalizing way.

As I hope to show, McCarthy's text demonstrates this apparent suspicion of history within a concomitant suspicion of plot, suspicions that Hayden White shares in relation to the predispositions of the modern historiographical establishment. According to White in "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," modern historiography regards an historical account as a "proper

history" only when it adheres to a certain set of requirements:

The events [treated in an historical account (whether "real" or "fictional," it matters little to White)] must be not only registered within the chronological framework of their original occurrence but narrated as well, that is to say, revealed as possessing a structure, an order of meaning, that they do not possess as mere sequence.

(The Content of the Form 5)

White holds that modern historiography's desire for endowing the events it treats with such an ordering structure, what we might also call plot, is met with a similar valuing of narrativity, "the presence of which in a discourse having to do with 'real' events signals at once its objectivity, its seriousness, and its realism" (24)--in a word, its verifiability. As White suggests, the value of narrativity to historiography involves its capacity to transform past events into a coherent, meaningful history, which makes the "wholeness" of the past immanently accessible to us insofar as this wholeness can be demonstrated to have been present in, that is to say, inherent to the past all along.

Both White and McCarthy break from this positivistic notion of the "proper history" by calling into question its dependence on the essentially "fictional" or representational nature of narrativity, a dependence on the capacity of plot to knit together the mysteries of the past into tidy

resolutions. White asks: "What wish is enacted, what desire is gratified, by the fantasy that real events are properly represented when they can be shown to display the formal coherency of a story?" (4). "What kind of insight does narrative give into the nature of real events?" (5).

McCarthy's unwillingness to crack open the "atavistic eggs" he unearthed as first-hand documents, his unwillingness to endow the Judge's past with the kind of formal closure so particular to traditional narratives suggest either apathy for or an inability to realize the desire White ascribes to the practice of modern historiography.

As a consequence, McCarthy, as well as his text, refuse the roles Sepich applies to them. McCarthy's text does not render the past verifiable; rather, by refusing to resolve the past, by refusing to write its "proper history," it foregrounds the difficulties that surface when an author tries to achieve such verifiability. At the end of the novel, only Judge Holden and the Kid, the novel's unnamed protagonist, remain. They are brought together for the last time where they discuss the mysteries of their past exploits and the whereabouts of yesterday:

Did you post witnesses? [the Judge] said. To report to you on the continuing existence of those places once you'd quit them?

That's crazy.

Is it? Where is yesterday? Where is Glanton and Brown and where is the priest? He leaned

closer. Where is Shelby, whom you left to the mercies of Elias in the desert, and where is Tate whom you abandoned in the mountains? (331)

Neither the Kid nor the Judge can provide concrete answers to these questions, and neither can we as readers; the novel simply refuses to offer the evidence required to solve them. Such questions might prompt us to reflect on past events in the novel, to finger through the novel for clues, but the dearth of satisfactory explanations disappoints as much it excites our desire for certainty.

McCarthy's unwillingness to resolve the past he treats would seem to place us in the role of the proper historian that he refuses to accept. Yet his text's avoidance of narrative closure also destabilizes our faith in historiography's claim to objectivity. The mysteries attending the end of the novel--the fates of Tobin (the priest), Tate, and Shelby--testify to the novel's lack of closure and its inability to resolve the enigmas it presents. What we are faced with is a narrative that either refuses or is incapable of assimilating historical data into a meaningful whole, a narrative that is virtually plotless.

In "Incredulous Narration: *Absalom, Absalom!*," Peter Brooks offers a definition of plot that helps to demonstrate the ways in which *Blood Meridian* operates as an unplotted narrative. According to Brooks, plot

might best be conceived as a combination of the proairetic and the hermeneutic, or better, an

overcoding of the proairetic by the hermeneutic. The actions and sequences of actions of the narrative are structured into larger wholes *by the play of enigma and resolution*: the hermeneutic acts as a large, shaping force, allowing us to sort out, to group, to see the significance of actions, to rename their sequences in terms of their significance for the narrative as a whole.⁴

(my italics, *Reading for the Plot* 287)

Not only does the play of enigma and resolution in *Blood Meridian* remain half-enacted with the unanswered questions we encounter at the end of the novel, but the novel's predominantly proairetic structure--its absent hermeneutic--presents events without pausing to draw the significance of these events into meaningful sequences.

The narrative progresses by tracing the journey of the scalphunters through an exhausting series of violent encounters. The following passages, taken from an extended episode chronicling the scalphunters travails across a Southwestern desert, represent the typical narrative strategy McCarthy employs throughout the novel:

They caught up and set out each day in the dark before the day yet was. . . . On this day two men fell sick and one died before dark. In the morning there was another ill to take his place. . . . The men turned out in the early morning darkness to dig their graves with the

bladebones of antelope and they covered them with stones and *they rode on again.*

They rode on and the sun in the east flushed pale with streaks of light. . . . *They rode* with their heads down. . . . By midmorning another man had died . . . and [they] buried him also and *rode on.* . . . *Moving on again.* . . . *the riders rode out in the cool dark.* . . . *They wobbled on.* . . .

Ten days out with four men dead *they started across* a plain of pure pumice. . . . They talked and the Mexican gestured and the captain gestured and after a while *they moved on again.*

(my italics 44-45)

Within the space of two pages, the narrator indifferently mentions that "they rode on" ten times. Events are rendered in a way that emphasizes forward movement through time. No narrative comments intrude on this bare chronicle of events to reflect on the implications of the actions, nor does the narrative offer a sense of the psychological state of the scalphunters. (Although the sheer repetitiveness of scenes suggests the banality of their violent life on the desert, we nevertheless are refused any direct glimpse into anyone's mindset.) We stand outside observing these raw events, which are loosely strung together with the proliferation of the coordinating conjunction "and." Causality, teleology, and motive as plot devices are backgrounded, if not absented

altogether. Instead, the narration propels us forward through a linear sequence of events much like the picaresque, which for Brooks approaches the "limit-case of a purely proairetic narrative" (18). As it stands, we can only look to ourselves to provide the missing hermeneutic. The role of assimilation is not given to the narrator, which we, along with Hutcheon, might say is another way McCarthy "foregrounds the process of assimilation," since we are ultimately left the responsibility of adducing the probable causes and effects of the events presented. In a way commensurate with White's understanding of modern historiography, we may choose to write the history by providing its plot, since what we encounter in *Blood Meridian* is presented as just another first-hand observation, another source material, a chronicle or annal of past events.

The difficulty we may experience reading *Blood Meridian* stems from its reluctance to plot the events it recounts, to push events either back toward their causes or pull them forward to their probable effects. McCarthy seems willing to do neither. Past events and locations of the scalphunters are treated as what McCarthy calls "some ignis fatuus belated upon the ground," about which his narrator comments:

For this will to deceive that is in things
luminous may manifest itself likewise in
retrospect and so by sleight of some fixed part of
a journey already accomplished may also post men to
fraudulent destinies. (120)

If history leads us to "fraudulent destinies" because of the past's "will to deceive," then McCarthy seems intent to allow us to reach this destiny alone.

Not only are we left to plot the events the narrative chronicles and to answer the questions it refuses to resolve, but we are also presented with a strange, apparently primordial Western desertscape. Like the scalphunters, we must negotiate a way through "those whited regions on old maps where monsters do live and where there is nothing other of the world save conjectural winds" (152). And not only do we witness the raw, unplotted events of the past, but we glimpse a "wild and barbarous" (4-5) world of an "uncompassed order" that exists before its own history. Indeed, much of *Blood Meridian* suggests our presence in a world yet untranslated by historiography, yet untainted by the defining, confining force of the human gaze:

In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence. The very clarity of these articles belied their familiarity, for the eye predicates the whole on some feature or part and here was nothing more luminous than another and nothing more enshadowed and in the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships. (247)

The world of *Blood Meridian* is one seemingly "without referents in the known desert about" (110), a trackless world of "gypsum so fine" (111) that creatures walking and skittering alike leave no traces upon it, a world whose "optical democracy" is bestowed upon us to define and order with our own predicating eye. McCarthy's text leaves all kinships "unguessed." Any differentiation to be made or conclusion to be drawn from the relation between landscape and humanity must be provided by someone other than the narrator. If this, then, is the "densely specific and particular" world created in historical fiction, it is specifically mysterious, a world which lends not a grain of verifiability to its history. Once again, faced with a world in all its preternatural "newness," we bear the responsibility for assimilation.

As a consequence, *Blood Meridian* does not construct what White calls a "proper history," one fully endowed with an hermeneutical coherence. Quite the contrary, McCarthy places the history he borrows from source materials into a world peculiarly a- or non-historical, a move that doubly intensifies the sense that we are not witnessing the writing of a history heretofore hidden in dusty documents. This motive seems the last thing with which McCarthy might be concerned. Rather, we witness the problematizing of that endeavor, or more precisely, the suspicions about it McCarthy seems to harbor. It would be foolish, however, to claim at this point that McCarthy simply enacts an erasure of history,

for after all he draws from that past "reality" and its historical documents for the raw materials of his novel. McCarthy does not "void" history; rather, he highlights some of the problems inherent to the "proper history." As Hutcheon states, historiographic metafiction

is not an attempt to void or avoid history. Instead it directly confronts the past of literature--and of historiography, for it too derives from other texts (documents). It uses and abuses those intertextual echoes, inscribing their powerful allusions and then subverting that power through irony. (118)

What is ironic about *Blood Meridian* is the way in which McCarthy presents the past not as history but simply as the past. And by presenting this past as a timeline or simple chronicle of events--with all the immediacy of their initial occurrence--he creates a world before history, an unplotted account of the past. McCarthy refuses to "void" history (here, understood as a chronicle of the past), yet he "avoids" imposing the ordering structure that would transform the past into the coherent form we know as a "proper history." He seems rather to situate himself and his reader alike as spectators immediately before a procession of past events yet to be confirmed as fact and yet to be written as history. In this way, history, even the "proper history," is very present in *Blood Meridian*, but only as a nascent

possibility for us to realize through our own desire for plot.

We might say in short that *Blood Meridian* marks an acceptance of the past and a simultaneous denial of the history of that past, if by history we mean a "proper history," a fully narrativized account that lends formal coherence and closure to a sequence of real past events. Rather than offering an authoritative or monoglossic narrative that would predetermine our response to the past, McCarthy reopens the past to the reader's powers of interrogation. McCarthy exposes a suspicion for the "proper history," specifically the authority it traditionally claims by imprisoning the past and all its variety of potential interpretations within fully resolved, fully plotted accounts.

This underlying suspicion is reflected in the proairetic structure of *Blood Meridian* and its attention to the particulars of event: "On the twenty-first of July in the year eighteen forty-nine they rode into the city of Chihuahua. . .(165). Such "historicizing" gestures are parceled out in a linear chronology throughout the narrative where they serve to highlight the novel's formal resemblance to the chronicle (as opposed to the "proper history"), a particular form of historical representation that maintains "the chronology as the organizing principle of the discourse" (White 16). According to White, "If it were only a matter of realism in representation, one could make a pretty good case

for the annals and the chronicle forms as paradigms of ways that reality offers itself to perception" (25). This indeed seems to be the case in *Blood Meridian*. As suggested earlier, McCarthy's narration is one which presents details without assimilating them, and as such it encourages our spectatorial relation to story. Perhaps nowhere in the novel is this so explicitly manifested than in its very first sentence: "See the child" (3). The imperative demands our visual attention; the world is offered to our perception, and to a certain degree, we are placed in the position of first-hand observers of these events. All that apparently stands between us and the past is the tegument of McCarthy's language, a language so decidedly descriptive at times that often we feel the tegument is rendered transparent, that we, once again, are observing a world before history.

Yet what else might account for this apparent suspicion of history, of plot? In "The Ambiguous Nihilism of Cormac McCarthy," Vereen M. Bell suggests that "Cormac McCarthy's novels are as innocent of theme and of ethical reference as they are of plot" (31).⁵ While Bell joins the problems of ethics and plot, he does not discuss in depth the possible interrelation these twin absences might share. According to White, however, plot and morality have much in common that is worth noting here:

If every fully realized [fully plotted?] story, however we define that familiar but conceptually elusive entity, is a kind of allegory, points to a

moral, or endows events, whether real or imaginary, with a significance that they do not possess as a mere sequence, then it seems possible to conclude that every historical narrative has as its latent or manifest purpose the desire to moralize the events of which it treats. (14)

For White, plotting real events does not reveal a structure to these events that was immanent all along; rather, the imposition of plot onto a sequence of events constitutes "images of that authority that summons us to participation in a moral universe" (21). The demand for plot and for narrative closure in historical representation reflects a similar demand for moral meaning, "a demand that sequences of real events be assessed as to their significance as elements of a moral drama" (21). This contention leads White to ask: "Could we ever narrativize without moralizing?" (25).

The case of *Blood Meridian* allows us to ask a corollary question: Can we avoid moralizing even though the novel refuses plot? At first glance, the world of *Blood Meridian* seems conspicuously amoralistic. Its grim violence and depravity (a moralizing term itself) are attended without the narrator's comments about them; events are simply presented, albeit graphically, yet indifferently:

one of the Delawares emerged from the smoke with a naked infant dangling in each hand and squatted at a ring of midden stones and swung them by the heels each in turn and bashed their heads against the

stones so that the brains burst forth through the fontanel in a bloody spew and humans on fire came shrieking forth like bezerkers and the riders hacked them down with their enormous knives

(156)

Not only can we note the narrator's indifferent and graphic portrait of the scene, but we can also recognize the narrator's refusal to offer a glimpse into the minds of the scalphunters. Although this refusal might seem to condemn the characters as "mindless" creatures, we still are given no clue as to whether regret, disgust, or even cold indifference visit their thoughts. As the narrator at one point intimates, "Here beyond men's judgements all covenants were brittle" (106). Of course, a stance proclaiming an amoral world is still a stance on morality, but McCarthy's narration nevertheless insists that any moralizing judgments will be imposed by someone else if at all.

Paralleling the narrator's hands-off approach to the question of morality is the Judge's radically amoralistic ontological perspective:

Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak. Historical law subverts it 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. The willingness of the principals to forgo further argument as the triviality which it in fact is and to petition directly the chambers of the historical absolute clearly indicates of how little moment are the opinions and of what great moment the divergences thereof. (250)

Might makes right for the Judge, and for him the sole organizing principle of the universe concerns one's ability to kill or be killed. This kind of statement augments the narrator's flat indifference to moral questions, and taken together, they foreground our responses. That is, they make us aware of our moral predispositions and concerns in light of our reactions. As with the novel's historical dimension, answers to these moral questions stand as nascent potentialities for us to realize and ponder.

Nowhere in the novel, however, is our ethical stance so elicited than in the story of the Kid with which the novel opens. McCarthy initially presents this story as a traditional, male Bildungsroman, and as a result of our knowledge of this genre, our expectations about the Kid's fate become in a sense predetermined. At fourteen, the Kid, an orphan, lights out from his Tennessee home on a trek westward across the continent into a strange, seemingly primordial landscape in which he is

finally divested of all that he has been. His origins are become as 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.

(4-5)

This early configuring of readerly expectations presages a transition within the moral standing of the protagonist, some integration into society or epiphany that would reference his life in terms of some ethical base which, in turn, would allow him to come to grips with the surrounding world or experience some kind of conversion. We expect him to renounce his life of depravity as a scalphunter and gain a more humanistic code. Yet nothing of the sort happens, at least not according to expectation.

After the disintegration of the scalphunting party, the Kid is placed in jail and subsequently freed a few days later. He lights out alone again after this separation from the remaining members of the original scalphunting party whose whereabouts, except for most of the dead, are unknown. He travels from town to town and job to job, essentially the same wanderer as he ever was, but at one point during his ramblings he keeps a Bible "he'd found at a mining camp and he carried this book with him no word of which could he read" (312). Here, such a transition is hinted at, when without pause or explanation, the narration leaps forward in years and rejoins his story "in the spring of his twenty-eighth year" (313). What happened in this long interim (before, the

Kid was still in his teens) is not explained, but to fit the form of the conventional Bildungsroman, such undivulged information is crucial, since the text leads us to believe that the Kid experiences the psychological development or spiritual crisis conventionally required for his maturity and integration into the larger social fabric.

Later in the narrative we encounter another hint suggesting the Kid's "successful" moral grounding, yet this episode also counteracts expectation. Traveling east through the desert he lights upon a group of massacred pilgrims, the same pilgrims he earlier agreed to convey through the desert but subsequently abandoned. He spots a very old woman sitting upright "in a small niche in the rocks" (315). He approaches, and in very rare fashion for this novel, we are allowed a glimpse of his state of mind:

He told her that he was an American and that he was a long way from the country of his birth and that he had no family and that he had traveled much and seen many things and had been at war and endured hardships. He told her that he would convey her to a safe place, some party of her countrypeople who would welcome her and that she should join them for he could not leave her in this place or she would surely die. (315)

This display of compassion, fellow-feeling, and a general concern for life accompanies our first, real glance at the Kid's mindset, yet his genuine offer of assistance is made to

a dead woman, someone whom he cannot help despite his effort: "She was just a dried shell and she had been in that place for years" (315). Compassion and ethical concerns are reduced in the face of what the judge terms "the historical absolute," the final word that for him renders moral judgments null and void. This episode with the dead eldress seems to impress upon the Kid such a nihilistic perspective.

In the next scene, the Kid (now referred to even more vaguely as "the man") encounters a band of buffalo hunters and bonepickers. This new appellation anticipates his development. Now as "the man," he displays biological maturity, but as we notice in this scene, his potential for ethical maturity remains unrealized. Once again, our expectations become undercut. One evening he makes camp just within sight of the bonepickers fires. A group of five children hail him and enter his camp, and one of them, Elrod, begins a litany of insults aimed at the man. When they leave, the man promises to kill Elrod should he return. Just before dawn Elrod returns with a rifle, and the man, after Elrod's first and only shot, quickly dispatches him. The other four children also return, but only to retrieve and carry the body away for burial. As one of the boys intimates, Elrod was an orphan from Kentucky, and now his younger brother, Randall, is orphaned twice over.

Although the man acts in self-defense (again, an ethical gesture on my part), he kills. Moreover, his actions propagate the continuation of the cycle of orphaning that

originally initiated his own westward venture under the hopeful auspice of the Bildungsroman and all the promises of redemption that particular intertext imparts to the narrative as a whole. The use and abuse of this particular fictional intertext disappoints expectations, precisely the expectation of the protagonist's eventual acquiescence to moral authority. We might say that what results is a kind of anti-Bildungsroman. Not only does the protagonist exhibit no significant moral or psychological development, but the paucity of references to such development and the general lack of access to his mental state would problematize the kid's standing as the novel's protagonist altogether. McCarthy thus also complicates our traditional notion of "hero," subverts what we expect to know about him and his journey through life.

In short, this subversion of the traditional Bildungsroman engenders a similar subversion of that particular moral authority so central to it. On the level of the Kid's story and also, then, on the level of the narrator's indifferent, unplotted treatment of the novel's embedded "real past," moral authority and ethical reference undergo a double erasure from the narrative. As a result, we are placed in an interrogative position in regard to the past as the processes of assimilating, plotting, and moralizing (for White, there is little difference among them) the significance of past events are consigned to us and foregrounded as our responsibility. In *Blood Meridian*,

McCarthy presents the past, not history, forcing us to reflect on our own demands and definitions of history and on our own individual and collective processes of narrating the past.

Notes

¹ Sepich provides a fine and extensive bibliography for those interested in pursuing further the historical context of *Blood Meridian*.

² According to M.M. Bakhtin in "Discourse in the Novel," "Every concrete utterance of a speaking subject [here, the narrator] serves as a point of where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear. The processes of centralization and decentralization, of unification and disunification, intersect in the utterance; the utterance not only answers the requirements of its own language as an individualized embodiment of a speech act, but it answers the requirements of heteroglossia as well; it is in fact an active participant in such speech diversity" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 272). As delineated by Bakhtin, centripetal forces are "*the forces that serve to unify and centralize the verbal-ideological world*" (original italics 270). As a monologizing force, the centripetal works against the centrifugal (decentralizing, disunifying) forces such that the nature of their mutual involvement always remains heteroglossic, or antagonistic. McCarthy posits the monologic structure of historical authenticity as the axis around which centripetal and centrifugal discourses compete. I am getting a little ahead of my argument here, but as this passage from *Blood Meridian* reveals, McCarthy's apparent desire for historical verifiability remains open to the play of opposed discourses such that the "air of dense

specificity" he creates becomes undercut by language that destabilizes such verifiability. As a consequence, seeing *Blood Meridian* strictly as an historical novel becomes complicated; McCarthy seems to question the dictates of this particular genre.

³ Brooks borrows the terms "proairetic" and "hermeneutic" from Roland Barthes' narrative codes. For a fuller explanation of these terms, see either Barthes' *S/Z* or Brooks' "Reading for the Plot" in *Reading For the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*.

⁴ In all fairness to Bell, his essay was published two years before *Blood Meridian*, yet to his credit, his observation seems very fitting for this novel as well.

**"This is doing nothing for my image is it": The
Inconclusive Image in Michael Ondaatje's
*The Collected Works of Billy the Kid***

In *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*,¹ Michael Ondaatje re-opens the questions of who and/or what was Billy the Kid, who and/or what he is today. In this postmodern text Ondaatje presents the mythic/historical figure of William Bonney, better known as Billy the Kid, through a series of poems, photographs, first-hand reminiscences of the Kid's acquaintances, selected passages from a comic-book about the Kid, as well as Ondaatje's own bits of fictive embellishment. This kaleidoscope of images focuses on the Kid and the variety of worlds, both real and fictive, he has inhabited--and been said to inhabit--over time. Neither a traditional narrative historical account nor a full-blown fictional reworking, Ondaatje's text functions as a locus for gathering together a myriad of complementary and conflicting viewpoints. Rather than a continuous prose story line, the material Ondaatje appropriates constitutes a fragmented, piece-meal structure, a collection of voices that all say something about who and/or what the Kid represents to them.

One of these voices belongs to the Kid himself. As Ondaatje's title suggests, this text purportedly operates more as a collection of the Kid's works than a bibliography of works about the Kid written by others, even though the

real Kid (Henry McCarty) "composed no more than a few letters."² While Ondaatje does not draw from these letters, he nevertheless uses the Kid as the primary narrator of the prose pieces and the primary speaker of the poems, allowing Billy to tell his own story--to narrate his own autobiography as it were. As it is, it can be argued that the Kid as narrator/speaker also functions as the ostensible author of this collection, just as the text's subtitle, *Left-Handed Poems*, suggests.³ (The Kid's dangerously quick left hand is legendary if not well-known.) Since the Kid occupies such a large portion of the text--as both its "author" and subject--the text creates the illusion that we peer through the Kid's eyes, sharing the Kid's thoughts about himself and his world.

It would seem that such a vast array of perspectives would at least approximate an answer to the question surrounding the Kid's identity, yet nothing of the sort happens. In fact, at text's onset the possibility of ever answering this question becomes threatened. The very first page presents an empty frame under which follow the words of the Western photographer L.A. Huffman:

I send you a picture of Billy made with the Perry shutter as quick as it can be worked--Pyro and soda developer. I am making daily experiments now and find I am able to take passing horses at a lively trot across the line of fire--bits of snow in the air--spokes well defined--some blur on top of wheel but sharp in the main--men walking are no trick--I

will send your proofs sometime. I shall show you what can be done from the saddle without ground glass or tripod--please notice when you get the specimens that they were made with the lens wide open and many of the best exposed when my horse was in motion. (original italics 5)

The portrait of the Kid to which Huffman refers remains absent from the text. The vacant frame contrasts sharply with Huffman's statement, especially its implicit positivist attitude about "what can be done" with a camera. The text thus begins with an entry that raises suspicions about these kinds of "experiments," "proofs," and "specimens," an entry that questions the possibility of capturing an image at all, never mind a "true" image. The one "true" image, just like the single authoritative voice, is absent from this text. We are not in a static relation to the past; it does not reify before our eyes into a single clear picture. We are, in Huffman's words, with "our lenses wide open" and our "horses in motion." As I hope to demonstrate, no conclusive "portrait" of the Kid emerges from *The Collected Works*. Instead, the text ultimately destabilizes our faith in harnessing verifiable and accurate accounts of the past.

Although Ondaatje incorporates texts and documents that testify to the spectrum of treatments given to the Kid's life and legend, the text refuses to weave them into a coherent or more comprehensive whole. And although we read the Kid's ostensible auto-biography, the empty frame suggests the Kid

is absent from his "own" text. For Ondaatje, it would seem, no appeal to documentary proof, no appeal to a wide variety of other material, no appeal even to the Kid himself can ensure the final capture of the Kid's "authentic" self. Unlike the historical novel which treats past events with a high degree of specificity and verifiability, Ondaatje's text problematizes such treatments of the past. Although *The Collected Works* contains the kind of intertexts that could facilitate an understanding of the Kid's "identity," the Kid's initial absence unworks the potential for such an understanding.

A tension thus emerges from the text, a tension between the possibility and impossibility of being conclusive about what and who Billy the Kid was and still means to the cultural imagination. Linda Hutcheon puts the problem of this paradox simply. In "Historiographic Metafiction: The Pastime of Past Time," Hutcheon asserts that "postmodernism is a contradictory cultural enterprise, one that is heavily implicated in that which it seeks to contest. It uses and abuses the very values it seeks to contest" (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 106). The value being contested here is one of verifiability. How can we be certain as to what the past presents to us? Although verifying the Kid's past is severely questioned, Ondaatje nevertheless provides texts that harken to this past and to a degree of certitude. As we move through the text, the Kid's empty frame slowly develops into a highly variegated portrait. Images of the Kid accrue;

the frame begins to fill. Yet Ondaatje halts the exposure, or rather, he throws the lens wide open. The accumulation of images offers only the illusion of reification, the illusion that an image of the Kid will rigidify within a photographic frame. This text does not operate like a polaroid camera: no fixed, stable image blurs into focus. Near the end of the text, the Kid, as the speaker of this particular poem, states that "a pencil/harnessing my face/goes stumbling into dots" (85). The Kid reveals an awareness of his incomplete portrait as this "attempted representation elliptically disintegrates before our eyes"⁴--that is, "goes stumbling into dots." The Kid's developing picture becomes only a potential portrait, a kind of playful connect-the-dots dependent on another to complete. The Kid recognizes and suggests the dependence his image has on the pencil that will piece him together. He calls attention to the fact of his inscription into form; yet, the form remains incomplete.

The Kid expresses a similar sentiment elsewhere in the text. In this passage, Ondaatje relates a (fictive) scene at the Chisum ranch in which the Kid, after a night of heavy drinking, experiences a terrible vomiting fit just off the porch of the ranch-house. In a direct address to the reader, the Kid states:

This is doing nothing for my image is it. Here I am 3/4s naked in a towel vomiting 10 yards from the house, to my left a fucking big desert where nothing is except wind picking up sand and dust and

the smell off dead animals a hundred yards away
and aiming it at me and my body. (my italics 70)

Again, the Kid reveals an awareness of his own image, this time an awareness that his image is in the process of undergoing reworking. Both of these examples suggest the difficulty of capturing the Kid once and for all. In the former, an attempted representation halts and fades into utter incompleteness. In the latter, the sheer malleability of the Kid's image emerges as a new and entirely fictional episode of the Kid's past is created. Both examples mark attempts to fashion images of the Kid, yet both resist being conclusive, complete.

The reader may anticipate finding a complete image by the end of the text, but while the text provides it, a question arises as to whom this image represents. On the very last page we encounter a small portrait of a young boy clad in gunfighter regalia. Although the text offers no clues as to whose portrait this is, a few critics contend the photo is of a young Michael Ondaatje.⁵ If this is the case, then over the course of the text we move from the Kid's non-photo to Ondaatje's. The placement of this photo at the end of the text emphasizes Ondaatje's authorial role, the part he plays in shaping the Kid's repertoire of possible pasts. This small photo is not centered; it is situated in the lower right corner of a larger frame, a "signature" of sorts that testifies to Ondaatje's authorship. While such "authorization" destroys the illusion of *The Collected Works*

as the Kid's autobiography, Ondaatje's outfit suggests how the myth of the Kid, the gunfighter myth, in a sense "authored" him, shaped and influenced his own childhood experience. This photo marks the relation between Billy and Ondaatje, the relation between the past and present, as one of mutual interaction; each to a degree complements the other.

As Ondaatje's text demonstrates, the past exists in the present for us to construct and as a force that constructs us. The following pair of examples highlights this suggestion. In this passage, the Kid relates his feelings on the morning after his spell of vomiting: "So it was a bad night. But this morning the room is white and silvery shadows roll across the ceiling. All is clean except our mouths and I move to the basin and rinse out last night's throat and pee down the drain and struggle back to bed" (71). The text's final passage partly mirrors this scene. Here, Ondaatje describes his own "bad night":

It is now early morning, was a bad night. The hotel room seems large. The morning sun has concentrated all the cigarette smoke so one can see it hanging in pillars or sliding along the roof like an amoeba. In the bathroom, I wash the loose nicotine out of my mouth. I smell the smoke still on my shirt. (105)

Taken together, these passages mark a conflation between the experiences of the Kid and the author. Through a repetition

of the same scene in two different temporal contexts, the text stresses how past and present overlap and extend into each other, how the authorial role overlaps between author and character.

Ondaatje manifests this extension as a kind of play. Just as with the playful connect-the-dots, getting to know the Kid involves participating in a series of games, games for the imagination. In this passage, Billy discusses the project of locating his "story" in terms of negotiating a maze: "Not a story about me through their eyes then. Find the beginning, the slight silver key to unlock it, to dig it out. Here then is a maze to begin, be in" (20). As Billy suggests, this is not a story "through their eyes," the eyes of the Kid's real acquaintances (this passage immediately follows a confession made by Paulita Maxwell, a friend of the Kid), but one waiting to be "dug out" by another. Ondaatje compares this process of unlocking the Kid's story to negotiating a maze, a labyrinth inhering in the spatio-temporal gap between "Here"--this place, the reader's present location--and "then"--that time, the Kid's past(/passed) era. Ondaatje's text once again suggests that our engagements with the past always involve an engagement with the present, a process of imaginative, playful, mutual involvement.

The text takes up this notion of mutual involvement in the following poem:

Up with the curtain
down with your pants

William Bonney

is going to dance (63)

Here, Ondaatje plays with the meaning(s) of "exposure," a word implicitly connected to the process of photography that pervades the text as a metaphor for "realistic" representation. In the poem, the Kid/speaker follows his imperative call, "Up with the curtain," immediately with an imperative to the reader, "down with your pants." Both the Kid and the reader in a sense "expose" themselves to each other, a mutual unveiling in which both dance partners reveal themselves as Bonney's dance--the articulation of his movements through a spatio-temporal dimension, which might be construed as an enactment or playful rendition of his past--is about to commence.

By calling us to drop our pants to the past, *The Collected Works* causes us to become self-aware, if not a little embarrassed, of the way we necessarily expose ourselves--our desire to know or not to know, our individual methods of interrogation, our readerly predispositions--in the process of unlocking the past from the texts in which it necessarily comes to us. More than just a joke, Ondaatje's reference to the interrelation between our private zones and Bonney's dance colors the entire project of examining the past with a tone of playful intimacy. Ondaatje makes no claims to and/or for authority. He symbolically "fucks" with the past, and he teases and coaxes us into the orgy (into the maze) as well. While Ondaatje thus inscribes the process of

assimilating the past within a humorous, playful context, in a sense abusing the positivism so endemic to the enterprises of photography and traditional historiography, he nevertheless voluntarily places himself within the dual role of the photographer/historiographer. Like Ondaatje, by accepting the invitation to revisit the past of Billy the Kid, by reading his "collected works," we are caught with our pants down; we are shown our own complicity in the act of reconstructing the past.

Just as the past remains to be reconstructed, as it stands as a maze yet to be completed, a dance yet to be tripped through, Ondaatje's text remains to be reconstructed. As suggested earlier, *The Collected Works* is by no means a single continuous narrative. Rather, it is a collection of poems, photographs, and odd bits of memorabilia both real and fictive which the text neglects to piece together. It is, as the Kid correctly states, a maze, filled with cul-de-sacs and gaps and an enormous proliferation of possible passageways. The juxtaposing of written and photographic texts seems haphazardly done, and the captions that might solidify the significance of the relationship between them are not offered. In effect, the text lacks the hermeneutic thread that could fill in the gaps with some kind of causal, conclusive link. This text operates as a collage of other texts, a pastiche whose grand structural plan, if there is one, refuses to present itself in an explicit or accessible way. Gaps between word and image stand as zones of nascent

significance waiting to be brought into meaning, to be brought to closure.

John Chisum's story about the mad-dogs bred by his New Orleans acquaintance Livingstone, for example, is prefaced by such a gap. Immediately above it is placed a photograph of a man and a dog upon a horse-drawn cart. The passage begins with the Kid recounting a brief tale formerly told by Sallie Chisum about her basset hound and the uses of the basset hound by French noblemen hunters. Yet clearly, the dog in the photograph is not a basset hound. What may we take from this gross discrepancy between word and image? Is it simply enough that an old photo of a dog stands above a passage about dogs? What is the nature of the relation between these two "texts"?

This discrepancy points toward a greater discrepancy emerging in the text. It functions precisely to highlight a larger gap--the epistemological break that emerges from the placing of "verifiable" intertexts within a framework that questions the very possibility of verifiability. The text maneuvers through tension; it approaches just as it recedes from a degree of certainty regarding Billy. It approaches the "facts" the various intertexts impart just as it recedes from them by throwing the Kid into hazy regions of incomplete portraits, malleability, and labyrinthine entanglements. In writing about the Kid, Ondaatje seems caught between harkening to documentary proof and harnessing the power of his own imagination.

In this enactment of the Kid's fictive exhumation, the text once again foregrounds the tension between "fact" and imagination:

Imagine if you dug him up and brought him out.
 You'd see very little. There'd be the buck teeth.
 Perhaps Garrett's bullet no longer in thick wet
 flesh would roll in the skull like a marble. From
 the head there'd be a trail of vertebrae like a row
 of pearl buttons off a rich coat down to the
 pelvis. The arms would be cramped on the edge of
 what was the box. And a pair of handcuffs holding
 ridiculously the fine ankle bones. (Even though
 dead they buried him in leg irons). There would be
 the silver from the toe of each boot. (97)

Ondaatje imaginatively reconstructs the scene by means of factual material--the buck teeth, Garret's bullet, the leg irons. In addition, the very process of exhumation contains within it the promise of revealing knowledge, that is, that by examining a corpse some kind of conclusive truth emerges concerning certain aspects of that person's life. Yet Ondaatje's persistent use of the conditional tense casts a tone of uncertainty over the entire passage. His use of the second-person pronoun and the imperative, "Imagine," call us and our imaginations to participate. By calling to our imaginations just as he tells us exactly what to expect to find in the grave, Ondaatje inserts us into the tension of his text.

These three tendencies constitute the primary machinery functioning in the text to create this tension. On the one hand, Ondaatje harkens to factual material; on the other hand, he seems to question its validity; and finally, he invites us into the middle of the epistemological mire that directly results. By offering the kinds of "proofs" and "specimens" that attest to the various dimensions of the Kid's legacy, Ondaatje endows the text with an element of verifiability. Yet through the processes of appropriation and re-creation, these texts come to inhabit new contexts, new zones of contact with other texts, new forms. Their individual messages join with other messages that both complement and contradict. Any authority they might enjoy in isolation becomes questioned simply by their appropriation and reinscription alongside other voices claiming authority. Ondaatje's text is neither a serious nor playful parody of former representations; rather, it is a collection of voices that independently testify to some aspect of the past yet never achieve together a unified, single, conclusive voice. Ondaatje's text is an enactment of the problematics stemming from a contemporary scepticism about our representations of the past and the authoritative final word we claim to gain from them.

Of the third tendency noted above, that of the role we play in all of this, Ondaatje, to a great extent like Crane and McCarthy, places us in a spectatorial point of vantage in relation to the parade of images he presents. Our eyes are

commissioned to examine the many perspectives that emerge from *The Collected Works*. In fact, eyeballs permeate this text: of the dying Charlie Bowdre, "the eyes grew all over his body" (12). By populating his text with a wide variety of focal points, Ondaatje absents the static eye/I, the monocular perspective or monoglossic rendition that would seek to harness conclusively "the" story of the Kid's past. In one of his poems, Ondaatje creates an instance of "subjunctive focalization"⁶ through which he problematizes the scene he matter-of-factly describes. Ondaatje/Billy relates a simple scene in which Garrett and two of his friends pass down a street. The poem ends with the speaker's assertion that: "All this I would have seen if I was on the roof looking" (46). Ondaatje's employment of the conditional tense emphasizes the "reality" of the scene--it would have been this way--just as it simultaneously confesses the absence of an onlooker's absolute confirmation. Again, the text maneuvers between confirming and denying an actual, verifiable event. It suggests that whatever the Kid's identity, it is contingent upon the eyes and minds of those, whether real acquaintances or not, who view it.

In the process of reading *The Collected Works*, we become such acquaintances; we participate in the creation of the what-might-have-been; we gain access to such subjunctive focal points. Yet so does Ondaatje. Of the utterance, "All this I would have seen if I was on the roof looking," we can ask who speaks. It remains unclear as to whether Billy

speaks or whether it is Ondaatje who speaks, voicing, in a highly self-reflexive, metafictional moment, what he would have seen had he been alive and along with the Kid during the latter's lifetime. Although the utterance is ostensibly Billy's, as most are in this text, we need not select between the possibilities just stated. Speaking through each other, author and hero momentarily collide. This single utterance concretely enacts the blurring between Ondaatje and the Kid, between past and present, and between author and character that comes to the fore in so many places throughout this text. The ambiguous ownership of the "I" can be understood as an instance of double-voicedness in which the voices of Ondaatje as "author/creator" and Billy as speaker overlap. Such double-voicedness not only calls to the mutual involvement of past and present, but it also points to the crisis in author-text relations that emerges in poststructural thought.

Although Hutcheon draws heavily from poststructural thought and while she refers to Barthes' call for the death of the author, she is quick to qualify the nature of her allegiance:

In emphasizing the receiver's role, postmodern works never, however, repress the process of production. The concept of the artist as unique and originating source of final and authoritative meaning may well be denied, as Barthes

claimed. . . . Nevertheless, it is possible to argue that this [the author's] *position* of discursive authority still lives on, because it is encoded into the enunciative act itself. (*Poetics* 77, original italics)

Here, Hutcheon allows the author a *position* in the text, an "author"-itative standing or presence that emerges from utterances within a text. Yet Ondaatje occupies more than just a position within this text; as an authorial presence, Ondaatje is more than just an entity that subtly surfaces in a few utterances or in the text's style. He operates in the text as a guide who leads the reader from the Kid's absent photo to his own, who exists as the pencil that attempts to harness the Kid's face and as the agent who is "doing nothing" for the Kid's image. Ondaatje's textual presence is more than just a consequence of style or enunciation; it is a force that actively contributes to what Hutcheon calls the process of production.

Although in some critical circles it is still proper to proclaim the death of the author, M.M. Bakhtin's early work in "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" adds another wrinkle to the debate.⁷ According to Bakhtin and his notion of the author/creator, the author remains in the text

in the form of a certain person, in the form of an individualized countenance of the author, which we often place into the world of the heroes that he created. But this objectified author (the author

who has ceased to be a principle of seeing and has become an object that is seen) is quite distinct from the author as the hero of biography. . . .

(*Art and Answerability* 207)

Just as Ondaatje's text-ending portrait heralds the author's presence within the text, it can be felt, sensed in many utterances throughout the text. Ondaatje is very present in the text as a voice to be heard, as an image (photo) to be viewed, and as an active principle that guides the reader's own processes of seeing, a steward who, along with the Kid, offers the key to unlock the beginning of the story of the Kid's past. According to Bakhtin, biography (perhaps the most apt generic distinction one could argue for *The Collected Works*) is the form in which "the author is closest to the hero--they can change places as it were" (152). In this text, author and hero frequently shift roles; both are alternately narrator, character, and author. It becomes unclear whose story is told, whose experience is narrated, whose voice is heard, and whose perspective is seen. The process of examining the past emerges as a process of experiencing that past in a vicarious fashion.

This is not to say that Ondaatje (as author/creator) has the final or authoritative word concerning the text. On the contrary, the author's closeness to the hero disallows the distanced, objective vantage from which a complete, disinterested, and accurate portrait of the Kid could be rendered. Ondaatje's manifested presence in the text holds no

hierarchically higher position than any other voice or intertext. The notion of authority becomes severely destabilized. Ondaatje's voice does not claim the final word, nor can it. It stands alongside other voices that all have something to contribute to Kid's story. As a result, Ondaatje is a rather faulty guide; he remains caught in the labyrinth along with the reader, caught in the world of the what-might-have-been, the subjunctive middle ground between fact and fiction.

Finally, Ondaatje's text cannot resolve the resulting epistemological uncertainty; instead, it provides avenues of approaching the past as it might have been. As Stephen Tatum suggests, this uncertainty surrounding the Kid's past has compelled, as it continues to compel, our cultural imagination into projects of revision and reworking:

Billy the Kid's imaginative appeal continues to prosper, extend its domain, and elude those desiring to capture him once and for all. . . .As with Buffalo Bill, Custer, and Jesse James, Billy the Kid's persistent presence in our imagination demonstrates an appeal that crosses and recrosses any supposedly firm boundaries between the folk, the popular, and the artistic imaginations, or any conventional boundaries between history and legend.
(*Inventing Billy the Kid* 4-6)

Tatum's statements neatly accord with much Ondaatje enacts in his text. First, Ondaatje reveals no concern for capturing

the Kid once and for all; in fact, he works against any such possibility. Second, Ondaatje's juxtaposing of factual documents, a comic-book story, and his own fictional embellishments highlights the Kid's flexibility, that is, the wide variety of mediums into which the Kid has been appropriated over time. For Ondaatje finally, the Kid is neither merely historical, mythical, nor fictional; he is at once all of these and more: he remains a function of our cultural imagination that continues to compell reappraisals and reworkings. As Tatum's words suggest, the Kid continues to ride on into the present just as the present continues to proliferate a seemingly endless variety of new representations. Ondaatje seems to share Tatum's conviction, and his text stands to comment on the implications of the Kid's virtual "immortality." The mysterious life and legend of Billy the Kid function as appropriate subjects for one to demonstrate deep suspicions about the way we author the past.

Notes

¹ All references to the text are taken from 1984 Penguin edition. Pages numbers to references appear parenthetically.

² See Stephen Tatum's *Inventing Billy the Kid*, 3.

³ The Penguin edition does not maintain this subtitle. Consult the original Anansi edition, 1970.

⁴ See Manina Jones essay "*The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Scripting the Docudrama*," 35.

⁵ See Tatum, 150. Also see T.D. MacLulich's essay "*Ondaatje's Mechanical Boy: Portrait of the Artist as Photographer*," 116-17.

⁶ I borrow this term from Bill Brown. See his essay "*Interlude: The Agony of Play in 'The Open Boat,'*" 36.

⁷ This debate is too cumbersome to be adequately discussed at this point, but I introduce it because Hutcheon does not go far enough in discussing how a text can foreground the role an author plays in what she calls the process of production. For Hutcheon, "the producer of the text (at least from the reader's point of view) is never, strictly speaking, a real or even an *implied* one, but it is one *inferred* by the reader from his/her positioning as enunciating entity" (*Poetics* 81, original italics). Bakhtin's notion of the author/creator should not be ignored when discussing author-text relations, for according to his scheme the author is very much alive and well and currently appearing in a text near you as an entity that is "seen" and "objectified" (as in the person of the Kid, into whom

Ondaatje as author/creator collapses) and not only as a being inferred by the reader, as Hutcheon suggests.

In the process of preparing this thesis, a few discrepancies emerged between my own readings of these texts and the theories I used to facilitate my arguments. By means of a few concluding remarks I would like to address some of the problems that have surfaced as a result of these discrepancies. First of all, it would not only be foolish but also intellectually naive to assume that any literary theory by itself could possess enough flexibility to illuminate the full field of issues and problems that come to the fore when one engages a literary text. Theories are tools to help a reader make sense of a text, and like tools, theories are most helpful when they are applied to the kinds of problems they are designed to treat. However, problems often arise for which the correct tools have yet to be found or fashioned.

Chapters two and three rely heavily on the ideas of Linda Hutcheon, and for good reason. Both *Blood Meridian* and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* mark the intersection of history and fiction that Hutcheon explores in great detail. Through the appropriation and reinscription of documentary evidence into fictive texts, history emerges not as a trustworthy, authoritative guide to the past but as simply another fiction, another text, another form of discourse that stands open to an endless proliferation of revisions and reinterpretations. The common-sensical distinction between fiction and history wears away. Hutcheon outlines the many

ways this issue is treated by contemporary artists, historians, and theorists alike. Yet missing from her study is an analysis that adds myth into the equation. It seems fair to assert that history and fiction are not the only realms in which the past, or the West for the matter, resides. Myth also delivers messages about the world, and in the course of writing this thesis it became increasingly apparent that myth plays a major role in how these three authors deal with the West, a role not treated by theories I enlisted.

In Crane's short stories, the issue of myth readily emerges. As newcomers to the West, Crane's protagonists bring with them a set of cultural assumptions, a set of myths about the West. These myths confront and interact with the "real" West these characters enter. What surfaces as a result of this confrontation is not a polarization of true and false, of real and mythic, but a conflation of these apparent oppositions. Myth emerges not as a set of lies but as a generative force capable of informing and shaping the "real" world. Crane shows the West as a place tightly tethered to ideas, not place--ideas that become objectified, realized, and played out in a very (hyper-)real West.

The same kind of objectified idea of the West can be readily seen--and readily purchased--in your average Western-wear outlet. But purchasing the "authentic" Western look may not necessarily guarantee one Western status. When a New Yorker purchases on Madison Avenue a pair of very expensive,

authentically soiled cowboy boots, some might cringe and scoff. Who is this poser urban cowboy! What a display of gratuitous Westernness! Yet is there a difference when a pick-up driving dude from Big Timber buys a fringed leather vest in a certain Montana dry-goods store? Is his action free from the reproachful giggling delivered upon the New Yorker simply because of the fact of his residency or lineage, or is the dude also participating in the dream of being Western? Is the vest somehow more authentic, more Western than the pair of boots? What would happen if the dude wore his vest down Madison Avenue? What would happen if the New Yorker took his boots into a Miles City bar? Which fellow, if either, is the authentic Westerner? These are not simple questions to answer, but they should suggest that authenticity exists as a highly unstable, relativized notion.

Neither a fact nor a cultural given, authenticity remains malleable. It can change upon the instant, and this instant often involves the exchange of goods for currency. This fact levels the New Yorker and the dude; both pay for the right to appear Western despite the fact of their respective state residencies. The authentic Western look has moved away from any grounding in reality into the realm of commodity. No longer a fact of existence even if it ever was, the Western look now exists as an image of the authentic Western look, as a representation of itself, as a "*Weltanschauung* which has become actual, materially translated," which is what Debord suggests has become of real

life in industrialized societies. If boots and vests call to the authentic West, it is because they signal themselves as objectified ideas of what the Western look means to us, ideas that spring from myth, history, and the myriad of images of the West orbiting about us.

One could reasonably argue that just as the production of the "authentic" West partly stems from and relies on myth, it also enacts a parallel production of myth. As with Western wear, the Western literature treated in this study maintains a strong, dynamic relation with myth. Neither McCarthy's nor Ondaatje's text explicitly purports to reveal a true history of the West's past, but both nevertheless deal with probing the real past as an issue. Far from being completely resolved, this issue becomes problematized instead. Apart from my previous arguments, I would like to suggest another way these texts question the possibility of knowing the real past, a way that concerns the role myth plays in relation to the past.

In *Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, Michael Ondaatje juxtaposes historical, fictional, and mythic treatments of the Kid's past. This wide spectrum of "evidence" concerning the Kid introduces a problem concerning how we fashion verifiable accounts of the past. While common-sense dictates that history explains the real and myth and fiction explain the false (the untrue), Ondaatje's text disrupts such a distinction. Here, fiction, history and myth stand side by side, yet none proves sufficient for rendering an accurate

picture of the Kid and his world. The Kid's historical dimension is not only rendered powerless as a means for capturing the Kid's authentic identity, but it is granted the same degree of authority as the mythic and fictive dimensions. As just another realm of the Kid's variegated textual existence, history obtains no priority in the attempt to produce the Kid's authentic portrait. *The Collected Works* thus allows the suggestion that in attempting to verify the real past, fiction and myth, rather than being disallowed as false accounts, actually approach history as viable sources for study. Like history, myth operates as an avenue to approach the past.

In *Blood Meridian* Cormac McCarthy treats the issue of myth in a manner different from either Crane or Ondaatje. He places real events from the past within a strange, seemingly primordial landscape, a surreal or mythic darkling plain upon which real historical personages enact a story from their lives. McCarthy transplants the real past into an epic framework. His actors are more like types than individualized, round characters, and they participate in a drama whose theme involves the huge existential questions of fate and freewill. Situated within this structure, McCarthy's nameless protagonist, the Kid, lights out, like so many before him in the histories of literature and myth, on the archetypal journey into the wilderness. Of course, McCarthy's text adds a twist to the formula, and the epic structure of his novel is often subverted, but these

particular and familiar elements of epic and the numinous quality of the narration impart an undeniable mythic dimension to the text, a dimension which intermingles with the novel's historicity. While McCarthy's text takes up the question of history, from it emerges a story of the past which more closely resembles myth. In the attempt to write about the past, McCarthy writes a novel that stands as a complex blend of mythic and historical elements. Such a seeming conflation between historiography and mythopoeia allows the assertion that the process of interrogating the past involves mythologizing the past.

The implications of this assertion extend beyond the texts treated in this study and reach into a variety of projects currently underway that purport to represent or unearth the "real" West. But by interrogating the West to locate its "authentic" self, are these projects consequently laying the groundwork for the birth of the next myth of the West? At any rate, artists and historians alike are taking up the contemporary rage for revising the image of the West, and people are purchasing their efforts. Publishing houses are printing stories of ranch-life and other accounts of hard-fought life in the West; they are publishing personal narratives and histories of Native Americans, women, early settlers, and other heretofore silenced Westerners. They are responding to the call for the "real" West.

As an example of this call, the editors of an anthology of personal narratives written by women settlers state that

the documents in their book "were selected for readability, authenticity, and representative significance" (*So Much to be Done* xx). While the editors suggest that "[t]hrough the voices of these nineteen women we may gain some understanding of thousands of others" (xx), these voices do not stand alone. Despite the apparent "authenticity" of these documents, they are not allowed to speak for themselves. Instead, they are prefaced by editorial comments which often stress the hardships of Western frontier life and the assertiveness of the women who lived there. While this anthology stresses its dedication to giving voice to the experience of previously silenced women and while it stresses its dedication to removing "the very lavishness of the praise [that] has sometimes obscured the reality" (xi) of these women's lives, one might wonder to what degree this anthology enacts precisely what it sets out to quell. Is one form of praise falling away to be replaced by another, a praise for the independent, hardworking frontier woman? Is this anthology creating a romanticized myth of the Western frontier woman just as it purports to render the sober facts of her history?

I confronted these nagging questions in a literary seminar I attended during the writing of these chapters, and they partly account for the genesis of this thesis. While noticing the current rage for the "real" West, it is hard not to notice a concomitant romancing of the hard-fought Western experience that is being used to counter other romanticized

views. In short, it is hard not to notice a romancing of the prospect that such a "real" West will emerge. Yet as the example of *Blood Meridian* demonstrates, seeking the "real" West can land one in the realm of myth. Is the current production of the "real" West also the production of the next myth of the West? Can the West escape its mooring in myth and romance? Will the West ever be comfortable without knowing its "authentic" self? These too are nagging questions.

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