

SUZERAINS OF THE ANTHROPOCENE:
A POSTHUMAN READING OF CORMAC McCARTHY'S

BLOOD MERIDIAN AND THE ROAD

by

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Abstract

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Suzerains of the Anthropocene: A Posthumanist Reading of Cormac McCarthy's Blood Meridian and The Road

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Scholars of Cormac McCarthy's fiction often cite the violence typically present within it as abundant in its volume and nihilistic in its meaning. However, the violence in McCarthy's work atypically does not exist for show or snuff or to progress the plot. Instead, the author repeatedly meditates upon violence and proffers dark assertions as to the nature of violence. In *Blood Meridian*, the bloodlust of the antagonist, Judge Holden, emerges from a being and a philosophy of the land. From the Darwinian struggle for supremacy articulated by Holden and reified by the content of the narrative, a posthuman condition built upon inter- and intraspecies violence that decentralizes the human emerges. McCarthy does this in *Blood Meridian* (1985) and *The Road* (2006) to articulate the violence inherent in the contemporary status quo of the primary human/biological condition, via respective examinations of bloodthirst in the American Southwest in 1849-50 and a post-apocalyptic near-future.

However, this thesis will primarily argue that McCarthy tempers the violence present in these works with the emergence of a morality based in posthumanism. Drawing heavily from Elizabeth Grosz' posthuman Darwinism as well as theory on the Anthropocene and other posthumanists, this essay will argue that central characters in *Blood Meridian* and *The Road* reject participation in the violence that unfolds around them and, in doing so, transcend the kill-or-be-killed binary posited as fundamental to life on earth in McCarthy's two novels. Their transcendence is marked by the responsibilities of those species, namely humans, that have succeeded in a Darwinian framework, and that the steps beyond a continued cornucopianist existence valued in the Anthropocene lie in the application of posthuman theory to life and systems beyond the human.

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Preface

This essay will argue that Cormac McCarthy's two novels *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West* and *The Road* contemplate the reality of a Darwinian "war of nature" or the Hobbesian state of nature, one which emphasizes violent natural selection, while simultaneously examining the both the role and viability of morality in such a world — primarily through the moral actions of the kid in *Blood Meridian* and the boy in *The Road*. Although moral rectitude rarely emerges victorious, the morality McCarthy articulates coincides with a combination of Grosz, Latour and Alaimo's vision of a posthuman earth, one which extends agency, decentralizes the human from the historical narrative and considers the nonhuman actors in our earth system in the shared language, economy, politics, or paradigm of natural selection that all living things speak.

However, while Grosz, Latour, Alaimo, and other posthumanists hope to enact the decentered human, McCarthy's writing also acknowledges the necessity of centering the human, specifically its more sophisticated and abstracted forms of morality, to both pragmatically achieve and uphold the values of this posthumanism. As Clive Hamilton writes in *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene* in defense of anthropocentrism in the Anthropocene:

We do not need to know anything more to justify the new Anthropocentrism because they place human beings inescapably at the center of the Earth System's evolution. Such truths may mean that human agency is now more potent than ever, even if we now understand that agency not as the autonomous capacity of free beings but as a force always constrained by its embeddedness in nature. (52)

McCarthy's fiction thus articulates a humanity embedded in nature, specifically in the world of violent selection, but also one that recognize what Hamilton calls, humanity's

“extraordinary power and unique responsibility” as a geological actor within the Anthropocene (152). Only the recognition of human evolutionary suzerainty and its pronounced geological impact in the Anthropocene will allow for the possibility of transformation and a reorientation of priorities to achieve a new paradigm.

Chapter 1 — *Azolla* and Alexander

“A tomb now suffices him for whom the whole world was not sufficient.”

— Epitaph on Alexander the Great’s tomb in Alexandria, Egypt

Fifty million years ago in the early half of the Eocene Epoch, long after the last of the dinosaurs had gone extinct, the Arctic Circle looked decidedly less Arctic than it does today. Giant flightless birds and crocodiles sunbathed on sandy beaches dotted with palm trees. Nearby forests — tropical by today’s standards — contained vast and impressive biodiversity, full of insects, turtles, early primates and even large, though relatively hairless, mammals unimpeded by the perpetually cold climate that typically limits it (Imster, Doyle). Though the dark winters probably turned somewhat cold, the relatively high percentage of carbon dioxide and other prominent greenhouse gases in Earth’s atmosphere likely kept it warm enough even for cold-blooded animals to survive the months of night due to the planet’s axial tilt.

However, in fewer than one million years, the birds, crocodiles and palm trees could no longer survive in the Arctic as the climate had changed drastically. Snow and ice had frozen over the paradise at the top of the world, and the temperature of surface of the then-landlocked Arctic Ocean fell from about 12°C to -10°C, according to a 2000 study in the journal *Nature* (“Episodic fresh surface waters” 606). This dramatic shift would change the Earth from a so-called “hothouse” planet to the “icehouse” planet humanity knows today.

This change all happened because of a little fern which had leaves no larger than a fly’s wing.

An ancient member of the *Azolla* genus, a type of freshwater fern, initiated this massive shift, an alteration of the planet’s climate on a scale not witnessed since the meteor

strike which slew the dinosaurs blocked out the sun for decades. Fifty million years ago, massive blooms of *Azolla* covered the 1.54 million square miles of freshwater surface of the Arctic Ocean. Species of the plant today are noted for their ability to draw in nitrogen and carbon dioxide at astonishing rates (one ton of nitrogen per acre per year and six tons of carbon dioxide per acre per year), and fossil records indicate the cyclical blooms drew down and sequestered roughly 80 percent of the carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, severely impacting its ability to retain the heat and energy provided by sunlight. Ever since then, sheets of ice miles thick have covered the North and South Poles, and snow typically falls in temperate regions in the winters, a rare phenomenon before the blooms.

Several million years later in 332 BCE, Alexander the Great peered across a small stretch of the Eastern Mediterranean Sea at the city-state of New Tyre. The inhabitants of the coastal Phoenician city of Old Tyre, in which he stood, fled to the island stronghold half of the two-part city, safe from the conqueror's *hetairoi*, *hypaspists* and *sarissa*-equipped phalanxes. Roughly half a mile of seawater lay between him and the richest port town in the Persian Empire, a worthy prize to add to his growing collection of territories. Several ancient kings, including the mythical Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar, had attempted to crack the defenses of the city to no avail. Alexander had too few ships to launch an amphibious invasion against the stronger Tyrian fleet, and the 40,000 men behind thick stone walls could withstand most conventional attacks anyway. He knows only that a landbridge submerged roughly six feet below the sea's surface connects New Tyre to the continent of Asia. He glances back to the city of Old Tyre, and the man who apocryphally cut the Gordian knot once again shows his prowess for lateral thinking.

Alexander orders his men to deconstruct Old Tyre, to use the stones of the city's buildings to build a causeway atop the landbridge. Six months of construction, siege and naval sorties later, Alexander captured the city and killed, crucified or enslaved most of its inhabitants.

To this day, in no small part because of Alexander's moment of brutal clarity, Tyre is a peninsula, not an island separated from the mainland.

Divided by eons of time, magnitudinous degrees of scale, delineations and grades of individual conscience and natural instinct, forecasted thought and atemporal action: these two examples indicate the potential power of the living organism in the vastness of systems often thought to cradle the biological agents upon the earth, its ability to effect change in the vastness of geology and climate, to insert itself into the deep history of the universe only briefly. In comparison to the *Azolla* ferns of the prehistoric Arctic, Alexander's achievements appear small and piecemeal. Who knows how much soil emerged from the oceans 50 million years ago as the ice caps froze into place, how many land bridges it created or destroyed? Yet humanity has grown considerably in the past 2,500 years and our agency grows so absolute and irrefutable that our actions, both intentional and directed as well as unforeseen, have given us the grim privilege and the horrifying knowledge that we now inherit *Azolla's* mantle.

We have become; more so than most plants, animals, or fungi in the entire history of our planet; a species *terra forma* — one that shapes the earth.

Chapter 2 - The Anthropocene

“Man has done much to mould the form of the earth’s surface, though we cannot always distinguish between the results of his actions and the effects of purely geological causes... we are not yet able to measure the force of the different elements of disturbance, or to say how far they have been compensated by each other... the myriad forms of animal and vegetable life, which covered the earth when man first entered upon the theatre of a nature whose harmonies he was designed to derange, have been, through his action, greatly changed in numerical proportion, sometimes much modified in form and product, and sometimes entirely extirpated.”

— George Perkins Marsh, *Man and Nature*

When atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer heralded the Anthropocene Epoch at the turn of the millenium, they did so with express purpose of transitioning humanity from a biological actor to a geological one, assigning the species *homo sapiens* the same impact and agency upon Earth’s ecosystems as plate tectonics and earthquakes, volcanoes, tidal forces and others. Crutzen noted in a brief follow up article in 2002 in the journal *Nature* titled “Geology of Mankind: The Anthropocene” that “It seems appropriate to assign the term ‘Anthropocene’ to the present, in many ways *human-dominated*, geological epoch.” (Crutzen, emphasis added). Crutzen adds many qualifiers to justify humanity’s ascension to the level of a geological actor instead of merely a biological one, but the gist of it comes down to the effects of the last 10,000 years of the development of civilization, plain to see in modernity. We release ever-increasing amounts of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into the air, divert streams and rivers for our agricultural pursuits, desalinate oceans while simultaneously dumping trash into them, frack for natural gas and mine for minerals and fossil fuels, pave over stretches of grassland with asphalt, and cut tunnels through mountains. Humanity has nearly eradicated the concept of wilderness in these pursuits, and the cornucopianist nature of modern capitalism and its

core value of growth has driven us to inhabit the world as a megafaunal species nearly eight billion individuals strong and growing, a figure which would have likely dumbfounded Malthus if he had seen it. As Crutzen notes, the world has become a space and a place utterly dominated by a hairless, bipedal primate to the extent that our supremacy strains even the broadest definition of apex species. Some have even argued that *homo sapiens* has effectively removed itself entirely from the biological web of interaction implicit in Darwinian natural selection or even that evolution no longer applies to us.

Though not sanctioned as an official era of Earth's natural history in part because of the ambiguity of the temporal boundaries of such a segment of time,¹ the Anthropocene has captured the minds of theorists, writers, artists and scholars in the humanities as much as it has climate scientists, specifically because it objectively attempts to measure humanity's centrality to natural history and the concepts of deep geology and deep ecology — schools that argue that natural history long precedes the existence of life, and even the only known planet upon which it unfolded. Yet, the "realization" of the Anthropocene depends on recent scientific discoveries, specifically discoveries surrounding climate change. Most, but not all, criticism regarding the Anthropocene views this era through the lens of climate change and global warming for a few main reasons. First, anthropogenic (human-caused) climate change implicates humanity directly in the dawn and creation of a new geological epoch, granting the species far greater power than it would have as just another animal. As Dipesh

¹ In the same article, Crutzen starts the Anthropocene roughly around the dawn of the Industrial Revolution or "in the latter part of the eighteenth century, when analyses of air trapped in polar ice showed the beginning of growing global concentrations of carbon dioxide and methane. This date also happens to coincide with James Watt's design of the steam engine in 1784" (Crutzen). Others have suggested placing the start of the Anthropocene as early as humanity's (or a close evolutionary relative's) ability to wield or create fire as early as 1.5 million years or as recently as the end of World War II in 1945, with the detonation of the first atomic bombs.

Chakrabarty writes in his essay “The Climate of History,” “In unwittingly destroying the artificial but time-honored distinction between natural and human histories, climate scientists posit that the human being has become something much larger than the simple biological agent that he or she has always been. Humans now wield a geological force” (206). We have become a “geological force” and in doing so collapsed the typically separated histories of the natural and the human. Clive Hamilton takes this claim a step further in his book *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene*² by noting that this combination of stories serves as both a revision of past cataloguing and chronicling efforts and new guideline against which new chapters of the world’s story are written. Hamilton contends, “We must concede what seemed impossible to contemplate — humans as agents changing the course of the deep history, or rather the Earth’s deep future, an event giving rise to what might be called ‘post-history’” (4). The impacts of this new cognition in some ways serve as reductive agents of human history in Chakrabarty’s mind because the cognition demands the realization of humanity as a collaborative, singular agent whose own past and future has a significant imprint upon the planet’s ecological past and future on a time scale beyond reckoning, if we are to believe Hamilton. Chakrabarty notes, “Climate change poses for us a question of human collectivity, an us, pointing to a figure of the universal that escapes our capacity to experience the world” (222).

Second, and more practically, most climatologists, researchers, anthropologists, and “hard” scientists project the effects of climate change to cause problems, challenges, obstacles and catastrophes on a global scale, not merely a local, national or even continental

² In the acknowledgements of the book, Hamilton notes that Chakrabarty helped revise an early draft and suggested ideas for it.

one. The dilemmas produced by anthropogenic climate change are numerous, but perhaps one of the most obviously impactful would be rising sea levels which would threaten several of the planet's most populated cities, including Shanghai, New York, Mumbai, Guangzhou, Tokyo, Rio de Janeiro, New Orleans, and Osaka, to name a few. That speaks nothing about the desertification which could foster major droughts in the world's breadbaskets, more acidic oceans that will likely harm ocean wildlife, and more severe weather caused by greater amounts of water in the atmosphere. On top of that, the people leaving the newly drowned or sun-scorched cities could cause an unparalleled refugee and humanitarian crisis. Ulrich Beck elaborates on the cascading effect that calamities in the climate will have on the humanity in his book, *World at Risk*.

The poorest people in the world will be the hardest hit. They will be the least able to adapt themselves to the changes in the environment... An exodus of eco-refugees and climatic asylum seekers will flood across the wealthy North; crises in the so-called Third and Fourth Worlds could escalate into war [and] dramatically accelerate the extinction of the species" (37).

In fact, he argues that these global threats will "[abolish] the three pillars of the risk calculus" necessary in anticipating, solving and remediating the problems caused by more typical disasters (28). Similar to the historical change Chakrabarty observes, Beck believes climate change will render the way in which humanity currently interacts with the world's challenges as obsolete as those challenges grow increasingly larger, requiring more and more resources to overcome.

Beyond humanity, the rest of the world's animals and plants will likely suffer even more than people; as land and fresh water become more scarce resources, wildlife will face increased threat of habitat loss and waning biodiversity could decimate already fragile ecologies. Already, the world is suffering from a mass extinction event, named as either the

Holocene extinction or the Anthropocene extinction, specifically because of human causes. In her book on the Anthropocene extinction, *The Sixth Extinction* (so named because Earth has experienced five mass extinction events before the current one), Elizabeth Kolbert explains that humans have accelerated the rate of ecological change through multiple ways from overhunting (largely from poaching) to ocean acidification to name a few, noting specifically that these effects have accumulated into a sort of “panic” state for the ecosystem causing an increase in extinction rates. “Conditions on earth change only very slowly, except when they don’t... Though rare, these moments of panic are disproportionately important. They determine the pattern of extinction, which is to say, the pattern of life” (94). She later adds that “the very freakishness of the events... renders them so deadly; all of a sudden, organisms find themselves facing conditions for which they are, evolutionarily, completely unprepared.” (104). Population biologists Gerardo Ceballos and Paul Ehrlich agree, writing in a 2018 article in *Science* that the current rate of extinction is roughly 100 times larger than it would be at “background levels”³ and noted that rate change, like all mass extinction events, is due to a “rare event changing the environment so quickly that many organisms cannot evolve in response to it” (Ceballos and Ehrlich 1080). Kolbert also writes that during such ecological crises “the usual rules of survival are suspended. Conditions change so drastically or so suddenly... that evolutionary history counts for little” (17). Importantly, Kolbert, Ceballos and Ehrlich all invoke the inability for species to adapt and evolve within a new ecosystem as the reason for their extinction.

³ Kolbert succinctly explains “background levels” far more effectively than I can in the text: She writes, “In ordinary times — times here understood to mean whole geologic epochs — extinction takes place only very rarely, more rarely even than speciation, and it occurs at what’s known as the background extinction rate... Mass extinctions are different. Instead of a background hum, there’s a crash, and disappearance rates spike” (Kolbert 15-16).

Beck's fear of human extinction should also fall under the Darwinist framework, though for different reasons. Human adaptability to various climates and its generalist survival strategy gave it the ability to take over diverse evolutionary roles and fill a wide variety of niches. While the Anthropocene has seemingly catapulted the human species into a new class of organism (as geological force, as Chakrabarty called it), it still belongs definitively within the realm of the biological as well — perhaps solely — because of its ability to go extinct. Kolbert acknowledges this new human liminality between the biological and the geological in the closing words of her text. "... Having freed ourselves from the constraints of evolution, humans nevertheless remain dependent on the earth's biological and geochemical systems. By disrupting those systems... we're putting our own survival in danger..." (267-8). Despite the peril in which we have placed ourselves, she continues by decentering the concern of the human in the face of the more present danger affecting other forms of life on this planet on the verge of extinction. "Right now, in the amazing moment that to us counts as the present, we are deciding, without quite meaning to, which evolutionary pathways will remain open and which will forever remain closed" (268).

The collective "we are deciding"⁴ in Kolbert's closing remarks does not currently denote an active decision-making process; there is no calculus as to what lives and what dies. Chakrabarty describes humanity not as consciously choosing to pursue existence as a geological force, but rather that "We have stumbled into [the Anthropocene]" (217). Yet we exist now in a supreme position of power over all life on earth. Like the *Azolla*, we have already chosen the fate of the world and its inhabitants for the foreseeable future, we have

⁴I too use and will continue to use the collective "we" throughout this paper, as writing from a place of separation and attempted objectivity (a fraught, useless and dishonest exercise, in my opinion) would be rather hypocritical given future contents.

selected without actually selecting species for extinction, and our rules stand equivocal or even supercede to those ordained by the seas, the soil, and the grand web of life.

All at once, the Anthropocene curiously centralizes the human within the discourse of the earth, marking it as exceptional, as separate from all other modes of life on earth, and admittedly for good reason. While all living creatures affect their surrounding systems via interactions with other organisms and even with the planet itself, few would argue that any single species has had more of a geological impact on Earth than humanity. Somewhat paradoxically though, this bold declaration creates a collision between the human and the natural world of which it formerly was a part. In some ways, the Anthropocene destabilizes and refutes humanist philosophy and theory, and in others, it fulfills its wildest dreams by ensuring the primacy of the human over the animal, the final separation of *homo sapiens* from the “lower” species as Darwin and others also described them. Broadly speaking, the Anthropocene fulfills the old Hobbesian aspiration, of humanity finally separating itself from the state of nature, though it also implicates us perhaps more within “nature” than any other animal possibly could because of our elevation to a geological caste of actors.

Chapter 3 - Posthuman Interaction

“Pull a thread here and you’ll find it’s attached to the rest of the world.”

– Nadeem Aslam, *The Wasted Vigil*

The entire last chapter of George Perkins Marsh’s seminal 1864 text *Man and Nature* details the “Projected or Possible Geographic Changes by Man” including the construction of canals, the diversion of rivers like the Rhine and the Nile, potentially draining the Zuiderzee in the Netherlands, and the effects of mining the world of its natural resources. As one of the United States’ and perhaps the world’s earliest conservationists, his concerns in the text lie with preserving nature, and even hinting at humankind’s place within it. His final words in the chapter however read as an ominous questioning of man’s geographical power and its unknown (and perhaps unknowable) impacts.

It is a legal maxim that ‘the law concerneth not itself with trifles’... but in the vocabulary of nature, little and great are terms of comparison only; she knows no trifles, and her laws are as inflexible in dealing with an atom as with a continent or planet. The human operations mentioned in the last few paragraphs, therefore, do act in the ways ascribed to them, though our limited faculties are at present, perhaps forever, incapable of weighing their immediate, still more their ultimate consequences. But our inability to assign definite values to these causes of the disturbance of natural arrangements is not a reason for ignoring the existence of such causes in any general view of the relations between man and nature, and we are never justified in assuming a force to be insignificant because its measure is unknown, or even because no physical effect can now be traced to it as its origin. The collection of phenomena must precede the analysis of them, and every new fact, illustrative of the action and reaction between humanity and the material world around it, is another step toward the determination of the great question, whether man is of nature or above her. (Marsh 465)

Marsh acknowledges the potential for overexploitation of nature by man, that unintended consequences still have weight, and finally he posits that the “great question” man must answer implicates either our transaction with nature or our supremacy over “her” (465).

The construction of mines and canals, altering the flow of rivers and clearing forests, or even

Alexander building a land bridge, then become not just the cries of a tree hugger, but an indictment and consideration of the role of humanity on the planet. While conservation and environmental efforts have gained considerable headway since the middle of the 19th century, so too has industrialization, modernization and development, all in the name of mankind's expansion and growth.

No branch of theory has attempted to decentralize the human from the narrative of the Earth more than posthumanism. Created as a direct response and criticism of humanism, critical or philosophical posthumanism counters human priority, authority and placement over the natural world. Cary Wolfe perhaps puts it best in the introduction to his book *What is Posthumanism?* when he writes,

... Posthumanism names a historical moment in which the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatic, and economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore, a historical development that points towards the necessity of new theoretical paradigms (but also thrusts them on us), a new mode of thought that comes after the cultural repressions and fantasies, the philosophical protocols and evasions, of humanism as a historically specific phenomenon. (Wolfe xv-xvi)

This definition could throw posthumanism all the way back to Galileo's observation of a heliocentric solar system, as the first of many successive moves away from the innate divinity or singularity of humanity. Wolfe's description correctly indicates that humanity actually participates in systems and networks it supposedly only oversaw. This reformulation of human participation serves to both decenter the human and democratize agency amongst more actors and systems (from plants, animals and machines, to ecologies and economies) and simultaneously opens the possibility for or recognition of greater interaction between those actors. In his essay "From Posthumanism to Posthuman Ecocriticism," Serpil Oppermann argues this new "interlinked humanism and new

materialist viewpoints” not only “acknowledg[es] the permeable boundaries of species in the naturalcultural continuum, but also recognize the profound interconnections between different forms of life in the composite world where previously we had seen separations” (25).

Posthumanism’s development takes many cues from postmodern thought in this regard, seeking to destabilize previously established metanarratives (the human as natural, intrinsic stewards or exploiters of the planet, allowed to do what they so please with its bounty) and blur conventional binaries and as Oppermann puts it “separations” (the observer vs. the participant in global systems, human standing simultaneously opposite to animal, nature, and machine). In doing so, Wolfe and Oppermann argue that posthumanism asks for the same revisions to humanism that postmodernism asks of modernity.

However, unlike postmodernism which (correctly) questions the role of empiricism, posthumanism’s “new mode of thought” still seems reliant on empirical science to make its claims (Wolfe xvi). The world of toxic bodies and transcorporeality that Stacy Alaimo describes in *Bodily Natures* is informed as much by her ecofeminist outlook as by the empirical fact of pollution of plastic in the ocean likely means most human bodies contains trace amounts of the petroleum byproduct. She notes in her essay “Thinking as Stuff in the World” that “Tracing intra-actions and other modes of entanglement between substances and systems enables political critique and the development of ethical and political modes that do not separate the human from the material world” (15). Posthumanism has more concrete, real world, empirically measurable implications as it becomes rooted in the type of materialism that Alaimo describes. Those possibilities then may offer a more concrete,

pragmatic approach to solving the problems present within the status quo than the nihilistic irony often employed by postmodern artists as mere critique of the status quo.

For anthropologist Anna Tsing, this empiricism takes the form of her ethnographic research into the varied and far-flung story of the matsutake mushroom in her book *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, which examines the various actors, human and nonhuman, create various communities and “assemblages” as she calls them, and how those interactions can create something new. She writes, “[M]ore than comparison, I seek histories through which humans, matsutake, and pine create forests... As ways of life come together, patch-based assemblages are formed. Assemblages, I show, are scenes for considering livability—the possibility of common life on a human-disturbed earth” (Tsing 163). Tsing applies the analogy of polyphonic (multi-voiced) music as a way of achieving harmony and dissonance to the natural world, likening each and every being and system to a different instrument in a symphony. The assemblages, the possibility of common life that Tsing speaks of segue into the most important ramification of posthumanism, agreed on by most posthuman scholars, and also named specifically by Alaimo: the creation of a posthuman politics in the fertile ground of the Anthropocene, a state which almost requires a reconception of how the world interacts with each other if life itself seeks salvation from the potentially disastrous impacts of the new epoch. Posthumanism could hold the answers to frightening questions posed by a new age that explicitly elevates and centralizes the human.

Chapter 4 - Politics

“All animals are equal... but some animals are more equal than others.”

— George Orwell, *Animal Farm*

Most contemporary scholars and critics concerned with the Anthropocene view a development of a politics, here meaning both governance and distribution of power or agency, as the pivotal task within the Anthropocene, and a brief survey will posit that claim. As Bruno Latour writes in his essay “Agency in the Time of the Anthropocene,” this epoch presents a chance for humanity to “seize this opportunity to advance our common cosmopolitics” (Latour 4). Clive Hamilton notes, “The only response to the threats of the Anthropocene is a collective one, politics” (160). Jedediah Purdy, an environmental law professor and author of *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene*, correctly notes that “Politics is the fulcrum, not because it is attractive or easy, but because the questions about what kind of world to make cannot be answered without collective choice” (266). Posthumanists also consider politics an important consideration in their formulation. Stacy Alaimo approaches the question of politics in the introduction of *Bodily Natures*, writing that “Potent ethical and political possibilities emerge from the literal contact zone between human corporeality and more-than-human nature” (*Natures* 2). Her idea of transcorporeality, the interchanges across bodies of all kinds of organisms and non-living things, sees the human as permanently “inter-meshed with the more-than-human world” and thus, “inseparable from ‘the environment’” (*Natures* 2)

As Greg Garrard explains in his primer to the critical genre of ecocriticism (simply titled *Ecocriticism*), this is because posthumanists and ecocritics alike see “the dualistic separation of humans from nature promoted by Western philosophy and culture as the

origin of the environmental crisis, and demands a return to a monistic primal identification of humans and the ecosphere” (24). The return to monism described by Garrard serves as both a massive paradigm shift for human history because it enlists “the ecosphere” within the story, recalling the collision of natural and human history that Chakrabarty details. Within that monism then, new interactions occur and the range of potential stakeholders expands to include living and non-living actors and agents. Latour specifically calls for a propagation of agency “as far and in as differentiated a way as possible” because “all agents share the same shape-changing destiny, a destiny that cannot be followed, documented, told, and represented by using any of the older traits associated with subjectivity or objectivity,” yet he resists the impulse to “‘reconcile’ or ‘combine’ nature and society” to render subject and object meaningless, again illustrating the postmodern influence on the posthuman (15). The subject acts upon the object, and in that, the object has no distinct sovereignty or agency; Latour seeks to remedy that imbalance, and the rest of his essay describes how humans have attributed agency to traditionally-considered objects as a sort of roadmap for how we might elevate objects into power-equitable agents. Yet, Latour misses here the gradations of agency which may still exist should the subject-object binary fall away; as the epigraph to this chapter suggests, some subjects (likely the geological forces) will likely have more power and thus more agency than others, and the ramifications of such cognizance could deeply impact the posthuman politics desired by so many.

However, if posthumanists agree on the necessity for a new politics, they rarely articulate exactly what this new politics looks like. Others argue that an excessively posthuman approach to politics could potentially render it impossible to achieve. Alaimo, like most of her contemporaries, does not immediately explain a political strategy for

articulating the non-human bodies involved in her transcorporeal interactions and participations in a global system. She correctly indicates in an essay refuting Ian Bogost's *Alien Phenomenology* that all decisions in the transcorporeal world become political as "what was once the ostensibly bounded human subject finds herself in a swirling landscape of uncertainty where practices and actions that were once not even remotely ethical or political matters suddenly become so" as "the material self cannot be disentangled" overwhelmingly massive systems and networks ("Stuff in the World" 17). Still, she does not quite theorize a definitive incarnation of how to mediate with these systems.

That said, Purdy resists the posthuman impulse of apparently spreading agency all willy-nilly. He notes in an interview with *The Atlantic's* Ross Anderson in 2015 that post-humanism fails to establish a specific variety of politics because politics requires organization of a common world and the articulation of what the world ought to be. After questioning the practical application of granting things like the wind or trees a right to enter the political discourse (though praising the theoretical pursuits of such practices) Purdy tells Anderson,

This radical group is really confused, maybe willfully so, in their conception of politics. What is distinctive about a politics that can organize a common world, and create an architecture for interdependence, is that it requires language. It is an artificial order whose materials are linguistic. People will object to this on sentimental or confused grounds, but I think it is irrefutable. You can't have politics without having linguistic access to others. (Anderson)

However, Purdy's insistence on a shared, common world may not even be achievable within the human species — despite our political sophistication — nonetheless with other animal and plant species. Objective facts remain questioned amongst us humans, conspiracy theorists and paid obscurants argue against empirical facts and figures with blind rhetoric

and pseudoscience, and the complacency brought upon us by modernity has bred a contempt for necessary, though uncomfortable change. Anthropogenic climate change, a primary factor of the Anthropocene itself, stands as a stark example of these traits in the American public, and other pressing political matters have effectively flummoxed the human race as a whole in its internal, highly dissonant polyphony, as Tsing might say. Purdy even somewhat admits this himself, writing, “The test is whether citizens can form the kind of democracy that can address the Anthropocene question, the question of what kind of world to make. A democracy that cannot do this will have marked itself as inadequate to its most basic problems” (267). Given the title of his book, Purdy would hopefully come close to what this politics looks like, but his iteration sounds remarkably similar to what his posthuman peers propagate. He imagines a simple rebranding of democracy that turns away from the neoliberal and colonial and imagines humanity’s interaction with the natural world as one built more on interaction, consideration and responsibility than on dominance, though he still looks to exclude the nonhuman from full participation because of the admittedly difficult task of granting it language.

Latour agrees with Purdy that the foundation of a politics for the Anthropocene requires language — politics “needs to endow its citizens with some capacity of speech, some degree of autonomy, some degree of liberty” — but he makes a strong case that a posthuman perception *grants* those actors language that otherwise would not have it because “such a process of composition is made impossible if what is to be composed is divided into two domains, one that is animate and has no agency, and one which is animated and concentrates all the agencies” (14). The goal, then, to uncovering this politics is to find and uncover a common “language” shared by all living organisms and nonliving forces on the planet,

specifically because language itself is the medium by which this politics operates. Furthermore, this language used *is* the politics because that language dictates the means of interaction between various agents. The language need not be anything concrete like English or bird calls or continental drift, but rather it must be something abstract. It must have a grammar, a ruleset that all can consciously and unconsciously follow. Mathematics often takes the role as a universal language, but it requires cognition and sentience to count and arithmetic and some of the new subjects within this domain lack that capability. Mathematics also has the problem of being too abstract and distanced for the pragmatic discussions required of these politics. One can only say so much by computing more and more digits of π .

Instead, we must find and focus on a system which articulates pure interaction between man, plant, animal, earth, water, air, microorganism and beyond. Fortunately, man has discovered that language, that politics which grants all actors their due agency. It always existed, but humankind has only relatively recently articulated its regulations, its dicta, and its stipulations and the implications it has for all life and nonlife on Earth.

I refer to the language of natural law, defined by Darwin's theory of evolution via natural selection.

Chapter 5 — Posthuman Darwinism

“It is not impossible therefore that in attributing an animal head to the remnant of Israel, the artist of the manuscript in the Ambrosian intended to suggest that on the last day, the relations between animals and men will take on a new form, and that man himself will be reconciled with his animal nature.”

— Giorgio Agamben, *The Open*

Since its inception just over 150 years ago, Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection has popularly, and incorrectly, been reduced to its supposedly essential elements and postulations: primarily, the idea of “survival of the fittest” that only the strongest of each species survives to carry on their own genetic code in the hopes of making the next generation inherently better. Each individual fights for intraspecies supremacy to further achieve interspecies supremacy, an evolutionary arms race happening simultaneously so quickly and so slowly as to hardly witness it happen at all. In *The Origin of Species*, Darwin himself calls this process “the war of nature,” and people have assumed the belligerence of separate animal and plant species towards one another ever since (649). However, others commented on such a violent state well before Darwin. Darwin’s theory neatly aligns with Tennyson’s line “nature, red in tooth and claw” (Tennyson LVI, 15) in his epic poem “In Memoriam A.A.H.” as well as Hobbes’ supposition of the state of nature between individual men as “nasty, brutish and short” (Hobbes 103).

The results of such a reading of Darwin were and have been nothing short of catastrophic, specifically because many early adherents to Darwin’s philosophy (though not including Darwin himself) saw this “war of nature” as hierarchical, in which increased complexity leads to increased strength with the strongest creatures reigning over all the “lower animals.” Humankind fits into the role as governor of all other species. However, precisely this narrative attribution led to rushed, poorly executed and thoroughly inhumane

attempts to achieve an end state — a bizarre parallel Darwin shares with his near-contemporary Karl Marx and his book, *Communist Manifesto*. Just as Stalin’s brutal pogroms and land redistribution forced an inorganic allegiance to what Marx imagined as an organic procession towards communist utopia, several influential people and populations attempted to selectively read and abuse Darwin’s writings to further the conflict between intra-*homo sapiens*, ostensibly to improve the race of man in an ideology which came to be known as Social Darwinism. Shortly after Darwin’s death, his half-cousin, Francis Galton, coined the phrase “eugenics” in the 1880s, drawing inspiration from his copy of *Origin of Species*, especially the first chapter which concerned human selection — better known as domestication. Fifty years later, Ernst Rudin would use the “science” of eugenics to justify the racial superiority of the Aryan race of Nazi Germany over all others. However, to solely accuse the Nazis of utilizing eugenics limits the wide scope of its practice far too severely. Most European nations in the early twentieth century had national eugenics societies that sought the forced sterilization of the mentally disabled, people of minority races, and/or the poor. Several prominent historical figures of the late 1800s and early 1900s publicly favored the practice of eugenics.⁵ Beyond eugenics, Social Darwinism reinvigorated and “scientifically” justified racism, sexism, imperialism and colonialism, class inequality, and all manner of degrees of separation amongst people as either the “fit” or the “unfit.”

Yet, while the struggle for survival, predation and supremacy do play major roles in Darwinian theory, Darwin also emphasizes throughout his work that these strategies and

⁵ That list includes, but is certainly not limited to: statisticians and economists like Karl Pearson, Sidney Webb, and John Maynard Keynes; biologist Charles Davenport; leading feminist and social critics Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Helen Keller, and Margaret Sanger; American Supreme Court jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes; U.S. Presidents William Howard Taft, Teddy Roosevelt, and Calvin Coolidge; conservative British Prime Ministers Winston Churchill and Arthur Balfour and modernist writers George Bernard Shaw, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, and T.S. Eliot.

ideals only serve as aspects of natural selection, as words within the larger language of survival. Social Darwinist readers failed to identify the nuance within the theory, which at its core, does not seek to enable certain species or subspecies or individuals within a genus or kingdom over others. Instead, Darwin speaks prominently about how natural selection serves primarily as a foundation for *how* life survives, not what kinds of life should. Notably, the strongest individuals do not survive in Darwinian selection; rather, the *fittest* survive. How does Darwin describe fitness? Initially he didn't.

The phrase “survival of the fittest” comes from a contemporary of Darwin's, a fellow English biologist named Herbert Spencer, who greatly appreciated *Origin of Species*. He first wrote the phrase in his book *Principles of Biology* (1864) as a replacement for the phrase “natural selection.” Darwin's collaborator and friend, Alfred Russell Wallace⁶ wrote to Darwin and suggested he replace the phrase “natural selection” with Spencer's term. However, Darwin argued against the replacement primarily for grammatical reasons, namely because “survival of the fittest” contains “a substantive governing a verb” (“Letter to Wallace”). However, Darwin also could have rejected this outlook for reasons of accuracy. One of Wallace's primary objections to the term is that “natural selection” personifies nature too much, and a certain reading of *Origin of Species* verifies this interpretation in spades (“From A.R. Wallace”). Does nature itself not select? Darwin again did not theorize some being sitting in a high tree with the head of a ram and the body of a lion with wings of an eagle with a ledger, deciding upon the fate of this species or that. Instead he imagined an

⁶ Interestingly, Wallace essentially discovered evolution by natural selection concurrently alongside Darwin. Darwin had discovered it earlier, but had yet to officially publish his findings, opting instead to conduct further experiments to verify. However, Wallace wrote to Darwin for advice on or ideas on a strange phenomenon/theory he was conjecturing about animals evolving to best fit within their environments, leading Darwin to publish his own findings shortly thereafter.

actor without perfect form, an amalgam of factors nearly infinite in number and variances in species of almost that same quantity as different emergent strategies to survive within ecosystems, at least long enough to further their own traits and characteristics (what would later come to be known as genetic code, shortly after Darwin's death) through sexual selection within species.

But surviving within the planetary ecosystem of the Earth demands navigating a complex language of respiration, ingestion, digestion, hydration, and copulation. It asks questions of each organism: How will you get food and water? How will you sleep? How will you survive predators? How can you pick off prey? What can you do better than your competitors? Where will you sleep? What dangers must you face and how will you face them? Each geographical, climactic, and organic entity asks this question of each organism in the struggle for survival. The human species implicitly has asked this question of other animal species, and in many ways, of the Earth itself, and the extinctions of the multitudes of plant and animal species — both those that have already occurred and those that have yet to occur — should serve as a harsh and thundering reply, as verbose and effective as any skilled orator's remarks: those species cannot adapt quickly to the inherent dangers we pose to them.

Yet that interchange itself is the politics desired by so many of the authors in the previous chapter. Purdy complains that animals and plants cannot speak, and thus cannot enter the political realm, but they can and do — quite often and quite loudly — via the language of natural selection. Repeated attempts by humanity to purge ourselves from the conversation of evolution have done little to dissuade other species that we do not serve as an important voice in the conversation of what survives on this planet. In fact, Chakrabarty's

insistence on the human as a geological force makes us one of the most prominent voices within that conversation. The essential tools which assured early human survival — toolmaking, pedagogy, domestication, agriculture, among others — have also evolved and amplified as civilizations have grown from those methods and repeatedly pushed out other animals that could not compete with a species that could set rocks on fire and level entire sections of forest in years, then months, then days, then seconds. Technology becomes inherently natural when viewed through this lens, as an amplifier held up to the mouths of mankind in the global conversation of survival.

Although the preceding paragraph (and arguably most of this essay thus far) perhaps comes off as misanthropic, re-imagining evolution as a conversation accomplishes two goals of re-situation that are not inherently anti- anything. First, it accurately conveys the gravity of the Anthropocene at a pivotal moment in the natural history of the world, and second, it also identifies how to interact with this world and make it slightly less foreign. If, as Latour says, human history and natural history have collapsed in upon themselves, then perhaps the idea of history — of past, present, and future — should dissolve as well. As Anthony Giddens says in his book *The Consequences of Modernity*:

Even those theories which stress the importance of discontinuist transition, like that of Marx, see human history as having an overall direction, governed by general dynamic principles. Evolutionary theories do indeed represent 'grand narratives,' although not necessarily ones which are teleologically inspired. According to evolutionism, 'history' can be told in terms of a 'story line' which imposes an orderly picture upon the jumble of human happenings. History 'begins' with small, isolated cultures of hunter gatherers, moves through the development of crop-growing and pastoral communities and from there to the formation of agrarian states, culminating in the emergence of modern societies in the West. Deconstructing social evolutionism means accepting that history cannot be seen as a unity, or as reflecting certain unifying principles of organization and transformation. But it does not imply that all is chaos..." (5-6)

The humanist readings of Darwinism evolution invoked an end state, an ultimate (human) species, attaching teleology to Darwin's work. Giddens, however, correctly notes evolution itself does not necessarily occur in a proper order towards ever greater progress. Much like Lyotard, he questions the idea of narrativity and direction but specifically in a sociological sense, but also in a biological sense as that sociology implicates humanity as a species. Lyotard's destruction of grand metanarratives in his overarching but succinct postulation on the fundamental truth of postmodernism would, in his view, delegitimize the finality of processes, bringing about the end of a coherent history and silencing notions that growth, complexity, intricacy, perfection all increase along a timeline until either humanity achieves utopia or falls into apocalypse or extinction itself.

But to see this dissolution of the metanarrative as disconcerting or dangerous is ill-founded. Instead, the lack of an end should *liberate* people and allow for the replacement of metanarratives with the idea of grand interactions, ongoing conflicts and cooperations by various parties that will exist in perpetuity. While this idea seems like a consignment of man to a secular purgatory, it instead just represents a shift of focus from valuing the supposed and conjectured outcomes and results of a specific system to *valuing the system itself*, a type of Kantian refocusing to that which is and has known inherent value instead of that which may or will be.⁷ As Elizabeth Grosz writes in her book *Becoming Undone*, "In what ways do Darwin and his followers elaborate a concept of life ... without teleology, without purpose, without a final accomplishment, without the human as its own end or goal... How to understand life as no longer bound by and defined through a hierarchy in which man is the

⁷ Not to say this shift should disparage consequentialists. On the contrary, knowing the consequences of our actions is the only way in which to confront and alter them for better outcomes within the perpetuity.

pinnacle of all living forms?" (4). In Darwinism, the praxis of this theory would disestablish what so many eugenicists believed was integral to natural selection, that nature itself desires an end state. Nature, of course, will never select an ultimate organism because the conditions in which an organism must live will always change. Grosz notably wants to "develop a concept of life that does not privilege the human as the aim or end of evolution, but sees the human as one among many species" (2). She specifically writes that in performing this theoretical task, she is "following Darwin" (2). Instead of focusing on Darwin's "sure but slow progress... when we have a distant object in view," we should note "the inextricable web of affinities" present within the Earth system (*Origin* 578). We should also keep in mind the closing words of *Origin of Species*, where Darwin primarily dwells on the interconnectedness of all things.

It is interesting to contemplate a tangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us... Whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning, endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved. (648-649)⁸

This reading of Darwinism refocuses the system from a fate, a telos, an eventuality that will unfold in the future, into a system of communication necessary and agreed upon by many posthumanists and environmentalist thinkers as the basis for the possibility and, subsequently, the implementation of a politics with the newly recognized agents of the Earth.

⁸ Though I must confess, the abridged section within that quote states: "From the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals directly follows," still showing an adherence to "higher" and "lower" species. Again, the abandonment of narrativity within Darwinism should make it postmodern Darwinism, and more desirable and feasible than imagining an "end state" species, human or otherwise.

For posthumanists, this basis of politics ideally will invoke what Alaimo calls in her *Thinking as Stuff in the World* essay the “practice of thinking from within and as part of the material world” (20). This practice includes “recognizing how all living creatures intra-act with place... [and] makes it imperative that we be accountable for the many material-semiotic systems we already inhabit” (20). Not only then must humanity understand the ways in which selection speaks to us from a position of vitality, but also from its seemingly inanimate actors, both the tangible (rocks, trees, wind) and the intangible (economies, ecologies, governments). The broad ruleset of natural selection certainly plays a part with both of these, but interestingly, the intangible concepts serve less as things and more as competing or subsequent rulesets. Thus, Alaimo sees posthuman politics as a wider cognizance, one intermeshed with wide, likely unfathomably large systems of interaction and materiality. In *Bodily Natures*, she writes, “Potent ethical and political possibilities emerge from the literal contact zone between human corporeality and more-than-human nature. Imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always inter-meshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment’” (*Natures* 2). In thinking as a member of the environment, as physically and bodily tied to it, Alaimo makes the reconnection more literal compared to Grosz’ figurative and theoretical analysis.

Regardless of approach, both should hold enormous sway, especially since both argue for a more environmentally-conscious, and arguably environmentally-friendly, approach to Darwinism, leading us to the realization of the depth and scope of the intermeshing present in Alaimo’s thoughts and the Derridean subject-revocation in Grosz. However, Grosz’ surest nod towards her postmodern forebears comes near the end of her first chapter. She writes:

The human, when situated as one among many, is no longer in the position of speaking for and authorizing the analysis of the animal as other, and no longer takes on the right to name, to categorize, the rest of the world but is now forced, or at least enticed to listen, to respond, to observe, to become attuned to nature it was always part of but had only aimed to master and control — not nature as a unified whole, but nature as ever-striving, as natural selection, as violence and conflict. (24)

Grosz beautifully articulates the grand design of her interpretation of Darwinism, one of connectedness, one of an apparent natural harmony. Most importantly, she casts postmodern Darwinism as a system which disperses and assigns agency far and wide and incorporates it all within a single mode of thought. Her views stand in sharp contrast to the perversions of Darwinism practiced by eugenicists and practitioners of genocide. However, Grosz' new politics of unity and a notion of listening to the world do not completely erase the existence of an evolutionary politics of violence. The amorality of Machiavelli, the cults of Mussolini and Stalin, the sheer, wanton violence of Genghis Khan and Alexander, all of whom lust for more, all who will commit any cardinal sin for a spot atop the world from which to prosecute further bloodshed. Animals, plants, humans, the earth, they all speak and they sometimes listen and cooperate with one another.

Chapter 6 — Violence

“War is not merely a political act but a real political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, a carrying out of the same by other means.”

— Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*

The interspecies politics of the Anthropocene requires a language, and the language of Darwinian selection, appears a prime candidate for that politics. Thus, it becomes necessary to understand the ways in which species speak with one another, not just how humans can speak with other species. Hamilton’s centralized humanity combined with Grosz’ posthuman affect and consideration of the rest of the natural world — a combination that can overcome some of the obstacles and challenges of the Anthropocene — it requires fluency in the language of natural law that still serves as a *lingua franca* for non-human life on the planet. As this essay also noted earlier, transcendence to the scale of a geological agent only means that humanity’s decisions carry more impact, so learning the entirety of this language, including its vulgarities, is essential to understanding the scope and scale of our own capability within that conversation.

Grosz’ reinterpretation of Darwinism as one of interaction, she implies or privileges apparently pacific interactions, but violence itself can and does serve as such an interaction within nature. Darwin himself acknowledged this truth and proclaimed it the “war of nature,” a term that aptly describes the evolutionary arms race that occurs between species fighting either to occupy the same niche within a given ecosystem, to predate upon another individual, or prevent their own predation. Violence simply exists as one method of interaction — a vernacular, if the metaphor might be extended —but it oftentimes is effective, especially in how it silences other individuals and determines fitness. This competition occurs not only at an interspecies level (interspecific competition), but at an

intra-species level as well (intraspecific competition): communities of chimpanzees will go to war with one another over territory, male lions taking over a pride of females will kill cubs sired by other males, and many male species fight one another for mating privileges. While Grosz' desire for peaceful methods of human interaction are laudable and advantageous, understanding all possible forms of posthuman interaction — including violence — is necessary to understanding human placement in the world and the potentially disastrous and apocalyptic ramifications of human action.

Cormac McCarthy's 1985 novel *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West* focuses on these interspecific and intraspecific competitions and emphasizes the perpetual and undeniable existence of natural violence. However, it does so in a uniquely posthuman way. In *Blood Meridian*, the human exists as no more important than any other creature or non-living thing, and thus it must compete with all creatures to assert itself as singular amongst the multitude. Arguably the most quoted posthuman/ecocritical passage in the novel — the “optical democracy” passage — indicates the total parity of existence promoted by the text, and by extension, the articulation of McCarthy's worldview: all objects inherently have an equal voice and importance in the world.

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. (*BM* 259)

The traditional hierarchical agency bestowed first upon men, then animal, then plant, then rock, here becomes irrelevant as none of can “put forth claim to precedence” over any other. The “unguessed kinships” also lend credence to the decentralized human, the aim of the

posthuman school of thought and a passage seemingly very much in line with Grosz' "one among many" view of postmodern Darwinism. The passage, indicative of the entirety of the novel, insists upon the reality that the human has never truly dictated or controlled its own conversation with nature, at least outside of its own anthropocentrism. Instead of decentralizing the human from the narrative, this "optical democracy" somewhat differently posits that the human has never been at the center of the natural story. As Steven Shaviro notes in his essay, "'The Very Life of Darkness': A Reading of *Blood Meridian*," "The eye no longer constitutes the basis of vision. We are given instead a kind of perception before or beyond the human. This is not a perspective *upon* the world, and not a vision that intends *upon* its objects: but an immanent perspective that already *is* the world, and a primordial visibility, a luminescence, that is indifferent to our acts of vision" (152, emphasis original). Shaviro's excellent interpretation here looks for the "optical" in McCarthy's prose and attempts to find the eye, and he finds it not relating to any one man or beast or object, but rather to be a disembodied and unnamable omniscience which witnesses all, of something decidedly not human as it exists "before or beyond the human."

A scene earlier in the novel describes the eye's witness to this optical democracy: the participants within that democracy themselves. Around a tree burning in the desert, the narrator focuses on the wide variety of creatures who come to stare at it. Tarantulas, "vicious" mygale spiders, solpugas (also known as solifugae or sun spiders⁹), vinegaroons, small owls, beaded lizards "deadly to man," desert basilisks that "jet blood from their eyes" and sandvipers; all carnivorous and deadly to one another yet for the moment in temporary

⁹ Personally, along with tarantulas, my least favorite animals on the planet. Not only can solifugae reach terrifying sizes for arachnids (5-6 inch legspans), they are also among some of the fastest land arthropods in nature.

alignment at the “heraldic” tree and its warmth (*BM* 224, 225). “A constellation of ignited eyes that edged the ring of light all bound in a precarious truce before this torch whose brightness had set back the stars in their sockets” (*BM* 225). The “luminescence” Shaviro describes can certainly be found here in the eyes of all agents within nature, who all see, and comprehend the world in their own way, ways that still coincidentally align with one another, as carnivores and devourers of flesh. The scene plays out almost religiously, with the tree called “heraldic” and in clear reference to the burning bush God spoke to Moses from in the Bible (*BM* 224) and it speaks to all of these creatures, including the kid (the protagonist of the novel), with a gospel of violence.

Blood Meridian follows the grisly adventures of this perpetually unnamed kid, noted early in the text as a child of about 15 years old who can “neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence” (3). The novel follows his travels in the 1849-50 borderlands of the United States and Mexico. After his group of filibusters is attacked and mostly slaughtered by a war party of Comanches, he eventually finds himself as a member of the Glanton Gang, a savage and barbaric band of scalp hunters led by John Joel Glanton and lieutenant by an enigmatic proselytizer of violence, Judge Holden.

To call *Blood Meridian* violent is a gross understatement. Both in popular spheres and in most professional criticism of the book, everyone talks about the violence. Petra Mundik, the author of *A Bloody and Barbarous God: The Metaphysics of Cormac McCarthy* writes “The world of *Blood Meridian* is drenched in violence and bloodshed” and Barclay Owens, author of *Cormac McCarthy’s Western Novels* devotes a chapter just to the violence of *Blood Meridian*, writing that “Everywhere the kid travels in this bleak western landscape, there are signs of violence and death” (Mundik 8, Owens 4). In a 2009 interview with the *A.V. Club*, literary

critic Harold Bloom goes a step further and notes darkly that “The violence is the book” (Bloom, qtd. in Price). In addition, a simple Google search of “Most violent books” will feature articles that include *Blood Meridian* more often than not.¹⁰ A Lithub list titled “Nine of the Most Violent Works of Literary Fiction” has *Blood Meridian* right at the top, it occupies a spot in the Huffington Post listicle “11 Books That Will Definitely Disturb You,” and *The New York Times*’ profiler of McCarthy, Richard Woodward, wrote in 1992 that “It may be the bloodiest book since ‘The Iliad’” (Woodward).

All of those professional and lay critics have a bevy of evidence to support their claims. In no particular order, the novel includes numerous scenes so shocking and blood-drenched, it makes the miscellaneous and still copious murders of man against man that regularly dot the text seem pedestrian and boring. *Blood Meridian* features multiple scalplings (by whites and Indians upon each other), the murder of children (which happens on several occasions, each more shocking than the last)¹¹, implied rape, slavery, dismemberment, abduction, allusions to pedophilia, the killing of two puppies on a whim, and of course, the scene in which the kid and a minor character named Sproule come upon “a bush that was hung with dead babies” (60). The narrator describes breathlessly that they “had holes punched in their underjaws and were hung by their throats from the broken stobs of a mesquite to stare eyeless at the naked sky. Bald and pale and bloated, larval to some unreckonable being” (60). Yet, none of this bloodshed implies a reduction to the level of snuff or for the pure shock of the imagery. Georg Guillemin explains in his book *The Pastoral Vision*

¹⁰ Other popular entries include Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho*, Iain Banks’ *The Wasp Factory*, Anthony Burgess’ *A Clockwork Orange*, and *Child of God*, another McCarthy novel.

¹¹ It is also not even close to the only instance of child/infant murder in McCarthy’s texts. *Child of God*, *the Road*, and *Outer Dark* all involve the murder of children or infants (in *The Road*, the horror comes double as nameless, faceless survivors partake in the cannibalism of an infant).

of *Cormac McCarthy* that the tree of dead babies serves as part in parcel of “Traversing the ‘optically democratic’ narrative desert, in which all things are of equal importance and human constructs such as morality and aesthetics have no dominion” (93). Thus the horror readers likely feel upon reading such a passage becomes moot specifically because the themes present in the novel render notions of morality so. Here, Guillemin utilizes the concept of the optical democracy to show that the decentralization of the human within the novel disregards its constructs outside of and beyond itself; in this sense, the infants hung from the branches of a mesquite bush should offend no more than if they were pears or lizards skewered upon the sticks. Guillemin posits a cruel question begged by this passage: “which of the effects is more powerful: the moral outrageousness or the fact that the context renders moral outrage pointless?” (93).

Nicholas Monk writes in his book *True and Living Prophet of Destruction: Cormac McCarthy and Modernity* that “Violence is never inexplicable in McCarthy’s work even when it might appear gratuitous” (79). He goes further in disagreeing with fellow McCarthy critic, Peter Josyph, who believes that the extreme violence present in McCarthy’s work undercuts and diminishes his fiction. Monk believes McCarthy’s “unflinching approach to violence is a necessary engagement of the truth of our interaction with other human beings... Modernity has brought us to this. We owe it to writers such as... McCarthy to engage with it” (89). McCarthy himself emphasizes the need to grapple with violence as a force; he comments to Woodward that “good authors... deal with life and death” and that “There’s no such thing as life without bloodshed” (Woodward). Idiomatically, Monk hits the nail on the head specifically when he writes on how McCarthy’s fictional journalism of violence labors to present a truth of the human condition, or at least one of its possible conditions, one geared

towards war and conflict. Yet, Monk also misses the mark just slightly because McCarthy establishes violence as a universal non-anthropocentric condition in the violent interactions between man and animal as well as animal and animal, not solely between man and man; the bear that carries away one of the Delawares in Glanton's gang, the wolves which appear constantly and appear to share some affinity with the most violent of men, and even the horses which become curiously carnivorous and cannibalistic in their exercise of violence in one scene. A snake-bitten horse with its "eyes bulged out of the shapeless head in a horror of agony" so frightens the rest of the horses in Glanton's party that one "came out of the remuda and struck at the thing twice and then turned and buried its teeth in its neck" (121).

Indeed, the novel has much to say and show on the topic of bloodshed and war, and its violence has purpose and meaning, specifically to underscore the effects and attributes of natural selection — its occasional randomness, its innateness, and its mechanisms. Despite the difficulty many readers have with the shocking and bloodsoaked content, one must consider the role it plays in any of McCarthy's novels (for it seems a favorite theme of the author's), but perhaps especially so in *Blood Meridian* because this novel primarily serves as a meditation upon the paradigm of the natural status quo: natural selection. In its own way, it marks violence as not only a form of posthuman interaction, but a mechanism, perhaps even the prime aspect of Darwinian selection which encompasses all life and its relationship with non-life. Instead of a strict decentralization of the human as argued by Grosz, McCarthy sees the world through a Darwinist framework that incorporates the latter's idea of the "war of nature," which initially decentralizes the human but subsequently offers the opportunity for the human, as well as any other creature, to centralize itself by merit of its fitness for such an occupation. In that sense, the human only takes prominence when it has "earned" that

hierarchically advantageous position, likely through violent means. McCarthy alludes to the deep historical ascendancy of man's violence in one of the epigraphs of the novel, an excerpt from a 1982 *Yuma Daily Sun* article of an anthropological discovery which indicated that "a re-examination of a 300,000-year-old fossil skull found... showed evidence of having been scalped" (*BM* 1). Both in this epigraph and in the novel itself, scalping indicates a violence not of necessity, as the top of the skull contains little flesh for consumption, but something more ritualistic and more indicative of an agency conquering another agency, of asserting supremacy over an opposing force.

The world presented in *Blood Meridian* depicts violence as the primary language or mode of inter- and intraspecies communication. As I suggested at the end of the last chapter, perhaps the most famous of the many monologues of the story's primary antagonist, Judge Holden, decrees that "War is God", labelling it as "The ultimate trade awaiting its ultimate practitioner. (BM 261, 259). He expands upon this idea, declaring "war is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one's will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence" (261).¹² The judge makes no mistake in the use of his term "select" when he refers to the "larger" will present in a theoretical game of chance upon which two men have wagered their lives in a hypothetical he posits earlier in his discourse. Literary critic Amy Hungerford also notes the clear linkage to Darwinism in her book, *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960*, writing that all the living creatures of the novel, including those with some apparent degree of choice seem swallowed up by the state of war. Hungerford says, "Even those apparently exercising agency

¹² See Appendix 1 for the full passage

in McCarthy's novel are controlled by some other agency. A personified form of war, or of Darwinian selection, sometimes looks to be responsible" (92). Whether termed as the "other agency" or the "larger will", the war that defines selection forces the "unity of existence" and acts as an unveiling where all else before and after simultaneously ceases to matter as one man's very existence depends upon the turn of a card, thus mattering all the more, as the judge says. "The whole universe for such a player has labored clanking to this moment which will tell if he is to die at that man's hand or that man at his. What more certain validation of a man's worth could there be?" (260-261).

However, war exists not just between men, and Holden even notes that it existed long before men: "It makes no difference what men think of war... War endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him" (259). Darwin himself noted the war of nature and the awful forms in which it could incarnated. In a letter to his frequent correspondent and contemporary, the renowned American botanist Asa Gray, Darwin noted the particularly perturbing nature of a group of parasitic wasps from the family Ichneumonidae¹³ as indicative of a lack of definitive goodness within nature or as a quality of its possible designer. Darwin writes "I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent [and] omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidæ with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars" ("Asa Gray"). He also notes that cats playing with mice troubled him into the same position. In his book, *The Greatest Show on Earth*, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins importantly points out that the sadistic nature of an act does not matter in the evolutionary process. "Gene survival," Darwin

¹³ The wasp, like most parasitic wasps, stings a spider, moth, cocoon, or some other unlucky invertebrate, paralyzing it, but not killing it. The ichneumon wasp then lays its eggs in the still living prey to give the larva a fresh meal once they hatch.

writes, “is a sufficient explanation for the cruelty of wasps and the callous indifference of all nature: sufficient — and satisfying to the intellect if not to human compassion” (Dawkins 400). Nature itself wars in ways as cruel and unusual as man’s use of napalm or a nuclear warhead, the practitioners of which seek constantly to divine a form more fit for their environment. Just as in the tree of dead babies, morality is rendered moot. After the judge’s long exposition on war, a member of the company named Irving challenges his assertions about war, saying that “Might does not make right... The man that wins in some combat is not vindicated morally” (261). In a passage that perhaps best summarizes the entire novel’s premise, the judge responds thusly:

Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak. Historical law subverts it at every turn. A moral view can never be proven right or wrong by any ultimate test... Man’s vanity may well approach the infinite in capacity but his knowledge remains imperfect and however much he comes to value his judgements ultimately he must submit them before a higher court. Here there can be no special pleading. Here are considerations of equity and rectitude and moral right rendered void and without warrant and here are the views of the litigants despised. Decisions of life and death, of what shall be and what shall not, beggar all question of right. In elections of these magnitudes are all lesser ones subsumed, moral, spiritual, natural. (261)

The judge’s refutation of morality primarily stems from its quality as “an invention of mankind,” a vain species with an inflated sense of self-worth, one laughably mispositioning itself as central to any dictum of how the world operates. Holden insists at the end of the monologue that human morality matters less than spiritual belief or natural law. Spiritual belief only qualifies itself above moral law because it includes the existence of some unseen arbiter: a god, deity or force, who can dissect disagreements more intelligently and objectively than the “imperfect” man’s knowledge. Holden’s ideal court “beggar[s] all question of right” where morality is “rendered void.” The ultimate and correct court

mentioned by the judge where “decisions of life and death” are made echoes McCarthy’s own belief that good writers must deal with issues of life and death — that mortality, not morality, matters. McCarthy thus suggests that the judge subscribes to a Darwinist philosophy where survival of the fittest matters because it enables the continuation of existence – the determinant “of what shall be and what shall not.” Hungerford notes in an online videotaped lecture on *Blood Meridian* that “the whole novel renders the idea of a moral machinery moot... The epigraphs to the novel¹⁴ suggest also the futility of a moral discourse” (Hungerford 24:53-25:14). Hungerford stands in accord with Guillemin, positing that a lack of morality brings into question whether an evil deed can be committed because it raises doubt of whether evil, in any human or posthuman definition of the word, can even exist. Within a world predicated on the paradigm of selection, the idea of morality becomes quaint. Only those questions which ask “who lives” matter; only suppositions of “how” relate more to a foundational Maslovian principle to fulfill basic needs and ignore any possibility of self-fulfillment, for how can such self-actualization exist in a world where one must constantly struggle for their own existence — both in the inter- and intraspecies conflicts that mark the novel. For all of mankind’s power and intelligence over the creatures of the earth, the judge correctly notes “the smallest crumb can devour us. Any smallest thing beyond yon rock out of men’s knowing” (207). Here then, the judge hits upon the true nature of the pastoral as presented in the novel, and thus the state of the world. Another scene shows the prominence this dark pastoral vision plays within the judge’s discourse. The kid and one of the few

¹⁴ The other two epigraphs: Paul Valery: “Your ideas are terrifying and your hearts are faint. Your acts of pity and cruelty are absurd, committed with no calm, as if they were irresistible. Finally, you fear blood more and more. Blood and time.” Jacob Boehme: “It is not to be thought that the life of darkness is sunk in misery and lost as if in sorrowing. There is no sorrowing. For sorrow is a thing that is swallowed up in death, and death and dying are the very life of darkness.”

(relatively) friendly faces in the company, the ex-priest Tobin Bell, sit near a fire on the frontier and, in conversation, attempt to comprehend the novel's antagonist. Notably, Tobin states that the judge has a curious moniker upon his rifle: *Et In Arcadia Ego* – “A reference to the lethal in it,” according the ex-priest (*BM* 131). Tobin notes he does not find it odd for the judge to have named his rifle (which he describes as being “mounted in german silver,” noting that several other men he has met have labelled their firearms. “I’ve heard Sweetlips and Hark From the Tombs and every sort of lady’s name,” Tobin says. “His is the first and only ever I seen with an inscription from the classics” (*BM* 131). The inscription refers to Nicolas Poussin’s 1638 painting of the same name, which depicts a scene of farmers and shepherds around a tomb in the pastoral landscape of Arcadia in Classical Greece. The Latin inscription roughly translates to “Even in Arcadia, I am there,” with the “I” being death, the “lethal” part of the inscription that Tobin accords the rifle. Loosely interpreted, the apparently Edenic and idyllic province of Arcadia cannot withstand or protect one from death or decay: indeed the painting has served as a *memento mori*, a reminder of death and the fleeting transience of the material in the face of eternal paradise or damnation, within a Christian context. Yet, the judge perverts this symbol by placing it upon his rifle. His practices, thoughts and beliefs — namely his insistence upon war as “the truest form of divination” — utilizes the *memento mori* to indict the pastoral and, by extension, nature itself (261).

The idea of the pastoral as inherently violence and death-filled permeates the text of *Blood Meridian*, and the novel's setting in American West serves primarily as a way to illustrate the harsh reality of natural law in nature. Greg Garrard identifies three types of pastorals in *Ecocriticism*: classical, romantic and American. Classical pastorals ranged from

Antiquity to the 18th century, and Garrard believes that especially older interpretations of pastorals — like the one idealized by Poussin’s classicist painting — represented an idyllic image of the “rural escape or repose” which used “nature as a reflection of human predicaments, rather than sustaining an interest in nature in and for itself” (Garrard 34). American pastorals, on the other hand, define the human as one who uses and controls nature given the “working rather than an aesthetic relationship with the land” emphasized by a “masculine colonial aggression” (Garrard 43). The idyllic has faded away from the pastoral in *Blood Meridian’s* Old West of the 1840s. McCarthy’s writing contains no possibility for landscape to retain the prospect of rural paradise, for the wilderness to serve as escape from civilization, qualities exemplified by the classical pastorals. But the judge’s ability to thrive in a place dictated by the true code of law, of natural selection, suggests the idyllic and mythological American West, which, idealized like Arcadia itself, existed only in the imagination. The inscription’s appearance on the judge’s rifle — itself an instrument of death that he wields quite expertly, according to Tobin — marks him as a harbinger of violence, ordained as such by the vicious language of nature itself.

The desert, jungle and snowy mountains Glanton’s gang traverse have no legal code aside from the natural, and McCarthy’s rifle shows that amoral death itself is an intrinsic part of natural discourse and interaction. Natural law, selection, language — whatever moniker it may take — subsumes everything within it. As Leo Daugherty writes in his essay, “Gravers False and True”:

It would be a gross understatement to call *Blood Meridian* a ‘pastoral tragedy,’ or even to term it ‘anti-pastoral.’ The point of the gun’s name is not that because of its appearance in the landscape, or by synecdoche the judge’s appearance, death had been introduced into an idyllic Arcadia: the entire novel makes clear... that the human world is, and has always been, a world of killing... the name suggests the judge’s awareness of, and his enthusiastic

endorsement of, the reality that the world has been a place of murder ever since the first victorious taking of a human life by another human. (Daugherty 163)

The judge's endorsement extends far beyond just human intraspecies violence and interaction though, and the dark pastoral vision of McCarthy's, of death being the ultimate pastoral experience has no better illustration than the "legion of horribles" passage¹⁵ early in the novel, where the kid travels with a gang of filibusters under a Captain White of the U.S. Army with intentions to restart the Mexican-American War (54). The company comes under attack from a group of Comanche warriors, and the narrator goes to great lengths to describe the dress of the Comanches "half naked or clad in costumes attic or biblical or wardrobed out of a fevered dream" dressed in the "skins of animals and silk finery and pieces of uniform still tracked with the blood of prior owners" (55). Some wear the coats of "slain dragoons" or the armor of a conquistador "deeply dented with old blows of mace or sabre done in another country by men whose very bones were dust" with one wearing a "bloodstained wedding veil and some in headgear of cranefeathers or rawhide helmets that bore the horns of bull or buffalo" (55). These vivid illustrations of dress actively bind the animal ("horns of bull or buffalo," "cranefeathers") and the objects of human manufacture ("silk finery" and "wedding veil") into one force. The legion of horribles personifies that nature of war as all-encompassing and all-enforcing by implicating as many outlandish and anachronistic modes of dress as possible, which extend far beyond time and space: the armor of the conquistador, crafted "in another country by men whose very bones were dust" especially emphasizes the deep historical nature of war. Moreover, the narrator also physically (and literally) combines man and beast as the Comanches wore "their braids spliced up with the hair of other beasts

¹⁵ See Appendix 2 for the full passage.

until they trailed upon the ground” and even adorned “their horses’ ears and tails... with bits of brightly colored cloth” (55). After the violent horror of the actual attack, the scene of the dead and dying filibusters and their own horses reads as a literary version of Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* (Fig. 1), which famously depicts the effects of war upon not only man, but animal as well, prominently featuring a violent bull and a horse with its mouth agape, gored by a lance or spear, alongside images of human suffering. The meaning of both the painting and McCarthy’s passage becomes explicitly clear. War affects all indiscriminately and the suffering and pain it causes are not endured by one species alone.

And now the horses of the dead came pounding out of the smoke and dust and circled with flapping leather and wild manes and eyes whited with fear like the eyes of the blind and some were feathered with arrows and some lanced through and stumbling and vomiting blood as they wheeled across the killing ground and clattered from sight again. Dust stanchd the wet and naked heads of the scalped who with the fringe of hair below their wounds and tonsured to the bone now lay like maimed and naked monks in the bloodslaked dust and everywhere the dying groaned and gibbered and horses lay screaming. (57)

The horses’ “screams” darkly give them an agency and an awareness seemingly not just of their own pain but of the existential horror they have just endured. They do not whinny or make other typical horse noises, but use a vocalization reserved only for terror. Horses, herbivorous by nature, but utilized by man to commit acts of war have become violent, and are, in fact, subsumed by it. Mundik comments on the aforementioned scene of the snake-bitten horse by presenting its pain as tantamount to the pain experienced by the humans within the text. Cross-applying her analysis to another instance of a horse suffering in the text only strengthens her original argument, especially as the dying horses lay alongside the dying men. She writes: “The suffering of the horse is as senseless as the suffering of victims of Glanton’s gang... The novel establishes no dichotomous opposition between natural and

moral evil, suggesting that the condition of all life on earth is one of violence, suffering, and brutality” (20). Guillemin writes that this necropolitical pastoralism fulfills the promise of the optical democracy by noting that within *Blood Meridian* “the absolute indifference of the natural environment and the absolute license of the social environment combine in the text... to subject picaresque survivalism and relational biocentrism jointly to the truth of entropy and death” (100). He adds that “*Blood Meridian* ought to be read[...] as a historicist epos in the sense that it negotiates the meaning of human history[...] within a meaningful nature, and thereby qualifies its existential status[...] Apart from the biocentric survivalism of the wilderness, the novel ventures no ethical or historiographic tenets (100). Guillemin here rightfully commits the same collapse of the segregation of human and natural history that Chakrabarty does, but adds that a “meaningful nature” then grants humanity an enhanced status since it become imbricated within the “biocentric survivalism,” the selection, that makes up the system. But as Inger-Anne Softing ponders in her essay “Desert Pandemonium,” when the forging of nature and human has overtly dark tones in the novel, writing “There is no elegiac reminiscing of bygone times and remote places in *Blood Meridian*, no romantic visions of oneness with a benevolent nature. On the contrary, oneness with nature in McCarthy's novel is ominous and disturbing since nature is cruel” (27). Indeed, Mundik writes. “*Blood Meridian* demonstrates that not only are living organisms on this planet subject to an endless cycle of devouring but they are also threatened by the hostile forces of nature” (21).

Here then comes the difference between Grosz’ attempts at a postmodern Darwinism, and why in a certain form, it loses impact. Her well-intentioned and solidly aspirational desire to decenter the human from natural history has merit, but it ignores the unconscious

desire of all living things to centralize themselves often without regard for other organisms. The *Azolla* plant grew and grew without the consciousness of the alligators, flightless birds and tropical plants that lived at the poles. By attempting to alter Darwinism, and effectively cast off his notion of the “war of nature,” her own incarnation then becomes ignorant of a certain way in which the world operates in the inter- and intraspecies communication necessary for Anthropocentric politics. Holding Grosz in conversation with *Blood Meridian*, she ignores the “mindless violence” of the kid, cast as intrinsic and integral to his character and natural in its incarnation¹⁶ (3). As the epigraph of this chapter intimates, war is simply an extension of the political, not a separate entity, and thus, though unwelcomed, it remains an essential aspect of the discourse, one which must be included. Grosz’ decentralization of the human, one of few species that can even attempt to articulate a vision beyond selection, disintegrates the politics so desperately needed within the Anthropocene, namely one that can achieve her posthuman approach of inclusivity and consideration of the nonhuman. Grosz’ sense of the possibility and promise of that new politics still serves as an end goal of this essay, and diminishing the role humans must play as newfound suzerain of an uncertain ecological future makes sense in a radicalist light, one which rightfully seeks change from a naturalist status quo. Purdy and Hamilton’s desires to keep the human central pragmatically makes sense from an evolutionary standpoint not only because of our current role as a species with the capacity to cause *Azolla*-scale change in the Earth’s climate, but also because *we have evolved* to be a creature capable of *Azolla*-scale changes or beyond. As the apex predator of apex predators on Earth, we sit perfectly positioned to guide a possible change

¹⁶ Refutation of the natural is certainly a valid tack, but because Grosz’ herself wants to reiterate a philosophy within (and admittedly beyond) a naturalist framework, it seems important to acknowledge all of its aspects.

in our own approach to a new political structure with the earth, but only if we properly acknowledge the interlocutions of the environment and all its inhabitants.

Blood Meridian dictates that the reality of the world is driven by violent selection, and the end of the novel insists on this concept, as the kid encounters the judge in a saloon some 20 years after the events which occur in the bulk of the narrative. The judge's new discourse identifies war and selection as a dance, one in which each individual dancer unconsciously participates for he cannot "comprehend the reason for his presence for he has no way of knowing even in what the event consists;" regardless, "it is enough that they have arrived" (342). The judge notes that the dancers "do not have to have a reason" to take part in the dance of war because "order is not set aside because of their indifference" (342). The human and animal¹⁷ alike participate in this dance then not because they choose to, but because they must; they are subsumed by war and selection. This subsumption takes physical form when the judge kills the kid in an outhouse when the judge "gathered him in his arms against his immense and terrible flesh and shot the wooden barlatch home behind him" (347). The kid importantly does not die by gunshot, arrow or stab wound, despite suffering those injuries earlier in the novel. Instead, the judge, a personification of war, seems to absorb the kid into his own person. Despite the kid's repeated attempts to avoid war later in the novel, he is part of it nevertheless, though not by his consent. The imagery of the last paragraph of the novel casts a demonic light on this procession, as "the fiddlers [grin] hideously over their canted pieces" and the dancers "staggering drunk" and half-naked revel in their own sin. The tense shift of the final paragraph from past tense, used in much of the novel to present tense,

¹⁷ To mark the start of the judge's discourse, he instigates a conflict which leads to the shooting of a dancing carnival bear on the stage as revelry and debauchery continue.

however, makes it all the more chilling. The dance still occurs and that shift into the present works to draw it out of the diegesis, to imprint the status of the entire philosophy of the judge onto the real world, and the judge joins the dancers and revels alongside them in the horrifying final words of the book.

Towering over them all is the judge and he is naked dancing, his small feet lively and quick and now in doubletime and bowing to the ladies, huge and pale and hairless, like an enormous infant. He never sleeps, he says. He says he'll never die. He bows to the fiddlers and sashays backwards and throws back his head and laughs deep in his throat and he is a great favorite, the judge. He wafts his hat and the lunar dome of his skull passes palely under the lamps and he swings about and takes possession of one of the fiddles and he pirouettes and makes a pass, two passes, dancing and fiddling at once. His feet are light and nimble. He never sleeps. He says that he will never die. He dances in light and in shadow and he is a great favorite. He never sleeps the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die. (348-349)

Regardless of rebellion or ignorance or positions of alternate paradigms and the possibility of progress, the dance always exists and selection encompasses everything. And atop it all, selection's primary agent, Judge Holden, serves: immortal, undying, unwavering and devout.

Chapter 7 - The Judge

“Battle is the most magnificent competition in which a human being can indulge. It brings out all that is best and it removes all that is base.”

— Gen. George S. Patton, U.S. Army

To any sensible person who abhors violence, the previous chapter begs either for a refutation present within the text of *Blood Meridian* or, more haltingly and tenuously, for some qualification as to the veracity of those claims. Chapters 11 and 12 will present a somewhat hopeful reading of *Blood Meridian* to explore the possibility of the former. As for the latter option, a reader only has to look upon the ruinous and terrifying desolation present in the novel’s antagonist, one of the most famous and horrible in American literary fiction.

Any conversation, analysis, critique or thesis on *Blood Meridian* inevitably turns towards its primary character: Judge Holden, and this screed shall prove no exception. Understanding the judge helps to better understand the novel as a whole, because, as Harold Bloom notes, “The Judge is the book, and the Judge is, short of Moby Dick, the most monstrous apparition in all of American literature. The Judge is violence incarnate. The Judge stands for incessant warfare for its own sake” (Bloom, qtd. in Price). Just as his hairless, pale white body — described thusly by the narrator early in the novel as “bald as a stone and he had no trace of beard and he had no brows to his eyes nor lashes to them and close on to seven feet in height” — dominates the physical space, so too does this macabre and hideous incarnation of violence tower over the rest of the novel and its characters (*BM* 6). Ultimately, the judge provides warrant for the ideology of violence and selection in the novel for the two diegetic roles he plays in the text: naturalist and super- or ultranaturalist. These qualities all establish Judge Holden not as a mere proselytizer of violent selection, but rather as an exemplar of it and a fervent crusader upon its behalf.

First, throughout the novel the judge shows a deep propensity for science and naturalism. Nicholas Monk proclaims in his book *True and Living Prophet of Destruction: Cormac McCarthy and Modernity* that “Holden... is the Enlightenment made flesh” with a “profound desire to disenchant the world through violent technology and instrumental reason” (81). As Monk notes, Holden displays several values and tenets of the Enlightenment — logic, empiricism, and objectivity — but those qualities become amplified in the judge to the point of parody. Empiricism and objectivity give way to a sociopathic lack of empathy for anyone or anything, and the cold, violent logic of Judge Holden goes unchallenged and unrefuted throughout the novel. The judge then promotes an extreme version of humanism that in many ways mocks the ideas of progress theorized as resulting from the centralization of the human in the world. The judge’s mentality stands in stark relief to the eugenicists and practitioners of genocide who also abused notions of humanism, like reason and science, to achieve prejudiced and inhuman ends. As I wrote earlier, Garrard notes that posthumanists agree that “the dualistic separation of humans from nature promoted by Western philosophy and culture [is] the origin of the environmental crisis” (Garrard 24). But many practitioners of humanism have ironically also caused a humanitarian crisis, embodied within the judge. Understanding Judge Holden as a scientist is to understand the judge as humanity utilizing (and abusing) the unique tools granted to it by natural selection, namely intellect. This depiction of the judge helps to understand the significant harms that occur by centering the human and privileging it over other species, especially given the judge’s — and allegorically, humanity’s — extreme fitness within the environmental system.

At first, Holden’s scientific inquiries appear relatively harmless. He collects specimens of butterflies and birds to keep in his travelling purses, he presses flowers, even

while on the run from hostile Indians, he ruminates on fossils and often holds extemporaneous lectures on geology (“In the afternoon he sat in the compound breaking ore samples with a hammer, the feldspar rich in red oxide of copper and native nuggets in whose organic lobations he purported to read news of the earth’s origins”), paleontology (“All in that company had heard the judge on paleontology save for the new recruits and they sat watching and putting to him such queries as they could conceive of. He answered them with care, amplifying their own questions for them, as if they might be apprentice scholars”), and other branches of natural history (*BM* 122, 263). And always, he keeps a notebook, a leather ledger into which he draws and catalogues all of his findings, sketching “with a practiced ease and there was no wrinkling of that bald brow or pursing of those oddly childish lips. His fingers traced the impression of old willow wicker on a piece of pottery clay and he put this into the book with nice shadings, an economy of pencil strokes. He is a draftsman as he is other things, well sufficient to the task” (146). In fact, a man in the company named Webster comments that the drawings are of such quality that the “pictures is like enough the things themselves” (147). So precise, so practiced, so perfect in ideation and execution of a task abounds in the judge as he has aptitude for anything as the ex-priest informs the kid one night around the fire. “The man’s a hand at anything,” says the ex-priest. “I’ve never seen him turn to a task but what he didn’t prove clever at” (128). He notes that Holden can “He can cut a trail, shoot a rifle, ride a horse, track a deer,” speak five different languages, and the ex-priest even claims that Holden is “the greatest fiddler I ever heard and that’s an end on it” and even capable of “outdanc[ing] the devil himself” (128-129).¹⁸ Such mastery and

¹⁸ The ex-priest speaks truer than he knows here, as the judge’s capacity for dance extends beyond ballroom spectacle, as noted in the last chapter.

capability at so many different tasks indicate that he has mastery over arts both human and natural, and thus an agency of capability at least beyond most normal men, this in comparison with his size, strength,¹⁹ oratorical skills and ruthlessness make him at the very least, a formidable force in arenas intellectual and physical.

The judge's desire to catalogue becomes more troubling upon learning his practices in the aftermath of this practice, illustrated in a scene just after he carefully sketches a "footpiece from a suit of armor hammered out in a shop in Toledo three centuries before" (146):

When [the judge] had took up the little footguard and turned it in his hand and studied it again and then he crushed it into a ball of foil and pitched it into the fire. He gathered up the other artifacts and cast them also into the fire and he shook out the wagon sheet and folded it away among his possibles together with the notebook... A Tennessean named Webster had been watching him and he asked the judge what he aimed to do with those notes and sketches and the judge smiled and said that it was his intention to expunge them from the memory of man. (146-147)

The judge's destruction of the footguard and other objects he has accumulated to "expunge them from the memory of man" not only shows how he hoards knowledge as a dragon hoards gold, underscoring that cataloguing becomes a form of exclusive possession. The gathering of knowledge allows him to revoke the access of that knowledge to others and in understanding the world better allows for its subjugation or destruction as evidenced by the violent discarding and demolition of the objects he catalogues here.

His expanded rationale for keeping such exacting notes in his ledger (mentioned later in the novel) further illustrate the judge's dictatorial nature, integrating that aspect of him into his scientific work. When Toadvine, a member of the Glanton Gang, asks his purpose of

¹⁹ At one point in the novel, he lifts and throws ten feet an iron meteorite that most other men in the company can hardly budge.

keeping his notebook, he answers with a chilling phrase emblematic of his persona: “Whatever exists, he said. Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent” (207). This edict as proclamation of a personal intent sounds at once insane, even for a man of Holden’s talents, and initially Petra Mundik agrees. However, she interprets this quote in the context of the judge acting as a force beyond the human in the chapter of her book devoted explicitly to the judge. She draws (as many *Blood Meridian* scholars do) upon the Gnostic religious tradition. Leo Daugherty succinctly summarizes the ideology thusly: “Most thoughtful people have looked at the world they lived in and asked, How did evil get into it?, the Gnostics have looked at the world and asked, how did good get into it” (Daugherty 162). Mundik (as well as Daugherty) identify Judge Holden here as an archon, a malevolent being that served the Gnostic creator god and helped maintain and establish the Gnostic tenet of *Heimarmene*, a word with varying meanings in Greek and Gnostic religious outlooks that essentially means “universal fate” dependent on and revelatory of the sole law of the universe. Mundik later calls it “a negative evaluation of the harmony of the cosmos.” (289) Taken under this evaluation, the judge’s desire to reckon all he may not know turns his scholarly pursuits into a dark portent, and ties scientific learning with a philosophy and a worldview of evil. “This statement would be absurd if uttered by a mortal man, but chilling if uttered by an archon bent on keeping all things imprisoned in the fetters of manifest existence,” Mundik writes (39). She later adds, “The tyrannical judge, like the Gnostic archons... wants all created life to succumb to his will; ‘autonomous’ life must not be permitted to exist” (41). The judge confirms this with one of his final remarks in the passage, proclaiming “The freedom of birds is an insult to me... I’d have them all in zoos” (208). Nature

must stand before him because it is only by the scientific accumulation of knowledge that he, and all beings, can understand the world. The judge says:

The man who believes the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear. Superstition will drag him down. The rain will erode the deeds of his life. But that man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate. (207-208)

The judge here explains that the humanist necessity of understanding the world, of defying ignorance, in fact allows for control over that world. Humanist centralization within the world system however causes atrocities to take place as human centralization results in the displacement of other species and even humans considered “lesser” as practiced by the eugenicists. Grosz, Aliamo, Giddens, Wolfe, and other posthumanists desire to undo this centralization of the human narrative within the narrative history of the planet reflects a desire to also undo the damages to ecosystems caused by humans because of human centrality. Posthumanism, ideally, is a refutation of humanism’s worst, most destructive tendencies.

However, the judge also indicts — or at the very least, complicates — the contention of posthumanism as an inherently healthy remedy through his role in the text as a being that exists beyond the natural. He too values decentralization of the human and acknowledges the interconnectedness of all things, noting as he sketches that “Whether in my book or not every man is tabernacled in every other and he in exchange and so on in an endless complexity of being and witness to the uttermost edge of the world” (147). His desire to have seemingly the definitive catalogue of the knowledge of the world — possibly the only such archive — reflects the humanist obsession with control via empiricism, but it also illustrates

that the posthuman postulation of understanding interconnectedness can be controlled and superceded by one individual (or species) who manages to single out the “thread of order from the tapestry.” The moral law the judge denounces is the providence of posthumanists insisting that the world should arbitrarily be a certain way, but moral law matters little to the judge because natural law serves as the foundation, a greater truth than any morality that can be ascribed. Those who adhere to natural law, selection or war have, in the judge’s eyes, more claim to controlling the world as they control the truth of the world. This becomes the dance the judge alludes in the last chapter of the novel:

As war becomes dishonored and its nobility called into question those honorable men who recognize the sanctity of blood will become excluded from the dance, which is the warrior’s right, and thereby will the dance become a false dance and the dancers false dancers. And yet there will be one there always who is a true dancer and can you guess who that might be?... Only that man who has offered up himself entire to the blood of war, who has been to the floor of the pit and seen horror in the round and learned at last that it speaks to his inmost heart, only that man can dance. (345)

A pure, unregulated posthumanism founded upon morality and empathy becomes the “false dance,” a dance that shuns war and violence as the primary method of nature. The true dancer participates in the dance of war and values it, honors the “sanctity of blood” and hears violence in “his inmost heart.” This dance transcends the humanist/posthumanist divide by incorporating the humanist will to dominate with the posthumanist’s ostensibly equal rhetoric between all species, albeit on the subject of war and struggle. We explore this convergence through the judge’s ultranatural condition in the novel.

An exploration of the judge’s supernatural condition has far-reaching, obvious and important merit²⁰ — at times throughout the novel, he is called “the devil” (7), “a great pale

²⁰ On a personal note, Mundik’s book is essential for any McCarthy fan interested even slightly in the role spirituality and religion play in his texts. Extremely well-written and filled with fascinating material.

deity" (97), and "a great ponderous djinn" (101), among other names which invoke gods, demons, spirits, etc. — though I would like to establish some of his supernatural features by another name: ultranatural. Super- or supranatural, as a term, fits some aspects and qualities of the judge, as existing beyond and transcending the realm of the natural, but it implies a separate, unseen plane of existence not normally visible in the observable universe, be the supernatural force a god, a ghost, or something else along those lines. I define the ultranatural as a secular transcendence of nature, going beyond it in capability, achieved typically by the mastery of nature. This definition, I believe, better fits the judge as exemplified in the previous chapter, though importantly, the two terms — supernatural and ultranatural — are not necessarily mutually exclusive. I offer the idea of the ultranatural to understand and evaluate the judge, who seems to derive his strange powers and abilities specifically from nature, by serving his god, war, and by becoming a prime specimen of selection. The ultranatural also help makes a more direct comparison of the judge as allegorical of humankind's own ultranatural state, and its own success within the war of nature. The term also has ramifications for the role of violent interaction within natural selection because the ultranatural being accumulates so much sovereignty, authority, and capability that it effectively ceases to be bound by natural law though it may still dictate that law. Adrian Mioc writes in his essay "Cormac McCarthy and the Ethics of Power" that Judge Holden "survives because he is always one step ahead... He has found a more immediate way of experiencing and thus a more efficient way to relate to the world" (132). As he exists more attuned to the world, he gleans ever more ability and agency, to staggering effect, placing him atop a natural hierarchy.

One particular illustration of the judge's reliance upon nature for his strength combines his knowledge of man, animal, plant and geology and the material use of those objects. Chronologically, when Glanton's Gang first meets the judge, long before the kid has ever joined the party, they were fleeing from a band of Indian, after having too little powder to use for their guns. After days of flight, the judge took them to the caldera of a dormant volcano, and there he worked together sulfur, bat guano, the men's own urine and charcoal to create enough gunpowder for the gang to slaughter their enemies. Mundik correctly points out that this scene is "no doubt an allusion to Satan's invention of gunpowder and canons in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*" (34), but the components of the gunpowder also underwrite Holden's mastery over nature at a chemical and elemental level. He also implicates various forms of existence within nature in his concoction, the urine of man, the guano of an animal, elemental sulfur rocks, and charcoal from a scorched and burned plant. If indeed gunpowder belongs to devilry, then each creature upon the earth might also be complicit in its creation. And, in so doing, the judge reduces and subjugates all beings of the earth in his mastery, his suzerainty over them. The passage implies that in some ways the judge knows these entities far better than they know themselves, as no other man nor beast had the intellect and creativity to know. Yet, the utility of these organic excretions and inorganic compounds serves as an equalizing degradation before the judge, establishing his ultranatural credibility over man, animal, plant, rock, and anything else on the earth.

To increasingly bind the judge to his ultranatural designation and illustrate him to be ultimate arbiter of natural law, McCarthy borrows perhaps the most significant animal in the American literary canon — another ultranatural creature — to further empower Holden as a force of nature: Moby Dick. Herman Melville's *Moby Dick, or the Whale* in its most basic

interpretation, is about man's ineffectual struggle against nature, and the comparison is merited within other literary studies of both novels. Hungerford, Phillips, Bloom and countless others have noted McCarthy's stylistic and formal borrowing from *Moby Dick* in *Blood Meridian* (Woodward notes in his *New York Times* profile that *Moby Dick* is McCarthy's favorite book), and McCarthy clearly gleaned from Melville's behemoth of an antagonist to create his own. The great white whale of the American canon represents the untamable aspect of nature that humanity ceaselessly and fruitlessly struggles against in a vain attempt to master the inevitable constraints of the natural world. Yet, *Moby Dick* serves not merely as an example of nature, but of a being that surpasses nature in its supreme capability. It is this quality of the whale that McCarthy primarily imprints onto the judge in *Blood Meridian*.

The similarities in appearance between the two novels' respective antagonists are readily apparent: both large, white and hairless, the judge figured as an albino. Curiously, McCarthy uses his first description of Holden to comment that the judge "had no brows to his eyes nor lashes to them" (*BM* 6), but it becomes much less curious when Melville's description of the sperm whale's head specifically includes "lashless eye" (Melville 359). *Moby Dick* and Judge Holden also both possess incredible physical strength which surpasses other individuals of their selective species. However, the similarities then become less readily perceptible as the two also share somewhat supernatural or ultranatural abilities. For instance, both McCarthy and Melville imply their antagonists exist extra-dimensionally, ignoring the typical laws of time and space. When Ishmael first describes *Moby Dick* after Ahab's pledge to destroy the beast, the narrator notes "one of the wildest suggestions referred to" by superstitious whalers "was the unearthly conceit that *Moby Dick* was ubiquitous; that he had actually been encountered in opposite latitudes at one and the same

instant of time” (Melville 197). Holden enjoys the same slippery quality. When the kid tells the ex-priest about his encounter with the judge at a circuit rider clergyman’s sermon which occurred some months prior to their shared inclusion among the scalp hunting party, Tobin only smiles and says “Every man in the company claims to have encountered the sooty-souled rascal in some other place” (McCarthy 130). Tobin then tells the kid of the Glanton gang’s first encounter with the judge; how they came upon him as he sat upon a single, solitary rock in the wilderness. “No horse. Just him and his legs crossed, smiling as we rode up. Like he’d been expectin us... It was like you couldn’t tell where he’d come from” (McCarthy 131-132).

Melville and McCarthy also respectively suggest the whale and the judge are immortal. Ishmael infers of the whale in *Moby Dick* that “Though groves of spears should be planted in his flanks, [Moby Dick] would still swim away unharmed” (198). In the closing chapters of *Moby Dick*, Captain Ahab, an expert whaler, famously tries to slay the white whale. Instead, *Moby Dick* toys with Ahab for a few days and nights before destroying the captain’s ship, the *Pequod*, and drowning Ahab. Holden likewise mocks death for when the kid has become a man at the end of the novel and sees the judge after decades have passed, he notes “[the judge] seemed little changed or none in all these years” (338) and despite the many close encounters the judge has with death — the Yuma massacre, the Indian attacks in the mountains, the kid leveling his pistol at him while he is unarmed — Holden never betrays the slightest hint of fear and he suffers little to no injury, aside from a particularly intense sunburn he suffers in escaping from the Yuma. As noted in the previous chapter, the judge even says at the end of the novel that he will never die, and due to a lack of change in his age and his unspoken avowal to not suffer harm, he seems more than capable of fulfilling that inhuman promise.

Even more frighteningly, McCarthy implies that the judge is not only immortal but eternal, as during a dream of the kid's in which he sees the judge, the narrator lays out the futility of tracing back the judge to any certain source. One could not simply "divide him back into his origins" and "whoever would seek out his history through what unraveling of loins and ledgerbooks" would "stand darkened and dumb at the shore of a void without terminus or origin" (322).

But beyond these surface qualities, the two antagonists also represent the pinnacle of selection. Eric Wilson, in his essay "Melville, Darwin, and the Great Chain of Being," writes the failure on Ahab's part to kill Moby Dick symbolizes a shift in thought that man no longer reigned supreme over the natural world, specifically because an animal had finally bested man, and done so with ease. Subsequently, one could argue *Moby Dick* has posthuman elements, and Wilson's reading of Melville's great tome appears indicative of that belief:

With Ahab's demise end the related pre-Darwinian beliefs that man, through his rational faculties, sits atop and controls the great chain of being; that civilized man is fundamentally different from and superior to uncivilized men and wild beasts; and that transformations in man and nature proceed according to design. The rise of Ishmael at the novel's close points to an alternative world, one controlled more by the forces of nature than by humans, one in which the civilized is not fundamentally different from the savage and the animal, one guided not by a linear plan but, to use Darwin's famous phrase, by an "inextricable web of affinities." (Wilson)

The judge does not so much differ from Moby Dick in this regard as they simply work as two agents in contest with one another within the same paradigm. *Moby Dick* demands a reconsideration and a decentralization of the human position, according to Wilson, but that is not what is really at play here. Any creature sufficient to remove the great white whale from that privileged position could do so at any time. The judge argues not for an inherent humanist position, but instead for the paradigm itself, for selection to determine fitness of

survival and suzerainty. Should man achieve the latter of those conditions, then it the system centralizes them as apex. Should they not, then that will happen as well. In this way, McCarthy straddles the line of humanist centralization of the human and posthumanist decentralization. *Blood Meridian* eradicates the illusion of relative human worth as greater over other members of the ecosystem, but in the violent meritocracy within the novel, mankind is still permitted to rule the world, so long as it acknowledges the world's lethality and his inability to transcend that quality of the world and in himself.

To serve as an exemplar of this world order, Judge Holden is easily one of the single most violent characters in all of literature. Aside from the miscellaneous murders he commits as part of the Glanton gang's raids, he adopts for three days a young Apache boy, orphaned by one such raid, but generally welcomed within the camp, as "some of the men played with it and made it laugh and they gave it jerky... They covered it with a blanket and in the morning the judge was dandling it on one knee while the men saddled their horses" (170). However, soon after that, the judge kills and scalps the child, for no apparent reason beyond the ransom placed upon the hair of his head. Children, mainly young girls, also have a tendency to go missing in towns the judge visits ("A little girl was missing and parties of citizens had turned out to search the mineshafts." (200); "In the street men were calling for the little girl whose bear was dead for she was lost. They went among the darkened lots with lanterns and torches calling out to her" (347)). His murder of the kid — who has become a grown man at the end of the novel — stands in stark contrast to most deaths as it becomes the only violent scene not shown because it is simply too gruesome for those characters who witness it to articulate. Even the narrator does not go into detail about the contents of the

jakes and whatever atrocity the judge committed upon the kid. The only hint is that one of the men who discovers the scene immediately begins vomiting.²¹

Yet one scene illustrates the judge's cruelty perhaps most graphically: the murder he commits of two puppies that he bought from a young boy in a random mining town in Mexico. After playfully performing a coin trick for the child in buying the dogs, he throws them into a nearby river for a man within the gang to shoot.

Here the Vandiemerlander stood urinating from a stone wall into the water. When he saw the judge commit the dogs from the bridge he drew his pistol and called out. The dogs disappeared in the foam. They swept one and the next down a broad green race over sheets of polished rock into the pool below. The Vandiemerlander raised and cocked the pistol. In the clear waters of the pool willow leaves turned like jade dace. The pistol bucked in his hand and one of the dogs leaped in the water and he cocked it again and fired again and a pink stain diffused. He cocked and fired the pistol a third time and the other dog also blossomed and sank. (201)²²

His casual casting of the dogs over the bridge and the eager trigger finger of his companion, the needlessness of it all, the slaying of a creature that could know no better about their brief owner, animals that have served as humanity's closest domesticated evolutionary companion knew allegiance to — man's best friend, to kill such an animal in such a way marks the judge's heinousness. His ultranatural position and abilities permit him to do essentially as he pleases, he uses the authority invested in him as an excuse to commit wholly unnecessary violence with an almost whimsical serenity.

²¹ Not to belabor the point, but the narrative silence of this scene due to its ultraviolent content says **a lot** about how horrifying it was. This book talked about a tree hung with dead babies like fish on a line within the first third of the novel.

²² Personal note: When I first read *Blood Meridian* nearly a decade ago, I had to reread this passage multiple times due to the sheer shock it induced in me. It was exactly here that I realized the judge was no normal character and this was no normal book.

And that's the point. Holden serves as allegorical to humankind and its own capacity for violence and destruction, conscious and unconscious, full of passion and hatred or devoid of them in scientific calculations. A hermit at the beginning of the novel accuses the species of such a large proportion of violence specifically through its industrial and scientific properties, noting "You can find meanness in the least of creatures, but when God made man, the devil was at his elbow. A creature that can do anything. Make a machine. And a machine to make the machine. An evil that can run itself a thousand years, no need to tend it" (20). As a suzerain predators, Holden and mankind have an ultranatural agency that allows for extreme success should they choose to execute violence. As Inger-Anne Softing writes "The judge offers no consolation, no assurance, that man in his encounter with wilderness did not become savage indeed, no consolation that man even before his encounter with wilderness was not inherently savage and evil" (17). I would argue further; the judge insists upon man's savage and evil nature and in the Gnostic sense, man has inherited violence and evil from the world around him, and the violence of selection forms the basis of a language. In conversation with all beings in the ecology, the judge lives up to his title, hearing the cases (though he does not listen, he only speaks and dictates) of those creatures incapable of supplanting him and executing any and all he wishes to silence, his propensity and efficiency for bloodshed shouting over all others.

Throughout this thesis, I have alluded to the idea of humankind's suzerainty over the natural world given its capacity as a geological force, and here, finally, I can confess that I have shamelessly stolen that word from Judge Holden, who utilizes the term to describe his end goal: of becoming a suzerain of the earth. His definition sets man in binary opposition to the natural world as he preaches that "Only nature can enslave man and only when the

existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth” (*BM* 207). When Toadvine, a member of Glanton’s gang asks what a suzerain is, Holden initially describes a suzerain as a “keeper or overlord,” but distinguishes it upon further inquiry from those others “because he is a special kind of keeper. A suzerain rules even where there are other rulers. His authority countermands local judgements” (*BM* 207). This latter definition of suzerainty fits perfectly within the judge’s desire to single out the “thread of tapestry” from the nature of the world, and his insistence upon obeying, respecting and instituting the most fundamental law codes. The frivolities of morality, a jurisdiction located within the realm of the human, matter little since a more foundational law, what Georg Guillemin identifies as “the interrelationship between man and nature at its lowest common denominator, that of survival,” holds utter and complete sway in the dark pastoral of *Blood Meridian* (80). In achieving, or desiring to achieve, suzerainty through both the empirical and ultranatural methods described in the previous chapter, the judge becomes symbolic of the tone of the book that insinuates mankind’s attempts to dominate nature in the basest incarnation of such a domination.

Barclay Owens posits this domination as indicative of natural suzerainty by drawing strict comparisons between humans with apes and wolves in the early sections of his book *Cormac McCarthy’s Western Novels*, which focus on *Blood Meridian*. Owens writes that “Atavistic violence is the true nature of mankind” and later that “Man has surpassed wolves and all other predators on his climb up the food chain, and as a consequence of successful competition, has reached an obsessive, crazed pinnacle of savagery. He is a clever genetic strain, a predator species run amok...” (4, 48). Indeed, the savagely, predatory nature of the humans within *Blood Meridian* makes up the bulk of the novel, but it rarely appears as man

preying upon nature. Rather nature seems to hunt man, as when a bear carries off one of the Delawares in Glanton's party ("The bear had carried off their kinsman like some fabled storybook beast and the land had swallowed them up beyond all ransom or reprieve" (143-144)) or men hunt each other, as either the kid's earliest adventures with the filibusters, of taking early part in a war unsanctioned by human government — a lesser law code to that of survival — to the scalping of Indians and Mexicans with the Glanton Gang to the Comanche raids. One passage near the end of the text though shows the extent to which humans have preyed upon the animals of the West, as the kid sits down at a campfire with a bison hunter to share tobacco.

The animals by the thousands and tens of thousands and the hides pegged out over actual square miles of ground and the teams of skinners spelling one around another around the clock and the shooting and shooting weeks and months till the bore shot slick and the stock shot lose at the tang and their shoulders were yellow and blue to the elbow... Two year ago we pulled out from Griffin for a last hunt. We ransacked the country. Six weeks. Finally found a herd of eight animals and we killed them and come in. They're gone. Ever one of them that God ever made is gone as if they'd never been at all. (330)

The ease and propensity with which hunters killed buffalo described in the first part of the excerpt contrasts with the hunters' inability to find any save eight bison after weeks of searching, the scene perfectly describes what Guillemin calls "The narrative ecosystem of wilderness" in the novel that "resembles not the primitive state restored but absolute desolation," emphasized by the hunters' apparent inability to value the handful of survivors by simply killing them upon the discovery of what for all they knew were the last bison on the continent (89). The ecosystem has been permanently destroyed by overhunting whereas a primitive state would imply some kind of balance or equanimity of humans within nature. Instead, the absence of a proper ecosystem because of human suzerainty over the wilderness

has decimated the wilderness itself, where humans become all-consuming predators over all, without consuming properly. In fact, only the skins of animals are collected in the passage, and the hunter notes “the meat rotting on the ground and the air whining with flies and the buzzards and ravens and the night a horror of snarling and feeding with the wolves half crazed and wallowing in the carrion” (330). All other creatures can only become scavengers, and the natural ecosystem has fallen out of whack, namely because humanity has created a state of nature devoid of true equilibrium, so disruptive in its own pursuits and an affront to the principles of natural systems, becoming a suzerain in its practices of predation.

To appropriate the judge’s definition for a more naturalistic sense, the suzerain predator rules even where other predators lay a claim to the land and its inhabitants, and such a predator’s authority certainly countermands local, more contained, judgements and paradigms employed by other predators who assert themselves as the pre-eminent rulers of their domain. The suzerain predator becomes thus becomes hyper-determinant, one both indubitably a part of its environment, yet also one which lays claim to such a force as other creatures and organisms must respect its authority, regardless of its intent.

To the judge, the suzerain — and in a natural sense, the apex predator of apex predators — demands utter control of his surroundings. When he reveals his ultimate goals to an enraptured Glanton gang, he does so by laying his hands upon the earth and states, “This is my claim... And yet everywhere upon it are pockets of autonomous life. Autonomous. In order for it to be mine nothing must be permitted to occur on it save by my dispensation” (207). His desire for total (personal) control over the natural world could easily stand as allegory for the ever-increasing human domination of the world, and its insistence that it becomes the only autonomous force, centralizing itself as one among a host of lesser beings.

Even as Georg Guillemin writes that “the pastoral intention of *Blood Meridian* as the suspension of the human claim to stewardship over nature,” the novel still clearly indicates that humankind’s intentions and practices still attempt to find that stewardship, and his reading in this excerpt seems to ignore the intention of mankind within the novel (80). While he’s correct that McCarthy challenges anthropocentrism within the system, he seems to ignore the hints that mankind has become immensely successful within that system. Julius Greve offers a more balanced approach by noting the paradox of mankind within the novel by comparing it to the work of naturalist and leading figure of the German *naturphilosophie* movement, Lorenz Oken, when the latter posits in his book *Elements of Physiophilosophy* that “Man is the summit, the crown of nature’s development and must comprehend everything that has proceeded him, even as the fruit includes within itself all the earlier developed parts of the plant. In a word, Man must represent the whole world in miniature” (Oken 2). In his book *Shreds of Matter: Cormac McCarthy and the Concept of Nature*, Greve writes that a reading of *Blood Meridian* in an Okensian sense rectifies the novel’s apparent anti-anthropocentrism and the suzerainical goals of the judge, and allegorically, of humankind. Greve writes, “All of this establishes one of Oken’s antinomic prepositions: that man is nature’s pinnacle... and simultaneously is nothing other than a manifestation or positing of the ‘primal mud,’ the zero, or the nothing of nature” (164). While Greve insists that the geological condition of man present throughout the novel (humans are often directly compared to “clay,” “mud,” etc.) is one of indistinctiveness with nature, another reading of that comparison also directly speaks to the core idea of the Anthropocene, of humankind simultaneously straddling the realms of the biological and the geological. In fact, most Anthropocene scholars would argue humankind’s capacity as a geological force is what

specifically makes it distinct from other animal life on the planet, if not by kind than by degree. Man has become a suzerain predator, a dominion achieved by way of the judge's own scientific cataloguing and ultranatural capabilities.

While the judge does not appear in the passage of the buffalo hunt physically, he certainly does spectrally. Holden is a distillation of the uniquely human capacity to dominate other forms of life by sheer, naked capability to do so. He never asks himself whether or not he should do something, at least not along moral suppositions and self-interrogations, nor do the hunters even consider leaving that small remnant of buffalo alive. The hunters' own ultranatural control over the environment prevents them from any kind of intimate relation to the animals besides a predatory one. The moral void of the hunters perfectly mirrors the rejection of morality offered by the judge. The casual slaying of the two pups, of the Indian boy, of the innumerable people in the novel that other he maims and murders, these events matter little more to him than the footguard from Toledo that he crumples up and throws into a campfire. Those beings are just more objects to expunge from the knowledge of man and any other creature who may be capable of reckoning them. By silencing those voices and denying them the right to further tabernacle and engage in a broader, posthuman-influenced web of interaction, his prominence —and thus within that conversation only grows. It grows to the extent that it becomes overpowering, just as the human voice has overpowered the voices of other animals in the Anthropocene. The rhetoric of natural selection utilized by the judge, which urges accumulation and consolidation of power both within the human species and of the human species over others, is the guiding principle that led us to this new epoch.

Yet, the judge's first alternate definition of suzerainty also warrants further consideration as it becomes one, he does not fulfill — that of keeper. Literally, a keeper need

only possess something so as to qualify him- or herself as one, but to keep something usually means not only the maintenance of its possession, but also of its care, and that latter definition completely eludes the judge. While he destroys anything he does not have, he also tends to destroy those things within his possession. The judge uses his cataloguing with the “intention to expunge [his collections] from the memory of man,” and his destructive tendencies, like the slaughter of the Apache boy or the wholly unnecessary of the two pups, emphasize that he does not take the role of keeping seriously, does not protect that which he comes to own as his own belligerence and love of war prevents him from doing so (147). While the judge is correct in many ways about the nature of the world (as Barclay Owens writes, “Judge Holden’s cold, hard logic concerning the affairs of men is too firmly planted in the graveyard of historical bedrock” (xvii)), his interpretation of how to approach that world can be called into question. If humankind does indeed sit atop a whirlwind, a maelstrom of other lesser rulesets dictated by Darwin’s lesser creatures, plants and animals as Holden and thus McCarthy seem to suggest, where still any “smallest crumb” retains the ability to “devour us,” then it becomes possible to dictate our own approach as a grand organizer of chaos and it compels us to do so with the consideration of those smallest crumbs in mind (*BM* 207).

Chapter 8 — Predation

“He was a killer, a thing that preyed, living on the things that lived, unaided, alone, by virtue of his own strength and prowess, surviving triumphantly in a hostile environment where only the strong survive.”

— Jack London, *The Call of the Wild*

The predation mentioned in the previous chapter girds the narrative of McCarthy’s most recent novel as well. *The Road* features a world in which the ecosystem itself has completely collapsed due to some unnamed calamity (likely a nuclear strike, but possibly a meteor) that has left the sky a permanent gray. Plant life has simply ceased to function as the last trees have long since died and serve only as kindling for the common firestorms present in the novel. The few animals described in the novel appear as the last of their kind, wild dogs starved to the bone. At one point in the novel, the man and the boy come upon a farm, and the man notes “There was yet a lingering odor of cows in the barn and he stood there thinking about cows and he realized they were extinct. Was that true? There could be a cow being fed and cared for. Could there? Fed what? Saved for what?” (*The Road* 120). Yet the hellish landscape of the novel, almost completely devoid of plants and animals — wild and domesticated (as that passage indicates), results not in the suspension of natural law and selection, but rather its modulation to a solely intraspecies process. The remnant human beings become an ecosystem unto themselves, of herbivores like the man and the boy, who scavenge for canned and preserved foods or find stray, dried morel mushrooms in the ruins of civilization and the desiccated wilderness, and carnivores who feast cannibalistically upon the herbivores. As Paul Patton notes in his essay, “McCarthy’s Fire,” “All that remains is a Mad Max world of roaming bands in search of ever diminishing supplies of canned or dried food. Worse still, in the absence of any living animals, they hunt for other people... man has

literally become wolf to man” (132). The narrator describes this shift succinctly in one passage, noting that after the apocalyptic event, the world became “largely populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes and the cities themselves held by cores of blackened looters who tunneled among the ruins and crawled from the rubble white of tooth and eye carrying charred and anonymous tins of food in nylon nets like shoppers in the commissaries of hell” (*The Road* 181). This “new” state of the world unveils the dangers of centralization of the human. The human occupier of the postapocalyptic world of *The Road* is entirely centered by virtue of there no longer being anything else. The new ecosystem is entirely human, yet the laws of survival and selection have not changed: instead, they have come into sharper focus with existence. Humanity has atavistically returned to a purely physical form of fitness, where Maslovian self-actualization seems almost impossible for the act of feasting upon the fellow human or fearing the fellow human as a potential predator both close individuals from discovering their species self.

Yet to locate this desolation of the human spirit as solely in the diegetic post-apocalypse of *The Road* is a mistake. In fact, McCarthy seems adamant to illustrate the lack of interconnectedness between people and their larger environments that takes place before the catastrophe that causes the hellish setting of the novel. Many of the man’s flashbacks to the world before catastrophe seem to emphasize the primal nature of the pre-apocalyptic world and his glib ignorance towards its condition then. Mundik describes the man’s naivete after one such flashback of a time when he held his wife and told her as she slept that “if he were God he would have made the world just so and no different” (219). Mundik writes in this scene that the man believes “the world is perfect simply because he is momentarily happy. He gives no thought to the senseless suffering of others, which obviously existed even

before the apocalyptic disaster, though the countless wars, famines, diseases, and natural disasters that have plagued the human race since the beginning of history” (Mundik 301). Indeed, his recollections support the reading of the man as blind to the violent realities around him in the pre-apocalyptic world. His vision of perfection in that moment limits his ability to see and comprehend the historical violence that occurred for that moment to happen, and in saying he would make the world no different, he unconsciously argues for that violence once more. In a posthuman sense, the man represents one divorced from the interaction. The man, like the judge, represents an aspect of humanity, but instead of exhibiting the deadly sin of wrath and greed like Holden, the man represents sloth, all too eager to become complacent and calloused to the unseen and thus unconsidered violence which exists in the world. In another flashback early in the novel, he describes a falcon hunting a crane, and the focus remains entirely upon the aesthetic and visual beauty of it, without real focus on the consequences of the violence, indicating the man’s disconnect from the gravity of what he witnessed. “In that long ago somewhere very near this place he’d watched a falcon fall down the long blue wall of the mountain and break with the keel of its breastbone the midmost from a flight of cranes and take it to the river below all gangly and wrecked and trailing its loose and blowsy plumage in the still autumn air” (20). The man remembers the beauty of the hunt but cannot impart a distinctive psychology or worldview to such an event. Instead, as Mundik notes, it shows a naivete to the condition of his environment, as ignorant of the violence inherent and naturally within the world. Even the setting of the falcon’s hunt — a “long ago somewhere very near this place” — seems indicative that despite the lapse of time and condition in encountering this space, spatially and conditionally, the apocalyptic event has changed little as predation features prominently

in both the pre-apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic worlds. The post-apocalypse of *The Road* has simply made the predation practiced by humans more explicit and apparent than in the pre-apocalypse as scarcity of resources and other creatures over which to exercise dominion have forced humanity back into a more natural, as opposed to ultranatural, state.

A later reflection in the novel indicates however that the pre-apocalyptic world also contained deliberate, willful violence of humanity towards nature. This flashback to the world before apocalypse recalls the wanton, unnecessary, wholesale slaughter of the buffalo in *Blood Meridian* and implicates the human as an aberrant towards other life forms. The man recalls an event as a young boy, one where he witnessed the mass extermination of a den of snakes:

Standing at the edge of a winter field among rough men. The boy's age. A little older. Watching while they opened up the rocky hillside ground with pick and mattock and brought to light a great bolus of serpents perhaps a hundred in number. Collected there for a common warmth. The dull tubes of them beginning to move sluggishly in the cold hard light. Like the bowels of some great beast exposed to the day. The men poured gasoline on them and burned them alive, having no remedy for evil but only for the image of it as they conceived it to be. The burning snakes twisted horribly and some crawled burning across the floor of the grotto to illuminate its darker recesses. As they were mute there were no screams of pain and the men watched them burn and writhe and blacken in just such silence themselves and they disbanded in silence in the winter dusk each with his own thoughts to go home to their suppers. (189)

Unlike the buffalo, however, the men assign no use value to the destruction of these snakes, where they take not even the skins in some kind of consumptive pursuit. Instead, the man interprets their only goal as an attempt to destroy not even evil, but "the image of it as they conceived it to be." Both the man and the larger collective of men fail to assign reason to such destruction, an unjustified massacre of animals who performed no actual wrong. The killing of the snakes with no consideration towards their inherent worth as living beings (or even

their value as commodities) later informs the post-apocalyptic society of *The Road*. In their inability to assign any kind of value to the snakes or even in failing to identify the snakes as a potential threat to survival, the men show a blindness to the creatures as an “other,” opting instead to ascribe a faulty illusory interpretation of morality upon them. While the desecration of the buffalo for their pelts shows a violation of an extension of Kant’s second categorical imperative to all life, the immolation of the snakes beggars the question entirely, as killing the snakes does not reduce them to a means or an end, but simply a cruel and needless act, especially since the ascription of the snakes as evil by the collective does not have any actual merit. This scene also delivers upon one of the overarching themes of the novel: that the world before and after the apocalypse share much more in common than one would suppose at first glance, and one of these commonalities is mankind’s nature as an apex predator. As Mundik notes, “Death is not unique to the postapocalyptic world of *The Road* but a horrific certainty that has awaited all living beings since the beginning of time” (294). The needless genocides and wars of competition between nations and ideologies and the industrial-scale subjugation of certain animals that existed in the pre-apocalypse (and exist in our world) the man is so ignorant of indeed illustrate that indeed though violence has become formalized, it still occurs, occasionally without reason and always in disregard of the other.

Likewise, in *The Road*, society has not truly transformed or achieved a new incarnation in this apocalyptic setting and the systems it instituted have not changed. It has merely shifted the goods it trades in because of the scarcity of resources, it has shifted backwards through time to something older, to something inherent and intrinsic. This atavism presents itself again late in the novel as the man ponders that “Perhaps in the world’s

destruction it would be possible to see how it was made. Oceans, mountains. The ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be. The sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular. The silence" (274). While the man dwells on the possible reversion in a larger nature, he witnesses this reversion in humanity throughout the novel primarily because of the emergent practice of cannibalism, an essential part of survival among many animal species today. As Mary Bates writes in an article for *Wired* magazine, "At first glance, cannibalism may seem like nature gone awry in the goriest way possible. But... it can make evolutionary sense to eat one's own kind. Whether it's a way to destroy competitors, nourish one's young, or simply out of hunger, cannibalism can be a shrewd strategy for survival" (Bates). Many archeologists and anthropologists also have substantive evidence to believe that early humans partook in cannibalistic practices. Richard Hollingham writes in his article "Natural Born Cannibals" for *New Scientist* that several dig sites have yielded butchered human bones with flesh removed by tools and in his article "Once Were Cannibals," Tim White notes that "studies have finally provided convincing evidence of prehistoric cannibalism" (White 338). Thus, the consumption of human flesh by humans in *The Road* effectively indicates the reversion of humanity into a more natural state, another example of the world in its unbecoming.

The cannibalism practiced in *The Road* is illustrated most shockingly in the scene whereupon the man and the boy enter a house they initially believe to be vacant. After descending into the house's basement and encountering at first just "coldness and damp" and "an ungodly stench," they see that the basement serves as a prison for people the tenants of the home have kept for food. "Huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands. On the mattress lay a man

with his legs gone to the hip and stumps of them blackened and burnt. The smell was hideous” (110). The reduction of the human into a food source brings the man’s realization of the extinction of cows into sharper focus. The lack of cows does not mean a lack of agriculture and husbandry, but rather a reduction of the human into nothing more than its edible flesh. One passage in the novel²³ also describes one of the many roving bands of cannibalistic marauders and McCarthy’s language insinuates a recursion to some prior point, noting a dead group of partisans tattooed in “homebrewed woad” with “runic slogans” and symbols of animals and targets, eliciting the Pictish, Celtic and Nordic traditions (90-91). He calls another band of roving men, a “phalanx,” recalling the Greek (91). Finally, they move as a war party carrying with them “wagons drawn by slaves in harness and piled with goods of war and after that the women, perhaps a dozen in number, some of them pregnant, and lastly a supplementary consort of catamites illclothed against the cold and fitted in dogcollars and yoked each to each” (92). These practices display the existence of culture in the post-apocalyptic wastes, but not of new culture. Instead these symbols and signs serve more to underscore the depth of regression in the post-apocalypse as the war parties merely imitate cultures that have not existed for millennia.

Regardless, the slaves, the catamites —a boy used explicitly for sexual release by pederasts — the women apparently used strictly for breeding purposes, have like the men and women in the basement been reduced to their utility, as means to an end of survival in an unenlightened repudiation of Kant, and more shockingly of animality, one who regardless of their ability or inability to see and recognize the other, disregards the distinction of their humanity (in a humanist strain) or their inherent value as a living thing (in a posthumanist

²³ See Appendix 3 for the full passage

strain) and instead chooses to partake in their flesh to fulfill a foundational, basic, Maslovian need to feed, to use them as a means to achieve the title of suzerain predator.

The carnivorous ouroboros employed by actors within *The Road* serves as an anti-apocalypse, where McCarthy—as he does in *Blood Meridian*—seeks only to unveil the world as it is, an attempt to articulate the paradigm which governs life and existence itself. *The Road* illustrates that no matter how much humanity attempts to distance itself from natural processes and natural law that it will always remain a part of that conversation. It cannot ignore its role in the world or suppose itself beyond the grasp of the world by illusions like civilization or progress. While Chakrabarty sees the Anthropocene as a collapse of human history and natural history, McCarthy seems to question the existence of such a separation and extinction at all as humans have readily, necessarily reverted into a more natural state due to the extreme scarcity of resources in the world of *The Road*. Just as in the Anthropocene, humanity has become a centralized part of nature in *The Road* by virtue of its suzerainical control over nature. Other animals have almost entirely gone extinct by virtue of inability to adapt to the changing environment and humanity's supremacy as an ultimate apex predator. However, that supremacy was established long before the world began to die in the novel. The difference between human suzerainty before and after the apocalypse is one of scale, not of kind, and McCarthy subtly but certainly compares the violence practiced by people in the apocalypse upon other people with the violence present in the pre-apocalypse, our status quo.

Chapter 9 — Extinctions and Apocalypses

“Animals are the old language of the imagination; one of the ten thousand tragedies of their disappearance would be a silencing of this speech.”

— Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*

Apocalypse has come to take on a meaning in contemporary society as any variety of events that describe in detail the end and truly final events of the world, especially in the Christian sense found in the Book of Revelation in the Bible. Common parlance describes nuclear apocalypses, in which mankind has finally used nuclear weapons in a war wiping out mankind, and the zombie apocalypse has become a popular science fiction genre, where the undead or seriously ill, infected by some manner of virus or disease that induces cannibalism as a primary symptom, roam the land searching for people to feast upon.

However, the literal meaning of apocalypse in Ancient Greek is that of “an uncovering” and it implies less an end to the world, but an unveiling, a great revelation of knowledge about the true nature of the world. In the Christian sense, this definition applies to the revelation of God and divine knowledge. In many ways, the Anthropocene can be identified as apocalypse, the realization of a new epoch fundamentally created upon the recognition of the human as a geological force rather than merely a biological one. But in both *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West* and *The Road*, McCarthy’s apocalyptic vision reveals his own interpretation of the truth inherent in the world, not of some grand new knowledge or of a greater proximity to God. The truth he seeks to is the fundamental truth of the world, one rooted in Darwinian natural selection as articulated in the previous chapters. *Blood Meridian* and *The Road* attempt to articulate the paradigm, ruleset, or language in which humanity can commune with the world, but also, and far more

fundamentally, to show how nature communes with itself, humanity being but a subsidiary actor within that larger whole. The man, one of two primary characters in *The Road*, articulates this interpretation best when he has his own unveiling, when he sees “for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world,” but not one of a futurity or of a world to come, but of the world as is: “The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like groundfoxes in their cover” (130). The “hunted animals... in their cover,” along with the rest of the novel, indicates a nihilistic predation of some sort, where the base need for survival, both of the prey and the predator, takes centerstage.

The Road focuses on extinction on a scale not often considered in fiction, and its implications ring throughout the text. In the previous chapter, the extinction of cows, other domesticated animals, and apparently nearly all wild animals and plants led to the reduction of humans into a food source, a collapse of the humanist distinction between human and animal, where certain humans become more fit than others and consume them. Illustrative of the dehumanizing dangers of valuing fitness on fitness alone, extinction also serves another purpose, namely the destruction of linearity and progress, as extinction happens often both in the real world and the world described in McCarthy’s novels.

First, the ruins present in *Blood Meridian* and *The Road* act as markers of what once was and, in the case of *The Road*’s near future setting, of what will be, and thus as atemporal, eternal markers of the present. The ruins serve as a shorthand for extinction as Ben de Bruyn suggests in his essay “Borrowed Time, Borrowed World and Borrowed Eyes: Care, Ruin and Vision in McCarthy’s *The Road* and Harrison’s Ecocriticism,” “many ruins hint at the

functional civilization that has disappeared. The catalogue of decay in *The Road* is hence not simply a matter of scenery or descriptive detail. The decaying cities and buildings, rusted cars and tools, weathered trains and boats, reveal the collapse of an entire world” (de Bruyn 782). The death of the world writ large, of a way of life, almost seems to signal the species’ death of the contemporary human, and within the context shown in the remnants that inhabit the world of *The Road*, especially the barbaric tribes in the wasteland. As Greve writes, “The catastrophic and world-transforming event that has taken place is all too conceivable and therefore imaginable. In other sense, the future humanity that genuinely will have survived such a catastrophe remains profoundly and irreducibly unimaginable.” (143) This argument might be a stretch, but regardless, modern American society in *The Road* has completely collapsed and in all functional capacity, the contemporary state of the world has vanished, leaving only ruins. At one point in the novel, the man stands “in the charred ruins of a library where blackened books lay in pools of water” (187). He notices someone has tipped over the shelves because of “some rage at the lies arranged in their thousands row on row” (187) “He picked up one of the books and thumbed through the heavy bloated pages. He’d not have thought the value of the smallest thing predicated on a world to come. It surprised him. That the space which these things occupied was itself an expectation” (187). The temporal space of the library as a remnant of the past, but simultaneously as a place promising a future, promising progress and advancement via the accumulation of knowledge, “an expectation,” insists upon its own eternal condition despite the decay it suffers and the extinction of those who could decipher such texts and attribute meaning unto them, because the attribution of meaning, of importance, allows for care. Books serve little more purpose at the end of a cold world than kindling.

The diegetic world of *The Road* differs little from the diegetic world of *Blood Meridian*. In fact, in terms of selection, little has changed, except that life on earth cannot renew itself as the sun's energy no longer leaves plant growth possible. Thus, McCarthy insists in both novels that selection is the ultimate state of the world, and his apocalyptic unveiling becomes utterly concrete and clear. As Dana Phillips writes in "‘He ought not have done it’: McCarthy and Apocalypse," "... While in *The Road* the world may have come to an end, the world is also the same as it ever was: filled with mortal peril" (173). He extends this argument later in the essay by writing that "In *The Road* there has been no apocalypse: the end of the world is simply the end of the world, and McCarthy describes the scene as if he were a policeman dispatched by who knows what agency: There is nothing new to see here, folks. Now move along. There can be no rubbernecking on the road" (188). Phillips here instills the idea of a non-apocalypse, and his delineation between the end of the world and the apocalypse, an unveiling, a revelation of some new knowledge, insightfully notes that no new knowledge is gained in this society.

The primordial truth then is the one which McCarthy seeks to uncover; selection serves as the primary and possibly sole determinant of those who live and those who die, unbiased towards any individual actor, only allowing those fit enough to continue in their struggle. While human sociocultural practices may mitigate or even occasionally subvert natural selection, the judge hierarchically places moral and spiritual law as subordinates to natural law to illustrate that those constructs have lesser impact in the natural dialectics. In fact, humanity still actively participates in natural law in several intraspecies systems that emphasize competition largely for clade-based claims of territory, little different than our nearest animal ancestors. Nationalism, racism, religious conflict, imperialism, the Marxist

class struggles of capitalism, and other intra-human struggles result from and are simply permutations or sophistications of humankind's natural state, one geared towards war, towards dominance and suzerainty, as much life is in the war of nature. McCarthy's novels elaborate a certain reading of Darwin, informed by gnosticism and Hobbes, of the world itself as a place to seek shelter from, not a paradise, but a hell of freedoms, including the freedom to suffer violence. Human culture, technology, and progress are dangerous illusions that hide this unsavory fact. As McCarthy tells Woodward, "the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea. Those who are afflicted with this notion are the first ones to give up their souls, their freedom. Your desire that it be that way will enslave you and make your life vacuous" (McCarthy, qtd. In Woodward).

McCarthy illustrates time and again in *Blood Meridian* and *The Road* that natural law and the war or state of nature functions as the world's ultimate and true state. He utilizes his fiction to further articulate his succinct philosophy towards literature, of valuing books that question the nature of life and death, that he voiced in *The New York Times'* profile of the author (Woodward). McCarthy repeatedly considers all organisms — in *The Road*, at least the few that remain — as caught up in this struggle for dominance, Darwin's war of nature. In his writings, the human does not take precedence. Instead, the evolutionary contest *itself* takes precedence, which allows for the human to simultaneously exist both in centered relation to the rest of nature, as "victor" of a bloody game of selection, and in a decentered relation, as one among many competitors — a philosophy that puts him in a liminality between the humanist and posthumanist approaches. All have the potential to sit upon the

throne, but few ever actually claim it. The Anthropocene as an epoch is recognition that humans wear a heavy crown, but a crown earned by innumerable gallons of blood and sweat.

But humans have not ended the process of selection. Indeed, we are embroiled in it, and eventually, should the war of nature rage on, we risk the chance that nature will eventually select against us. Pathogen, nuclear war, climate crises, even outlandish claims like the dead coming back to life to feast on brains, unimaginable alien races participating in a cosmic version of our earthly struggle, machines we ourselves craft rising against their human oppressors, or even the Second Coming itself: popular culture has articulated possible apocalypses and religious eschatologies have also elaborated upon the many ways in which humankind will come to an end. However, it ends, something else, something decidedly not human, will come next until Earth cannot sustain life in billions of years when the sun scorches the very atmosphere away. As Judge Holden notes when the gang camps near some long abandoned Anasazi dwellings, “[T]hese ruins wondered at by tribes of savages, do you not think that this will be again? Aye. And again. With other people, with other sons” (153). The judge may as well be talking about the library in *The Road*, as well. McCarthy’s nihilism of inevitable, fatalistic conflict presented in *The Road* and *Blood Meridian* gnashes everything in its bloody jaws

And that is precisely why the turn to something like Grosz’ reformulation of Darwinism is so important.

McCarthy’s works successfully catalogue and identify humanity’s current approach to the world, as an object to control in a Darwinist struggle for survival against other species and against other people. Human history, time and again, has been marred by unceasing violence and war and it has never stopped, despite our best efforts, because our reptilian

brains still need to fight for food, mates, and territory to continue the species. Grosz' posthuman Darwinism is a transcendence of that war of nature, that struggle for survival, a request not to take up arms against other forms of life but to value, and aspects of human culture which embody the ability to see past one's own interests — art and trade, among others— are representative of that altruistic part of us as well. Early humans may have butchered one another, but they also crafted flutes and drums and made music with them.

Grosz also recognizes humanity's transience, writing "Man is not the center of animal life, just as the earth is not the center of the universe. The human is but a momentary blip in the history and cosmology that remains fundamentally indifferent to this temporary eruption" (24-25). However, instead of utilizing mankind's brevity as an excuse to grip ever tighter to our own species' existence, she suggests using that time to peacefully understand our relationships with other forms of life on this planet — to die gracefully as a species. Not kicking and screaming and eating one another, but in observing what we already have, in doing away with the competition for more, the accumulation of progress and the false divisions that scarcity sows among the species. In this way, we become more attuned to our reality. Grosz writes:

Darwin makes it clear that he does not believe that it is possible to understand a single, (God-given) morality, reason or logic as regulating of all life on earth. Rather, each species, each bodily form orients the world, and its actions in it according to its ability to maximize action in the world, the kinds of action that its particular evolved bodily form enables. This is perhaps the only ethics internal to life itself: to maximize action, to enable to proliferation of actions, movements. (22)

In the keeper role as suzerains of the earth, we have the potential to understand these articulations of action, to curate them, to participate in maximizing action in ways that proliferate life and foster it, instead of seeking to win any kind of competition. Our victory

already occurred, and the continued devastation humanity has inflicted upon ecosystems in the name of prioritized human growth that Kolbert writes about potentially threatens the existence of life on this planet.

To value life, Grosz seems to insist that learning how life orients its world, how it interprets the world, is what must be valued. McCarthy insists that all life orients the world based on violent survival, and to an extent that's true. But listening to how other species struggle to survive and even how other species transcend survival may yield other secrets and mysteries worth examining. It is in empathy with life then that we can find the way to combat our compulsion to dominate the world and ourselves.

The Road also offers a hope at redemption through empathy, and potentially even course correction, as humanity recognizes its own power in the Anthropocene, represented by a new addition to the world: the son of the man, known simply as the boy. A posthumanism then which extends not only agency, but an inherent value once thought the exclusive purview of *homo sapiens* to all creatures, systems and inanimate objects, serves as a vision of what the world could — and should — be. As the epigraph to this chapter implies, authority in and of itself does not cause damage, but without wisdom and all the qualities and attributes that wisdom entails — foresight and hindsight, intellect, compassion, moderation, humility, recognition and reflection — authority can only serve destructive ends. However, the possibility of changing such a system, of a new orientation of the human towards the natural world, could theoretically allow for such a cycle to come to an end or at least not make humanity complicit in the mass extinctions taking place.

Chapter 10 — Morality

"This is the tomb of the dog, Stephanos, who perished, Whom Rhodope shed tears for and buried like a human. I am the dog Stephanos, and Rhodope set up a tomb for me."

— Epitaph on an ancient Greek grave

For a man who so ruptured the traditional moral framework of religion via his own scientific discoveries, Darwin endorsed an inherent morality within the human that could be biologically developed. He notes in *Descent of Man* that he “fully subscribe[s] to the judgment of those writers who maintain that of all the differences between man and the lower animals, the moral sense or conscience is by far the most important” (94). He continues that “It is the most noble of all the attributes of man, leading him without a moment’s hesitation to risk his life for that of a fellow-creature; or after due deliberation, impelled simply by the deep feeling of right or duty, to sacrifice it in some great cause” (94). In quite unscientific and unempirical terms, Darwin here praises the ability for mankind to risk life, so hard fought for within the war of nature, for life beyond themselves as something to cherish and honor, an attribute “most noble.” I want to continue elaborating on this theory, but the next chapter of the thesis, will explore this noble attribute of morality, of empathy, as it appears in both of McCarthy’s texts — but specifically *The Road* — to underscore that for all of McCarthy’s supposition of a hellish, gnostic, amoral world, sublime morality can still exist through altruistic actions.

Darwin investigates morality within an evolutionary framework and indicates from a developmental biology that in its current human incarnation, morality evolved and possibly even continues to develop and progress into ever more nuance and greater consideration for the other. Darwin defines morality in a biological context as an extension of an altruistic group survival strategy, in which generosity towards individuals beyond the self in a social

animal setting helps to develop strong relationships which can influence sexual selection, coordinate survival and hunting or foraging strategies and help ward off larger and more dangerous predators.

Altruism in a biological context specifically means that an actor commits an action to benefit another individual at the harm of the actor, which, though it occurs in nature runs counter to the actual goals of evolution. David Sloan Wilson writes in his book *Does Altruism Exist?* “Altruism occupies center stage in Darwinian thought because it appears difficult to explain as a product of natural selection,” yet examples of altruism in nature abound (4). The constant vigil of meerkat families, the coordinated hunting activities of chimpanzees, lions and wolves, and cape buffalo will go out of their way to fight predators like lions and hyenas to save fallen members of the herd, unlike another prominent African ungulate: the wildebeest: each of these examples, among countless others, demonstrate individual animals will go out of their way to benefit the larger group.

Darwin writes that the development of morality came from this natural altruism. Ancestors to *homo sapiens* developed group dynamics similar to the aforementioned examples and placed less value on the self than on that of the group, hunting, foraging and dwelling in small social groups. As those hominids developed into *homo sapiens*, Darwin explained that alongside the growth in pronounced intellect came further sophistication in morality. He writes in *Descent of Man*:

As man gradually advanced in intellectual power, and was enabled to trace the more remote consequences of his actions; as he acquired sufficient knowledge to reject baneful customs and superstitions; as he regarded more and more, not only the welfare, but the happiness of his fellow-men; as from habit, following on beneficial experience, instruction and example, his sympathies became more tender and widely diffused, extending to men of all races, to the imbecile, maimed and other useless members of society, and finally to the lower animals — so would the standard of his morality rise higher and higher.

And it is admitted by moralists of the derivative school and by some intuitionists, that the standard of morality has risen since an early period in the history of man. (121)

This passage certainly has some dated and coarse language, but even so, Darwin's points still stand. The extension of compassion and sympathy mark an important development in the moral standing of humankind, and a possible breaking point from the war of nature. When Judge Holden tells the Glanton Gang in the Anasazi ruins that "Wolves cull themselves...and is the race of man not more predacious yet?" (153), Darwin then seems to offer a counterpoint through the care of people considered lesser in the eyes of society and to animals considered "lower" that the predation has limits and that different rules of individual survival or even rules counter to individual survival have surfaced naturally within the war of nature and been developed culturally as humans have developed more metrics of morality

More astonishingly, humans have also shown the capacity to assist other animals in escaping the war of nature, which oddly enough illustrates the "unguessed kinships" that McCarthy refers to in the "optical democracy" section of *Blood Meridian* (259). While McCarthy alludes often to wolves in that novel, Darwin focused much more on their closest relative in the animal kingdom: dogs, man's best friend. Journalist Emma Townshend writes in *Darwin's Dogs: How Darwin's Pets Helped Form a World-Changing Theory of Evolution* that the deeply loved canine companions of Darwin and his family had a humongous impact upon Darwin's theory of human evolution because the emotional ties between humans and dogs also signal evolutionary ties from similar behavior, wants and desires. Indeed, Darwin writes frequently about dogs in *Origin of Species* and *Descent of Man* and Townshend explains that Darwin found a companion for the human in the animal world via the dog.

Darwin believed that humans had evolved; but most of all he believed that we shouldn't be insulted, or feel that we are being dragged down, when we accept our animal ancestry. And every one of those dogs contributed to his thinking. Every single one helped fuel his argument that what we might see as a huge gap, between human and animal is actually less than we think. When we become angry, we can see the behavior in dog. When we love, said Darwin, we can see the same behavior in a dog. When we dream, we can look at a dog twitching and yapping whilst it sleeps, and know that they are dreaming too. (8-9)

The famous primatologist Jane Goodall also noted in an interview that dogs had a formative effect on her ability to attribute "beingness" to other creatures on the planet, saying "I was told that we humans were the only beings with personalities, minds and emotions, but I learned from my childhood teacher that wasn't true. And that childhood teacher was my dog, Rusty." (Goodall). Understanding the dog and valuing the relationship between the human and the dog contextualizes our relationship with the animal aspects of ourselves.

Thus, Darwinian selection itself occupies a liminal kind of space, one in which he notes that a war of nature exists, but also that within that war there exist profound moments of peace and understanding even between species who cannot truly ever know one another. The epigraph of this chapter suggests that love for dogs is not a new phenomenon either. This revelation also throws Judge Holden's killing of the two pups into a new light, one which shows that action denies shared experience of being found in both human and dog and in the shared relationship of our species. It becomes all the more abhorrent as a result, as it breaches an armistice, a trust between two competitors in the struggle for survival.

However, the pacific relationship between man and dog could indicate that the war of nature might not be a permanent or necessary state, but one which we can transcend. Dogs were only the first creatures people domesticated and, in many ways, learned to love and appreciate, not just for their labor, but for companionship. Horses, llamas, cats, parrots,

ferrets, and even tamed animals, to name just a few, can all reciprocate the companionship humans give to them and engage in complex relationships resulting in differing personalities.²⁴ The dog, domesticated over the course of 10,000 years of joint evolution, indicates a jumping off point in which the human can possibly come to terms with understanding the value inherent in all life beyond just a simple need to survive.

Agamben writes in *The Open* that the distinction between the man and the animal causes man to animalize other men and the catastrophic dangers that accompany such a task, especially if the aspects of violent selection, dominance and resource scarcity affect that animalization. Yet, in another sense, humankind recognizing itself as animal, as part of natural lineage, serves as the platform by which morality and altruism, even at the point of harm towards the human race, could prevent anthropogenic extinctions.

Wilson argues for a possible future focused on the power of moral altruism, centering the human capacity for altruism just as Hamilton does, but also with the values of decentralization of the human offered by the posthumanists. He writes: "... if we want the world to become a better place, we must choose policies with the welfare of the whole world in mind. As far as our selection criteria are concerned, we must become planetary altruists." (149) To do so, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, in his own landmark text, *The Selfish Gene*, writes, that a kind of rebellion against the "natural order" is necessary or desirable. "We have the power to defy the selfish genes of our birth and, if necessary, the selfish memes

²⁴ Although I do not cite a specific source here, anyone who has ever had a pet also knows this is as true as the fact that the sun rises in the East, and there exist literally millions of videos on the Internet that prove just how much humans and animals can truly love each other and that many animals definitively experience the same emotions as humans and have personalities.

of our indoctrination... We are built as gene machines and cultured as meme machines, but we have the power to turn against our creators. We, alone on earth, can rebel." (100)

Chapter 11 — Responsibility

“Authority without wisdom is like a heavy axe without an edge, fitter to bruise than polish.”

— Anne Bradstreet, *Meditations Divine and Moral*

Thus far, my analysis of *Blood Meridian* and *The Road* has attempted to illustrate how McCarthy views the world, one vested with self-interested selection and Darwinian portent, with survival, life and death, at the center of all struggles and interrelations. Yet, within those novels lie hints of what the world could or should be. *The Road* in stark clarity details the struggle not just of the man and the boy to survive, but also that, as Paul Patton writes in “McCarthy’s Fire,” “At the heart of *The Road* is the story of a father’s effort to imbue his son with the most rudimentary elements of a moral code.” (138). The obvious symbolism of this morality is the repeated refrain that the man and the boy are “carrying the fire” a spark of warmth and light in a cruel, dark, gray, and cold world, clearly symbolizes a moral (83). The man and the boy repeatedly promise each other that they will not resort to eating people no matter how desperate their circumstances. They do this even with the knowledge that the world is cruel, but the practice of carrying the fire allows them to overcome its challenges in a moralistic way.

The boy clearly represents the potential for a renewal of morality, and, as Mundik writes, within him “the potential for personal, esoteric spirituality remains undiminished” (307). Time and again, he shows a desire to reach out to others, to help people and even the few animals remaining in the wasteland, namely a stray dog. Upon hearing a dog bark, the man must first explain to the boy what the noise is, but immediately after the explanation, the boy asks, “We’re not going to kill it, are we Papa?” showing a deep-seated compassion for

the rest of the world (82). A little later, he insists to his father that he believes he saw another little boy “about his age” and even when his father tells him the little boy does not exist, the boy’s first instinct is to show compassion, asking if he has “anybody to take care of him” and promising that if they find him, he could “give that little boy half of my food” (85, 86). The boy then urges his father to share some of their food with a blind, old (unappreciative) wanderer named Ely. When they find an emergency bunker filled to the brim with survival rations, canned food and supplies, the boy even prays to the people who must have stocked it and yet been unable to use it. He even seems not to know how to pray as he seems “lost” according to the narrator, but the spark of divinity and “esoteric spirituality” noted by Mundik quickly reveals itself (*The Road* 146). “The man was about to speak when [the boy] said: Dear people, thank you for all this food and stuff. We know that you saved it for yourself and if you were here we wouldn’t eat it no matter how hungry we were and we’re sorry that you didn’t get to eat it and we hope that you’re safe in heaven with God” (146). The boy even extends this kindness to a man who attempted to steal the cart which contained the man and boy’s supplies and provisions. When the man and the boy find the thief, the boy begs repeatedly for his father not to kill him. While the man obliges this request, he demands the man take off his clothes and shoes and put them on the cart, and the boy weeps all throughout the humiliating process. Eventually, the boy convinces the man to turn the cart around and search for the man to give him back his clothes. “They went up the road calling out in the empty dusk, their voices lost over the darkening shorelands. They stopped and stood with their hands cupped to their mouths, hallooing mindlessly into the waste. Finally he piled the man’s shoes and clothes in the road. He put a rock on top of them” (260). As a result of not being able to find him, the boy feels extreme guilt over the belief that he and his father killed

the thief, despite the fact that the thief's actions likely would have killed them had they not found him. Mundik again puts it best, and places his empathy for others, "Despite the fact that the child seems to have come to terms with death, he has not become desensitized to the suffering of others, often weeping for their plight as if it were his own... [The boy] values moral, ethical, and spiritual goodness over mere physical survival" (295-296).

However, here Mundik differs with Patton a bit, as she notes that the father rarely indulges in fulfilling the morality that his son so desires. "While the father is fixated on their own survival," she writes, "the boy continually tries to help others, even if such aid proves detrimental to his own well-being" (295). The answer to this riddle, of why the son is moral while the father is not, comes from the two worlds in which they have both been indoctrinated: the father in the pre-apocalyptic event, and the son in the post-apocalyptic event. Knowing plenty and then scarcity creates a marked psychological difference of approach for the man as compared to the boy who has known scarcity and only scarcity. A selfish and unselfish greed to protect his son and to stay alive makes the father bristle at others (and rightfully so given that cannibals and rapists roam the land in droves). But the boy's innocence, sometimes to a fault, allows him to see opportunity to lessen the scarcity of others, and commit moral, ethical action.

By extension, the morality the boy displays illustrates how one might achieve planetary altruism in the Anthropocene. As Susan Kollin writes in her essay, "'Barren, silent, godless': Ecodisaster and the Post-abundant Landscape in *The Road*," "The task for both the readers and the characters then is to imagine what comes next, what may be salvaged and what must be left behind in order to rebuild society and reconceptualize human relations to nature and to each other" (164). The boy's survival at the end of the novel, and the man's

demise indicates that the old ways of the man should fall by the wayside, while the morality embodied by and represented in the boy should remain, but the man is not completely without his lessons. The first contact the boy has with his rescuer at the end of the novel after his father's death is tense, as the boy stands in the titular road with "the pistol in his hand" (281). This new man seems to force an ultimatum upon the boy, to stay with his dead father or go with him, who by all appearances could be a hungry, lone stranger, one "scarred across his cheek and the bone stoven and the one eye wandering" with a band of shells and a shotgun to match — not exactly a welcoming figure (282). The boy is rightly wary, informed by his own father's caution, but ultimately, he decides to join the man. And, as a result, his faith in others is rewarded, in some karmic miracle typically absent in McCarthy's novels, the boy's own goodness is cosmically repaid, as the new man has with him a family, a wife, a son, and a daughter. The convergence of the boy and his entire adoptive family reinforces the ideal of not forgetting the lessons his father taught him, and fulfilling the promise that he would "talk to [him] every day" and that he "wont forget. No matter what" (286).

The woman when she saw him put her arms around him and held him. Oh, she said. I am so glad to see you. She would talk to him sometimes about God. He tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didn't forget. The woman said that was all right. She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time. (286)

At its most basic level, this novel tells a simple story about a father preparing his son for his own death and the challenges that father faces in teaching his progeny to confront and mediate a terrifying world. Inheritor of all of his unfulfilled promises and hopes and dreams, and yet the son even in his relative infancy, in his youth, manages to fulfill and surpass, while still understanding his father's faults and failures, but also understanding the stress and

struggles his father undertook so they could survive. The children always inherit parts of their parents, death always comes to their fathers and mothers. *The Road* also emphasizes atavism in its setting and its characters as the post-apocalyptic landscape signals a return to the primacy of survival, of life and death. But the boy illustrates how life can transcend past the war of nature even in a natural state, in effect questioning the notion that such a war need exist. The boy makes conscious decision after decision to become radically akin to all of it that he sees, in spite of his own need to survive. He represents the possibility of something better just as children always represent the vested hopes of futurity. Yet, *The Road* goes a step further, and the boy becomes that being conscious of all beings, considerate, caring, loving, and in the end, his propensity for love and trust saves him from the loneliness, alienation and isolation of the world present of *The Road*. His love, not only for his father, but also for the nameless little boy, for Ely the ungrateful wanderer, and even for the thief, exists as a departure from his father's own fearful outlook upon the world. The boy's surrender to the whims of his newly adoptive family at the end of the novel suggests that despite the condition of the world, one of conflict and constant war, morality — the fire — still has a place within it.²⁵

²⁵ The fire also features in a prominent scene in McCarthy's novel *No Country for Old Men* (2005), which immediately preceded the *The Road*. The final words of the former also speak about the fire, and it promises much the same themes and readings: "It was like we was both back in older times and I was on horseback goin through the mountains of a night. Goin through this pass in the mountains. It was cold and there was snow on the ground and he rode past me and kept on goin. Never said nothin. He just rode on past and he had this blanket wrapped around him and he had his head down and when he rode past I seen he was carryin fire in a horn the way people used to do and I could see the horn from the light inside of it. About the color of the moon. And in the dream I knew that he was goin on ahead and that he was fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there. And then I woke up."

Blood Meridian also seems to suggest the possibility for morality in extremely adverse conditions, and, as with *The Road*, the youngest pursues it: moral action becomes a task undertaken by the kid. Though he ultimately falls prey to the judge, the embodiment of the war on nature, the kid rarely ever actively participates in it. Though he rides with the Glanton Gang, the kid either vanishes into the text with only sparse direct mention even of his existence in the group, and in the gang's bloodiest ventures, the kid usually does not appear at all, divorced from the violence expounded by Judge Holden.

After his blood-soaked ventures with the scalphunters, the kid takes odd jobs for roughly 25 years, but none particularly violent, though he does witness it seeing women "fought over to the death whose value they themselves set at two dollars" and "bears and lions turned loose in pits to fight wild bulls" and he witnesses the San Francisco Fire of 1851 (325). He also hears rumors of the judge constantly. Eventually, he works as a hired hand to guide a "band of pilgrims... dusty and travelworn" across the West, though he meets with a barren directionless wilderness. He travels with "a bible that he'd found at the mining camps and he carried this book with him no word of which he could read" (325), showing an attempt at developing a moral code or at least to live by a code which does not condone irrational bloodshed. Even with his illiteracy, he wishes to adhere to a moral life. Upon his travels, he eventually meets an old woman, and seeks to help her instead of rob from or murder her, a sign of his development. But his situation becomes troubling upon further reading.

She was very old and her face was gray and leathery and sand had collected in the folds of her clothing. She did not look up... He spoke to her in a low voice. 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... He reached into the little cove and touched her arm. She moved slightly, her whole body, light and rigid. She weighed nothing. She was just a dried hull and she had been dead in that place for years. (328)

In a final, desperate attempt to connect with someone, and to show a moral compass, baring his soul to her, only to realize that he has just spilled his soul to a long-dead corpse. While one reading of this passage could certainly be read that the kid lacks even a basic conception of humanity, for he no longer recognizes the what life without bloodshed even looks like, confusing the dead for the living, indicative of his status as too dehumanized, a conscience inebriated with violence, more optimistically, this passage indicates the development of a morality. The young man is a far cry from the boy who had within him “a taste for mindless violence” (3). His is a failed morality, one rendered obsolete, too, when he himself becomes—quite literally—subsumed within the “war of nature” when the judge smothers him. But, it is a morality nonetheless that develops in the kid (Others would argue that the kid’s murder of young boy in the last chapter of the book would disqualify him from his self-actualization, but he only did so out of self-defense as the boy tried to murder him²⁶).

Most importantly, the kid resists the judge’s attempts to indoctrinate him into the war of nature, and the judge himself acknowledges this resistance. He does not take the sleight well. As the kid sits in a jailhouse after escaping the desert in the aftermath of the Yuma massacre, the judge visits him and tells him, “You were a witness against yourself. You sat in judgement on your own deeds. You put your own allowances before the judgements of history and you broke with the body of which you were pledged a part and poisoned it in all its enterprise. Hear me, man. I spoke in the desert for you and you only and you turned a deaf

²⁶ Even the children in McCarthy novels are lethal!

ear to me" (319). Indeed, even in the desert with the Glanton gang, the kid curiously does not directly appear to take part in the scalping raids against Indians or Mexicans. He is not mentioned at the Yuma river crossing where the gang takes part in abhorrent crimes as highwaymen, the enslavement of locals and the murder, rape, and pillage of passers-through. He only directly appears at the escape from the annihilation of the gang by an Indian war party, or in passing, and never committing crimes. He even shows the selfsame goodness of the boy in *The Road*, putting himself at mortal peril to assist another member of the party. He volunteers to help a man named Brown get an arrow out of his leg, after the rest of the gang only laughs at Brown's plight. Later, the ex-priest scolds him for his naivete, implying that Brown could have raped the kid. "Don't you know he'd have took you with him? He'd of took you, boy. Like a bride to the altar" (169). Still, the kid performed a good deed, regardless of this knowledge or not, in helping an injured man, altruistically putting himself at risk to assist someone else.

Though the kid in *Blood Meridian* has difficulty defining and finding a sense of morality as he grows older, and the boy in *The Road's* morality may become meaningless in the dying state of the world, their moral efforts matter even if they have little consequence. Several scholars have argued against that. As I cited earlier in the thesis, Hungerford notes "the whole novel renders the idea of a moral machinery moot... The epigraphs to the novel suggest also the futility of a moral discourse" (Hungerford 24:53-25:14). Dana Phillips also (humorously) argues that "To read *The Road* for signs of hope and redemption is to misread it, and worse: it is to miss the boat not by an hour or a day, but by an epoch or even an era" (188). A fatalistic, nihilistic reading of the text clearly supports these interpretations and these two scholars are certainly correct in suggesting the futility of morality. However, these

two characters practice an ethical deontology, where actions in and of themselves provide the basis for morality, rather than the consequences of said actions serving as determinate of their “rightness” or “wrongness.”

Yet, it is by virtue of their interactions with others within the paradigm of selection that makes their choice of moral action all the more impressive, admirable, and ultimately, necessary, as exemplars of how people should act within the evolutionary framework how to interact with the world in the Anthropocene, our own permanently apocalyptic setting. Rasmus Simonsen writes in “Guns and Material Determinism in *The Road*” that despite the desolation of the wasteland in that novel that “The end of the world is the last outcome of a series of effects and human goals have lost their impetus... However, things still happen, and the characters of the novel still interact with their surroundings. In other words, choices continue to matter” (93). Even in posthuman hellscapes — the figurative of *Blood Meridian*, which goes to great lengths to combat given anthropocentrism, and the literal of *The Road*, where people will soon cease to exist at all — human agency still matters because humans interact with that world. Humanity has power, authority, autonomy, suzerainty over other lifeforms and even over entire ecosystems, because its propensity for violence, but the kid and the boy’s moral endeavors indicate that tempering such a force offers, if not necessarily a better route in terms of valuing our species’ survival, than an alternate one, which values the lives of ecologies and the plants, animals, fungi, microorganisms and the other geological features present within them.

What human knowledge and power and authority requires then, as all knowledge, power, and authority requires, is responsibility. The awareness of our existence in the Anthropocene has illustrated, if nothing else, the capability of humanity to further

commodify the natural world, to reduce it merely to its utility, to participate again in the “war of nature” of which Darwin speaks, is simply a choice. Grosz suggests humanity can reformulate its participation in such a war, and we would be wise to take her up on her offer lest our fight continues to harm the planet as Kolbert and Crutzen believe it to be doing. Understanding the natural and human strains of violence amplified by McCarthy, provides stakes for our decisions as we transition into an uncertain epoch, where traps and dangers lurk, some discovered and named, some named but undiscovered, and some shrouded in utter mystery hidden by a future unseen. Destruction within the system is still possible and likely even encouraged by the war of nature, but for too long, that mode of thinking has justified arbitrary horrors. The alternate route however, one of responsible suzerainty, of serving more as a keeper than as an overlord, leads to sublime, unselfish, un-anthropocentric beauty of humanity rejoining the natural world, but as a guide and a steward.

One might recall the aforementioned scene towards the end of *Origin of Species* of the “tangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us,” an aesthetic observation of the complexities within organisms and the interactions they have with each other and the inanimate aspects of the world (*Origin* 648-649). Yet again, it comes to choice. The choices made by the man and the boy of *The Road* indicate that human agency can give value to our roles in the face of the only god recognized in McCarthy’s texts: war. They choose not to cannibalize. The boy chooses care for strangers, the boy prays his appreciation for the people who left a bunker and stockpile of food, the boy chooses to trust

the final stranger. Most of all though, the love between kin, between a father and his son in a great a terrible change can endure, even past extinction. The boy's choices also show how far that love can extend to those who are not kin, but who might become so and how they may become so. In some ways, humanity as a species has become first in knowledge to pass Lacan's mirror stage at a species-wide level, aware of ourselves, our capabilities, and the first known to acquire an idea of collective self, and that introspection allows for action, and as some would argue, demands it. To requote Stacy Alaimo as she writes in "Thinking as the Stuff of the World" the posthuman approach, "Recognizing how all living creatures intra-act with place... makes it imperative that we be accountable for the many material-semiotic systems we already inhabit" what she calls the "practice of thinking from within and as part of the material world" (20).

Human accountability and responsibility then is required in the Anthropocene should we hope to avoid the catastrophes, known and unknown, over this epoch. However much Hamilton disagrees with the posthuman approach, he agrees with the conclusion, arguing that "It is this amplified responsibility for the Earth that is at the heart of the new anthropocentrism... Rather than shunning or deflating human agency by embedding it in something much larger than we are, the obligation now is to embrace it, to own it" (53). Hamilton would also refute Judge Holden's anthropocentrism, noting while he envisions the Anthropocene world as dominated by humans, indeed "it is the reverse of the stance of exploitation and control entrenched in previous anthropocentrism" (53). Purdy, who certainly sides more with Hamilton, argues that the difference between a democratic Anthropocene politics and a neoliberal one is that of self-restraint, another term for responsibility. "Democratic failures are often failures to impose self-restraint, and self-

restraint is exactly what environmental politics needs” (256). He perhaps speaks most clearly against the whimsical nature of the judge’s own abuse of power, his wanton destruction. Humanity’s authority, its suzerainty, its ability to at once create and participate in new laws of nature must be respected primarily by humanity. Humanity must understand itself not merely as a species (a difficult ask in the first place) but also, and perhaps primarily, as an apocalypse, in both the revelatory, eschatological way and in the termini which proceed from such great change. We are harbingers of destruction, prophets of evolutionary, biological doom, but we also have the capacity for compassion with one another and with plants and animals as the previous chapter illustrated. As Kolbert writes, “Certainly humans can be destructive and short-sighted; they can also be forward-thinking and altruistic” (261).

But what qualifies this altruism towards the creatures with whom we share the earth? My chapter on the judge sought to qualify his statements, the warrants he provides for his actions, so what then guarantees this beneficence of man. It is a simple choice of listening to the world in the language it speaks and remaining to serve as determinant. In doing so, humankind will assign value beyond itself. As Nicholas Monk writes about the ending of *The Road*, “Might it be that a conclusion that confronts us at the end of *The Road* is that from a world cleansed of modernity individuals will emerge infused with the spirit to regrow that world in harmony with nature?... Is this a false note that corrupts the political power and integrity of the fiction, or a welcome hint of what is to come?” (168). Like Monk, I myself do not know the answer to that question. The obliteration of the old though must come with an institution of the new, and Grosz’ reconception of Darwinism, as one which expands agency and emphasizes a harmoniousness, alongside Lyotard’s erasure of progression and McCarthy’s selection-minded approach to navigate the paradoxical centralized-

decentralized human-nature binary (as well as hopefully my own ideas that Darwinism exists primarily as a language or currency by which to communicate with the other) has a certain appeal. It recognizes the world state, but does not insist upon an end goal, simply a way of living in the world, of interacting with it devoid of any apocalyptic fears, either from the world or from mankind.

But the rectification of such an inter- and intraspecies politics relies now on the centered human in the Anthropocene. By invoking it, by saying this truth exists, we make it so, and thereupon instead of the judge's "singling out the thread of order from the tapestry," we make a new thread, one not as dependent on death and violence, but still mindful of its power (208). As Hamilton writes,

We have to confront the most difficult truth — in the Anthropocene we have no ethical resources to draw on. The cupboard is bare. For all of their worthiness, appeals to 'responsibility' have no heft, no ontological substance... Unless, that is, we can become beings guided by a new cosmological sense rooted in the profound significance of humankind in the arc of the Earth. (155-156)

At once, the responsibility becomes clear and possibly even optimistic and simultaneously ominous. Hamilton makes a sound argument, but relying on the inherent goodness of humanity as a guide means depending upon its potential to avoid the historical, suzerainical, predatory, and wanton violence allegorized by the judge. It requires the reversal of centuries of human desire of conquest and the eons-long battle to ascend to the peak and reign over Darwin's "war of nature." Can we be successful in such an endeavor?

After the kid and Sproule run away from the Comanches, they are found by a group of Mexican riders. The leader of the group asks if they want water and then gives it to them. Then, he taps his sword upon his saddle before he says cryptically, "When the lambs is lost

in the mountain, he said. They is cry. Sometime come the mother. Sometime the wolf' (68).

Then, he rides away leaving them in the desert to ponder such a proclamation.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 — “Legion of Horribles” passage from Blood Meridian

“... Some among the company had begun to saw back on their mounts and some to mill in confusion when up from the offside of those ponies there rose a fabled horde of mounted lancers and archers bearing shields bedight with bits of broken mirrorglass that cast a thousand unpieced suns against the eyes of their enemies. A legion of horribles, hundreds in number, half naked or clad in costumes attic or biblical or wardrobed out of a fevered dream with the skins of animals and silk finery and pieces of uniform still tracked with the blood of prior owners, coats of slain dragoons, frogged and braided cavalry jackets, one in a stovepipe hat and one with an umbrella and one with white stockings and a bloodstained wedding veil and some in headgear of cranefeathers or rawhide helmets that bore the horns of bull or buffalo and one in a pigeontailed coat worn backwards and otherwise naked and one in the armor of a Spanish conquistador, the breastplate and pauldrons deeply dented with old blows of mace or sabre done in another country by men whose very bones were dust and many with their braids spliced up with the hair of other beasts until they trailed upon the ground and their horses' ears and tails worked with bits of brightly colored cloth and one whose horse's whole head was painted crimson red and all the horsemen's faces gaudy and grotesque with daubings like a company of mounted clowns, death hilarious, all howling in a barbarous tongue and riding down upon them like a horde from a hell more horrible yet than the brimstone land of christian reckoning, screeching and tammering and clothed in smoke like those vaporous beings in regions beyond right knowing where the eye wanders and the lip jerks and drools...

“A rattling drove of arrows passed through the company and men tottered and dropped from their mounts. Horses were rearing and plunging and the mongol hordes swung up upon them with lances.

“The company was now come to a halt and the first shots were fired and the gray riflesmoke rolled through the dust as the lancers breached their ranks. The kid's horse sank beneath him with a long pneumatic sigh. He had already fired his rifle and now he sat on the ground and fumbled with his shotpouch. A man near him sat with an arrow hanging out of his neck. He was bent slightly as if in prayer. The kid would have reached for the bloody hoop-iron point but then he saw that the man wore another arrow in his breast to the fletching and he was dead. Everywhere there were horses down and men scrambling and he saw a man who sat charging his rifle while blood ran from his ears and he saw men with their revolvers disassembled trying to fit the spare loaded cylinders they carried and he saw men kneeling who tilted and clasped their shadows on the ground and he saw men lanced and caught up by the hair and scalped standing and he saw the horses of war trample down the fallen and a little whitefaced pony with one clouded eye leaned out of the murk and snapped at him like a dog and was gone. Among the wounded some seemed dumb and without understanding and some had fouled themselves or tottered brokenly onto the spears of the savages. Now driving in a wild frieze of headlong horses with eyes walled and teeth cropped and naked riders with clusters of arrows clenched in their jaws and their shields winking in the dust and up the far side of the ruined ranks in a piping of boneflutes and dropping down off the sides of their mounts with one heel hung in the withers strap and their short bows

flexing beneath the outstretched necks of the ponies until they had circled the company and cut their ranks in two and then rising up again like funhouse figures, some with nightmare facepainted on their breasts, riding down the unhorsed Saxons and spearing and clubbing them and leaping from their mounts with knives and running about on the ground with a peculiar bandy-legged trot like creatures driven to alien forms of locomotion and stripping the clothes from the dead and seizing them up by the hair and passing their blades about the skulls of the living and the dead alike and snatching aloft the bloody wigs and hacking and chopping at the naked bodies, ripping off limbs, heads, gutting the strange white torsos and holding up great handfuls of viscera, genitals, some of the savages so slathered up with gore they might have rolled in it like dogs and some who fell upon the dying and sodomized them with loud cries to their fellows. And now the horses of the dead came pounding out of the smoke and dust and circled with flapping leather and wild manes and eyes whited with fear like the eyes of the blind and some were feathered with arrows and some lanced through and stumbling and vomiting blood as they wheeled across the killing ground and clattered from sight again. Dust stanching the wet and naked heads of the scalped who with the fringe of hair below their wounds and tonsured to the bone now lay like maimed and naked monks in the bloodslaked dust and everywhere the dying groaned and gibbered and horses lay screaming." (54-57)

Appendix 2 — Judge Holden’s “War is God” speech from Blood Meridian

“Men are born for games. Nothing else. Every child knows that play is nobler than work. He knows too that the worth or merit of a game is not inherent in the game itself but rather in the value of that which is put at hazard. Games of chance require a wager to have meaning at all. Games of sport involve the skill and strength of the opponents and the humiliation of defeat and the pride of victory are in themselves sufficient stake because they inhere in the worth of the principals and define them. But trial of chance or trial of worth all games aspire to the condition of war for here that which is wagered swallows up the game, player, all. Suppose two men at cards with nothing to wager save their lives. Who has not heard such a tale? A turn of the card. The whole universe for such a player has labored clanking to this moment which will tell if he is to die at that man’s hand or that man at his. What more certain validation of a man’s worth could there be? This enhancement of the game to its ultimate state admits no argument concerning the notion of fate. The selection of one man over another is a preference absolute and irrevocable and it is a dull man indeed who could reckon so profound a decision without agency or significance either one. In such games as have for their stake the annihilation of the defeated the decisions are quite clear. The man holding this particular arrangement of cards in his hand is thereby removed from existence. This is the nature of war, whose stake is at once the game and the authority and the justification. Seen so, war is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one’s will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god.” (260-261)

Appendix 3 — The “Phalanx” passage from The Road

“They followed a stone wall past the remains of an orchard. The trees in their ordered rows gnarled and black and the fallen limbs thick on the ground. He stopped and looked across the fields. Wind in the east. The soft ash moving in the furrows. Stopping. Moving again. He’s seen it all before. Shapes of dried blood in the stubble grass and gray coils of viscera where the slain had been field-dressed and hauled away. The wall beyond held a frieze of human heads, all faced alike, dried and caved with their taut grins and shrunken eyes. They wore gold rings in their leather ears and in the wind their sparse and ratty hair twisted about on their skulls. The teeth in their sockets like dental molds, the crude tattoos etched in some homebrewed woad faded in the beggared sunlight. Spiders, swords, targets. A dragon. Runic slogans, creeds misspelled. Old scars with old motifs stitched along their borders. The heads not truncheoned shapeless had been flayed of their skins and the raw skulls painted and signed across the forehead in a scrawl and one white bone skull had the plate sutures etched carefully in ink like a blueprint for assembly. He looked back at the boy. Standing by the cart in the wind. He looked at the dry grass where it moved and at the dark and twisted trees in their rows. A few shreds of clothing blown against the wall, everything gray in the ash... He’d come to see a message in such late history, a message and a warning, and so this tableau of the slain and the devoured did prove to be. He woke in the morning and turned over in the blanket and looked back down the road through the trees the way they’d come in time to see the marchers four abreast... An army of tennis shoes, tramping. Carrying three-foot lengths of pipe with leather wrappings. Lanyards at the wrist. Some of the pipes were threaded through with lengths of chain fitted at their ends with every matter of bludgeon. They clanked past, marching with a swaying gait like wind-up toys. Bearded their breath smoking through their masks... The phalanx following carried spears or lances tasseled with ribbons, the long blades hammered out of trucksprings in some crude forge upcountry... They passed two hundred feet away, the ground shuddering lightly. Tramping. Behind them came wagons drawn by slaves in harness and piled with goods of war and after that the women, perhaps a dozen in number, some of them pregnant, and lastly a supplementary consort of catamites illclothed against the cold and fitted in dogcollars and yoked each to each.” (90-92)