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Cormac McCarthy’s Borders and Landscapes is an inspiring new collection of essays which spans the American author’s career through a variety of eco-based approaches, the first to do so. The five subsections of the collection, which focus on frontier violence, the comparative approach, bioregionalism, liminal thresholds, and the cinematic, demonstrate its breadth within the titular thematics of borders and landscapes. Louise Jillet’s assessment in the preface that the “range of new eco- and bio-related perspectives on McCarthy” is “of particular significance” to McCarthy studies (vii) is well founded; such critical lenses are generally demonstrating their increasing relevance in the field of literary studies. Those interested in McCarthy’s masterpiece Blood Meridian will find a significant amount of rich analysis, including discussion of the novel’s relationship with Gnosticism, the role of place and its landscapes, and its relation to the baroque. The rest of McCarthy’s oeuvre is present as well, and the collection works through both singular and comparative analysis to demonstrate McCarthy’s exploration of or connection to such concepts as Eric Santner’s creatureliness and the undead, Tim Ingold’s ecology of life, Augé’s non-place, Benjamin’s flâneur, an eco-based stylistics, and the potential cinematic nature of prose. Overall, and without contradicting each other, the authors collectively advance the relevance of an eco-based approach to one of the United States’ most influential authors, and impressive feat which gives weight to the importance of such eco- and bio-related criticism in the wider sense.

The collection opens with the first essay of the “Frontier Violence” section, in which Dianne C. Luce unveils the intimate relationship between the “doomed enterprises” (3) of the fictional boys in McCarthy’s Border Trilogy and the historical Henry Crabb expedition of 1857. Through the application of significant historical research into the Crabb
expedition, Luce demonstrates that this relationship has to do with issues of borders and their permeability, “intercultural contacts, and American attitudes of exceptionalism” (4). Such a comparison, which relates the actual events of 1857 to the fictional ones of the 1950s, utilizes the “in flux” (8) nature of the nineteenth-century border to question the supposed fixed one of a century later and to eventually free McCarthy’s readers from “the cultural amnesia that allows us to see border transgression today as a uniquely Mexican sin” (17).

Building upon the political relevance of McCarthy as suggested in the preceding article, Lucy Neave’s discussion of All the Pretty Horses is heavily informed by Eric Santner’s titular conception in his On Creaturely Life. Santner’s concept, as Neave points out, is developed to discuss human “states of exception” (ala Agamben) caused by being placed in an in-between position regarding the political field (20). Through effective close reading which focuses on the textual “slippage between the representation of humans and that of animals” (20) regarding characters John Grady Cole and Jimmy Blevins, her essay arrives at the assertion that this McCarthy novel “suggests that subjection to a form of sovereign authority is an almost universal experience, a risk of living in modernity” (27).

Petra Mundik’s discussion of evil in Blood Meridian demonstrates at length her in-depth understanding of both Buddhism and Gnostic mysticism, and even more importantly solidifies the connection between the latter’s ideology and the world of McCarthy’s novel in their “anticosmic (or world-rejecting) attitude[s] toward existence and creation” (29). Mundik’s extended discussion of the consistent inversion of the symbol of the life-giving sun and of passages which “evoke the terror of the void” (35) are tied to the Gnostic dismay at the “spatial and temporal enormity of the cosmos” (34). Buddhism is eventually brought in through the parallel between the two religious ideologies and Blood Meridian in regards to “earthly existence [as] characterized by illusion and impermanence” (40), and in the end the essay aligns the novel with the mystic, whose role is to “strip away all the veils of illusion that obscure the ultimate reality of the absolute” (43).

Opening the section on “Comparative Literature and Landscape,” Jan Nordby Gretlund again takes up Blood Meridian, this time alongside the text of another author – Voss by Australia’s Patrick White. Gretlund, also looking at frontiers, uses the comparative approach to examine the “importance, or lack of importance” of the human in the “landscape of the Australian Interior and of the American West” by examining the “characters’ apparently accidental wanderings” (48) in both texts. Gretlund argues against any transcendental reading of man and nature’s unity (or of violence) in these texts, and argues for an interesting parallel between the authors in terms of both stylistics and thematics.

The second comparative approach is Tom Lee’s connection of Blood Meridian with the works of W.G. Sebald and Alfred Whitehead, eventually demonstrating its parallel with Lucy Neave’s article in its invocation of Santner’s On Creaturely Life. Re-emphasizing the importance of the Judge, Lee poetically argues that the character’s awareness of humanity’s long history “act[s] as something of a license to reduce everything to the equivalence of a ruin” (62), an idea he later ties to Santner’s conception of the “undead.” The connection between Blood Meridian and Whitehead’s philosophy is elucidated last, providing a new suggestion as to the source behind the “rarely matched sense of literary pathos” (66) that McCarthy’s novel represents.

Joel Found continues the comparative approach to Blood Meridian with the addition of Tim Winton, arguing that among the many similarities between the authors the most
prominent is in their approach to place, which serves as character more than mere backdrop in the fiction of these authors. Found's approach is another which sees place specifically in its ecocritical context, making an interesting argument which, based on the presence and use of rivers in novels by both Winton and McCarthy, suggests an approach towards literature as helping, in the vein of Tim Ingold, “to make sense of our own place in an ecology of life, which is both political and ontological, yet always and inescapably geographical” (80).

11 David Gugin opens perhaps the most outstanding subsection of this collection – “Bioregionalism and Nomadism in McCarthy's Western Literature” – with a formal analysis of All the Pretty Horses which examines its environmental stylistics. In dialogue with Found’s article, Gugin argues that “the human species is context, is place” (83) as a precedent to his bioregional approach, which convincingly demonstrates McCarthy's creation of “an iconic relationship between form and content” that unifies semiotics and linguistic analysis (88). Gugin identifies some thirty “nomadic sentences” within the novel, with the end result of a demonstration of character John Grady Cole's role as “a quintessential, twenty-first-century nomad” (93).

12 Kate Montague’s exceptional article teases out two “distinct yet overlapping manifestations of the baroque in Blood Meridian” as prose style and through the tragic subgenre (98). Effectively demonstrating the baroque “combinatorial excess” (100) of depictions of myth and violence in the novel, which in the former minimizes its effect and in the latter amplifies it, Montague eventually arrives at a discussion of baroque tragedy through the characters of the Judge and the kid, who represent opposing figures in the ongoing drama between myth and actuality.

13 Katja Rebmann’s article brings the focus on McCarthy back to the spatial lens, this time invoking Marc Augé’s idea of “non-place.” Rebmann makes the interesting claim that the Judge, with his violence and tendency to thrive in the harsh desert, represents a historically contingent “avatar of space” (110). The discussion then advances to No Country for Old Men to effectively argue for its character Anton Chigurh as “the postmodern successor of the monstrous judge” (112) regarding such an avatar. Her final inclusion of The Road as a novel no longer needing an avatar for space due to its ahistorical setting terminates McCarthy’s progressive engagement with “mankind’s vain failure to understand that in the grand scheme of things the soil upon which they build their self-importance is indifferent to their very existence” (119).

15 Opening the “Liminal Thresholds” section, Béatrice Trotignon approaches the collection’s theme of the border through an interesting formal analysis of The Road’s unusual tactic of separating each paragraph with two blank lines instead of the typical one. Such inner borders, she argues, create “highly effective cliffhangers” (132), “Pascalian fragments” whose gaps evoke silence and listening (134), and serve as a tactic towards “deferred meaning” (139). In the end, such methods purposely allow “various (mis)adventures in reading” (142) which, she argues, place the question of meaning back in the hands of the reader.

16 Louise Jillet applies her considerable knowledge of Walter Benjamin’s flânerie to McCarthy’s novel Suttree, expanding its borders to the 1950’s Knoxville setting of the novel. After considering the figure’s potential to cross the Atlantic through a discussion of Whitman and Poe’s “Man of the Crowd,” Jillet makes the interesting correlation
between the appearance of Benjamin’s flâneur as signifying “the decline of the city of which he is part” (144) and the placement of Suttree at the onset of modernity. Suttree thus represents a liminal figure, Jillet argues, exploring the urban fringe of Knoxville in the moment before its destruction in the face of beautification projects and a new interstate.

Anthony Uhlmann’s builds upon the already substantial criticism relating Suttree to “Circe” episode of Joyce’s Ulysses in order to connect the McCarthy novel to Flaubert’s The Temptation of Saint Anthony. Uhlmann’s main thematic connection is “the recurring motif of delirium” (164), which he relates, along with Suttree’s tendency to repetition, to the struggle for meaning which is central to the novel. While the suggestion that certain paintings from the 16th and 17th centuries related to St. Anthony’s Fire and Flaubert’s novel “might be the source of some of the ideas set out in Suttree” (169) remains tentative, Uhlmann’s work serves to effectively establish a thematic connection between the two novels.

While the final section of this collection is titled “Interdisciplinary Approaches,” all three of its chapters are discussing McCarthy in light of the cinematic. Paul Sheehan begins by drawing an interesting correlation between the novel Blood Meridian and the recent television series Deadwood. After discussing the Western genre’s draw in terms of American individualism and its capacity for high drama, Sheehan draws a parallel between McCarthy’s tendency to “narrow the gap between novel and film” with Blood Meridian and David Milch’s pushing at the boundaries “of long-form TV drama to arrive at a kind of carefully weighted theatricality” (184) with his 2004-2006 series. The essay focuses on the frontier as a “liminal, lawless space” (186) and its related use as a space for the contesting of moral values, especially in the way that the imposition of law actually undermines the frontiers’ myths in both of these works.

David Otto Fitzgerald’s approach is interdisciplinary in the sense that he applies Deleuze’s formulation of the cinematic time image to McCarthy’s literature, arguing through an analysis of the various “chronotypes” in The Orchard Keeper that “McCarthy’s metaphor for perceived history expresses an essentially cinematic representation of time” (197). Fitzgerald works to draw an interesting correlation between the function of memory in the novel and cinematic time, arguing positively for the capacity of intruding memories to “present us with inspirational ways of reading the present that can in turn influence our future” (200).

The collection concludes with an essay by Peter Josyph attempting to elucidate just what went wrong with McCarthy’s screenplay and 2013 film The Counselor, which was directed by Ridley Scott, starred a large number of well-known actors, and was a critical and popular failure. Often anecdotal due to the author’s personal relationship with McCarthy and the film industry, the article seeks to approach the film in the face of its lack of scholarly engagement, which Josyph suggests is like a “bastard son,” in the eyes of scholars, “a miscreant creature better to be forgotten than examined for its failings” (205). After critically examining a number of scenes of the film, the gist of Josyph’s argument is that McCarthy was clearly uninspired in the writing of the screenplay, but that nobody had the ability to criticize such a lauded author, resulting in a film which is “profoundly uncharacteristic of McCarthy” in its “untrue[ness] to the complexity of the world” (222).

Cormac McCarthy’s Borders and Landscapes is a rich and varied collection of essays and it is impossible to give its full due in such a short review. Due to the uniting element of the
eco- or bio-based approach, the collection is of particular relevance to scholars, seasoned and emerging alike, in both McCarthy studies and the broader fields of ecocriticism, bioregionalism, and studies of space and place in literature and film. Regardless of one’s impression of McCarthy’s work before engaging with this collection, the result is an inevitable acknowledgment that his concerns with humanity are deeply and inextricably tied up with the earth, with its borders and landscapes.