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Reconstructing the Myth: Blood Meridian as the New Western

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

Vedoucí bakalářské práce (supervisor):

PhDr. Hana Ulmanová, Ph.D.

Zpracoval (author):

Jan Kesman

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V Praze, dne 3. srpna 2020

.....

(Jan Kesman, podpis)

Dedicated to the memory of my grandfather

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I have no objections to the BA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

Souhlasím se zapůjčením bakalářské práce ke studijním účelům.

Thesis Abstract

This thesis deals with the deconstruction of the myth of American westward expansion in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West*; it also tries to answer the question of how the book fits into the Western genre. The chief focus is on the two key characters: the kid and Judge Holden, and their fight for dominance, the depiction of the frontier landscape, and the portrayal of violence.

The thesis is divided into three larger sections, followed by a conclusion. The first part, titled "*Blood Meridian: Between History and Myth*," is an extended overview, putting *Blood Meridian* into the context of the author's literary production and introducing the central themes of the novel that are examined in the subsequent sections of the thesis. The second part, titled "Introduction," is divided into four chapters presenting notions essential to understanding how *Blood Meridian* engages with the myths of American westward expansion and subsequently dismantles them. The first chapter focuses on Frederick Jackson Turner's theory that the American frontier was the birthplace of the American character. The second chapter introduces Roland Barthes' definition of myths and the second and third semiological chains, as well as William H. McNeill's concept of mythistory. The third chapter examines *Blood Meridian* as a historical novel and investigates how it works with historical sources. The fourth chapter chronicles the evolution of the Western genre and establishes *Blood Meridian's* place among the revisionist Westerns.

The third part, titled "Reconstructing the Myth of the American West," contains the analytical part of the thesis and is once again divided into four chapters. The first two chapters of the analytical part follow the conflict of the nameless hero, the kid, with the main villain, Judge Holden, discussing how the hero fails the expectations of his role and his eventual death at the hands of the villain Holden, who appropriates the position of the central character of the novel. The second chapter also introduces several possible approaches to interpreting the

character of Judge Holden. The third chapter ponders at the absence of God on the frontier of *Blood Meridian* and explains the workings of occult sciences present in the book. The fourth and final chapter deals with the portrayal of violence and the conflict between Euro-Americans and Indians.

The principal goal is to demonstrate that *Blood Meridian* dismantles the long-established myths of American westward expansion by using both history and counter-myth. The thesis is based upon the assumption that myths are historical, and therefore subject to change; it follows the evolution of the myth of American expansion west from its conception to the point of its revision, which was compelled by a historical change, and subsequently shows how *Blood Meridian* developed on the tradition of both classical and revisionist Westerns.

Key words: Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, myth, frontier, Western, revisionist Western, American West, Manifest Destiny, Violence, Frederick Jackson Turner, Roland Barthes

Abstrakt

Tato práce se zabývá dekonstrukcí mýtu americké expanze na západ v knize Cormaca McCarthyho *Krvavý poledník, aneb Večerní červánky na západě* a taktéž se snaží zodpovědět otázku, kam kniha spadá v rámci žánru westernu. Práce se zaměřuje primárně na dvě hlavní postavy: kluka a soudce Holdena, jejich souboj o nadřazenost, zobrazení krajiny amerického západu a vyobrazení násilí.

Práce je rozdělena na tři větší části a závěr. První část, nazvaná „*Krvavý poledník: mezi historií a mýtem*“, je rozšířený přehled, který zasazuje *Krvavý poledník* do kontextu autorovy literární tvorby a představuje základní témata knihy, která jsou rozebrána v následujících částech práce. Druhá část nazvaná „Úvod“ je rozdělena na čtyři kapitoly, které představují pojmy nezbytné pro pochopení, jak *Krvavý poledník* pracuje s mýty Americké expanze a následně je nabourává. První kapitola se zabývá teorií Fredericka Jacksona Turnera o zrození amerického charakteru na území amerického pohraničí. Druhá kapitola představuje definici mýtu a sekundárního a terciárního sémiologického systému podle Rolanda Barthesa a taktéž koncept historie-mýtu Williama H. McNeilla. Třetí kapitola se zabývá *Krvavým poledníkem* jakožto historickým románem a zkoumá, jak nakládá s historickými prameny. Čtvrtá kapitola popisuje evoluci westernu a zasazuje *Krvavý poledník* mezi revizionistické westerny.

Třetí část, nazvaná „Rekonstrukce mýtu amerického západu“, obsahuje analytickou část práce a je znovu rozdělena na čtyři kapitoly. První dvě kapitoly analytické části popisují souboj bezejmenného hrdiny, kluka, s hlavní zápornou postavou, soudcem Holdenem a rozebírají, jak protagonista nedokáže dostát očekáváním spojeným se svou rolí hlavního hrdiny, a sledují jeho následnou smrt rukou padoucha Holdena, který si přivlastňuje pozici ústřední postavy knihy. Druhá kapitola taktéž uvádí několik možných přístupů k interpretaci postavy soudce Holdena. Třetí kapitola se zamýšlí nad absencí Boha v pohraničí *Krvavého*

poledniku a vysvětluje, jak v knize působí okultní vědy. Čtvrtá a poslední kapitola se zabývá zobrazením násilí a konfliktu mezi Euroameričany a Indiány.

Hlavním cílem je prokázat, že *Krvavý poledník* nabourává dávno etablované mýty americké expanze na západ za použití historie a protimýtu. Práce vychází z předpokladu, že mýty jsou historické, a tudíž mohou být podrobeny změně. Práce sleduje vývoj mýtu americké expanze na západ od jeho zrodu do bodu, kdy musel být z důvodu historické proměny revidován, a následně prezentuje, jak *Krvavý poledník* nakládá s tradicí klasických i revizionistických westernů.

Klíčová slova: Cormac McCarthy, *Krvavý poledník*, mýtus, pohraničí, western, revizionistický western, americký západ, Manifest Destiny, násilí, Frederick Jackson Turner, Roland Barthes

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*There's a race of men that don't fit in,
A race that can't stay still;
So they break the hearts of kith and kin,
And they roam the world at will.
They range the field and they rove the flood,
And they climb the mountain's crest;
Theirs is the curse of the gypsy blood,
And they don't know how to rest.*

*If they just went straight they might go far;
They are strong and brave and true;
But they're always tired of the things that are,
And they want the strange and new.*

- Robert W. Service¹

¹ Robert W. Service, "The Men that Don't Fit In," *The Spell of the Yukon, and Other Verses*, Project Gutenberg
< <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/207/207-h/207-h.htm> > Aug 2, 2020.

1. Preface

Blood Meridian tells a tale of violence and depravity that attended the settling of the American West, subverting the conventions of the American frontier narratives and mythology of the Western genre. Based on little-known historical events that transpired on the American-Mexican border during the California Gold Rush, it follows the adventures of a young pioneer who sets off from his native Tennessee on a brutal odyssey in search of better fortunes. He soon joins up with a gang of scalp hunters led by a man called Judge Holden, who in himself combines features of Milton's Devil, Melville's White Whale, and Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor with education in both Western and non-Western philosophy and theology, and an insatiable taste for violence. The novel describes their journey littered with corpses across the American continent in a language that aspires to the status of poetry.

The thesis aims to analyze how *Blood Meridian* dismantles the myth of American westward expansion, focusing on how McCarthy alters the perception of the American Wild West by subverting the mythical stereotypes of the genre and using historical accounts from the time he recreates. I will compare the book with the mythology of the Western genre, Roland Barthes' understanding of the myth in popular culture and its subversion, and deal with the book's historical validity. The analysis will focus on two key characters: the kid and Judge Holden and their lethal struggle for dominance, as well as the landscape of the frontier and its isolation from God. It will also try to explain the senseless violence that floods the pages of the book with blood.

The chief points of reference for my reading of *Blood Meridian* and its place in the canon of the Western genre are John Sepich's comprehensive *Notes on Blood Meridian*, *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, edited by Steven Frye, Michal Svěrák's *Svět v hrsti prachu*, Richard Slotkin's trilogy chronicling the evolution of frontier in the American consciousness, especially the final volume *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in*

Twentieth-Century America, and a multitude of other works dealing with McCarthy's fiction. Even though the thesis will analyze a work of literature, and therefore will be literary, I will not differentiate between the specifics of literary and cinematic language, and instead will consider the Western genre as a whole.

In its core, *Blood Meridian* is an amalgamate of ideas and genres spanning from the ancient philosophical and theological thought to the modern-day, presented with linguistic prowess that would deserve an analysis of its own. My thesis cannot conceivably take note of all possible notions McCarthy's oeuvre offers. Instead, it will focus on how it engages with the myth and history of American westward expansion and revises the Western genre. The concluding words should answer the question of how *Blood Meridian* fits into the context of the genre it engages with, and whether it opens new ways for it to develop in a refined form in the future.

2. *Blood Meridian* and the Frontier Myth

2.1. Note on Structure

The thesis opens with an extensive overview, titled “*Blood Meridian: Between History and Myth*,” that classifies *Blood Meridian* within the context of McCarthy’s bibliography and presents the themes and premises of the thesis. The overview will be followed by an introduction dealing with four major concepts *Blood Meridian* engages with in regard to history and myth. The analysis of the work proper, titled “Reconstructing the Myth of the American West,” will be divided into four parts and will be accompanied by a conclusion surmising the findings.

2.2. *Blood Meridian: Between History and Myth*

Blood Meridian stands at a junction of Cormac McCarthy’s oeuvre. Prior to *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy had established a reputation of an obscure Southern² writer with a remarkable gift for language whose dark and violent novels had often been compared with the work of William Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor.³ With *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy, just like the hero of the novel, left the Appalachian Mountains of his native Tennessee for the violent borderlands of the United States and Mexico, the territory where five of his ten novels would eventually take place. The move westward proved to be decisive for McCarthy’s career as his second novel in this setting, *All the Pretty Horses*, became a surprise best-seller enlarging McCarthy’s reader-base. The novel was later followed up by two sequels together constituting the Border Trilogy and a standalone *No Country for Old Men*.

² The term “Southern” relates to the literature of the American South. It is a cultural concept, rather than a geographical one. For more information on this topic see Sharon Monteith, “Introduction: Mapping the Figurative South,” *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of American South* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2013).

³ Timothy Parrish, “History and the Problem of Evil in McCarthy’s Western Novels,” *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Steven Frye, (Bakersfield: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 67.

Apart from *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy's Westerns belong to the contemporary, or neo-Western subgenre, taking place in modern times after the closing of the American frontier. They advance the themes first presented in *Blood Meridian* and engage with the myth of American westward expansion and historical confrontation of two cultures: Native and Euro-American. McCarthy's Westerns, especially *Blood Meridian*, are part of the revisionist movement, re-evaluating the frontier myth and the Western genre.

While perusing the margins of the *Blood Meridian* manuscript, Steven Frye noticed that McCarthy had referred to his work-in-progress as "his Western," and in doing so he had to be aware that he had been working with (if not within) a genre that is mythologically constituted.⁴ *Blood Meridian* adheres to the tropes of traditional Westerns and operates within the same environment and thematic framework. The action takes place in the second part of the 19th century on the border between the United States, Mexico, and the Indian country and features a story of American cavalymen fighting the Indians.⁵ It includes the usual suspects of any Western story: the American cowboys wearing hats, armed with revolvers and riding on horses through the inhospitable terrains of the uncivilized countryside, the Indians painted for battle and scalping their enemies, pilgrims moving west to cultivate the free land, and "forty-niners" lured to California by the prospect of finding gold. There are also saloons and bordellos and desperados and thieves to wreak havoc in them. Despite that, *Blood Meridian* does not subscribe to the celebratory myth, which described the frontier as the birthplace of American individualism and laid the foundation for traditional Western narratives. It demystifies or rather re-mystifies the American frontier of the traditional Wild West stories by turning violence into myth, thus creating, in Barthian terms, a second-order myth or mythology.

⁴ Steven Frye, "Blood Meridian: and the Poetics of Violence," *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Steven Frye, (Bakersfield: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 110.

⁵ I will use the terms Indians and Native Americans interchangeably, as both terms appear in the sources I am working with. The terms "savage," or "negro" for African Americans will appear only in quotes or paraphrases. They are products of their time, not consistent with the contemporary politically correct speech. The aim of this thesis is not to make political statements.

While re-mystifying the myth of the frontier, McCarthy also re-mystifies the symbolic incarnation of American exceptionalism—the cowboy. The cowboy often stands at the forefront of Western stories. He is the traditional hero who symbolizes American qualities like self-reliance, individualism, and inventive turn of mind. The hero of *Blood Meridian*, referred to as the kid,⁶ shares the characteristics of a universal all-American hero. Like Huckleberry Finn, he escapes from the tyranny of his drunkard father and moves west in search of freedom and opportunity. He soon acquires a horse, a saddle, and a pair of brand-new Colt revolvers and sets off with a gang of American scalp-hunters to track down the local Indian war chief.

Despite the similar setup, *Blood Meridian* is not a traditional bildungsroman. The kid undergoes an initiation phase on the frontier, but the experience does not change him into a better man, nor help him develop any sensible set of skills. At the end of the book, he remains in large part the same character he was at the beginning, losing only the “taste for mindless violence,”⁷ which was his defining feature at the outset of the novel. Unable to evolve or reach religious catharsis, he dies a violent death just like most of the characters that appear in the book. Apart from the disappointing resolution of his story arc, the kid also fails in the role of the main character and is overshadowed by the erudite and charismatic Judge, who hijacks the narrative and becomes the single evaluating voice in the novel.

The supporting characters fare no better than the hero. *Blood Meridian* subverts the black-and-white stock characters typical for the genre and problematizes the question of good and evil. When compared to the traditional Westerns, the characters in *Blood Meridian* often stand in two or more opposing roles. The Glanton Gang symbolize, at the same time, the antagonistic violent gangs of desperados who pillage and murder for sport and also the lawmen,

⁶ The narrator also refers to the protagonist as “the child” on page 3 and “the man” in chapters XXII and XXIII, but I will continue to refer to him only as “the kid” for clarity’s sake.

⁷ Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, (London: Picador, 2011) 3. All future page references will be to this edition and will be included in parentheses in the text.

or “shock-troops of Euro-American civilization,”⁸ hired by the local government to stop the Indian raids. The Indians themselves appear both in roles of bloodthirsty war-bands and innocent victims of the violent colonization.

The symbolically richest and most contradicting character in the book is Judge Holden. He is the most learned and civilized member of the gang, yet he is also the most violent and perverted one. He stands at nearly seven feet of height, yet his hairless complexion and small feet make him look like a giant baby. In a feverish dream, the kid has near the end of the book he describes the judge’s contradictory nature: “Whatever his antecedents he was something wholly other than their sum, nor was there system by which to divide him back into his origins for he would not go” (326).

Outside the realm of characters, *Blood Meridian* presents a plurality in terms of genre. At its core, it is a historical novel in discourse with the frontier myth and the Western genre, but it combines these traditions with elements of mysticism and grotesque.

As John Sepich illustrates in his *Notes on Blood Meridian*, McCarthy’s story closely follows a memoir *My Confession: Recollections of a Rogue* by Samuel Chamberlain, a historical account about the massacre of 1850 at the Yuma ferry, and a number of other authentic sources from that time. The better part of the story takes place between the years 1849–1850, a year or so after the end of the Mexican American war and during the peak of California Gold Rush. It later ends in 1878 with the killing of the buffalo and parceling of the conquered land.

Blood Meridian, hence, covers the historical period popularly known as the Wild West, which started with the opening of the frontier to American prospectors and settlers after the war and ended with the demise of the traditional Indian way of life dependent on hunting of the buffalo. The frontier itself would not be closed for some twenty years after the book’s

⁸ Parrish 71.

conclusion, but the end of the Indian threat and fencing of the open ranges signals a beginning of an end to this era. Thematically, the last chapter takes place in the winter-time at Fort Griffin, Texas, a site which was largely abandoned by the summer of 1879.⁹

Unlike the traditional Westerns founded on the orthodox reading of American history fueled by the frontier myth, *Blood Meridian* does not cast the Euro-American civilization against the Native American “barbarism.” To be sure, the members of the Glanton Gang kill Indians (as well as Mexicans and Americans), but the book implies a kind of marriage of the Indian past with the Euro-American future. The Americans inherit with the land the history of the landscape and all that happened there.¹⁰ The book implies that the birth of the American character is a result of intercourse between two distinct cultures rather than a rebirth of European man induced by the conditions of the American wilderness.

Apart from the historical layer, *Blood Meridian* confronts the frontier myth with the question of religion, mysticism, and grotesque descriptions of violence. It shatters the myth of America as the second Garden of Eden.¹¹ In the world of *Blood Meridian*, Christianity is a false faith that grants no protection to the weak; churches and places of worship have degenerated into places of slaughter, and men of God are either false preachers or converts who switched the “livery of God”¹² for a pair of revolvers and a bowieknife. Even the Christian symbols are impotent and cannot protect their wearers, nor connect them with the providence. Only the occult sciences, namely astrology and tarot cards, have supernatural powers and can foretell the future. The godlessness of the world is enhanced by the sublime setting and the

⁹ John Sepich, *Notes on Blood Meridian*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008) 66-67.

¹⁰ Parrish 70-71.

¹¹ Josef Benson, “An ironic contention: the kid’s heroic failure to rebel against the judge’s hypermasculinity in *Blood Meridian*,” *Southwestern American Literature*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2011, p. 70+. Gale Literature Resource Center,

<<https://go.gale.com/ps/anonymous?id=GALE%7CA270372892&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&linkaccess=abs&iissn=00491675&p=LitRC&sw=w>> May 23, 2020.

¹² An expression used by McCarthy on page 7. In the thesis, I try to stay consistent with McCarthy’s use of language, opting for phrases, spelling, and capitalization of certain words that differ from the standard of present-day English, but are present in *Blood Meridian*.

character of Judge Holden, who resembles the Judeo-Christian representation of the devil and tries to usurp the role of world-creator.

The violence is perhaps the most shocking aspect of *Blood Meridian* and the dominant driving force behind the re-mystification of the frontier myth. “Although moments of brutality erupt in the traditional Westerns, these moments are generally ameliorated or contained by a subsequent civilizing gesture that helps to explain the necessity of this violence.”¹³ There is not any explicit reason given for the violence at the end of *Blood Meridian*, only a vision of a man parceling the land. The purpose of myth is to push certain notions into the background while moving others forth. Myth, therefore, hides nothing; it blurs.¹⁴ Frontier myth celebrates the result of the westward expansion while mitigating the bloodshed that took place; *Blood Meridian* highlights the godless violence as the price of the colonization that resulted in present-day America.

Whereas McCarthy’s subsequent Western novels would tackle the nostalgia for the mythical past, *Blood Meridian* deals with the past itself. It creates a myth that deals with the means of the westward expansion rather than its achievements. As one of America’s most characteristic and oldest myths, the frontier myth encompasses myths and beliefs like Manifest Destiny, American Progress, and America as the second Garden of Eden. These older myths led the Euro-Americans to expand west and are the antecedents of the frontier myth. They highlight the benefits of colonization while deemphasizing the cost it had on human lives. *Blood Meridian* subverts the myth focused on the results of American expansion and fills the American West with gore and excessive amount of violence. It reduces the Western narrative into a ceaseless carnage and portrays the emblematic American heroes as low-life villains while remaining historically accurate. The West McCarthy depicts is a sublime wilderness forsaken

¹³ John Dudley, “McCarthy’s Heroes: Revisiting Masculinity,” *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Steven Frye, (Bakersfield: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 177.

¹⁴ Lukáš Chytrý, *Myth and National Identity*, Repozitář závěrečných prací, <<https://is.cuni.cz/webapps/zzp/detail/96191>> May 15, 2020.

by God roamed by the devil-like creature who calls himself the judge. *Blood Meridian* is also a revival of a dying, over-saturated genre. It is regeneration through violence.

3. Introduction

3.1. What the Mediterranean Sea was to the Greeks

The myth of the frontier was important for the formation of present-day America. From the Pilgrim Fathers who first settled the land to the colonists who ventured beyond the borders either in search of pelts or new fertile land, to the “forty-niners” who rushed to California in search of gold, generations upon generations of Americans persistently pushed the American frontier further west. The philosophy of Manifest Destiny, a belief that it was a divine mission of the American people to expand across North America and colonize the land which was rightfully theirs, drove the constant cycle of migration, colonization, and wars with the native population;¹⁵ Robert Frost later described the sentiment in one of his poems: “The land was ours before we were the land’s.”¹⁶ The accomplishment of this “divine mission” by 1890¹⁷ allowed the Americans to look back at their past, compose a reading of their history and explain their national character. Frederick Jackson Turner took up the task and introduced in his “Frontier Thesis” ideas that laid the foundation for the myth of the colonization of the United States.

The closing of the American frontier meant for Turner an end to the first era of American history, a symbolic coming of age of the nation that was once a distant colony of the British Empire. He saw the advance of the frontier as a steady movement away from the paternal influence of Europe and a rationale behind what made the Americans and their system

¹⁵ John L. O’Sullivan first coined the term “Manifest Destiny” in an editorial on the Texas issue in *Democratic Review* for July and August 1845. The area which was prearranged by Heaven for the American settler was not clearly defined. For some, it meant expansion to the Pacific, for others over the North American continent or the entire northern hemisphere. For more information on Manifest Destiny see Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1995).

¹⁶ Robert Frost, “The Gift Outright,” *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1979) 348.

¹⁷ Based on the data from the Eleventh Census of 1890: “Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present, the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line.” Robert P. Porter, Henry Gannet, William C. Hunt, “Progress of the Nation -Part 1,” *Eleventh Census - Volume 1. (Part I & Part II) Report on Population of the United States (1895)*: p. xxxiv, United States Census Bureau
<<https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1895/dec/volume-1.html>> Apr 12, 2020.

of government different from the British and the rest of the “Old World.” “What the Mediterranean Sea was to the Greeks, breaking the bond of custom, offering new experiences, calling out new institutions and activities, that and more, the ever retreating frontier has been to the United States directly, and to the nations of Europe more remotely.”¹⁸

The advance of the American settlement on the frontier pushed the development of the American institutions, which had to adapt themselves to the changes of expanding people. The United States was evolving along two lines: the first line was the territory along the Atlantic coast, which was progressing from primitive industrial society without division of labor into manufacturing civilization, not unlike the countries of Europe. The second line was the continually advancing frontier that had to be developed from primeval aboriginal conditions into territories that were later incorporated as states. The social development on the frontier was hence in a state of perennial rebirth, which by being initiated over and over again, as the frontier moved further west, allowed for several reevaluations of American laws. Turner argued that the constant movement westward and rough frontier experience were the dominant forces that furnished the character of the American system of government.¹⁹

The legislation of the national government was in Turner’s eyes conditioned by the frontier. The frontier as a meeting point between the civilized and the primitive gave birth to American individualism. It changed the European settler, with his European values, and the settler, reformed by the experience in the wilderness, cultivated his surroundings, not into old Europe, but something new, genuinely American. The cultivation resulted in the development of new democratic institutions that better suited the needs of the contemporary settler and allowed for economic competition with the East.

¹⁸ Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1921) 42.

¹⁹ Turner criticized the focus of earlier historians on Germanic germs (Germanic blood) theory, which concluded that American democracy is a product of the Anglo-Saxon tendency to generate liberal societies, pointing out that the product of American colonization is a new phenomenon that differs from Europe. Turner 3-4.

The surge of ideas coming from the western territories influenced the political landscape of the East. American democracy during the settlement of the Great West thus underwent a major change: it “transformed the democracy of Jefferson into the national republicanism of Monroe and the democracy of Andrew Jackson.”²⁰ Each expansion of the frontier served as a launchpad for further movement west, each piece of land added into the fold was like a tributary of a river that is the present-day democracy in America, and by extension the democracy in Europe.

The settlement of the West proved to be a difficult endeavor. The settlers had to deal with both the primitive conditions of living on the uncultivated periphery and the aboriginal people who saw the land as their hunting grounds. The land in the West often had to be fought over in a series of Indian wars, as the Indian tribes laid claim to the land centuries before the settlers from the East stepped on the continent, and they would not cede it without a fight. For this reason, the American army built a series of forts along the frontier line that served a double purpose: to protect the American settlers and as a wedge to advance farther into the Indian country.

Considering that the American institutions could not keep up with the flow of the American settlers west, the frontier was infamous for lax government control and rough justice executed by vigilantes rather than a court of law. Turner admitted in his study that “democracy born of free land, strong in selfishness and individualism [...] has its dangers as well as benefits,” and that the “frontier was the region whence emanated many of the worst forms of evil currency.”²¹ But he did not want to dwell “on the lawless characteristics of the frontier because they [were] well known.”²² The evil and violence of the frontier were for Turner redeemed by the singular quality the frontier experience bestowed upon the American intellect.

²⁰ Turner 29-30.

²¹ Turner 32.

²² Turner 32-33.

He believed that individualism, democratic spirit, acuteness, inquisitiveness, inventive turn of mind, and a substantial body of American literature all found their origin in the frontier experience.

The theory of American development through the frontier experience quickly gained on influence and, as Richard Slotkin points out, spawned an entire school of American historical interpretation that influenced not only textbooks on American history but also political speech and perhaps the most authentically American genre—the Western.²³ The conquest of the frontier became synonymous with progress. John F. Kennedy, in his Democratic Party’s nomination acceptance speech, called for an opening of a new frontier of unknown opportunities,²⁴ and more than fifty years after his death, the term “new frontier” is still used in connection with space exploration.

Turner’s interpretation of American history affirmed American *ideology*: “the basic system of concepts, beliefs, and values that defines a society’s way of interpreting its place in the cosmos and the meaning of its history,”²⁵ and prefigured the creation of Western myths and counter-myths, which McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* is a prime example of. Turner’s vision of the conquest of the West produced the Western—a celebratory genre that stands for Turner’s ideological reading of the westward expansion and its importance in American history. Just like Turner in his study, the traditional Westerns would not dwell on the villains, or explore their mindsets. The violence, which is the focal point of *Blood Meridian*, transpires even in Westerns influenced by Turner’s thesis, but never reaches the mindless grandeur of McCarthy’s scenes of carnage. It usually happens in self-defense or is ameliorated by a happy ending.

The conflict in traditional Westerns is mostly black-and-white: “good guys” fighting against the “bad guys.” The resolution of their conflict usually ends in the defeat of the villains

²³ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992) 3-4.

²⁴ Slotkin 2.

²⁵ Slotkin 5.

and leads to a positive outcome that makes the setting of their struggle more civilized. The heroes embody the positive American values described by Turner as stemming from the unique American experience. The cowboy is the ultimate practitioner of these values. He is primarily an obstinate champion of goodness, law, and democracy, savior of the weak and an enemy of evil.

Blood Meridian and other Westerns that appear around the same time²⁶ de-mythicize the conquest of the West and oppose Turner's thesis while using the symbolism of traditional Westerns. This change in perspective occurred during the Vietnam war era; the myth of the American frontier died with the disillusionment of soldiers returning from the war and with the Red Power Movement. The myth no longer supported contemporary American ideology and had to be transformed for modern times. The revisionist movement, of which *Blood Meridian* is a part of, reshaped the myth to reflect the complexities of contemporary thinking about the past. *Blood Meridian* achieved this by reconstituting the West as a place of godless violence.

3.2. The Third Semiological Chain

In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes' collection of essays about the myths of mass culture, Barthes deciphers the symbols and signs deeply rooted in familiar aspects of contemporary consciousness and unmasks their hidden meaning and ideology that affect the thought and behavior of everyday life. To explain the concept of myth, he updates Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic system by adding second and third semiotic chains. Myth in Barthes' words is "a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things".²⁷ "It is defined by its intention much more than by its literal sense."²⁸

²⁶ This topic is developed in detail on pages 38-39.

²⁷ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Jonathan Cape (London: Vintage, 2009) 132.

²⁸ Barthes 148.

Myth is an ideological communication transmitted to push a specific interpretation on the receiver's end. Its function is to distort the truth. It deforms but does not abolish the meaning, because the thing that the myth mythicizes remains visible. Barthes describes it as looking out of a window of a moving car and alternatively focusing on the scenery and noticing the presence of the glass that stands between the observer and the moving landscape. Myth is like a moving turnstile which alternatively presents the signifier and the myth.²⁹ It may appear as any form of communication, as long as the ideological interpretation occurs. Myth is not confined to oral speech, because any object may possess an arbitrary meaning: a movie, a painting, a book, even materials or foods.

Myth, like the semiological system, is a tri-dimensional pattern comprising the signifier, the signified, and the sign. It builds on the first semiological system introduced by Saussure and it is, therefore, a *second-order semiological chain*. Barthes calls the first chain the *language-object*, "because it is the language which myth gets hold of in order to build its own system," and the second chain *metalanguage*, "because it is a second language, in which one speaks about the first."³⁰ The sign of the first semiological chain, or the *language-object*, becomes the signifier in the second chain, the *metalanguage*. For clarity's sake, Barthes calls the last term of the first system (the sign) *meaning* and the first term of the second system *form*. To limit the ambiguity, he terms the signified on the level of the metalanguage *concept*, and the third term, which is in correlation with the first two, *signification*. *Signification* like the sign, or *meaning* on the level of *language-object*, is the final product of *metalanguage*.

To illustrate what he means, Barthes uses a copy of *Paris-Match* offered to him in a barber's shop. On the cover of the magazine is a young black man saluting in a French uniform with his eyes uplifted and fixed possibly on a fold of the French flag. What Barthes sees is the

²⁹ Barthes 146-148.

³⁰ Barthes 138.

meaning of the picture, or in other words: the sign of the *language-object*. What the picture signifies to him, though, is “that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any color discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal of this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors.”³¹ The picture is, therefore, a greater semiological system, there is the signifier (*form*) already established with the previous system (*the language-object*): a black soldier is giving the French salute. The signified (*concept*): a purposeful Frenchness and militariness. And finally, as a result, there is the *signification*: Africans are faithful to France and do not feel oppressed by French colonization.

As a type of speech determined by history and ideology, myth can undergo a change or disintegration. It is because myths are historical that history can suppress them. “[O]ne can conceive of very ancient myths, but there are no eternal ones; for it is human history which converts reality into speech, and it alone rules the life and death of mythical language.”³² Myths serve their purpose as long as they support the ideology that gave rise to them. When the ideology changes, myths either change or disappear altogether; eventually, new myths replace the old ones and change the accepted narratives.

In Barthes’ view, the best weapon against a myth is to mythicize it in its turn and produce a reconstituted myth, or in other words *mythology*. “All that is needed is to use [the original myth] as the departure point for a third semiological chain, to take its signification as the first term of a second myth.”³³ Looking back at the example of the black soldier on the cover of the *Paris-Match* magazine, the mythical meaning the picture evokes in Barthes may become the *form* of a second myth. The picture, when fully established as a myth in people’s consciousness, might, in a different context or slightly altered yet still recognizable form, serve

³¹ Barthes 139.

³² Barthes 132.

³³ Barthes 161.

as a vehicle for the reevaluation of the first myth. If the *concept* of the second myth is an unwillingness or defiance, the signified will be that the French empire is exploiting the African people and forcefully pressures them to enter French military, while pretending that their service is voluntary and inspired by patriotism. Myths are, in consequence, historical and fluid. They are not something given, but something made. “By our way of remembering, retelling, and re-imagining [...], we too engage myths with history and thus initiate the process by which our culture is steadily revised and transformed.”³⁴

In the essay “Mythistory, or Truth, Myth, History, and Historians,” historian William H. McNeill discussed the relationship between history and myth. According to McNeill, historians are under constant pressure to portray the people they write about as they wish to be remembered. They are likely to select facts to show the cherished principles and omit the details when the group they portray fell short of their ideals. The result of this writing is mythical; it simplifies reading of history into a contest between the good guys and the bad guys, “us” and “them.”

Most national histories are of this character. They either portray a society whose accustomed status seems threatened and describe their admirable virtues and undeserved sufferings, or a society accustomed to power and their successes and failures in bringing practice into conformity with principles. This leads to a situation in which one person’s historical truths are another’s myths. Myths often self-validate a nation or human group; they provide a heroic rendition of the past that sets an example of how to behave in future crises.

They may also mislead disastrously. An uncritical acceptance of a myth that naively praises the ideals of one group and denigrates others is potentially highly dangerous and may lead to a situation like the one in Nazi Germany.³⁵ McNeill’s solution to combat myths is the

³⁴ Slotkin 660.

³⁵ The use of the Western myth in popular culture was partly inspired by the success of the Nazi national myth to energize the German population. For more information, see footnote 68.

creation of mythhistories, monographs that blend historical truth with myth to be accepted by society and yet introduce enough new and credible facts to clear some of the mythical layer. He believed “that historians’ truths, like those of scientists, evolve across the generations, so that versions of the past acceptable today are superior in scope, range, and accuracy to versions available in earlier times.”³⁶ The continual myth-breaking should cumulate across time, helping people to learn from the past and live in groups less destructive to themselves and to their neighbors than before.

Turner’s Frontier thesis fits into McNeill’s idea of national mythological history: it portrays a dominant society, bringing practice into conformity with principles. It justifies the conquest of the West and what happened during that era of American history. Traditional Westerns, as myths based on Turner’s thesis, “are stories drawn from a society’s history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society’s ideology and of dramatizing its moral consciousness.”³⁷

Blood Meridian breaks the mythology of Wild West in two unique ways. It builds a third semiological chain on top of traditional Westerns; it creates mythology, reproducing the stereotypes and aspects of the Western genre and using the genre expectations as the *form* for the new myth. With extreme violence and godlessness as the *concept*, it reshapes the idealized mythical West into a place of anarchy and cruelty—a place that should not be uncritically celebrated as the finest hour of American history. The second way is historical. In accordance with McNeill’s idea of mythistory, *Blood Meridian*, albeit not a monograph per se, blends history with myth. It introduces unpleasant historical facts while, as a work of *belles-lettres*,

³⁶ William Hardy McNeill, “Mythistory, or Truth, Myth, History, and Historians,” *The American Historical Review*, vol. 91, no. 1, Feb. 1986, pp. 1–10. EBSCOhost, <search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=rh&AN=ATLA0000960741&lang=cs&site=eds-live&scope=site> May 13, 2020.

³⁷ Slotkin 5.

remaining digestible to its audience. *Blood Meridian*, consequently, breaks the frontier myth using both myth and history against it.

3.3. Recollections of a Rogue

Blood Meridian seeps with little-known history. Most of the events, places, and characters the protagonist meets on his way are, as John Sepich proves in his study of the book, historically verifiable. The story itself is in a substantial part a rewriting of Samuel Chamberlain's memoir about his time spent riding with the Glanton gang hunting Indians, enriched by a plethora of other historical sources which contribute details to McCarthy's tale.³⁸ "A review of source texts displays both McCarthy's devotion to historical authenticity and the audacity with which he tailors the sources to his own ends."³⁹ Chamberlain's memoir provides McCarthy with the historical basis for his characters and their traits, as well as an analogue to the hero. From the scant data collected from historical sources, McCarthy "creates fully rendered characters, elevating them to mythic and densely philosophical proportions."⁴⁰ *Blood Meridian* is a historical novel in which history transcends the boundaries of the book's narrative and prompts discussion about the necessity of violence. The world of *Blood Meridian* is mythical and highly stylized, yet also historically accurate.

One of the major topics the book covers are the scalp-hunting expeditions of Americans hired by the Mexican government. Mexico in the 1840s "was a despotism, a land of Indians and mestizos (Indians mixed with Spanish) controlled by criollos-whites of Spanish blood.

³⁸ While Chamberlain's *My Confession: Recollections of a Rogue* was the key source for *Blood Meridian*'s story, it was not the only one. Among other notable inspirations, Sepich includes George Frederick Ruxton's *Adventures in Mexico and the Rocky Mountains*, and Life in the Far West, James Hobbs' *Wild Life in Far West: Personal Adventures of a Border Mountain Man*, John Woodhouse Audubon's *Audubon's Western Journal: 1849-1850*, John Russell Barlett's *Personal Narrative of Exploration and Incidents*, Adolphus Wislizenus' *Memoir of a Tour to Northern Mexico*, John Hughes' *Dophian Expedition*, Mayne Reid's *The Scalp-Hunters*, J. Frank Dobie's *Apache Gold and Yaqui Silver*, Frederick A. Ober's *Travels in Mexico* and John G. Bourke's *On the Border with Crook*. Sepich 68-93.

³⁹ Sepich 3.

⁴⁰ Steven Frye, *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, (Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 2009) 68-69.

There were a million criollos, 2 million mestizos, 3 million Indians.”⁴¹ The countryside in northern Mexico was under continuous raids by Comanche tribes who at the time in which the book takes place preyed on the swelling numbers of westward-bound caravans of gold seekers swarming across the vast landscapes of the continent. To break the cycle of Indian incursions, the northern Mexican state of Chihuahua hired Anglo aliens to kill the raiders. These mercenaries would return with scalps of the natives as receipts of their work. The willingness of Chihuahua to pay for the scalps of women and children, though at a lower rate and the peak of scalp-hunting business in late in 1849 and 1850 drove some scalp-hunting gangs to prey even on the mestizo population, whose hair was similar to the Indian in color and texture.⁴²

Glanton gang’s behavior in *Blood Meridian* matches this trend perfectly. During their first expedition, they hunt down and massacre a camp of Indian warriors, but during their subsequent exploits they descent into killing whomever they meet: riders in the mountains, peons, inhabitants of a pueblo on the Nacozari River, until Sonoran cavalry under general Elias drives them out of Mexico.

Following the Mexican campaign, the gang moves to California, where they take over a ferry across the Colorado river operated by “a doctor from New York state named Lincoln” (267). After provoking a fight with the local tribe of Yumas and destroying their ferryboat, the gang, having now a monopoly in the ferrying business on the artery connecting Arizona and California, raise the tariff for the journey and ultimately drop all pretense and rob their customers outright (276). The Yumas, eventually, carry out their revenge on the gang, slaughtering doctor Lincoln, Glanton, and most of his men slumbering in an alcohol-induced sleep and burn their corpses at a pagan bonfire.

⁴¹ Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2015) 159-160.

⁴² Sepich 6-8.

The portrayal of the gang's last days and description of their demise correlates with William Carr's deposition about the massacre at the Yuma crossing. Carr was a member of Glanton's crew at the ferry who, like the hero of the book, escaped the Indian vengeance.⁴³ McCarthy carefully accommodates Carr's testimony into his narrative. He adapts both the important details like the description of Lincoln's and Glanton's death and the subsequent burning of his body, as well as minor ones: the names of the characters James Miller and black John Jackson, or a story about the man named Callahan who operated the Indian ferry. According to Carr's deposition: "he was found dead, lying in the river [...] His death could not be accounted for, though he seemed to have been shot."⁴⁴ In the book: "Callaghan's headless body floated anonymously downriver, a vulture standing between the shoulderblades in clerical black, silent rider to the sea" (277). Small, yet authentic details like these are interspersed throughout the book, reinforcing its status as a historical novel.

In one scene, Glanton asks a recruit named Sloat about the commodore of the same name (215). "Commodore Sloat took California for the United States upon his arrival at Monterey during the Mexican War. [...] McCarthy, simply by using the name Sloat, introduces a biographically verifiable character into the novel. Glanton's question to the recruit can be seen, too, as associating Glanton with the Army of the West in California."⁴⁵ Glanton himself was a veteran of the Mexican War; he applied for a scalp-hunting license issued by Chihuahua on June 27, 1849.⁴⁶ "Chamberlain writes that Glanton's seventeen-year-old fiancée had been taken and killed by the Indians in Texas."⁴⁷ McCarthy possibly alludes to this information, as

⁴³ Sepich mentions that the name Carr or Anderson of the deposition might have been a false name given by Samuel Chamberlain to screen his desertion from the army, but it is unclear whether Chamberlain was a member of Carr's group or another group on its way out of the camp before the attack even started. The contrast between the gang's treatment of the Yumas in the deposition and Chamberlain's memoir supports more the latter version. Sepich 25-26.

⁴⁴ William Carr, et al., "Depredation by the Yumas," *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California and of the Pioneers of Los Angeles County*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1903, pp. 52-56. JSTOR, <www.jstor.org/stable/41169609> Jun 16, 2019.

⁴⁵ Sepich 3.

⁴⁶ Sepich 8.

⁴⁷ Sepich 8.

during the charge of Indian cavalry into Captain White's men, one of the Indians is spotted wearing a "bloodstained weddingveil" (55).

Revenge presumably was not the only reason for Glanton to work for Chihuahua, as the job paid well.⁴⁸ Moreover, both the historical and McCarthy's Glanton rode with Indians in their gangs, as well as Mexicans and African-Americans. Sepich quotes the pioneer Robert A. Eccleston who crossed the Colorado river at the Yuma crossing during Glanton's operation there; he reports that Glanton's party consisted of 27 Americans, 30 Mexicans, and 1 Apache, a traitor to his nation.⁴⁹ Glanton's gang in *Blood Meridian*, much like the real one, comprises men of all races. McCarthy illustrates the gang's democratic spirit on the story of black John Jackson and a white man of the same name. When black Jackson kills white Jackson at the gang's campfire, Glanton rises, but nobody says or does anything else (113-114). The acceptance of the white Jackson's murder shows "Glanton's unqualified acceptance of both John Jacksons as equals. [...] Glanton's loyalties seem not to favor Anglos over Indians, or Anglos over Mexicans, but gang members over outsiders."⁵⁰

The most salient member of the gang is Judge Holden, but whereas "John Glanton is mentioned with some consistency in many stories of the Southwest, Judge Holden's named historical existence rests solely on information provided by Samuel Chamberlain."⁵¹ McCarthy's devilish depiction of Holden is a hyperbole of Chamberlain's description of the man, but interestingly enough, McCarthy is much closer to the original than it might seem.

Chamberlain describes Holden, as a walking encyclopedia and "by far the most educated man in northern Mexico,"⁵² who spoke multiple Indian lingos, out-waltzed any poblana of the ball, was fluent in the ancient history of the Indians, was educated in botany and

⁴⁸ According to Sepich, Chihuahua City paid two hundred dollars a scalp, which meant that a group of fifty Indian hunters would have to bring in only four scalps a month to exceed the American army's pay. Sepich 7.

⁴⁹ Sepich 10.

⁵⁰ Sepich 10-11.

⁵¹ Sepich 14.

⁵² Sepich 15.

mineralogy and held extemporary lectures on theology and geology. His pandeismic⁵³ statement in *Blood Meridian* that God “speaks in stones and trees, the bones of things” (124) echoes Chamberlain’s narrative.

Chamberlain likewise mentions terrible stories that circulated in the camp about horrid crimes committed by Holden under a different name and suspicions about him being involved in the rape and murder of a young girl. The suspicions reverberate in *Blood Meridian*, as McCarthy’s Holden is multiple times associated with dead children. The final pages of Chamberlain’s narrative describe the escape of the survivors from the Yuma-ferry massacre and depict Holden as an unstoppable force of nature. Chamberlain and his fellow survivors abandon Holden in the desert and are rescued by an Indian tribe sometime later, only to find Holden two mornings later eating breakfast at the same campfire.⁵⁴

Tensions were high between Holden and Chamberlain, who hated Holden at first sight, though he admits that Holden always tried to be nice and kind to him.⁵⁵ The kid is an analogue to Chamberlain. Chamberlain, like the kid in the novel, joined the gang in mid-adventure and was wary of Holden. He professed sympathy for the Indian victims in his writings, a crime the kid is accused of in the novel, albeit the book never mentions him protesting any violence against the Natives.⁵⁶ “Chamberlain’s contact with the gang may have suggested McCarthy’s use of an ‘outsider’ to contrast with the gang.”⁵⁷ Reading *Blood Meridian* with the knowledge of Chamberlain’s book gives context to the judge’s otherwise unwarranted words to the

⁵³ Referring to Pandeism, a theological doctrine that explains why the world is seemingly abandoned by God. It holds that the creator-God became one with the universe and parts of the divine are in all things that make up the world. It combines elements of pantheism (God is the universe) and deism (God created the universe and then withdrew himself). In the European tradition of thought, Pandeism was strongly expressed in the teachings of Giordano Bruno, though similar theological ideas could be traced back to antiquity. For more information see: Max Bernhard Weinstein, *Welt- und Lebensanschauungen hervorgegangen aus Religion, Philosophie und Naturerkenntnis*, (Leipzig, Johann Ambrosius Barth, 1910) especially pages 227-239; The term is also explained in Alan H. Dawe, *The God Franchise: A Theory of Everything*, (Auckland, Life Magic Publishing, 2012) 48.

⁵⁴ Sepich 15-18.

⁵⁵ Sepich 16.

⁵⁶ The only member of the gang who speaks up against the killing of the Indians is Toadvine, saying: “Them sons of bitches aint botherin nobody” (183), just before the gang slaughters a camp of peaceful Tiguas.

⁵⁷ Sepich 1.

imprisoned kid: “You sat in judgment [...] You put your own allowances before the judgments of history and you broke with the body of which you were pledged a part and poisoned it in all its enterprise” (323). Given Holden’s and the book’s engagement with broader history transcending the narrative of the book, it is possible that Holden’s words in this scene are intended for Chamberlain and his unfavorable description of the gang’s actions rather than the kid.

McCarthy’s Holden is a “control freak.”⁵⁸ He wants to assume authority over the historical narrative the same way he controls members of the gang. When the gang breaks camp near the Anasazi ruins, he collects some artifacts, sketches them into his notebook, and throws them into flames. When Webster questions his intentions, Holden answers “that it was his intention to expunge them from the memory of men” (148). He corroborates:

The tools, the art, the building—these things stand in judgement on the latter races. Yet there is nothing for them to grapple with. [...] Their spirit is entombed in the stone. It lies upon the land with the same weight and the same ubiquity. For whoever makes a shelter of reeds and hides has joined his spirit to the common destiny of creatures and he will subside back into the primal mud with scarcely a cry. But who builds in stone seeks to alter the structure of the universe and so it was with these masons however primitive their work may seem to us. (153-154)

The artifacts in question are a testament of a race of Indians more advanced than the ones the gang annihilates for money. They are evidence against Turner’s thesis that pioneers brought the light of civilization into an uncivilized countryside that sustained no one like them before. Holden wants to eradicate them from existence because they pose a threat to the gang’s “civilizational” mission and its acceptance by history. They likewise oppose Holden’s ordering of the world, as he explicitly tries to assume the role of world maker and usurp the power of the God Creator. Through his acts of destruction, he assumes unique knowledge and lays claim

⁵⁸ Used as a slang term in psychology for a personality disorder. “[A] person whose behavior indicates a powerful need to control people or circumstances in everyday matters” “Control Freak,” *Merriam Webster*, June 21, 2020, <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/control%20freak>> Jul 4, 2020.

to wisdom about the origins of the world he explores.⁵⁹ This maniacal craving for power is best surmised in Holden's statement: "Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent" (209).

From the first pages, *Blood Meridian* is set within a broader history than its narrative.

The novel opens with a quote from *The Yuma Daily Sun* from June 13, 1982:

Clark, who led last year's expedition to the Afar regions of northern Ethiopia, and UC Berkley colleague Tim D. White, also said that a re-examination of a 300,000-year-old fossil skull found in the same region earlier shows evidence of having been scalped (ix).

Leo Daugherty connects this epigraph with the inscription on Holden's gun: *Et in Arcadia Ego* (132), an allusion to Poussin's and Guercino's paintings of the same name. It is a *memento mori*, meaning that "Even in Arcadia [paradise, or utopia] am I [Death]." "[T]he entire novel makes clear (primarily through the judge, who continuously emphasizes the point in his preachments) that the human world is, and has always been, a world of killing."⁶⁰ This theory is supported by the reappearance of number eight, which when written horizontally becomes the infinity symbol. It appears in places where acts of violence are described or implied.⁶¹

Blood Meridian, hence, is not a revisionist Western, as the term is generally understood.⁶² It accepts violence as a condition of being alive. It does not solely critique a cartoonish mythical version of an exceptionalist American history but establishes a correlation between the necessity of violence and the building of civilization. It also creates a bridge between the history of the Indians and the colonizers. The clash between Captain White's men and the Comanches is also a clash between the American past and its future. The Indians clad

⁵⁹ Parrish 75.

⁶⁰ Leo Daugherty, "Gravers False and True: *Blood Meridian* as Gnostic Tragedy," *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1999) 165.

⁶¹ *Blood Meridian*, pages: 28, 35, 61, 67, 103, 132, 136, 142, 172, 176, 190, 195, 205, 232, 242, 286, 290, 326, 334.

⁶² For more information about the term "revisionist Western" see page 38-39.

in garbs of Euro-American history, including the aforementioned “bloodstained weddingveil” (55), sodomize their victims, suggesting a kind of perverted marriage between the cultures.

The fate of McCarthy’s characters and the Indians is the same; in the Border Trilogy John Grady Cole rides west from his home along the old Comanche road, his death in *The Crossing* “recycles and replays the death of the Indians before him. In a sense, they lead him toward his end.”⁶³ The reason Cole takes the old road and leaves the ever-modernizing world of his childhood on a horseback is a nostalgia for the mythical past. Similarly, in *No Country for Old Men*, just before Moss stumbles upon the scene of the shootout and takes the briefcase full of drug money which starts a series of events that eventually lead to his and his wife’s death, he notices rocks “etched with pictographs perhaps a thousand years old” drawn by hunters like himself of whom “there was no other trace.”⁶⁴

3.4. Revisionist Western

The uncharted territories of the western frontier populated by sprawling wildlife and alien aboriginal people had always been a fitting setting for American stories. The adventurers returning home from these parts beyond the civilized settlement came back with tales that inspired the establishment of frontier narratives.⁶⁵ In the second part of the 18th century, this tradition of frontier story-making culminated in the conception of the Western genre, which depicted pioneers conquering the American wilderness and subjugating the native population. The genre found expression through media as varied as the pamphlet, the dime-novel, the Wild West show, the movie, the modern paperback, TV miniseries, and most recently video games.⁶⁶

⁶³ Parrish 69-72.

⁶⁴ Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men*, (London: Picador, 2011) 11.

⁶⁵ These include the “captivity narrative” modeled on the popular personal account of Mary Rowlandson, narratives celebrating the exploits of Indian fighters, and later wilderness hunters modeled on the adventures of Benjamin Church and Daniel Boone, and the frontier romances of James Fenimore Cooper. Slotkin 14-15.

⁶⁶ Slotkin 25.

Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902) was the first fictional Western novel, but the genre matured primarily in the film form.

Western saw its film debut with Edwin S. Porter's 1903 *The Great Train Robbery*, yet the rapid spike in production that catapulted it into a mainstay of American cinema did not come until the late 1930s. Between 1938 and 1940, Hollywood more than tripled its production of Western movies.⁶⁷ This "renaissance" that inaugurated a period of thirty years in which the Western films became the pre-eminent genre of American mass-culture was driven by a widely felt need for a renewal of progressive and patriotic optimism that had been punctured by the Depression. The hunger for a patriotic myth that would once again reinforce the reading of American history as a kind of "success story" was only augmented by the nationalistic radicalism and threat of war coming from Europe and Japan.⁶⁸

The productions in the late 1930s focused on stories in line with Frederick Jackson Turner's perception of the frontier as the birthplace of the unique American character. They disregarded the contradictory depictions of the era like Helen Hunt Jackson's *A Century of Dishonor*, which chronicled the United States' treatment of the Indians in a negative light and instead focused on celebratory tales of heroism and goodwill of the American cowboys. In 1939, two major trends of representing American myths appeared on the cinema screens.

The first was the progressive epic, which inherited the market niche previously held by historical romance and bio-pic. It included films like *Dodge City* (1939), or *Drums Along the Mohawk* (1939). The dominant themes of these movies associate the Frontier with the heroic phase of America's industrial and democratic progress, which often goes hand in hand with the

⁶⁷ In 1938, Westerns constituted 1.1 percent of Hollywood's total production and 6.9 percent of all Westerns. In 1940, the number rose to 3.5 percent of total production and 21.7 percent of all Western production. Slotkin 278.

⁶⁸ In a 1938 *Atlantic Monthly* article titled "Patriotism—But How?" Howard Mumford Jones articulated a program for the renewal of American national myth based on the history of the American frontier. He observed that the fascist nations were united and energized by their governments' manipulation of patriotic myths and urged American writers to actively seek out "thrilling anecdotes" and "glamorous" episodes from the past in which the audiences could see the heroic expression of American and democratic virtues. Slotkin 278-280.

building of the railroad. They praise the virtue and wisdom of the ordinary people and represent valiant individuals as the initiators of historical change. Progressive epics prefer ethnically alien or snobbish villains and represent Indians as savages with a propensity for bloodshed.⁶⁹

The second trend was the cult of the outlaw Western, which developed from the gangster films of the early 1930s and addressed the dark sides of progressive history. Outlaw Westerns celebrate the careers of famous Wild West outlaws, particularly those associated with the gang of Jesse James. They illustrate how progress can lead to injustice, oppression, and crime. The heroes fall into the Robin Hoodesque “good outlaw” category and are driven to the life of crime by systematic injustice. The movies that best illustrate the ideological dynamics of this subgenre are *The Oklahoma Kid* (1939) and *Jesse James* (1939).⁷⁰ Even though the heroes of these films are outlaws, they behave nobly. Just like their progressive epic counterparts, they follow codes of honor comparable to the ones of medieval knights or Japanese samurai.⁷¹

At the beginning of the 1970s, the era of the cowboy was heading to a close. “[The genre] had reached its peak of popularity and cultural pre-eminence from 1969 to 1972, with an average release by American producers of 24 feature Westerns per year, with a high of 29 in 1971.” In the following years, the genre experienced a steady decline in popularity, plummeting to “an average of 4 releases per year from 1977 to 1982.”⁷² Western at this point was plagued by over-saturation and genre-fatigue, which was illustrated by the failure of Michel Cimino’s five-hour-epic *Heaven’s Gate* (1980) to capture the attention of audiences.⁷³

⁶⁹ Slotkin 286-288.

⁷⁰ Slotkin 293-295

⁷¹ Japanese samurai movies in fact became a rich source of inspiration for Western films in the 1960s. John Sturges’ *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) and Sergio Leone’s *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) are Western remakes of Akira Kurosawa’s Samurai-epic *Seven Samurai* and *Yojimbo* respectively.

⁷² Slotkin 627.

⁷³ *Heaven’s Gate* had a budget of \$44m but earned only \$3.5m at the US box office. The loss effectively killed the studio that stood behind it. Nicholas Barber, “*Heaven’s Gate*: From Hollywood disaster to masterpiece,” *BBC Culture*, December 4, 2015, <<https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20151120-heavens-gate-from-hollywood-disaster-to-masterpiece>> Jul 6, 2020.

It pushed Hollywood to seek out new genres like urban-crime dramas of the 1970s, science-fiction, and fantasy films of the late 1970s and 80s, or horror/slasher movies following in the steps of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). “Violence remained as central to these new genre-scenarios as it had been to the Western, but the necessity for violence was no longer rationalized by an appeal to the progressive historical myth of westward expansion.”⁷⁴

The chief reason for the drop in popularity was a shift in ideology in the late 1960s and early 1970s following the American withdrawal from the Vietnam war⁷⁵ and the emergence of political movements fighting for the rights of Native Americans and their representation in popular culture.⁷⁶ With this change, the myth of the frontier inevitably had to transform or disappear completely. Between 1968 and 1976, the Western genre underwent a revision in an attempt to retain a grip on cultural relevance. According to Richard Slotkin, there were several systematic attempts by the studios to change and revive the genre in the wake of the Mylai massacre and the success of *The Wild Bunch* (1969).

During the first period from 1969 to 1972, three new types of alternative Westerns were produced: the formalist Western inspired by the “spaghetti Westerns” of Sergio Leone with abstract plots, gunfighter protagonist and landscapes devoid of the historical association; the neorealist dark and gritty, seriously historical Western that looks behind the facade of Western mythology; and the counterculture Western that demonstrates the ethical culpability of the whites, appeals for peaceful co-existence with the Native Americans and shows their culture

⁷⁴ Slotkin 633-635

⁷⁵ Richard Slotkin writes: “The return of the last American combat forces from Vietnam in 1973 marked the sudden end of the pre-eminence of the Western among the mythic genres.” Slotkin 627.

⁷⁶ This struggle for fair representation directly affected the film industry, as Marlon Brando boycotted the 1973 Academy Awards ceremony and refused to accept the Best Actor prize for his role in *The Godfather*. Indian rights activist Sacheen Littlefeather delivered a speech in his stead to announce that Brando’s reasons for not attending the ceremony were based upon his disagreement with the portrayal of Native Americans by the Hollywood and Television. “Brando rejects Oscar award,” *The Age*, March 29, 1973: 10, <<https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1300&dat=19730329&id=WslUAAAIAIBAJ&sjid=4ZADAAAIBAJ&pg=4606,6893153>> Jul 14, 2020.

as a possibly superior alternative to civilization.⁷⁷ The subsequent attempts to revive the genre built upon the alternative forms developed during the first period. The Westerns released after 1972 were far more likely to follow an alternative scenario than revert to the progressive model of *The Searchers* (1956) or *Rio Bravo* (1959).⁷⁸

Blood Meridian belongs to a wave of new Westerns that appeared in the second part of the 1980s, which includes works like *Young Guns* (1988, 1990), *Lonesome Dove* (1990), and *Dances with Wolves* (1991). They build on the neorealist and counterculture Westerns of the first revisionist wave offering a dark and realistic take on the Old West or focus on the Native American point of view.⁷⁹ The historically accurate *Blood Meridian* belongs to the neorealist branch of revisionist Western, but it combines the realistic approach with elements of the supernatural, and cinematic portrayal of violence, which is closer in aesthetics to a gothic story, or a slasher movie than other products of the same genre.⁸⁰

The kid's journey and its resolution also call to mind Acid Westerns⁸¹ like *El Topo* (1970), or *Dead Man* (1995), in which the journey west becomes increasingly nightmarish and leads to death, rather than freedom or improvement. In *Blood Meridian*, the descent is not bound by space but rather by time. This is illustrated in the scene with the bonepickers in chapter XXIII, which mirrors the scene with cattle drovers from chapter II. Both

⁷⁷ Clint Eastwood's *Joe Kidd* (1972) and *High Plains Drifter* (1973) are representative of the formalist Western, *The Spikes Gang* (1974), *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* (1972), *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971) represent the neorealist approach to the genre, and movies like *Little Big Man* (1970) or *Buck and the Preacher* (1971), or *Soldier Blue* (1970) the counterculture Western. Slotkin 628–631, 758.

⁷⁸ Slotkin 633.

⁷⁹ The Westerns of this era are not as overtly political as their predecessors. For example, the motif of "black cowboy" as the lead established by films like *Buck and the Preacher* (1971), *Boss Nigger* (1975) and *Joshua* (1976) would only return in the 21st century in films like *Django Unchained* (2012), or *The Hateful Eight* (2015).

⁸⁰ The supernatural elements and violence will be discussed in chapters 4.3. and 4.4.

⁸¹ The term "Acid Western" was popularized by Jonathan Rosenbaum's review of Jim Jarmusch's 1995 *Dead Man*. Rosenbaum identifies Acid Western as a revisionist counterculture subgenre that continually developed since Monte Hellman's *The Shooting* (1966). *Dead Man* is a blossoming of this long developing branch of Westerns. Acid Westerns are typically metaphorical, they reinterpret the history to make way for hallucinogenic or psychedelic experiences, they understand the Wild West not as a literal historical place, but as a mythic landscape, and they mostly end with the death of the hero. Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Acid Western," *Chicago Reader*, June 27, 1996, <<https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/acid-western/Content?oid=890861>> Jul 9, 2020.

take place in Texas twenty-nine years apart from one another. In both instances, the kid asks for directions, but his experience with the fellow-travelers is different. The cattle drovers act nobly, like the people from the progressive Westerns would, and leave the destitute kid a small bag of food and a knife even though they are “ragged lot themselves” (22). Twenty-nine years later the cattle herders are replaced by bonepickers who collect the bones of the dead buffalo. The kid’s encounter with these people is far less pleasant than the one from before, since one of the bonepickers tries to murder the kid at night. What is more, the bonepickers direct the kid to Griffin, which is, as they put it, “set up to be the biggest town for sin in all Texas. It’s as lively a place for murderers as you’d care to visit” (336). It is also the place where the kid meets his end.

Even though *Blood Meridian* alludes extensively to other novels, works of philosophy, theology, and art, in terms of genre, McCarthy found the biggest inspiration in film. *Blood Meridian* continues in the tradition of neorealists Westerns and presents a brutal, historically accurate version of the Western myth in the form of a paperback. Despite that, *Blood Meridian* is not a revisionist history in the way the term is generally understood; it accepts violence as a condition of being alive, and establishes a correlation between the necessity of violence and the building of civilization; the goal is not necessarily to castigate Euro-Americans or the Indians for their violent acts but to portray those acts as precisely as possible and see if they mean anything other than the primal surge of power.⁸²

⁸² Parrish 71-72.

4. Reconstructing the Myth of the American West

4.1. The Failure of the Hero

In *Studies in Classic American Literature*, D. H. Lawrence noted that the typical hero of American frontier fiction is a stoic, cold man, “who lives by death, by killing.”⁸³ The kid, within whom “broods already a taste for mindless violence” (3), is positioned as an everyman of American fiction. The scant biographical details about his childhood bring to mind another orphaned fourteen-year-old southerner lighting out for the territory in the 1840s, and like Huckleberry Finn, the kid’s provisional, unformed subjectivity is modeled and transformed by those he meets. Even as a man, the hero never reaches full individuality, nor attains a name. His nickname brings to mind the infamous outlaw of the American Wild West: Billy the Kid, but unlike the protagonists of classical Westerns, the kid fails both in the role of the main character and in the role of a masculine Western hero whom the frontier experience transforms into a successful man. “*Blood Meridian* is a *bildungsroman* without the necessary development; like the kid’s life, the narrative ends not with adulthood, but with death.”⁸⁴

The kid does not function as an obvious hero in the tradition of classic cowboy and Indian tales; his adventures on the frontier are comparable with the ones of other American protagonists, but he appears to be strangely out of the narrative, both physically and intellectually. In the scenes of violence against the Apaches and Comanches, the narrator does not show him taking part in the killing, but it is implied that he does. He loses his individuality and becomes a part of the violent common, one with the gang. “Their participation in violence at once causes them to lose themselves and to band together in a very rough and makeshift community of destruction [...] a community that is built on death,”⁸⁵ led by the judge. In the scene of the massacre of Captain White’s army, the narrator captures the kid trying to reload

⁸³ D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, (London: Martin Secker, 1920) 66.

⁸⁴ Dudley 180.

⁸⁵ Brian Evenson, “McCarthy and the Uses of Philosophy in the Tennessee Novels,” *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Steven Frye (Bakersfield: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 55.

his rifle on the ground. Following this scene, the camera⁸⁶ moves away from the kid and captures the Indians killing and sodomizing the irregulars, returning to him only in the dead of night when he rises from among the corpses of his fellow men (54-58). In the subsequent scenes, where the gang engages in acts of violence, the kid is missing completely and reappears as an individual only after the fight is over.

Moral and ethical questions lie at the heart of *Blood Meridian*, but the book seems on the surface deaf to them.⁸⁷ The kid does not provide the book with an evaluating voice. Instead, he remains silent, ceding the textual space to the judge and his judgments about the world. The kid lacks Holden's textual capabilities and the capacity to name and create. His illiteracy functions as his defining feature that is juxtaposed with the judge's education and charisma. Holden's unopposed prowess with words allows him to hijack the narrative and become the single voice of judgment in the book and the defining persona of the novel.⁸⁸ By the end, progress and "civilization" triumph over the old and "barbaric" Indian West. With the disappearance of the frontier, the illiterate hero loses his place in the world and becomes reactionary like the Indians he helped to eradicate in his youth. He represents a breed of men unfit for the new "civilized" world, and so he must disappear with the old.⁸⁹

The kid attempts to construct his own identity outside of the judge's textual influence, albeit only after the gang is routed by the Yumas and Glanton is dead. Though he is not the single member of the gang who opposes the judge in the novel, as Toadvine and the expriest also at times express distaste for Holden's acts, he is the only one who musters enough courage to act upon his feelings, even though his rebellion is too weak and ultimately ends in failure.

⁸⁶ I use the word camera on purpose because the description of the fight is strikingly cinematic. It utilizes slow-motion as the narrator takes in the scene around the hero like modern war-movies do. I discuss the topic of McCarthy's cinematic aesthetic in detail on pages 60-61.

⁸⁷ Frye, "Blood Meridian and the Poetics of Violence" 108.

⁸⁸ Benson.

⁸⁹ The kid thus shares the same fate as the other heroes of McCarthy's Western novels. John Grady Cole attempts to project the old Western myth onto Mexico and is killed in *The Crossing* because he is not compatible with the contemporary world. Sheriff Bell retires at the end of *No Country for Old Men*, because he does not understand the world anymore and is nostalgic for the past.

During the escape from the Yuma crossing, the kid gets a chance to end Holden's life while he is unarmed, and although the expriest advises him to do so, the kid ultimately cannot bring himself to shoot Holden. He regrets his decision later when the judge obtains a gun, and the two engage in a duel from which the kid and the expriest barely escape with their lives. The kid eventually breaks free from the judge and the gang. It is at this point that the narrator stops referring to him as the kid and instead calls him the man. The man is less inclined to violence than the kid, but he is unable to meaningfully evolve, or truly become an adult. He continues to roam the frontier, taking the odd jobs as a guide, until he meets with the judge once again.

The main way the kid tries to differentiate himself from Judge Holden and his ethics of war, is religion. "He begins to carry a bible, a book already made defunct by the judge as a false scripture and a symbol of empty moral laws."⁹⁰ Holden's philosophy and thinking about God in great part borrows from the Nietzschean idea of *Übermensch*, or Superman, believing that God is dead, rejecting external notions of value, and defining morality through self-discovery and the force of will.⁹¹ By traveling with the bible, even if he cannot read it, the kid positions himself as Holden's philosophical counterpart.

The kid's turn to religion is understandable in the context of his journey, for he participates in the recurrence of biblical events. The short-lived expedition with the filibuster army under Captain White and the kid's rising from the dead recall the narratives from the New Testament: the temptation of Christ in the desert and his resurrection from the dead. Another allusion to the bible comes shortly after the Sonoran cavalry under general Elias chase the gang out of Mexico. The kid is left behind without a horse, he finds shelter by a "lone tree burning on the desert" (226) which attracts all manner of creatures beside the kid. The scene is linked with yet another messianic story, this time from the Old Testament: the burning bush from the

⁹⁰ Benson.

⁹¹ Steven Frye, "Histories, Novels, Ideas: Cormac McCarthy and the Art of Philosophy," *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Steven Frye, (Bakersfield: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 7.

Book of Exodus. Unlike the biblical stories, both events in *Blood Meridian* seem empty of meaning. In the biblical burning bush story, God appointed Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, yet in *Blood Meridian*, God never speaks to the kid, and the kid does not become a messiah.

On one of his late journeys, the now-adult hero comes upon a caravan of pilgrims butchered by marauders. He notices an old Indian woman, and in an attempt to repent for his life of violence he promises to take her to safety. “He identifies himself as an American and calls her ‘abuelita,’ or grandmother, but he cannot help her because she is a fossil clothed in rags and her blessing is beyond his reach.”⁹² This moment does not offer any religious catharsis; God is not present, and the kid cannot save anyone.

When the narrator describes the kid, he states that his “folk are known for hewers of wood and drawers of water” (3), alluding to the sons of Ham (son of Noah) who was punished along with his posterity because he saw his father naked.⁹³ This allusion to the bible comes full circle in the final chapter of the novel when the naked judge, who behaved toward the kid like a father figure,⁹⁴ gathers the kid “in his arms against his immense and terrible flesh and [shuts] the wooden barlatch [of the outhouse] home behind him” (351). The book does not openly state what happens between the judge and the kid in the outhouse, but the trail of dead babies the kid sees on his journey west and Holden’s tendency to appear near dead children imply that the kid is murdered and possibly raped.

From the outset of the novel, the kid is built up as an archetypal hero of the monomyth described by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. At its core, his story echoes

⁹² Parrish 71.

⁹³ The quote itself is from Joshua 9:23, where Gibeonites of Canaan were condemned to servitude under Israelites. In Genesis 9:25 Noah curses Canaan (Ham was the father of Canaan): “Cursed be Canaan, a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.” The punishment of Gibeonites hence echoes Noah’s earlier curse of Ham and Canaan.

⁹⁴ For more information on the father and son dynamic between the kid and Judge Holden see Josef Benson, “An Ironic Contention: The Kid’s Heroic Failure to Rebel Against the Judge’s Hypermasculinity in *Blood Meridian*.”

mythical tales, both ancient and modern. The biblical narratives about Moses, Jesus Christ, classical Westerns about cowboys-saviors and the story of the kid are on the fundamental level very much alike:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.⁹⁵

Yet the kid cannot live up to the larger-than-life heroes of the monomyth. His story is a subversion of the ancient mythical formula. The narrator describes him as an all-American hero, and his journey repeats biblical narratives, but the kid cannot meet the expectations established by his mythical predecessors. He is overshadowed and defeated by his nemesis, Judge Holden, who takes the position as the central figure of the novel, and its philosophical voice.

The kid also subverts Turner's ideal of a pioneer because the frontier does not turn him into a strong, individual man, but rather an unthinking cog of the colonizing machine. He eventually tries to build his own subjectivity, but only positions himself as an opponent of the judge without fully understanding his newly adopted creed. In the end, *Blood Meridian* is an antithesis of a bildungsroman. The kid remains stuck in time, he cannot change or reinvent himself. In the conquered land, he no longer embodies progress, and his death repeats the death of the Indians he helped to eradicate in his youth. He ends up as a frontiersman in a world without frontiers and must inevitably make way for the civilization, embodied by the judge, and disappear with the wilderness he once helped to subjugate.

⁹⁵ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) 28.

4.2. Judge Holden: Devilry and Civilization

After hearing the story of how the judge joined the gang, the kid asks: “What’s he a judge of?” (142), but his question remains unanswered. Holden’s alias, the judge, suggests “logos,” the lawgiver, and although he is fluent in legal language, he appears to prevent, rather than assert, order.⁹⁶ Like the grim triune from the *Outer Dark*, who seemingly emerge in the world to punish the hero Culla Holme for abandoning his incest-begotten child in the forest, the judge does not act as an agent of justice, but as an intensifier of evil. He is, at the same time, the most violent, educated, and civilized character in the book that deals with the brutality of colonization. He is the symbolical embodiment of civilization arriving on the American frontier.

John Sepich likens the judge to the Faustian devil, basing his arguments on Holden’s gift of gunpowder to the gang, which “has overtones of Mephistopheles’ gifts to Faust.”⁹⁷ The expriest Tobin alludes to a Mephistophelian contract, saying that the judge and Glanton “[have] a secret commerce. Some terrible covenant.” (133). Parallels with the representation of Satan⁹⁸ in Western culture are interspersed throughout *Blood Meridian*. As a man of law, Holden practices one of the devil’s favorite professions. Moreover, he is as intelligent as he is devilishly cunning. He is so intoxicated with his own intellect, he believes his thoughts are legal decisions.⁹⁹ He shares Satan’s skills of dancing and playing the violin,¹⁰⁰ and his flaws of coldness, vanity, and pride. He claims that he never sleeps, that he will never die (353), and appears to be omniscient and omnipresent.

⁹⁶ Dudley 183.

⁹⁷ For gunpowder made in improvised conditions, it is strangely accurate and does not cause a single misfire, which would, at the time of black powder warfare, happen commonly even with a batch of standard gunpowder. Sepich 121.

⁹⁸ I use the words Satan, Mephistopheles, the devil, and adjectives formed from these words as synonyms.

⁹⁹ Sepich 126.

¹⁰⁰ In the Middle Ages, the devil was said to own a violin with which he could set entire cities to dancing until they fell dead from sheer exhaustion. Sepich 124. In the book, the expriest Tobin praises Holden’s skill with the fiddle: “He is the greatest fiddler I ever heard and that’s an end on it. The greatest.” (130).

When the kid meets the judge for the first time in Nacogdoches, he enters the tent where a congregation is being held and accuses the reverend of being an imposter wanted by the law in the states of Tennessee, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Arkansas for violating “a girl of eleven years” and “having congress with a goat” (6-7). Later, when a posse is being drawn to pursue the preacher, the judge claims: “I never laid eyes on the man before today. Never even heard of him.” (8-9). Sepich notices that the incident provides not only comic relief but also establishes Holden’s omniscience. Though the judge’s allegations appear to be much exaggerated, Reverend Greed is a historically verifiable figure with a history of misconduct.¹⁰¹ He is also the first of many characters in the book who identifies Judge Holden as the devil (7).

Tobin discloses to the kid that he is not the only man who saw the judge before he joined the gang, as “[e]very man in the company claims to have encountered that sootysouled rascal in some other place” (131). Holden’s ability to speak fluently in several languages, while discussing the news from the capitals of the “Old Continent,” lead Tobin to believe that he has been all over the world (130). Linking Holden’s supposed omnipresence, or at the very least wayfaring spirit, with his physical features of “some great pale deity” (98), and a body completely devoid of hair, it is hard not to liken him to Melville’s White Whale. Though, as Michal Svěrák warns, comparing Judge Holden with Moby Dick is problematic. Unlike Holden, the White Whale is not unanimously interpreted as evil, and some critics interpret it as an allegory of nature, goodness, or resurrection. Not to mention that Holden, in his quest for world dominion, and submission of the wilderness, mirrors Captain Ahab, rather than the Whale.¹⁰²

Holden’s physical appearance is problematic even for Sepich’s interpretation. Satan is traditionally represented as lean, as opposed to the judge’s more robust body. Sepich concludes

¹⁰¹ Sepich 13-14.

¹⁰² Michal Svěrák, *Svět v hrsti prachu*, (Praha: Argo, 2012) 135.

that “Holden may be literally as evil as he is fat.”¹⁰³ On the other hand, he points to the judge’s dress. Satan usually appears as a well-bred, cultivated man of the world in fine clothes, and the narrator pays more attention to Holden’s wardrobe than to any other character’s. He appears to be as finely dressed as his mission with the gang allows. Even in the desert, when fleeing the wrath of the Yumas, the judge manages to put together a hat and a parasol from the available materials.¹⁰⁴ Holden’s vanity and pride then come to the forefront in the scenes where he sheds his clothes and dances naked, “bowing to the ladies, huge and pale and hairless, like an enormous infant” (353).

The judge and the devil also have in common the disposition for manipulation and trickery. Svěrák argues that Holden’s monologues on philosophy and theology are not a product of a single coherent belief, but a way to assert linguistic and intellectual dominance, and to exploit others.¹⁰⁵ This is evident in the scene where the judge opens a debate on the presence of God in the world, encouraging members of the gang in speculations “until they [are] right proselytes of the new order whereupon he [laughs] at them for fools” (124).

Moreover, Holden delivers speeches that at times contradict one another. Svěrák illustrates the contradictions in Holden’s thoughts on three monologues on the mysteries of the world.¹⁰⁶ In response to Toadvine’s claim that “[n]o man can acquaint himself with everything on this earth” (209), the judge tilts his head and declares:

The man who believes that 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 the 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 (209-210).

Some pages later, after opening a debate on astrology, he claims:

¹⁰³ Sepich 122.

¹⁰⁴ Sepich 124.

¹⁰⁵ Svěrák 151.

¹⁰⁶ Svěrák 151-152.

The universe is no narrow thing and the order within it is not constrained by the latitude in its conception to repeat what exists in one part in any other part. Even in this world more things exist without our knowledge than with it and the order in creation which you see is what is that which you have put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way. For existence has its own order and that no man's mind can compass, that mind being but a fact among others (258-259).

Later yet, he says: "The mystery is that there is no mystery." (266). Holden uses his linguistic superiority to rise above the others, even though they might not possess the intellectual capabilities to apprehend what he means. His urge to own and control manifests in his sketches of Indian artifacts, which he subsequently destroys. The act of destruction shows Holden's jealousy; he sketches the artifacts because it would not be practical to pack them for his travels; he destroys them so that no one else can take possession of them and the knowledge they hold.

Holden possesses supernatural powers, but he does not seem to be all-powerful. Svěrák points to the scene, where Holden implies that his goal is to become a "suzerain" (209), rather than a sovereign, and thus to become one among the rulers, and not the absolute overlord. Holden, in this scene, either acknowledges that he cannot become the supreme authority or makes a mistake, which would mean that even his uncontested proficiency with words does not attain divine perfection.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, Holden's dominion is limited to horizontal space. "The freedom of birds," he says, "is an insult to me. I'd have them all in zoos." (210) Birds insult Holden precisely because he is not able to control or destroy them after sketching them into his ledger; they are beyond his sphere of influence.

Judge's quest for suzerainty, instead of sovereignty, supports Daugherty's and Mundik's Gnostic reading of the judge as an *archon*. *Archons*, according to the Gnostic theology, are evil angels who rule the material world created by a hostile, or at best, ignorant creator-God known as the *demiurge*. Their role is to keep humanity trapped in a state of

¹⁰⁷ Svěrák 148-149. Oxford English Dictionary traces the use of the terms to C. Butler's *Hist. Revol. Empire Germany* iii. (1812) 53: "The king was called the *Sovereign* lord; his immediate vassal was called the *Suzereign*; and the tenants holding of him were called the *arrière* vassals." "suzerain, n. (and adj.)." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2020 <www.oed.com/view/Entry/195271> Jul 24, 2020.

tyrannical world-rule known as the *heimarmene* or “universal Fate,” and not allow them to apprehend the immaterial state of the universe and reunite with the legitimate, transcendent God, who remains withdrawn from the material world. Salvation in Gnosticism is attained through knowledge, and therefore *archons* perpetuate their rule through the spreading of ignorance.¹⁰⁸

Blood Meridian is replete with Gnostic symbols and concepts. After leaving Nacogdoches, the kid comes to a lone hut on the prairie far from any road, inhabited by a hermit who tells him: “You can find meanness in the least of creatures, but when God made men the devil was at his elbow.” (20). His lesson echoes the Gnostic belief that humanity has a divided nature composed of body and soul, which were created by and belong to the *demiurge*, and of *pneuma*, a divine spirit that belongs to the legitimate alien God.¹⁰⁹ Using Gnosticism, Mundik interprets the kid’s dream in which he realizes what is Holden judge of:

The fool was no longer there but another man and this other man he could never see in his entirety but he seemed an artisan and a worker in metal. The judge enshadowed him where he crouched at his trade but he was a coldforger who worked with hammer and die, perhaps under some indictment and an exile from men’s fires, hammering out like his own conjectural destiny all through the night of his becoming some coinage for a dawn that would not be. It is this false moneyer with his gravers and burins who seeks favor with the judge and he is at contriving from cold slag brute in the crucible a face that will pass, an image that will render this residual specie current in the markets where men barter. Of this is the judge judge and the night does not end. (326-327)

Mundik sees the false coins as the false teachings of organized religion that give false promises of salvation (such as the second coming of Christ), while their real purpose is to keep humanity in a state of perpetual spiritual darkness. The kid, in her view, realizes that the judge is

¹⁰⁸ Petra Mundik, “‘Striking the Fire Out of the Rock’: Gnostic Theology in Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*,” *South Central Review*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2009, pp. 72-97. *JSTOR* <www.jstor.org/stable/40645988> 73, 74, 82, 85. Mar 30, 2020.

¹⁰⁹ Mundik 73.

responsible for overseeing the production of false currency that keeps mankind in a never-ending ignorance, represented by the “night” that “does not end.”¹¹⁰

While I agree with Mundik’s second argument, I think Holden’s trade is more in violence and war, which are also the forms of “evil currency” Turner did not want to dwell on,¹¹¹ than religion, as he time and again questions the presence of God and castigates his teachings. I find it unlikely that the kid, knowing well that Christianity and organized religion are but a trick to keep humanity under the judge’s rule, would travel with a bible he could not read. Instead, the kid rebels against Holden by accepting Christian faith and refraining from acts of violence. Years later, when he strikes a conversation with the bonepickers, they notice his necklace of human ears, which are perfectly black and dry with age (337), suggesting that the kid did not add any since he bought it as memorabilia reminding him of the time spent with the gang. Soon after he shoots one of the bonepickers in self-defense, he meets the judge once again, as if by killing someone, he exposed himself to Holden’s judgment and broke some spell that protected him from his punishment.

Be that as it may, Holden lives up to the warning that he cannot be surmised by any one system, nor compared to a single figure; his antecedents are plentiful, most of them evil (326). Unlike the kid, Holden meets the ideal of an American frontier hero: “He can cut a trail, shoot a rifle, ride a horse, track a deer” (130), and he is strong, brave, intelligent, self-reliant, and individualistic to the point he breaks away from religion and carries himself as some new divinity. He is the most enlightened and cultured character in the book, a living epitome of colonizing spirit. He rides at the head of the gang as some regalia announcing their mission to bring civilization to the barbarous and god-forsaken frontier, much different from the men who help him pave its way:

¹¹⁰ Mundik 85-86.

¹¹¹ See page 21.

[T]hey saw one day a pack of vicious-looking humans mounted on unshod Indian ponies riding half drunk through the streets, bearded, barbarous, clad in the skins of animals stitched up with thews and armed with weapons of every description, revolvers of enormous weight and bowieknives the size of claymores and short two-barreled rifles with bores you could stick your thumbs in and the trappings of their horses fashioned out of human skin and their bridles woven up from human hair and decorated with human teeth and the riders wearing scapulars or necklaces of dried and blackened human ears and the horses raw-looking and wild in the eye and their teeth bared like feral dogs and riding also in the company a number of half-naked savages reeling in the saddle, dangerous, filthy, brutal, the whole like a visitation from some heathen land where they and others like them fed on human flesh.

Foremost among them, outsized and childlike with his naked face, rode the judge. His cheeks were ruddy and he was smiling and bowing to the ladies and doffing his filthy hat. The enormous dome of his head when he bared it was blinding white and perfectly circumscribed about so that it looked to have been painted. He and the reeking horde of rabble with him passed on through the stunned streets and hove up before the governor's palace where their leader, a small black-haired man, clapped for entrance by kicking at the oaken doors with his boot. (83-84)

Even if he is not the actual leader of the gang, Holden always finds himself the center of attention and is treated as Glanton's superior, and socially better. *Blood Meridian* thus creates an oblique order, in which the judge takes the central stage and occupies the position dedicated to the hero of the book. Neither the characters nor the third-person omniscient narrator, who reports things as they happen and offers no moral assessment, contradict the judge's moral position with any substantial force. Consequently, only Holden's opinions remain on the page.¹¹²

Holden subverts the established mythical tradition and combines in himself the greatest villains of Western mythology with the frontier heroes who are supposed to expel evil from the American Wild West and usher in civilization and progress. *Blood Meridian* reconstitutes the myth of American westward expansion and demonstrates that only villains could tame the land west of the ninety-ninth meridian.¹¹³ Mythical heroes make an appearance on *Blood Meridian's*

¹¹² Benson.

¹¹³ Turner saw the ninety-ninth meridian as the border of the civilized world with the American wilderness. The oldest Texan town of Nacogdoches (founded in 1779), where the kid starts his journey across the American

frontier, but its wild and barbarous terrains that “try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man’s will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay” (5) are too harsh for them to survive.¹¹⁴

4.3. *Terra Damnata*

The frontier is a uniquely American space; its crossing traditionally promises initiation into masculine subjectivity. The land beyond the frontier line is in American mythology believed to be the land of opportunity destined by God for Euro-American settlement. The landscape of *Blood Meridian*, described as “a hungry country” (18), “a terra damnata” (64), is a space that defies the binary oppositions of good and evil, civilized and savage, sacred and occult. This is articulated by the aptly named Captain White early in the novel: “What we are dealing with, he said, is a race of degenerates. A mongrel race, little better than niggers. And maybe no better. There is no government in Mexico. Hell, there’s no God in Mexico.” (36). In refutation of his black and white beliefs stemming from the American exceptionalism, his expedition is soon slaughtered by Comanches, and his head ends up pickled in a jar of mescal, memorably displayed in a traveling medicine show.¹¹⁵

Captain White’s quixotic beliefs lead to his and his company’s demise, but he is right about one thing: there is no God in the land he is about to travel, but his presence is not limited by a country, but rather by the ninety-ninth meridian. When the kid runs away from his home, he wanders through a “pastoral landscape” (4) near Memphis, which is described in terms suggestive of the biblical garden of Eden, but following his escape from Nacogdoches, the

frontier, lies near the ninety-eight meridian and therefore on the very edge of the civilized world. Svěrák 118, Turner 9.

¹¹⁴ Apart from the kid, who represents the hero of the monomyth, the narrator also mentions Argonauts, Greek heroes, who accompanied Jason on his quest to find the Golden Fleece, and who in *Blood Meridian* stand for the “forty-niners” traveling across the American continent to search for gold in the Californian mountains. The gang later finds these heroes of the ancient myths brutally slain in the desert by white men “who preyed on travelers in that wilderness and disguised their work to be that of the savages” (161).

¹¹⁵ Dudley 183.

landscape turns grim and sublime. Churches he comes across on his way either show signs of decay or have degenerated into tombs, offering false sanctuary for the believers who fill their sacristies with their dead bodies.¹¹⁶ The kid stumbles into one such church, still on the American soil, shortly before joining Captain White's doomed mission of conquest (28-29).

There comes a time when even the kid pleads with divine providence for his salvation. Sepich identifies the old, mummified woman kneeling near the scene of the massacre of Mexican penitents (332) as a variation of the Virgin Mary. The shawl that covers her head with a pattern of "stars and quartermoons and other insignia" (332), resembles "elements associated with Mary in Revelation 12:1 and in the painted depiction of Mary's appearance as Our Lady of Guadalupe."¹¹⁷ But even she cannot offer the kid any protection, nor grant him absolution, and is deaf to his pleas. She is "an empty shell of meaningless religious iconography, thwarting the kid's genuine search for redemption."¹¹⁸

It appears that even the landscape in *Blood Meridian* craves violence. When traveling through the desert with Captain White's army, the soldiers make a camp and fall asleep "with their alien hearts beating in the sand like pilgrims exhausted upon the face of the planet Anareta, clutched to a namelessness wheeling in the night" (48). Daugherty, with the help of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, connects this passage with the Renaissance belief that Anareta is "the planet which destroys life," and that "violent deaths are caused when the Malefics have agents in the anaretic place."¹¹⁹ The conclusion is that the Earth in *Blood Meridian* is anaretic, and therefore destructive of life.

Astrology, in *Blood Meridian*, plays a critical role in determining the fate of the characters, especially on the frontier. There is a dichotomy present between the landscape

¹¹⁶ Benson.

¹¹⁷ Sepich 123.

¹¹⁸ Mundik 87.

¹¹⁹ Daugherty 163. I corrected Daugherty's erroneous spelling of "malifics" to "Malefics." See: "a'nareta, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2020 <www.oed.com/view/Entry/71119> Jul 25, 2020.

before and beyond the ninety-ninth meridian. God is present on one side, but he is completely deaf on the other, where only occult sciences like astrology and tarot cards hold their power. *Blood Meridian* thus subverts Manifest Destiny, a belief that the divine providence preordained the West for the Christian settlers. It suggests that the West is a place beyond God's domain, and should, therefore, be left to the "heathens."

The story of the kid's nativity relates to the Leonid meteor shower of 1833: "The Leonids they were called. God how the stars did fall. I looked for blackness, holes in the heavens. The Dipper stove." (3). Sepich dates the occurrence of this astrological event to November 12. The kid is, therefore, born under the astrological sign of Scorpio, which is ruled by the planet Mars, a "violent planet," and by Pluto, "the planet of secrecy." Leo, the constellation from which the meteors descended, is ruled by the sun, which is characterized by generosity and kindness.¹²⁰ The kid shows his goodness in chapter XV when, after a fight with the Sonoran cavalry, he contradicts Glanton's order, and hides the wounded Shelby in a bush, rather than dispatching him. On his way to catch up with the gang, he meets another rider leading his hurt horse through the desert, he dismounts and walks with him, risking that the enemy will catch up to them both (216-223). Sepich also argues that Holden's charge that the kid had "reserved in [his] soul some corner of clemency for the heathen" (316), even though the narrator does not provide any scenes to support it, "is prefigured astrologically in the novel's first page."¹²¹

The night sky of the kid's final journey to the outhouse mirrors the one of his birth: "Stars were falling across the sky myriad and random, speeding along brief vectors from their origins in night to their destinies in dust and nothingness." (351), suggesting McCarthy's theme

¹²⁰ Sepich 51.

¹²¹ Sepich 51-52. I deal with a similar charge on pages 32-33. The interpretation of Holden's accusations is ambiguous; Sepich also admits that Holden's censure and murder of the kid may have been based "on recognition of their mutual hatred in their source document." Sepich 106.

of cyclic extinctions.¹²² The place of the kid's death is not accidental. Since the kid is associated with the constellation of Leo, which predetermined his inclination for kindness, Fort Griffin appears his astrologically appropriate place of destruction. The mythological griffin has a lion's body, and when the judge destroys the kid's body, he symbolically destroys also the thing he hates about him the most.¹²³ The trait that did not allow him to wholeheartedly commit himself to the gang's mission of extermination.

The kid's dual nature is also implied in his association with the tarot card "Cuattro de copas," four of cups (100), linked with the kid at two points in the novel. He first comes across the card in a town sacked by the Comanches (63), and later when a Mexican woman reads his fortune (100). Using Robert Wang's *The Qabalistic Tarot: A Textbook of Mystical Philosophy*, Sepich determines that the card indicates "*blended pleasure and success, receiving pleasure but mixed with some discomfort or anxieties*,"¹²⁴ confirming his argument that the kid has a divided heart and inclination for both mercy and violence. The judge is silently laughing when the kid's card is presented to the men, which suggests that he understands its significance, "or that perhaps he has in some way predetermined its selection."¹²⁵

In the same scene, black John Jackson picks his card before the kid, and Glanton draws another. Jackson's card is "El tonto," the fool (98), the most powerful trump in the pack. It indicates lost wits, but also divine wisdom.¹²⁶ Jackson does not speak Spanish, so he turns to Holden for help in understanding the fortune-teller's prophecy. "I think she means to say that in your fortune lie our fortunes all," says the judge, "I think she'd have you beware the demon

¹²² McCarthy's reference to the Leonid does not limit his frame of historical reference. The year of the kid's birth is connected with two major events that changed the American frontier. The first was the end of demand for beaver fur, which in years prior was a popular material for the hats of the British gentlemen, and caused a shift in the frontier economy. The second was the first reported scalping on the Texas territory. The event started a bloody era that ended with the annihilation of the buffalo in Texas. Without their traditional source of meat, all possibilities of Indian independence vanished. The kid's death in 1878 is consequently connected with another sweeping change that transpired on the territory of Texas. Sepich 53-54.

¹²³ Sepich 52.

¹²⁴ Sepich 106.

¹²⁵ Sepich 107.

¹²⁶ Sepich 107

rum. Prudent counsel enough, what do you think?” (98-99). Judge’s warning proves accurate, as Jackson is the first man of the intoxicated company killed at the Yuma crossing:

At dawn the black walked out to the landing and stood urinating in the river [...] a long cane arrow passed through his upper abdomen [...] second arrow passed him on the left and two more struck and lodged fast in his chest and in his groin. They were a full four feet in length and they lofted slightly with his movements like ceremonial wands and he [...] took a step toward the shore and fell sideways into the river. (288-289)

His death embodies yet another tarot card: the four of wands, which signifies “*perfected work, settlement and rest after labor.*”¹²⁷ The scene of Jackson’s death is clearly meant to be symbolic, as the real black John Jackson was thrown overboard a boat in a scuffle, and drowned.¹²⁸

Glanton’s card disappears in the dark of night, whipped by the wind so quickly that it is not clear whether he even managed to get a glimpse of the card’s face (101). But the blind fortune-teller knows his fate regardless: “The coach, the coach, cried the beldam. Inverted. Card of war, of vengeance. I saw it without wheels on a dark river... [...] Dead wagon, full of bones. The youngster that...”¹²⁹ She does not finish her prophecy, because she is “clouted away” (102). Sepich identifies the card as the Chariot, which symbolizes “cyclic repetition in its turning wheels and emphasizes the cycles of dominance embodied in *Blood Meridian.*”¹³⁰ The fortune-teller foretells that Glanton’s war of vengeance against the Indians will turn into their vengeance at the Yuma crossing.

The cart without wheels represents the boat at the crossing “contrived from a pair of old wagonboxes fitted together and caulked with a pitch” (267), the dark river stands for the

¹²⁷ Sepich 107.

¹²⁸ Carr 54.

¹²⁹ I quote the English translation by John Sepich, the original is in Spanish: “*La carroza, la carroza, cried the beldam. Invertido. Carta de guerra, de vanganza. La ví sin ruedas sobre un rio obscuro.... [...] Carroza de muertos, llena de huesos. El joven qué...*” (101-102). Sepich 108.

¹³⁰ Sepich 109

Colorado River, and its “claycolored waters” (266).¹³¹ In the second part of her prophecy, she sees the kid’s encounter with the bonepickers, their “heavy wagons” of bones, and the youngster “Elrod” whom the kid kills in self-defense (334-340). The part of the prophecy that remains unsaid is that, like in Glanton’s case before, the kid’s wheel of fortune will eventually also change its course, and in turn, he will meet the judge once again.

It is not uncommon for Westerns to portray the harsh landscapes of the American Wild West as the antagonist of the story. For instance, the characters in Bret Harte’s “The Outcasts of Poker Flat,” struggle to survive in the American wilderness; but by divesting the frontier of God, McCarthy questions the myth that drove the settlers west, the Manifest Destiny. The narrator calls the land beyond the frontier line “a terra damnata” (64), the damned earth. Damned, because of the empty vastness of the desert dotted by corpses of the dead animals and slaughtered people, which the providence abandoned after its creation, leaving it a godless cinderland of destruction.¹³² Even though God abandoned the place, the forces of the supernatural are present in this landscape. The arcane arts can foretell the fate of the characters, which seem to be preordained and cyclical. By repeating the biblical narratives, and mirroring scenes from the beginning of the kid’s journey, the book implies that history and historical events tend to repeat themselves and that violence is an ever-present part of human experience.

4.4. Like Two Sides of One Coin: Violence in *Blood Meridian*

Before he became the author of Westerns, Cormac McCarthy’s novels evoked the style of the Southern Gothic genre. Not only by the setting but also by their exploration of social taboos

¹³¹ Sepich noticed that John Russel Barlett in his *Personal Narrative of Explorations and Incidents in Texas, New Mexico, California, Sonora, and Chihuahua* described the color of the Colorado River as “dark reddish.” Sepich 108.

¹³² Timothy Parrish argues: “When the judge examines the pattern of a fossil, he hopes to discern the logic left by the world that he encounters. God has spoken in the rock, the judge implies, but the rock can only attest to God’s having once spoken nothing more.” Parrish 76. I have discussed a similar topic in connection to the Gnostic reading of the work on pages 49-50.

and repressed urges, including incest and necrophilia. *Outer Dark* and *Child of God* are perhaps the most Gothic of his early novels. With *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy takes his Gothic sensibilities and moves them to the landscapes of the American Southwest, challenging the progressive version of the American past, and subverting the mythologized history with the eclipsed reality of violence.¹³³

The Gothic genre in America serves to address the nation's otherwise unacknowledged ghosts haunting the country's exceptionalist presumptions of innocence that seek to submerge the awareness of its genocidal social foundations. McCarthy rewrites American myths about the frontier by including all aspects of the country's origins.¹³⁴ The violence he portrays is surreal, grotesque, and highly aesthetic in the Gothic tradition, but "it reflects the realities of conquest and nation-building."¹³⁵ Neither the Indians nor the Euro-Americans appear in direct comparison as clear-cut heroes or villains. They are both shown capable of committing atrocities, as well as helping their fellow men, suggesting that there is a duality at the heart of human nature, which is also one of the crucial elements of Gothic fiction. The kid, in this regard, represents the duality of mankind and its inclinations to both kindness and violence. The judge, on the other hand, symbolizes the duality of historical perception and distribution of civilization.¹³⁶

Although McCarthy's depiction of violence walks a fine line between revoltingly gruesome and grotesquely absurd, it is not without its historical merits. John Sepich finds similarities between the scene of the Comanche's ambush of Captain White filibuster army, and the Great Raid of Linville from August 8, 1840. According to the historian J.W. Wilbarger, the Comanches had completely concealed themselves on the sides of their horses, whom the

¹³³ Ronja Vieth, "A Frontier Myth Turns Gothic: *Blood Meridian: Or, the Evening Redness in the West*," *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2010, pp. 55–72. JSTOR< www.jstor.org/stable/42909410> 55, Jul 29, 2020.

¹³⁴ Vieth 56-57, 59.

¹³⁵ Frye, "Blood Meridian and the Poetics of Violence," 109.

¹³⁶ Vieth 58, 67-68.

townsfolk believed to be brought over from Mexico for trading purposes. Once the Indians closed the distance, they raised in their saddles and dashed upon the defenseless town, which they subsequently ravaged with impunity.¹³⁷ Steven Frye, in his analysis of the same scene, concludes that “attacks of this sort occurred on many occasions and were by no means atypical of the manner in which the Comanche waged war.”¹³⁸

Timothy Parrish, on the other hand, interprets the encounter as an allusion to Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*.¹³⁹ Captain White’s men see “clouds of dust” appearing on the horizon, which they mistake for a “[h]ell of a herd of [...] horses” (53). In Cervantes’ novel, Don Quixote comes upon two clouds of dust raised by droves of ewes and sheep, which his fancy turns into armies of many nations; their great bleating into neighing of steeds, braying of trumpets and rolling of drums. The chivalrous Don Quixote decides, against all odds, to charge headlong into the squadrons of the enemy and spears them with his lance as if they were mortal enemies in earnest. Only, in *Blood Meridian*, the clouds of dust bring actual warriors, “a fabled horde of mounted lancers [...] clad in costumes attic or biblical or wardrobed out of a fevered dream [...] in the armor of a Spanish conquistador, the breastplate and pauldrons deeply dented” (55). In an ironic turn of events, the Euro-American conquerors end up skewered by spears like the ewes in Cervantes.¹⁴⁰

Sepich implies that the confrontation is inspired by personal narratives, diaries, and histories dealing with the period, rather than cinema and television, but he devotes his attention

¹³⁷ Sepich 55.

¹³⁸ Frye, “*Blood Meridian* and the Poetics of Violence,” 117.

¹³⁹ Parrish’s approach to read this scene as an allusion is not unwarranted, as parodying or referencing other works of fiction is a typical feature of McCarthy’s style. In the first confrontation between the kid and Toadvine, for instance, McCarthy alludes to Jack and his tribes of hunters from *Lord of the Flies* when Toadvine unsheathes his “immense bowieknife,” and repeats the “word kill like a crazed chant” (10). What is more, Russel M. Hillier identifies McCarthy’s second novel *Outer Dark* in his essay “‘In a Dark Parody’ of John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*: The Presence of Subversive Allegory in Cormac McCarthy’s *Outer Dark*,” as a satirical rewriting of Bunyan’s religious allegory.

¹⁴⁰ Parrish 69, Miguel de Cervantes, “Chapter XVIII,” *The History of Don Quixote*, Project Gutenberg <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/996/996-h/996-h.htm#ch18>> Jul 29, 2020.

to the circumstances of the encounter and largely overlooks the battle itself.¹⁴¹ The narrator captures the battle in a cinematic way, using fast cuts and zooms. At one moment, he captures the kid struggling on the ground and then zooms out, recording the surrounding turmoil. His focus is then on the other men of the company fighting a one-sided battle with the Indians. The scene evocative of a war-movie soon changes genre and transforms into a slasher horror, as the battle turns into a slaughter. The narrator describes scalping, chopping up the dead bodies, and sodomizing of the dying (56-57). The sheer cinematic brutality of the encounter is perhaps most akin to Ruggero Deodato's controversial *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980).

Analyzing the portrayal of the Yuma massacre and slaughter of the Gileños, Stephen Frye argues that two films established in part the cinema aesthetic of *Blood Meridian*: Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and Ralph Nelson's *Soldier Blue* (1970), both tremendously influential for the revisionist Westerns.

McCarthy describes [the violence] almost entirely in visual terms, using parallel constructions to mimic the shifts from shot to cinematic shot [...] McCarthy's visual montage blends group movement and individual movement as the language pace is slowed by modifiers in the same manner as the film, in which slow motion is employed particularly when people are killed. [...] The influence of cinematic technique is further evidenced in McCarthy's departure from his more typical style, which is dependent on objectively rendered thought, ornate and frequently subordinated language, and the use of multiple senses.¹⁴²

The purpose is to heighten the sense of reality of violence. By describing the scenes in purely visual terms, McCarthy breaks the boundaries separating the reader from the action that plays out on the page.

Sources of horror abound in *Blood Meridian*; scenes like the tree "hung with dead babies" (60), or of the Argonauts with "strange menstrual wounds between their legs [and] wigs of dried blood" (161), in tandem with the pernicious landscapes, create the feeling of the

¹⁴¹ Sepich 55-60.

¹⁴² Frye, "Blood Meridian and the Poetics of Violence," 113.

Gothic sublime. McCarthy's beautifully lyrical text "is what causes the Gothic effect of engaging the reader's unconscious and thus threatening the reader's aesthetic distance, which allows for the terror of horror to take effect."¹⁴³ The gruesomeness of the scenes is an essential part of McCarthy's subversion of the mythical narratives. The portrayal of violence is not strictly realistic, but by making it as revolting as possible, McCarthy corrupts the image of the heroic conquest of the West.

Unlike the progressive Westerns like *The Searchers* (1956), where the Indian raid on the powerless farmers is so dreadful that the camera cuts away to spare the viewer of the ghastly details, *Blood Meridian* presents the carnage in all its gruesome glory without judgment. The archetypal heroes like the kid or the Argonauts do not fare well on the frontier and eventually end up consumed by its violent nature. Conquest cleared of the mythical cloud of American exceptionalism is not a heroic endeavor. *Blood Meridian* presents an impartial vision of the colonization of the American West and shows neither side as better or worse. The atrocities committed by the Euro-Americans and Indians are like two sides of one coin without the book differentiating between heads and tails.

¹⁴³ Vieth 62.

5. Conclusion

Myths, as Roland Barthes asserts, are historical and can undergo a change or disappear completely. Some are ancient, but none are eternal. Just like the myth of Spartan invincibility vanished after their defeat at the Battle of Leuctra, the exceptionalist myth that informed classical Westerns disappeared as the United States faced unsuccess both in foreign relations and internal affairs. In a world exhausted of frontiers, the Cowboy era came to an end¹⁴⁴ and was replaced by a period of cultural change, in which the Western underwent a revision to reflect the contemporary sensibilities. The revisionist movement inhabited the old form inherited from the traditional Westerns and created alternative versions of the classical narratives about the Wild West.

Blood Meridian builds on the existing revisionist subgenres, blending historical accuracy with rich symbolism and movie-like descriptions of violence. It dismantles the prescriptive myths about the conquest of the American West by setting a universal nameless American hero into a world founded on historical sources and watching him fail. His journey is an antithesis of a bildungsroman. In the end, he cannot find his place in the world that is not built for heroes and dies. The main villain, *au contraire*, is a living epitome of civilization arriving on the frontier, combining in his person both the positive and negative sides of colonization. He symbolizes the naked truth, *nuda veritas*, revealing facts the frontier myth highlighted, as well as those it tried to blur, holding out a mirror to the reader.

In refutation of Manifest Destiny, the frontier in *Blood Meridian* is not preordained for the Euro-American settlement, as the land beyond the ninety-ninth meridian is strikingly abandoned by God, and only astrology and tarot cards maintain their power to predict the future. McCarthy's portrayal of the Euro-American and Indian lethal struggle is uncommonly impartial compared to both the classical and revisionist Westerns. The narrator in *Blood*

¹⁴⁴ Slotkin also talks about "The End of the Cowboy Economy." Slotkin 625.

Meridian describes both parties as barbaric: in the way they wage war and in their dress. Besides their choice of weaponry, neither side of the conflict appears to be more civilized than the other, as they commit atrocities in similar fashion and amount. Both acts of violence and acts of kindness of the Indians mirror those of the Euro-Americans and vice versa. The result of their war of extermination, shown at the end of the book, is an apocalyptic wasteland beset by corpses of the buffalo which, after the adoption of the scorched-earth tactic, were brought to near extinction. The epilogue, ironically, shows the arrival of progress to the American frontier in the form of a man sectioning the conquered land, making holes for poles to fence the open prairies.

Blood Meridian builds on the neorealist and counterculture revisionist Westerns, but it does not simply critique either side of the Anglo-Indian conflict. Instead, it shows the conquest of the West for what it was, a cruel genocide not too different from any other conquest that took place in the past. McCarthy portrays the subjugation of the West as unexceptional and awfully unheroic. The book implies that the cruelty of the “civilized” American men of the 19th century did not differ from the brutality of a stone-age man from the Afar region of Northern Ethiopia, mentioned in the epigraph. Contrary to Turner’s belief that the American wilderness transformed the Euro-Americans into something new, *Blood Meridian* shows that it instead brought out something old and animalistic. Like the English boys in *Lord of the Flies*, the men in *Blood Meridian* turn into savages when subjected to the American frontier.

Blood Meridian would not rekindle the fire of the once-dominant genre of the American cinema, but in the steady stream of Westerns that appeared since its release some would adopt aspects from its rendition of the American past. Jim Jarmusch’s *Dead Man* (1995) would build upon *Blood Meridian*’s symbolism; setting an unfitting hero into a purgatorial version of the American Wild West, the film uses the theme of the killing of the buffalo to break the Indian independence and develops on McCarthy’s use of mirroring. Each scene in *Dead Man* is

rendered twice, first as the hero travels through the landscape, and then as he is tracked by the bounty hunters. As recently as 2015, American Western horror film *Bone Tomahawk* would build on *Blood Meridian*'s aesthetics of violence, blending the genres of Western and slasher horror, depicting a Gothic version of the American Wild West.

McCarthy himself would continue to write Westerns set within modern-day America, rather than the era of colonization. The Border Trilogy and *No Country for Old Men* advance some of the motifs first presented in *Blood Meridian*, like the merging of Euro-American and Indian cultures, or coin as a symbol of chance. But instead of dealing with the frontier myth itself, they comment upon the effects it had on the American consciousness. At the end of *No Country for Old Men*, disgusted by the death toll of the last couple of days, Sheriff Bell decides to retire. He thinks about the "good ol' days" when people called each other sir and ma'am and violence was rare. Paradoxically, the book takes place in the same space as *Blood Meridian*, in West Texas, and therefore beyond the ninety-ninth meridian. Sheriff Bell's beliefs about the idolized past leave him unprepared for the cruelty the landscape can bring out in men; the bloodletting started by a deal gone wrong in the desert is shocking for the Sheriff, but not for the country itself.

In retrospect, the sources that informed my reading of *Blood Meridian*, and McCarthy's fiction in general, the most are: John Sepich's *Notes on Blood Meridian* that provided the necessary historical and cultural context, and highlighted some details that proved important for my interpretation of the book, and that would otherwise be overlooked; Steven Frye's essays "Histories, Novels, Ideas," "*Blood Meridian* and the Poetics of Violence," and his book *Understanding Cormac McCarthy* that explained the author's use of philosophy, imagery, and aesthetics, and Timothy Parrish's essay "History and the Problem of Evil in McCarthy's Western Novels" that gave me the idea of choosing this topic in the first place. It is important to remember that *Blood Meridian* remains an ambiguous novel; it does not provide

the reader with simple answers, and the interpretations may vary critic by critic. As demonstrated on the passage where the Comanches ambush Captain White's army, there is often a plurality of influences at play behind the scenes. The sentiment the kid expresses regarding the judge: "Whatever his antecedents he was something wholly other than their sum," (326), applies just as well to the book.

With that being said, there are still aspects of the novel that are beyond the scope of this work, and that would deserve a thoughtful inspection in the future, potentially changing some of the conclusions presented by this thesis. The chief among these is the depiction of Native American animistic religion and pagan traditions, which could also shed some light on the judge's dance and his tendency to appear naked or half-naked at night, or around a campfire. Then there is also the question of McCarthy's use of capitalization, especially of the words God and the devil, masculinity of the hero or lack thereof in comparison with the judge, the father and son relationship between the judge and the kid, implied in the second part of the novel, and McCarthy's use of allusions to other works of *belles-lettres*.

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