

Fall 12-1-2021

From the Corner of One's Soul: The Methods of Negotiating Tension in Cormac McCarthy's Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West

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FROM THE CORNER OF ONE'S SOUL: THE METHODS OF NEGOTIATING TENSION IN
CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *BLOOD MERIDIAN OR THE EVENING REDNESS IN THE WEST*

A Thesis

by

JULIAN DAVID PEÑA

Submitted to Texas A&M International University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

December 2021

Major Subject: English

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Chair of Committee,	Manuel Broncano
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December 2021

Major: English

ABSTRACT

From the Corner of One's Soul: The Methods of Negotiating Tension in Cormac McCarthy's
Blood Meridian Or The Evening Redness in The West (December 2021)

Julian David Peña, B. A., Texas A&M International University;

Chair of Committee: Dr. Manuel Broncano

This thesis provides a practical and meaningful reading of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West*, one that is rooted in the claim that both Judge Holden and the Kid reflect two different methods for negotiating a tension impinged upon them by their external circumstances. Using a theoretical framework that is inspired by the social psychological Theory of Cognitive Dissonance, this thesis provides an extensive analysis of the novel's fictional universe, Judge Holden, and the Kid. Such an analysis elucidates the violent nature of *Blood Meridian's* universe and further reveals the character of Judge Holden and the kid by means of their actions and behaviors. As demonstrated by both the scope of the judge's intellectual thought, and his response to the dissentient kid, the judge reflects a method of negotiation that relies on affirming himself as the ultimate agent over existence in order to dismiss his tension. Conversely, the kid reflects a method that entails engaging tension directly, as he takes personal responsibility for reconciling the conflicting ideas of his tension by means of his own actions. Through such an analysis, several important implications for the novel arise, and even a new, ambiguous reading of the novel's conclusion is made available for the reader to ponder.

DEDICATION

*To all those who have supported and doubted me,
your contribution is greatly appreciated.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

If one appreciates what they read in this thesis, then they should recognize the support and contributions of those people in my life who were essential to its completion. Of these people, my mother and father – Mrs. Diana Rendon and Mr. Jesus J. Gonzalez – must be recognized for the foundation they built and upon which I am lucky to pursue my intellectual aspirations. It is a foundation built on love, support, and example. They have each demonstrated, at separate points in history, great strength and perseverance, as they worked full-time jobs while attending the university and rearing their children. It is by virtue of their unconditional love, their dogged efforts to provide a home for their children, and their respect for education – as educators themselves – that I am, and have been, lucky enough to pursue my own intellectual aspirations. And while they may at times struggled to understand my passion for philosophy and literature, they nevertheless supported my pursuits. So, as a son of their respective houses, I must thank them, for I would never have gotten this far without them.

On the matter of family, I would also like to acknowledge the assistance of my brothers, Alex and Joey. My conversations with Alex, especially amidst the conditions of confinement felt at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, were a source of solace by means of humor and brotherly feeling. Such conversations, often times, helped me relax to such an extent that I was able to continue my work with renewed enthusiasm and purpose. And to my brother Joey, I must express my sincere gratitude for all the hot meals he cooked that kept me going every day and night. Additionally, I would like to thank Drs. Jonathan Murphy, Monica Muñoz, and Nathaniel Racine for their patience, enthusiasm, and willingness to listen to my ideas. My work took well over a year to accomplish, and they all warmly received the manuscript as though it were produced the day after I proposed it. Indeed, I must thank them for their role in my life thus far, as they have been either my teacher or someone whom I have had the honor of working

alongside. Also, I must thank the professors in my graduate program – Drs. Charlene Summers, John Dean, Kaitlyn Culliton, and Paul Niemeyer – for every assignment, discussion, and iota of feedback they have given contributed to my development as a capable thinker and writer. Yet, I must also thank those at TAMIU who are outside of the program – Drs. Claudia San Miguel and Marcus Antonius Ynalvez. Both Dr. San Miguel and Dr. Ynalvez have been utterly supportive of my academic and career pursuits, and they always encouraged me to complete my thesis, especially at times when I was honestly not sure I could. Their diligent work ethic and expectation for producing critical, impactful work, all in a friendly environment, has helped me both cultivate my talents and shown me the great value in teamwork. I thank them for all their steadfast support through all these years, to which I fear I can never truly repay. Hopefully, this thesis honors their support and demonstrates the quality of a student and scholar who comes from the college that they tirelessly work to advance and maintain.

And, with utter sincerity, I thank William Nolen for being one of the most influential human beings in my life. Nolen is, and has been, not only a steady source of encouragement ever since my time as an undisciplined Intro to Philosophy student, but a source of healthy opposition. His high standards for quality expected in every class, every assignment, provided an overall challenge that required me to hone my critical thinking, reading, and oral/written communication skills to a degree I would have never thought possible, and Nolen always encourages me to further hone such skills. Moreover, Nolen has truly taught me the value of continental philosophy for our lives in the 21st century, showing me both the relevance of thinkers, from antiquity to postmodernity, regarding contemporary issues and the necessity, as a thinker, to comprehend the complex nuances of differing perspectives involved in such issues. Indeed, Nolen inspires me to ensure that the focus of my scholarship is relevant to the lived experience

of the reader, and speaks to the challenges we face as individuals and/or a society. Such an inspiration has influenced the goal of my thesis, however, beyond the thesis, I owe who I am as a disciplined and committed intellectual to Nolen and his teachings.

To Manuel Broncano, I must also express my thanks, for throughout the thesis process he has become one of the most influential people in my life, as well as a sincere friend. It is Broncano who introduced me to *Blood Meridian*, jesting to me that, if I were to read the novel, then I would do well to “bring a raincoat.” I found the novel fascinating, and my conversations with Broncano about the novel soon evolved into discussions about literature, the value of a humanities education, and the responsibility of an educator. He has shown me the beauty and power of literature, for which I cannot deny my love, and, through our conversations, Broncano has made me see myself as a true scholar. Without his patience, guidance, and faith in my ability, I would never have completed my thesis. Indeed, Broncano is a true friend who enriches the experience of life, who has inspired me to pursue my dreams.

If I have gotten so far, it is because of these people. Each have played a crucial role in the long play of history that has led to the completion of this thesis before the reader. To them, I carry in my heart sincere gratitude and love. May the best of my accomplishments in life echo their names.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The thesis before you sets out to argue that American author Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian Or the Evening Redness in the West* (1985) reflects two different methods to negotiating tension as exemplified by the characters Judge Holden and the kid. For those unfamiliar with Cormac McCarthy (1933-present) or *Blood Meridian*, a brief overview follows. Although born in Providence, Rhode Island, McCarthy was raised in Knoxville, Tennessee, a region which would serve as the setting for his initial works, *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), *Outer Dark* (1968), *Child of God* (1973), and *Suttree* (1979). Such works would earn him recognition amongst scholars as a prominent American author in the Southern Gothic tradition who takes after William Faulkner and Flannery O' Connor – his admired authors. Yet, by 1978, McCarthy moved to El Paso, Texas, where his literary talent evidently expanded from the Southern Gothic tradition to include the American Western tradition. In 1985, he would publish his first Western novel, *Blood Meridian*, which, like his previous novels, only experienced a cult success. Nevertheless, *Blood Meridian* would be hailed a great literary achievement amongst scholars, as exemplified by literary critic Harold Bloom's statement "that there is no greater work by a living American" (qtd. in "Histories, Novels, Ideas" 3). McCarthy's popularity would surpass the size of a cult following, as his publication of *All the Pretty Horses* (1992) – the first novel of McCarthy's Border Trilogy and followed by the novels *The Crossing* (1996) and *Cities of the Plain* (1998) – would be the first of his novels to sell over five thousand hardback copies ("Histories, Novels, Ideas" 3). With these novels, McCarthy was undoubtedly considered a Western author, and his publication of *No Country for Old Men* (2005) would ostensibly finalize his use of the West. His most recent novel, *The Road* (2006), would once again prove

McCarthy's expansive literary talent by showing he could not only write within the Southern Gothic and Western tradition, but also for the postapocalyptic.

McCarthy has written ten novels, two short stories, and two screenplays, and his novels *All the Pretty Horses*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *The Road* were adapted to film and widely viewed by American audiences. Although it has taken time for McCarthy to emerge from the arcane circles of literary scholarship, he has become a notable voice in American culture. *Blood Meridian* is the novel immediately preceding his emergence, yet, by itself, the novel is one of McCarthy's most potent texts which offers both scholars and casual readers alike much to consider about American culture and history. For those unfamiliar with *Blood Meridian*, the story is as follows: In 1847, a teenager – referred to throughout the novel as “the kid” – journeys from his home in Tennessee to Texas, whereon he is recruited for a U.S. filibuster campaign into Mexico led by Captain White (McCarthy 5). A few days into this campaign, the filibusters are decimated by a group of Comanches, and the surviving kid traverses the desert plains of Mexico until he is arrested by local Mexican authorities. However, he is later released from prison by virtue of being recruited into the Glanton gang, a group of scalp hunters led by John Joel Glanton and, ostensibly, Judge Holden. Together, the gang traverses northern Mexico and the southwestern U.S., murdering and pillaging indigenous, Mexican, and American communities alike until the gang's violent dissolution by the Yuma natives. The kid manages to flee from the Yumas, whereafter he is hunted by Judge Holden. The kid manages to avoid him, yet, several years later, in 1878, the kid – now referred to as “the man” – coincidentally reunites with Judge Holden in Griffin, Texas, and subsequently suffers an unspoken end at the hands of the judge (McCarthy 334). The novel concludes with Judge Holden attending a nearby fandango, triumphantly dancing and laughing, proclaiming that he will never die.

McCarthy's choice to write a story situated in the 19th century southwest, along with this choice to follow the journey of the kid and the Glanton Gang, means *Blood Meridian* is a historical fiction, one that veritably challenges the supposed moral grandeur of American Exceptionalism. Indeed, John Sepich, in his *Notes on Blood Meridian* (2008), reveals the degree of historical fidelity McCarthy portrayed in the novel. Historically, a Captain John Joel Glanton did exist, and he traveled into northern Mexico with several others to collect bounties on indigenous peoples (Sepich 5). He and his group were hired by the Mexican State of Chihuahua, and payments were given in exchange for human scalps (Sepich 5). However, due to the similarity of hair and scalp color between indigenous and Mexican peoples, scalp hunters such as the Glanton Gang would also murder Mexican populaces and sell their scalps under the guise of the indigenous (Sepich 8). *Blood Meridian* foregrounds the violent destruction of the indigenous and the disdain for the foreign Mexican that is part of the American history, and, by this portrayal alone, the novel is a potent manifestation of McCarthy's voice on the character of American culture.

Because of *Blood Meridian*'s historical content, scholars offer compelling examinations of the novel against U.S. history and myth. John Dean, for instance, highlights how *Blood Meridian* reflects the narrative process and truth-claims embedded in the myth of American Exceptionalism, as well as how the novel's characters are predetermined by such myth (75). In addition, Lauren Brown shows that *Blood Meridian* invites readers to reconsider "the violence against excluded, 'othered' populations omitted from the sociopolitical narrative of U.S. history as well as the violent precariousness of existing as a subject of the nation-state itself" (76). However, scholars also note the many other dimensions by which the novel is a rich addition to the corpus of American literature. Steven Frye points out *Blood Meridian* is McCarthy's "most

overtly philosophical novel,” as the novel’s story is a complex weave of ancient Gnosticism, Neo-Platonism, Nietzschean materialism, and existential Christianity (“Histories, Novels, Ideas” 5). From a theological perspective, Leo Daugherty finds Gnostic thought central to the novel’s narrative, as the Gnostic metaphysical view that the material world is evil and ruled by malevolent archons perfectly corresponds to the violent world of *Blood Meridian* and Judge Holden’s malevolent pursuit to be a suzerain of the earth (162-64). On a more literary note, critics and scholars repeatedly emphasize *Blood Meridian*’s rich intertextuality. The notable Judge Holden takes after John Milton’s Satan, Goethe’s Mephistopheles, and Herman Melville’s Moby Dick. The novel’s violence and immense, chaotic landscapes are at times portrayed with Burkean sublimity, and the prose is often considered by scholars as complex and profound as that of William Faulkner. The novel’s narrative reads like a descent into a Dantean inferno, and events throughout the novel are narrated in a style reminiscent of the Old Testament.

Altogether, Cormac McCarthy is an author with extensive knowledge and literary prowess, and *Blood Meridian* is one of his many novels that demonstrate this, as the novel is a complex of theological, philosophical, historical, and literary ideas dating back to classical antiquity. However, as *Blood Meridian* also demonstrates, McCarthy should be recognized for his keen illustration of characters, such as Judge Holden and the kid, who reflect different ways of negotiating tension. For in *Blood Meridian*, there is a palpable tension felt throughout McCarthy’s southwestern odyssey. It exists as the overbearing violent conditions of the novel’s universe, and then it gradually reaches its zenith as the judge and the kid come to confront each other. Yet, much like the status of truth or the nature of the divine in *Blood Meridian*, the psychological details of this tension in the minds of the judge and the kid are inarticulable, because they are irretrievably stowed away behind a material world of action, speech, and

brutality. Nevertheless, by following the overt behaviors of the kid and the judge relative to each other and their surroundings, one can see patterns which reflect alternative styles of negotiating tension, each of which provide insight into the nature of these characters and even allow for new interpretations of the novel's ending.

To note, the ideas of tension and negotiation referred to here are mainly *inspired* by cognitive dissonance theory as introduced by social psychologist Leon Festinger and enhanced by Elliot Aronson and Claude Steele. In 1957, Festinger outlined cognitive dissonance theory to explain how people deal with the psychological discomfort arising from “the existence of nonfitting[sic] relations among cognitions” (Festinger 2-3). By “cognitions,” Festinger refers to “any knowledge, opinion, or belief about the environment, about oneself, or about one’s behavior” (3). When an individual perceives an inconsistency – or “*dissonance*” – between cognitions, he claims that they experience personal psychological discomfort as a result (2; his emphasis). Moreover, Festinger claims that individuals experiencing the psychological discomfort stemming from dissonance are compelled to reduce it (3). He states, “[t]he presence of dissonance gives rise to pressures to reduce or eliminate the dissonance. [. . .] In other words, dissonance acts in the same way as a state of drive or need or tension” (18). This is to say that, depending on the magnitude of the psychological discomfort an individual feels from dissonant ideas, beliefs, and/or actions, they will strive in equal measure to reconcile this dissonance, subsequently reducing their discomfort (18). A simple analogy Festinger offers is between dissonance and hunger (18). Just as hunger compels an individual “as a state of drive or need” to eat in order to quell the discomfort arising from hunger, so too does dissonance act as a drive or need that compels an individual to reduce it in order to quell its accompanying psychological discomfort (18).

For Festinger, individuals generally reduce dissonance by manipulating one of the dissonant cognitions (19). A simple illustration is his example of a regular smoker who learns smoking is bad for his health (6). The smoker recognizes this new knowledge is dissonant with his behavior of smoking, and, therefore, he feels a sense of discomfort regarding whether or not he should continue smoking. How should he reduce this dissonance and thereby resolve his discomfort? As Festinger explains, he can simply stop smoking – that is, change the behavior that is dissonant with the newfound knowledge that smoking is bad for his health – or, he could either refuse to believe in the veracity of this knowledge or lessen the salience of this knowledge by emphasizing other cognitions that support the opinion that smoking is good for his health (6). If he chooses any of the latter, then he eliminates or dismisses the knowledge that is dissonant with his behavior. In either case, the smoker's dissonance between obverse cognitions compels him to act, to either change his behavior or the importance of the dissonant knowledge, as a means to reconcile his discomfort. As such, Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory offers a psychological explanation for how people feel when confronted with conflicting ideas about their environment, themselves, or their own behavior, as well as a general pattern of behavior that people follow to negotiate their feelings when the discomfort aroused by these conflicting ideas becomes too uncomfortable.

Since Festinger's introduction of cognitive dissonance theory, numerous studies have been conducted to investigate the mechanisms of cognitive dissonance, the conditions in which it manifests, and the strategies people use to reduce the its discomfort. Throughout this time, social psychologists Elliot Aronson and Claude Steele provided notable clarifications on the theory. According to Aronson, cognitive dissonance is most pronounced when the dissonant cognitions involve our self-concept and a behavior or idea that violates this self-concept ("The Return of the

Repressed” 305). Contrary to Festinger, Aronson argues that a logical inconsistency between ideas about one’s environment, self, and behavior is not enough to assure one will strongly feel psychological discomfort (305). Rather, the discomfort stems from the perception that the inconsistent ideas challenge our understanding of how we prefer to perceive ourselves – that is, our self-concept (305). To Aronson, the most commonly violated ideas about one’s self-concept are that one is either morally good or competent (“Taking a Closer Look” 592). Generally, no one prefers think of themselves as guilty or dumb, so any idea which imposes a quality of guilt or stupidity on an individual’s notion of who they are will likely cause them to experience psychological discomfort. Relative to Festinger’s example of the smoker, the smoker does not feel dissonance because the newfound knowledge that smoking is bad for his health is obverse to his tendency to smoke. Rather, the smoker likely feels dissonance because the knowledge that smoking is bad for one’s health is inconsistent with his desire to see himself as one who is smart enough to not do things that cause self-harm. Aronson admittedly notes that an individual’s notion of moral good is subjective, and not all people may define themselves according to a “positive self-concept” that assumes they are intelligent and ethical (592). For instance, some people may have a self-concept which assumes they are not competent or morally good. Nevertheless, whether an individual maintains a positive or negative self-concept is besides Aronson’s larger point: dissonance most likely occurs when one is encounters an idea that is inconsistent with their preferred idea(s) of who they are.

Germane to Aronson’s clarification is Claude Steele’s work regarding the role of self-affirmation. Whereas Aronson argues dissonance is a product of an inconsistency between an idea about oneself and their desired self-concept, Steele highlights how the affirmation of one’s self-concept in light of a threatening idea is a common coping strategy for dismissing the

psychological discomfort involved in cognitive dissonance (Steele 262). For Steele, self-affirmation is a psychological process that “essentially explains ourselves, and the world at large, to ourselves” for the purpose of maintaining “a phenomenal experience of the self” (262). When confronted by an idea that threatens one’s self-concept, it is chiefly “through explanation, rationalization, and/or action” that one finds a way to protect and affirm their ideal notion of who they are (262). For instance, a person becomes aware that they have behaved in a manner that inconsistent with their morals, and, upon feeling the psychological discomfort that comes with realizing these dissonant ideas about themselves, they either immediately commit an act that is consistent with their morals, or, perhaps, they reassure their moral image by recalling moments when they acted according to their morals. Either response reaffirms the moral character they associate with their self-concept, and, although they do nothing to reconcile the original dissonant ideas about themselves, they increase their resilience to the accompanying discomfort (262). In this manner, Steele explains a common coping strategy for negotiating dissonance, a strategy which seeks to altogether dismiss one’s psychological discomfort and the threatening cognition through self-affirmation (263).

In this thesis, Festinger’s, Aronson’s, and Steele’s work in cognitive dissonance theory *inspire* my theoretical approach to analyze the kid and the judge, primarily through the use of concepts such as tension and negotiation, albeit in a qualified fashion. With the concept of tension, I adopt a definition that amalgamates Festinger’s and Aronson’s notion of cognitive dissonance – that is, tension consists of an apparent dissonance between an individual’s knowledge, opinion, or ideas, especially regarding themselves and an element of their surroundings or behavior. And, with the concept of negotiation, I refer to the confrontation and resolution taken on behalf of the individual to eliminate an apparent tension. These definitions lack an

inclusion of psychological discomfort that accompanies cognitive dissonance, an omission that accords with my rationale for emphasizing the *apparency* of dissonance in these definitions. My rationale is that, although the theoretical approach to the judge and the kid in this thesis is rooted in psychological theory, an analysis of these characters cannot be psychological but only behavioral. *Blood Meridian* is written in a manner that does not allow readers access to the psychology of its characters, because, and as will be further discussed in chapter one of this thesis, McCarthy's choice of narrative voice for the novel generally conveys its story through physical descriptions of landscapes as well as character action and speech. Moreover, if any insight into the mind of a character is provided, then it is solely mediated by the narrator rather than being told to the reader from the character themselves. The result is that the kid's and the judge's thoughts, feelings, and first-hand experiences in *Blood Meridian* are unavailable for observation, much less analysis; thus, any attempt to make psychological claims about them is speculative at best.

However, the lack of unmediated psychological content in *Blood Meridian* is compensated for by an abundance of behavioral content, as evidenced by the judge's monologues, sketches, and violent actions as well as the contrasting violent and non-violent actions of the kid. In addition, there are also persistent depictions of violent natural environs, an element of the novel's story that obviously affects the behavior of the characters who must survive such harsh conditions. By focusing on the material aspects of *Blood Meridian* and the behavioral content of the judge and the kid, an analysis of these characters according to tension and negotiation is qualified by arguing that both the judge and the kid *reflect* different methods of negotiating tension. Such an analysis acknowledges the overt tension between these characters and their surrounding world yet lays no claim on the content of their psychological lives; it follows their

behaviors to elucidate a pattern of speech and/or action that appears as a negotiation of the tension amongst each other and their environment, generally in a manner that recalls the ways of reducing dissonance outlined by Festinger, Aronson, and Steele.

Pursuing this argument and analysis of *Blood Meridian* is ultimately important for two reasons. On the one hand, it enhances the relationship between the individual reader and *Blood Meridian* as a literary work of art, for reading the judge and the kid as reflections of different methods of negotiating tension may reveal for the reader a personal line of inquiry that encourages them to reflect on how they negotiate tension. Anyone who has read the novel is familiar with the polarity between the judge's and the kid's character, the former being malicious and tyrannical while the latter, throughout the course of the novel, becomes somewhat compassionate and altruistic. The polarity of these characters, as will be shown in this thesis, also extends to a polarity in the way they negotiate tension, providing readers a dichotomy of methods for negotiation wherein they may reflect on how they, too, understand and negotiate their own tension. Although *Blood Meridian's* story is set in the mid-nineteenth century southwest, the dissonance between the judge, the kid, and the violent conditions of the novel's world may be read as a metaphor for the tension-inducing circumstances a reader likely experiences in 21st century American life. Like the kid and Judge Holden, the reader is presumably challenged by several contemporary issues – whether they are largescale issues such as environmental destruction, political incompetence, social inequality, socio-economic strife, a pandemic, etc., or those much more personal and of which the reader is better able to identify. Indeed, relative to one's relationship with other people, the dissonance between the judge and the kid may also be useful to consider when tension arises with other people whose ideas, beliefs, or actions are dissonant with the reader. Hence, the different methods of negotiation that the kid and

the judge reflect provide a conceptual basis for the reader to consider as they navigate their life. In this manner, one important reason for pursuing this argument and analysis of *Blood Meridian* is to provide a practical, reflective reading of the novel that, while using extant scholarship, is meaningful for the individual reader, whether they are a scholar or not.

On the other hand, pursuing *Blood Meridian* in this manner potentially opens up a new line of inquiry that points out another way McCarthy comments on American culture and, in some sense, its Western European heritage. For an analysis on how the kid and Judge Holden negotiate their tension, along with the ethical implications of their response, is compatible with an allegorical reading of these characters and the novel itself. A clear example is Judge Holden, who is a considerable allegory for Western European thought. As Nicholas Monk notes, Judge Holden's will to rationalize and control the world around him makes him the "supreme avatar" of European Enlightenment (37). His extensive knowledge of chemistry, physics, geology, jurisprudence, anthropology, Latin, in combination with his scientific disposition to catalogue and investigate the flora, fauna, and man-made artifacts of elder societies, all indicate he is a metaphor for Western European intellectual culture. He is a renaissance man, yet one with the tyrannical aspiration to become "suzerain of the earth" (McCarthy 198). His knowledge and scientific disposition are his means to dictate the narrative by which others understand the world and, by extension, their actions (Brown 81). And it is Judge Holden, as the tyrannical representative of European Enlightenment, who by "[s]ome terrible covenant" is allied with John Glanton and the Glanton gang (McCarthy 126) – "the Americans" of the story (103).

The relationship between Judge Holden and the Glanton gang can be allegorically read as a relationship between Western European culture and American culture. While the gang is led by Glanton, Judge Holden is nevertheless the visionary and spiritual leader for the gang's activities,

and, thus, the influence of the latter on the former can be read as the influence of one culture upon another. By analyzing Judge Holden's method of negotiating tension, the results may be used to draw further insights from these allegorical associations. For instance, does McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* illustrate a continuity of behavioral patterns between American culture, history, and its Western European antecedents through Judge Holden and the Glanton Gang? If so, then to what extent does continuity align with the judge's method for negotiating elements that are discordant with himself? The current thesis opens up this line of inquiry, which may add another reason why *Blood Meridian* is a salient manifestation of McCarthy's voice in American culture, and why McCarthy himself is a remarkable author in the American literary tradition.

In the pages to follow, the thesis that both Judge Holden and the kid reflect two different methods of negotiating tension will be argued through four separate chapters. Chapter two will lay the foundation for why it is appropriate to analyze *Blood Meridian* and the aforementioned characters according to the notions of tension and negotiation. This will be done by acknowledging that *Blood Meridian* is an American naturalist text, employing features of the tradition that encourage readers to see the fictional universe of the novel as inherently antagonistic towards its characters and, thus, a source of dissonance. Thereafter, chapter two will identify the dominant narrative voice who frames the readers perception of such universe. Chapter three will then analyze this narrator's descriptions of *Blood Meridian* in order to highlight the distinctively violent qualities of this fictional universe that challenge the judge and the kid. Chapter four will focus on the judge, arguing that, as indicated by his speech and actions, he reflects a self-affirming method for negotiating an apparent tension between himself, the conditions of his surrounding world, and the kid. Naturally, chapter five is an analysis of the kid via his behaviors, illustrating that he reflects a method of negotiating that consists of engaging

the discordant elements of his apparent tension between himself, the violence of his surroundings, and Judge Holden. Lastly, this thesis will conclude with the findings of my analysis, highlighting the notable implications these findings bear on the novel and, finally, offer new, ambiguous interpretations of the novel's conclusion and why the story of *Blood Meridian* is told.

CHAPTER II: *BLOOD MERIDIAN*'S NARRATOR

To date, there is no scholarship on McCarthy that focuses on tension and negotiation, much less scholarship that is inspired by cognitive dissonance theory. Admittedly, this likely stems from the fact that most literary scholars simply look to cognitive dissonance theory for their approach to literary texts. However, scholars have set a precedent for using this theory to investigate either the dissonance authors use as a rhetorical strategy in their novels or the dissonance aroused in readers as evidenced by their reaction to the events or conclusions in a novel. For instance, Christine W. Sizemore uses cognitive dissonance theory to explain readers' reactions and scholarly interpretations to the narrative ambiguities in Franz Kafka's *The Castle* (1926) (25). Marco Caracciolo relies on cognitive dissonance theory to elucidate how different narrative points of view provide readers an opportunity to understand alternative ideas and perspectives they may have never originally considered (34-35). Lastly, John Bird argues how cognitive dissonance drives character action in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) as well as explains readers' reactions to the novel's ending (138). As such, there is a precedent for examining literature in a manner inspired by cognitive dissonance theory, and what this chapter aims to do is to lay the groundwork for understanding *Blood Meridian* in terms of the most notable dissonant elements that constitute a palpable, albeit psychologically indescribable, sense of tension that permeates the novel. This begins by pointing out the single, most persistent element involved in the apparent tensions throughout *Blood Meridian* – that is, the novel's inherently violent universe. For violence in McCarthy's southwest is an overarching condition which, in the case of the judge, *has been* an element of tension, and, in the case of the kid, *is* an element of tension throughout his journey. In this chapter, a consideration of violence

as a dissonant element constituting a sense of tension in the novel will be affirmed the fact that, amongst many things, *Blood Meridian* is written in a manner that takes after American literary naturalism, a literary tradition known for depicting characters who struggle with the conditions of their surrounding world. Thereafter, this chapter will prove that there is a predominant narrative voice in the novel from whose telling of the story is derived the specific characteristics that make *Blood Meridian*'s violent universe a notable dissonant element for the kid's journey and in the judge's history.

1. McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, and American Literary Naturalism

Viewing the inherently violent universe of *Blood Meridian* as an overtly dissonant element with characters such as the kid and the judge is not so farfetched. One of the earliest statements in the novel pertaining to the relationship between its world and its characters is that "not again in all the world's turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay" (McCarthy 4-5). From the novel's outset, the antagonism between a violent world and the characters who must traverse this world is foregrounded, and this early foregrounding foreshadows the perilous ventures of the kid and the Glanton Gang across the southwest. Moreover, this thematic antagonism between man and environment suggests a conflict between the idea that man is a free agent and the idea that man is determined by the forces of his surrounding environment. This thematic struggle pervades *Blood Meridian*'s story, and its presence is affirmed by what scholars identify as McCarthy's intentional continuation of the American literary naturalist tradition. According to Donald Pizer, American literary naturalism began as a movement in the 1890s with the authors Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Theodore

Dreiser (18). Taking after French naturalist Emile Zola's thought "that the naturalist is a scientist manqué who describes human behavior as closely related to the demonstrable material factors that have conditioned it," Crane, Norris, and Dreiser would adapt naturalism to reflect the feeling that the common American "was limited, shaped, conditioned" by the industrial, social, economic, and political forces of a post-Reconstruction America (18). The resulting works by these authors would illustrate that "the poor – in education, intellect, and worldly goods – are indeed pushed and forced, that the powerful do control the weak, that few can overcome the handicaps imposed upon them by inadequacies of body and mind, and that many have instinctive needs that are not amenable to moral suasion or rational argument" (20). In short, the early American naturalists would illustrate the common man's tragic struggle with the environment, whether that environment is the landscape, human biology, psychology, or those socially constructed, like the inner-city slum, manufactory, family unit, or military regiment.

Pizer notes how the early American naturalists generally illustrated this issue through several tragic themes. There is the "waste of the individual potential because of the conditioning forces of life," as external circumstances like poverty, tradition, or natural phenomena undercut the individual's evident potential for personal growth (21). Similarly, there is also the depiction characters who fail "to maintain in a shifting, uncertain world the order and stability they require to survive" because either their habits/desires or other circumstances wrench them from stable lifestyles (21). Lastly, there is the epistemological tragedy of characters who are unable to develop "a clear sense of [them]self in a complex and constantly shifting world" either because knowledge about the world is equally shifting and difficult to ascertain or because characters neither have the resources nor intellectual acuity to develop an understanding of themselves (21). Nevertheless, such characters yearn for this knowledge (21). Altogether, these tragic themes are

what constitute the early American naturalists' tragic hero, who, despite having the "potential for growth[. . .] fails to develop because of the circumstances of life" (20).

American naturalism would continue throughout the twentieth century, arising to address the harsh social conditions of American life throughout the following decades. In the 1930s, authors such as James T. Farrell, John Dos Passos, and John Steinbeck would adapt naturalism to address the beleaguering circumstances of the Great Depression and attempt to forge a shared sense of national solidarity out of the "universality of the American dilemma" (25-26). By the late 1940s and early 1950s, the appearance of the atomic bomb and concentration camps, along with the subsequent cold war, Korean war, and McCarthyism, inspired another generation of naturalists to address the insignificance of the individual's freedom in light of mankind's destructiveness and overarching social and political institutions (29-30). By the late 1960s to the late 1970s, Cormac McCarthy's contemporaries, such as Joyce Carol Oates, Norman Mailer, and Robert Stone, would arise to address the harsh social and political conditions of American life impinged by the Vietnam War, Watergate scandal, and U.S. race riots (169-170).

However, scholars argue McCarthy should be considered a notable contemporary naturalist, as his works, especially *Blood Meridian*, adapt several features of the American naturalistic novel. As Eric Carl Link suggests, McCarthy is "perhaps *the*" prime example of a literary naturalist by virtue of his use of the tradition's key features (154). McCarthy's use of "primitive, wild, or stripped-down" landscapes where "the mannerisms of polite and cultured civilizations are brushed aside" appear throughout McCarthy's works, especially in *Blood Meridian* (Link 154). One can easily identify the Glanton Gang's constant debauchery, pillaging, and crime within towns and cities across a wild and perilous southwest as clear examples of these naturalistic features. In addition, Link also notes McCarthy's works tend to emphasize the

atavistic, primal elements of human nature along with characters who have “a limited inner life” that is expressed via their interaction with the environment rather than their personal thoughts or reflections (154). In a similar vein, it is often cited that McCarthy’s narrators rarely provide readers direct access to the thoughts and feelings of characters. Instead, his narrators focus on the external features of the setting or character behavior and dialogue, another feature common to the American naturalist tradition. Yet, Link also points out how McCarthy’s works certainly include “mediocre and unfulfilled lives, alcoholism, crime, and violence,” all of which are features that describe *Blood Meridian*’s characters and their activities (154).

To Michael Clarke, McCarthy “is exemplary of the new naturalism,” as the author demonstrates “a preoccupation with determinism and fate,” a “writing style that focuses on exteriors of characters and rarely provides interior views,” and “an assault on the Enlightenment beliefs of progress, human perfectibility, and the rational subject” (55). Relative to *Blood Meridian*, Clarke’s statements immediately recall the novel’s early statement foregrounding the antagonism between the violent southwest and man, as well as aptly describing the narrative voice’s focus on the exteriority of characters rather than the contents of their minds. In addition, Clarke’s comments regarding McCarthy’s “assault” on Enlightenment beliefs finds a perfect expression in *Blood Meridian*’s Judge Holden (55), whose rationality and scientific activities are central to his tyrannical aspiration of becoming a “suzerain of the earth” (McCarthy 198). Most notably, Clarke also points out that McCarthy’s novels involve “constructing and entrapping environments that tend to dwarf and overpower characters,” a feature very much apparent in *Blood Meridian* and, as will be shown in chapter 4, a primary naturalistic feature of the novel that serves to as an element of tension for the kid (55). Lastly, Alan Gibbs finds McCarthy’s characters are likely understood as motivated by external, “unwilled factors” rather than

motivations derived by self-reflection and rational choice (62), and, like Link, he identifies McCarthy's naturalistic tendency to focus on characters from poor backgrounds who are "subject to overwhelming forces and sequences of events outside of their control" (62).

As Gibbs notes, McCarthy's characters seem derived from those of the earlier generations of American Naturalism (62). Indeed, Link also suggests that *Blood Meridian's* the kid fits the criteria of the naturalistic tragic hero, who, as a result of being conditioned by the world, is wasted human potential (Link 152). It is not difficult to affirm Link's suggestion, as McCarthy's kid veritably reflects the early naturalists' depiction of the "poor – in education, intellect, and worldly goods" (Pizer 20). He comes from a broken family, an impoverished home, and, despite his alcoholic father's status as a schoolteacher, the kid is illiterate. His initial taste "for mindless violence" is an instinctive desire which inevitably pushes him into the ventures of the Glanton gang and within reach of Judge Holden's influence, whereafter it may be said the kid's potential for individual growth and fulfillment is ultimately wasted (McCarthy 3). Life with the Glanton Gang leaves him alone and troubled, as he later confesses that "he had no family and that he had traveled much and seen many things and had been at war and endured hardships" (315). Although he does demonstrate some moral development, as he eventually becomes a lone wanderer carrying a bible, his illiteracy keeps him from accessing the biblical knowledge necessary to articulate to himself and to others his growth – which reflects a tragic inability to comprehend his development after a life of hardships. Ultimately, he suffers an unspeakable end in a random outhouse, deprived of human dignity or fulfillment (334). McCarthy's kid could certainly be read as an early American naturalists' tragic hero, a "waste of individual potential because of the conditioning forces of life" (Pizer 20).

Clearly, McCarthy constructed *Blood Meridian* as a naturalistic text, implementing the most key features of the American literary naturalist tradition. However, it is worthwhile to note that even McCarthy's artistic approach to fashion the historical and violent content of *Blood Meridian*'s story takes after the early American naturalists, as he certainly utilized the historical and cultural context of his contemporary moment. Whereas the social conditions depicted in early American naturalist works were based on life in a post-Reconstruction America, the social conditions portrayed in *Blood Meridian* were likely based on life in a late 1960s and early 1970s America, the time period preceding McCarthy's drafting of *Blood Meridian* in 1974 (Crews 154). During this time, the Vietnam war was in full swing, as the Tet Offensive escalated the conflict to bloodier proportions, and the My Lai massacre, an incident where U.S. soldiers nearly obliterated a village of Southern Vietnamese civilians, revealed an image of America as ruthlessly violent, no different than the Glanton Gang (Owens 23). Yet, the violence abroad was reflected at home as police and civil rights protestors clashed in riotous conflict across the U.S. (Owens 22). Altogether, these experiences would result in "unprecedented images of violence" that were televised for all American households, leaving the average American with no other course of action than to bear witness to the real-life violence before them (Owens 20).

This condition is very much the reader's experience of *Blood Meridian*, as the novel's violence is too overt to ignore and lacking in moral commentary. They can only witness the novel's violence transpire. However, the violent events of the 1960s and 1970s echo the bloody struggles of the past that McCarthy portrays in *Blood Meridian*. Because the Vietnam war would be considered a new battle waged on an international realm, one which U.S. president John F. Kennedy would publicly declare "a new frontier," the U.S. involvement in Vietnam would be understood through the lens of American historical myth (Slotkin 2). The U.S.'s geopolitical

directive to stem the advance of Communism was metaphorically interpreted as having the same moral grandeur and heroism of the old western frontiersman who had to fight Indian savagery for the survival and prosperity of civilization (Slotkin 3). As Slotkin notes, this ideological connection “shaped the language through which the resultant wars would be understood” (3). The Vietnam war itself was ultimately portrayed by the U.S. military “as a game of ‘Cowboys and Indians’” (3). This struggle is reiterated semi-fictitiously in *Blood Meridian*. As John Sepich recounts in his *Notes on Blood Meridian*, John Joel Glanton was a real historical figure in the mid-nineteenth century southwest, and he and his gang were contracted by the state of Chihuahua to scalp and kill Comanches, historical facts which the novel reiterates with fidelity (6). Of course, one must keep in mind that such facts, even as they are portrayed in *Blood Meridian*, were the result of 19th century American geopolitics – that is, the exigency of American expansionism which eliminated or displaced indigenous populations in favor of expanding westward on a Manifest Destiny. Moreover, one can also see the conflict between civil rights protestors and police throughout the U.S. as another iteration of racial struggle in American history, for this historical facet is seen in the treatment of *Blood Meridian*’s black Jackson along with Captain White’s and Judge Holden’s consideration of the Mexican peoples as “mongrel” (McCarthy 159). Altogether, the overt violence and its historical antecedents in *Blood Meridian* were constructed in the same manner as early American naturalist works, they take after the social conditions of the author’s time – in this case, the violence, racial struggle, and American geopolitics of the McCarthy’s time.

McCarthy’s well-documented use of American literary naturalist features, along with a similar, if not the same, method of constructing *Blood Meridian*’s historical and violent content as that of early naturalists in their works, shows that he both continues the American naturalist

tradition and allows *Blood Meridian* to be read as a naturalistic text. Indeed, it is not overly dramatic to consider McCarthy as an American naturalist in his own right. Of course, it must be said that *Blood Meridian* is not strictly a naturalist text, for such a claim overlooks the other dimensions by which to appreciate *Blood Meridian*. As Steven Frye points out, McCarthy is a “consummate aesthetic alchemist,” whose works, *Blood Meridian* included, can be insightfully examined theologically, philosophically, aesthetically, intertextually, and historically (“Histories, Novels, Ideas” 10). As such, *Blood Meridian* is a hybrid text, and the struggle between the characters and harsh conditions of the novel’s world is a naturalistic aspect of the such hybridity. Yet, because this aspect surely exists, the novel legitimately invites a consideration of its inherently violent universe as a salient element that is central to the felt tension that pervades the novel. In fact, as will be argued later chapters three and four, it is the violent conditions of such universe that is, or has been, a dissonant element of tension for the kid and the judge, respectively. However, to understand the characteristics that make the violent conditions in *Blood Meridian* a source of tension, one must acknowledge the predominance of a single narrative voice that McCarthy uses to such a violent world.

2. The Narrator of *Blood Meridian*

Readers have access to the elements of the novel’s story, such as its characters, events, and settings, only to the extent that the narrator conveys them. After all, *Blood Meridian* is a narrative text – that is, in the words of Mieke Bal and Christine van Boeheeman, “a text in which an agent or subject conveys to an addressee (‘tells’ the reader) a story” (5). *Blood Meridian*’s narrator – as this “agent or subject” – is responsible for conveying the content of the novel’s story, which of significance here includes the nature of the novel’s world (5). In this manner, the narrator is the mind which precedes, leads, and makes readers’ experience of *Blood Meridian*’s

world. However, identifying this narrator is not as straightforward as scholars assume. As noted above, scholars like Link, Gibbs, and Clarke tend to generalize McCarthy's narrators as heterodiegetic – that is, as narrators who are not involved in the events of the story they respectively convey. Regarding *Blood Meridian*, Steven Shaviro goes as far as to claim that the novel's prose “cannot be attributed to any fixed center of enunciation, neither to an authorial presence nor to a narrating voice nor to the consciousness of any of the characters” (154). As such, the scholarly sentiment appears to be that *Blood Meridian*'s narrator is either non-existent or utterly uninvolved in the story they convey. However, how might these claims remain valid when the ex-priest Tobin is very much involved in narrating the majority of chapter ten? What about Judge Holden's several monologues on war, history, the destiny of man, or life as a hat-trick? The first-person voice who opens the novel, chapter two, and concludes the story? What about the father of the kid and his description of the kid's birth? What about the third-person narrator? The issue is that *Blood Meridian* has several narrators – several centers of enunciation that control what readers perceive in the story.

This is a subtle issue most scholars do not address in their analysis of *Blood Meridian*. Some narrators are more difficult to identify than others, and each narrator has more or less authority over conveying the details of the novel's story and world. Hence, if there is any chance of understanding the nature of *Blood Meridian*'s world via the narrator who conveys it, then it is crucial to start by clarifying which narrator is the highest of all, wherein, as Uri Margolin describes, “the text as a whole can be seen as a macro speech act or utterance emanating from that voice, and [. . .] all textually occurring utterances originating with other speakers are embedded within this macro speech act” (354). From thereon, the narrator from whom the

novel's story originates can be identified, and their descriptions will thereafter be examined to reveal the nature of the novel's world that challenges the characters therein.

As Margolin describes, “[a] narrative consists of someone telling someone else that something happened, and no such act can be imagined without a sender-narrator position” (352). Every utterance made in the narrative – that is, every word or linguistic sign which conveys an event, actor, or experience – must be preceded by an ‘utterer,’ a narrator. As such, the first utterances of *Blood Meridian*'s narrative likewise reveal the novel's first narrator:

See the child. He is pale and thin, he wears a thin and ragged linen shirt. He stokes the scullery fire. Outside lie dark turned fields with rags of snow and darker woods beyond that harbor yet a few last wolves. His folk are known for hewers of wood and drawers of water but in truth his father has been a school master. He lies in drink, he quotes from poets whose names are now lost. The boy crouches by the fire and watches him. (McCarthy 3)

The narrator's general use of the present tense – as indicated by the phrases “he *wears*,” “he *stokes*,” “[h]e *lies*,” “he *quotes*,” etc. – reveals they are a first-person voice introducing readers to *Blood Meridian*'s story (3; emphasis mine). The narrator imposes an immediate vision and description upon the reader, as though the two are immediately besides the child; then, the narrator directs the reader's glance outside to see the “dark turned fields” (3); afterwards, the reader is brought to the child's father as he “lies in drink,” whereafter the narrator walks the reader once again besides the child. Relative to the story's content, this narrator introduces readers to the kid and the conditions of his domestic life before he sets out for the southwest. Moreover, the narrator's claim that the boy watches his father contextualizes a change in narrative voice seen in the following paragraph, as it is presumably the father's voice who briefly takes over the narrative to explain the night of the kid's birth (3). Afterwards, the first-person narrative voice is reinstated, and they go on to explain how the kid runs away at the age of

fourteen until he is “divested of all that he has been” and “[h]is origins are become as remote as his destiny” (3-4). Hence, the initial narrator that readers encounter in *Blood Meridian* is the first-person narrator, who introduces the novel’s story beginning with the kid, his origins, and his decision to embark on a journey southwest.

In one respect, the first-person narrator bears much authority over *Blood Meridian*’s story, because they establish the novel’s overall narrative situation and allegorical structure. As Manuel Broncano points out, the novel’s opening line – “See the child” – is “an imperative address to the reader that establishes a direct dialogue between narrator and narratee in which the former takes control of the narrative, as if to deprive the reader of any interpretive freedom” (37). There is a first-person narrator that not only begins *Blood Meridian*’s story but also establishes what Broncano characterizes as sermonic narrator-narratee relationship (37). The narrator begins by awakening the narratee to the image of the impoverished child, as if the narratee is one of “the members of the congregation,” thereby using the narratee’s sympathy to engage the narrator’s story from the position of a captive audience (38). From thereon, the narratee can only abide the narrator’s sermon. In this manner, Broncano highlights that the first-person narrator establishes the narrative situation of *Blood Meridian*. Contrary to the scholars mentioned above, this means the story and its contents are not bestowed upon readers by an uninvolved agent who presents the story *as is*. Rather, the story begins with a narrator’s imposition – a command – to pay attention to the tale. But a tale of what? To Broncano, the narrator presents the narratee with an allegory that subverts the traditional elements of biblical narratives (37). However, the exact meaning of the allegory is left to the reader’s interpretation, and one may even consider the present analysis one of many interpretations on *Blood Meridian*’s allegorical message. Nevertheless, suffice it to say that Broncano observes there is a first-person narrator who establishes the narrative situation

and the allegorical structure in which the novel is meant to be read. By virtue of this, the first-person narrator bears much authority over conveying *Blood Meridian*'s story, because it is *their* allegory to tell the narratee.

Of course, the first-person narrator's authority of the novel also lies in their ability to begin and end the story. Whereas this narrator begins *Blood Meridian* by introducing the kid, the novel concludes with their description of Judge Holden at a dance:

[. . . the judge] is naked dancing, his small feet lively and quick and now in doubletime and bowing to the ladies, huge and pale and hairless, like an enormous infant. He never sleeps, he says. He says he'll never die. He bows to the fiddlers and sashays backwards and throws back his head and laughs deep in his throat and he is a great favorite, the judge. He wafts his hat and the lunar dome of his skull passes palely under the lamps and he swings about and takes possession of one of the fiddles and he pirouettes and makes a pass, two passes, dancing and fiddling at once. His feet are light and nimble. He never sleeps. He says that he will never die. He dances in light and shadow and he is a great favorite. He never sleeps, the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die. (McCarthy 335)

The use of the present tense, in phrases such as "He *says*," "He *bows*," or "*throws* back his head," indicates the first-person narrative voice is in control (335; emphasis mine). The narrator directs the narratee to witness the judge's celebratory dance as though the narratee and narrator are standing beside the judge as he sashays, pirouettes, and fiddles in joyous assurance of his immortality. Relative to the narrative situation, the change in narrative voice to the sermonic first-person narrator as a means to conclude the story means this narrator is done conveying their allegory. Yet, their ability to introduce and conclude the narrative also means that every narrative voice in between the beginning and end of the story are circumscribed by this narrator. All other narrative voices are only provisional speakers, whose utterances are embedded within the first-person narrator's macro speech act (Uri Margolin 354). The kid's father in chapter one, the

hermit in chapter two, the Mennonite in chapter three, the Mexican preacher in chapter eight, Tobin in chapter ten, and Judge Holden on several occasions – all are subordinate voices to the first-person narrator’s speech act of telling *Blood Meridian* as an allegory to a narratee.

Hence, the first-person narrator’s establishment of the narrative situation and allegorical structure, along with the ability to introduce and conclude the narrative, suggests they have significant authority over conveying *Blood Meridian*’s story. They are ostensibly *the* supreme narrator of the narrative; thus, they must be responsible for framing the reader’s perception of the novel’s world. However, the first-person narrator’s authority is undermined by the fact that they do not convey the majority of the narrative. Once the reader advances to the thirteenth paragraph of the first chapter, the text undergoes a narrative change in voice. Whereas, in the paragraph before, the first-person narrator tells the narratee where the kid “works” and “rides”– verbs in the present-tense – the following paragraph reads:

The Reverend Green had been playing to a full house daily as long as the rain had been falling and the rain had been falling for two weeks. When the kid ducked into the ratty canvas tent there was standing room along the walls, a place or two, and such a heady reek of the wet and bathless that they themselves would sally forth into the downpour now and again for fresh air before the rain drove them in again. (McCarthy 5-6).

As indicated by the phrases “*had been playing*,” “the kid *ducked*,” “*there was standing room*,” the present-tense is replaced by the past-tense (5-6; emphasis mine). This is a subtle shift in the narrative voice that any reader would likely miss, yet it reveals that the first-person narrator has been replaced by a third-person narrator. This same shift in narrative voice appears again in chapter two. The first-person narrator begins the chapter by telling the narratee of the kid’s “days of begging, days of theft,” where he “*keeps off*” from the main road “for fear of citizenry” until he eventually “*hails up at a doorway*” of an old hermit (15-16; my emphasis). Here, the narrative

voice shifts mid-paragraph, as a third-person narrator goes on to describe how the hermit “*watched* while the kid *eased* down stiffly from the mule” (16; my emphasis). From thereon, the third-person narrator conveys the remainder of the chapter, and they will continue to convey the rest of the novel’s story with the occasional shift to other character voices.

Hence, there is a problem with identifying the supreme narrator responsible for conveying *Blood Meridian*’s story and world. On the one hand, there is the first-person narrator who begins and ends the novel as well as establishes the narrative situation and allegorical structure. However, on the other hand, there is the third-person narrator who conveys much more of *Blood Meridian*’s story and fictional world than the first-person narrator. Who is the ultimate authority responsible for conveying the narrative? Simply put, it is safe to presume they are the same, because there is enough evidence to suggest they are the same agent merely speaking in different tenses. Both narrators share a similar diction, as exemplified by the tendency for each narrative voice to phrase their descriptions with a frequent use of “and.” For example, the first-person narrator notes, “[the kid] left behind the pinewood country *and* the evening sun declines before him beyond an endless swale *and* dark falls here like a thunderclap *and* a cold wind sets the weeds to gnashing” (15; my emphasis). Similarly, the third-person narrator conveys, “[The kid] came upon Bexar in the evening of the fourth day *and* he sat the tattered mule on a low rise *and* looked down at the town, the quiet adobe houses, the line green of oaks *and* cottonwoods that marked the course of the river, the plaza filled with wagons with their osnaburg covers *and* the whitewashed public buildings [. . .]” (21; my emphasis). Although the third-person narrator’s description is eventually conducted through the focalization of the kid’s view of a town below him, this narrator uses same style of diction as seen by that of the first-person narrator to convey what the kid focalizes. In this manner, it is no wonder why many readers may easily overlook the

change in narrative voice between the first- and third-person narrators, for they essentially speak in the same way, and one may even find their vocabulary remarkably similar.

In addition, whereas both of the first- and third-person narrative voices are generally seen at separate points in the narrative, readers will find in chapter nine a brief moment when their voices blend to convey the narrative:

His fingers *traced* the impression of old willow wicker on a piece of pottery clay and he *put* this into his book with nice shadings, an economy of pencil strokes. He *is* a draftsman as he is other things, well-sufficient to the task. He *looks* up from time to time at the fire or at his companions in arms or at the night beyond. Lastly he *set* before him the footpiece [sic] from a suit of armor hammered out in a shop in Toledo three centuries before, a small steel tapadero frail and shelled with rot. This the judge *sketched* [. . .]. (140)

The first-person narrator, as indicated by the present-tense action verbs, briefly replaces the third-person narrative voice, who is indicated by the past-tense action verbs. Thereafter, the third-person narrator re-assumes their conveyance. It is as though the first-person narrator is following along the third-person narrator and then interrupts to add detail to the latter's descriptions about the judge. Yet, the two voices demonstrate the same syntactical structure in their sentences, as both use subordinate clauses in the same way to describe the judge's "economy of pencil strokes" or that he is "well-sufficient to the task" (140). These voices also work together to provide the narratee a step-by-step account of the judge as he traces a willow wicker, then looks up, and "[l]astly" sets the foot piece before him (140). The first- and third-person voices read so similarly towards the same goal of describing the judge that they are virtually the same voice.

Indeed, another striking piece of evidence lies in how the third-person narrator is aware of, and sustains, the narrative situation set by the first-person narrator. In chapter one, the third-person narrator describes "[t]he door stood open and *you* could see the rain falling in the empty

lot behind the hotel” (9; emphasis mine). Later in chapter four, immediately before Captain White and his filibusters are decimated by Comanches, the third-person narrator portrays a suspenseful scene: “Already *you* could see through the dust on the ponies’ hides the painted chevrons [. . .] and now too *you* could hear above the rounding of the unshod hooves the piping of the quena, flutes made from human bones” (52; emphasis mine). Once again in chapter six, the same narrator describes, “[. . .] and they saw one day a pack of viciouslooking [sic] humans [. . .] armed with weapons of every description, revolvers of enormous weight and bowieknives the size of claymores and short twobarreled rifles with bores *you* could stick your thumbs in” (78; emphasis mine). Lastly, in chapter 9, the third-person narrator describes the body of a murdered Apache and mentions “[y]*ou* could see the hole where the ball from Toadvine’s rifle had gone in above the lower rib” (110; emphasis mine). Who is the narrator talking to in these disparate scenes? None of the characters are being addressed, and, although one may argue the narrator’s use of “you” is for rhetorical effect, there is nevertheless “someone telling someone else that something happened” (Margolin 352); thus, there is narrator who is conveying to a narratee. In these subtle examples, the third-person narrator is likely evoking the same narrative situation the first-person narrator established when commanding the narratee to “See the child” at the beginning of the tale (McCarthy 3). The narrator is directly addressing the narratee, telling them that “you” could see or hear such-and-such a thing in the narrative. In this manner, the third-person narrator is aware of, and sustains, the sermonic narrator-to-narratee relationship, which confidently helps one presume that such a narrator has always been conveying the narrative in the context of this relationship.

Altogether, the first- and third-person narrators are too similar to consider as separate agents. Their diction and vocabulary are so similar that the reader likely overlooks the change in

narrative voices between them. The voices seamlessly blend together throughout the narrative, even working in tandem to convey a scene with the judge. Moreover, the third-person narrator continues the narrative situation set by the first-person narrator and, thus, grants continuity to the latter's attempt at conveying an allegory and thereby sustains the novel's allegorical structure. In short, there is substantial evidence to consider these two narrators are one and the same. Hence, by extension, one may safely presume the authority these two narrators have over conveying *Blood Meridian's* story are the authority of a singular, supreme narrator. This singular agent – who at times narrates in the first-person and at other times narrates in the third-person – begins and ends the novel, establishes the narrative situation and allegorical structure, conveys the majority of the narrative's events, actors, and experiences, and subsumes all other narrative voices into their macro speech act. They are *the* narrator of *Blood Meridian* – the mind which precedes, leads, and makes the readers experience of the novel, and to understand the nature of *Blood Meridian's* world, readers must turn to the narrator's conveyance of this world.

CHAPTER III: THE FICTIONAL UNIVERSE OF *BLOOD MERIDIAN*

Now that *Blood Meridian*'s predominant narrative voice is identified, it is possible to identify the characteristics of violence inherent throughout the many settings of the novel, which altogether reveal how the violent universe of *Blood Meridian* is, or was, a source of apparent tension for the kid and the judge in the novel. To note, while such characteristics are conveyed by the narrative voice, it must be said McCarthy himself establishes the leitmotif of violence in the novel. Prior to the novel's beginning and, thus, before the narrator tells their narrative, McCarthy provides three epigrams for readers' to consider. One such epigram, taken from an article in *The Yuma Daily Sun*, reads:

Clark, who led last year's expedition to the Afar region of northern Ethiopia, and UC Berkeley 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.
(McCarthy 1)

The 300,000-year-old evidence of scalping that this epigram foregrounds implies brutal violence, perpetrated by humans against humans, is older than recorded history. It introduces a theme of primordial violence, which is a fundamental idea in McCarthy's worldview, as in a 1992 interview with Richard B. Woodward of the *New York Times* McCarthy claims "There's no such thing as life without bloodshed." As such, a premise derived from this epigram's theme is that violence is an inherent condition of worldly existence. If so, then this thematic preface to *Blood Meridian*'s story implies that the violence in the novel is not an aberration of human behavior but a semi-fictitious example of the norm. In the other two epigrams, Paul Valéry's statement that "Finally, you fear blood more and more. Blood and time," in combination with Jacob Boehme's "death and dying are the very life of the darkness," further add to an atmospheric wariness – and weariness – accompanying a prolonged meditation on this theme (1). However, once the

narrative begins, the narrator continues this theme by through specific characteristics of violence that permeate McCarthy's southwestern world – such characteristics being physical and metaphysical violence.

1. Physical Violence

The physical violence of *Blood Meridian's* world encompasses the explicit brutality, perpetrated by man against man, that the narrator brings to the narratee's attention. It is the violence that, as Barclay Owens remarks, gives the novel "its shocking assault, page after page" on readers' psyche (3). The narrator first emphasizes this form of physical violence in the novel's world by asserting man's nature is characterized by animalistic violence. Merely five paragraphs into the narrative, the narrator describes that the kid frequently visits a tavern in New Orleans "like some fairybook beast to fight with the sailors," and "they fight with fists, with feet, with bottles or knives. All races, all breeds" (McCarthy 4). "The child's face is curiously untouched behind the scars, the eyes oddly innocent," yet he is described as venturing into the tavern at night like Grendel – a "fairybook beast" – to fight men "whose speech sounds like the grunting of apes" (4). The narrative voice depicts an ironic description of innocent eyes embodied in a beastly specimen who "feels mankind itself vindicated" when standing over his bloodied opponents (4). These juxtaposed images suggest that child-like innocence does not preclude inherent inclinations towards violence, but rather allows these inclinations to freely manifest without moral injunction. Moreover, the description of the kid fighting men of "[a]ll races, all breeds," who sound like apes, further suggests that man is animalistic enough to naturally sustain these inclinations into adulthood. These associations are a continuation of McCarthy's theme of primordial violence set prior to the beginning of the narrative. Man is born with a proclivity

towards violence, and this proclivity is not naturally stymied as one ages but atavistically emerges throughout man's existence (I say "man" because women are never perpetrators of violence in the novel). As Barclay Owens notes, these illustrations ultimately reveal "McCarthy's thesis: mindless, atavistic violence is the true nature of mankind, a genetic heritage in common with apes and wolves" (4).

Although mankind's violence in *Blood Meridian* is not as mindless as Owens suggests – which will be clarified further below – he nevertheless observes a central thesis of man's nature the narrator will continue to foreground in the behavior of the indigenous, Mexican, and American factions contesting the southwest. Although Captain White and his U.S. filibusters become victims of human violence rather than perpetrators, the narrative voice highlights the captain's belligerent inclinations. Eyeing what he believes is "a parcel of heathen stock thieves" on the horizon, the narrator notes "[t]he captain smiled grimly" at the prospect of what Captain White hopes is "a little sport before the day is out" (McCarthy 51). However, it is the "horde of Comanches" who find Captain White and his filibusters the prey for a gruesome sport of lancing, scalping, mutilation, and sodomy (53-54). This brutal marauding attributed to roaming indigenous groups is the catalyst for Chihuahua City governor Angel Trias' bounty on native scalps. Historically, John Sepich points out that the state of Chihuahua did hire Anglo aliens and guerilla bands to hunt indigenous raiders, and that these hunters were paid per scalp (6-7). Yet, the attitude towards eliminating hostile indigenous groups is not one of pragmatic policy-making but enthusiastic extermination. As the narrator voice describes, conquest over native groups is glorified by adorning the local cathedral of Chihuahua City with both Catholic iconography and human scalps. Much later, when scalp hunters return after murdering the Gileños, the narrator

points out the local gazebo is ornamented with the Gileños' scalps "like decorations for some barbaric celebration," and their severed heads are raised on lamp poles (McCarthy 168).

The bounty set by the local Mexican governor is the impetus for the Glanton Gang – whom the narrative voice refers to as "the Americans" on several occasions – who massacre, rape, and pillage across the southwest, much to the detriment of the Mexican populaces whom the gang were essentially hired to protect (103). The narrative voice brings to the reader's attention the "great vomit of gore" following John Glanton's execution of an old woman (98); Not long after, there is the Glanton gang's thorough massacre of the Gileños by "moving on foot among the huts with torches and dragging the victims out, slathered and dripping with blood, hacking at the dying and decapitating those who knelt for mercy" (156); afterwards, there is mention of the Glanton Gang finding the peaceful Tiguas and "slaughter[ing] them every soul" (173). The interludes between the gang's massacres consist in either wild debauchery or outright pillaging of Mexican pueblos, which at times include scalping the inhabitants. Yet, the Glanton Gang is equally a victim of violence in the southwest. Apaches hang the last of the gang's scouts "head downwards from the limbs [. . .] skewered through the cords of their heels with sharpened shuttles of green wood [. . .] and naked above the dead ashes of the coals where they'd been roasted" (226-227). The Yumas effectively dissolve the gang, as their ambush kills the majority of the gang's members and results in the assassination of John Glanton by means of splitting his head "to the thrapple" (275).

This cacophony of violence amongst factions of the southwest serve to elaborate mankind's inherent and sustained proclivity to violence. The overt confirmation of this thesis leads scholars such as Owens to characterize *Blood Meridian's* world as Darwinian struggle wherein "[w]e are forced to witness the thematic motif of primal violence" (50). However, it must be mentioned

that such violence is not as mindless as Owens suggests, for the narrative voice describes several well-crafted displays of murder, suggesting people who are quite mindful of the violence they perpetrate. Prior to ambushing the Gileños' camp, the Glanton Gang ride single file, refrain from talking, and scout the camp at a distance – a premeditated and strategically executed case of genocide. In addition, the tree of dead babies who are hung by holes punched in their jaws or the circle of heads posted in the desert as grave warnings are examples of violence carried out thoughtfully – even artistically – but not mindlessly.

Mankind's proclivity to violence in *Blood Meridian* is not merely portrayed as an animalistic impulse embedded in the fabric of human genetics. Rather, violence is portrayed as an impulse which is elevated to the status of an all-too-human activity that constitutes the social conditions of novel's southwestern world. Violence is elevated to the primary practice – the method of expedience – for politics, economics, and, according to Judge Holden, human agency. Captain White's filibuster campaign into Mexico under the ideological exigencies to govern a "mongrel race" who cannot govern themselves, and to bring "liberation in a dark and troubled land," all legitimize violence against the indigenous and Mexicans as an expedience to political and economic ends (McCarthy 35). Violence helps to expand U.S. influence in Mexico while providing Americans, especially Captain White and his filibusters, "Fine grassland. [. . .] A land rich in minerals, in gold and silver" (34). Similarly, Governor Angel Trias' bounty on native scalps legitimizes violence as an expedience to safeguard the city of Chihuahua from hostile native groups, thus ensuring his governance. In addition, this bounty justifies a violent form of commerce, as human scalps equal coin, and this equivocation means violence is the Glanton Gang's expedience to wealth. Lastly, Judge Holden's confession that "war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence" idealizes violence as the sanctified practice for man's control over the

surrounding world (249). Violence for violence's sake is not the aim of such characters and factions. Rather, violence is the most direct means to their ends and, thus, is the prime activity of their endeavors. The overall result of this widespread elevation of violence is that the social conditions of *Blood Meridian's* southwestern world impinge upon characters the necessity to become either a murderer or the murdered in service to one faction's goal. And if the recurring images of armor leftover by old conquistadors or scattered debris of elder societies indicate anything, then they indicate that such violence has been a timeless, social condition of *Blood Meridian's* world.

Yet, these violent social conditions are only one form of physical violence that characterizes *Blood Meridian's* world. Barclay Owens claims that man "reflects the violent character of a brutal environment," and this claim is veritably accurate once one recognizes that the narrator also portrays the geophysical environs and wildlife – that is, the other *physical* phenomena constituting *Blood Meridian's* world – as violent (7). Ten days into Captain White's filibustering campaign across the northern plains of Mexico, the filibusters are run "ragged" by a sun which, as the narrative voice describes, "squat pulsing and malevolent behind them" (McCarthy 44-45). They lose four men to illness alone, and the sands of the plain erode their sun-cracked wagon wheels, threatening to slow the filibusters' travels to a deadly halt in that desert inferno, which will presumably also halt the hungry wolves following them (45). After suffering the Comanche's assault, the wounded Sproule dies from infection, but not before being attacked in his sleep by a blood-sucking bat and witnessing carnivorous birds feast on the dead. Merely less than five chapters into *Blood Meridian*, the narrator depicts a world wherein the physical elements and creatures are predominantly violent.

The narrative voice continues to illustrate this predominance throughout the Glanton Gang's travels. In a fir forest, the gang is surprised by a bear which seizes a member and carries him off into a land that "swallowed them up beyond ransom or reprieve" (138). Traveling westward from Chihuahua, Mexico, along a mountain torrent, the gang is said to observe "on the slopes of those ferric grounds old paths of fire and the blackened bones of trees *assassinated* in the mountain storms" (187-88; my emphasis). Later on, the kid's narrow escape from General Elias' forces leaves him traversing a frigid desert plain, where his only solace against the numbing coldness of the night is described as a lone "heraldic tree that [a] passing storm had left afire" (215). The kid reaches the burning tree, along with owls, spiders, and lizards, "deadly to man," who "were bound in a precarious truth before this torch," the truth being their solidarity as victims of a frigid, apathetic desert night (215). Further westward in the Santa Cruz valley, free range wild bulls charge the Glanton Gang, one of which, in a surprise ambush, impales a member's horse, lifting the animal kicking and screaming (223-24). The list of examples could go on, as the descriptions of the novel's environs and wildlife themselves casts the world of *Blood Meridian* as timelessly violent. Old storms scar the landscape; the sunbaked desert days run men of the past and present ragged, eroding their accoutrements and rending flesh from the bones of the dead, or the desert night numbs the life out of all who dare to survive; and the wildlife kill or feed on the unfortunate, the latter of which are many as carrion birds are a common sight throughout the novel.

In following the narrative voice's illustration of *Blood Meridian*, physical violence is a subset characteristic of the novel's generally violent universe. From the landscape to the weather and wildlife, violence pervades all. Like gravity, it is a physical law that governs all phenomena under its influence. This influence is most certainly observed, and enhanced, in the portrayal of

mankind. Violence is first shown as an inherent impulse of man's nature. However, as revealed over the course of the narrative, the justification of violence for political, economic, and existential ends emphasizes that violence is not only a natural inclination, but also a valued activity that perpetuates a harsh social condition of the novel's physical world.

2. Metaphysical Violence

But the physical violence of *Blood Meridian*'s world is obvious. Even if readers overlook the violence of the world's physical phenomena, mankind in the novel overwhelmingly compensates. However, it is evident that the violence of *Blood Meridian*'s universe is also depicted in a metaphysical sense, for, as seen in narrator descriptions, the fictional universe of the novel prohibits an ontological stability that obscures a perception of what truly exists. One such condition that evidences this type of violence is that physical forms and figures are consistently distorted by the surrounding environment. An apt summarization of this is depicted in a remark that the kid "watched the world tend away at the edges to a shimmering surmise," for this tending away into "a shimmering surmise" is a common occurrence in *Blood Meridian* (215). The narrative voice illustrates this when describing a horizon-bound stagecoach that "diminished upon the plain [. . .] dissolving in the heat rising off the sand until [it was] no more than a mote struggling in that hallucinatory void and then nothing at all" (113).

While an ostensibly trivial observation, this distortion is feature of *Blood Meridian*'s world that is dissonant with characters, such as the kid, who struggle to survive, for traversing this "hallucinatory void" requires confronting the ominously ambiguous forms which spawn and disappear at any edge of the horizon (113). This is best seen when the wounded kid and Toadvine are running across the desert away from Yumas, as they eventually witness in the

distance before them a figure whom the narrative voice describes “stood warped in the quaking lens of that world and held out one hand, in welcome or warning they had no way to know” (279). Fortunately for them, the ambiguity of this figure and their intentions – in “welcome or warning” – is eventually clarified to their benefit (279). The figure is their comrade, Tobin, who is signaling them to refuge in a nearby well. However, this ambiguity of distorted figures appears once again as, when Judge Holden and the idiot approach from the horizon, the narrative voice notes their figures are were at first “quick with clarity and now fugitive in the strangeness of that same light. Like things whose very portents render them ambiguous” (282). Their clear figures are abruptly distorted until their arrival at the well, and their intentions are equally ambiguous until they are close enough to clarify them. For the judge, as opposed to Tobin, such intentions are treacherous; he intends to tempt his fellow gang members into giving him their most valuable resources – Toadvine’s hat and the kid’s sole revolver – so he may better survive a journey across the Californian desert, even if it is at the cost of his comrades’ lives. The difficulty of such distortions lies in the inability to discern what a singular object or being *is*. It disrupts a clear perception of what lies at the horizon of a hostile world, whether it is friend or foe, aid or doom, mirage or reality. In doing so, the metaphysical character of violence in *Blood Meridian* contributes to a felt sense of tension within the novel.

Another condition is that, in conjunction with such distortions of form, there are also several instances where forms are duplicated in strange ways that are at odds with their referents. The narrator initially illustrates this when the kid and Sproule, while desperately trying to survive in a foreign land, struggle to descend a mountain. Here, “their shadows contorted on the broken terrain like creatures seeking their own forms” (65). Later on, as the kid rides under a gibbous moon with the Glanton gang, the narrator describes how horse and rider were “spanceled to their

shadows,” a description which implies an antagonism between concrete referent and its mimetic representation (151). Yet, this antagonism becomes peculiar when sudden flares of lighting from an advancing storm had “those selfsame forms rearing with a terrible redundancy behind them like some third aspect of their presence hammered out black and wild” (151). A third afterimage, appearing intermittently and wild, complicates the already complex display of referent and representation, making for a truly confusing experience of the immediate world. Indeed, this duplication is also seen in the night sky, as the gang rides a “moonblanched waste” where “the moon sat in a ring overhead and in that ring lay a mock moon with its own cold gray and nacre seas” (244). Much later, when the kid is already “the man,” he drinks at a bustling saloon in Griffin, Texas, where the mirror at the backbar reflects “only smoke and phantoms” (325), and the shadows cast by a dancing bear and a little girl with a crank organ “might have gone begging for referents in any daylight world” (326). These examples serve to show that, throughout the novel, there is a sustained duplication of forms, the mimetic representations of which range from near perfect copies to obscure phantasms with questionable referents. Whereas the distorted forms and figures caused by the shimmering landscapes create a difficulty in determining the nature of singular objects, these duplications further complicate an ontological grasp of what exists in the novel’s numerous environs by adding confusing, alternative forms with which one must reckon.

A third condition of metaphysical violence in *Blood Meridian* regards light. Whether it is light from the sun, stars, or fire, light is commonly shown as an element of the novel’s physical landscapes that threatens to mislead one’s perceptions astray rather than offer a comprehensible view of the surrounding world or a referent by which one may orient themselves. One strong

example of this is the description of the battle between General Elias' army and the Glanton Gang:

[. . .] in the long light of that evening he saw from that high rimland the collision of armies remote and silent upon the plain below. The dark little horses circled and the landscape shifted in the paling light and the mountains brewed in darkening silhouette. The distant horseman rode and parried and a faint drift of smoke passed over them and they moved on up the deepening shade of the valley floor leaving behind them the shapes of mortal men who had lost their lives in that place. He watched all of this pass below him mute and ordered and senseless until the warring horseman were gone in the sudden rush of dark that fell over the desert. All that land lay cold and blue and without definition and the sun shone solely on the high rocks where he stood. (213)

Standing above the plain, the kid presumably has a comprehensive view of the battle and landscape. However, what the kid observes is entirely mediated by the light cast over the plain below him. It is because of the "long light of that evening" that the kid discerns remote armies colliding with their "dark little horses" (213). However, the "landscape shifted in the paling light," whereon the mountains darkened and the shade in the valley deepened until "the warring horseman were gone in a sudden rush of dark that fell over the desert" (213). Soon after, the once discernable battleground of horses and mortal men is obfuscated by a land that suddenly becomes "cold and blue and without definition" (213). As the sunlight changes so too does the nature of the landscape change and, therefore, how the kid perceives what exists on the landscape.

In this description alone, any comprehension of the surrounding world is contingent on the ever-shifting dynamism of light. The inconsistent severity and color of sunlight results in the continuously changing appearance and mood of *Blood Meridian's* landscapes. At one moment, "[a] urinecolored sun" paints the landscape as "a dim world and without feature" (47); at another moment, the landscape becomes infernal, as the sunlight takes "a deeper run of color like blood"

(44), which, much later, a similar sunset makes a “myriad of icicles among the conifers [glisten] blood red in the reflected light” (212); Yet, such hellish images of the landscapes are at other times replaced by a land that is “blue and cold” after a fallen sun (303). Relative to the earlier observations on form in *Blood Meridian*, the dynamic nature of sunlight in the novel further reinforces an ontological instability at a larger scale. Not only is it difficult to discern what singularly exists in the surrounding world, but also the surrounding world itself is difficult to discern. Moreover, even if such surroundings can be comprehended, all landscapes inevitably become incomprehensible under the “problematical destruction of darkness” brought by the night (105).

Even under “the unanimous dark of the world,” neither the stars of the cosmos nor the fires of the night are stable phenomena by which one can orient one’s self in *Blood Meridian*’s world (185). When Tobin and the kid relied on the stars to navigate their journey across a frigid desert plain, the two eventually “slept curled and shivering in the darkness of the plains and woke to find the heavens all changed and the stars by which they’d traveled not to be found” (300). The stars of the cosmos shift and change location, leaving the kid and Tobin to survive the desert plains only by the aid of the Diegueños, one of the few instances of generosity in the novel (300). Similarly, the narrator describes how, “leaving [a] fire on the ground behind them, and as [the Glanton Gang] rode up into the mountains this fire seemed to become altered of its location, now here, now there, drawing away, or shifting unaccountably along the flank of their movement. Like some ignis fatuus” (121). Indeed, the consideration of fire as an ignis fatuus is apt, for fire is oftentimes portrayed as inherently deceptive. On several occasions, fires are built by man as “false fires” meant either to feign large group numbers or falsify a group’s position on the desert plains (148); at another time, fire is the result of a passing storm which, when approached,

“seemed to recede” (215). In any case, fire and stars in *Blood Meridian* appear as dynamic as the sun. They provide neither a stable reference to understand what exists in the surrounding world nor are true guides to orient one’s self amidst the chaotic display of phenomenon around them.

This exhaustive list of examples ultimately serves to argue that it is difficult to determine what is real about *Blood Meridian*’s world. The ability to discern the surrounding reality, from singular figures to comprehensive landscapes, is confounded by the physical conditions of the novel’s world. The desert heat distorts forms and figures, and sources of light – whether they are the sun, stars, or fire – shift and move, duplicating forms into strange mimetic representations and mediating the intelligibility of the landscape in-itself. In short, *Blood Meridian*’s world altogether denies the possibility to comprehend “*the* ontology in big letters that correctly explains the way things really are [. . .] the actually existent objects and states of affairs that constitute the actual world” (Jacquette 5; his emphasis).

3. Conclusion

When examining how the narrative voice conveys the universe of *Blood Meridian*, one finds the portrayal of an existentially challenging world by virtue of its inherently violent nature. In one respect, this violence is thoroughly physical. Characters within the story must continuously navigate harsh environments, dangerous wildlife, and, as often seen, the violent social conditions they impose and perpetuate amongst each other. Much like the oft seen comets that speed “along brief vectors from their origins in night to their destinies in dust and nothingness,” the lives of characters appear momentarily in the novel, compelled from their remote origins along brief vectors across the southwest only to suddenly dissipate in violence, with any history of their

existence being lost to time (333). Yet, in another respect, *Blood Meridian* is portrayed as a truly confusing world. As characters traverse the desert plains, figures and forms appear ominously ambiguous at the shimmering horizon, and all attempts to view the surrounding world are mediated by an unreliable dynamism of light, which the encroaching night will ultimately render dark and incomprehensible. The stars and fire shift positions, threatening to mislead characters who try to orient themselves according to their luminous presence. Singular forms are at times duplicated either into perfect copies or wild representations, both of which render a reality whose true nature is difficult to discern. This is the world which readers strive to comprehend and which characters of the novel must navigate to survive, yet it is a world which prohibits any ontological stability.

To note, these characteristics of violence specify how McCarthy uses violence as a naturalist feature in *Blood Meridian*, as he implements them to the same tragic effect as that depicted by early American naturalists. There is the waste of human potential due to the violent conditions of the surrounding world, as these conditions encourage characters, like the kid, Sproule, and several of the young scalp hunters, to become murderers in service to the factions contesting the southwest, and, in the course of such service, to waste their individual potential for growth by suffering a terrible fate. There is also the epistemological tragedy of characters who can neither develop any meaningful knowledge and experience for themselves nor understand the constantly shifting world they traverse. For the metaphysical violence in *Blood Meridian* fosters a naturalist effect “of uncertainty, of doubt and perplexity, about whether anything can be gained or learned from experience” (Pizer 23). The majority of characters in *Blood Meridian* are forced to survive in an illusory, hostile world wherein it is difficult to develop a working knowledge one’s surroundings, because one can barely discern what truly exists.

Yet, it is the physical and metaphysical characteristics of violence in *Blood Meridian* that altogether contribute to an apparent sense of tension in the novel. For, as will be closely examined in the next chapter, the metaphysical character of violence appears to have been a dissonant element to the judge, contributing to an apparent tension that, by the time readers encounter the judge, he has already negotiated in a manner of behavior that is reiterated in his dealings with the kid. In addition, the overt, physical character of violence appears to be a source of tension for the kid throughout his southwestern journey, as it seems to become dissonant with the kid's increasingly non-violent attitude, an attitude which will itself become a source of tension between him and the judge. As such, by following the narrator's conveyance of *Blood Meridian*, one begins to uncover one salient element of dissonance underlying the palpable tension felt when reading the novel – namely, the inherently violent world of the novel itself. Yet, the tension of the novel is only made palpable by the interactions, both past and present, between the universe of *Blood Meridian*, the judge, and the kid.

CHAPTER IV: THE JUDGE

In the introduction to the 2010 edition of *Blood Meridian*, Harold Bloom asks, “What is the reader to make of the Judge? He is immortal as principle, War Everlasting, but is he a person, or something other?” (x). Here, Bloom refers to McCarthy’s ambiguous representation of Judge Holden as either a mortal man or an immortal mythical entity. McCarthy never clarifies this ambiguity, yet scholarship keenly points out that McCarthy did contrive Judge Holden as both man and myth from historical, literary, theological, and philosophical sources. As John Sepich notes, McCarthy’s Judge Holden is derived from a man of the same name in Samuel Chamberlain’s autobiography, *My Confession: Recollections of a Rogue* (1957). In his personal narrative, the nineteenth century American soldier, and real Glanton gang member, recounts a Judge Holden whose physical proportions, expansive knowledge, marksmanship, and virtuosity, are the same as McCarthy’s Judge Holden (Sepich 15-16). Indeed, the judge’s actions in *Blood Meridian*, such as his extemporaneous lectures, his raping of children, his consolation of an enraged John Glanton, and his framing of the kid as responsible for the massacre at Lincoln’s Ferry Crossing, are all more or less exact references to the actions of the Judge Holden in Chamberlain’s account (Sepich 16-18). Furthermore, in an extensive analysis of McCarthy’s personal notes and drafts, Michael Lynn Crews points out McCarthy’s intentional allusions to John Milton’s Satan, as well as references to Goethe’s *Faust*, Flaubert’s *Temptation of St. Anthony*, and Jacob Boehme’s *Six Theosophic Points*, all which indicate that “McCarthy gave much thought to how to create a fictional devil” (160-161). In addition, McCarthy’s notes show that pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus’ consideration of war – as “father and king of all” – is the direct inspiration for the judge’s view that “War is the truest form of divination [. . .] War is

god” (183). The ambiguous Judge Holden is one of the most memorable characters in the corpus of American literature. His words, deeds, and appearance altogether represent his character with an ominous aura of mystique that leaves a notable, if unwanted, impression on the reader’s psyche long after they walk away from the pages of *Blood Meridian*. In whatever manner one regards the judge – whether as a mortal man of American history, an everlasting satanic tempter from myth, or as a philosopher of war – he is a disturbing figure the reader must confront during and after their reading of *Blood Meridian*, as evidenced by Bloom’s reiterated and emphatically concerned question, “What can the reader do with the haunting and terrifying Judge?” (xii).

By means of this thesis, the answer to Bloom is simple: one must better understand the judge, not so as to dismiss his character and the imprint he leaves on one’s psyche, but to recognize how he reflects an excessive aspect of our self-regard. As this chapter will argue, however terrifying and ambiguous Judge Holden may be, his speech and action reveal a particular method of negotiating tension, the defining feature of which is self-affirmation. Self-affirmation is defined here according to Claude Steele’s research on the role self-affirmation plays in reducing the discomfort accompanying cognitive dissonance. Steele theorizes the existence of a “self-affirmation system [. . . that] is activated whenever information threatens the perceived integrity of the self and pressures for adaptation, behavioral or cognitive, until this perception is restored” (267). Should an experience occur that asserts an idea that challenges one’s preferred notion of who they are (i.e., their self-concept), there is a tendency to re-affirm one’s cherished self-concept as a way to defend themselves from the discomfort aroused by the challenging experience. To Steele, the cognitive or behavioral mechanisms for affirming one’s self-concept are “through explanation, rationalization, and/or action,” all of which may be utilized until one’s ideal self-concept is restored (262). Using Festinger’s example of the smoker who feels discomfort at the

dissonance between their behavior of smoking and the newfound knowledge that smoking is bad for their health, Steele argues the smoker's discomfort is not due to the inconsistency between their behavior and their knowledge, but because they feel this newfound knowledge implies a negative idea about who they are – that is, as “foolish or unable to control important behavior” (262). To restore the integrity of their self-concept as competent, the smoker may engage in behaviors that reaffirm this self-concept, say, by explaining to themselves that smoking is crucial for success at their job (262). The discomfort evoked by a threat to one's preferred way of characterizing themselves is met with a behavior and/or rationalization that offsets their felt discomfort by restoring the integrity of their self-concept. Whether or not any self-affirming responses do reconcile the inconsistency between the self-threatening element and one's self-concept is irrelevant, for it is a matter of restoring one's preferred idea of themselves rather than addressing the threat. As such, Steele essentially introduces a coping method to reduce the discomfort stemming from cognitive dissonance, one that opts “to sustain a phenomenal experience of the self” (289).

Admittedly, readers never learn the ideas by which the judge regards himself. However, when examining his speech and actions, he exhibits a pattern of behavior that is similar to the process of self-affirmation Steele describes. This is especially so in reference to the dissonant elements of the novel relative to his character. One such element gleaned from an examination of the judge's intellectual thought is the metaphysical violence characteristic of the world in *Blood Meridian*, which appears to *have been* the cause for an apparent state of tension for the judge that, by the time readers encounter him in the novel, he has negotiated. Yet, throughout the events of the novel, the kid *is* another element of dissonance for the judge, impinging upon him an apparent state of tension he appears to negotiate at the novel's conclusion. However, in both

instances of apparent tension, Judge Holden's behavior reflects method of negotiation that is excessively self-affirming, as he appears to consistently affirm himself as having god-like agency over the world rather than engage the self-threatening ideas evoked by both the metaphysical violence of his surroundings and the kid.

1. A Pattern of Negotiating Tension First Seen in Judge Holden's Thought

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the universe of *Blood Meridian* is permeated by a violence best characterized as metaphysical. It consists of a state of ontological uncertainty, where, as per the narrator's descriptions, it is altogether difficult to discern what truly exists in the material world in *Blood Meridian*. Singular figures and forms are often distorted and/or duplicated in surreal ways at odds with their referents. Sources of light – be they the sun, stars, or fire – are misleading, yet nevertheless mediate how one comprehends the landscape in-itself. This ontological uncertainty is a state of affairs in which, aside from the harsh physical and social conditions of the southwest, one must reckon with a confusing experience of reality throughout the numerous landscapes, a reckoning which is continuously disrupted.

Yet, the metaphysical violence in *Blood Meridian* bears an existential implication that is articulated by Judge Holden, and which, as seen through his general actions and intellectual discourse, appears to make the metaphysical violence of the novel a dissonant element relative himself. The judge articulates the existential implication of metaphysical violence when he explains:

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 that man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of the order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world

and it is only by such taking charge of the world will he effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate. (199)

Here, the judge juxtaposes two types of men who each depict an epistemological attitude and subsequent fate. First, there is the man “who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden” (199). This type of man believes the truth of the world is forever beyond his comprehension, and, as such, he lives in “mystery and fear” amidst an incomprehensible world (199). He is undermined by superstition – that is, false reasonings and beliefs about the world; thus, to the judge, the deeds of his life are unending. His view that world’s secrets are inaccessible is the epistemological premise to a life that, in the words of J. A. Bernstein, “is therefore subject to the forces of natural erasure” (389). In contrast, the judge introduces the type of man “who sets himself the task of singling out the order from the tapestry” (McCarthy 199). This man’s “singling out” represents a seeking of knowledge about the world by studying its nature, or “tapestry” (199). By implication, this man represents an epistemological attitude that presumes the world is comprehensible, and, because he strives for knowledge, he may therefore take “charge of the world” and dictate “the terms of his own fate” (199).

But these two types of men are an extended metaphor for a dichotomy of dissonant ideas that correspond to the metaphysical violence of *Blood Meridian* and the judge, respectively. For the judge’s first type of man is a metaphor that associates ignorance and determinism. It is the belief that the world is incomprehensible which predisposes one to live in ignorance of the world, making them vulnerable to superstition and, more importantly, precluding them from developing the “intellectual tools” to liberate their actions from nature’s constraints (Cusher 225). The result, as the judge conceives it through the first type of man, is that ignorance predetermines one’s fate, as it consigns one to live and die at nature’s behest, and with no legacy that recalls their

existence. Contrary to this, the judge offers the second type of man as an opposing metaphor that associates knowledge and agency, as it is “by the decision alone” to learn about the world that he may earn a sense of agency over his own fate (199). As Bernstein describes, it is through the second man that the judge articulates an ostensible belief that “the attempt to gain knowledge establishes a semblance of free agency, or will” (389). Hence, in the judge’s dichotomy he asserts two dissonant pairs of ideas – ignorance and determinism versus knowledge and agency.

These dissonant sets of ideas respectively correspond to the existential implication of metaphysical violence in *Blood Meridian* and the judge’s behavior. As concluded in chapter two, the metaphysical violence of the novel may be read as a naturalistic feature that imposes an effect “of uncertainty, of doubt and perplexity, about whether anything can be gained or learned from experience” (Pizer 23). If experiences are unstable because it is difficult to discern what truly exists in one’s surroundings, then it is difficult to develop a working knowledge about the world by which to adapt one’s behavior. The boundary between what is real and illusory is obscure, fostering a perplexing experience of the world from human eyes. As seen with the kid and Toadvine when running away from the Yumas, they must immediately decide whether they will approach a figure which “stood warped in the quaking lends of that world,” illustrating that one must nevertheless navigate this world in spite of its perilous uncertainties (McCarthy 279). The existential implication of such conditions is that the individual’s understanding of the world is circumscribed, and, therefore, their actions always reactionary. This implication contributes to a type of naturalistic tragedy seen in early American naturalist works, where characters fail “to maintain in a shifting, uncertain world the order and stability they require to survive” (Pizer 21). Yet, this implication entails the associated ideas of ignorance and determinism that are metaphorically represented by the judge’s first type of man. For traversing the perplexing world

without any stable experience by which to cultivate knowledge of one's surroundings is akin to living in "mystery and fear," as one is vulnerable to falsehoods and cannot develop the knowledge to utilize the world for lasting deeds that leave a legacy transcending their death (McCarthy 199). Like the first type of man, the existential implication of one's existence under conditions of metaphysical violence means "[t]he rain will erode the deeds of [their] life" (199).

Contrary to the ideas of ignorance and determinism inherent in the image of the first man, and associated with the metaphysical violence of *Blood Meridian*, are the notions of knowledge and freedom that are represented by the second man and which appear associated with Judge Holden. The second type of man's dedication to "the task of singling out the thread of the order from the tapestry" is essentially his dedication to diligently accrue knowledge about the world down to its "smallest crumb," as the judge would have it (198-199). Moreover, it is by this "decision alone" – to dedicate himself to knowledge – that the second type of man takes "charge of the world" and, to the judge's understanding, may utilize this knowledge for "effecting a way to dictate the terms of his own fate" (199). Inherent in the image of the second type of man is the dictum that knowledge is key to agency, and it is easy to see that the judge abides by this. For the judge's dedication to capturing, sketching, and making annotations about the various flora, fauna, and human artifacts in his personal ledger is a way of learning about his surround world, as he though he were compiling knowledge for an encyclopedia on the very biodiversity and culture of the southwest. Indeed, that the judge is successful in accruing knowledge is exemplified by his ability to "read news of the earth's origins" from random broken ore or lecture on an ancient bone (116). As illustrated by his concoction of gunpowder – that "devil's batter" – from brimstone, charcoal, niter, sulphur, and urine, his knowledge allows him an agency over the natural world to a remarkable degree (132). Such knowledge even extends to his

agency over human affairs, as his familiarity with ancient and classical jurisprudence allows him to legally defend Glanton and his gang from accusations of murder (237). Like the second type of man, the judge's voracious accumulation of knowledge lends to a sense of agency over his surroundings.

Hence, when examining the judge's distinction between the two types of men, there is the expression of a dissonant relationship between himself and the metaphysical violence of his surrounding world, one which is marked by contrary sets of ideas – that is, ignorance and determinism versus knowledge and agency. Admittedly, in the events of *Blood Meridian's* story, this dissonance does not seem to bother the judge, as he does not suffer from an existential quandary regarding himself and his surrounding world. However, in the scope of the judge's intellectual thought and actions, from his consideration that “[o]nly nature can enslave man”(198), in addition to the notion that “[w]ar is god” (249), it appears as though this dissonance among the judge and the existential implications of living in a metaphysically violent world – the issue of living in ignorant deference to a determining world versus living as a free agent with the aid of knowledge – was the source of an apparent tension. A past struggle whose traces are intimated by the very edifice of the judge's intellectual thought.

Initially, the judge's negotiation of the tension between himself and the metaphysical violence of his surrounding world, while arguably self-affirming in its method, appears to be waged on epistemological terms. As the judge declares, “Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth” (198). Here, the judge asserts a relationship between nature and humankind that also reflects an apparent tension between himself and the metaphysical violence of the novel. Like the existential implication that one must live in ignorance and

deference to an unknowable world, nature is an antagonistic force that threatens one's agency by means of ignorance to "[a]ny smallest thing" (198). However, by learning about nature (i.e., knowledge), the judge conceives that one may overturn nature's threat and, instead, become a ruler whose "authority countermands local judgements" of nature (199). What the judge asserts here is the presupposition that knowledge of the world will bring one liberation from its natural constraints; and to be liberated means having agency over one's surrounding world and its natural processes (199). This relationship between knowledge and liberation once again corresponds to the judge's second type of man whose pursuit of knowledge allows him to take charge of the world and dictate his fate, an example which the judge appears to follow relative to metaphysically violent quality of his surroundings.

One must note the growing yet dichotomized register of concepts and respective values that appear to outline the judge's thought. On the one hand, there is nature, slavery, ignorance, determinism, and the one who lives "in mystery and fear" (199). On the other hand, there is man, liberation, knowledge, agency, and the one who "singles out the order from the tapestry" (199). The judge considers the former line of concepts detestable and something which must be combated, while he finds the latter concepts are praiseworthy and worth emulating. However, this bifurcated register further illustrates a past tension between the judge and the metaphysical violence of the universe in *Blood Meridian*, for the detestable concepts correspond to the conditions of metaphysical violence and the praiseworthy concepts, as seen through the judge's behaviors, correspond to himself. Yet, the judge's ostensibly dichotomized thought, as well as the behaviors that follow from it, are premised on the "conception of the relationship between knowledge and nature [that] calls to mind the chief objectives of the modern scientific project," especially as propounded by thinkers of the 17th – 18th century European Enlightenment (Cusher

225). For instance, Francis Bacon conceived of science as “furnish[ing] ‘a rich storehouse’ for humanity, for ‘the relief of man’s estate,’” and Thomas Hobbes’ similarly claimed that “‘the light of human minds is perspicuous words . . . *reason* is the *pace*; increase of *science*, the *way*; and the benefits of mankind, the *end*’” (qtd. in Cusher 225-226; Cusher’s emphasis). Reason, refined into a scientific practice of science, is presumed to be a philanthropic force for human liberation, as through scientific inquiry humankind will develop “knowledge of the world [that] gives [them] power in and over the world,” as well as provide them the “intellectual tools to render [them]self free” (Cusher 225). This outlook is the foundation for the judge’s ostensibly bifurcated thought – that is, of nature vs. man, ignorance vs. knowledge, determinism vs. agency, etc. – and his sketches and annotations support his adherence to those positively valued concepts in his thought, as these activities “rout out and make naked before him” the inner workings of the natural world (McCarthy 198).

In this manner, the judge’s intellectual discourse and activities not only reflect a tension between himself and a life of ignorance and determination implied by a metaphysically violent world, but they also reflect a method for negotiating this tension by means of affirming himself as having agency over his surroundings, primarily by means of accruing knowledge. His presumption that the world (i.e., nature) and man are antagonistic elements may be read as an explanation of the world that helps him to, in Claude Steele’s words, “maintain a phenomenal experience of the self” (262). This explanation ostensibly helps the judge rationalize specific behaviors, such as sketching and annotating the flora, fauna, and human artifacts of the world, as conducive to realizing a view of himself as one who cannot be ignorant and, therefore, subject to being determined, because he accrues knowledge that will allow him the agency to “dictate the terms of his own fate” (McCarthy 199). Whether or not the dissonance between the conditions of

metaphysical violence and himself are truly reconciled does not matter, for the judge's thought and actions reflect a negotiation that resists the dissonance these ideas evoke, as all efforts situated in this apparent tension focus on affirming himself as free.

By considering knowledge and agency as central concepts to the judge's negotiation of this past tension, it seems the judge indulges in an intellectual hubris, one that accords with scholars' general characterization of him as an absolute, tyrannical offspring of European Enlightenment thought. For instance, based on the judge's intellectual activities and his tendency to destroy his studied objects, Steven Frye surmises the judge represents a "case of the Enlightenment gone horribly astray" (*Understanding Cormac McCarthy* 69); Nicholas Monk, especially, considers the judge's intellectual activities, destruction of artifacts, and extermination of indigenous peoples as evidence that he is "the European Enlightenment made flesh" (37); and, as referenced above, Brent Cusher finds the judge's intellectual thought and activities are premised on European Enlightenment views of science, knowledge, and nature (225). Such scholars see the judge as *pure descendent* of European Enlightenment thought, albeit with tyrannical aspirations that make his character a fitting allegory for European westernization and, by extension, American imperialism.

According to Ronald Love's *The Enlightenment* (2008), the scientific achievements of Johann Kepler, Francis Bacon, Galileo Galilei, and Isaac Newton exemplified the power of human reason to elucidate the "natural laws that govern physical nature and the universe" (7-8). Such examples would inspire Enlightenment intellectuals such as Voltaire, Diderot, and Rousseau to place "supreme confidence in the power of man's reason and basic common sense [. . .] 'to dispel the obscuring clouds of ignorance and mystery which weighed upon the human spirit and impeded human liberty in all its forms'" (7-8). Such intellectuals not only valued human reason

for its potential to discover the true workings of the physical world, but also for what they surmised as reason's capacity to reveal for both the individual and society a "'natural' way in which human beings function," one which is grounded in material phenomena (8). As such, reason was exalted for its potential to provide an alternative, positivistic account of oneself and society, with the potential to liberate people from the entrenched cultural narratives employed by institutions like the monolithic Catholic Church (Love 7). Hence, Enlightenment intellectuals attributed a primacy to human reason which was associated with an intellectual and social freedom. In the words of Love, "reason was exalted [. . .] as the natural sovereign of a free people" (7).

Even Immanuel Kant, in his essay *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* (1784), associates reason and freedom in the character of enlightenment, as he argues the enlightened individual is one who has the courage and resolve to use their own intellect (17). Rather than mindlessly relying on "[s]tatutes and formulae, those mechanical tools of rational use, or rather misuse, of [the individual's] natural endowments," the enlightened individual undergoes the "intellectual toil" of exercising one's own reason on matters of religion, politics, and/or ethics (18). In this manner, Kant associates reason and freedom by characterizing the enlightened individual as a free thinker, who cultivates and relies on their own intellect rather than thoughtlessly adhering to the rationale of others out of a sense of idleness or cowardice (17). To Kant, the enlightened individual's intellectual freedom then serves to liberate society via the social freedom to "make *public* use of one's reason in all matters" (18; his emphasis), for the "calling to free *thinking*" in public discourse will "gradually extend its effects to the disposition of the people (through which the people gradually becomes more capable of *freedom of action*)" (23; his emphasis).

The judge is ostensibly a pure embodiment of the European Enlightenment's exaltation of reason, knowledge, and freedom. His ways of attaining knowledge about the surrounding world are considerably based on rational observation, as his sketches are ratiocinated accounts of his objects' shapes, proportions, and qualities, all drawn with "an economy of pencil strokes" and remarkable fidelity, as though he has "been a draftsman somewhere" (McCarthy 140-141). Indeed, one may imagine the collection of his annotations form a sizeable textbook on history, ornithology, entomology, botany, and anthropology – a veritable tome of taxonomized knowledge. However, whereas the Enlightenment intellectuals saw utopian possibilities in the prowess of human reason – such as, in Robert Caponigri's words, that reason would "render men at once happier, and morally and spiritually better" (qtd. in Love 7) – rationality, as embodied by Judge Holden, only promises a Eurocentric tyranny, specifically against the southwest and its denizens. This interpretation of the judge is argued by scholars such as Nicholas Monk, who see the judge as "the supreme avatar of the European Enlightenment" (37). To Monk, the judge's rationality is "a necessary part" of a larger, Eurocentric effort to civilize the southwest (38). His aspiration to be a "suzerain of the earth," in addition to his declaration that "[w]hatever exists in creation without my knowledge exists without my consent" (McCarthy 198), indicates a prerogative "to usurp control of the world and its inhabitants, and to experiment in the name of knowing and the rational" (Monk 38). When the judge records and erases an ancient pictograph at the Hueco tanks (McCarthy 173), crushes a three-century old tapadero and pitches it into a fire (140), shoots and stuffs exotic birds for his study (198), or tears the leaves from native plants and places them between the pages of his ledger (198), he takes control of the history, culture, and ecology of the southwest, transforming them into a linguistic catalogue of knowledge that exists only for his own purposes. In doing so, the judge employs his rationality to

recreate an idea of the southwest according to an intelligible, civilized design, thereby representing European modernity's triumph (Monk 38).

This allegorical reading of the judge as an agent of European modernity's westernization project reaches its apotheosis in his destruction of the "other" outside of "Western culture" – that is, the indigenous peoples (41). Relying on Kant's essay discussed above, Monk interprets the judge as "the everyman of the Enlightenment," whose "psychology and behavior" lacks the cowardice and laziness that precludes one from being "liberated to make sense of the world according to reason" (41). Monk readily assumes that the judge attributes "cowardice" and "laziness" to *Blood Meridian's* "Native American 'savage,' who are "sunk in idleness and immaturity and reliant on interpretations of the world that lie outside the scope of the rational" (41). Reading the judge in this way, Monk easily interprets the judge's rationale for murdering the southwest's indigenous peoples as a civilizing of the region, mainly by means of removing its unenlightened, "lower order" peoples (42).

Monk's interpretation of the judge is an example of scholars' common characterization of the judge as a *pure descendent* of the European Enlightenment, a true case "of the Enlightenment gone horribly astray," as Steven Frye summarily describes (*Understanding Cormac McCarthy* 69). Admittedly, such an interpretation is the basis for reading McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* as a critical exposition on American Expansionism, its violence, and its ideological antecedents found in modern European thought. As Chris Dacus points out, it is in the image of Judge Holden where readers will find McCarthy's argument for why the "progressive humanitarian desire to improve mankind results in more inhumanity than the 'uncivilized' condition that pre-existed progress itself" (99). Once again, this common characterization of the judge is compatible with the view that he reflects a self-affirming method for negotiating an apparent tension between

himself and the metaphysical violence *Blood Meridian's* fictional universe. For he is an intellectual juggernaut armed with what appears as centuries worth of the conviction that the world can be rendered comprehensible as various forms of knowledge, and, by doing so, he may affirm in his being a degree of agency that essentially arrogates to himself the status of God. The judge, read as a hubristic intellectual, bears the ultimate affirmation of himself over the tension evoked by a metaphysically violent world that implies a life of ignorance and determinism.

However, to believe the judge negotiates his tension in a manner that accords with Enlightenment ideas of knowledge and freedom is erroneous, for it ignores the judge's philosophy of war that is founded on a bleaker epistemological premise, yet which nevertheless underlies the pattern of speech and actions that reflect his *true* self-affirming negotiation of tension. According to the judge:

The universe is no narrow thing and the order within it is not constrained by any 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 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 itself being but a fact among others. (McCarthy 245)

To the judge, the sheer grandeur of the universe is reason enough to think that what exists in one miniscule part of it is not necessarily repeated in another part, as though the universe were obliged to exhibit a recognizable pattern – an order – that humankind can know. Even within the boundaries of the earth, the judge asserts the sheer vastness of what exists is overwhelmingly beyond the capacity for what one may know, and whatever order one perceives in their surrounding world is, in reality, only their projection of order. This projection does not represent a one-to-one correspondence between what the one perceives and an objective pattern of

existence. Instead, as the judge claims, this projection of an order only serves to help the individual navigate their surroundings, like “a string in a maze” (245).

These comments show the judge believes there is a chasm between what one can know about the world and the way the world truly is, an epistemological premise that is contrary to the notion that human reason is capable of knowing the objective truth of the world. Hence, rather than being a *pure descendant* of Enlightenment thought, the judge adheres to a counter-Enlightenment sentiment, one which is articulated by thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche. In Nietzsche’s *On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense* (1873), he asserts the human intellect “has no further mission that might extend beyond the bounds of human life” – that is to say, the human intellect is both in service to the needs of human survival and is limited in its capacity to objectively know the world due to the constraints of subjective human experience (752). Regarding the latter respect, the perspicuity of the human intellect is limited by its reliance on concepts, all of which are only an interpretation of one’s experience of the world. As Nietzsche argues, concepts are words – a linguistic phenomenon – whose formulation happens after a series of metaphors beginning with one’s experience of nervous stimuli from their environment (755). A stimulus is received and then is translated into an image – that is, a mental representation of what provided the stimulus. Thereafter, a “second metaphor” is made when this image is then “imitated by a sound,” such as a linguistic signifier (i.e., a word) (755). As such, the concepts that the human intellect relies on are contrived from a series of subjective interpretations. Moreover, because this process is interpretive, the human intellect “possess only metaphors for things” which are not guaranteed to correspond to the “original entities” that one experiences in the world (755). Hence, there is a genuine gap between what is known about the world (i.e., only metaphor) and the way the world truly exists in-itself. Nevertheless, as Nietzsche argues, once these metaphors

“have been in use for a long time, [they] strike a people as firmly established, canonical, and binding” – that is, as a true about the world (756). However, such truth is only “[a] mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, in short a sum of human relations which have been subjected to poetic and rhetorical intensification, translation, and decoration [. . .]” (756).

In the judge’s claim that “the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there,” he echoes Nietzsche’s point that what one believes to have discovered as true about the world via their reason or intellect does not necessarily correspond to the way the world truly is in-itself (McCarthy 245). The so called “order in creation” – which, is what the judge’s second type of man dedicates himself to singling out – is, at best, only an interpretation, not truth (245). Yet, the judge solidifies his adherence to this epistemological stance by affirming there is no chance that such interpretations will ever correspond to what the world, and all that exists within it, truly is in-itself. For, as the judge concludes, “existence has its own order and that no man’s mind can compass, that mind itself being but a fact among others” (245).

As such, an accurate portrayal of how the judge appears to negotiate, in a self-affirming manner, the past tension between himself and the metaphysically violent conditions of *Blood Meridian*’s universe does not rely on rationalization that knowledge will earn him agency over the world. To the judge, knowledge is a myth, and therefore, it can provide no liberation from a natural state of ignorance and determination as threatened by a state of metaphysical violence. As such, the true portrayal of what appears to be the judge’s self-affirming method for negotiating this tension must account for his philosophy of war, as it rationalizes violence as *the* means to affirm his agency over the world. As the judge explains, “It makes no difference what men think of war. [. . .] War endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate trade awaiting its ultimate practitioner.

That is the way it was and will be. That way and not some other way” (248). Like stone, the judge asserts that war has long preceded humankind, yet, unlike stone, war is obviously a violent state of affairs between creatures in existence. For the judge, that “war endures,” and that it’s primordial influence on existence “was and will be” with no “other way” to regard its role, means the judge considers war as the fundamental state of affairs for existence – the “ultimate trade” that both organically manifests from within existence and determines the procession of life via death (249).

Scholar Dwight Eddins likens the judge’s notion of war to the metaphysical role of *der Wille* (the Will) as espoused by 18th century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. As per Schopenhauer’s philosophy, the Will is “a mindless, ceaseless striving of energies, a blind vortex of creation and destruction without goals” that both underlies and determines one’s experience of reality (28). As Eddins describes, the Will is “primal,” and all of its objects – the very matter in all reality – are representations of the Will’s “ceaseless striving of energies” (28-30). Yet, these representations are subject to “an inner antagonism” that is conceived as a “constant struggle of the phenomena of [the Will’s] natural forces with one another” (qtd. in Eddins 29-30). Relative to *Blood Meridian*, the role of war in the judge’s philosophy is analogous to this constant, dynamic struggle between the phenomena of the Will, as exemplified by the persistent conflict and predation seen amongst the wildlife, human factions, landscapes, and dangerous weather in *Blood Meridian*. As such, in his philosophy, the judge attributes to war the status of a cosmological force – a primordial mechanism – which, via the perpetual struggle between phenomena in existence, continuously determines how existence proceeds.

Yet, the judge’s philosophy of war asserts a relationship between war and humankind which is key to his self-affirming method for negotiating tension. As the judge asserts, “Men are born

for games. Nothing else,” and “all games aspire to the condition of war for here that which is wagered swallows up game, player, all” (249). For the judge, humankind is meant to play games, and the best game is that which puts the most “at hazard” (249). Because those who play at war wager their life and potential to play evermore, war puts the most at hazard and, therefore, is the ultimate game (249). However, with high risk comes high reward, so war may also be considered the ultimate game because, through it, the winner stands to win the most valuable reward – that is, “forcing the unity of existence” (249). According to the judge, it is the “larger will” of existence which “binds” the opponents together, as though “the whole universe [. . .] has labored clanking to this moment which will tell if [one player] is to die at that [other player’s] hand or that [player] at his” (249). In war, the players rely on violence to decide who lives and who dies, effectively dictating how existence must proceed. As such, war is the game through which, by the testing “one’s will and the will of another,” existence is ultimately “*forced to select*” (249; my emphasis). Those who win the game of war simultaneously win the “authority and justification” to shape what does and does not exist (249). Hence, while war existed before humankind, it is humankind – as the “the ultimate practitioner” born to participate in war – who may determine existence itself (249).

In abiding by this narrative of the world and man, the judge sincerely declares, “[. . .] war is the truest form of divination. [. . .] War is god,” a philosophical conclusion McCarthy intentionally derived from the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus’ claim, ““War is the father of us all and out [*sic*] king. War discloses who is godlike and who is but a man, who is slave and who is a freeman”” (Crews 183). It is through war that one may be godlike, and, in this spirit, the judge’s philosophy of war provides him the much-needed “explanation, rationalization, and/or action” to negotiate the apparent tension evoked by the notions of ignorance and determination

implied by metaphysical violence (Steele 262). By asserting war is the primordial force governing existence, the judge establishes an “explanation for the world at large” that ostensibly allows him a way to affirm a “phenomenal experience of the self” (262). For as a man of such a world, he reasons that his participation in war will allot him a self-justified authority – the agency of a god – to dictate a metaphysically violent existence that he perceives would otherwise dictate him. In this manner, the judge’s philosophy of war explains the world and his place in a manner that rationalizes a clear course of action by which to affirm himself. For it is in this philosophy that the judge’s violent behaviors, every atrocity of his that scathes the reader’s psyche, are rationalized as actions that illustrate his agency. From pitching a pair of puppies into a river, to scalping an indigenous child who moments before happily bounced on his lap, and to appropriating the Glanton gang, through some “terrible covenant” with John Glanton, to eradicate the “heathen,” all are conducted to affirm that the appropriately named *Judge* Holden is the one who decides what exists and what does not (McCarthy 299).

Even his intellectual activities may be read as actions aimed at affirming his agency. When asked “[w]hat about all them notebooks and bones and stuff,” the judge casually admits, “All other trades are contained in that of war” (249). His sketches and annotations are not meant to accrue knowledge about the world but to develop an archive of worldly images from which he may control others’ outlook on life. As Dan Moos argues, by reproducing the image of an original artifact in his ledger, and then destroying said artifact, the judge becomes “the sole owner of knowledge” over its image, securing for himself the power to reinscribe a new meaning of the object to his advantage (30-31). Moreover, by destroying the artifacts of his study, in an effort “to expunge them from the memory of man,” the judge solidifies his control over how others perceive the world (McCarthy 140). Not only does he forever preclude others from

examining such artifacts for themselves, but he also establishes himself as the only authority one can consult about their significance; thus, as Lauren Brown describes, the judge becomes “the ultimate referent – the transcendental signifier – of all meaning” (75). Whether it is a war of action waged on the battlefield or a war of words around the campfire, the judge strives for physical and intellectual dominance for what appears to be the sake of affirming a sense of agency over the world.

When examining the judge’s intellectual discourse, he exhibits a pattern of behavior that reflects a self-affirming method of negotiating a tension between himself and the metaphysically violent conditions seen in the novel. As revealed through his speech, the judge appears to take issue with notions of ignorance and determinism, both of which are implied qualities of human life that stems from the metaphysical violence *Blood Meridian*’s fictional universe. Rather than consider that these ideas truly describe the quality of his existence, or somehow prove he is not wholly ignorant and determined, he appears to respond by affirming himself as a free agent, completely resisting the dissonance evoked by these challenging ideas. While this affirmation is ostensibly conducted by means of acquiring knowledge in order to liberate himself from a life of ignorance and, therefore, determinism, his true self-affirming method is based on a philosophy of war, for, as the judge claims, it is through war that one may establish their agency over the world. Thus, in the range of the judge’s intellectual thought, which informs and is attended by his violent behavior, the judge reflects a pattern that resembles a self-affirming negotiation of tension.

2. This Same Method of Negotiating Tension Relative to The Kid

What has been argued about the judge is only derived from the content of his intellectual thought and violent behaviors, and the apparent tension so far discussed is not a palpable sense of tension felt in *Blood Meridian*. In fact, if McCarthy were to affirm that the judge's character was at tension with a metaphysically violent world, which is highly unlikely, then this tension, along with its negotiation, would be a fact of the judge's past, prior to readers' encounter of him. For in the events of *Blood Meridian* the judge does not seem at tension with the nature of his surroundings. Across the novel's infernal southwestern setting, he generally appears confident and amused, as if he were a giant immortal child enjoying a twisted game amongst naïve mortals. At most, readers only see the judge in what appears to be his constant affirmation of agency by means of intellectual control and physical violence. However, there is a palpable tension foregrounded in the events of *Blood Meridian* that involves the judge and that other discordant element of the novel relative to himself – namely, the kid. In this apparent tension, the claim that the judge reflects a self-affirming method of negotiation is further substantiated. For the kid subverts the judge's philosophy of war and challenges his sense of agency, and since the judge can neither convert the kid to his ideology, acknowledge the limitation of his agency, nor note exceptions to his philosophy, the judge must resort to violence as a way to affirm his agency, thereby resisting the tension the kid evokes.

Initially, the kid and the judge do not appear dissonant. Early in the novel, the judge approves of the kid's arson in Nacogdoches, Texas, and when the judge and kid coincidentally come across each other in Chihuahua City, the judge is depicted as smiling at the kid, perhaps amused by the possibility of recruiting the kid for his game of war. At such points in the novel, the only sense of tension felt stems from the judge's ominous, foreboding smiles, not from any conflict

between he and the kid. However, the kid gradually proves quite dissonant relative to the judge. While the kid is recruited to kill the “heathen” indigenous peoples, he instead exhibits a sense of compassion towards his wounded comrades, rendering aid to the weak and weary who should perish as per the elections of war (McCarthy 299). Such compassion is a direct subversion of the judge’s philosophy of war, for, as William Clement claims, the kid’s actions are “moral concessions he gives in a world seemingly devoid of compassion,” and which “opposes the judge’s un-remiting [*sic*] notion that the un-relenting animosity of the universe defines its hostile nature” (7). If those who should perish after losing the game of war are kept from dying, then war is no longer a sacred mechanism for determining how existence proceeds. In addition, humankind’s attempt at dictating existence by participating in war is undermined. Through the kid, the judge’s sanctified means of affirming agency is made profanely inert; “[i]f war is not holy man is nothing but antic clay,” the judge decrees (McCarthy 307). Without the blessed endowment of agency that war provides, man cannot determine the world but only be determined by it. Hence, rather than validate the judge’s philosophy of war, which the kid is expected to do as a member of the Glanton gang, the kid gradually subverts it through acts of compassion, thereby fostering an apparent tension between the two characters.

This tension is exacerbated as the kid challenges the judge’s agency over the world, both by means of circumscribing the judge’s intellectual control and by refusing to convert to his philosophy of war. “I spoke in the desert for you and you only,” the judge tells the kid as the latter sits in prison (307). But the judge has always spoken to him. For during his extemporaneous lectures on the earth and its denizens, his explanation on the lack of order in the universe, and his sermon on the holiness of war, “[a]ll listened as he spoke, those who had turned to watch him and those who would not” (245). Belonging to this audience is the kid, whose

scrutiny of the judge is betrayed by occasional depictions of him watching and studying the judge (243). Yet, as the judge accuses, “you turned a deaf ear to me” (307). To the judge, the kid always resisted his teachings, which may be read as an indirect challenge to the judge’s own agency. As mentioned above, the judge’s intellectual activities are not intended to gain knowledge about the world but, instead, sustain his ongoing efforts to control what others perceive about the world. In appearing as an expert authority, he simultaneously assumes an intellectual control over what ideas are circulated and believed by those around him. However, that the kid turns a “deaf ear” to the judge’s teachings circumscribes the judge’s ability to act as the foremost intellectual authority (307). The kid will not validate the judge’s preferred hierarchy that posits the judge as the teacher and the kid as his pupil. As such, in circumscribing the judge’s intellectual control, the kid indirectly challenges the judge’s agency over those around him.

In addition to the kid’s compassion and resistance to the judge’s intellectual authority, the judge’s failure to convert the kid into being an adherent to war also exacerbates the tension between them, as it once again foregrounds the limitations of the judge’s control. As the kid and the expriest Tobin try to escape the judge’s pursuit across a Californian desert, the judge tries to tempt the kid into committing cold-blooded murder. As the kid and Tobin hide amongst a bone strewn waste, hoping the judge will pass them by, the ostensibly unsuspecting judge passes only to turn around and mention, “I’ve passed your gunsights twice this hour and will pass a third time” (299). The initial passing the judge refers to is at the wells of Alamo Mucho, where the three men in addition to Toadvine and the idiot sought refuge from the Yuma ambush at Lincoln’s Ferry Crossing. At the time, Tobin futilely begs the kid to shoot the judge. Now, amidst a wasteland of bones, the judge intentionally places himself within the kid’s firing range,

and his awareness of having once again passed the kid's gunsights suggests that the judge voluntarily parades himself as a target for the kid. For one may credit the judge with knowing that it is the kid, not Tobin, who wields the gun, and who has been the only member throughout the entirety of the Glanton gang's journey who reserves a sense of compassion for the gang's victims and wounded scalphunters – which, to the judge, violates the sanctity of war by preserving those who should perish. Over the course of his game of war across the southwest, he discerns that “[t]here's a flawed place in the fabric of [the kid's] heart,” a place where “clemency” resides (299). In parading himself in front of the kid's gunsights, the judge tempts the kid to cleanse this clemency from his soul by means of bloodshed, to iron out the flaw in the fabric of his heart by committing cold-blooded murder. In this manner, the judge tries to convert the kid into an adherent to war – indeed, passing by the kid's gunsights for a third time – for by trying to kill the judge in cold-blood, the kid will thereby validate the primacy of violence and war as an expedience for determining how existence should be (Clement 48).

However, the kid refuses the judge's temptations and, therefore, resists the judge's attempt to convert him. Even as the judge visits the kid during his imprisonment in San Diego, where, from across the jail cell bars, he beckons the kid to “[c]ome here [. . .] Let me touch you,” the judge offers the kid a chance to redeem his failure to “empty out his heart” for the common cause of the Glanton gang (307). This is once more the judge's attempt to convert the kid to his cause, to band together through “the sharing of enemies,” where the judge may love the kid as his own son (307). Yet, once again, the kid rebuffs the judge, refusing to come forth from the dark corner of his cell to take “part in [the judge's] craziness” (307). While the judge is far from emotionally disturbed by such refusal, as he once more shines an ominous smile at the kid prior to walking away to tend to his “errands,” the kid once again challenges the judge's agency over the world

(308). For by refusing the judge's temptations, and by refusing to see the judge as an intellectual authority, the kid sustains himself as an "evasive and resistive autonomy," as Lauren Brown describes (77). He shows himself to be a pocket of "autonomous life" that lives beyond the judge's dispensation, and, by virtue of this alone, the kid makes evident that there are limits to the judge's agency over the world while also subverting the ideological edifice of war the judge relies on to affirm his agency (McCarthy 199).

Unable to sway the kid to convert to his ideological outlook, and thereby reconcile the dissonance he evokes, the judge once again finds recourse to the sanctity of war and violence to affirm his precious sense of agency. However, his affirmation is not without one final attempt at converting the kid. More than twenty years after their encounter in San Diego, the judge and the kid come across each other in a saloon at Fort Griffin, Texas, where together they witness the execution of a dancing bear, an abrupt end to the immediate entertainment that is to be replaced by a subsequently announced public dance. "Plenty of time for the dance," the judge tells the kid, an implicit invitation that suggest the kid should participate in more than music and festivities (327). For the judge, the dance is a significant ritual that validates his philosophy, as it honors the eternal process of war and its victors. It "includes the letting of blood," for "[r]ituals which fail in this requirement are but mock rituals" (329). In addition, the dance also "contains complete within itself its own arrangement and history and finale" (329). To the judge, the dance is not a recreational event but a ritual consisting of history, bloodletting, arrangement, and finale, all of which must be reenacted in order to genuinely honor war and its victors. Consider the pattern of violence and celebration seen throughout *Blood Meridian*. There is the overarching history of early Spanish colonization, American expansionism, and the subsequent displacement of indigenous peoples, all of which have led to the formation and confrontation of each Mexican,

American, and indigenous faction across the southwest. There is the bloodletting of war, from the Comanches decimation of White's filibusters to the Glanton gang's extermination of the Gileños and Tiguas. Then, after blood has been shed, there is the arrangement of the victors of war, the finale of their endeavors being a mass celebration, as seen with the Glanton gang's knack for debauchery throughout the novel.

In suggesting to the kid that he stay for the dance, the judge invites him to take part in a ritual that both honors war as a sacred, primordial process and celebrates those who have exerted their agency over existence through violence. Indeed, their coincidental meeting at Fort Griffin, along with the slaying of the dancing bear, already meet the judge's criteria to initiating the ritual dance of war, for it is "by reason of some other" that all attendees at the saloon, including the kid and himself, have convened (328). Moreover, the execution of the dancing bear emulates the bloodletting of war. As such, all that remains is the arrangement and finale; yet, until then is the judge's offer to the kid to join him as a partner in the dance. However, "I aint studyin no dance," the kid decides, and his stated intention "to go" aggrieves the judge (327). Once again, the kid eludes the judge's efforts to sway him to his outlook, thereby emphasizing his limited agency as someone who "aint nothin" (331). In response, the judge sticks to the ideological outlook underlying his self-affirming method of negotiation, as he asserts there will always be a "true dancer" who has "offered himself entire to the blood of war," an aspiration the judge evidently strives to achieve (331).

With such an exchange, the judge's apparent tension with the kid remains. His offer is rejected, yet, to the judge, the "arrangement" necessary for the ritual dance of war must be decided (329). So, after claiming there "is room on stage for one beast and one alone," the judge resorts to war, surprising the kid in an outhouse behind the saloon – taking the kid in to his

“immense and terrible flesh” – and enacting upon the kid a presumably violent fate that the narrator only describes through another man’s reaction, “Good God almighty” (331-34).

To note, the ineffability of the kid’s fate, an intentionally vague decision on McCarthy’s part, has been interpreted in multiple ways. Most scholars presume the kid is dead, likely mutilated by the judge’s extraordinary strength in a manner that recalls the time the judge crushed a man’s skull with his bare hands, leaving “something wrong” with the shape of the man’s head (179). Scholars such as Patrick W. Shaw argue that the judge sexually assaults the kid in a grand act of humiliation, as though the kid’s intolerable clemency must be met with a “most humiliating and devastating” punishment (107). Of course, nothing about the description, or lack thereof, of the kid’s fate denies the possibility that the judge rapes, mutilates, and kills the kid. McCarthy leaves such interpretations to the reader. However, what is not left to interpretation is that the judge eliminates the kid from *Blood Meridian*’s story, and, my analysis leads one to see that the judge does so to once more affirm his agency by using violence to literally dismiss the kid and the dissonance he evokes. The judge cannot withstand the discordance the kid brings to his precious image of himself as a “suzerain of the earth” (McCarthy 198), and unable to sway the kid into validating the ideology that is key to the judge’s self-affirmation, and unwilling to compromise, the judge relies on his ideological “explanation of the world,” and attendant violent behaviors to assert his cherished self-image as a free agent (Steele 262). Thus, the self-affirming method of negotiation first intimated by the apparent tension between himself and the metaphysical violence of *Blood Meridian*’s fictional universe is further reinforced by the way he negotiates his apparent tension with the kid.

In this manner, the judge reflects a distinct method of negotiating tension. Such a method, as exemplified by Judge Holden, illustrates an immoderate desire to validate one’s ego, even if such

validation requires taking all of existence and mutilating it. According to such an understanding, we see that the judge essentially represents an over excessive aspect of ourselves, a true devil hidden in the corner of our hearts that, if left unchecked, threatens to tyrannize the world around us. In this manner, seeing the judge as a reflection of a self-affirming method of negotiation also gives us an answer to Harold Bloom's earnest question of what we are to do with "the haunting and terrifying Judge" (xii). The answer: To confront him in ourselves.

CHAPTER V: THE KID

Whereas the judge is enigmatic by virtue of his convoluted philosophical ideas, his ominous fleshy presence, and his inscrutable yet overtly devilish grin – all of which appear in abundance throughout *Blood Meridian* – the kid is just as enigmatic despite his absence. The kid disappears for roughly a third of the novel, as the initial account of his journey from Tennessee into Mexico is subsumed by an account of the Glanton gang’s bloody scourge across the southwest. His thoughts and feelings – the very fabric of his inner-life and, one may say, the source of his individuality – is mainly overlooked, for the narrative voice hardly grants the reader insight into his mind, and the kid’s brusque laconic speech leaves little evidence by which to delineate an outlook distinct to his character. The reader is briefly made aware of only his “pale and thin” figure, his “big wrists, big hands,” the “shoulders [. . .] set close,” and, “behind the scars, the eyes oddly innocent” (McCarthy 3-4). The reader may be forgiven for their inability to maintain a clear portrait of the kid throughout the novel, for, as Craig A. Warren points out, the kid is persistently “[d]enied any detailed physical description by the narrator” (3). The novel begins with a vague depiction of the kid, and it ends with an obscure suggestion of his fate. For what seems to be the brief duration of his life amidst the apathetic and violent universe of *Blood Meridian*, he is a veritable enigma by virtue of his omission, a “linguistic and interpretive void,” as Warren describes, from which he earnestly enquires, “how might we mine the few available details for meaning” (3)?

Based on their approach to the novel, scholars have used these “few available details” to produce a range of different interpretations about the kid and what he represents (Warren 3). For instance, in an assessment of *Blood Meridian*’s violence, Barclay Owens finds both the kid’s uneducated upbringing and his belligerent disposition as ample evidence to interpret him as a

“dumb” or “mindless” animal that represents the novel’s Darwinian culture (30). To Owens, the kid “kills by instinct, savagely, [. . .] without forethought or rationale,” and he lacks the intellect necessary to understand the judge’s philosophy or Captain White’s ideology (30). Leo Daugherty interprets the kid according to his Gnostic analysis of the novel, arguing that, amidst an evil material world ruled by archons like Judge Holden, the kid represents one who is “awakened” to the *pneuma* – the “spark of the alien divine” – which comprises the human spirit and yearns to reunite with “the original, good god” beyond the world (24-28). This awakening to *pneuma* is simultaneously the kid’s attainment of a “will outside the will” of the Glanton gang and Judge Holden’s murderous subculture, as demonstrated by the kid’s “acts of fraternal mercy” towards his comrades (28). Looking at *Blood Meridian* as the apocryphal Book of Genesis in McCarthy’s oeuvre, Manuel Broncano sees the kid as a “toy in the hands of an angry narrator,” who uses the kid to convey a counter-allegory that subverts the traditional elements of biblical narrative (51). Largely denied the autonomy to express himself, the kid is used to portray an allegorical hero who descends into a physical and spiritual wilderness, much like Mary Rowlandson’s captivity narrative, with the hallmark elements of desolation, suffering, yet some means of spiritual guidance (52-53). However, for all the kid’s toil and spiritual growth apropos of biblical narrative, he is ultimately alone and inevitably vanquished in a violent, inscrutable world – where any signifier that would signify morality, God, redemption, or salvation are mere symbolic ruins bereft of spiritual substance (41).

These scholarly interpretations are insightful examples that give meaning to the “interpretive void” that is the kid (Warren 3). However, what is less interpretive is the source material from which McCarthy contrived the kid. Like many of the events and characters portrayed in *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy’s kid derives from Samuel Chamberlain’s autobiography, *My Confession*,

specifically from Chamberlain's portrayal of himself. Chamberlain's tale begins in 1848 at Boston, Massachusetts – the Eastern U.S. – when, at the age of sixteen, he leaves his home to traverse the southwest and northern Mexico by virtue of joining the U.S. military. Eventually, Chamberlain deserts the military and joins a gang of scalp hunters led by John Joel Glanton and involving a Judge Holden. McCarthy virtually mirrors this plot for the kid in *Blood Meridian*. In 1847, the kid is also a teenager when he runs away from his home in the Eastern U.S., and he travels to the southwest whereon he joins the U.S. military's Captain White, who leads a filibustering expedition into northern Mexico. Although the kid does not desert the U.S. filibusters, he eventually joins the Glanton gang, who, like the Glanton gang of Chamberlain's account, are also disbanded by a Yuma ambush. Moreover, the kid's knack for risking his life to help his fellow comrades, the clemency he reserves for the gang's victims (Sepich 136), and his status as an ideological outsider to the gang's collective mission are all features adapted from Chamberlain's narrativized self (Sepich 3).

However, that both the plot of the kid's story and the few articulated features of his character derive from Chamberlain by no means diminishes the significance of what he represents. For another meaningful interpretation about the kid that follows an examination of *Blood Meridian* according to its palpable tensions is that he reflects a method for negotiating tension. Such tension is borne from the kid's resistance to the physical violence of his surrounding world and its most salient expression – that is, Judge Holden. Moreover, that the kid negotiates this tension amongst these dissonant elements is indicated by the change in his character from the novel's outset to its conclusion. For the kid is initially shown to behave in accordance with the violence of his surrounding world. He is depicted in the early chapters of *Blood Meridian* as an arsonist and murderer, who feels “mankind itself vindicated” as he stands over his victims (McCarthy 4).

At this point, he is the perfect candidate for Judge Holden's game of war, a specimen fit for genocide. Yet, by the denouement of the novel, he is no longer depicted as such. Instead, he appears compassionate, even demonstrating a sense of altruism. Although it is impossible to verify via the kid's thoughts and emotions that he experiences a state of tension, as the narrative voice rarely "enter[s] the mind" of the story's characters, the contrast between the kid's actions at the beginning and the end of the novel mirrors a process of undergoing tension and, throughout the kid's journey, its negotiation (Schopen 182). For in his brief stint with Captain White's filibusters, his travels with the Glanton gang, and his desperate attempt to escape Judge Holden's pursuit across a Californian desert – events which effectively comprise the central third portion of the novel – the kid demonstrates a pattern of behavior that recalls Festinger's original discussion on reducing dissonance between two conflicting ideas; for the kid appears to negate the violent influences of his surrounding world and the judge by changing his behavior to affirm a non-violent state of affairs.

As the most overt element of the novel, the physical violence of *Blood Meridian* is not only a conditioning force on the kid's life and journey, but an eventual, overarching dissonant element relative to his character. As argued in chapter 3, daytime in the southwest means the "malevolent" sun bakes the living who dare traverse the desert plains, and the frigid nights bring all living creatures into solidarity, the common experience of which is insufferable numbness (McCarthy 45). Storms lash the sky with whips of lightning borne "out of the absolute night like some demon kingdom summoned up" (47). There are raging bulls, a blood-sucking bat, a pig-eyed bear, as well as an abundance of scavenging wolf packs and carrion birds that gladly feed on the remains of humans and livestock alike, as though the only nourishment for the wildlife of *Blood Meridian* is hostility and death. Illness alone seals the fate of several U.S. filibusters,

blood loss leads to Sproule's gangrenous demise, and the image of burnt-out landscapes and trees "assassinated" by passing storms are sights to behold throughout the Glanton gang's adventures (187-188). From the weather patterns and landscapes to the habits of wildlife and the shortcomings of human biology, violence is the most common expression of *Blood Meridian's* physical world.

However, as also argued in chapter 3, the physical violence depicted in *Blood Meridian* encompasses the social conditions that idealize violence. In the novel, violence is not merely shown as an aggressive animalistic impulse but an all-too-human enterprise. It is the cherished method of expedience by which the indigenous, Mexican, and American factions contesting the southwest rely on to achieve their own goals. Captain White's ideological duty to bring "liberation to a dark and troubled land" is a pathetic veneer over his desire to appropriate from Mexico what he believes will be "[f]ine grassland. [. . .] A land rich in minerals, in gold and silver," and he means to do this with the threat of violence in the form of an armed filibuster unit (34). Governor Angel Trias' bounty on native scalps is the promotion of violence as a means to ensure his governance over the city of Chihuahua, an ironic decision, given that he is unable to control the same scalp hunters from debauching the city and harassing its citizenry to such severity that the latter declare their preference for the indigenous who raid them (171). Violence is obviously central to the Glanton gang's wealth, and, as argued at length in the previous chapter, Judge Holden sanctifies violence, for he believes it is the only way man may achieve agency over the world. Moreover, as evidenced by the Comanches and Apache, there are indigenous sub-groups who find recourse to pillaging settlements and travelers for resources; however, the raiders responsible not only brutalize their targets, but also leave behind grave, yet creative, warnings for future travelers – a circle of severed heads, a tree of dead babies, or the

roasted carcasses of enemy scouts. One must also remember that the Yuma leaders are fooled by Glanton and Judge Holden into believing that, with the aid of the gang, they will violently usurp Lincoln's Ferry Crossing and thereby assume control of a key trade route for goods. In short, the physical violence depicted in *Blood Meridian* entails more than man's inherent inclination towards violence and the destructive nature of the world's physical systems. Violence is a cherished activity that constitutes the social conditions of the novel; it is the prime activity for man's own endeavors, be they political power, economic wealth, or the existential desire for a sense of agency.

Relative to the kid, the physical violence of his surrounding world, in a naturalistic fashion, conditions his life. This is made evident as soon as the novel begins. As noted in the opening page of *Blood Meridian*, his "mother dead these fourteen years did incubate in her own bosom the creature who would carry her off" (3). The labor of childbirth, a naturally violent process, denies the kid a nurturing mentor figure for his childhood, a role his alcoholic father fails to fulfill as he spends his time in a drunken stupor, quoting "from poets whose names are now lost" (3). The narrative voice points out the kid will "not see again the freezing kitchen house [. . .] The firewood, the washpots," specific artifacts of his household life that suggest he was responsible for tending to both his and his father's needs (4). As such, the kid's childhood is marked by a physical and emotional neglect, where he must fend for himself without even an idea of his mother for personal consolation, as "[t]he father never speaks her name, the child does not know it" (3). Violence is present from the outset of the kid's personal history, and it is most saliently expressed in the narrative of his early history as the death of his mother, for which he is blamed as the "creature" responsible for "carry[ing] her off" (3).

Yet, throughout the early portions of the kid's journey, he adheres to the physical violence of his surrounding world, as he initially embodies without reservation the persona of a murderous creature. In New Orleans, he ventures to fight men of "[a]ll races, all breeds," and he feels "mankind itself vindicated" when he stands over the bodies of his bloodied, defeated opponents (4). At Nacogdoches, he instigates a fight with Toadvine by kicking him in the jaw, only to thereafter join him in brutalizing a man named Sidney and burning down the hotel where he resides, thus, forging their comradery in bloodshed and arson. Afterward, in San Antonio de Bexar, the kid smashes two bottles of liquor over an angry bartender's head, and then proceeds to execute the beaten man by cramming jagged glass into his eye (25). In the early events of the kid's journey southwest, it seems as though he is committed to being the most violent creature, showing that, at this point, the physical violence of his surrounding world is not only a conditioning force on his life, but also an element of his environment to which he accords.

However, it is worthwhile to consider that the kid's adherence to violence is by virtue of his naive submission to the influence of violence as manifest through his childhood neglect and adolescent development. Early in the novel, the narrator provides a rare insight into the kid's teenage mind prior to leaving for his journey, revealing "in him broods already a taste for mindless violence" (3). The origin of this "taste" that "broods" very well lies in the kid's adolescence, a belligerent impulse excited by a biological process of development that shares "a genetic heritage [. . .] with apes and wolves," and which lies beyond the uneducated kid's control (Owens 4). Given the general absence of a mentor figure who could have helped the kid better understand and manage his impulses, it reasonably follows that the kid's behavior is largely the result of his naïve submission to such impulses, the visible manifestations of which are acts of violence.

These notions about the kid are not meant to argue his innocence, but only to point out the early consonance between the inherent violence of the physical world in *Blood Meridian* and the kid's life as a phenomenon of the same world. Violence is the salient condition that shapes him through both the deprivation of a nurturing figure in his childhood and the unavoidable urges that are simply a product of his aging. Both are expressions of violence that cohere with the overarching condition of physical violence, and which substantiate a reading of the kid as a product of his environment rather than a fully conscious agent over his own social and ethical development. To note, this way of conceiving the early representation of the kid and his character may allow one to surmise that he is a naturalistic protagonist. As per Donald Pizer's description of what early American literary naturalists strived to illustrate through their protagonists, the kid veritably represents "the poor – in education, intellect, and worldly goods" – who is "indeed pushed and forced" by his neglected upbringing and yields to his "instinctive needs that are not amenable to moral suasion or rational argument" (20). Moreover, that violence is the condition that influences his circumstances and behavior early in his life perfectly takes after the rhetorical use of violence by early American naturalists. For instance, according to Donna Campbell's analysis of Stephen Crane's slum tales like *Maggie: A Girl of the Street* or *A Dark Brown Dog*, violence is depicted as a salient feature of the naturalistic protagonists' household life that not only serves to condition their daily experience, but also leads them to their tragic demise (501). With the kid, violence surely conditions the early experiences of his life, showing that he is a youthful subject at the mercy of a violent world that is even expressed in his history and impulses, and which, like a protagonist from a naturalistic tale, serve to further immerse him in the violent conditions of his surrounding world.

For the historical and biological manifestations of violence in the kid's life lead to his immersion in the violent social conditions of the southwest. Whether knowingly or not, the kid has been exposed to such social conditions since his youth. His early witnessing of the "Blacks in the fields, lank and stooped, their fingers spiderlike among the bolls of cotton," foregrounds the conditions of slavery in the state of Tennessee (McCarthy 4). In addition, that the kid's "folk are known for hewers of wood and drawers of water," despite the reality that his father has been a school master, suggests that the kid's family may be discriminated by others as an ethnic minority, for such menial jobs were socially construed as fit for only immigrants (Broncano 38). Yet, his actions in San Antonio de Bexar truly begin his entanglement in the novel's violent social conditions. Found by an army recruiter looking for the "feller" that "knocked in that Mexer's head," the kid is introduced to Captain White, who looks to appropriate the kid for a filibustering campaign (29). At the prospect of a new saddle, horse, and rifle, the kid naively accepts Captain White's offer, unaware that he has inadvertently agreed to enter the geopolitical conflict of the southwest, where he will not fight the occasional drunkard but confront "[t]he wrath of God" that "was hid a million years before men were" (29). The kid crosses the Rio del Norte into the "howling wilderness" of Mexico, where the full reality of the violent social conditions to which he has committed himself first manifests as a "horde from a hell more horrible yet than the brimstone land of Christian reckoning" – a Comanche raiding party, who before his eyes hack, chop, stab, scalp, and sodomize his fellow filibusters in a carnival of madness and gore (53).

It is at this point when the physical violence of *Blood Meridian's* universe and the kid begin to become dissonant, adding to the tension felt between the reader and the violence of the novel by germinating from within the story itself a sense of tension between the kid and the state of

affairs in his surrounding world. This tension begins with the kid's subtly noted sense of terror at witnessing a degree of unprecedented violence unfold before his eyes and the immediate concern he demonstrates for his fellow wounded filibuster. After a "drove of arrows" rattled through White's filibusters, and the Comanches ambushed their unit along the flanks, the kid unexpectedly sank with his wounded horse to the ground where he "fumbled with his shotpouch" (53). At this point in the novel, the kid has been a violent creature and seen his share of bloody skirmishes, but he has never been at the mercy of an experienced group of mounted warriors who tear through their enemy with pure volition. Despite the kid's history of violence, his fumbling with his ammunition betrays that he is shaken by the carnage around him. Nevertheless, upon seeing "a man near him [. . .] with an arrow hanging out of his neck," the kid's first instinct is to reach "for the bloody hoop-iron point" so he may remove the arrow (53). This is a subtle yet key detail that contrasts with the kid's so far violent character. Rather than defaulting to his violent disposition by attacking the nearest Comanche, and therefore continuing the consonance between his behavior and the physically violent conditions encompassing his life, the kid's initial instinct is to act in a contrary manner by helping his fellow man.

This willingness to help reappears in the case of Sproule, as the kid deliberately tries to help him survive. As miraculous survivors of the Comanche's ambush, the kid and Sproule are left to traverse the desert plains and suffer from dehydration, freezing nights, and, in the case of Sproule, a gangrenous wound that will prove fatal. Amidst the physically violent conditions of "an enemy country far from home," a logic of survival obviously dictates that the wounded and increasingly ill Sproule is a burden that threatens to slow the kid's movements and consume the scarce resources needed to stay alive (65). However, the kid accompanies Sproule, at times looking out for a place where they may rest and even sharing a precious supply of piñole for

food. Eventually, Sproule submits to the logic of survival once he hears a group of Mexican riders will soon overtake them, going as far as to tell the kid in a defeated attitude, “Go on [. . .] Save yourself” (63). However, rather than abandoning Sproule for the sake of his own survival, or deeming him a burden out of frustration, the kid remains silent and waits with Sproule in a foreboding suspense for the riders who could easily slay them (63).

For all the kid’s belligerence during the early part of his journey, he begins to demonstrate a sense of compassion, as though the terror of witnessing the unprecedented brutality of the Comanche’s ambush awakened him from his naïve, adolescent disposition towards violence to realize the terrible suffering caused by those committed to violence. However, as per the unforgiving nature of McCarthy’s southwest, Sproule ultimately succumbs to his wounds, and, although the kid begins to demonstrate a sense of compassion, his earlier affiliation with Captain White’s filibusters nevertheless codifies him in the geopolitical struggle of the southwest as an American imperialist. So, upon being discovered by Mexican authorities, he is inevitably arrested and imprisoned in Chihuahua City, where the bond he forged with Toadvine in arson and murder at Nacogdoches will yield its karmic returns, as their reuniting in prison results in the kid’s involuntary recruitment into the Glanton gang under the guise of a “seasoned indiantkiller” (79). From thereon, his individual person is wholly subsumed into the violent subculture of the Glanton Gang as directed by John Glanton and influenced by Judge Holden. A subculture of which, as suggested by the hunting down and killing of the deserter, Chambers, the kid cannot simply leave.

Yet, it is by virtue of being recruited into the Glanton gang that the kid’s capacity for compassion forges another sense of tension in the novel, for by being part of the gang he comes into immediate contact with Judge Holden, whose high valuation of war and violence makes him

a dissonant element relative to notions of compassion and non-violence (i.e., the kid's behavior). Initially, the judge is only an enigmatic figure in the kid's journey, dramatically appearing to rouse a mob to chase Reverend Green and then later appearing in Nacogdoches, gazing and smiling at the kid in approval of the latter's work at setting alight a hotel. Once recruited into the Glanton gang, the kid is then a source of the judge's curious amusement, as he is occasionally seen watching the kid, smiling as always, and even requests a fortuneteller to read aloud the kid's fate while he laughs silently and bends "slightly the better to see the kid" (94). While it is only until much later that the judge divulges the sanctity of war, it is presumably true that his philosophical outlook on existence prejudices his scrutiny of the kid and his behavior. For, to the judge, the wounded Davy Brown who requests aid in removing an arrow embedded in his leg is comedic; "I'll write a policy on your life against every mishap save the noose," he tells Brown prior to chuckling in his face, and, appropriately so, given that the judge will later effect Brown's death by hanging. However, whereas the judge chuckles at Brown's suffering, the kid renders him assistance, an act the judge must have witnessed and found bothersome (163).

Thereafter, it is no surprise to see the judge goes on to test the kid's allegiance to the violent dictums of the Glanton gang, as his watchful gaze leads the kid to choose the red-tasseled arrow that indicates he must kill his fellow wounded scalp hunter, Shelby (205). However, fully aware of the wrath the kid might rouse in Glanton were he to discover that the kid did not carry out his task, the kid nevertheless decides to try carrying Shelby to cover and even refills Shelby's flask with his own water to increase the wounded man's odds of survival (208-209). The kid's behavior fails the judge's test and runs contrary to the violent expectations of the gang, both of which cohere with the physically violent universe of the novel. To add to this dissonance between the kid, the judge, and the physical violence of his surroundings, he then opts to help

another of his fellow men. Shortly after helping Shelby, and while pursued by the Mexican army, the kid rides upon the stranded scalp hunter, Tate. Told to “[g]o on if you want,” the kid instead opts to help Tate and his lame horse catch up with the gang (210).

To Elisabeth Anderson, the kid’s moments of compassion are “problematic” acts of mercy that, while revealing he “has evolved into something more” than an effigy of violence, indicate his struggle “between the mindless violence necessary to his merger in the ‘communal soul’ of the [Glanton gang], and his own developing conscience” (102). In addition, William Dean Clement reads the kid’s actions as “generous and life-endangering assistance” that demonstrates his morality, and, more importantly, “countermands the judge’s theory of war,” for “[i]f everyone helps the weak survive, then the judge’s process of ascending the survival ladder and establishing control becomes more and more difficult” (40-41). Both scholars accurately point out the moral opposition between the kid’s moments of compassion and the violent subculture of his peers; however, both scholars undercut the significance of kid’s transgressive acts of compassion and the tension they generate in the novel by interpreting their meaning only in relation to the Glanton gang and Judge Holden. For in the grand circumstance of physical violence that pervades the kid’s life and surrounding world, the Glanton gang and the judge are only salient, social expressions of this circumstance. As the Glanton gang’s and Judge Holden’s expectations for violence increase, so too increases the kid’s tendency to act compassionately, which increases the dissonance between both parties and, therefore, contributes to the overall sense of tension in the novel.

However, in kid’s climactic moments with the judge and Tobin, such tension reaches its zenith, and the kid clearly reflects a method for negotiating this tension. Running from the Yumas who annihilated much of the Glanton gang, Toadvine and the kid eventually take refuge

with Tobin in the wells of Alamo Mucho, where they are later joined by the judge and the idiot. Like “some scurrilous king stripped of his vestiture and driven together with his fool” (282), the naked judge and his idiot situate themselves at the floor of a well to drink its water, while Toadvine, Tobin, and the kid inversely stand atop the well like some “rival band” (284). Soon after, the judge tries to tempt the kid into selling his gun, the only weapon available amongst these forlorn remnants of the Glanton gang. Having witnessed Toadvine join the judge at the bottom of the well after selling his hat for gold and meat, as though at the prospect of wealth and food Toadvine was tricked into selling his soul to the judge, Tobin hisses at the kid to take the pistol and begs him to “[d]o him. [. . .] Do it. He is naked. He is unarmed. God’s blood, do you think you’ll best him any other way” (285)? Yet, in response, the kid merely “put the pistol in his belt” and turned away to “set out west” (286). Provided the opportunity to kill the judge in cold blood, and even begged to so by Tobin with the conviction that murder is the only answer to how one may defeat the judge, the kid decides not to execute him, an opportunity Tobin claims the kid will “get no second chance” (285).

However, the kid does get a second chance – even a third – yet he remains non-violent. As the judge relentlessly pursues the kid and Tobin across the Californian desert, the two exhausted men find the opportunity to hide amongst the bones of dead mules, hoping to evade the judge as he passes. Yet, as the judge passed, Tobin “seized [the kid’s] arm and hissed and gestured toward the passing judge,” an indication that the kid should assassinate the judge while he is within firing range (298). However, the kid “lowered the hammer of the pistol” and put it “in his belt,” once again prompting Tobin to say he will “get no such a chance as that again” (298). Aware of the men’s attempt to hide, and perhaps amused by what he surmises is Tobin’s failed assassination plot, the judge calls out to the kid, “I’ve passed before your gunsights twice this

hour and will pass a third time. Why not show yourself?” (299). His offer to “show yourself” is not a serious request that the kid reveal his presence, but a rhetorical gesture the judge mockingly uses to show Tobin that the kid is unable to reveal himself as a killer (299). “No assassin,” the judge says of the kid, “[a]nd no partisan either” (299). Tobin, the expriest, who has until this point in the novel been the closest the kid has to a spiritual mentor, educating him on the God who has “an uncommon love for the common man,” naively expects the kid to accord with the physical violence of their surround world by committing cold-blooded murder (123). This is something the kid is unable to do, and it is the judge who ultimately points out the nature of the kid’s character as observed throughout his time watching him – “There’s a flawed place in the fabric of your heart. [. . .] You alone reserved in your soul some corner of clemency for the heathen” (299). Shortly thereafter, the judge even confirms the kid’s unwillingness to kill by passing “once more across the boneyard,” where the kid lay silently (300).

While the expriest Tobin considers the kid’s inability to murder the judge a grievous error, the kid’s persistent refusal to kill is a clear negotiation of the tension between himself, the judge, and the broader condition of violence that dominates the southwest. This is especially clear given that the judge is the most articulate and potent expression of violence in the kid’s journey. As discussed in the previous chapter, the judge contrives of a philosophy that presumes war is *the* fundamental force that drives all of existence forward, and, by participating in war, an individual uses violence to assume a self-justified authority to dictate what does and does not exist. Of all the expressions of physical violence in the kid’s life – the death of his mother, his own adolescent impulses, Captain White’s filibusters, the Comanches, and the Glanton gang – the judge is the only one who fabricates a coherent ideology that reduces all existence to a series of violent conflicts and, thus, legitimizes violence. Although kid may lack a formal education, the

significance of the judge's words are not lost on the kid as though he were a mindless belligerent, as Barclay Owens asserts (30). For just as the judge is seen watching the kid throughout their travels, so too is the kid described as "watching the judge" on several occasions (McCarthy 243). The kid has seen the judge sketch and destroy artifacts, flora, and fauna, and he has seen the judge lecture with the intent to turn those around him into "proselytes of the new order" under his intellectual control, whereupon he will "[laugh] at them for fools" as they expend their lives in the game of war (116). In his time riding with the Glanton gang, the watchful kid has "done studied [the judge]," so, when he confronts the judge, the kid is aware that he confronts the most powerful expression and proponent of physical violence in all his southwestern odyssey, a character who embodies and promotes the very conditions at odds with the kid's own sense of compassion (122).

To kill the judge, as Clement posits, would surely be the kid's "physical validation of his philosophy," for it would mean that the kid must participate in war by using violence as a means to resolve his confrontation with the judge (48). To do this would be tantamount to validating war as the fundamental force guiding existence, thereby defining the kid as a mere participant in this guidance. By refusing to kill the judge, as Clement further asserts, the kid "tries to prove the judge wrong, to live another way" that does not rely on violence and war (48). Yet, the kid's persistent refusal to kill the judge also reflects his method for negotiating the tension between himself, the judge, and the physically violent conditions of his surrounding world. For both these conditions that hitherto defined the trajectory of the kid's journey, along with the judge's philosophy of war and his expectation that the kid be a murderer, are the dissonant elements relative to the kid because they altogether encourage that he adheres to violence. Even if he killed the judge, which would once again make him consonant with the nature of his surrounding

world, the kid could never completely eliminate the dissonance between himself and his environment. So, to reduce this dissonance and, therefore, negotiate the apparent tension, he negates the violent state of affairs through his non-violent behavior. The kid, to use Leon Festinger's words regarding cognitive dissonance, attempts "the possibility of reducing the total dissonance with some element [i.e., non-violence] by reducing the proportion of dissonant as compared with consonant relations involving the element" (22). Relative to the kid, Festinger's idea is reflected in each non-violent behavior the kid exhibits with the judge – the holstering of his pistol, his decision to walk away, and his silence – which altogether reduce the predominance of violence as a condition of the kid's surroundings. Thus, the kid essentially negotiates the tension between himself, the judge, and the physical violence of *Blood Meridian's* universe by changing his behavior to reduce the violence encouraged by the latter two parties.

This method of negotiation is thoroughly established when the kid refuses to come forth and accept the judge's embrace. During the judge's surprise visit to the imprisoned kid at San Diego, the judge reaches through the prison bars and implores the kid to come closer out of the shadows, where he may "speak softly" and "touch" the kid (306-307). However, the kid remains in the shadows, standing "against the far wall" opposite of the judge (306). As the judge extends his arms to the kid as a final offer for the latter to repent for his "flawed" heart, and to embrace an existence committed to war by the judge's side, the kid refuses to come forth (299). In doing so, he fully negates the last opportunity to accord with violence under the auspices of the judge, a negation the kid may reasonably consider the final act in his life, given how he believes he will soon be mistakenly hanged as the criminal who conspired with the Yumas to massacre those at Lincoln's Ferry Crossing (306). Yet, this act of negation symbolizes the complete change in the kid's once belligerent character, as, on the day of his expected execution, a Spanish priest

baptizes the kid, and he is set free into the streets of San Diego (308). The kid's final, climactic negation of his violent world results in a baptism – a symbolic purification of the kid's soul that follows in the wake of his acts of resistance to the violent temptations of his surroundings. From thereon, the reader arrives at the denouement of the novel, where the kid, "as one who had got onto terms with life beyond what his years could account for," is no longer to be considered another violent phenomenon that takes after his environment, as he helps safeguard the passage of travelers and offers aid to an old woman back to her people (312).

To note, one could theorize the kid's method for negotiating tension is a reaction to a sense of tension he feels between the moral content of his character and the violence of his surrounding world. In refusing to participate in the violence of his environment, especially as encouraged by the subculture of the Glanton gang and the judge, it is as though the kid resists being defined solely in accordance to violence. As such, it appears as if the kid is addressing a sense of cognitive dissonance that "is greatest and clearest when it involves not just any two cognitions but, rather, a cognition about the self and a piece of our behavior that violates that self-concept," as Elliot Aronson describes ("The Return of the Repressed" 305). Participating in acts of violence may very well violate a desired notion the kid has of himself, albeit a notion that the narrative voice never elucidates for the reader. Nevertheless, an alternative way of considering the kid as a reflection of a method for negotiating tension between violence and the kid's own self-concept is, perhaps, that the kid's non-violent behaviors negate any consideration of himself as a man of violence. As such, the kid's behavior allows him to "preserve a morally good sense of self," although, again, any notions the kid maintains about himself and morality is never articulated, as is the psychological content of his character (305).

Nevertheless, whether in a more psychological respect the kid's behavior is regarded as a confrontation of the violence of his surrounding world and the judge for the sake of his own self-concept or, in a more behavioral analysis, the kid merely reflects a method of negotiating tension in a manner similar Leon Festinger's description, the kid engages directly the dissonant elements that surround him. Thus, one way of interpreting the kid's story is as a remarkable struggle with the overarching circumstance of violence. In a manner that takes after American naturalism, this circumstance conditions the kid's history and early behavior, entrapping him in bloody social conditions that encourage him to define himself as a product of his violent surrounding world. However, the kid gradually grows at odds with such conditions, especially as the judge becomes more of a presence in his journey. Contrary to his environment and the judge, he strives to act compassionately, promoting a sense of non-violence. To note, such actions relinquish the kid from being wholly determined by his violent conditions, showing that McCarthy breaks away from the American naturalist tradition of depicting protagonists whose choices are solely determined by their environment. Yet, his actions ultimately reflect a method of negotiating the tension between himself, his conditions, and the judge that engages the dissonant elements and negates them by means of his own behavior.

CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

What this thesis has proven is that, in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, both Judge Holden and the kid reflect different methods of negotiating tension within the novel. In the introductory chapter, qualified definitions for tension and negotiation are given, and they provide for my analysis a loose theoretical framework by which to analyze features of the novel's fictional universe as well as the behaviors of the judge and the kid, respectively. Tension consists of a dissonance between one's knowledge, opinion, or ideas, especially regarding oneself and an element of their surroundings or behavior. Negotiation refers to the way one confronts and resolves tension. These definitions are inspired by the works of Leon Festinger, Elliot Aronson, and Claude Steele on the social psychological theory of cognitive dissonance. Yet, because readers are never granted direct access to the thoughts and feelings of the kid and the judge, the tension revolving around these characters is only considered *apparent*, and their method of negotiation is only inferred via analyses of their behaviors. Nevertheless, the introductory chapter provides the theoretical framework by which to claim that both Judge Holden and the kid reflect different methods of negotiating tension.

Chapter one lays the foundation for reading *Blood Meridian* in terms of the dissonant elements that contribute to the apparent tensions involving the kid and the judge. The novel is an American naturalist text, as McCarthy employs key features of the tradition that support a reading of the universe of the novel as antagonistic towards the characters. Moreover, chapter one shows that there is a dominant narrative voice from which one may understand in detail the antagonistic character of *Blood Meridian*'s universe and, therefore, that this universe is a discordant element in the apparent tension of Judge Holden and the kid. Chapter two elucidates the what makes of this universe antagonistic, primarily by examining the narrator's descriptions

of the novel's various settings. Violence, as the analysis of my thesis shows, permeates the universe of *Blood Meridian* in a physical and metaphysical sense.

Chapter three proves that, when examining the judge's words and deeds, he reflects a self-affirming method to negotiating tension. This is first suggested by the apparent tension between himself and the metaphysically violent character of his surrounding world. Threatened by notions of ignorance and determinism implied by metaphysical violence, the judge does not attempt to reconcile the possible veracity of these qualities on his existence; instead, he opts to ignore the dissonance of these ideas by affirming, through violence and war, that he is a free agent. This method is confirmed in his response to the tension between himself and the kid, as the latter is a most dissonant element by virtue of making salient the limits of the judge's agency over the world. Rather than strive to reconcile such limitation, the judge once again ignores it by affirming his agency through violence against the kid.

Lastly, in chapter 4 we see the kid illustrates another method of negotiation, mainly by way of engaging the dissonant elements of his apparent tension directly. Throughout the kid's journey with Captain White and the Glanton gang, he becomes increasingly discordant with the brutal, physically violent conditions of his surrounding world, an element of dissonance relative to the kid that is compounded by Judge Holden, who encourages the kid to adhere to violence. Caught in a palpable tension between his own growing compassion and the demand to become yet another violent phenomenon of a violent world, the kid engages this tension by rejecting an alliance with the judge and persistently refusing to participate in violence, behaviors which altogether negate the violent state of affairs that contribute to his tension.

Thus, my analysis makes quite evident that both the kid and the judge reflect distinct methods for negotiating tension. In the former, we see a method that acknowledges the influence

of dissonant elements, engages them directly, and takes personal responsibility for reconciling the apparent tension these elements evoke for oneself. In the latter, we also see a method that strives to avoid the salience of discordant elements by opting to affirm a preferred idea of oneself, thereby dismissing tension altogether. Given such findings, and my novel analysis of *Blood Meridian*, there are several implications for one's understanding of the novel and, most notably, its ending.

First and foremost, while a polyphony of voices are heard throughout *Blood Meridian*, the story is told from the point of view of a single narrator who, though detached from the story's events, is veritably concerned with telling it. This narrator administers the chronology of events and tailors the narratee's perception of the novel's fictional universe and the events within it. In addition, this narrative voice also determines which characters are heard, seen, and what they are permitted to say, momentarily delegating to them a provisional control of the narration until the narrator reassumes control over telling the story. The judge is occasionally given the chance to voice, in his own words, his philosophy of war or his thoughts on the order of the universe. The Reverend Green may sermonize with his evangelical flare, as opposed to being replaced by the indirect speech of the narrator, and the hermit is granted a moment to speak through his own idiolect of man's inherent evil. Yet, the kid is only permitted a few brief moments, aside from terse dialogue, where he can express himself. In short, one implication of my analysis is that *Blood Meridian* is a story told by a single narrator – a single center of enunciation from which several voices emerge, giving *Blood Meridian* the appearance of polyphony.

On a tangential note, examining the narrator's descriptions of the universe in *Blood Meridian* elucidates the key aesthetic features that highlight McCarthy's representation of the Old West. Whereas the American Western tradition often depicts the West as a harsh albeit picturesque

world, McCarthy's West is at times beautiful but always brutal. McCarthy's numerous southwestern landscapes share an atmosphere of hostility and death, be it through the presence of predatory creatures, treacherous terrain, an unrelenting sun, or a bone strewn waste; And any relief the reader feels when gazing upon a wonderous constellation, or a distant mountain range, is quickly unsettled by McCarthy's niche display of the West as a foreboding, surreal land where reality and grotesque illusion comingle. McCarthy's West is physically ruthless and ontologically opaque, features which not only make the novel's settings inherently antagonistic to characters, but also aesthetically replaces the traditional image of the twilight-hued southwest, so popular in American imagination, for an infernal West whose image is reminiscent of Hieronymus Bosch's sublime, nightmarish hellscapes.

Relative to the kid, *Blood Meridian* may be read as a proto-linguistic *bildungsroman*. In following the kid's gradual moral development, the novel makes evident that his journey is a process of his own maturation. Yet, his maturation is sustained by first-hand experience rather than any linguistic instruction bestowed upon him by a text or mentor. His moral development begins with the terror of witnessing Comanches tear his comrades apart, and it is augmented with his experience of Sproule's feebleness, Davy Brown's unanswered calls for aid, Shelby's despair at realizing his imminent death, and Tate's helplessness. In each scenario, these experiences of suffering, along with the opportunity to either aid or abandon his fellow men, serves as the hands-on instructional material from which the kid grows, action by action, into the man who will later safeguard pilgrims and offer to escort an old woman to safety. One may say Tobin is the kid's mentor, instructing him according to the remnants of his own Judeo-Christian morality derived from biblical text. However, the kid's maturation begins well before he meets Tobin, and Tobin ultimately supports the judge's attempts at tempting the kid to commit cold-blooded

murder, making him a poor mentor whom the kid easily ignores while tested by the judge. The kid's development cannot be credited to linguistic instruction, either from the written symbol or the spoken word, but to his raw experience of the southwest. Therefore, *Blood Meridian* may be read as a proto-linguistic *bildungsroman*.

Lastly, my analysis offers new interpretations of *Blood Meridian's* ending, which altogether exemplify the calculated ambiguity with which McCarthy composed the novel's conclusion. At the center of this ambiguity is the final image of the judge, triumphantly dancing and claiming he will never die. Read pessimistically, this image represents not only the judge's victory, but also the eternal preponderance of the self-affirming method of negotiation he embodies. This is an inherently tragic conclusion, for it affirms that the kid, who we see struggle to mature into the man who represents an alternative, less pernicious way of confronting the discordance of his surroundings, is ultimately overpowered by the judge and the method he represents. Based on such a reading, *Blood Meridian* may then be regarded as a cautionary allegorical tale, one in which McCarthy warns us of the predominance of the judge's method in our own world, as exemplified by the rather crimson color of American history, both recent and dated. Read more personally, *Blood Meridian* is also McCarthy's illustration of what the devil of our heart and mind looks like, and more often than not prevails.

Yet, in a more optimistic reading, the judge's triumphant dance is considerably his most boisterous act of self-affirmation, overcompensating for the fact that, by eliminating the kid, he immortalizes him as the one who has incontrovertibly proven the judge is no true suzerain over the earth. The judge makes "an idol of perfection" out of the kid, whose claim to greatness is in never submitting to the judge's authority and ideological narrative of war, thereby inscribing the limitations of the judge's agency in history (145). Seen so, *Blood Meridian* may be regarded as

an allegory championing the kid and, by extension, the method of negotiating tension that he represents over the method the judge reflects. While the kid's elimination from the story at the hands of the judge is tragic, the kid and his method for reconciling the discordance of his surrounding world is a heroic ideal that, though rare, promises a better way of living than does the judge and his method. Ultimately, however one decides to interpret the novel's conclusion, McCarthy is an American author whose narratives are a rich weave of philosophical, literary, and historical material. *Blood Meridian* exemplifies this; yet, as my thesis essentially argues, it also exemplifies a literary work of art that challenges readers to reflect on patterns of behavior that both express the apparent turmoil of one's character and the way these behaviors, in response, impact the world – for better or worse.

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