

19th-Century Frontier Ideology in *Blood Meridian*:
Cormac McCarthy's Treatment of History and Judge Holden's Monologue



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ABSTRACT

Cormac McCarthy's historical novel, *Blood Meridian* (1985), takes place on the U.S. - Mexico borderlands in the first couple years following the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe de Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican-American War. The book serves as an extensive historiographic challenge to dominant and unconsciously nationalistic conceptions of American historical and cultural identity in relation to the American West. This thesis seeks to locate and enlarge on these challenges through a close literary and character analysis of the text. Close reading and interpretation is done through the critical lenses of cultural studies and historiography, and is focused on 19th-century American ideology defining the period during which *Blood Meridian* takes place.

The setting and ideology of *Blood Meridian* simultaneously mocks, exaggerates, distorts, or renounces the thinking advanced by frontier historian, Frederick Jackson Turner, in his 1893 essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History"—an essay, which has had huge and lasting impacts on writings of Western American history, and on the broader cultural consciousness of American identity. McCarthy interrogates the very nature of historical officialdom, and the problems attending any continuous subscription to or claim of ownership to history. He does so primarily through Judge Holden—*Blood Meridian's* outspoken, literate, and philosophic-minded antagonist, who competes for the role of protagonist—both in the book in terms of the kid, and in the universe at large by way of his efforts to seize control and ownership of all modes of representation, especially history. The judge is more American than America, and an exaggeration, or dramatization, of those ideologies giving definition to his actions and intent. In a broad ranging attempt to isolate what, if any particular, version of American history or character Cormac

McCarthy has proposed in *Blood Meridian*, an analysis of the judge’s character is crucial, and part of the broader aims of this thesis as well.

CONTENTS

By Way of Introduction.....4

Blood Meridian Vis-á-Vis Frederick Jackson Turner.....14

Judge Holden.....26

Judge Holden Cont’d.....47

The Kid Vis-á-Vis Judge Holden.....54

A Circle of Conclusion: The Epilogue.....63

Bibliography.....65

BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION



Only now is the child finally divested of all that he has been. His origins are become remote as his destiny and *not again in all the world's turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will* or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay. ...He sleeps on the deck, a *pilgrim* among others.¹
-Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*

Never again can such an opportunity come to the sons of men. [The frontier] was unique, and the thing is so near us, so much a part of our lives, that we do not even yet comprehend its full significance. The existence of this land of opportunity has made America the goal of idealists from the days of the *Pilgrim Fathers*.² -Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History"



Immediately at its onset, *Blood Meridian* evokes the exceptional direction of "West" inherent in the formation of an American identity by focusing on a boat pointed for Texas that carries the kid (at this point still "the child") on board. In this first depiction of a "pioneer," how strikingly and obviously similar to Frederick Jackson Turner's own words nearly a century earlier in his famous frontier thesis. Cormac McCarthy's conflation of the kid's westward pilgrimage, which overwrites the idealized image of Turner's frontiersman, is hard to miss; yet as the book progresses this conflation and tone of agreement, comes to reveal itself as something closer to a mockery than any romantic regurgitation of Western ideals. The kid is an orphan, but not in any recognizable cultural or spiritual sense in keeping with traditional American exceptionalist thinking. There is nothing definitively new about his America—no quality of Adamic innocence pertaining to a Divinely Manifested sense of direction and purpose. The kid, who lacks any agency

¹ Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* (New York: Random House, 1985), 4-5.

² Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," (Primary Sources: Workshops in American History), <http://www.learner.org/workshops/primarysources/corporations/docs/turner.html> (accessed March 22, 2011).

or pioneering spirit, let alone a single thought regarding his condition or his future, is doomed on the contrary to wander, and to find himself swept up in the violent trade of scalp hunting as the youngest member of the Glanton gang. His individualism is largely checked by his obscurity amid the gang and, particularly, the all-encompassing voice of Judge Holden.

In fact, the kid's tendency to disappear almost entirely from large sections of *Blood Meridian*, only to be summoned into visibility again as if named back into being by the power of the judge's own surveillance over him, is one aspect of the novel that will require further consideration. Although the book certainly traces the origins and end of the kid closely, Holden's omnipresence over the kid and the broader text in general seems in disagreement with a general consensus that the kid is the protagonist and main character of *Blood Meridian*. Furthermore, the relationship between the judge and the kid, being one in which the judge is able to name, call attention to, and basically by the power of articulation write or un-write the kid's presence is, at least in certain instances, microcosmic of the relationship of history to the world at large. All war may in part be understood as a claim to history. So too, the complexity and uniqueness of the war between the judge and the kid is understandable in terms of one who is with agency, voice, and textual power versus one who is controlled ultimately by another, mute by the circumstances of his own illiteracy, and ignorant of the authority of representation to control the historical significance of his fate.

The Glanton gang itself is unofficial and unsanctioned except by the terms of private hire, and these terms are dismissed at the first sign of opportunity. Contracted to serve the Indian genocidal aims of select Mexican states—namely, Sonora and Chihuahua—the gang quickly recognizes the larger profit at their disposal when they begin to cash in the scalps of the states' own rural peasants. The gang—like the kid, both before and after his time serving under Glanton—is

also without marked direction or course of conduct as the widespread mongering of its collective body moves, anti-linearly, about the uncharted, un-signified desert of the Southwest. Their movements, alternately north and south, are without much distinction between borders. The majority of *Blood Meridian*, however, takes place in the first couple years following the 1848 signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe de Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican-American War.

In stark contrast to the heroic, nationalistic images of Turner's frontier, the members of the Glanton gang are described as mere survivors who sleep at night "...with their alien hearts beating in the sand like pilgrims exhausted upon the face of the planet Anareta, clutched to a namelessness wheeling in the night."³ McCarthy's tendency to tie unfamiliar descriptions of Western setting with biblical alignments to words like "firmament"⁴ suggests at his broader aims to challenge readers' conceptions of American history and identity, but also the very ambiguity and fluidity of language—especially the written word. Neither the kid, however, nor the gang analyzed singularly as a unit, provides the intellectual crux of the novel upon which any ultimate such challenge by McCarthy may be understood, for they are virtually silenced by the prose itself, which contains only the sparsest of dialogue. Although they provide numerous facets to the challenge, nonetheless these are only readable when in direct relation to Holden, who speaks articulately with a voice ironically invincible to challenge, and dangerously devoid of logical fallacy.

Ironically, McCarthy's version of Holden makes for a doubly fictionalized historical character. Based on the embellished ghost of Sam Chamberlain's memoirs recorded during the Mexican-American War, *My Confession: The Recollections of a Rogue*,⁵ Holden is reimagined a second time from largely absent primary sources into a second work of historical fiction. This

³ Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 46.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Rick Wallach, "Sam Chamberlain's Judge Holden and the Iconography of Science in Mid-19th Century Nation-Building." *Southwestern American Literature* 9 (1997): 9-17.

doubling of Holden's character by McCarthy is as if to ask outright the question: how much of history is story? How much of story is history? Dan Moos, in "*Lacking the Article Itself: Representation and History in Cormac McCarthy's Blood Meridian*," has observed the way in which *Blood Meridian*

...problematizes both literature as historical documentation and history as literary text...McCarthy creates a world where fictional and historical characters (and events) share the stage without any apparent centralizing or determined logic . . . he builds certain major fictional events in the narrative out of pieces of minor historical artifacts and strings certain major historical events together with his fiction.⁶

Rick Wallach, in "Sam Chamberlain's Judge Holden and the Iconography of Science in Mid-19th Century Nation-Building" adds that "...McCarthy's own retextualization of the Judge Holden figure from Sam Chamberlain's journal, complete with indeterminate ontology, not only foregrounds an otherwise implicit allegory of reading and establishes an objectively intertextual relation; it explicitly represents the giant as derived from an encompassing metatext."⁷ In these ways, *Blood Meridian* serves as a distortion, or revision of the myth surrounding the frontier in American history and intellectual discourse by bringing under interrogation the relationship between the real and the ideal—or the primary and the secondary. The kid is no hero on this frontier and Holden, who embodies the ideologies and thinking of nineteenth-century America most spiritedly in the text, is a grossly perverted and morally debased version of Turner's cliché prototype.

⁶ Dan Moos, "Lacking the Article Itself: Representation and History in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," *Cormac McCarthy.com: The Official Website of the Cormac McCarthy Society* 25, 23-39 (accessed February 29, 2011).

⁷ Rick Wallach, "Sam Chamberlain's Judge Holden...", 130.

My most significant thesis surrounding *Blood Meridian's* Judge Holden, which will be woven throughout a topically varied discussion of Holden's philosophies and his relationship to the kid, especially, deals centrally with this observation: that the judge's grotesquery lies in his recognition of his own agency and claim to free will within the framework of another's fate—namely, the kid's. *Blood Meridian* is a world in which the judge professes his own control and authorship over things and persons, all the while seeing these as mere means to his own freely determined end, or lack thereof. To exert violence and to declare war is to exert will and to control fates outside the judge's own, thereby incorporating the subjective and objective constituents of others into a sense of his own being and entitlement. I perceive this tension to be closely related to issues of history writing, in which such writing tends to become inseparable from the larger rhetoric of a nationalist cultural identity. If the morally ideal history is a dialogue, which posits fewer answers and more points of views, then the history we often end up with, and certainly which we find in Turner's thesis, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," is something closer to a monologue. If the judge is the subject, the object, and the totality of *Blood Meridian*—claiming all, naming all, ruling all—who is he, then, besides a character in a historical novel?

Neil Campbell, and other critics including myself, have argued "[the judge] is a vision of America *in extremis*..."⁸ and according to Joshua Masters, "...a nightmarish embodiment of the myths of colonial expansionism, myths that he extends, rewrites, and reconstructs to apocalyptic ends."⁹ Campbell, who has also compared the judge to Turner's thesis has noted, "[w]hen Frederick Jackson Turner wrote 'The Problem of the West' he felt that 'The individual has been given an open field, unchecked by restraints of an old social order, or of scientific administration of

⁸Neil Campbell, "Beyond Reckoning?: Cormac McCarthy's Version of the West in *Blood Meridian* or *The Evening Redness in the West*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Literature* 59 (1997): 55-64.

⁹Joshua J Masters, "Witness to the Uttermost Edge of the World:" Judge Holden's Textual Enterprise in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Literature* 25 (1998): 25-37.

government [and that] the self-made man was the Western man's ideal (213).⁹ That portrait, taken to its logical conclusion, is the Judge in *Blood Meridian*, literally acting out the ideology of the frontier."¹⁰ I would also argue that Holden embodies the textual endeavors of the "myth of the West" under the guise of official and academic memory—that is to say, *history*—in the final and un-editable self-presentation of its own authority. This is conveyed repeatedly throughout *Blood Meridian* by the egotistical nature of Holden's attempt to write the world according to his own violent authorship. As Campbell has noted,

[t]he Judge wants to remain the 'one' and delay his move 'down into the darkness.' To become the 'one' means for the Judge to have 'been to the floor of the pit and seen horror . . . and learned . . . that it speaks to his inmost heart' (331). That is Turner's 'dominant individualism' at its most extreme, where the survival of the fittest is uppermost, and any moral law is irrelevant because 'moral law [according to the judge] is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favour of the weak' (250).¹¹

The details of this possible claim are of course numerous, and facets to it are well supported by the secondary literature as well, paving and aiding the way to a close analysis of Judge Holden, the related angles of which are centered on problems of history and nineteenth-century American ideology.



Bringing together the creative tools of fiction and the events of history, historical fiction opens the door to re-examine, as well as re-imagine the past. *Blood Meridian* is historical fiction that operates on many levels at once much the way history itself, in reality, operates on many levels.

¹⁰ Neil Campbell, "Beyond Reckoning'...", 62.

¹¹ Ibid.

McCarthy's challenge to dominant conceptions of the settling of the American West is not primarily through those concrete and time-marked events that took place on the frontier. For this reason, treatment of the book alongside a more traditional historiography of the time period would not be the most revealing approach. Much more so, his challenge is reflected via popular nineteenth-century thinking. McCarthy delves to beneath-the-surface trends of the time period, depicting the intellectual and identifying views prevalent in American society in the period following the Mexican-American War. Critic David Holloway has pointed out, "as any revisionist historian or novelist understands it is the expropriation and redistribution of meaning – the ownership of language – that structures the form in which histories appear and vanish before us."¹²

Hailed as scientific and modern in the name of progress and toward the cause of American expansionism—espoused amid a physically and psychologically expanding sense of nationalism—intellectual biases of the nineteenth century produced the sort of claims, and the cultural arrogance needed to justify a new country's story as told unto itself. Imagination, more so than the events themselves, is what serves in many instances to create a culturally unified identification in terms of nation and physical space. Imaginations often produce myths—"attractive answers"—before they produce history. Furthermore violence in the West, even those acts committed and culturally sanctioned outside of standard declared warfare, has been protected under a rhetorical banner of national purpose or greater good. Well into the present day, much of "history" has continued to be recorded and recast as part of an ideologically cohesive and linear text defining American identity and historical progress. Considered from this angle, historical fiction has to do with more than simply re-highlighting or reimagining the past; the ramifications of such texts, and especially our interpretations of them, are political in nature. As the author of historical fiction well understands,

¹² David Holloway, "A False Book is no Book at All': the Ideology of Representation in *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy," in *Myth, Legend, Dust: Critical Responses to Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Rick Wallach (New York: University of Manchester Press, 2000), 192.

we must recognize the ways in which all history and all attempts to tell a new story write as much via exclusion as they do by inclusion, and as much by denial or absence as by acknowledgment or presence.

Blood Meridian serves to challenge dominant conceptions of American westward expansion by disrupting hegemonic clichés of Manifest Destiny and American exceptionalism. McCarthy accomplishes this primarily by exposing the directionless, gang-like bloodshed devoid of moral or otherwise rational significance, which comprises the Glanton gang story. At other times—either through grotesque exaggeration, or simply by focusing our attention on the details of violence, which we have chosen to ignore or at least not write about—the text functions to portray frontier violence and the anarchic environment of the West as directly connected to, and resultant of, a way of thinking. The critical and philosophic weight of Judge Holden’s monologues extends easily beyond the bounds of fiction encompassing a historiographic sensitivity, which his character, ironically, lacks altogether. When Holden takes it upon himself to lecture beyond the rules of humanity and its cultures, extending his worldview to the entire universe, he is often doing so in a way that seems an outright exaggeration, or dramatization, of those ideologies giving definition to his actions and intent. Just as frontier historian Frederick Jackson Turner was a product of his time period as much as his own genius, so Judge Holden is the outright epitome of nineteenth-century American thinking, unleashed and permitted to expand to the width and breadth of a sheer villain who, nonetheless, cannot help but be admired and quoted for all his articulateness and convincing nature.

In her essay, “Intellectual History/History of Ideas,” Beverly Southgate defines what is an exceptionally philosophic and thought-based area of historical discourse. The job of “historians of ideas” is roughly defined as that of enhancing understanding of cultural environments, and

introducing more explicit conceptualizations to our readings of historiographies than are typically available within conventional history. The central consciousness that helps shape such synthesis is recognition of our own historicity at any given point in time.¹³ This concept is non-linear and resists the implication that we are all soon-to-be relics of a direct, forward-moving or teleological history. In *Blood Meridian*, the concept of non-linearity is portrayed by the book's noticeable lack of plot. Actions do not naturally or necessarily beget related actions. The temporal reality of any historical moment is complicated by the text's greater preoccupation with language, and the self-reflexive way in which the judge's voice seems conscious of its presence both in the world of *Blood Meridian* and in the written text itself.

In one scene, a member of the Glanton gang by the name of Webster wishes not to have his portrait drawn into the judge's notebook. The judge's playing response is, "[m]y book or some other book. ...Whether in my book or not, every man is tabernacled in every other and he in exchange and so on in an endless complexity of being and witness to the uttermost edge of the world."¹⁴ At another point, the judge reminds his audience—both the Glanton gang and readers of *Blood Meridian*—that “words are things,”¹⁵ and in this way testifies to the concreteness of language in opposition to the more popular assumption that words are subjective, fleeting, or of minor significance in comparison to objective actions. For the judge, words and pictures, as power symbols, are inherently related to actions because they are representations subject to interpretation, which will be acted upon to give shape to the world, and the world's version of itself by any historical account.

¹³ Beverly Southgate, “Intellectual History/History of Ideas,” in *Writing History: Theory and Practice*, ed. Stefan Berger, Heiko Feldner, Kevin Passmore (London: Oxford University Press Inc., 2003), 248.

¹⁴ Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 141.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.

Similarly, “living historicity” embraces the notion that we are agents in framing how we look at the past, as well as in how we relate to the future as active, historically based thinkers and epistemologists operating in the present. With a developed historical understanding, a focused literary analysis of *Blood Meridian* and Judge Holden especially, moves beyond simply relating the character to the historical period; it examines McCarthy’s nuanced treatment of history within the creative format of historical fiction as well as how the reader’s appreciation of that past is shaped by the lessons his character brings to the reading experience.

BLOOD MERIDIAN
VIS-Á-VIS
FREDERICK JACKSON TURNER



The problem of history writing - The Frontier Thesis, and myth and memory - Presence and absence, and what lies somewhere in between or separate - Borders and the cartography of national consciousness - Sectional and secular teleologies and theologies - Birth of a nation and immaculate unconception - Paradox and abstractions in the bedrock of geology - Cash crops and culpability.



Historian Martin Ridge writes, “[f]rom the time Turner’s essay was published in the 1890s until today, it has been the one piece of American historical writing that historians have praised, denounced, and tried to ignore. It has been called both a North Star and an albatross in American history.”¹⁶ And it *is* basically an impossibility to begin any discussion on the American West

¹⁶ Martin Ridge, Introduction to *History, Frontier, and Section: Three Essays by Frederick Jackson Turner*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 75.

referring to the “frontier” without unconsciously or accidentally summoning forth a veritable tidal wave of images and old idealized assumptions about the West, which continue to resonate over a century later in the American imagination in connection to any collective relationship with the historical trajectory of American expansionism. Ridge has noted the way in which

“[t]he pervasiveness, dilution, and mythologizing of Turner’s ideas about the frontier during the past century is almost impossible to describe. The novelist has remained the primary popularizer of an exaggerated if not distorted view of Turner’s American exceptionalism by utilizing the frontier as the setting for an increasingly subtle morality play emphasizing the significance of the frontier’s contradictory characterization of individualism.

Whereas *Blood Meridian* is one of the more complicated distortions of the frontier cliché to enter the realm of literary historical critiques of Western American history, the book anchors itself on this (old, by American standards) ideal, discovering its own textual and intellectual freedom yet from a starting point none too remote.

In 1893 Turner claimed “The United States lies like a huge page in the history of society. Line by line as we read this continental page from West to East we find the record of social evolution.”¹⁷ Of course, this “line” came from the East and “society” constituted a singular race of European-descended men who traveled from the East to make the West their own. In his article, “‘Beyond Reckoning’: Cormac McCarthy’s Version of the West in *Blood Meridian* or *The Evening Redness in the West*,” Campbell observes that, “For Turner ... ‘West’ offered a ‘transparent text’ that he could translate and reproduce as a myth of America. ... [Campbell cautions, however, that] myths need to be examined closely [since] they ‘distort’ by naturalizing

¹⁷ Frederick Jackson Turner, *History, Frontier, and Section...*, 66.

history, hollowing it out into a neat, closed, unambiguous process.”¹⁸ Without such precaution “the myth of the West [becomes] a dangerous reduction of many issues to a few sets of ideas; a dialogue is transformed into a monologue.”¹⁹ Turner’s essay serves as one lens through which to examine not only *Blood Meridian*, but also—central to both—the intellectual trends of nineteenth-century America. The idea of a “monologue” concerning cultural and historical discourse remains essential to my interpretation of Judge Holden.

The conceptual boundaries between fiction, historiography, and myth—just like the actual frontier—are ambiguous at best, as Campbell has indicated. Much common understanding of the settling of the West in American culture, however, continues to be informed by very teleological accounts like those by Turner wherein “West” seems at all times a direction destined, natural, and fundamentally necessary to an American national identity. With a hint of humor, historian Patricia Nelson Limerick remarks how, “[a]t a certain vintage, aged automobiles receive the title of ‘classic’ and gain an exemption from emissions tests. In a very similar manner, the Frontier Thesis has become a classic, exempted from the usual tests of verification, evidence, and accuracy.”²⁰ Yet it is by analyzing those works that have withstood the passage of time, which brings us closer to the subtler beliefs and unconsciously justified truths American culture holds in relationship toward itself. Historian and cultural critic, Richard Slotkin, points to the problematic nature of historiography when he reflects that “[m]yths are the stories drawn from a society’s history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society’s ideology and dramatizing its moral consciousness [including] the complexities and contradictions that

¹⁸ Neil Campbell, “Beyond Reckoning’..., 55.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁰ Patricia Nelson Limerick, “Turnerians All: The Dream of a Helpful History in an Intelligible World” in *Something in the Soil: Legacies and Reckonings in the New West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), 142.

consciousness contains.”²¹ Levels of cultural awareness are not confined to history and mythology, but are expressed significantly through contemporary works of fiction that attempt, as Campbell notes, “to reopen closed dialogues [in this case] about the West and the actions that have become associated with it...”²²

Limerick discusses Turner’s deterministic tendencies in her essay, “Turnerians All: The Dream of a Helpful History in an Intelligible World.” “Identifying types, forces, and conditions, Turner could write with a tone of certainty that bordered on the theological.”²³ Despite her acknowledgement of the fact that Turner never refers to God explicitly in his historical writings, Limerick argues, “in his declarations on the patterns of history, [he] nonetheless wrote in a tone of certainty that conveyed a secularized faith in destiny.”²⁴ Though she does not write this connection here, by making linguistic observations in analysis over Turner’s use of language to amplify meaning through sheer force of argument, and by relating this tendency to theology, and the absence of God’s presence in Turner’s thesis, Limerick has touched on the broader situation of nineteenth-century American thought, which in the late-1800s was experiencing an overall religious decline. In a particularly useful chapter titled, “The Waning of Providence: The West,” historian Lewis O. Saum centers the majority of his focus on the roles of luck, destiny, chance, fortune, and the basically common nature of violence in the post-Civil War West. Saum gives some attention to the role of science in general, and Darwin’s publication of *The Origin of Species (1859)* specifically to explain, if not the unilaterally declining presence of God in American life, the

²¹ Steven Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 5.

²² Neil Campbell, “Beyond Reckoning’..., 56.

²³ Patricia Nelson Limerick, “Turnerians All...,” 158.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 159.

“evolving” thought processes that changed the way Americans began to think of God and issues of morality, and compare their “fortune in heaven” with a “fortune in time.”²⁵

By the later-19th – early-20th century, God’s role overall had diminished significantly in the greater scheme of national concerns. Replacing this role were trends in science and “rational” thought; a dominant and competitive emphasis on business, and the moneymaking applications of skill and creativity; an increased awareness of self, and the individual’s role in destiny; as well, a tendency toward preoccupation with worldliness as opposed to godliness was underway.ⁱ Nationally unifying myths are capable of replacing religion, or if not altogether replacing, then creating the same fervency of feeling and emotion within the broader collectivity of cultural consciousness. This, in effect, is what Limerick has discerned from Turner’s own convictions on the history of the frontier: that he retained the idea of destiny and teleology, albeit wrapping it into the secular folds of an illusively logical and scientific history writing.

Though he wrote the sort of history that would, following publication, come to constitute the epitomic mytho-historiographic material imported into cultural conceptions of American identity, it is important to keep in mind that historians like Turner were not speaking in monologue form, strictly speaking. Though she quotes Turner somewhat facetiously, allowing him to make an oxymoron of his passionate belief in historical presentism, Limerick offers Turner’s own italicized words: *“Each age writes the history of the past anew with reference to the conditions uppermost in its own time.”*²⁶ Regardless of any shortcomings as an historian, we must not forget that Turner himself was very much a product of the time period from which he wrote and that as a trained historian, he had at least some developed awareness of this fact, regardless of how swept up he tended to be within the scope of his own narrative. Thus the “abstractions [that] are tangible

²⁵ Lewis O. Saum, *The Popular Mood of America, 1860-1890* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 42.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 149.

and virtually animate, right on the verge of speaking for themselves [and the] ... elements, and processes [that] inhabit the Turnerian world like the weightiest and most settled of citizens”²⁷ are closely representative of the self-identifying thought processes and rationales of nineteenth-century Americans. Had they been otherwise, Turner’s ideas would never have been so widely applauded, and unconsciously accepted to this day—handed down to generations as a way of understanding America’s cultural and historical relationship toward the West.

Certainly, we are speaking of a relationship *toward* the West, for very much so Turner’s essay imagines a developing trajectory from which the civilized “American,” more proximal to the Old World and attendant old ways, begins in the East and only gradually—almost evolutionarily—comes to perceive himself as part of the West as well. This magic feeling of connectedness, after all, is what drives a sense of nationalism so convinced even to this day despite, in the United States, a very widespread body politic in terms of both culture and geography. When Turner writes, then, that history is “all the remains that have come down to us from the past, studied with all the critical and interpretive power that the present can bring to the task,”²⁸ it is possible to recognize the way in which he is attempting to link physical and social evolution to one another. Given that the intellectual frontier of the time was so centered on emerging claims and discoveries in the “hard sciences,” in part this tendency can be viewed as Turner’s conscious aim to make the discipline of history more scientific and “rational,” and thus more appealing to his contemporary audience. Suddenly, it is as though “history” lies like a great geological preserve, simply awaiting the historian’s trained eye; the past must only be palpably illuminated in order to expose the concrete truth of its own abstract existence for all to see.

²⁷ Ibid., 141.

²⁸ Martin Ridge, *History, Frontier, and Section...*, 8.

From this sort of reasoning, we arrive at typical examples of Turner’s grandiose, overly encompassing statements in which “[m]oving westward, the frontier [becomes] more and more American: *As successive terminal moraines result from successive glaciations, so each frontier leaves its trace behind it, and when it becomes a settled area the region still partakes of the frontier characteristics.*”²⁹ Ridge centers his introduction to a volume of Turner’s essays by emphasizing the importance of reading them in the context of Turner’s life.³⁰ Perhaps most significantly, Ridge makes the observation that “[h]is generation of historians accepted evolution, believed in progress, trusted in democracy, and held that social and economic problems of a modernizing society could be resolved through rational means.”³¹ Turner also harbored “an Emersonian appreciation of nature ...[and] an intellectual contradiction: a love of the wilderness and a faith in economic development and material progress.”³²

Turner’s writings debuted at a critical juncture in Western culture, and by “Western” that is to say connected to the European world, as well as the Euro-American West although the term “Euro-American” was not present then and would have very likely been resisted by the majority of self-defined Americans inhabiting the later nineteenth century. For despite Turner’s exceptionalist renunciation of American ties to European cultures, this reality cannot very realistically be ignored by our own modern conceptions of historical thinking, nor certainly by the thinking inherent in New Western History today with its sensitivity to complications of race, class, gender, and other factors underlying any proposed story about the American frontier. For Turner, the “frontier” signifies an actual cusp: “...the outer edge of the wave—the meeting point between savagery and

²⁹ Frederick Jackson Turner, *History, Frontier, and Section...*, 61. (Original emphasis)

³⁰ Martin Ridge, *History, Frontier, and Section...*, 2.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 4.

civilization” and “the hither edge of free land.”³³ Forces mostly unseen cause the frontier to advance in a fairly Westward-linear direction, regressing in terms of civilization before eventually sporting institutions the like of which raise it above the level of “savagery.”ⁱⁱ

Yet in *Blood Meridian*, this Turner-esque thinking is simultaneously exaggerated to highlight the central ideas embedded in nineteenth-century ideology, and just as often the ideas are altered or changed to give the same effect. Instead of “Onward,” “Westward,” the reader experiences continual circling around the unmarked, uncharted desert of the Southwest: a vast space, only vaguely constituting a geographic encapsulation of newly defined U.S. and Mexican territories, still literally and figuratively devoid of recognizable borders, or cultural and linguistic signs of demarcation. As one might come to intuit after reading *Blood Meridian* and experiencing McCarthy’s American Southwest, the lack of such textually simplified transparencies is perhaps not even central to any oppositional thesis or any specifically political idea pertaining to this fact. Rather, any clear presence of ideological abstractions whatsoever seems devoid and not necessarily in the sense that its opposite is merely unwritten or unacknowledged.

Conceivably, *Blood Meridian* strives at its utmost to do just this: to *unconceive*, if such is even possible—to transcend the usual mode of critique, which almost invariably subscribes to a system of linguistic binaries, and of similes and antonyms, and erase by the profound presence of absence. This, in fact, is one mode of writing and argument that utilizes exclusion as its means of persuasion, and what more heavily central, after all, to the entire problem of history writing. Holloway has observed, “...in the act of opposing one succeeds only in confirming the intractable presence of what one might hope to remove. The enduring of the judge, in other words, is a proposition which McCarthy’s deconstructive approach to meaning and to language seems

³³ Frederick Jackson Turner, *History, Frontier, and Section...*, 60.

powerless to resist.”³⁴ In *Blood Meridian*, the sun becomes central to movement once again, on earth as it is in the heavens—casting shadows, metaphoric of doubt, in every direction—alluding, constantly, to the entropic, anarchic authority of American expansion and the very complicated abstractions we lose within the idea of “direction” when subscribing so entirely to a belief in coherency over chaos.

When Turner asked the rhetorical question, “What is the frontier?” he answered by saying that “[i]t is not the European frontier,” arguing ultimately that “[i]n the settlement of America we have to observe how European life entered the continent, (elsewhere referred to as “inert”) and how America modified and developed that life, and reacted on Europe.”³⁵ In addition to moving independently away from Europe toward a self-defined national identity, the pioneers of the frontier in Turner’s neatly charted ideas are working upon a landscape that represents a blank slate, or *tabula rasa*. That is to say that the already-present cultures they come across are, quite literally, part and parcel to the “wilderness” which must be “won.”³⁶ Once again, McCarthy’s critique comes in the form of altering the myth to expose something much uglier, and difficult to define. By his own reckoning, the West is something more like a “terra damnata,”³⁷ though perhaps also an Eden of opportunity. American capitalism, for one, is brought under scrupulous moral interrogation (not in the narration by any means, but by the majority of readers, presumably) since the Glanton gang’s multidirectional pilgrimage spirals around a basic plot of hunting Indian scalps and then, illegally, those of Mexican peasants. Campbell remarks how,

The marketplace, especially with reference to Glanton’s collected scalps, remains not derivative of war...but precisely war itself. The market of *Blood Meridian*, not

³⁴ David Holloway, “A False Book is no Book at All’...”, 195.

³⁵ Frederick Jackson Turner, *History, Frontier, and Section...*, 61.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.

³⁷ Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 61.

unlike the market of global capitalism (if not all capitalism), has become slick with blood of the world's referents, a genocidal pit with sweaty brokers fighting for the value of ephemeral bills whose guarantees are no longer material, if even alive.³⁸

All of this is performed as cash contract work between the scalp hunters and various Mexican state governments painting a distortedly unfamiliar, yet also historically veritable picture of “how the West was won.”

The narrative setting of *Blood Meridian* turns more typical trajectories of the West—as a space easily conquered in civilized fashion by Eastern Anglos—on their head. Whereas we tend to imagine an organized American military in conflict with a fragmented and unofficial (or unqualified) Mexican nation-state, *Blood Meridian* depicts an unfamiliar mix of profiteers who lack even the ideological interests of vigilantes or a volunteer army. The Glanton gang is devoid of a civilizing agenda and led by recent war heroes like Glanton himself—otherwise comprised of the poorest, most un-rooted and uneducated of recruits. The gang has no direct contact with the American government and is much closer in its dealings with Mexican state governments, which seem highly organized and official in *Blood Meridian* in contrast to the gang. The very notion of who is civilized and who savage is clearly brought into tension in the text, since there is no civilization, no morality, no empathy or sympathy to speak of, and only a violence for violence's sake repeating around a series of philosophical debates and musings, courtesy of Judge Holden.

More than the object, or—in the case of Indian scalps—referents to the object, are for sale according to McCarthy and the judge. Dan Moos has argued that

[u]ltimately, *Blood Meridian* is about exchange value and comodification under both nineteenth-century imperialism and twentieth-century late capitalism—our own

³⁸ Neil Campbell, “Beyond Reckoning’..., 35.

official histories also available on some intellectual market. The distinctions between that market and an arena of war have grown fuzzy and indistinct. Dragging everything—goods, lives, ideals, history, knowledge, and body parts—into markets fueled by American expansionist politics, Judge Holden bluntly tells Toadvine, as well as us, ‘Everything’s for sale’ (BM 282).³⁹

With the incorporation of all of these subjects into a single critique of capitalism, acknowledging the power of the marketplace to make morality a thing remote or defunct—capable of consuming ideology and reorganizing it to its own ends—the boundaries of commodity begin to extend in every direction at once. Moos has also argued that “[t]he judge heralds a new age of science and truth, a world based on the data of rational, Enlightenment evaluation. [Yet] the judge’s new world does not operate on the level of the original article, but in a world built upon representation only.”⁴⁰ In a similar fashion, Turner’s frontier imagines its own significance; but rather than acknowledge the materially competitive and violent drive, which an actual frontier might be said to inspire, Turner has filled his frontier with the abstract. If the frontier is the “original article” then Turner has, by the very act of writing his thesis, made the need for the “real” void. The frontier, rather, becomes a sufficiently stable abstraction so that everything, which appears to grow off of it is already ideologically sound and justified by the power of the frontier to stand in representational defense of new objects and actions. War, genocide, unprovoked violence, and loose ends to an overarching national agenda are swallowed up by narrative vindication. Indeed, according to Turner, “even the slavery struggle, which is made so exclusive an object of attention by writers...occupies its important place in American history because of its relation to westward expansion.”⁴¹

³⁹ Dan Moos, “Lacking the Article Itself...,” 36-37.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴¹ Frederick Jackson Turner, <http://www.learner.org/workshops/primarysources/corporations/docs/turner.html>

Finally, for many readers of Turner, there is an initially perceived error to his argument that “Line by line as we read this continental page from West to East we find the record of social evolution.”¹² A nearly immediate reaction is to wonder why he is not saying East to West the other way around. It takes some mental juggling to recognize Turner is referring to direction in terms of time itself, which, in relation to the frontier, he refers to at one point as like a “geologic moraine.”¹³ In this sense Turner perceives the West as more recent in relation to the East, thus it is the archeological beginning point for a historical dig, so to speak. The historian who seeks to trace the evolution of American history should proceed to do so from the latest built-upon remnants of the frontier. On the other hand, by accepting Turner’s “after the fact” reflections from “West to East,” how ironically like a book: when held upright in the hands it reads from left to right and if the book were a map, it would also be read from West to East, and one would have to read to the end to know what made the beginning in fact significant.

The author of any book enters, by the writing of the first letter, a contract with his reader, who is confident that all books must end, and furthermore that they ought to conclude. But as the judge acknowledges, “Words are things... Their authority transcends [a person’s] ignorance to their meaning. ...It is not necessary, [he says], that the principles here be in possession of the facts concerning their case, for their acts will ultimately accommodate history with or without their understanding,”¹⁴ Power lies less in the referent than in the rendition, and the entire world progresses from points of representation. Power lies in the ability to control and reorganize the order of meaning—from West to East, if need be—for finally, the judge reckons, “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

¹² Frederick Jackson Turner, *History, Frontier, and Section...*, 66.

¹³ Frederick Jackson Turner, <http://www.learner.org/workshops/primarysources/corporations/docs/turner.html>

¹⁴ Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 85.

existence has its own order and that no man's mind can compass itself being but a fact among others."⁴⁵

JUDGE HOLDEN



On American religion - God versus the judge (or) fate versus freewill - A common-law wedding between biblical injunction and secular demand⁴⁶ - Judge Holden as the middle: on origin and ending, and the question of telos -Turner's thesis: nature *versus* nurture, and the significance of a *tabula rasa* in American history - Where lies the objective eye - Historical dialogue and the judge as monologist - Weight in the written word - Referents and representations - On books and the Bible - American Adam: bloody innocence and *Et in Arcadia Ego*.



In a broad ranging attempt to isolate what, if any particular, version of American history or character Cormac McCarthy proposes in *Blood Meridian*, it makes sense to begin by considering the role and importance of religion in the text, since a philosophical challenge surrounding God is evident at the onset of the first chapter. Dubiousness of faith and purpose are woven intermittently through scenes and conversations that inform or interrogate those justifications and rationales surrounding actions of war, racial and cultural dominance, history, and a nationalized identity as well as a myriad of subtler topics. Certainly, the voice of authority on all of these, throughout, continues to be that of Judge Holden's.

Blood Meridian lacks an easily discernable moral center, and the only character whose presence is fully marked throughout every phase of the novel is "the judge." McCarthy endows

⁴⁵ Ibid., 245.

⁴⁶ "There is no such thing as "common-law divorce"—that is, it is far easier to get into than it is to get out of."

Judge Holden, most noticeably, with the presence of language. In a book otherwise heavily dependent on setting, directionless movement, and violence as its primary modes of action and semblance of plot, the only individual granted literary space to launch his countless philosophic monologues is Judge Holden. As McCarthy scholar Joshua Masters observes, “[a]midst the arbitrary violence and mindless wanderings of the Glanton Gang, we find only the judge’s voice, for he provides the coherence, the order, *the meaning* that defines the scalps hunters’ pilgrimage west.”⁴⁷ This source of heightened verbalization in contrast to the rest of *Blood Meridian*, which is nearly devoid of dialogue whatsoever, serves to place the intellectual fulcrum of the text on Holden.

Although “God” is named at the very opening of the book in relation to the kid’s birth, it is the unnamed narrator, or voice of the father who art in flesh, who casually remarks “God how the stars did fall.”⁴⁸ The Hermit who offers the kid shelter in the second chapter is the first to speak at length about God. His views are realistic, if not pessimistic or resigned to the random fortune or fate of a few, when he says, “The way of the transgressor is hard. God made this world, but he didnt [sic] make it to suit everybody, did he?”⁴⁹ God is at the end of the book, in the epilogue: “In the dawn there is a man ... striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there.”⁵⁰ Predominantly, God’s presence in *Blood Meridian* is used to remark upon, or indicate a source of origin to the otherwise barrenly elemental existence of the physical world, and to add mystery to the fact that some human beings have it good, and some do not. When otherwise, the word “god” tends to be employed merely as an exclamation or a curse.

⁴⁷ Joshua J Masters, “Witness to the Uttermost Edge of the World...,” 25. Original emphasis

⁴⁸ Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 3

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 19

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 337

Conceivably, a physical world possessing a divine source of creation is more mysterious than divinely created life itself. For once geology, physical anthropology, and other advancing sciences in the nineteenth century have done their secular part to stretch the temporal past of the Earth back in terms of real, but hugely unimaginable numbers of years, the dual and paradoxical retention of a faith in God and in science only serves to make the ‘natural’—that is, at least within a Western worldview, the non-sentient—all the more strange and removed from conscious human experience. Scientific method, which stresses the notion of objectivity as the main lens through which all that is “real” can be rigorously observed and explained, seems to be a point of view located intermediate to divine and natural realities. Suddenly all that is created, and all that is the technological achievement or invention of man is intermediate as well, further away from God and closer to man. In nineteenth-century America it is a point of view employed, almost feverishly, to every area of thinking extending outside the sciences. Frederick Jackson Turner borrowed the language and conceptual frameworks of geology and evolution to build up his own field of history. The social sciences as well were rampantly bent towards the goal of justifying culturally based moral and social beliefs on premises that could easily, and headily, be articulated in the language of scientific soundness and tangibility.

McCarthy scholar Rick Wallach has made the observation as well, that “[d]uring the nineteenth century, scientific progress became linked with the crucible of American capitalism to the Biblical injunction to ‘subdue the earth.’ This paradoxical amalgam of empirical and religious imperatives, lionized as manifest destiny, drove [American] expansion.”⁵¹ It is the very fervency of this belief in a justified and urgent need for geographic expansion, which seems to have sparked violence at the root of a desire to grow manifestly as though scientifically and technologically

⁵¹ Rick Wallach, “Sam Chamberlain’s Judge Holden...,” 9.

chosen, and not simply by divine accordance alone. For not only is the prevalence of violence increasingly eminent in the mentalities of Americans writing and speaking about their lives and perceptions during this period, but a general decline in religiosity as a morally motivating force in society served, dangerously, to promote a type of character subscribing to an unyielding “survival of the fittest” tenacity. This combined with the quintessential get-up-and-go spirit of American pioneer practicality in an environment that was unpredictable and given alternately to sudden boom or sudden collapse. According to Saum:

In a general sense, the West provided an equivalent for war, though hardly a moral one. Both arenas [the West and the Civil War] reeked of disruption, of separation, of wild oscillation between utter boredom and terrible excitement, of frantic and indecipherable movement, of hardship, suffering, sudden death, opportunity, chance, and, for the lucky, quick and large rewards.⁵²

In *Blood Meridian* we get a sense of this mentality and setting, for the absence or rarity of God and the complete lack of morality reflected in the text does not fit concisely with one of the broader critiques of the book, which argues that McCarthy, in his writing of *Blood Meridian*, has merely portrayed a simplified version of the West in which nihilistic and gratuitous violence wins over any greater claim to historical or cultural purpose. This critique greatly trivializes the magnitude of the book. Although the apocalyptic tone of *Blood Meridian* allows for a postmodern reading of the West that is unsatisfying, and which falls flat on the ears of readers who would not give up the high degree of significance we have attached to the West in American culture, we cannot read with such a degree of face value that we forget meaning may be brought forward by meaning’s absence as much as by its presence, or assume that an apparent lack of meaning

⁵² Lewis O. Saum, *The Popular Mood of America...*, 41.

immediately leads to irrelevance or nihilism. The weakness of many texts claiming postmodernist status surrounds this very issue of meaning, particularly when related to larger, irresolvable issues of identity and historical verity. Yet *Blood Meridian* is not amoral or anti-moral, or fully closed to considerations of meaning pertaining to the American West. In fact, the text shows the very degree of competition and uncertainty in the West around survival, profit, and unpredictable opportunity and loss, and does so while retaining its sensitivity to the problems of nineteenth-century American ideology as well as the darker sides of capitalism in the face of race, class and gender. This dynamic portrayal is well supported by New Western authors such as Patricia Nelson Limerick who in her writing in general, and her book *Legacies of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*,⁵³ presents a detailed chronicling of the West as a place much more driven by practical economics and entrepreneurship than abstract ideological claims.

Judge Holden is the exemplary American self-made man who conceives of himself as scientifically and technologically chosen—as more immediately in tune with the physical, tangible world of science and freewill than as an oppositely divined vessel of God’s fating design or moral concern. He is a perfect blending of the abstractions of American ideology with objective actions, which he unleashes simultaneously upon the factual world and the abstraction of history. Holden is closer to the world of man than the average man because by his objectivity he knows it more intimately. Yet he is also inherently more justified in his claims to domain than other men of the world by virtue of his proximity to God—either to an actual God, or simply in terms of his hierarchal status approaching God according to his self-awarded rank among men. This rank, importantly, is not accorded by birth so much as by claim, and thus is in keeping with American ideals, which have placed emphasis on the individual, and valued self-sufficiency as a trait befitting

⁵³ Patricia Nelson Limerick, “Empire of Innocence” in *Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987).

and naturally characteristic of the frontier. As Campbell has argued, “[i]n extremis, these become not the traits of decent, democratic society—as Turner has claimed—but the trappings of imperialist conquest and individual greed through which McCarthy creates his vision of an archetypal West(ern) man in Judge Holden...”⁵⁴

Holden is no atheist, however; he views God, rather, as his equal. As his equal, God is an opponent in the same battle for authority and ownership, which the judge perceives to be the ultimate game of chance and intellect between men. During a conversation with members of the Glanton gang in which, as usual, the judge is central and speaks to his masses with the sweeping conviction of a preacher, yet with the logical infallibility of an actual judge, he declares that “[b]ooks lie.” Quite clearly, this statement makes no exception of the Bible, or other historical texts. A member of the gang protests by holding that “God dont [sic] lie.” For many Americans in the nineteenth century, after all, “book” referred primarily, and for some exclusively, to the Bible.

No, said the judge. He does not. And these are his words.

He held up a chunk of rock.

He speaks in the stones and trees, the bones of things.

The squatters in their rags nodded among themselves and were soon reckoning him correct, this man of learning, in all his speculations, and this the judge encouraged until they were right proselytes of the new order whereupon he laughed at them for fools.⁵⁵

The judge, in this passage, acknowledges the presence and creation of God; he subscribes to that paradoxical retention of the principal existence of God, if in fact not to a religious faith in God. In

⁵⁴ Neil Campbell, “Liberty Beyond its Proper Bounds”: Cormac McCarthy’s History of the West in *Blood Meridian*” in *Myth, Legend, Dust: Critical Responses to Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Rick Wallach (New York: University of Manchester Press, 2000), 22.

⁵⁵ Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 116.

fact, the judge has faith in science, and only a belief in God, although for the judge the two systems seem yoked, or perhaps even one and the same.

The judge is distinguishable from those who do not attempt to reconcile their unharmonious belief in religion and science, but rather are content to live out the actions of subscription to both without intellectual interrogation. The judge, who is obsessed with knowledge and the power knowledge affords, recognizes that science itself is as much God as God is himself. This is precisely why he laughs at the gang for being fools; their readily swayed foundations of belief demonstrate to the judge not only that faith is subjective and controllable, but also that men choose to be governed. Even given the choice of claiming freewill, a great many will select at least some degree of fate and determinism as necessary to the natural order of the world and in doing so acquiesce to the yet individual selection of their own lesser existence. Their acceptance, whether based on humility or a lack of desire or effort to change their condition, is ultimately weak and leads to their control by men such as the judge, who pick up the reigns and gain greater freewill through the submission of others to their fate under a larger, more encompassing will. The judge does not sacrifice transparency about his power when speaking to an audience he knows he dominates, although the audience itself, and the individuals out of which it is comprised, may be ignorant to their own capitulation. The judge argues:

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 order from the tapestry [namely, the judge] will by the decision alone have taken charge

of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate.⁵⁶

Furthermore, one must not even be correct in judgment, for truth is only valid inasmuch as it is a tool to shape the desired order of the world according to higher rulers, as the judge also reminds us: “It is not necessary...that the principles here be in possession of the facts concerning their case, for their acts will ultimately accommodate history with or without their understanding.”⁵⁷

Ironically, although man might be made in the image of God, God’s own likeness to men either pits him directly against his own creation, or at the very least justifies the morally disinterested self-servingness of men, whose subjective qualities must also resemble God in some ways. Survival of the fittest is natural, and in fact nurtured by the premises of science in a quantitatively knowable world. “Whatever exists, [the judge] said. Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent.”⁵⁸ Presumably, the judge means to include God in this statement. Although his tone is one of admonition and warning, it serves to warn separately in both directions, toward the world of men and of God. There is some history to this notion as well. With regards to American religion, specifically in the nineteenth century, R.W.B Lewis’ *American Adam* serves to illuminate similarities between Holden’s relationship to God and what Lewis perceived to have been a uniquely American relationship to God:

Adam [before the Fall] was the first, the archetypal, man. His moral position was prior to experience and in his very newness he was fundamentally innocent. The world and history lay before him. And he was the type of creator, the poet par

⁵⁶ Ibid., 199.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 85.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 198.

excellence, creating language itself by naming the elements of the scene around him.⁵⁹

But whereas American Adam still perceives himself intermediate to the world of man—yet very alone in a new environment, and thus closer to God than his historical predecessors—Holden problematizes the simplicity of this distance by consuming God, along with the world and all its inhabitants, materials, and technology, within his own ego. This causes any attendant innocence belonging to the Adamic figure—historical and individual—to be all the more dangerous, and morally ambiguous to contemplate when embodied by the judge.

Yet the judge, repeatedly throughout *Blood Meridian*, is described in childlike terms insinuating at some aspect of his innocence. Even on the very last page, at which point the blood and carnage of more than three hundred pages of text lie on the heels of the judge, “...he is [still] 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.”⁶⁰ The judge says, “[o]nly 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.”⁶¹ This loaded passage alternately posits the judge meting out the judgment of God—as one who will know each individual in their naked, unconcealed state *including* God—ironic, given the judge’s plural role as scalper, rapist, scientist, anthropologist/ethnographer, preacher, etcetera. In his essay, “The Killer Wears the Halo: Cormac McCarthy, Flannery O’Connor, and the American Religion,” Tim Parrish notes that “[o]n one level, the judge is studying God, compiling evidence of His power and mystery. On a deeper

⁵⁹ R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 5.

⁶⁰ Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 335.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 198.

level, the judge is communing with God and uncovering the deity within himself.”⁶² As “suzerain” the judge’s wish is basically to become the feudal overlord of all knowledge, and to mediate all autonomy in the known universe by “knowing” alone. This idea is difficult to separate from the abstracted voice of God in Genesis except that the judge advances along a closed path towards all-knowingness, inheriting the power of God with every intellectual accumulation and the organization of facts into violent reorganization by representation.

Someone asks the judge “What’s a suzerain?” the judge replies “[a] keeper or overlord.” When the same speaker asks, “Why not say keeper then?” the judge elaborates: “Because he is a special kind of keeper. A suzerain rules even where there are other rulers. His authority countermands local judgments.”⁶³ In his article, “‘A False Book is no Book at All’: the Ideology of Representation in *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy,” David Holloway observes how “[a] capacity for representation...gives political power over the material world. In whatever semiotic form—speech, ledger, story, parable—it is Holden’s ownership over language and meaning, his control over the act of representation, which underpins his agency and guarantees his suzerainty.”⁶⁴ Importantly, it would seem this is similar to the way in which the authority of history wins: by revoking the authority of other judgments and by writing the sovereign truth as told by the point of view in control, history behaves much as the judge behaves, whereas the judge wishes to be in league with all of history. The judge’s desire to become all of history by subsuming all other competing “original articles” stands neatly in contrast to his own lack of history, in this way akin to American Adam in his apparent innocence and stripped lack of origin. It is pivotal to note in this

⁶² Tim Parrish, “The Killer Wears the Halo: Cormac McCarthy, Flannery O’Connor, and the American Religion,” in *Sacred Violence: A Reader’s Companion to Cormac McCarthy* ed. Wade Hall, Rick Wallach (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1995), 35.

⁶³ Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 198.

⁶⁴ David Holloway, “‘A False Book is no Book at All...,’ 192.

case that God is also without origin or history, and remains a mystery to men precisely because he is textually embodied by symbols alone, represented but without revealing the original article of his existence. The judge's unknown origin is literal, both to the world of *Blood Meridian*, and the actual world according to historical account, since he is already a textually based character by the time McCarthy extracts him from Chamberlain's embellished memoirs. Thus, similarly to God, the judge is a mystery because the original article, which would rationalize his presence in the world, is obscured. Hyper-literate and in the active process of cataloging the entire world of objects he encounters, the judge himself, a sign by the mere fact of his presence, is a signifier to some unknown signified meaning for he is without any "antecedent," and even the "unraveling of loins and ledgerbooks"⁶⁵ will not explain him.

In the Hermit's observation of a human "transgressor"⁶⁶ who, allegedly created by God, inhabits His world regardless of any covenant or lack thereof, the point is further highlighted that even a believer in God must not choose Him or His ways. A person in this case is denoted with a degree of agency sufficient to exist free of God and God's laws, if he so chooses—not, however, without judgment. Judgment then is that least fair aspect of living under any god. Life being various parts choice and fate in the most widely accepted sense, it would seem some of us are cast into an environment where the choice towards goodwill, and following the moral laws given unto us, is made easier. That we all stand equal in judgment despite this fact would seem less than evenhanded treatment per individual, and here a person might be tempted to avoid, if only temporarily, his own judgment under God by placing himself wholly and without any other

⁶⁵ Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 309.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

allegiance, within the world of men: men who themselves take on the power of judging, and decide to inherit the Earth, as the Bible also says to do, with the injunction to subdue and dominate it.⁶⁷

An irreconcilable amount of choice would seem to exist within the notion that man is created by God, yet also creator of the technological world around him: how does an agent owing the source of his existence to another being truly possess all that material, which he is capable himself of producing? Furthermore, would claiming a certain level of ownership over one's own creation necessitate devotion to science with a correlating rejection of God, and would such a rejection have to come in the form of atheism, or is the former possible without even naming God at all? Yet to achieve actual Godlessness within a Western worldview is, arguably, not fully possible since the memory and the history of God as a legitimized character figure is written into the memory and history of nations—as both cultures and states—and God cannot be forcibly expelled from time. Thus God is a presence even in the context in which he is unwritten, or cast from the historical Eden of secular man. God's very lastingness is produced primarily through the textual institution and enterprise of the Bible, which will exist indeterminately and possibly forever amid the world of men, overlapping even those borders within which a biblical presence is argued not to exist.

With some help, Parrish summarizes the American situation rather concisely by arguing that

“[n]either God nor the American precedes or supersedes the other. Paraphrasing Emerson, the American soul is part and particle of God; God is part and particle of the American soul. Bloom writes: ‘...What is around has been created by God,

⁶⁷ Genesis 1:28 <http://esv.scripturetext.com/genesis/1.htm>

but the spirit is as old as God is, and so is no part of God's creation. What was created fell away from the spirit, a fall that was creation."⁶⁸

This articulation aids the hypothesizing of a world in which God in America is no longer as primary as he once was yet his presence is merely shadowed or overwritten by science and secularism although he continues to be deemed the source of human origin and the physical world. And while God's presence in the world continues to add mystery to the fact that some human beings have it good, and some do not—as the Hermit observes—still American progress, technical and historical, marks an advancement away from divine origin. This phenomenon might be imagined much the way in which Turner characterizes the frontier, for the positing of a Westward movement is idealized as leaving the Old behind, modifying and abandoning ideologies that do not fit it as it advances and evolves. In this sense, biblical authority is made even more remote by the absence of the European continent from which Americans, particularly in the nineteenth century, view themselves essentially as sprung-forth offspring, even semi-orphaned in the New World in which they are left to resort to their own basic principles and survivalist instincts in order to progress. Campbell argues, “[w]hat Turner established was indeed a creation myth for America. ... Turner translated the text of the American West for us and reproduced for our consumption a grand-narrative of America in which social evolution was spelt out in the very development of the frontier itself.”⁶⁹ In accordance with Limerick's notion that the story of the frontier subscribes—if even unwittingly—to a “secularized faith in destiny”⁷⁰ humans are, from the frontier line onward, granted more secure faith in the self-designed telos of their own fates.

In nineteenth-century America the frontier as a spatial boundary is not limited in its conception to signifying a physical boundary, upon which the notions of transgression and

⁶⁸ Tim Parrish, “The Killer Wears the Halo...,” 27-28.

⁶⁹ Neil Campbell, “Liberty Beyond its Proper Bounds...,” 219.

⁷⁰ Patricia Nelson Limerick, “Turnerians All...,” 159.

transcendence are vital to the progress of civilization and a generalized progress. The frontier serves in addition as a psychologically enlarged space upon which the more subjective aspects of a frontier American character are assumed to develop, and in which such an identity is without any foreseeable finalization as it continues, in health, to reinvent and re-imagine an individualized understanding of self Westward. Turner wrote:

American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character.⁷¹

Self-determination (on a more individual as opposed to collective basis), and faith in the technological expansion of a continent via its yet also manifestly destined people, is seen as occurring naturally, almost as fundamentally as if the Earth itself were producing all of this new reality in an unfrequented environment. McCarthy also invents ways of positing this idea with new, unfamiliar language that is harder for us to get a hold of, but which presents multiple and contradictory understandings of the West.

At times McCarthy sticks with the tropes of death and foreignness attributed to the West in classic western mythology: "...they rode through stands of sunflowers tall as a man on horseback, the dead faces dished toward the west."⁷² At other times, he reinvents the idea that although breeding chaos and decay, the West is also a place, curiously conscious in the way Turner writes it, where things are reduced to their most basic foundations, regenerated along some unknowable natural order of things. Mystery seems to surround the West in these distantly narrated depictions, which seem in stark contrast to the judge's sense that all things, by a process of commodification

⁷¹ Frederick Jackson Turner, <http://www.learner.org/workshops/primarysources/corporations/docs/turner.html>

⁷² Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 199.

and by being “routed from the tapestry” are knowable: “As if the very sediment of things contained yet some residue of sentience. As if the transit of those riders were a thing so profoundly terrible as to register even the uttermost granulation of reality.”⁷³ While it is not clear whether a “residue of sentience” refers to the land itself or God, still the West is an abandoned place; West is a direction at once compelling and yet undesirable, unsustainable, and fated to ruin. The negative significance of the Glanton gang’s presence is so registerable that the land begins to give way around them; the very particles of its foundations in time and space are “granulated,” and reality seems unconnected from history—past or future. It is moments such as these in *Blood Meridian*—subtle, scarce, and easy to lose sight of amidst so much blood and carnage and festival in violence—, which are solemn in tone, hinting at some moral essence contained within the book after all.

McCarthy even seems to encourage, as Turner does, a sense that the land itself enforces its own crude democracy—perhaps only literally a survival of the fittest—yet the full weight of his critique comes to bear immediately after he has said a thing that sounds in keeping with an easy ideological identification:

“In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence. The very clarity of these articles belied their familiarity, for the eye predicates the whole on some feature or part and here was nothing more luminous than another and nothing more enshadowed and in the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinship.”⁷⁴

⁷³ Ibid., 247.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

At the very minute he seems to be attributing the Western landscape with some consciousness or democratizing agency of its own, McCarthy turns the idea on its head by focusing on the fallibility of the human eye to discern beyond select details. The forest is lost for the trees; a bird's eye view—history, namely, and the story of the world—is clouded due to the proximity of the body and mind to the world it inhabits. In other words, there is no objectivity: not in terms of science, nor in terms of God or human origin, or the relationship of humans to things, or to one another. The frontier of the West sports a false democracy, or the mere illusion of such; and yet belief in that democracy produces the experience, nonetheless, of equality, and a kinship—between large and small things, and sentient and insentient things—as if the feeling or tone of equality is enough to warrant its actual existence.



Any attempted wedding between secular and religious domains—between technological free will and divinely destined direction— is imperfect at best. It contains within it the paradox of a temporally constrained and somewhat predictable and progressive science alongside a temporally infinite divine existence under God, which nonetheless, the pre-writing of history via subscription to such ideals as Manifest Destiny, attempts also to predict. To achieve true and actual Godlessness in this setting requires a level of emancipation and self-encapsulation that frees up the subject to write his own universe, and exist outside of the world as it is conceived by the dominant culture or society.

Judge Holden is doubtless one such man but he is more self-assuredly free, more so than any hypothetical atheist or nihilist. Within his own ego there must not even exist the possibility that God is more capable than he is, and there must be no higher moral code of conduct leading to an ultimate judgment, which the judge cannot evade. By his very appellation, the judge answers for

himself as well as for others and is one hundred percent of the material world at least where action is concerned. To allow for the possibility of God would necessitate an allowance of doubt in relation to self, which is an allowance the judge does not contain. He makes his own laws, and lives in his own universe wherein the ideas of God are not written, and perhaps even unwritten or erased as the case may be. “There he [sits] with his hands cupped in his lap and [seems] much satisfied with the world, as if his counsel had been sought at its creation.”⁷⁵

The first time we see Judge Holden is during and immediately after the burning down of Reverend Green’s makeshift church: “[the judge] was as a stone and he had no trace of beard and he had no brows to his eyes nor lashes to them. ... His face was serene and strangely childlike. His hands were small. He held them out.”⁷⁶ Interestingly, the church is a makeshift one made of white canvas and described as a “nomadic house of God.”⁷⁷ An assembly of Americans divinely destined to be here in the West, listening to the reverend’s sermon, seem to resemble the chosen Israelites of the New World as they stand in the mobile home of God, which bares striking similarity to the arc of the covenant, not to mention the transient and continually progressing nature of the frontier. This seems true enough at least until the judge interrupts to call into question the reverend’s legitimacy—a legitimacy which rests, ironically, not on faith but on literacy, and on his ability to read the Bible true to each word. Thus from the very beginning, *Blood Meridian* sets up a world according to the judge in which someone who has merely committed their truth and their history to memory is an “imposter,” and a fraud.⁷⁸ In the shade of the hotel, whilst the fire consumes the congregation outside, the judge seats himself at the bar and is soon joined by other men. A conversation ensues between the judge and an unnamed speaker who wishes to know how the

⁷⁵ Ibid., 140.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 6.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 6-7.

judge knows the Reverend Green. Smiling and seemingly unconcerned the judge says, “I never laid eyes on the man before today. Never even heard of him.”⁷⁹ Slowly, silence gives way and laughter becomes general around the barroom as if the audience has been witness to nothing more than a practical joke.

“[The judge raises] his glass but not to them.”⁸⁰ To whom or to what occasion he is toasting, if not specifically the burning of the church, remains rather ambiguous. It may be presumed, however, that the judge merely salutes himself in this case unless he is pointedly mocking God—and well so, that he should salute himself. This introductory scene, which is so focused on the Bible—the primary historical text according to religious subscribers—is banished from *Blood Meridian* at this very instant in which the judge has just usurped the Reverend Green’s control over his audience. Every mention of the word “book”⁸¹ hereafter is in reference to one of the judge’s notebooks, in which he records drawings and descriptions of objects he finds before destroying the original copies so as to “expunge them from the memory of man.”⁸¹ The second and last mention of the Bible comes at the very end of *Blood Meridian* and in relation to the kid who, ironically enough, is illiterate, and carries the book with him leading up to his death at the hands of the judge for whatever unknown company or conciliation it seems to bring him.

With an expansive articulateness that echoes the weight and style of biblical command, the judge speaks, and thus calls into being a reality, which all surrounding him must adhere to. As the judge erases the call for moral grounds or justification, he demands that all those in his company not only follow him in suit but also believe in him entirely without reserving a subjective portion of self private from the judge’s own surveillance. In this way, the judge is certainly like a god: one who will see into the hearts of men and in this way know the best way to control them. If, as in the case

⁷⁹ Ibid., 8.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., 140.

of the kid, someone has failed to turn himself entirely over to the judge in surrendering totality, that obscurity in itself is a crime, and a transgression. The judge keeps a close record on the kid throughout the book, holding him accountable as an agent yet unto his own while noting, “[y]ou came forward ... to take part in a work. But you were a witness against yourself. You sat in judgment on your own deeds. You put your allowances before the judgments of history and you broke with the body of which you were pledged a part and poisoned it in all its enterprise.”⁸² This implies that while the judge follows rules internal to his own notions of truth and conduct, he simultaneously holds all others accountable to themselves in the same way, extolling laws that do not exist in the external sense, but along a personalized course fitted according to the naked individualism of each within the arbitrary whole of the gang.

At times, McCarthy’s sudden shifts in narrative tense stand out, casting the judge jarringly in a world that is both here and now, and past and future. *Blood Meridian*, which reads almost exclusively in the past tense at a great distance from the setting and the characters therein, will occasionally make huge leaps in favor of the judge, all in one passage:

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.⁸³

These seamless shifts into present tense reinforce the judge’s central place within the narrative. At the very end of the book, where the repetition of “never sleeping, always dancing, never dying” becomes nearly hypnotic to the reader, the tense again is brought immediately to the present: “He

⁸² Ibid., 307.

⁸³ Ibid., 140.

is a great favorite.”⁸⁴

The judge is equated with levels of self-sufficiency that frequently seem inhuman in proportion. He is granted levels of near-divine status and immortality that equate him back to the center of the universe, beyond the parameters of the novel. As Masters puts it, the judge “...is a lawgiver who has made no covenant with a higher power, save, of course, war.”⁸⁵ The motif of the egg to describe him, which is recurrent throughout the novel, is a symbol of that self-sufficiency: “[h]e smiled, he removed his hat. The great pale dome of his skull shone like an enormous phosphorescent egg in the lamplight.”⁸⁶ The expriest Tobin recounts to the kid how the judge once said in so many words: “...our mother the earth [...is] round like an egg and [contains] all good things in her.”⁸⁷ Because their physical descriptions are so similar, indirectly, the earth and the judge are equated with the same status: both are alternately bigger than life, or containing all of life within their borders.

Along with the egg-like self-sufficiency inherent in the judge, comes fundamental innocence. This innocence remains untouched by the ruthless acts of violence committed most visibly by the judge in *Blood Meridian*. The judge cannot see or know wrong, and is in fact impervious to any pathos, relying on the empirical and guiltless power of erasure as ultimate proof to himself that he exists in the universe. Like American Adam, the judge is “an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever [awaits] him with the aid of his own unique resources.”⁸⁸ If the parallels between the judge and American Adam seem closely tied to the Western values stereotypically

⁸⁴ Ibid., 335.

⁸⁵ Joshua J Masters, “Witness to the Uttermost Edge of the World...,” 25.

⁸⁶ Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 327.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 130.

⁸⁸ R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam...*, 5.

celebrated by Turner, and continued even in our time, one should be quick to dismiss the idea that the judge is any such prototype according to McCarthy's aim. If he is, then he is the curse of freewill, visiting earth with an ego fit to rule the universe—aware of the magnanimous potential of his own will—calculating only that which he himself can determine. As Masters observes, "...the judge remains free from the telos of a closed system; thus, any role, rule, or law can be invoked or revoked as the situation warrants, for the only 'end' the judge recognizes is encapsulated in his own ego."⁸⁹

If the judge is American Adam, he is a grotesquery of the whole idea. His innocence is killing and childlike at once: "...he is naked dancing, his small feet lively and quick and now in doubletime and bowing to the ladies, huge and pale and hairless, like an enormous infant." Not only is the judge "a favorite," but "he will never die."⁹⁰ In summary, the judge favors himself over all other men, and himself over God. If he is American Adam he has escaped the wrath of God; if he has been banished to an American desert from the Garden of Eden, even so he will never die. In this way, the judge does not achieve immortality by way of having it granted to him; rather he *claims* it. His existence is a mockery to all order including God's order, defying the rules, both natural and divine, laid down for man even by man's own moral and scientific reckoning:

Whatever his antecedents he was something wholly other than their sum, nor was there system by which to divide him back into his origins for he would not go.

Whoever would seek out his history through what unraveling of loins and ledgerbooks must stand at last darkened and dumb at the shore of a void without terminus or origin and whatever science he might bring to bear upon the dusty primal matter blowing down out of the millennia will discover no trace of any

⁸⁹ Joshua J Masters, "Witness to the Uttermost Edge of the World...," 26.

⁹⁰ Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 335.

atavistic egg by which to reckon his commencing.⁹¹

In this passage perhaps more than any other, McCarthy fully embraces the ineptitude of chronological thinking to rationalize human existence and telos. An attempt to justify the present through an historical narrative will write equations of cause and effect into the human timeline that are simply invented. The judge is the villain of a world in which Turner's history is correct: anything and everything that can be made into belief will inscribe itself on the world with permission.

JUDGE HOLDEN CONT'D



A final note on history: it's all in the past - The judge who judges - Anthropology, ethnography, and Holden's violent social science - The end of history and ideology per the judge - Notebooks to write the null - Collector and erasure: creator and destroyer - The bloody pen: concerning linguistic authorship, written word, and who's rules - Colonial gaze or colonial guise - History voted for the judge - A creed of profit, and the economic stain of the West - The living are things too: "get that receipt" - The judge as author without antonym - A victory into void.



At the end of *Blood Meridian* the judge speaks again, or rather continues to speak, since ultimately "[h]e is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die."⁹² He argues that "[i]n any event the history of all is not the history of each nor indeed the sum of those histories and none here can finally comprehend the reason for his presence for he has no way of knowing even in what the event consists."⁹³ There is much packed into this near-riddle; to be sure almost everything the judge says may be interpreted as something of a conundrum, and in general must be read at least twice.

⁹¹ Ibid., 309-310.

⁹² Ibid., 335.

⁹³ Ibid., 329.

Thereafter the reader is left unsure if he has said one thing or another thing, or both, or if they have canceled each other out by some mathematical logic, which refutes the presence of dualities where the judge will permit only one—that one being himself, at any cost. Critic Joshua Masters has remarked similarly on “his dual role as insider and outsider [noting that] the judge straddles oppositions, existing ‘betwixt and between’ two cultural locations.”⁹⁴ Yet in his words, *the history of all is not the history of each nor indeed the sum of those histories*, what does the judge actually aim to say? He might simply be saying that no two people share a common history, and that adding all individual histories together does not make for any shared or communal narrative in which each may claim representation. This idea is legitimate, yet it readily displays the tension between individualism and collectivity. Paradoxically, or perhaps simply *also*, the judge may be describing what already *is* by the process of inscribing history to something as narrow and limiting in concept as the American frontier. The singular, dominant history—the one which writes a nationally cohesive identity in its wake— must, simply by virtue of the power of its claim and ability to submerge all other histories, reign unidirectional and manifest across the West.

The rest of his sentence, *none here can finally comprehend the reason for his presence for he has no way of knowing even in what the event consists*, implies a creator, or ruler, or author over the reality which most will live according to although in ignorance. But do they live abidingly in ignorance by any will of their own, or precisely because their fates are controlled by one larger, more all-encompassing freedom of will, which negates individual claims to freewill and incorporates them under the umbrella of a larger will—one that casts all lesser wills under an earthly imposed fate. Certainly this has tended to be true for the people who have not won at history, and who are living testimonies to the fact that the history of all is not the history of each. As

⁹⁴Joshua J Masters, “Witness to the Uttermost Edge of the World...,” 26.

readers, we may presume in this case that the judge controls the source of power behind the weakness of all humanity and all history, and that indirectly he is referring once more to himself, for rarely is he not.

The judge is a killer, but of more than life. He is a great empiricist and a great utilitarian inhabiting a closed system world in which all may become known and by the same logic—given that the universe is quantifiable and complete in nature—all things that cease to exist cease utterly, and their histories with them. This is true of the Indians; not only does the judge aid in the physical war of scalping and cashing in for profit which the Glanton gang is primarily concerned with, but he takes his genocide a step further. He crushes and erases every trace of human existence he encounters, ironically wiping the *tabula rasa* of the frontier and all free land clear behind him in the process. Because he a utilitarian though, and because he grasps that his efforts to expunge everything from the memory of man are final and absolute, he records and keeps for himself every detail packed into the ledgers and notebooks of his saddle.

The judge is an enemy of culture and anything that persists in its original form in the world; “The freedom of birds is an insult to me [the judge says]. I’d have them all in zoos.”⁹⁵ As if the judge foreshadows the future risk of his own encapsulation in some version of history, in order to maintain dominance he must not leave anything behind and intact. He must turn every original into a mere representation of the referent: the real—what actually happened in history—is swallowed up in the story left behind on paper. Dan Moos argues as well that by destroying original sources “[t]he judge maintains control over knowledge ...leaving the representation to stand for the original, or more so, leaving the representation to stand for itself; the referent for the sketch must

⁹⁵ Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 199.

be merely the sketch itself, as the original is gone.”⁹⁶ In a chapter devoted to *Blood Meridian*, John Cant argues,

“[t]he judge personifies the extreme of anthropocentrism, of Enlightenment hubris. He writes his *ledger* and makes his *claim*. This is the language of the accountant; it expresses the notion of knowledge as power, of the earth as commodity. It is a language of quantity rather than value. It holds the promise of progress through empirical investigation and the use of reason alone.”⁹⁷

“This is my claim, [the judge says]. And yet everywhere upon it are pockets of autonomous life. Autonomous. In order for it to be mine nothing must be permitted to occur upon it save by my dispensation.”⁹⁸ To mediate all autonomy in the known universe separate from himself is the judge’s way of empirically controlling his own fate. “To destroy history as he finds it, the judge builds a system that needs no referent, as the Bible needs no referent; the judge’s world, built out of the earth, will be written.”⁹⁹

In his article titled, “‘The Very Life of Darkness’: A Reading of *Blood Meridian*,” Steven Shaviro argues “...we might be tempted to say that whereas all the other characters [in *Blood Meridian*] kill casually and thoughtlessly, out of greed or blood lust or some other trivial cause, only the judge kills out of a will and conviction and a deep commitment to the cause and the canons of Western rationality.”¹⁰⁰ There is no passion in his work; he is thorough, concise, methodical in his actions, but even when he scalps children there is no revel in bloodshed even to

⁹⁶ Dan Moos, “Lacking the Article Itself...,” 29.

⁹⁷ John Cant, “Blood Meridian,” in *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism*, (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2008), 157-176.

⁹⁸ Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 170-171.

⁹⁹ Dan Moos, “Lacking the Article Itself...,” 31.

¹⁰⁰ Steven Shaviro, “‘The Very Life of Darkness’: A Reading of *Blood Meridian*” in *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Edwin T. Arnold, Dianne C. Luce (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 149.

the degree that other members of the Glanton gang seem to discover an expression of themselves through killing and unmitigated violence. Their killing is reactionary, or it is psychologically deviant and irrational. Their violence is of the sort we condemn in our accounts of the West: “[w]e dismiss the details of historical violence or blame atrocities on maniacal or ostracized individuals,”¹⁰¹ and by all accounts the Glanton gang is unofficial. On the other hand the judge is official, and his killing is only another small and necessary action, secondary to the entire ideology defining his enterprise. Ironically, readers have a more negative emotional reaction to the judge’s behavior than that of the gang, and rightly they should, perhaps, although it is the judge who has been protected by history. The judge, and other likes him, have been safeguarded behind the logic inherent in their violence—at first outwardly, and later only in the subtle justifications—which have tended to come in the form of a sigh, and a vague lament to the fact “history is in the past.” It was after all, a U.S. officer in the second half of the nineteenth century who defended the killing of Cheyenne women and children on the premises that “nits breed lice.”¹⁰²

The judge, at last, is an unknowable character. His claims are not even contentious enough to beg outrage, so composed does he remain in his self-assuredness of vision; yet he remains resistant to categorization or any ideological singularity, and this fact seems closely representational of the history of the American West as well. At once, the U.S. has been a place in which, historically and well into the current day, a supposed degree of straightforwardness and ideological transparency has been valued; the nation has envisioned itself as more practical than impassioned, and inherently democratic in character. Yet as Tim Parrish notes, “...the United States has always shielded itself from the violence of its history by recourse to a peculiar—and bloody—innocence.”¹⁰³ Contradictions in the face of race, class, religion and gender have continually run up against any

¹⁰¹ Dan Moos, “Lacking the Article Itself...,” 36.

¹⁰² <http://www.enotes.com/genocide-encyclopedia/wounded-knee>

¹⁰³ Tim Parrish, “The Killer Wears the Halo...,” 24.

proposed American character. The democratic traits that the U.S. proposes to espouse are complicated by an ever-expanding and changing frontier, which has become more economic than environmental since the mid-nineteenth century. The increasing complexity of a capially driven, and socially and economically stratified society problematizes generic notions of freedom and liberty, and the presumption of a historically unprecedented degree of freewill distinctive of American citizenship.

Blood Meridian is the pre-setting to even larger-scale industrialization in the West, and the monopolization of railroads, and land and agriculture, not to mention imperial exploit through global warfare. As such, it charges the U.S. with a history of colonial conquest based far less on the abstract ideologies of any creed than the economic advantages laid claim to within the context and justifications of the frontier. The history of the U.S. has defended itself from accusations of economic gluttony, yet even in *Blood Meridian*, and certainly within the judge's worldview, all things have the potential to be commodified and profited from. Dan Moos notes that as "...more than just symbols and proofs, the scalps operate as specie, as articles exchanged for other articles or for different monies in officially government-sanctioned slaughter..."¹⁰⁴ Driving home the degree to which the scalping trade is based off profit first and foremost—not even on eugenicist thinking or the inevitability of racial domination implied by Manifest Destiny—Glanton orders one of his soldiers, too ironically "[a] Mexican, solitary of his race in that company," to "[g]et that receipt..."¹⁰⁵ in reference to a scalp. The judge's earlier remark that "[e]verything's for sale"¹⁰⁶ harks to this very transaction, although in the context in which he says it, he is referring to a hat.

The judge is ultimately unknowable and impossible to place ideologically. Although he does not logically contradict himself he still seems to subscribe, at times, to a plurality of views on

¹⁰⁴ Dan Moos, "Lacking the Article Itself..." 32.

¹⁰⁵ Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 98.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 282.

the world, which although not observably false seem incongruous with one another. The judge's practical application of scientific method and his attempt at an exhaustive taxonomy of the universe is not quite decided, for periodically he lapses into a worldview much more enshrouded in mystery.

The truth about the world, he [says], is that anything is possible. Had you not seen it all from birth and thereby bled it of its strangeness it would appear to you for what it is, a hat trick in a medicine show, a fevered dream, a trance bepopulate with chimeras having neither analogue nor precedent, an itinerant carnival, a migratory tentshow whose ultimate destination after many a pitch in many a mudded field is unspeakable and calamitous beyond reckoning.¹⁰⁷

Yet the judge argues differently elsewhere when speaking to the same audience of Glanton gang recruits: "Your heart's desire is to be told some mystery [he says]. The mystery is that there is no mystery."¹⁰⁸ ("As if he were no mystery himself, the bloody hoodwinker,"¹⁰⁹ the expriest counters). Although both arguments are logically and rationally plausible and therefore not excludable, they are in direct opposition to one another. The judge's location on both sides of a single duality—and his ability to straddle oppositions—points to his duplicity, and affirms the notion that *truth*, for the judge, is only valid insomuch as it is a tool to shape the desired order of the world according to his own individualized vision. The judge maintains, "...each man's destiny is as large as the world he inhabits and contains within it all opposites as well."¹¹⁰ And in the context of the frontier, as

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 245.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 252.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 252

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 330.

Campbell writes “...there is, ultimately, no Manifest Destiny, no God-given right to the West...but rather a terrible struggle of individuals to try and impose their own destiny upon the world.”¹¹¹

THE KID VIS-Á-VIS JUDGE HOLDEN



Bloodshed and bloodlines - In what direction lays transgression - “The child the father of the man” - Origins and ontology - Some fated and others free - The kid cannot “make it so” - Entombment in text - Transcendence by history, precisely - One side to every story, but two sides to a coin - The spoken word dies, what is writ remains - Deaf ears at the confessional - Abuelita’s return - The shape of the universe in stone - a terminus into the manifestly destined void - On memory and disremembrance



In direct contrast to Judge Holden, the kid is inarticulate, illiterate, and often his presence is an extended muteness within the setting of *Blood Meridian*. Indeed the book does, in the self-conscious way texts are capable of operating, hold on to the idea that the kid is the main protagonist, even after it effectively relinquishes all focus on him—as it comes to spiral, again and again—around the gravitational pull of the judge and the judge’s own ideas. The book begins with the kid, charting his origins, his abandonment of home and family in the East, and his pilgrimage West. The majority of *Blood Meridian* follows the trajectory of his time as a youth with the Glanton gang, years after which he is killed at the hands of the judge. McCarthy’s encouragement of a false sense that the kid is the leading character paves a semblance of plot through a text otherwise undirected and unmotivated by anything but a generalized movement lacking significant finality, and a festival of carnage and warfare that leads nowhere, resisting any tone of conclusion or

¹¹¹ Neil Campbell, “Liberty Beyond its Proper Bounds...,” 222.

ultimate meaning. The apparentness of McCarthy's postmodern ambivalence or ambiguity presents itself more probably as a critique of history, and a reinforced reminder that there is no traceable telos to the story of humanity, nor human nations.

The death of the kid comes seemingly unannounced and un-foreshadowed not, however, before the judge has effectively usurped the entirety of *Blood Meridian* with the expansiveness of his soliloquies. *Blood Meridian*, apparently containing a diverse group of characters and centering on the kid and the judge, gives slowly and convincingly way to a sense that the entire book is exclusively Holden's monologue. That not only has he gotten hold of the reigns of historical and textual manipulation within the world of *Blood Meridian*, but in fact the reigns of the book itself as if he were conscious, by the nature of his own hyper-literacy, of being written. The judge's ownership of the text runs parallel to other insinuations in *Blood Meridian* at his immortality and capacity to outlive all of history and mankind by the controlled textual enterprise Joshua Masters has defined.¹¹² Although perhaps without any ultimate proof, Rick Wallach makes the striking observation that "Holden's identification with inscription...is characteristically made explicit during a mock hieratic disclosure, the expriest Tobin's remark about the judge's bulk: 'And him weighin twenty-four stone which he did then and does now...' (128). This English measure is equivalent to 336 pounds, practically identical to the novel's page count."¹¹³ In this sense, the judge embodies *Blood Meridian* by his own transcendent manifestation into written word; the keeper of notebooks must also guess at the fact that others have their notebooks, too—Sam Chamberlain, namely, in his memoirs *My Confession: The Recollections of a Rogue*.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Joshua J Masters, "Witness to the Uttermost Edge of the World...", 25.

¹¹³ Rick Wallach, "Judge Holden, Blood Meridian's Evil Archon," in *Sacred Violence: A Reader's Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Wade Hall, Rick Wallach (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1995), 133.

¹¹⁴ Rick Wallach, "Sam Chamberlain's Judge Holden...", 9.

Although the kid and the judge share certain similarities—mainly, an attribution of innocence at odds with their violent natures—the judge is decidedly different because he is without origin, without history, and apparently also without end. The *book* ends with the judge dancing after the fact of the kid’s death, himself quite assured when “[h]e says that he will never die.”¹¹⁵ The kid is “[a]ll history present in that visage, the child the father of the man” and clearly of maternal flesh as well by “[t]he mother dead these fourteen years [who] did incubate in her own bosom the creature who would carry her off.”¹¹⁶ On the other hand, the judge is rootless and without antecedent, and cannot be unraveled or explained by “loins or ledgerbooks.”¹¹⁷ In his article, “History, Bloodshed, and the Spectacle of American Identity in *Blood Meridian*,” Adam Parkes argues “[a] careful reading of *Blood Meridian* suggests...that in addition to the obvious reference to violence, the term *bloodshed* has a second meaning, unnervingly related to the first: the shedding of biological origins, [and] the severance of blood ties.” In this sense, the kid and the judge share an emancipation from their pasts; but whereas the judge controls by the design of his own agency, the kid is more fated—destined, rather, to be the sum of events outside his will. The judge, regardless of the events particular to his unknown history is “...something wholly other than their sum...”¹¹⁸

The judge controls *Blood Meridian* primarily through the scope of his vocal presence, but because his ideas come to encompass the text so thoroughly, at times his voice seems to bleed simultaneously between the reality of the book and the reality of the world inherent to *Blood Meridian*. In these instances, not only does the judge own a vocal presence unchallenged by any of the book’s other characters, but there is a sense that he begins to have command as well, and that

¹¹⁵ Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 335.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 310.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 309.

through textual control he gains ascendancy, more literally, over the existence of others—especially the kid. Approximately one third of the way through *Blood Meridian* the kid seems to have disappeared into some background, which the reader is not privy to—at least he has not spoken or been visible for several pages when the Glanton gang temporarily admits “a family of itinerant magicians”¹¹⁹ into its circle. The members of the family entertain the gang in general by performing tricks, card readings, and juggling. Finally they are reading fortunes to members of the gang by a selection of cards, and after each reading the father wonders aloud whose should be told next:

Quién, quién, he whispered among them.

They were right loath all. When he came before the judge the judge, who sat with one hand splayed across the broad expanse of his stomach, raised a finger and pointed.

Young Blasarius yonder, he said.

Cómo?

El joven.

El joven, whispered the juggler. He looked about him slowly with an air of mystery until he found with his eyes the one so spoken.¹²⁰

Not only does the judge summon the attention of readers of *Blood Meridian* to the fact of the kid’s presence, but even the juggler seems to look around for a moment, as if he has not seen the youth at the campfire until now. In his designation of “the one so spoken,” it is as if the kid has been literally named back into being by the power of the judge’s own voice. The significance of this possibility rests on the fact that spoken word, historically, has tended to be weak compared to the written word, at least in the Western world. Yet within the context of a textual enterprise even the

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 89.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 93-94.

spoken word—with the backing of representation through linguistic concreteness—begins to gain a tonal degree of command. This power is reminiscent of the disembodied voice of God in Genesis, which names into being precisely through the inscription of the Bible.

Early in *Blood Meridian* we witness the first and practically only time in which the kid speaks at length to anyone. This dialogue takes place prior to his recruitment by Captain White to the Glanton gang while he is lost somewhere remote and unnamed during a storm. A hermit offers him crude shelter in his home “...nested away in the sod like a ground sloth.”¹²¹ This comparison, which draws its analogy from an extinct animal native to the Americas over ten thousand years ago, implies that the hermit is literally one who has been left behind, who has not progressed or evolved with the rest of time and the frontier.

The old man swung his head back and forth. The way of the transgressor is hard.

God made this world, but he didnt make it for everybody did he?

I dont think he much had me in mind [the kid replies].

Aye, said the old man. But where does a man come by his notions. What world’s

he seen that he liked better?

I can think of better places and better ways [the kid answers].

Can you make it be?

No.¹²²

In the kid’s final answer, and his admission that he cannot make it be, he diverges markedly once more from the judge, whose entire existence is predicated on his exercise of control in shaping the world and his own destiny, first and foremost.

¹²¹ Ibid., 16.

¹²² Ibid., 19.

The majority of critics have focused on the relationship between the kid and the judge as one that is unconventionally paternal in nature. In this case the kid's primary role is that of the disobedient or unhearing child although the judge, wise though he is, embodies anything but the corresponding role of a moral mentor. Along the same lines, or in slightly altered ways, critics have explained the profound tension between the kid and the judge as based on the kid's divided heart, arguing in this case that since the kid is not fully committed to the judge or the judge's worldview this amounts to a transgression, which the judge is compelled to resolve by killing the kid if he cannot convert or conform him to his own will. Joshua Masters argues that "[t]he only character who threatens to usurp the judge's textual order is the kid. His lack of absolute faith in the gang's warfare indicates a moral possibility existing outside of the judge's ego. ...[Hence because] the kid has preserved a capacity for judgment, mercy, and morality, he has preserved some portion of himself outside the judge's textual domain."¹²³ These observations are certainly valid and worthy of further elaboration, and in fact their significance in terms of the overall relationship between the kid and the judge may have the most bearing. However, the themes of language, history, and freewill versus fate, serve to distinguish most clearly the fundamental differences between the kid and the judge. Since the judge is the winner and the inheritor of *Blood Meridian* whereas the kid loses everything, we may presume that it is their oppositionality to one another, which accounts for this outcome.

The kid's major transgression where the judge is concerned has to do with his indecisiveness and his inconsistent sympathy and morality, which the judge perceives as a weakness, and perhaps also perceives as a contradiction between the kid's privately harbored beliefs and his actions. That the kid persists in hanging on to any moral ground whilst engaged in

¹²³ Joshua J Masters, "Witness to the Uttermost Edge of the World...", 33-34.

the employment of mass murder means that he is unsure, and furthermore that he is a fraud at least to the extent that there is a broken link between his ideology and his enactment of ideology. The closest thing to morality, which the judge subscribes to, is his notion that a person must behave according to the theory that defines their enterprise. Hence when the judge kills, he is not right or wrong, but merely correct because he enacts upon the world the same vision he has rationalized according to his own violent doctrine of how the world should be. To be unsure is to be less than whole; to be less than whole is to be less than knowable, and all that which exists without the judge's knowledge exists without his consent.¹²⁴ Notably, American individualism has valued the person, as well, who knows what he stands for and stands for that thing a hundred percent. The judge is a hundred percent self-assured; the kid is less than a hundred percent and on these grounds fallible, and destined to lose.

Masters, exclusively, makes note of the fact that “[t]he kid’s inability to tell his story and construct a text, a text perhaps capable of transcending the judge’s textual order, manifests itself in his failed confession to the ‘eldress in the rocks.’”¹²⁵ This is a scene in the years since the Glanton gang was disbanded, during which the kid, now “the man,” wanders throughout the West without much aim or prospect. Alone, he comes across an old woman in the desert, leaning into a niche in the rocks.

He spoke to her in a low voice. He told her that he was an American and that he was a long way from the country of his birth and that he had no family and that he had traveled much and seen many things and had been at war and endured hardships. He told her that he would convey her to a safe place, some party of her

¹²⁴ Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 198.

¹²⁵ Joshua J Masters, “Witness to the Uttermost Edge of the World...,” 35.

countrypeople who would welcome her and that she should join them for he could not leave her in this place or she would surely die.¹²⁶

The kid, now the man, has apparently learned Spanish at some point along the way for now he leans toward her: “Abuelita, he [says]. No puedes escucharme?” At this very moment he calls the woman grandmother, and wonders why she cannot hear him, he realizes she is not living but rather “...just a dried shell and...dead in [this] place for years.”¹²⁷

Masters observantly notes in this case that “[the kid’s] one chance at redemption by way of apology, confession, self-revelation, and rescue is thwarted by the fact that he whispers his words into the ear of a withered corpse...”¹²⁸ More significantly though, it should be noted that the kid is speaking his language—which spoken is only fleeting and devoid of any lasting testimony, just as the body of the old woman left alone is destined to return to dust in the desert. Writing represents the organization and confinement of time within a lasting memory and representation. In this sense, written word symbolizes eternity, immortality, and objectivity. On the other hand, spoken language without symbols to preserve it, symbolizes precisely the opposite: impermanence, mortality, and fleetingness destined for decay—banishment from the universe by way of disremembrance. “Words are things,”¹²⁹ the judge has said. As well,

[a]ll progressions from a higher to a lower order are marked by ruins and mystery and a residue of nameless rage. So. Here are the dead fathers. Their spirit is entombed in the stone. It lies upon the land with the same weight and the same ubiquity. For whoever makes a shelter of reeds and hides has joined his spirit to the common destiny of creatures and he will subside back into the primal mud with a

¹²⁶ Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 315.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 315.

¹²⁸ Joshua J Masters, “Witness to the Uttermost Edge of the World...,” 36.

¹²⁹ Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 84

scarcely a cry. But who builds in stone seeks to alter the structure of the universe
and so it was with these masons however primitive their works may seem to us.¹³⁰

The rest, like animals thrown from a cliff into an historical void, are destined to “...[fall] from sight
into a sink of cold blue space that [absolves them] forever of memory in the mind of any living
thing that was.”¹³¹

A CIRCLE OF CONCLUSION: THE EPILOGUE



*In the dawn there is a man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground. He uses an implement with two handles and he chucks it into the hole and he enkindles the stone in the hole with his steel hole by hole striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there. On the plain behind him are the wanderers in search of bones and those who do not search and they move haltingly in the light like mechanisms whose movements are monitored with escapement and pallet so that they appear restrained by a prudence or reflectiveness which has no inner reality and they cross in their progress one by one that track of holes that runs to the rim of the visible ground and which seems less the pursuit of some continuance than the verification of a principle, a validation of sequence and causality as if each round and perfect hole owed its existence to the one before it there on that prairie upon which are the bones and the gatherers of bones and those who do not gather. He strikes fire in the hole and draws out his steel. Then they all move on again.¹³² (Epilogue: *Blood Meridian*, 337).*



The epilogue seems to jump us ahead in time to some point in the twentieth century, perhaps all the way to 1985 when *Blood Meridian* is written. The language of this passage is fairly seamless; it minimizes and excludes the traditional use of commas, and instead of acknowledging natural clauses the words are brought closer to flow together with the lilting repetition of the word “and.” It reads poetically without sacrificing the use of one large word after another, which

¹³⁰ Ibid., 146.

¹³¹ Ibid., 147.

¹³² Ibid., 337.

McCarthy seems a great fan of in general. The tone is reminiscent of a style of storytelling, so that the reader can easily imagine these are the words of someone alive and observant within the setting described. Who is speaking, if in fact this is a voice, remains unclear. The picture illustrated is mostly unfamiliar and resists categorization into one easy understanding of time and place; even the actions that are occurring in the passage are difficult to make sense of.

The *man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground* seems to refer to the post holes typically dug in preparation for the construction of a fence. The frontier has arrived at its destined end; now all there is left to do is draw the vertical and horizontal lines of greater and greater delineation and control across a continent That he keeps hitting stone, *striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there*, reminds us that God created this physical world, but perhaps due to the rockiness and the aridness of the earth he is working with it is also plausible that the passage takes place somewhere upon a section of weak topsoil in an agriculturally unfit area of the West. *On the plain behind him are the wanderers in search of bones and those who do not search.* To me this refers to some melancholic doubt in relation to the American people who have been emancipated from their pasts and set free of inheritance. Now that they have reached the Pacific Coast and Manifest Destiny has seen them through to the end of their great expansion, the frontier has turned up over them like a wave, and as individual and self-determined as they now are, still they move backwards—suddenly desirous to know from whence they came—searching the ground they have walked once already for a trace of belonging, or some self-defining remnant.

Yet the fact *that they appear restrained by a prudence or reflectiveness which has no inner reality* seems to suggest at a degree of fickleness. For all their apparent concern, and their communal thirst for connection, or reconnection, they retain yet some series of traits, which causes

them to *cross in their progress one by one that track of holes that runs to the rim of the visible ground*, so that their aspirations track only at the heels of a progress that in fact does not lead to their professed desire. Rather “progress” represents only the same repeated desire of belonging and connectedness without fruition, and the path they follow *seems less the pursuit of some continuance than the verification of a principle, a validation of sequence and causality as if each round and perfect hole owed its existence to the one before it there on that prairie*. The fact that they are still awaiting a sense of completion and finality, and confident that one thing will necessarily lead to another, illustrates their expectation of some teleological arrival, yet the effect of waiting is less progress than it is treading water. Perhaps then the end of history is simply advancing forward while waiting for history to happen.

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ⁱ For more on these general aspects of Saum's discussion, see chapters 2 and 7 in particular.

ⁱⁱ Although a case for this argument is built upon throughout Turner's essay, most of it can be summarized in the first section of "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," pages 59-62.

ⁱⁱⁱ Referring to a concordance of *Blood Meridian* (listed in the bibliography), I scanned the entire text for the words "book," and "Bible." The word "Bible" appears only on pages 7 and 312. The word "book" appears multiple times, and only referring to the judge's notebooks, on pages 127, 133, 139-141, 173, 198, 248, 252.