

“HELIOTROPIC PLAGUE”: *BLOOD MERIDIAN*’S NEW MYTH
OF THE AMERICAN SOUTHWEST

THESIS

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by

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I. INTRODUCTION

While I was speaking to a friend about Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, or, *The Evening Redness in the West*, he remarked, "I was blown away by McCarthy's prose, but I was embarrassed to tell anyone I was reading him because of the violence." As his remark indicates, the violence in *Blood Meridian* is hard to assimilate and the narrative confronts the reader with one brutal scene after another. As Barclay Owens asserts: "Despite attempts to sneak back later, to redact the evidence, to investigate our reactions, to explain away certain scenes as moral, we cannot forget the initial shock of the novel's violence" (xiii). From John Glanton's murder of a defenseless and blind woman to the judge's murder of children, *Blood Meridian* revels in carnage and McCarthy presents this slaughter without a mediating narrative voice; the violence just *is*, left on the page for the reader to decipher its significance.

I was overwhelmed by the carnage and mesmerized by the language, and, unlike my friend, I was not embarrassed by my enjoyment of McCarthy's aesthetically beautiful violence. Primordial violence has defined the first decade of the twenty-first century, and ever since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, war has been the theme of American culture. We find ourselves in a war against terror, a war that by its definition is destined never to end. I grew up in the comparatively peaceful '90s, and this attack necessitated a new look at the world, a new ability to understand violence. An artist of McCarthy's caliber is doing

something with violence, not just engaging violence for its own sake. *Blood Meridian's* violence and its characters, especially the judge, will not leave my head.

Blood Meridian, published in 1985, is McCarthy's fifth novel and the first to be set in the Southwest. The Southwest has always been defined by what it is not, notably, the industrialized Northeast. The region's name indicates its isolation and its historic association with the frontier. For the purposes of this thesis, I define the Southwest as the geographic region that begins in Central Texas and extends to California, including the vast desert terrain existing in the region that has now become Arizona, New Mexico, and parts of Northern Mexico. Sara L. Spurgeon notes that the Southwest "can be seen as a condensation of the West, containing all the mythic elements commonly associated with both the West and frontiers" (6). At times, I use the terms "Southwest" and "West" interchangeably, because the history and myth of the Southwest contain the history and myth of the Old West. Before I begin my introduction of the major characters and themes in *Blood Meridian*, I will briefly summarize the novel's plot to establish the details that are important to my thesis.

The narrative of *Blood Meridian* follows "the kid," who remains unnamed throughout the novel, as he travels from Tennessee to the Southwest. At fourteen, "he can neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence" (McCarthy 3). The kid is illiterate and has a natural inclination for violence and, like all the other characters in the novel, rarely reflects upon the implications of his actions. He enters Texas in 1849 and finds a land that is perfectly suited to his violent tendencies. The kid's first foray into organized violence occurs when he joins Captain White's filibustering expedition, an illegal military operation designed to take Mexican land

forcibly. Captain White and his men are slaughtered by the Comanche after they first enter Mexico, an attack the kid survives. The kid enters an unnamed Mexican town and is quickly jailed by the Mexican authorities for his involvement with Captain White's illegal scheme.

While in jail, the kid learns about John Joel Glanton and his contract with the government of Chihuahua to hunt down Apaches and provide scalps as confirmation of the Indians' death. From there, the narrative follows Glanton and his men, including Toadvine, Tobin, "Doc" Irving, and "Black" John Jackson, as they journey the Southwest in search of Apache Indians. When Glanton can't find Apaches to scalp, he murders Mexicans and peaceful Indian Tribes, such as the Gileños, because of the similarity between their scalps and Apache scalps. While Glanton and his men are heedless in their violence, Judge Holden, the second-in-command, philosophizes upon the nature of their quest, giving the Glanton gang numerous lectures upon geology, morality, and destiny. Try as the men might, they cannot refute the judge's logic, and the narrative increasingly makes it clear that the men have become the judge's disciples.

Eventually, officials of the Mexican government realize that Glanton and his men are killing just as many of the country's own citizens as they are the Apache, and they send troops after the scalp hunters. A running fight ensues between Glanton's gang and the Mexican army, but Glanton and his men lose their pursuers and travel to what is now Arizona. The Glanton gang encounters the Yuma Indians lead by "Caballo en Pelo" and agrees to help them capture the Yuma ferry crossing on the Colorado River. Having arrived at the ferry crossing, Glanton and his men double-cross the Yumas and shoot them as they come to seize the ferry. After this, they commandeer the ferry, charging

outrageous prices to those who try to cross the river, and eventually Glanton and his men resort to raping and killing the travelers. After several days of the gang's lechery, the Yumas return for revenge and catch Glanton and his men off guard and kill every single member of the gang except the kid, Tobin, Toadvine, David Brown, and the judge.

Tobin and the judge are split from the other survivors and manage to break free of the pursuing Yuma Indians, only to meet the judge at a watering hole in the desert. The judge turns on his former compatriots and hounds them across the desert. The judge tempts the kid into a final showdown, but the kid and Tobin hide from the judge, realizing that they are not his match. He eventually travels on, and the kid and Tobin make it to Los Angeles.

The narrative then jumps forward twenty-eight years, and the kid is now "the man," still wandering the Southwest. At Fort Griffin, a north Texas town, the man encounters the judge. They have a long and strange conversation about war and mercy and rituals, with the judge finally telling the kid, "This night thy soul may be required of thee" (McCarthy 327). In the only unrecorded act of violence in the novel, the judge murders the man in an outhouse. Thus ends the kid's journey through the Southwest. The judge is the last member of the Glanton gang, and the text indicates that "he will never die" (McCarthy 335). This is a horrifying thought; the judge's godhood indicates that American society is, at its heart, willfully violent. But by bringing this violence to the forefront, I believe that McCarthy's text acts as a counterpoint to the unchecked myth of American progress.

The Glanton gang's violence and the judge's ideology of warfare recall the forgotten violence that was necessary for the Anglo conquest of the Southwest, and by

doing so, the narrative demonstrates that merciless warfare is the dark heart of Manifest Destiny. The critical literature on *Blood Meridian* divides into two camps: those who see the novel as a historical retelling of the Anglo conquest of the Southwest, and those that read the novel as a metaphysical enterprise that implicates God as an evil being and his creation as wholly devoid of goodness. For example, Susan Kollin analyzes *Blood Meridian* as a revisionary Western and states that “nation-building functions as a bloody act in the text, with violence ensuring the success of United States encroachment in the Southwest” (563). Where Kollin sees *Blood Meridian* as denouncing American imperialism, Leo Daugherty views the novel as a text that displays Gnostic theology and argues that Judge Holden is the earth’s evil archon (163). History and myth converge in *Blood Meridian*, and I argue in this thesis that the novel must be viewed in both lights because the historical accuracy of the violence increases the impact of McCarthy’s new myth of the American West.

As John Sepich has demonstrated, John Glanton, the judge, and most of the gang are based on historical figures found in Samuel Chamberlain’s *My Confession*. Yet McCarthy’s narrative voice undermines this historical accuracy by insisting on the mythic nature of the Glanton gang’s scalp hunting quest. The contradiction between historical accuracy and mythical storytelling has yet to be adequately explained by McCarthy scholars. The myth of the American West is the dominant myth of American culture, based on the archetypal story of an Anglo male traveling westward, encountering the wilderness and conquering the Indians. The story is typically presented as a story of progress in which civilization overcomes savagery and the highest American ideals flourish. In *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy strips the west of any romantic connotations.

Instead of heroic Indian fighters who make the wilderness safe for democracy, McCarthy gives us Glanton and the judge, mighty transgressors of any and all social order, in order to interrogate the myths that justify American imperialism.

In my first chapter, “War is God,” I analyze the history of the Southwest in order to demonstrate that the violence in the novel correlates to the violence that occurred after the Mexican-American War. In 1849, Texas was a land defined by violence, with racial tension still simmering long after the war’s end. Manifest Destiny prompted Americans to dream of a continental empire, with little regard for the rights of the Indian and Mexican populations that already occupied the Southwest. As John Cant states, the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny “legitimatized the cultural and material extirpation of the indigenous population as a divine mission to civilize the savage” (157). McCarthy’s novel deconstructs the very notion of civilization representing progress by presenting the atrocities committed by John Glanton, the scalp hunters, and the judge. In McCarthy’s presentation of the scalp hunting expedition and his adherence to historical accuracy, he recontextualizes the Anglo presence in the Southwest as savage imperialism. The judge, an embodiment of Western culture, uses his knowledge of the law, the land, and the history of the Southwest to better depopulate the land of any trace of the cultures that previously inhabited the region. Ultimately, the Glanton gang’s violence enables the Anglo conquest of the Southwest.

However, McCarthy uses the history of Glanton and the scalp hunters to fashion his own myth of the Southwest that works as a counter-text to the traditional myth of the American West. In his seminal work *Regeneration Through Violence*, Richard Slotkin defines myth as a “narrative formulation of a culture’s world view and self-concept,

which draws on both the historical experience of that culture and on sources of feeling, fear, and aspiration...deep in the human subconscious” (294). The myth of the American West is based on the history of its people and their attempts to justify the violence that accompanied territorial expansion. Out of this experience comes the “archetypal hero of the American frontier,” embodied by the “man who made the wilderness safe for democracy” (Slotkin, *RTV* 268-9). The frontier hero’s most typical manifestation is the cowboy riding the range and fighting Indians in order to make the wilderness safe for civilization.¹

In the second chapter, “A Patrol Condemned,” I examine how McCarthy takes the archetype of the frontier hero and refashions him into a murdering, depraved barbarian who is no better or even worse than the “savages” he comes to conquer. McCarthy’s language places the characters in the context of a mythic realm, and so McCarthy’s text can be read as an emerging counter-myth that deconstructs the dominant American mythology by borrowing the archetypes and settings of the classical Western. In this chapter, I demonstrate that McCarthy’s mythic language transforms the Glanton gang’s scalp hunting expedition from a singular historic event into a fundamental expression of the founding of the American Southwest. Furthermore, McCarthy’s language and presentation of the judge indicate that he is God of the Southwest. The mythic nature of the novel indicates that McCarthy creates a new mythology of the American West through which current Americans view their past.

McCarthy’s new myth of the American West critically examines ideas about American superiority and our current role as spreaders of democracy. In the third chapter, “The Distant Pandemonium of the Sun,” I synthesize my findings from the first

two chapters in order to demonstrate how the history and myth of *Blood Meridian* comment on the current state of American foreign policy and Americans' perception of the current war on terror. Former President George W. Bush packaged and sold the war on terror using the myth of the American West, essentially justifying American imperialism by claiming that it is America's duty to spread democracy in the world. McCarthy's counter-myth of the American West deconstructs the rhetoric of expansion by revealing the violence that is necessary for territorial conquest.

Ultimately, what is fascinating about *Blood Meridian* is its engagement with the brutal history of the Southwest and how McCarthy transforms historical fact into a counter-myth through the recasting of archetypal heroes and settings. The kid, Glanton, Tobin, and the judge have all found a permanent home in my brain, for better or worse. I have incorporated McCarthy's draft material into my argument, housed in the Wittliff Collection at Texas State University-San Marcos, because the textual differences between the published version and draft versions of *Blood Meridian* inform my reading of the novel and also contribute to the field of McCarthy scholarship since few scholars have seen McCarthy's draft material.²

As a meditation on violence, *Blood Meridian* is unparalleled. McCarthy's text suggests that the primal nature of mankind, which civilization has supposedly tamed, simmers just below the surface of every-day life. The judge espouses a philosophy that is eerily convincing in its deification of war, and his philosophy questions the very notion of goodness and recasts history as a testing of wills, devoid of morality. But I think all the violence and the judge's elevation to the divine ultimately force the reader to investigate the nature of war in contemporary American life, questioning the ideology

that justifies warfare by arguing that it is a moral good. Is there a penchant for violence in the American mind? Are Americans afraid of their violent past and what it says about America's violent present? These are important questions that must be answered, regardless of the impropriety or indecency of the images that evoke this response. By exploring the tension between history and mythmaking in *Blood Meridian*, I attempt to address these questions. My examination of the role of violence in American culture has critical relevance to contemporary American events such as the country's involvement in two foreign wars and to the ongoing chronicle of American violence in the varied news media every day.

II. "WAR IS GOD"

History is integral to McCarthy's mythmaking, and it does *Blood Meridian* a disservice to try to untangle the myth from the historical reality. Owens asserts, "Myth and historical fact soon blend together into popular stories bearing cultural expectations, supporting or challenging our most cherished orthodoxies" (xv). McCarthy deconstructs the notion of "American Exceptionalism," embodied in the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny, by forcing the reader to bear witness to the acts of genocide and unmediated violence that depopulated the Southwest of its native inhabitants (Cant 6). Observed through an historical lens, the judge and the Glanton gang's cultural and physical violence against Indians and Mexicans presents a pattern of Anglo conquest. The novel's violence rejects the "triumphalist literature" that has "enshrined the experience of the 'Old West' in tales of victory and progress" (Montejano 1). "Triumphalist Literature," as David Montejano defines it, is the "romanticized awareness of southwestern history—Indians and Mexicans were subdued, ranches fenced, railroads built, and so on until the West was completely won" (1). Triumphalist literature hinges upon the notion of conquest as progress; in comparison, *Blood Meridian* demonstrates that the very notion of progress is inconsistent with the violence that accompanied America's westward expansion.

The frontier society of the Southwest was magnificently violent, embodied in the ethnic violence between Anglos and Mexicans, Anglos and Indians, and Mexicans and

Indians. Once one moves beyond the sanitized dream of American progress and lifts the veil, the horror of history confronts us, as the judge says, “in the round” (McCarthy 331). Denis Donoghue, writing about teaching *Blood Meridian* in the classroom, states, “Some students thought that the ethical issue in *Blood Meridian* could be set aside by construing the book as a satire against the myth of Manifest Destiny” and concludes that “satire is evidently not the issue” (408). Donoghue argues that it is absurd to reduce *Blood Meridian* to a satire of Manifest Destiny, yet I think it is absurd to ignore the questioning of conquest the book presents. McCarthy does not satirize Manifest Destiny because he is not interested in conventional ethics. *Blood Meridian* engages in deconstructing the history of Manifest Destiny to explore man’s primal nature.

Contextualizing *Blood Meridian*

First, the social and historical context of the novel must be understood. In “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” Frederick Jackson Turner defines the frontier as the “meeting point between civilization and savagery” (Turner 3). Turner posits: “The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westwards, explain American development” (1). Turner’s diction upholds the dominant ideology of American superiority by imagining the American West as a “free land,” open for American development. He dehumanizes Indians, characterizing them as impediments for Anglo westward expansion. For example, the westward push of Americans was “won by a series of Indian wars” (Turner 9). Turner celebrates the winning of the “Indian wars” unconditionally and without reserve. He continues: “The frontier army post, serving to protect the settlers from the Indians, has

also acted as a wedge to open the Indian country, and has been a nucleus for settlement” (Turner 16). Turner contains the violence of the frontier by insisting on the positive nature of Anglo expansion: “Since the days when the fleet of Columbus sailed into the waters of the New World, America has been another name for opportunity, and the people of the United States have taken their tone from the incessant expansion which has not only been open but has even been forced upon them” (Turner 37). Turner’s theorizing of the frontier demonstrates that history is a “process of selection and control” (Campbell 218). Turner’s frontier thesis naturalizes American expansionism by ignoring complicating factors, such as the genocide of the Indians, in order to promote American interests. Turner’s thesis reflects the dominant stereotype of the frontier, where progress is stressed, Anglo-Americans are generators of civilization, and the genocide of Indians is considered a part of that overall progress. With the rise of New West Historians, Turner’s frontier thesis began to be examined critically.

The New West Historians reacted to the violence of the Vietnam War and began to deconstruct the view of the frontier presented by Turner (Owens 21). The dominant theme of New West Historicism is that the simplified view of the frontier as the “meeting point between civilization and savagery” does not hold when confronted with the evidence of Anglo genocide (Turner 3). Unlike the South’s history of slavery, the Anglo conquest of the West was not critically inspected until the last decades of the twentieth century (Limerick 18). In *The Legacy of Conquest*, Patricia Nelson Limerick states, “In the popular imagination, the reality of conquest dissolved into stereotypes of noble savages and noble pioneers struggling quaintly in the wilderness” (19). To move beyond this simple and romantic view of the Southwest requires the ability to deal with the

complex, violent, and imperialistic nature of the Anglo conquest of the Southwest. In Limerick's view, "the history of the West is a study of a place undergoing conquest and never fully escaping its consequences" (26). By reevaluating Turner's frontier thesis, Limerick discovers that "conquest forms the historical bedrock of the whole nation, and the American West is a preeminent case study in conquest and its consequences" (27-8). The appearance of progress collapses when one actually examines the violence that accompanied expansion. Limerick's research demonstrates the need for a critical re-evaluation of American's brutal past, and this violence can best be reassessed in the history of the Southwest.

David Montejano's account of the situation in Texas and the Southwest in 1849 focuses on the violence that Turner's frontier thesis excludes. In *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986*, David Montejano states:

Texas independence and subsequent annexation of the northern Mexican territory were essentially the reflection of a "manifest destiny." The Anglo-Saxon nation was bound to glory; the inferior, decadent Indian race and the half-breed Mexicans were to succumb before the inexorable march of the superior Anglo-Saxon people. (24)

Manifest Destiny was first coined by John L. O'Sullivan in the *Democratic Review* (July–August 1845) in 1845 (Pratt 798). Manifest Destiny glorified the conquest of the Southwest using religious language:

The far-reaching, the boundless future will be the era of American greatness. In its magnificent domain of space and time, the nation of many nations is destined to manifest to mankind the excellence of divine

principles; to establish on earth the noblest temple ever dedicated to the worship of the most high—the Sacred and the True. Its floor shall be a hemisphere—its roof the firmament of the star-studded heavens, and its congregation an Union of many Republics, comprising hundreds of happy millions, calling, owning no man master, but governed by God’s natural and moral law of equality, the law of brotherhood—of “peace and good will amongst men.” (O’Sullivan qtd. in Pratt 797)

Divine, peaceful progress, the spread of democracy, these were the stated goals of Manifest Destiny. Yet the historical situation of Texas after the influx of pioneers influenced by the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny belies O’Sullivan’s optimistic outlook.

After Texas achieved independence, “a spirit of revenge and abandon prevailed in the young republic, and many [Anglo] ex-soldiers carried out raids that claimed the land, stock, and lives of Mexicans, ally and foe alike” (Montejano 26). Warfare and racial violence were a constant in the decades following Texas independence. For instance, “The old Mexican town of La Bahia, once an important port with a thousand residents...was completely razed, and the fort and church destroyed” (Montejano 26). The ruined churches and villages that dominate the landscape of *Blood Meridian* are, in part, a result of the racial violence that occurred after the Texas war for independence. By reassessing the myth of the frontier, Montejano, like Limerick, demonstrates the primitive violence that Anglos engaged in while conquering the area.

McCarthy’s research further demonstrates the importance of historical accuracy in the composition of the novel. His notes on Nacogdoches display a meticulous attention to detail. For example, “Main Street Town Plaza Old Stone ‘fort’ was the house of

Capt Gil Y' Barbo built about 1778 and was [sic] later a trading post. It was at Main and Fredonia and visible at end of street looking east (it faced the northeast corner of the Plaza Principal where the two branches of the Camino Real merged" (McCarthy, draft n. pag., 91/35/7). McCarthy records the population statistics, "1847 Population 402: 211 white males & 88 white females (plus blacks (slaves))," and identifies individuals that lived in Nacogdoches, such as, "John Henry 30 mail carrier (Alamo escapee's son?)," and "Vardra McGinnis stagedriver from N C" (McCarthy, draft n. pag., 91/35/7).

Among his notes is the line, "This latterday republic of Fredonia (under Edwards, named by Dr Mitchel (prior to Texas independence)" (McCarthy, draft n. pag., 91/35/7). Next to this entry, McCarthy has written, "use page four?" In the published novel, McCarthy writes, "In the spring of the year eighteen and forty-nine he rides up through the latterday republic of Fredonia into the town of Nacogdoches" (5). My point in presenting McCarthy's research is to demonstrate the impossibility of divesting *Blood Meridian* of its historical sources because history is the very language that constitutes the novel. One cannot dismiss the history that begets the fiction because the history is repulsive to our modern sensibilities.

John Emil Sepich has conclusively shown the debt McCarthy's fiction owes to Samuel Chamberlain's *My Confession: Recollections of a Rogue* (Sepich 1). Chamberlain's memoir is a "long-lost personal narrative of the late 1840s" (Sepich 5). Brown, Tobin, Glanton, and the judge are all found in Chamberlain's memoir. The historical Glanton "fought Mexicans during the Mexican War, and later killed Indians and Mexicans for profit" (Sepich 8). Chamberlain first sees him in a San Antonio saloon, where Glanton assaults a Texas Ranger who has insulted one of his compatriots.

Chamberlain writes, “Quick as a flash, Glanton sprang up, a huge Bowie Knife flashed in the candle light, and the tall powerful young Ranger fell with a sickening thud to the floor a corpse! his neck cut half through” (Chamberlain 61). On June 27, 1849, Glanton contracted with Chihuahua to provide the scalps of raiding Apache Indians (Sepich 8). Scalp hunting, as Sepich notes, was a common practice during these times: “The decade of the forties saw the northern Mexico state of Chihuahua, in its attempt to break the cycle of Indian incursions, hire Anglo aliens to kill the raiders” (6). The scalp provided the most discernible method of proving the Indian’s death (Sepich 6).

The historical Judge Holden, also found in Chamberlain’s narrative (Sepich 14), is as surprisingly impressive and uncanny as the judge that appears in *Blood Meridian*. As Sepich notes, “little of Chamberlain’s historical Holden will surprise McCarthy’s readers” (Sepich 14). In Chamberlain’s account, Judge Holden “was a man of gigantic size” who stood “six foot six” with “a dull-tallow colored face destitute of hair and all expression” (Chamberlain 306). Chamberlain states:

His [Holden’s] desires was [sic] blood and women, and terrible stories were circulated in camp of horrid crimes committed by him when bearing another name in the Cherokee nation and Texas. And before we left Fronteras a little girl of ten years was found in the chapperal [sic], foully violated and murdered. (Chamberlain)

McCarthy amplifies this horrifying figure, yet the judge’s traits are historical facts. These historical figures are the stuff from which McCarthy fashioned *Blood Meridian*. Chamberlain’s activity with the scalp hunting gang demonstrates that the atavistic

violence at the heart of *Blood Meridian* is historically accurate. Creating his fiction from fact, McCarthy deconstructs the notion of progress.

Bones in the Desert: The Geographic Record of Violence

The landscape in *Blood Meridian* is marred by the violence of centuries of warfare. The kid, upon leaving Tennessee, has left Western civilization behind him, in the unmistakably American dream of starting anew in the West. The kid's "origins are become remote as is 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" (McCarthy 4-5). But McCarthy's West is not the regenerative Eden of conventional American ideology, and the kid's rebirth that occurs after White's failed filibustering quest to Mexico only leads to more bones in the desert.

Bones are a defining feature of the landscape: "Bone paling ruled the small and dusty purlieus here and death seemed the most prevalent feature of the landscape" (McCarthy 48). Concurrently, vultures are a predominant animal in this desolate landscape, where "nothing moved in that purgatorial waste save carnivorous birds" (McCarthy 63). Travelers, mules, and Indians are all subject to the severity of the Western expanse and leave behind fragments of their broken bodies. Time is condensed in the desert, the dry air preserving ancient and modern bones alike. Traveling with White, the kid passes "little wooden crosses propped in cairns of stone where travelers had met with death" (McCarthy 62). Later on, Judge Holden finds "a great femur from

some beast long extinct” (251). What we witness in the desert is the confirmation that death is “the most prevalent feature of the landscape” (McCarthy 48).

The prominence of bones and the ruins of older cultures reject the conception of the Southwest as devoid of previous inhabitants where the land pristinely waits for the Anglo-Saxon to bring God and civilization to the wretched barbarians. The kid and Sproule pass a night in a “shallow cave...an old reliquary of flintknappings and rachel scattered about on the stone floor with beads of shell and polished bone and the charcoal of ancient fires” (McCarthy 57). Later in the novel, the Glanton gang camps “in the ruins of an older culture deep in the stone mountains...dwellings of mud and stone were walled up beneath an overhanging cliff and the valley was traced with the work of old acequias. The loose sand in the valley floor was strewn everywhere with pieces of pottery” (McCarthy 139). The ruins of the Anasazi attest to a culture that was highly developed: the Anasazi produced art, aqueducts, and permanent settlements. McCarthy’s focus on the advanced civilization of the Anasazi rejects the conventional history of the Southwest by demonstrating the similarities between Indian culture and American culture. It is illogical to typify the Anasazi or their descendants as “savages” because they have intelligently adapted to the harsh conditions of the Southwest by creating advancements in building and agricultural techniques.

The Judge

The judge’s ideology justifies Manifest Destiny by arguing that there is no authority higher than warfare. His physical and intellectual characteristics define him as an embodiment of Western rationality. Like the judge found in Chamberlain’s narrative,

McCarthy's Judge Holden is enormous, "close on to seven feet," and completely hairless, "bald as a stone" with "no trace of beard" and "no brows to his eyes nor lashes to them" (McCarthy 6). He is abnormally white, almost an albino; for example, he "shone like the moon so pale he was" (McCarthy 167). He is a nightmare creature, his physical traits a grotesque exaggeration of the invading white man. His extreme hairlessness suggests he is further along the evolutionary timeline than most humans. For all his size, the judge's face is "strangely childlike" (McCarthy 6). Rick Wallach suggests the judge's neoteny, an expression of juvenile traits retained into adulthood, acts as a "metaphor [that] harmoniously unifies the judge's exaggerated intellect with his outlandishly childlike appearance" (4). The judge's intellect produces an ideology that is childlike in its simplicity and ruthless in its execution.

Judge Holden is a paradox, at once the most civilized person in the novel and the most savage. Steven Shaviro states: "Whereas all the other characters kill casually and thoughtlessly, only the judge kills out of will and conviction and a deep commitment to the cause and the canons of Western rationality" (147). His savagery is distinct from the other scalp hunters because it is founded on a fully developed ideology of imperialism. Susan Kollin sees the judge as "a pastiche of imperial figures such as Joseph Conrad's Kurtz and Herman Melville's Ahab." She also finds similarities between the judge's physical attributes and "Marlon Brando's performance as the violent and depraved imperial agent in *Apocalypse Now*" (568). In her comparison of the judge to Ahab, Kollin states: "The character is obsessed with the logic that underpins expansion. The Judge functions as the embodiment of rational order, the philosopher who theorizes the mission, the historian who chronicles the events, and the poet who transforms it all into language"

(568). Judge Holden is connected to Ahab and Kurtz because he orders the world according to his will, and all who come in contact with him are reduced to bit players forced into a play that they can never comprehend. Furthermore, Ahab, Kurtz, and the judge define the ideology of imperialist expansion through violence and the contest of wills, thereby divesting the ideology of its romantic, noble, or even economic excuses.

When the judge speaks around the campfire, the men are transfixed: “The judge cracked with the back of an axe the shinbones on an antelope and the hot marrow dripped smoking on the stones. They watched him. The subject was war” (McCarthy 248). The image of the judge pouring marrow on the hot rocks is reminiscent of a blood sacrifice. He begins by stating that war is the ultimate game and that all games “aspire to the condition of war for here that which is wagered swallows up game, player, all” (McCarthy 249). He continues, “War is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one’s will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god” (McCarthy 249).

Judge Holden’s ideology is founded on nihilism, a theory developed by Friedrich Nietzsche that “exposed the limitations of the language by means of which religious, ethical, psychological, and political discourses attempt simultaneously to capture human essences and to obscure their own institutional interests in power, and he thus revealed each of these discourse as radically relative” (Phillips 453). In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche defines nihilism as a philosophical system in which the “highest values devalue themselves” (9). The unleashing of the will is a positive for Nietzsche, and he argues that a moral system that holds peace superior to war is “antibiological,” because

“life is a consequence of war, society itself a means to war” (33). Although the judge predates Nietzsche, Nietzsche’s philosophy informs the judge’s ideology and the overall structure of the novel. In the judge’s ideology of war, morality and ethics are proven absurd because they mean nothing in a game whose stakes are life and death. Through its finality, death erases the loser’s moral, political, and ethical claims. The victor, merely by staying alive, asserts his will upon the conquered and erases any counterclaims the defeated had. But the judge’s nihilism is a positive nihilism because he raises war to the status of a moral imperative. For the judge, there is joy to be found by applying his will to shape the world.

Irving, a scalp hunter, interrupts the judge’s speech with the moral platitude, “Might does not make right...the man that wins in some combat is not vindicated morally” (McCarthy 250). Irving is destined to lose his argument because his rhetoric and ideas are not equal to the Judge’s ideology. While the judge’s ideology is formed by nihilism, in war he finds a language that cannot be contradicted by human insight. In war:

There can be no special pleading. Here are considerations of equity and rectitude and moral right rendered void and without warrant and here are the views of the litigants despised. Decisions of life and death, of what shall be and what shall not, beggar all question of right. In elections of these magnitudes are all lesser ones subsumed, moral, spiritual, natural.

(McCarthy 250)

As the judge’s speech demonstrates, morality and justice are human constructs that reach their limit in the concrete reality of war. As Dana Phillips states, “violence and death, it

would seem, are the more or less objective truths of all human experience” (439). War further reduces human existence to a game of life and death, where the human will is rendered absurd and all questions of moral justice are void. Finally, the insistence that the violent exertion of will is the ultimate judge in human history affirms Manifest Destiny’s violent conquest of the Southwest.

McCarthy’s text revises the standard presentation of the conquest of the Southwest by focusing on the amoral violence of the Glanton gang. The history of the Southwest is reconceived as a series of wars recorded by the victors that erase the voice of the murdered Indians and Mexicans that previously inhabited the region. By doing so, *Blood Meridian* accurately recalls the racial violence that followed the Mexican-American War, and this violence refutes the romanticized view of the frontier presented by Turner. As stated previously, McCarthy’s text uncovers the true history of the Southwest by fictionalizing historical events and figures that have been conveniently forgotten because the actual events negate the ideology of progress that is necessary for the justification of the conquest of the Southwest.

By indiscriminately slaughtering any person with brown skin, the Glanton gang is an unwitting agent in America’s Manifest Destiny. Mark A. Eaton argues, “*Blood Meridian* demands to be read as a counter-narrative to the overly sanitized rhetoric of Manifest Destiny. For McCarthy’s account of bloodshed in the Southwest borderlands gives the lie to such benign rhetoric about the US’s expansionist aims” (160). However, while the violence of Glanton and his men opens the Southwest for Anglo immigration by depopulating the region of Indians and Mexicans, their violence is not ideologically driven.

Toadvine, the kid's companion, first describes the scalp-hunting quest: "His name is Glanton...He's got a contract with Trias. They're to pay him a hundred dollars a head for scalps" (McCarthy 79). Preceding the introduction of Glanton's expedition, the narrator describes the first Americans heading west in search of gold as "patched argonauts from the states driving mules through the streets on their way south through the mountains to the coast. Goldseekers. Itinerant degenerates bleeding westward like some heliotropic plague" (McCarthy 78). A "heliotropic plague" is a contagious illness that is stimulated by and oriented towards sunlight, an apt description of the Anglo's expansion westward.

The ruthlessness of southwestern expansion is best illustrated by the Glanton gang's attack on a sleeping tribe of Gileños Indians. Before the attack, Glanton rouses his men's spirits by saying, "If we don't kill ever nigger here we need to be whipped and sent home" (McCarthy 155).¹ Robert L. Jarrett states: "The only justification supplied for their various massacres, beyond the scalp bounty to which the troop soon quit all pretense of claim, is their psychopathic racism aimed against all members of non-white races, particularly Native Americans and Mexicans" (91). Glanton's racist views find their analogue in the philosophy of Manifest Destiny, which was founded upon the Anglo race's superiority over Indians and Mexicans and the belief that Anglo's "held the true title to the American landscape" (Jarrett 70). The violence is stunningly rendered as the men ride "down upon the encampment where there lay sleeping upward of a thousand souls" (McCarthy 155). One Gileño "seemed to be coming apart as he ran, hit by half a dozen pistolballs" (McCarthy 155). As the slaughter continues:

Some of the men were moving on foot among the huts with torches and dragging the victims out, slathered and dripping with blood, hacking at the dying and decapitating those who knelt for mercy. There were in the camp a number of Mexican slaves and these ran forth calling out in Spanish and were brained or shot and one of the Delawares emerged from the smoke with a naked infant dangling in each hand and squatted at a ring of midden stones and swung them by the heels each in turn and bashed their heads through the fontanel in a bloody spew and humans on fire came shrieking forth like berserkers and the riders hacked them down with their enormous knives. (McCarthy 156)

In this passage, the conquest of the Southwest is shown in all its bloody reality.

Furthermore, it illustrates the scalp hunters' absolute amorality, as they kill infants, Mexican slaves, and those who kneel in surrender. This passage "reminds us, and so remembers, that US imperialism in the Southwest is haunted by the specter of dismembered bodies" (Eaton 161). While the massacre is enacted by men with no allegiance to Manifest Destiny, the killing of Indians and Mexicans advances Anglo expansion into the Southwest.

Glanton and his men are egalitarians when it comes to murder, equally without mercy for man, woman, or child. Their group is racially diverse and includes two Delaware Indians and a Mexican, strange companions for scalp hunters whose goal is to "kill ever nigger" (McCarthy 155). The group's racial diversity indicates that racism is not the driving force for the slaughter of Indians and Mexicans. Nor does money seem to be the point. These men do not envision themselves ever returning to society and

building a commercial or ranching enterprise; they have transgressed the normal order of frontier society. These killers are bound by their transgressions, each equal in violent potential, every member committed to violence in and for itself. As Steven Shaviro argues, “All these men—and not just the kid—are childlike in their unconsciousness, or indifference, as to motivations and consequences” (154). In *Blood Meridian*, violence is an art form, and Glanton and his men are the ultimate artists, aesthetes removed from the world and committed to violence for violence’s sake.

Because the judge’s ideology of war covers every facet of human existence, he wages a cultural war as he travels throughout the Southwest. As he travels with the Glanton gang, the judge meticulously records the natural and historical artifacts he comes across. For example, the judge leaves camp to explore the surrounding country for Indian or Spanish artifacts. He returns with Indian flint, potsherds, primitive tools and a Spanish suit of armor and begins to draw each item in his “leather ledgerbook.” The judge “sketched with a practiced ease...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” (McCarthy 140). The judge is a master in the European tradition—he is equally adept at rhetoric, philosophy, science, and art—and made uncanny by such mastery.² The last item he sketches is a “footpiece from a suit of armor hammered out in a shop in Toledo three centuries before” and the judge draws this in his sketchbook “citing the dimensions in his neat script, making marginal notes” (McCarthy 140). The narrator’s description of the judge’s drawing abilities makes the impression that the drawings replicate the artifacts perfectly. After he is finished sketching, the judge “took up the little

footguard...[and] crushed it into a ball of foil and pitched it into the fire,” and then he “gathered up the other artifacts and cast them also into the fire” (McCarthy 140). This strange ceremony is repeated throughout the course of the novel; in each instance the judge makes a perfect copy of the objects and subsequently destroys the objects. In this way, he exerts his will over the history of the Southwest. In effect, the judge declares war on the history of the Southwest because it tells the history of the war’s losers. Webster, a member of the Glanton band, asks the judge what he plans do with the sketches and the judge replies “that it was his intention to expunge them from the memory of man” (McCarthy 140). Adrian V. Fielder argues that “the judge’s scrutinous scientific gaze becomes an extension of a vast epistemological enterprise, emanating from the West, which has been invested...in the systematic identification and tabulation of the earth’s life forms and natural resources” (38). Historically:

This urge to document the world...was deeply implicated in the political and economic forces encouraging European expansion, and that the prolific production of scientific knowledge thus catalyzed was instrumental in the subsequent imperial domination of those parts of the world under investigation. (Fielder 38)

Finally, “through the figure of the judge, *Blood Meridian* suggests that this enterprise was still quite flourishing in the nineteenth century, and that it played an important role during American expansion” (Fielder 38). As Fielder suggests, the judge is aiding imperial expansion by erasing the history of those who previously inhabited the region. He is whitewashing the Southwest, erasing its history artifact by artifact, thereby erasing the

very violence that promotes the idealized view of Manifest Destiny found in Turner's frontier thesis.

In another example of the judge's war against Southwestern history, Glanton and his men stop at "the Hueco tanks, a group of natural stone cisterns in the desert" (McCarthy 173). This cistern has been the site of Indian culture for generations, and the walls are covered with petroglyphs. The petroglyphs record the ancient culture's history and "were of men and animals and of the chase and there were curious birds and arcane maps and there were constructions of such singular vision as to justify every fear of man and the things that are in him" (McCarthy 173). These petroglyphs represent the ancient Indian culture in all its multifaceted aspects—their history, geography, daily routines, religious beliefs, and most of all, they bear witness to the existence of an advanced and intelligent Indian culture existing in the Southwest for centuries. The petroglyphs' existence refutes the judge's willpower because they exist outside of his knowledge. Furthermore, because the judge is a self-fashioned conqueror of the Southwest, he must erase any trace of the Indians because in war the "views of the litigants [are] despised" (McCarthy 250). After studying and copying a petroglyph, the judge "rose and with a piece of broken chert he scrapped away one of the designs, leaving no trace of it only a raw place on the stone where it had been" (McCarthy 173). The judge's act of drawing and destroying artifacts is a "continual movement of accretion that also implies the cruelty of triage or selection" (Shaviro 153). The language of this passage indicates the cultural violence enacted against Indian culture, with the scraped stone resembling a wound. In a later passage the judge is asked why he keeps the notebook. He replies, "Whatever exists... Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my

consent” (McCarthy 198). There can be no conflicting accounts, no culture or nature outside of the judge’s will. For the judge, there is no right or wrong that accompanies his collection and destruction of artifacts because the process is founded on the supremacy of war in which power decides the clash of cultures.

However, there is a desire to argue that *Blood Meridian* condemns the violence of the Glanton gang and rejects the judge’s nihilistic philosophy of war. Dennis Sansom argues the novel critiques the philosophy of “Theo-Determinism,” which holds two major tenets: first, God is “absolutely sovereign over everything...[and He] is the omni-causal agent of everything; second, “every action thus reflects God’s holy will” (4). He argues Theo-Determinism operates through the novel by elevating war to the absolute expression of God’s will and that war is “the cruelest and most divine activity possible for humans” (Sansom 7). Finally, he argues our personal experience negates the idea of warfare as an expression of divinity, because humans live in a world of good and evil based on the subjective human experience and that the “only world we can recognize is one in which we make moral choices. We have to assume a moral world to recognize it, and that assumes we can recognize a moral choice” (Sansom 16). In other words, when a single human views the world it is impossible not to assign a moral hierarchy in which certain actions are good and certain actions are evil. In Sansom’s conclusion, he moralizes the novel’s violence, stating that “in the world of human experience, people are indeed guilty, the judge is diabolical, and war is hell. Scalping is wrong and killing babies is sinful” (18).

However, the novel’s ending asserts that scalping is good and killing Indian or Mexican babies is a form of social progress. Roughly twenty-eight years after the Yuma

massacre of the Glanton gang, the kid runs into the judge in a North Texas bar. The judge's victory can be seen in the fact that he "seemed little changed or none in all these years" (McCarthy 325). His ideology of divine warfare has served him well, preserving his life where weaker men were felled by knife wound or gunshot. Before he kills the kid in some unspeakable manner, the judge tells him, "Only that man who has offered up himself entire to the blood of war, who has been to the floor of the pit and seen horror in the round and learned at last that it speaks to his inmost heart, only that man can dance" (McCarthy 331). His ideology is unchanged and vindicated by his very existence; furthermore, history, where force and not moral right has shaped the world, vindicates his elevation of warfare as the ultimate judge of human activity. In the haunting final passage, the judge is triumphant: "His feet are light and nimble. He never sleeps. He says that he will never die. He dances in light and in shadow and he is a great favorite. He never sleeps, the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die" (McCarthy 335). The novel asserts that this great killer of mankind is a favorite at the dance because his ideology of unlimited warfare is the ultimate expression of the human heart. The judge never sleeps and he never dies, and his triumph vindicates the absolute good of scalping the innocent and killing babies. His triumph also implicates the reader's thrill and enjoyment of this pageant of violence. For the reader, there is "no purgation or release...no curative discharge of fear and pity...we are rather swamped by emotions which can find no outlet, we too are implicated in this savage spectacle" (Shaviro 154). Although Sansom's argument is based on an excellent grasp of the judge's philosophy, his assertion that the violence in the novel is morally wrong is contradicted by the judge's triumphant dance. Finally, the judge's warfare is proven right by the subsequent Anglo

conquest of the Southwest. To this day, we Americans still enjoy the fruits of the Glanton gang's nihilistic, murderous rampage.

Blood Meridian is a complex and problematic novel based on the bloody history of Anglo expansion into the Southwest. The novel, by following the Glanton gang's scalp hunting expedition, forces the reader to confront the violence that history has forgotten. The ideology of the judge justifies the Anglo conquest of the Southwest by arguing that the Indians and Mexican's claims to the area are made invalid by their weakness in warfare, where questions of morality are settled in blood. Our nation's current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan validate the judge's ideology. What is being decided in these wars is not the question of which culture is morally superior, but which culture is more adept at exerting their violent will. And this is why the judge is still dancing in my head long after I have finished *Blood Meridian*.

III. "A PATROL CONDEMNED"

In *Blood Meridian*, Cormac McCarthy's narrative voice undermines the historical accuracy of the novel by insisting on the mythic nature of the Glanton gang's scalp hunting quest. Fantastic images intrude and disrupt the presentation of the real American Southwest in 1849. However, the mythic level of the story is firmly based on the reader's believing in the historical reality of the novel's setting and characters because myth is the result of a culture's attempt to explain the reality of specific historical situations. This contradiction between the real and the unreal disorients the reader and allows the novel to accrete a mythic narration gradually. The desert landscape through which the kid and the Glanton gang ride is a primordial hellscape that McCarthy likens to "some demon kingdom summoned up or changeling land" (McCarthy 47). The men of the Glanton gang are "like beings provoked out of the absolute rock and set nameless and at no remove from their own loomings to wander ravenous and doomed and mute as gorgons shambling the brutal wastes of Gondwanaland in a time before nomenclature was and each was all" (McCarthy 173). McCarthy's mythic language transforms the Glanton gang's scalp hunting expedition from a singular historic event into a fundamental expression of the founding of the American Southwest.

The fantastic element in *Blood Meridian* conjures an impossible world, yet by the repetition of similes that reference the fantastic, the objective world loses its clarity. Rosemary Jackson's observation about the "fantastic narrative" explains the manner in

which the fantastic begins to intrude upon realistic narratives. She states, the fantastic narrative's "means of establishing its 'reality' are initially 'mimetic' ('realistic,' presenting an 'object' world 'objectively) but then move into another mode which would seem to be marvellous ('unrealistic,' representing apparent impossibilities), were it not for its initial grounding in the 'real'" (20). *Blood Meridian* follows the pattern of the fantastic plot as described by Jackson. The kid's initial foray into Texas is realistically described. For example, the kid "looked down at the town, the quiet adobe houses, the line of green oaks and cottonwoods that marked the course of the river, the plaza filled with wagons...and the whitewashed public buildings" (McCarthy 21). McCarthy's language mimics the real San Antonio de Bexar of 1849 by representing natural and man-made objects in concrete, unadorned language. As the kid progresses in his journey and is lost in primal violence, the mimetic world breaks down and the narrative voice superimposes a mythical, imaginary realm.

Earlier in the novel, the kid comes across a favorite McCarthy trope, the hermit in the wilderness. The "anchorite" is described as "solitary, half mad," with "redrimmed" eyes (McCarthy 16). As with all of McCarthy's anchorites, this man holds secret knowledge about the workings of the world. He is also a degenerate ex-slave-trader who shows the kid a slave's heart, "dried and blackened" (McCarthy 18). He sizes the kid up and declares, "Lost ye way in the dark" (McCarthy 18). He notes, "The way of the transgressor is hard. God made this world, but he didn't make it to suit everybody, did he?" (McCarthy 19). "I dont [sic] believe he much had me in mind," the kid replies. The hermit then asks an important question: "But where does a man come by his notions. What world's he seen that he liked better?" (McCarthy 19). The kid, like an artist,

answers, “I can think of better places and better ways” (McCarthy 19). But the kid lacks the artistic or divine skills necessary to “make it be” (McCarthy 19). This scene informs the rest of the novel by questioning humanity’s desire to live in a world that is other than and distinct from the phenomenological world of quotidian existence. There is something lacking in our lives, some void that remains unfulfilled. The void results in chaos and what we lack is a tangible structure in the universe. The fantastic in *Blood Meridian* alters objective reality and creates a higher mode of reality out of its historical subjects.

The narrator of *Blood Meridian* conjures another world through the use of simile. A few examples from the novel will illustrate McCarthy’s process of writing the fantastic into being through language. An old man attempts to hide when he sees Glanton and his men coming, and Glanton hunts him down and finds him hiding in some bushes. The narrator describes the old man “sitting in the shrubbery solitary as a gnome” (McCarthy 197). Another instance occurs at Jesús María, where the narrator states, “The night was cold and they [the Glanton gang] shambled steaming through the cobbled town like fairybook beasts” (McCarthy 190). A further illustration occurs when a bear attacks the Glanton gang and carries off one of the Delaware Indians. The narrator relates that “the bear had carried off their kinsmen like some fabled storybook beast” (137).¹ In the final example, an Apache child “rode mute and stoic watching the land advance before it with huge black eyes like some changeling” (McCarthy 160). Gnomes, fairybook beasts, and a changeling child are all strange reference points for a novel that is ostensibly about the historical Glanton gang and the American Southwest. The effect of the narrator’s reference to an imaginary world disorients the reader. Jackson states, “The fantastic

plays upon difficulties of interpreting events/things as objects or as images, thus disorienting the reader's categorization of the 'real'" (20). In *Blood Meridian*, the use of the fantastic causes the reader to lose her bearings and upsets her grasp of the novel as representing any known, objective world. Correspondingly, this advances the reader's realization that McCarthy is getting at something larger than just a single, historically specific tale of brutal warfare. Through the use of simile, the men and landscape of *Blood Meridian* "become endowed with unguessed kinships" (McCarthy 247).

The Western land through which the Glanton gang rides is mutated into an archetypal hellscape through the use of simile, and as David Holmberg notes, McCarthy's writing "essentially eliminates the West from his otherwise Western novel" (149). Fear, violence, and malevolence are the ruling features of the terrain and as Vereen Bell indicates, "the landscapes seem mysteriously to be gazing at us" ("Between the Wish" 39). The narrator states, "All night sheetlightning quaked sourceless to the west beyond the midnight thunderheads, making a bluish day of the distant desert, the mountains on the sudden skyline stark and black and livid like a land of some other order out there whose true geology was not stone but fear" (McCarthy 47). This sentence begins by describing natural phenomena, in this case, lightning that briefly illuminates the countryside, but then the narrator subverts the previous naturalism in order to impress upon the reader the unreality of the countryside. Night, day, the natural world threatens those who dare stumble into the Western wastes. Even the sunrise is anthropomorphized into a threatening, masculine figure: "[T]he top of the sun rose out of nothing like the head of a great red phallus until it cleared the unseen rim and sat squat and pulsing and

malevolent behind them” (McCarthy 44-5). The shapelessness of the desert becomes a menacing “hallucinatory void” (McCarthy 113).

Ultimately, the landscape is transformed from being “like” a mythic hellscape into an actual representation of the underworld. The cumulative effect of McCarthy’s similes is to disorient the narrative, imbuing the landscape with an evil presence. The Glanton gang “traveled through the high country deeper into the mountains where the storms had their lairs, a fiery clangorous region where white flames ran on the peaks and the ground bore the burnt smell of broken flint” (McCarthy 188). At this point in the tale, the actual Southwest has been replaced by a legendary Southwest where storms are personified, the land is filled with fire, and the desert becomes “a terra damnata of smoking slag” (McCarthy 61).

Along with the similes that reshape the landscape, McCarthy’s language recasts the Comanche, the Apache, and the Glanton gang as warriors eternal. The Comanche that slaughter White’s filibustering expedition are described as a “fabled horde” (McCarthy 52). The Comanche are “a legion of horrors, hundreds in number, half naked or clad in costumes attic or biblical or wardrobed out of a fevered dream with the skins of animals and silk finery and pieces of uniform still tracked with the blood of prior owners” (McCarthy 52).² The naturalistic description of the Comanche is terrifying enough, but McCarthy heightens the surrealism of the Comanche through his use of simile. The Comanche are “like a horde from a hell more horrible yet than the brimstone land of Christian reckoning, screeching and yammering and clothed in smoke like those vaporous beings in regions beyond right knowing where the eye wanders and the lip jerks

and drools” (McCarthy 53). The double simile of this sentence points to a world outside reality, a world of madness and demons that wage war for eternity.

Glanton and his men, like the Comanche, are presented as beings outside of any rational, objective reality. The narrator first describes them as a “pack of viciouslooking [sic] humans...barbarous, clad in the skins of animals...armed with weapons of every description” (McCarthy 78). The Glanton gang and the Comanche are similar in appearance: they carry weapons from all ages of history, are clothed in animal skin, and are absolutely primitive in appearance. In this way, McCarthy depicts the agents of Anglo civilization as equally savage as the Indians they are to subdue, and this description links the text’s mythology back to the history of conquest in which the will to conquer is the ultimate force in human history. The Glanton gang and their horses are festooned with human skin: “The trappings of their horses [were] fashioned out of human skin and their bridles [were] woven up from human hair and decorated with human teeth and the riders [were] wearing scapulars or necklaces of dried and blackened human ears” (McCarthy 78). This dizzying description reminds the reader that the Comanche disrupt the distinction between “civilization” and “savagery”: American and Indian are united by their outlandish, fantastic garb. Symbolically, the cannibalistic appearance of the Glanton gang destroys any resemblance they might have had to frontier heroes by stressing their predation upon men, women, and children.³ Finally, the Glanton gang is “like a visitation from some heathen land where they and others like them fed on human flesh” (McCarthy 78). Primitive, violent, antisocial, clothed in the skin of other humans, the Glanton gang is outside of civilization and reality.

McCarthy's similes further remove the Glanton gang from reality by the repetitive insistence that the men are from a primeval void. Glanton and his men are "like a patrol condemned to ride out some ancient curse" (McCarthy 151). The "ancient curse" seems to point back to the text's insistence that mankind has evil in its heart and that we are still defined by our evolutionary drive and ability to be the dominant predator. In another instance, McCarthy writes, "They rode like men invested with a purpose whose origins were antecedent to them, like blood legatees of an order both imperative and remote" (McCarthy 152). McCarthy subverts Glanton's verifiable scalp hunting operation, in order to give his subject mythological meaning. They are "like beings from an older age" (McCarthy 176). The scalp hunters "seemed journeyed from a legendary world and they left behind a strange tainture like an afterimage on the eye and the air they disturbed was altered and electric" (McCarthy 175). Their violence and excellence in warfare have marked them as unnatural creatures that upset the order of the world. Similar to the landscape, Glanton and his men become divided from the real world by McCarthy's insistence that they are cannibals or primitive warrior-bands who are doomed to wander the underworld, indicating that they are representatives of eternal warfare.

McCarthy's language merges the world of objective reality with a fantastic, sinister realm in which demons, gnomes, and men become indecipherable from one another. The reader becomes disoriented and open to the suggestion that the most terrifying figure in the novel, Judge Holden, is a supernatural being outside of history. McCarthy's language works in the mode that Richard Slotkin terms the "mythopoeic mode of consciousness" (*RTV* 7). Slotkin states:

The mythopeic mode of consciousness comprehends the world through a process of thought- and perception-association, a process of reasoning-by-metaphor in which direct statement and logical analysis are replaced by figurative or poetic statement: the sudden, non-logical perception and expression of “an objective relation between parts of reality, or between objective and subjective realities.” (*RTV* 7)

McCarthy’s language produces a “non-logical” world that is predicated on the fantastic language that blurs the line between this world and other, imagined worlds. McCarthy’s new myth of the American West in *Blood Meridian* is structured around the “myth of the heroic quest” that Slotkin identifies as the “most important archetype underlying American cultural mythology” (*RTV* 10). The kid’s journey through the Southwest, his initiation into violence, and his confrontation with the judge structure the heroic quest of the novel but alter the archetypal pattern into something new.

The kid journeys into the American Southwest in order to “try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man’s will” (McCarthy 4-5). In other words, the kid’s westward movement is a journey of self-discovery in which his identity will be forged. The heroic quest “involves the departure of the hero from his common-day world to seek the power of the gods in the underworld, the eternal kingdom of death and dreams from which all men emerge” (Slotkin, *RTV* 10). In conventional European mythology, the West has long been “associated with the kingdom of death and dreams, the underworld” (Slotkin, *RTV* 28). The horrific images that punctuate McCarthy’s landscape add to the overall nightmarish effect of his language. The dead baby tree serves as an effective example: skewered upon a mesquite tree are eight babies that “had holes punched in their

under jaws and were hung so by their throats from the broken stobs of a mesquite to stare eyeless at the naked sky” (McCarthy 57). This atrocious image points to a world that is consumed by feverish violence, a dark underworld of unleashed antagonistic willpower.

Notably, after his first experience in combat, the kid is transformed into an emblem of warfare. The kid and Sproule are the only survivors of Captain White’s illegal military operation to capture Mexican land. McCarthy writes, “With darkness one soul rose wondrously from among the new slain dead...and he went forth stained and stinking like some reeking issue of the incarnate dam of war herself” (McCarthy 55). Once again, McCarthy’s simile engages in mythological language, thereby raising the kid’s existence into the mythic realm of Homeric epics. The kid is baptized in blood in a perversion of the Christian ritual. His journey through the Southwest replaces the romantic theme of self-discovery through immersion in nature with a narrative that emphasizes the kid’s descent into an amoral world based on the theory of war’s supremacy.

Once the kid signs up with the Glanton gang, Judge Holden, Glanton’s right-hand-man, takes a special interest in him. Just as McCarthy’s prose transforms the Glanton gang from a singular historic absolute into representatives of an eternally recurring warrior-tribe, so McCarthy performs a similar feat with Judge Holden. Indeed, Judge Holden is the god that the kid must confront to complete his heroic quest.

Holden is an expert killer, a philosopher, and a trickster. Thus, McCarthy provides him with many of the conventional characteristics of the Christian Devil. As I argued in the previous chapter, he embodies a nihilistic positivism in which the individual’s will to power is seen as the supreme historical force in American history.

When the kid first enters the town of Nacogdoches, he enters a tent where Reverend Green is holding a revival.⁴ The judge enters the tent, and his appearance already marks him as an uncanny being. He is “bald as a stone” with “no trace of beard” nor “brows to his eyes nor lashes to them” (McCarthy 6). He is nearly seven feet tall with a face “serene and strangely childlike” (McCarthy 6). Like a malevolent Buddha, the judge is always serenely smiling. His ability to engender chaos is clear in this scene: he denounces Reverend Green for “having congress with a goat” and raping an eleven-year-old girl “while clothed in the livery of his God” (McCarthy 7).⁵ His insinuations appall the audience, and they proceed to tear apart the tent in an attempt to harm Green. Once the kid makes it to the saloon, he finds the judge complacently sitting at the bar (McCarthy 7). The men that slowly filter in from the collapsed tent ask, “Judge, how did you come to have the goods on that no account?” (McCarthy 8). The judge responds, “You mean the Reverend Green...I never laid eyes on the man before today. Never even heard of him” (McCarthy 8). The men approve of the judge’s deception, and “soon they were all laughing together. Someone bought the judge a drink” (McCarthy 8). Holden can draw men towards him and make them complicit in his aggression. The judge is a charismatic leader, able to sway any man’s opinion and understanding of reality.

Besides the judge’s actions, McCarthy’s prose suggests that the Holden is a god. After the judge gives a speech, the men are afraid to disturb the judge’s repose. He sits upon the ground, with “eyes [that] were empty slots,” and “none among the company harbored any notion as to what this attitude implied, yet so like an icon was he in his sitting that they grew cautious and spoke with circumspection among themselves as if they would not waken something that had better been left sleeping” (McCarthy 147).

The judge is “like an icon,” and the men fear upsetting whatever implacable power he has within him. By the end of the novel, McCarthy all but implicitly states that the judge has no beginning and no end. The narrator observes:

Whatever [the judge’s] 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 ultimate atavistic egg by which to reckon his commencing. (McCarthy 310)

Holden is described as a primordial being with unlimited power that is without source and outside the realm of human knowledge. The range of rational human thought cannot explain the judge. He is ultimately “dusty primal matter blowing down out of the millennia” (McCarthy 310).

Paradoxically enough, the judge represents much of what Slotkin describes as “the maternal world of Moira” (*RTV* 11). Although Slotkin’s reference to Moira is not in relation to *Blood Meridian*, characteristics of Moira do explain aspects of Holden. Slotkin states that “archetypal myths derive from and mirror archetypal states of mind” (*RTV* 11). Moira “was a prehistoric earth-goddess, predating the Olympian deities of Greece, a Goddess ruling both personal destiny and the allotment of ‘moieties’ of land, a maternal spirit of place” (Slotkin, *RTV* 11). Holden, like Moira, rules the “personal destiny” of the men around him. For example, he jokes with David Brown that he’ll

“write a policy on your life against every mishap save the noose” (McCarthy 161). The judge’s joke contains a prescience that is otherwise unexplainable because David Brown later dies by hanging (McCarthy 311).⁶ Moira’s nature is “established by the impulses, dreams, and inchoate desires that characterize the human unconscious” (Slotkin, *RTV* 11). Holden appropriates paternal authority in order to spread the chaos of his being across the land. Slotkin states, “Although Moria ceases to dominate the gods, she or her avatars retain a subordinate position under Zeus and periodically assert their primordial power against paternal authority” (*RTV* 12). The judge represents the primordial power of warfare that rejects societal restraint in favor of chaos.

The “expriest” Tobin, a member of the Glanton gang, is the most aware of the “divine” nature of the judge (McCarthy 122). Fallen from his original faith, he is the first to accept the judge as a god. He acts as the kid’s guide and attempts to warn the kid about the danger the judge poses. He relates the fantastical story about how the judge came to join the Glanton gang. This story acts as a mini-myth upon which the judge’s godhood is elaborated. Tobin’s speech indicates that he views Holden as Satan. The judge is ubiquitous; as Tobin says, “Every man in the company claims to have encountered that sootysouled rascal in some other place” (McCarthy 124). In the story he relates, the Glanton gang are in the desert without any gunpowder pursued by Apaches intent upon the gang’s destruction (McCarthy 124). In the conventional mythology of the American West, Glanton and his men would be forces of good fighting against the demonic Indians but their acceptance of Holden as their leader implies the equally demonic nature of the Anglo in the West. They come across the judge, sitting on a “rock in the middle of the greatest desert you’d ever want to see. Just perched on this rock like

a man waitin [sic] for a coach” (McCarthy 124). Holden essentially appears to manifest out of the very desert, with no logical explanation for his being there. The judge then shows the Glanton gang how to make gunpowder out of sulphur, nitre, and urine (McCarthy 127-134). Through this process, the judge saves the Glanton gang and turns them into his worshippers.

In this way the judge preaches to the gang in the bleak desert landscape which Tobin describes as a “vast malpais” (McCarthy 129). The terrain is reminiscent of hell, made out of hardened lava flow and surrounded by volcanoes (McCarthy 129). Tobin is semi-convinced that heaven and hell may overlap in the malpais: “Where for aught any man knows lies the locality of hell. For the earth is a globe in the void...and there’s men in this company besides myself seen little cloven hoofprints in the stone clever as a little doe in her going but what little doe ever trod melted rock” (McCarthy 130). The fantastic and the natural world merge at the moment the judge joins the Glanton gang. As Tobin states, “But someplace in the scheme of things this world must touch the other. And something put them little hooflet markings in the lava flow” (McCarthy 130). The proximity between Tobin’s reflection on the very real possibility that the American Southwest is the location of hell and the judge’s appearance all signify the judge as the Devil. By the end of the judge’s speech, Tobin states that the Glanton gang rode “behind him like the disciples of a new faith” (McCarthy 130). The perverse logic of *Blood Meridian* indicates that there is no difference between God and the Devil and that the judge can be thought to represent either deity. Bell perceives that Holden “may as well be Satan; but if he is Satan, he may as well be God also...[because] the two are not

conceived as inversions of one another” (*Achievement* 122). In either case, Holden is represented as the ruling power of the American Southwest.

Tobin’s speech about god parallels his later discussion of the judge to the kid. Despite Tobin’s allegiance to the judge’s new religion, the “expriest” is still faithful to the Christian God. Tobin says, “God speaks in the least of creatures,” and uses a metaphor about horses that the kid can understand to explain God’s presence. He asks the kid, “At night...when the horses are grazing and the company is asleep, who hears them [the horses] grazing?” (McCarthy 124). The kid responds, “Dont [sic] nobody hear them if they’re asleep” (McCarthy 124). Tobin continues, “And if they cease their grazing who is it that wakes?” (McCarthy 124). The kid answers, “Every man” (McCarthy 124). Although Tobin is now a killer of men that has defected from the Catholic Church, he still argues for God’s presence in the universe. Later, when the kid and Tobin are squaring off against the judge in the desert, Tobin tells the kid to ignore the judge’s words: “Dont [sic] listen,” he implores the kid, telling him to cover his ears (McCarthy 293).

The draft material in the McCarthy archives makes it clear that the judge’s voice has the same properties that Tobin has given to the Christian God. This scene is expanded in the draft material, with Tobin actually “cutting strips of cloth from the remnants of the shirt that hung from his waistband and he made two swabs and put them toward the kid’s ears” (McCarthy, draft 410, 91/35/9). The kid tells Tobin, “I trust ye to hear him” (McCarthy, draft 410, 91/35/9). Tobin’s answer, “I will hear him...I will hear him in every place where he goes,” is an important line that doesn’t appear in the published novel (McCarthy, draft 410, 91/35/9). Tobin’s statement about God parallels

the language he uses to warn the kid of the judge's divine power. Tobin's belief in an all-present God is transferred to the judge and lends the judge's voice the power of Logos, the Christian God's will expressed through speech. In effect, these two passages demonstrate the judge's ability to structure reality through his language.

The Glanton gang's profane pilgrimage ends in the consumption of death with only the judge, Tobin, the kid, Toadvine, and David Brown surviving the Yuma ferry massacre. The narrative voice enters the mythic mode, stating, "The desert upon which they were entrained was desert absolute and it was devoid of feature altogether and there was nothing to mark their progress upon it" (McCarthy 295). The adherence to reality is cast off by the narration at this point, as the judge turns upon the kid and Tobin, his former comrades, hunting them down in the desert (McCarthy 287). His divine role is to consume all the men of the Glanton gang, ensuring the triumph of primordial chaos. His antipathy towards the kid, whom he has watched unceasingly throughout the novel, erupts, as he goads the kid into a final confrontation, tempting the kid to give up his soul to "death hilarious" (McCarthy 53). McCarthy emphasizes the religious nature of the kid and Tobin's attempt to escape the judge. They are "pilgrims...weak from their wounds" in a "godless quadrant cold and sterile and bearing news of nothing at all" (McCarthy 293). A passage from the draft further emphasizes the unreal nature of their situation:

They [the kid and Tobin] were the locus, erecting moment by moment out of nothing the limits of a creation that could be neither approached nor abandoned, ~~but~~ but? dragging with them the whole of the known world, of sun and wind and judge and fool, hounded over the planet's round like fugitive's of their own selves recreated in endless images [sic] running

between the implacabilities of becoming and done in a universe
ultimately measurable only along the chord of a single human soul.

(McCarthy, draft 412B/413, 91/35/9)

The world becomes reduced to absolute desert, with the only referents being the kid and Tobin pursued by the judge. The kid is in the very heart of darkness, face to face with McCarthy's version of the god of the underworld.

The judge taunts the kid in an attempt to force him into recognize his divinity. Tobin is fully convinced that the judge is indeed a god, telling the kid, "You'll not kill him" (McCarthy 291). The kid responds, "He aint nothin [sic]" (McCarthy 297). The kid's statement is a lie; he quickly backpedals when Tobin tells him to "face him down then" (McCarthy 297). He excuses his inability to shoot the judge because he is outgunned: the kid says, "And him with a rifle and me with a pistol." (McCarthy 297). This excuse belies the fact that the kid is realizing that the judge is immortal. For example, the judge's ubiquity is localized in this scene; he appears to materialize at will. The kid tries to keep the judge in his sights, but by the time he thinks he locates him, the judge is "in another quarter altogether" (McCarthy 290). The kid fails to shoot the judge, and this enrages the judge.

Judge Holden not only embodies divinity but also the inchoate will of imperialism that has been the basis of conventional American mythology. The kid, now named the man, wanders the West for twenty-eight years, attempting to reintegrate himself into society by protecting emigrants before he meets the judge in a Fort Griffin bar. The man, as his name indicates, is now middle-aged, but the judge "seemed little changed or none in all these years" (McCarthy 325). The ageless Holden has been waiting to prove that

the kid's denial of his divinity has made his life empty, because although he is protecting these emigrants, the judge has left his mark. The man "remains a man marked by the gods, alienated psychologically from the commonday reality by his possession of dark and fundamental knowledge" (Slotkin, *RTV* 28).

Just prior to this, the man kills his doppelganger, a young kid named Elrod who has been hounding him. In the draft version, Elrod, the man's still youthful double, says, "You aint nothin [sic]," oddly reminiscent of the previous scene in which the kid makes the same statement to Tobin and in the following scene in which he makes the same statement to the judge (McCarthy, draft 453, 91/35/9). This refutes his good work in protecting the emigrants. In the draft material, the man is called "the stranger," indicating that he is alienated from himself and his true desires (McCarthy, draft A-4, 91/35/9). By denying the judge, the kid has denied a part of himself.

In conclusion, McCarthy's mythmaking process is based on the transformative power of simile in which his language references an imaginary world that is outside the historical reality of the American Southwest, and this merging of the real and unreal changes the reader's interpretation of characters and events. Glanton and his men come to represent the constant presence of war in history by the narrator's repeated references to cannibals and primitive warrior-tribes. By subverting notions of reality and imagination, McCarthy suggests that Holden is the god of the American Southwest that realizes his goal of unleashed, violent chaos through the Glanton gang's undifferentiated slaughter of Mexicans and Indians.

So the new myth of the American West goes something like this for the representative initiate, the kid: follow Manifest Destiny, find a hellscape, confront a

trickster god who is the Devil, kill, maim, repeat, enact genocide, destroy all codes of conduct, revert to primeval violence, and finally, be murdered by evil incarnate.

McCarthy's novel investigates the notion of "regeneration through violence" that Slotkin has identified as the major theme of American mythology (*RTV* 5). The frontier hero is emptied of his heroism, ultimately devoid of any redeeming value, and Holden seems destined to rule the Southwest for the next coming millennia. McCarthy's counter-myth of the American West posits some dangerous ideas about the American character that reverberate throughout the land today.

IV. "DISTANT PANDEMONIUM OF THE SUN"

In a 1992 interview with Richard B. Woodward, McCarthy states, "I've always been interested in the Southwest...there isn't a place in the world you can go where they don't know about cowboys and Indians and the myth of the West" (36). American popular culture has long been dominated by the myths of the American West, and these myths still hold a mesmeric sway over our national consciousness. The twenty-first century, predicated on the dot com bust and boom, seemingly heralded a new technological age in which the internet increasingly created a global community. But the events of 9/11 and the two wars that followed have brought the myth of the American West to the forefront of American culture once again. In *Exploding the Western*, Sara L. Spurgeon argues, "The nineteenth-century narrative of the Anglo duty to defeat the savages and make the West safe for white civilization now becomes the American duty to defeat the savages and make the world safe for democracy" (9-10). The confrontation between cowboys and Indians has been globalized in the war on terror, and primal violence has again erupted between American civilization and a foreign, "primitive," *other* in the conflict between American soldiers and the insurgents in Iraq and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. Although our army is now multi-cultural, the old tribalism is still evident: Americans refer to Middle-Eastern people as *sand-niggers*, much like John Joel Glanton's insistence that "if we dont [sic] kill ever [sic] nigger here we need to be

whipped and sent home” (McCarthy 155). Racism and the joy of conquest structure both the Glantongang’s scalp-hunting mission and much of America’s approach to the war against terrorism. There are parallels between the Vietnam War and the wars in which we are currently immersed.

In *Gunfighter Nation*, Slotkin connects the myth of the frontier with America’s approach to the Vietnam War and depicts the failure of the myth of regeneration to explain America’s conduct in the war. In particular, the Mylai massacre changed many Americans’ view of the war because the atrocities committed by American troops were of the same savage nature as the Viet Cong (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 588). The horror of the Vietnam War produced a counter-myth that required Americans to re-evaluate the standard narrative of the American West. Slotkin states:

The Mylai counter-myth follows the scenario of the old “Cult of the Indian”: the standard Western mythology of captivities, rescues, and regenerative violence is reproduced, with the normal racial referents reversed, so that the Whites are savages and the Indians are pure and hapless victims. (*Gunfighter* 590)

Regeneration through violence fails to be a convincing myth in the Vietnam War because “Mylai represents the upsurge of an evil so ‘mysterious’ that it may well be limitlessly pervasive and may represent...a demonic potential inherent in our civilization, a ‘madness’ to which the home front is not immune” (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 586). The Vietnam War debunks the myth of regeneration by showing that the war’s violence doesn’t lead to a reinvigoration of American values, and this point is demonstrated by the outpouring of counter-culture protests against the war and American’s violence toward

the Vietnamese civilians we were supposed to be protecting. Slotkin's analysis of the Vietnam War is allied to the frontier myth in representing the collapse of the concept of violence as regenerative.

McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* reveals the ugly history of the Anglo conquest of the American Southwest by stripping Manifest Destiny of its noble claims of spreading democracy and morality across a dark continent. As I argued in the previous chapter, McCarthy transforms this singular historic event into the archetypal myth, the heroic quest. Myths are commonly used to naturalize the dominant ideology of a culture (Cant 8). The Cowboy and the Indian have long fought each other in American popular culture—on TV, in films, and in novels. Americans have generally accepted the violence that accompanies these depictions of the American West in popular literature without questioning the dark social and psychological logic that accepts mass-murderers as national heroes. McCarthy's new myth of the American West is so unflinchingly violent that it forces the reader to question the validity of the views presented in the conventional Western. The judge's claim, "In order for it to be mine nothing must be permitted to occur upon it [the earth] save by my dispensation," indicates the chaos underpinning the imperialist's will (McCarthy 199). The judge represents the primordial will to power that underlies American imperialism, embodied in his desire to consume the entire earth. The novel's violence subverts notions of historical progress by insisting on the divinity and triumph of the judge as a reification of primordial, eternal war.

McCarthy's mythmaking represents what Slotkin calls the "consummatory stage" of myth, in which the novelist "attack[s] the conventions of thought, feeling, and expression" contained in the popular mythology of American culture (RTV 13). In order

to deconstruct the paradigm embodied in the myth of the American West, the “consummatory myth-maker must draw upon the vocabulary of myth-images and -structures that is his cultural heritage” (Slotkin, *RTV* 13). So McCarthy creates characters that appear to embody the frontier ethos romanticized by Turner. Turner argues that the frontier created the unique American individual whose traits are “coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things...that dominant individualism...and withal the buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom” (37). Glanton and Judge Holden represent what Turner defines as the best characteristics of the American spirit, but their individualism is portrayed as monstrous. McCarthy, therefore, creates out of the old myths a counter-myth that holds American individualism and its natural extension, imperialism, up to a critical light.

Clearly, the Glanton gang’s genocidal rampage appears to be an archetypal expression of American imperialism. The Glanton gang’s violence is universalized to all Americans. For example, the Mexicans of Nacori “had seen Americans in plenty... half crazed with the enormity of their own presences in that immense and bloodslaked waste, commandeering meal and meat or indulging a latent taste for rape among the sloe-eyed girls of that country” (McCarthy 177).¹ McCarthy’s Americans in *Blood Meridian* are ignoble rapists who embody an individualistic fascism that considers the Western land and its inhabitants as objects to consume. Rather than Turner’s admirable rugged individualists, the pioneers of McCarthy’s West are murderers and rapists.

The vast expanse of the American continent “stimulated...an obscene Faustian lust to satisfy nature by violating all bonds of obedience, religion, and morality” (Slotkin,

RTV 35). McCarthy's new myth of the American West uncovers the dark side of individualism that Turner romanticizes. The elevation of the individual to the sacred realm is fundamental to our national myth, and Judge Holden's extreme individualism is apparent in his rapacious desire for children. The draft material uncovers the judge's pederast tendencies. In the published novel, the judge, upon seeing a naked boy, asks, "Who's this child" (McCarthy 116). In the manuscript, the judge's question is phrased, "Who's this ~~little darling~~ child?" (McCarthy, draft 161, 91/36/1). The judge in the draft version uses romantic language to signify the naked child. The judge is a hungry god; after he consumes the child he is seen "picking his teeth with a thorn as if he had just eaten" (McCarthy 118). The judge's godhood is refreshed by violating and consuming children, a strangely terrifying metaphor for war. The reason the judge is such a popular topic for critical extrapolation is because, as Vereen M. Bell notes, we "admire" him (*Achievement* 117). Holden's logic is hard to refute. Yes, he does contradict himself, but not out of insecurity (Kim 169), but in a grand, Whitmanesque manner: "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then...I contradict myself; / I am large...I contain multitudes" (Whitman 1314-16). The judge only conforms to himself, and he defines a system of ethics so bereft of conventional Christian morality, a system that is nihilistically aggressive in which the exertion of power to destroy the weak is a moral imperative. Like Nietzsche's, Judge Holden's warrior-will subverts Christian morality by viewing conformity, reserve, and mercy as signs of an abominable weakness.

Through *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy uncovers unsettling truths about human nature: we are not far along the evolutionary timeline, and we—like all humankind McCarthy suggests—love violence for violence's sake. At the start of the Iraq War, I

remember watching the “Shock and Awe” campaign and being mesmerized by the barrage of bombs dropped on Baghdad, caught on film in the strange green glow of night-vision cameras. Americans apparently enjoy conquering other nations, other lands, other ideologies. Ironically, McCarthy’s novels are becoming increasingly popular. Between Oprah’s endorsement of *The Road* and the success of the Coen Brother’s film adaptation of *No Country for Old Men*, McCarthy can realistically be seen as shaping American mythology. Moreover, the popularity of the film version of *No Country for Old Men* indicates our growing need to reassess American violence. McCarthy’s rising popularity comes at a moment when America is engaged in two foreign wars that have dominated the political and cultural discourse of the first decade of the twenty-first century. His dark recasting of the frontier myth resonates with the reality of American imperialism embodied by these wars. These wars both stem from the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and America finds itself plunged into a global war, not against nation-states, but against fundamentalist sects that operate in uncompromising terrain.

McCarthy’s myth-making demonstrates that pushed to its extreme, American individualism becomes tyrannical. This theme can also be seen in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, where Ahab “seeks to impose his reason...on the blank, unintelligible face of the natural universe” in his relentless quest of the White Whale (Slotkin, *RTV* 542). Like Ahab’s destructive quest, Captain White’s filibustering expedition demonstrates the “violent contradiction between rhetoric and reality” that erupts when an individual internalizes the dominant myth of the American culture (Spurgeon 12). The Mexican expedition demonstrates the underbelly of American territorial conquest. Bush justified Operation Iraqi Freedom by insisting that we were liberating the Iraqis from Saddam

Hussein's tyranny; White argues that he will bring democracy and civilization to Mexico. White helms an illegal military operation to take Mexican land through warfare. White's desires and actions result from his faith in the American myth of progress and democracy. His rhetoric reveals the racist assumption that Mexicans do not deserve the land they maintained after the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo ended the Mexican War.

Speaking to the kid, White states:

What we are dealing with...is a race of degenerates. A mongrel race, little better than niggers...There is no government in Mexico. Hell, there's no God in Mexico. Never will be. We are dealing with a people manifestly incapable of governing themselves. And do you know what happens with people who cannot govern themselves? That's right. Others come in to govern for them. (McCarthy 34)

As his name indicates, Captain White fanatically believes in the superiority of the Anglo race and dehumanizes Mexicans. He speaks of his mission with religious zeal and believes that God, indicated by the word "manifestly," has judged the Mexicans to be unable of ruling themselves. In *Frontier Violence: Another Look*, historian W. Eugene Hollon assesses the land greed apparent in Captain White's attitude towards Mexicans; he states, "For almost 300 years, pioneer settlers pressed westward in their insatiable greed for more land...Had not God ordained that Americans were destined to extend their superior institutions to the less fortunate peoples of the continent—even if they had to kill them in the process?" (126). White states, "We are to be the instruments of liberation in a dark and troubled land," regardless of the fact that this liberation will undoubtedly involve the slaughter of the Mexicans he has come to liberate (McCarthy 34). White uses

the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny to justify his hatred of Mexicans and his urgent desire for more Anglo-controlled land. Ultimately, White's true desire is expressed when he tells the kid, "And we will be the ones who will divide the spoils. There will be a section of land for every man in my company. Fine grassland. Some of the finest in the world. A land rich in minerals, in gold and silver I would say beyond the wildest speculation" (McCarthy 34). Captain White represents the most insidious version of Manifest Destiny by demonstrating the racism and greed that is at the heart of America's expanding empire. This racism justifies taking land from Mexicans and Indians because they are inherently unfit to possess it. Ironically, Captain White's racist contempt for Mexicans and Indians causes his undoing.

Anglo superiority is shown to be a lie by the complete decimation of Captain White's filibustering expedition. Unlike the warriors of the Glanton gang, White's men are out of their element. The desert environment erodes the men's conviction of the righteousness of their quest as men fall ill and die under the scorching sun. As one man says, "This looks like the high road to hell to me" (McCarthy 45). Another example of Anglo weakness is Captain White's reliance on Candelario, a "Mexican who served as guide" to the filibusterers (McCarthy 45). Upon seeing a cloud of dust on the horizon, White calls Candelario to consult with him about what is hidden within the dust because he needs Candelario's experience in the desert to understand what he sees. White does not register the fact that the horses Candelario identifies might represent a threat to himself and his men. He believes the approaching party is nothing more than a "parcel of heathen stockthieves" (McCarthy 51). The moral universe that White's rhetoric expresses, in which Anglos are morally, physically, and institutionally superior to

Mexicans, causes him to underestimate the ability of non-Anglos. White's fundamental failure to apprehend the reality of his situation causes his undoing.

Captain White's filibustering expedition fails because he hides his true goal, the conquest of Mexican lands, behind a façade of self-righteous morality. In the world of *Blood Meridian*, ruled by the judge, any conception of morality and progress is a sign of weakness. In comparison, the Comanche that massacre White and his army are without mercy and tireless in their warfare. They are experts at death. White, incapable of imagining the superiority of Mexicans or the Comanche, has not prepared his men to meet these warriors of the plains. They are slaughtered, with the Comanche "riding down the unhorsed Saxons and spearing and clubbing them" (McCarthy 54). White's failure to grasp the violent reality of the region he proposes to conquer leads to his ironic fate: his severed head is placed in a jar and is used by the Mexicans to taunt the kid, the sole survivor of White's filibusterers (McCarthy 70). White's failure inversely demonstrates the reasons that the Glanton gang survives for so long in the violent Southwest: Glanton and his men are disciples of the judge and embody primordial, eternal war.

As the judge would have us believe, the moral world, in which a definable good opposes a definable evil, is a lie. Owens states that the "questing urge to see what's beyond the next ridge has always included killing what we find there, whether it is useful for food or dangerous or simply different" (x). *Blood Meridian's* central thesis is that "mindless, atavistic violence is the true nature of mankind, a genetic heritage in common with apes and wolves" (Owens 4). The novel engages in revisionary history but refuses to condemn the violence that it reveals as necessary for Anglo expansion into the Southwest. *Blood Meridian* does what the majority of news organizations refuse to: it

captures the violence of war, of conquest, in all its comic-grotesque indecency (Hall 54). History demonstrates that “war is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence” (McCarthy 249). The disturbing fact is that human existence has been defined by war. Today, the frontier has been globalized: the old drama of the American individual subduing the savage plays out in Iraq and Afghanistan with the appeal of war’s violence demonstrated by the Academy Award for 2009 presented in the Iraq War drama, *The Hurt Locker*. Unlike the Vietnam War, Americans have mainly been sheltered from the gore of America’s “War on Terror.” Frontier ideology, where the righteous Anglo meets and confronts the savage *other* still dominates current American political discourse.

Former President Bush framed the war on terrorism by using the images and language of the mythic American West. Barry Stephenson states, “In the days and months after 9/11, President Bush and members of his administration made repeated use of ‘cowboy’ and frontier imagery (15). Speaking to the National Cattleman’s Association on February 8, 2002 Bush states:

I appreciate being with people who love the land and appreciate open space. I realize there’s nobody more central to the American experience than the cowboy. ... You know, when the enemy hit us on September the 11th, they must have not figured out what we were all about. See, they thought we weren’t determined. They thought we were soft. They obviously have never been to a national cattlemen’s convention before. ... I intend to find the killers wherever they may hide and run them down and bring them to justice. They think there’s a cave deep enough; they’re

wrong. They think that we're going to run out of patience; they are wrong. ... Either you're with us, or you're against us. (qtd. in Stephenson 15)

Bush internalized the myth of the American West and the ideology that goes with it. His speech indicates that the war on terror is refashioned as a frontier war, where righteous Americans fight against brutal savages. He speaks to cattlemen, those who prospered through the egregious acts of genocide enacted against Indians in the conquest of the American Southwest. As Stephenson notes, "The imagery and rhetoric used by Mr. Bush and his handlers—'smoke 'em out,' 'dead or alive,' 'bring it on,' cutting wood on his ranch, the swaggering walk—in playing the 'cowboy' card, the Bush Administration has been tapping deep roots in the American psyche" (32). The power of the frontier myth damaged American's ability to see through the rhetoric of the Bush Administration, and once again we found ourselves plunged into a war of genocide and imperialism.

The war on terror is an indefinite war with the frontier moving across the globe, with the part of the frontier hero played by American soldiers and the terrorists/insurgents recast as the Indians that must be subdued in order for imperial conquest to be complete. As Stephenson argues, "The war in Iraq has been framed as the most recent in a long line of battles 'between savagery and civilization.' Symbolically, mythically, Iraq is the newest frontier, the latest 'Indian country'" (11). Stephenson's quote returns us to Turner's frontier thesis, in which imperialism is romanticized. What occurred in the opening years of the twenty-first century was an embrace of war, commanded by a President that fashioned himself as a cowboy. Apparently, American individualism once

again became American imperialism on a grand scale. Bush used the language of morality, of good versus evil, to justify the imperialist wars of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Bush's rhetoric sold imperialism under the guise of national security. *Blood Meridian*, through its graphic depiction of imperialism, refutes Bush's cowboy rhetoric of civilization confronting savagery. After reading *Blood Meridian*, the very notion of the cowboy representing a moral good becomes untenable. Like Captain White, Bush's rhetoric hid the atavistic greed for land and the dominance of cultures that are deemed savage. What McCarthy does is remind us that wars of conquest, of which the conquest of Iraq and Afghanistan are the latest examples, require the same horrific acts of war found in *Blood Meridian*.

It therefore seems clear that *Blood Meridian*'s new myth of the American Southwest destroys the older one based on romantic notions of conquest. If we look at the book's record of violence as an example of how conquest destroys the very ideals of American society, then we can see the positive value of the book's horror. The judge's positive nihilism is something we must confront as a society. Underlying the logic of Bush's rhetoric is the judge's primordial chaos that wants to consume the entire world. Viewed through the lens of the judge's philosophy of war, the war on terror becomes a contest of wills, devoid of morality.

Blood Meridian uses the history of the Glanton gang to create a counter-myth of the American Southwest that deconstructs American imperialism by demonstrating that extreme violence is necessary for territorial expansion. Slotkin has demonstrated the importance of analyzing our culture's mythology in order to untangle the cultural assumptions that the myth of the frontier supports. This myth is so deeply ingrained in

our national consciousness that it is rendered invisible, and this results in the naturalization of the violence between Anglos and Indians. *Blood Meridian* pushes the myth to its dark conclusions and shows that the morality of conquest is a logical fallacy that creates a vicious circle that renders morality obsolete. The excessive violence of *Blood Meridian* ultimately causes the reader to question the current justifications for our war on terror and shows that the romanticizing of imperialism limits our ability to objectively view the complex world we live in.

V. CONCLUSION

Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* is a dense and violent novel about the Anglo conquest of the Southwest questioning the ideology that justifies territorial expansion under the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny. Ultimately a novel about war and evil and mankind's capacity for horrific savagery, it lacks a mediating narrative voice that explains this violence. Thus, in itself, the novel is decidedly nihilistic. As I have argued throughout the preceding chapters, the judge's religion of war structures the novel, and each scene supports the idea that war in reality and metaphor is the supreme force in life. The Glanton gang through acts of rampage enacts the judge's ideology by destroying weaker-willed humans and then moving on. The judge's positive nihilism glories in the freedom of transgression and the possibilities that the American West offers to the strong-willed man dead set on transforming himself into something more than human, something strange and dark and primordial, something hungry at the edge of creation.

In the first chapter, "War is God," I explored the notion of the frontier, first theorized by Frederick Jackson Turner as the "meeting point between savagery and civilization," to demonstrate how Turner's theory has been explored by Patricia Nelson Limerick in order to recover the complexities of America's westward expansion (3). McCarthy goes further than Limerick in deconstructing the notion of Anglo progress and social evolution championed by Turner by recovering the particularly violence of the historical Glanton gang's scalp-hunting expedition through the Southwest. The judge

uses his vast intellect to convert the men of the Glanton gang to his warrior religion, arguing that the weak deserve to perish because of their very weakness. The judge's philosophy justifies American imperialism by arguing that Anglos have demonstrated their superiority by the very efficiency with which they enact genocide against the Indian cultures that inhabited the region. The history of the American Southwest in *Blood Meridian* establishes the framework for McCarthy's counter-myth of the American West.

In the second chapter, "A Patrol Condemned," I argued that through his language, especially his powerful similes that reference the fantastic, McCarthy transforms historical fact into myth. The realistic world of the American Southwest becomes, through the disorienting effect of McCarthy's prose, a representation of the underworld, with Glanton and his men representing the timelessness of warfare that enact and reproduce a hellscape. The kid's journey through the Southwest is structured by the archetype of the heroic quest, in which a hero must descend into the underworld and confront a god in order to complete his maturation. Judge Holden is the perverse god of the American Southwest who embodies many of the characteristics of the Christian Devil. God or the devil, it is one and the same, because the text makes it clear that the American Southwest is ruled and shaped by the judge's will. The kid is ultimately defeated in his quest, consumed and vanquished by the judge in an outhouse.

Myth and history are intertwined in *Blood Meridian*, and my synthesis of these two strands of enquiry extends my argument to suggest connections between the fiction and the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, in which Americans again find themselves justifying territorial acquisition using the language and archetypes of the frontier. McCarthy's counter-myth of the West deconstructs the notions of American superiority embodied in

the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny and former President George W. Bush's cowboy rhetoric often used to justify the war on terror. If we read *Blood Meridian* as a founding myth of the America Southwest, then we must realize that we are also a part of the novel's violence. McCarthy's counter-myth of the American West empties the frontier hero of his romantic associations. Glanton and his men use the freedom of the Southwest to terrorize and murder those who are weaker than they are. The judge demands nightly sacrifices, and killing becomes a sacred act. The kid is ultimately destroyed through his association with Holden's dark godhood. McCarthy's new myth of the American West is terrifying because it mythologizes America's violent history of conquest and genocide.

Unlike Edwin T. Arnold who argues that McCarthy's work is not nihilistic and that his novels always demonstrate a "profound belief in the need for moral order" (46), throughout this thesis, I have argued that *Blood Meridian* is indeed a positively nihilistic novel that asserts the judge's divinity and supports his philosophy of divine warfare. Out of the violent history of the American Southwest McCarthy has created a disturbing and new counter-myth that deconstructs notions of progress and Anglo superiority. I conclude that the novel does not posit a moral center. By applying McCarthy's counter-myth of the American West to current events, I indicate that the novel provides an important critique of former President Bush's justification of the Iraq War: the spread of democracy. The violence of *Blood Meridian* may dazzle readers at first, but it ultimately forces them to analyze the role of violence in American society. The analogues between the conquest of the Southwest in 1849 and the conquest of Iraq and Afghanistan at the beginning of the twenty-first century are frightening, and readers must decide whether or not they wish to become the judge's disciple. Ironically the moral of McCarthy's amoral

story is outside of the text; the application of McCarthy's counter-myth of the American West always reminds the reader that violence is always the base of war regardless of the stated justification.

My reading of *Blood Meridian* points to other areas that can be examined. For instance, the role of women in the novel has yet to be adequately explored. They exist on the outer edges of the novel, as whores and healers, but they are there. The character of Sarah Borginnis briefly dominates the text, baptizing the "idiot" child, and this scene bears mythic overtones that would be interesting to explore. Another area of study that would be interesting to apply to *Blood Meridian* is the burgeoning field of waste studies, in which defiled and bleeding bodies are analyzed in order to examine underlying paradigms of our culture. At any rate, year after year the critical literature on *Blood Meridian* will grow, as each new reader struggles with the overwhelming violence and beauty of the kid's mythical quest. And the judge will always be there, smiling, an enigma that is not an enigma, an anti-mystery that is central to the mystery of existence.

As of March 2010, McCarthy readers avidly await McCarthy's next novel, the "New Orleans book," currently titled *The Passenger*. On the cormacmccarthy.com forum, Rick Wallach states, "I'll check with Knopf on Monday and see if the implosion of marketing for [the film version of] *The Road*...has helped fix a timetable for *The Passenger*, assuming that's still what he calls it. Remember, that was essentially a working title, which could mean anything" (1/24/2010). Indeed, *The Road*'s release was badly mishandled, and many were unable to see the movie because of its limited release. But I doubt the movie's commercial failings will diminish McCarthy's rising fame and popularity. Ever since *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy has created novels with relatable

characters, a move that some see as a diminishment of his literary talents. However, McCarthy has always refused to water-down his bleak view of human nature, and I'm sure *The Passenger* will deal with familiar McCarthy themes, such as man's relation to nature and the existence of violence and evil in the world.

The violence in *Blood Meridian* does have a point: it questions how far a society is willing to go in the name of democracy, progress, and God. It forces Americans to view their past critically and ask urgent questions about their future. What are the costs of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and by extension all wars? What are we willing to do in order to ensure democracy spreads and that we are safe from the "primitive" terrorists? There is a line in the manuscript version of *Blood Meridian* that records the effect of violence upon the kid. McCarthy writes, "The world rolled on, sea on sand, and ther [sic] was nothing to give this child back the shape of his own face" (Draft 424, 91/35/9). This poignant moment is left out of the novel because it addresses the horrible cost of war and violence upon the kid and doesn't fit with the narrator's detached style of the published novel. In this line, the narrator sympathizes with the kid because he is damaged, divided from his self, unable to find his way forward or his way back. Ultimately, *Blood Meridian* demonstrates that Americans may find themselves, like the kid, divided from themselves because of the terrific acts of violence that are being committed in our unending pursuit of safety and the spread of democracy.

NOTES

I. INTRODUCTION

¹ Richard Slotkin traces the evolution of the frontier myth in American culture in his trilogy that begins with *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (1973), continues in *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (1985), and ends in *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (1998).

² Admittedly, there are interesting scenes in the draft material that I did not include in this thesis because they did not fit logically into my argument. For example, in the kid's showdown with the judge after the Glanton gang is destroyed, the kid comes across the "idiot" who "seized its face head in its hands <and moaned> and then it turned over on its hands and knees and eleveated [sic] its hindquarters towards him like an ape in estrus" (McCarthy, draft 406, 91/35/9). In another example that occurs during the judge's final speech to the kid, McCarthy writes, "Who would not be a dancer? said the judge. If he could, if he could. All your life you've longed to dance. Killer of men and dancer manque [sic]. An eternal novitiate to the order of blood" (draft 461, 91/35/9). McCarthy removed this scene from the Yuma ferry episode in which the judge terrorizes the travelers trying to cross: "The judge had fallen to ~~holding~~ dangling small hostages over the side of the ferry, children, infants, held perhaps by one leg above the midriver boil while he demanded ransom, howling mothers dragging gold and silver from secret ~~hiding~~ places, and so it was with the child of one of these. Her husband stood with the infant in his arms. When the mother did not reappear this man and his party moved downriver in search of a wetnurse in the camp of the Yumas" (draft 213d/214-A, 91/35/9).

II. "WAR IS GOD"

¹ Although McCarthy doesn't reveal Glanton's motivation for killing Indians and Mexicans in the novel, Chamberlain's account reveals that Glanton's young fiancé was killed by Indians and a desire to revenge her murder may motivate Glanton's actions (Sepich 8). Chamberlain relates that Glanton and other Texans pursued the Indians but Glanton's fiancé was "tomahawked and scalped" during the battle (306).

² In Chamberlain's narrative, the historical Holden has the same propensity to lecture as he does in McCarthy's novel. Chamberlain relates one such lecture: "Judge Holden, mounted a rock for a rostrum, and gave us a scientific lecture on geology. The 'Scalp Hunters' grouped in easy attitude around, listened to the demon like 'literati' with marked attention...His lecture no doubt was very learned, but hardly true, for one statement he made was 'that *millions* of years had witnessed the operation producing the result around us'" (Chamberlain 311). McCarthy presents many scenes that demonstrate Holden's advanced knowledge that seem uncanny to the less-educated members of the Glanton gang.

III. "A PATROL CONDEMNED"

¹ Spurgeon notes that the bear is a "terrible avatar of the wilderness" and conjectures that the bear acts as "nature's own sacred hunter" in the text (31). Indeed, bears resemble humans because they can stand upright and are the dominant hunters in any area they occupy.

² Sepich contends that McCarthy's historical source for the Comanche's strange dress comes from the "army journalist" W. H. Emory (55). In his meeting with Mangas Colorado, Emory reports that the Indians were dressed in "the most fantastical style. One had a jacket made of a Henry Clay flag, which aroused unpleasant sensations, for the acquisition, no doubt, cost one of our countrymen his life. Several wore beautiful helmets, decked with black feathers, which, with the short shirt, waist belt, bare legs and buskins gave them the look of pictures of antique Grecian warriors" (qtd. in Sepich 56).

³ In John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), there is a scene in which the Indians and Anglos ride in parallel that emphasizes the similarity between the two groups (*Searchers*, *The*).

⁴ Sepich reveals that Reverend Green is "the first verifiable historical character in *Blood Meridian*" (13). Although the judge states he has never met the man, the historical Reverend Green was kicked out of the Nacogdoches congregation for drinking (Sepich 13).

⁵ Strangely, the judge's accusations double back on him: he commonly murders and rapes children.

⁶ Sepich has shown that the narrative of *Blood Meridian* is structured by the tarot-reading scene, in which a Mexican gypsy reads the fortune of the kid and "Black" Jackson. For

further information, see the chapter “Tarot and Divination” in Sepich’s revised edition of *Notes on Blood Meridian* (105-17).

IV. “DISTANT PANDEMONIUM OF THE SUN”

¹ McCarthy’s research indicates that he bases his demonization of the American in the West on factual events. McCarthy’s typed note states, “Ruxton says that in the village of Galeana at a peacemaking Kirker slaughtered 160 apaches [sic]. One pregnant woman rushed into the church and clasped the altar crying out for mercy and was pierced with a dozen lances, ripped open, her child baptized and then its brains bashed out against the altar” (draft n. pag., 91/35/7). McCarthy’s source for this material is George Frederick Ruxton, an Englishman who traveled throughout the Southwest in the mid-1800s (Sepich 71). The “Kirker” McCarthy refers to is James Kirker, a scalp hunter who “brought hundreds of ‘proofs’ of the deaths of Indians...to Chihuahua City” (Sepich 6).

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