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**The Judge's Hold: A Struggle for Voice in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian***

by Dan Johnson

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ENG 489: Critical Research and Writing

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## Introduction

Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* is an American novel that has drawn much critical analysis out of scholars in the late twentieth century because of its clear commentary on the ways in which the American west was acquired. The text is awash with gratuitous violence, historical reflections, metaphors, symbolism and storytelling; all of these components together synthesize a piece that effectively brands a modern interpretation on the idea of American national identity. Many studies, including this one, have been undertaken as a result because such a text is ripe for interpretation, analysis and research in a postmodern, American world in which history has become a reflexive concept—far from an understood truth or reality—that is constantly being questioned and challenged.

The narrative follows a group of bounty-hunters—one that was indeed real—called the John Joel Glanton gang that, during the time just following the Mexican-American War in the 1840s-50s, is contracted by the governor of Chihuahua, Mexico to purge southwest America and northwest Mexico of the indigenous, violent Apache tribe. In order to verify the completion of this task, they are to remove the scalp from every native slain and exchange it for their payment. The majority of the novel is spent following the Glanton gang through their many massacres and sackings of small Mexican cities, native camps, and border crossing. But it is not so much the plot that draws attention from contemporary scholars as it is the commentary *Blood Meridian* creates on the American Manifest Destiny of the nineteenth century that expanded the country's geographical, political, and economic reach to the Pacific Ocean; much of this statement is created through the novel's two primary characters: The Kid and the Judge.

*Blood Meridian's* protagonist is only named "the Kid"; he is a nihilist about whom very little history surfaces save the first pages of the novel. "See the child. He is pale and thin, he wears a thin and ragged linen shirt...At fourteen he runs away" (McCarthy 3). We never are given any insights as to his thoughts and we rarely hear his voice; from the time when he falls in company with the Glanton gang until its dismantling by the Yuman Indians and he is left a lone survivor, the Kid is utterly deindividualized and his presence merely becomes that of the scalp hunters themselves. In "Genre and the Geographies of Violence: Cormac McCarthy and the Contemporary Western", Susan Kollin states "far from being a virtuous or upright character, the kid rivals the adults in his capacity for brutality". He is, for much of the beginning of the novel as well as the majority of its close, our vessel for *Blood Meridian's* narrative consciousness; but he is no hero, no Western champion. She says that "rather than allowing the figure to claim redemption through acts of conquest, the novel provides readers with a horrific portrayal of a westerner who offers nothing in the way of heroism" and that "the kid instead serves as an allegorical figure for the depraved America—the youthful nation—which is portrayed here as fallen and corrupted from its very inception" (564-565). This analysis speaks less to his role within *Blood Meridian* alone and more to the novel's seemingly deliberate subversion of the codes and conventions of the Western genre. Scholars agree, then, that the Kid's nihilistic nature thus becomes *Blood Meridian's* anti-hero in a novel that itself can be seen as an anti-Western because of its play and subversion with the typical codes and convention of the genre.

The more compelling—yet ambiguous—critical research dealing with *Blood Meridian's* characters, however, concerns the Judge Holden, whom Harold Bloom proclaims to be "the most frightening figure in all of American literature" (vi). He is a seven-foot, entirely hairless man who throughout the course of *Blood Meridian* speaks at least five different languages, concocts gunpowder out of urine, performs magic tricks, molests and kills multiple children, adopts a fool as a pet, orates lectures on war, philosophy, education, science, astronomy, religion, history, etc.,

makes a man bleed from every orifice with only his right hand, demonstrates his mastery of dancing, and effectively violates and kills the Kid in an outhouse bathroom in one of the novel's final scenes. Any unfamiliar object he comes across in the "terra damnata" (63) that is McCarthy's American west, he examines closely and sketches it into his famous ledgerbook before he destroys it in the campfire. The Judge's character draws so much attention because of how set apart he is from the rest of the Glanton gang; he is individualized throughout the novel like no other and is the only character that remains living at its close. Some go so far as to argue that he is the protagonist, not the Kid, because of how heavily emphasized his presence is during the course of *Blood Meridian*'s narrative structure, no more so than the very last line of the book where it is stated that "He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die" (McCarthy 349).

Bloom in his "Introduction" written in 2000 for the 2001 Modern Library Edition of *Blood Meridian* seeks to flesh out and explain to the best of his ability the nature of Judge Holden's elusive, inexplicable yet very real character in the novel. He explains him as "the spiritual leader of Glanton's filibusters" (vii) and sees Holden as one of the two central characters to the novel, the other being the Kid. Bloom definitively states that "By the book's close, I have come to believe that the Judge is immortal" (viii). He also relates him to the similarly elusive great white whale in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. However, he does go on to somewhat conclude that the Judge "is first and foremost a Western American...that incarnates [its] tradition" (ix). Thus, for one of American literature's most renowned critics, despite McCarthy's—or the narrator's—deliberate stylistic obscurity in regards to the characterization of Judge Holden, his character remains a conundrum, but one whose ambiguities are rooted in some sort of play with the tropes and conventions of the American Western.

Maybe most important of all the Judge's characteristics is his aptitude for rhetorical speech. Many times amongst the campfires of the idle scalp-hunters does he engage himself in orations and monologues about the way of the universe:

"The truth about the world, he said, is that anything is possible. Had you not seen it all from birth and thereby bled it of its strangeness it would appear to you for what it is, a hat trick in a medicine show, a fevered dream, a trance bepopulate with chimeras having neither analogue nor precedent, an itinerant carnival, a migratory tentshow whose ultimate destination after many a pitch in many a muddled field is unspeakable and calamitous beyond reckoning" (McCarthy 256).

His ability to wield words in such a way that they come across as universal truths runs congruously with his god-like, ubiquitous presence in the *Blood Meridian* universe. In literal judge-like fashion, he seems to preside over all the sequences of brutal violence and degeneracy throughout the novel and grants them credence with his principled words and linguistic speeches. But his language, at its core, is solely rhetorical and thus its authority surely must be analyzed and questioned inasmuch as the language of history must be challenged as well. Scholarship dealing with Holden, much of which is mentioned later in this study, focuses on his unique method of discourse, but also tend to arrive at seemingly dead ends, or ends so obscure and amorphous—like Bloom's—that the nature of his character, *in regards to his functioning and positioning within the novel*, begs for more analysis in hopes that such gaps can be bridged.

*Blood Meridian* is a text dealing with the power of rhetorical voice—specifically in terms of the that constructed and wielded by Judge Holden—not just in terms of its role in the formation of America's hegemonic history dating back to Manifest Destiny, but also in regards to the way such a rhetorical voice functions within the novel itself. As a result, this analysis will examine several aspects of the text in order to determine what will be shown as clear struggles

between three voices: the narrator, The Kid, and Judge Holden. By first analyzing the relationship between Judge Holden and the Kid, it will be suggested that the tension in their relationship—and eventually, the nature of their final, fatal encounter in which the Judge murders the Kid—is rooted in this struggle between their voices. Further, this will lead into an analysis of the relationship between Judge Holden and the novel's narrator, showing how the narrator functions as an outlet for Judge Holden's voice and rhetoric to overpower rather than as an objective presence that allows other voices and other worldviews—such as the Kid's, the natives', the scalphunters', etc.—to enter the narrative. This is all to say that *Blood Meridian* intentionally silences other voices and worldviews within the text by using Judge Holden's to suppress them all in order to show the inescapability and invulnerability of his rhetorical discourse—one founded in a worldview that effectively fostered the American westward expansion—during nineteenth century America.

### **A Voice Manifested**

When analyzing McCarthy's novel as one that is dealing with the notion of the Judge's discourse and rhetoric, a fundamental struggle generates between he and the Kid. Throughout the course of the novel, Judge Holden never seems to have the wondrous, awesome influence on the Kid as he does other characters in Glanton's company. The last words the Kid says to the Judge are "You aint nothin'" (345); it is clear, then, that he never buys into the Judge's philanthropy or falls prey to his rhetoric. While the Judge's character is founded heavily upon the influence of the many types of discourse he employs, such discourse has little effect on the Kid. In fact, one could even say that the Kid retains a keen awareness for the way discourse skews realities when he says to his brief companion, Sproule: "People see what they want to see" (66). However, in a novel like *Blood Meridian* where orations and voices are the primary linguistic outlets for the characters—the only one who ever does any writing is Judge Holden—one may speculate upon the Kid's ignorance or resistance to language as being due to his possessing little voice for himself. Though he appears to be confident in every move he makes, the reader does not often hear from *Blood Meridian*'s "protagonist", if he can be called that. Thus, within the text itself, the Kid can be seen as Judge Holden's literary foil. The Judge wields discourse as a weapon with mastery while the Kid barely speaks; the former is an eternal force while the latter is utterly mortal; Holden concocts principles and philosophy to justify violence—"war is the truest form of divination... War is god" (McCarthy 261)—while the within the Kid only "broods already a taste for mindless violence" (3).

If the *Blood Meridian* universe were one where the Kid's presence reigned supreme in the narrative, the majority of the violence would appear to be meaningless, mindless and gratuitous. But this is not the case. While McCarthy's novel has been said to be fairly liberal when it comes to its brutality, by its close the massacres and ambushes hardly seem empty; they seem calculated, of design, and even principled. This can be ascribed to the Judge's existence. So often does he embark on verbal passages that give the appearance that the violence he commits is based in philosophy, that this barbaric quest of which he is a part stands for something far beyond the understanding of the degenerate scalp-hunters, including the Kid. He speaks of such lack of understanding on behalf of his contemporaries in the following passage: "It is not necessary, he said, that the principals here be in possession of the facts concerning their case, for their acts will ultimately accommodate history with or without their understanding... Words are things. The words he is in possession of he cannot be deprived of. Their authority transcends his ignorance of their meaning" (89). Though this excerpt seems to dissuade the gang from

understanding his words, Holden nonetheless exercises his expertise in rhetoric and in so doing asserts his dominance thusly. All that he says—and we must be of the mindset that what he says, he believes—gnaws at the idea that there is some “larger protocol exacted by the agenda of an absolute destiny” (89) that he and the Glanton gang—knowingly or not—facilitate and follow in their quest to clear the American and Mexican west of its indigenous peoples. No quote of his in regards to this “larger protocol” is more powerful than his claim that war is god (261).

Is this justification not what Manifest Destiny provided for America’s nineteenth century westward expansion? Frederick Merk, in his book *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History: A Reinterpretation* lists several definitions of the national belief, including “expansion, prearranged by Heaven” (24) and “a sense of mission to redeem the Old World by high example ... generated by the potentialities of a new earth for building a new heaven” (2). The Mexican War—just having officially ended prior to the Kid’s falling in company with Captain White at the beginning of *Blood Meridian*—was seen as entirely warranted under this national dogma, this political rhetoric. It gave credence to some of the ugliest truths and realities in America’s national identity, functioning for the violence and brutality in United States history just as the Judge’s philosophical, philanthropic rhetoric functions for the scalp-hunting in *Blood Meridian*; it facilitated the future hegemony of white American political history. The angel holding her schoolbook that hovers over the American west in John Gast’s famous painting *American Progress* could just as well be replaced by the reader’s image of Judge Holden, suspended over the frontier, holding his ledgerbook and sneering.

So while the Kid’s violence appears to be characteristically meaningless, the Judge’s is merited by the one of the farthest philosophies from it: reason. He has a theoretical, yet logical explanation for everything, even war itself:

“Men are born for games. Nothing else. Every child knows that play is nobler than work. He knows too that the worth or merit of a game is not inherent in the game itself but rather in the value of that which is put at hazard. Games of chance require a wager to have meaning at all. Games of sport involve the skill and strength of the opponents and the humiliation and defeat and the pride of victory are in themselves sufficient stake because they inhere in the worth of the principals and define them. But trial of chance or trial of worth all games aspire to the condition of war for here that which is wagered swallows up game, player, all” (260).

Reasons notwithstanding, however, the violence committed by the Judge is not at all different than that of the Kid; the Judge just manages to dress his actions up in ways that would make any man reconsider his moral viewpoint on war. “Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak. Historical law subverts it at every turn” (261). By this quote alone, it is safe to say, then, that the Judge’s rhetoric has some roots in *historical discourse*, particularly involving that of dominant, hegemonic ideologies and their weaker, utterly contained parties of dissent. Brian Edwards, in “History, Fiction, and Mythopoesis: The Power of Blackness in Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*,” speaks about such discourse, stating “history is selective, ideological, and narrative in its composition and fraught with the usual instabilities of language...because these accounts with their first-person claims upon authenticity are doubly imbued with tensions between word and world” (33). These exact weaknesses in the language that composes history are precisely those that not just the Judge, but also Manifest Destiny exploit that effectively deemed violence for the sake of an expanding economy to be willed by God; these “instabilities of language” ultimately usher the Kid to his bitter end.

What we are seeing here, when juxtaposing Judge Holden and the Kid, is a tension within *Blood Meridian* between an America that uses political rhetoric to justify the violence used as the primary agent, the physical precursor to its Manifest Destiny and economic westward expansion and an America that resists such rhetorical discourse and accepts its historical embarrassments; what we are experiencing is a battle between hegemonic rhetoric and the truth it seeks to hide—that is, the genocide of an indigenous people. But while *Blood Meridian* certainly exposes some of the cultural disgraces that occurred during America’s westward expansion, it may not be totally subverting or undermining them, but instead giving them an explanation. In other words, instead of only choosing to “understand this novel and its ubiquitous violence as a demythologizing of the American West, as a revisionist western that challenges and critiques the once-popular view of the West as a place of romance and honor,” (Peebles 231) the more complex case could be made that McCarthy’s novel sees the political and mythological rhetoric that paved the way for Manifest Destiny and America’s empire to be inescapable and invulnerable.

### **A Voice Silenced: Why The Kid Had to Die**

What becomes important for this particular analysis, then, is the question of whom or what *Blood Meridian*, as a novel, chooses to believe—which worldview dominates the narrative or whose voice, between the Judge and the Kid, we hear more often. One of the primary focal points for this, then, must be an investigation of Judge Holden’s murdering of the Kid at the narrative’s close. We will first examine what other scholars have to say about this particular scene.

John Emil Sepich, in his essay “The Dance of History in Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*”, attempts to investigate a possible motive behind Judge Holden’s murdering of the Kid. He does so by examining the scene during which several members of the Glanton gang draw Tarot cards from a sojourned juggler that falls in line with their company. Ellis notes that the Kid’s drawing of the “Four of Cups” card suggests that he has within him some thread of mercy, or “clemency for the heathen” (McCarthy 304), of which Judge Holden—embodying the foremost advocate of the gang’s genocide and ruthless economic war—is indeed aware. He relates the Judge to “The Fool” card, which is also drawn, by saying “Judge Holden is defined by this card...he stands both as judge of the dance that was the scalphunters’ war and as a personification of those universal energies, both super-rational and mad folly, that are war itself” (24). Holden’s fidelity to war and his desire for bloodshed and violence—as well as Sepich’s connection between his character and the drawing of “The Fool” Tarot card—fuel his contempt for the Kid and his internal mercy and thusly serve as one explanation for the Judge’s murder of *Blood Meridian*’s protagonist.

Taking a much more radical approach to this scene, Patrick W. Shaw, in his essay “The Kid’s Fate, the Judge’s Guilt: Ramifications of Closure in Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*” seeks to flesh out and explain the final scene in the novel by suggesting that—rather than simple murder—the Judge molests, rapes, then kills the Kid in an outhouse at a Texas bar. He states that “When the judge assaults the kid in the Griffin jakes, therefore, he betrays a complex of psychological, historical, and sexual values of which the kid has no conscious awareness but which are distinctly conveyed to the reader” (117). He ascribes most of this betrayal to the homoeroticism and male-to-male sexuality that the Judge inflicts on the Kid, a notion that serves to undermine the Calvinist-Christian undertones and allusions as well as the super-masculine combat culture that define the Glanton gang’s aspirations. The Judge’s sudden appearance and

altercation with the Kid after the novel's seventeen-year time lapse is described as a "*deus ex machina* conclusion" (108) and thus serves to strengthen the Judge's ubiquity throughout the *Blood Meridian* universe because of his taste for violence and bloodshed that is so closely bonded to his characterized pedophilia and homosexuality. Both of these defining aspects of Holden, Shaw suggests, are precisely with what the Kid and his Christian clemency battle and they ultimately defeat him, leaving only the Judge to remain alive beyond the novel's close.

Coming to a similar conclusion, Dennis Sansom in his account "Learning from Art: Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* as a Critique of Divine Determinism" views the events and characters in the novel, because of the lack of moral subjectivity in McCarthy's Glanton gang, as determined by a sovereign entity whose divine will encompasses and, more importantly, justifies the possible ethical implications of the violence, rape, and nihilism that so defines *Blood Meridian*'s narrative. "In a blood meridian there is a metaphysical plan, but there are no moral distinctions because if God ordains war based upon the authority of God's will, then whether we think it is just or not makes no difference to its place within the divine plan" (7). Sansom sees this also as an explanation as to why Judge Holden murders the Kid at the end of the novel, because his clemency and mercy—both of which serve to prevent him from fully committing to the Glanton gang's cause—as evidenced by his drawing of the "Four of Cups" Tarot card can be seen as sacrilege and heresy. Moral judgments therefore become erroneous in the novel and the only judgments that do matter are that of the sovereign, determinist entity that pre-ordained *Blood Meridian*'s events as part of a divine plan as well as that of Judge Holden, who is "unreal in a normal world but in the blood meridian he is the epitome of what is real—that is, the holiness of war" (9). For Sansom—and for Holden—war is a weapon and a divine ritual that facilitates the ubiquitous reign and sovereign will of the determinist entity manifested in the novel and thus the Kid must perish and the Judge must live on. These interpretations are integral to understanding the foundation for my argument against this particular approach to the novel's final scene.

While these interpretations, intentionally or not, lightly graze this idea that there is some metaphysical battle going on between Holden and the Kid, none of them seem to really hit the core of their tension. Sepich believes that Holden wants the Kid to die because within him is manifested clemency or mercy for their enemy, but that would inversely imply that the Judge harbors hatred for all of America's indigenous people. And never in the novel does Holden outwardly express some bone-deep, quintessential abhorrence for the Apache—save, maybe, when he refers to them as "heathen" (312)—rather does he simply covet the idea of violence and war; in this instance, the natives are his adversary. It also remains important to remember that, like the Judge, the Kid also possesses an affinity for violence. The tension between both characters thus cannot be, at its primacy, surrounding only the notions of war and violence because each willingly participates in both. Sansom comes slightly closer to this understanding. But, as shown in this analysis, the duel between Holden and the Kid being founded on a battle between an overpowering voice of rhetoric and a more silenced voice of meaninglessness provides a more characteristically all-encompassing explanation as to why both literally and physically Judge Holden and the Kid *could not coexist as equals* at the end of *Blood Meridian*; the pursuit and sustenance of hegemony through rhetoric must always manipulate reality and actual history into some state of elongated weakness. It can thus be conjectured that the novel does believe, on some level, that such a powerful, political, rhetorical voice retains itself in an eternal continuum of supremacy, just as Judge Holden does as he "never dies" (349).



### **A Battle for Voice: How the Narration is Complicit in Aiding the Judge**

But while this tension between Judge Holden and the Kid can be analyzed in this symbolic fashion, current scholarship focuses far too much on plot events—like the murder—and not enough on the deeper level that examines their competing voices within the narration. Mikael Bakhtin, in his *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, speaks about multiple voices entering a seemingly independent narrating voice within a novel when he says “even in those places where the author’s voice seems at first glance to be unitary and consistent, direct and unmediatedly intentional, beneath that smooth single-languaged surface we can uncover prose’s three-dimensionality, its profound speech diversity” (315). While McCarthy’s narrator appears to be in an objective, removed state from the novel, such multi-voice tension does indeed occur throughout the text. One of the only scholars who focuses at all on the narrative voice within *Blood Meridian* is Thomas Pughe in his essay “Revision and Vision: Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*.” He, by analyzing one of the initial descriptions the narrator gives of the Comanche tribe, sees other voices entering the narration that exist outside of the context of the novel.

“This depiction is not only cut off from individual experience but also from the historical context of Indian wars. McCarthy’s writing breaks with the conventions of linear historical narrative, *anachronistically mixing different historical periods and cultures* (‘unhorsed Saxons,’ ‘mongol hordes’ [53]), building clusters of analogy to myth, legend and carnival (‘a fabled horde of mounted lancers’ [52], ‘a legion of horrors,’ ‘a company of mounted clowns,’ ‘a horde from hell’) and exaggerating the sonorities of the narrating voice to gain an incantatory effect” (374, emphasis mine).

But rather than seeing this passage as McCarthy using historiographic metafiction in order to place the legitimacy of his narrator in question, the argument can be made that this is not at all the case; the labels of the Comanches pointed out by Pughe are not anachronistic in the sense that a very well-learned man in the 1850s would not be able to understand them. All of these are references to *the past*. Within the text, the only character assumedly cultured and well-read enough to articulate such descriptions is Judge Holden; what we are seeing here is the Judge’s worldview—and arguably even his voice—entering the narration in the way that he understands history and views the Natives. So, while Bakhtin and Pughe would argue that multiple voices have the opportunity to enter the narrative voice in *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy is deliberately silencing those other voices by using the Judge to overpower them all.

Beyond that, simply in terms of their discourse, the Judge and the narrator share striking similarities in the way some of their more rhetorical passages are composed. Below is an example of what originally appeared to be an objective description of a gypsum lake that quickly shifts into a rhetorical musing on behalf of the narrator:

“Far out on the desert to the north dustspouts rose wobbling and augered the earth and some said they’d heard of pilgrims borne aloft like dervishes in those mindless coils to be dropped broken and bleeding upon the desert again and there perhaps to watch the thing that had destroyed them lurch onward like some drunken djinn and resolve itself once more into the elements from which it sprang. Out of that whirlwind no voice spoke and the pilgrim lying in his broken bones may cry out and in his anguish he may rage, but rage at what? And if the dried and blackened shell of him is found among the sands by travelers to come yet who can discover the engine of his ruin” (117)?

And here is an excerpt from the end of the Judge’s speech on the Ansazi and the masonry they left behind:

“But who builds in stone seeks to alter the structure of the universe and so it was with these masons however primitive their works may seem to us...If God meant to interfere in the degeneracy of mankind would he not have done so by now? Wolves cull themselves, man. What other creature could? And is the race of man not more predacious yet? The way of the world is to bloom and to flower and die but in the affairs of men there is no waning and the noon of his expression signals the onset of his night” (153).

It feels as if both passages are being spoken by the same entity. Questions occupy most of the speech in both, but they are noticeably rhetorical as, in each passage, they are either answered by the speaker or are answered in themselves and require no external response; the narrator did not ask those questions about at what the pilgrim may rage in anticipation of an answer from the reader just as the Judge did not want the scalp-hunters to answer his questions. There are many points throughout *Blood Meridian*, like the one above, where the narrator’s descriptions of the scalp-hunters’ surroundings transform into a subjective observation from his own voice, thus evolving into free indirect discourse. Pughe notes “The narrator’s vision is superimposed on the characters’ experience with the effect that they appear for the most part not only to possess just the rudiments of language but also to be mindless or too brutalized for any emotion” (376). But while the narrator superimposes his own subjective vision onto the narrative, as examined above, his vision and the way that he composes it are irrefutably similar to the vision and voice of Judge Holden and thus could be argued that free indirect speech is being utilized here by the narrator and what the reader is hearing is, again, the overpowering voice of the Judge.

### **The Ever-Present Judge**

In the case of *Blood Meridian*, as previously stated, the Judge’s rhetorical discourse indoctrinates the colonialist, imperialist motives of a white American empire that used political and religious deception to justify the genocide of almost an entire indigenous people. Once we—not just as readers, but as citizens—become aware of such language by acknowledging its existence, we hear its resonating influences within languages and voices that, at face value, appear to be sovereign. The same can be said for the influence of the Judge’s voice on *Blood Meridian*’s narrative; his character, language and ideas are so powerful and dominant within the text that the reader can hear it from the mouth of the narrator himself, and also *when he is not there in the narrative*. In order to substantiate this parallel, we must analyze the parts of the novel in which the Judge is not physically present.

His influence is particularly prevalent during Chapter V, where the Kid arises in the Bolson de Mapimi after the initial massacre of Captain White’s militia by the Comanches and proceeds to join hands with Sproule as they make their way through various crossroads and camps until they reach Chihuahua City. This section of *Blood Meridian* is awash with images that combine divinity and profanity and merge the sacred with the violent. The Kid passes through two churches in which buzzards are the only living inhabitants of the sacristies; it is as if these birds are the overseers, the keepers of such institutions. The only solace evidently found in these places is the peace that came after the slaughtered suffered a violent death:

“He shook his head and rose and walked off across the plaza toward the church. There were buzzards squatting among the old carved wooden corbels ... There were no pews in the church and the stone floor was heaped with the scalped and naked and partly eaten bodies of some forty souls who’d barricaded themselves in this house of God against the heathen. The savages had hacked holes in the roof and shot them down from above and the floor was littered with arrowshafts where they’d snapped them off to get the clothes from the bodies. The altars had been hauled down and the tabernacle looted and the great sleeping God of the Mexicans routed from his golden cup. The primitive painted saints in their frames hung cocked on the walls as if an earthquake had visited and a dead Christ in a glass bier lay broken in the chancel floor.

The murdered lay in a great pool of their communal blood. It had set up into a sort of pudding that crossed everywhere with the tracks of wolves or dogs and along the edges it had dried and cracked into a burgundy ceramic. Blood lay in dark tongues on the floor and blood grouted the flagstones and ran in the vestibule where the stones were cupped from the feet of the faithful and their fathers before them and it had threaded its way down the steps and dripped from the stones among the dark red tracks of the scavengers” (61-64).

“... the cathedral where vultures squatted along the dusty entablatures and among the niches in the carved façade hard by the figures of Christ and the apostles, the birds holding out their own dark vestments in postures of strange benevolence while about them flapped on the wind the dried scalps of slaughtered indians strung on cords, the long dull hair swinging like the filaments of certain seaforms and the dry hides clapping against the stones” (76).

Other images combining sacred imagery with profanity in Chapter V include:

“Turrets stood like basalt prophets” (65)...

“... little wooden crosses propped in cairns of some where travelers had met with death” (65).

“The way narrowed through rocks and *by and by* they came to a bush that was hung with dead babies.

They stopped side by side, reeling in the heat. These small victims, seven, eight of them had holes punched in their underjaws and were hung so by their throats from the broken stobs of a mesquite to stare eyeless at the naked sky. Bald and pale and bloated, larval to some unreckonable being” (60).

All of these grotesque tableaux combine agents of war with agents of divinity, taking images that represent hope, salvation and new life and corrupting them with remnants, ruins, and scenes of brutality. Houses of God have become houses of death, houses of war. This is an example of a point in the novel where the Kid is present but his consciousness is absent, yet it is filtered through the Judge’s worldview and the narrator’s voice, and thus the narrator is not allowing the Kid’s worldview to come through in the narration. While reading these passages we are hard-pressed to turn a deaf ear to the echoes of the Judge and his philosophy that “war is the truest form of divination... War is god” (McCarthy 261). Long before he even declares this notion, his discourse enters our consciousness in the form of these images from the narrator’s voice and, already in the *Blood Meridian* universe, it is as true as rhetorical truths can be.

Further, it is important to note that throughout the text, not a single native voice is heard, save from the narrator’s descriptions of their “screeching and yammering” (McCarthy 55). In fact, they are often described as “savages” (153) and the initial image of them relayed by the narrator is “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 skin of animals...” (54-55). Michael Ryan puts forward that “savagery suggests an ability to commit violence against others without any sense of moral restraint” (198); and while *Blood Meridian*’s Comanches are described as “chopping at the naked bodies, ripping off limbs, heads, gutting the strange white torsos and holding up great handfuls of viscera, genitals, some of the savages so slathered up with gore they might have rolled in it like dogs...” (56), one gets the sense that the narrator is identifying them with just this sort of operationally defined “savagery.” These being the first images of his indigenous peoples, one could immediately associate them with primitive perverts that appear acceptable of being eradicated; this is an example of the type of linguistic rhetoric that justified their genocide not just in the nineteenth century westward expansion in the United States but also within the text of *Blood Meridian* itself. After drawing that parallel, one can look at this as another far-reaching extension of Judge Holden’s worldview—who later refers to the natives as “the heathen” (312)—pervading into the narrator’s voice at an instance where he is not present.

Thus the narrator is effectively silencing the voice of the natives as well, disputing again what Bakhtin would see as an opportunity for multi-voiced, objective narrative.

### **A Loud Defeat**

Such a study of areas in the novel like those mentioned above blatantly unearth a connection between the voice of the novel's narrator and the voice of Judge Holden, all the while noting that these are the two voices heard most throughout the course of *Blood Meridian*. Though the narrator is positioned in a way that he could function as an entity above and, in some ways, removed from the novel's narrative—especially because this is a historical novel—his voice is undeniably in some type of direct contact with the Judge's. Even when Holden is not physically present in the narrative, the narrator's language casts images of his worldview and, though these descriptions of the churches and the initial slaughter scene are located in a realm of the novel where the Kid's consciousness and voice should hold sway over what the reader is envisioning—what Bakhtin would call the Kid's "voice-zone" (46)—the narrator describes what the Judge would have him see: the unity of war and god, and the degeneracy, bestiality and barbarousness of the natives. This is yet another example of the Kid losing to the Judge in the narrative power struggle.

Because the voices of the narrator and the Judge are the most powerful and prevalent voices heard throughout the novel, it becomes difficult for the reader to remain at a removed, objective stance in regards to the colonialist, imperialist rhetoric that is heard within both voices and supported by the Judge's worldview. When the reader isn't hearing it from the Judge, he is seeing it in the narrator's descriptions or hearing it in free indirect discourse; when the narrator's own voice is silent, the Judge preaches the religious, philosophical, scientific, and historical merit in the war against the natives and the open west. For the reader to escape to a place where the natives are not seen as savages, where the scalping is not seen as principled and necessary—to escape to a place where the Judge's ideology is not the lens through which we view this westward expansion—becomes an increasingly frustrating and futile task throughout the novel; thus *Blood Meridian*, on some level, is demonstrating that the Judge's rhetoric—like the rhetoric that sustained the hegemony of colonialist nineteenth century America—is an all-pervading weapon.

This struggle in objectivity in reader response brings us back to the tension between the Kid's voice and the voice of the Judge and sheds a different light on the Kid's role within *Blood Meridian*. When the narrator informs us, on the very first page of the novel, that there is "all history present in that visage" (3), he is indicating to us that the Kid is going to be the vehicle through which we, as readers, are able to examine the Judge's rhetoric. "All history" is present in the Kid because it is only through him that our consciousness will be channeled into the American West of *Blood Meridian*. We, as readers, are inclined to identify with the Kid, not only because he is our protagonist, but also because he provides this resistance to the Judge; without the Kid's lack of voice and resistance to rhetoric and discourse, there would be no escape from the Judge's ideology, mainly because the narrator does not provide one for us and there are no other voices within the text that come close to opposing him, let alone overtaking him. However, we can never escape too far from the Judge—as evidenced by his role in the narrator's voice—because we can never truly identify with the Kid; "some fairybook beast" (4) who has "a taste for mindless violence" (3) is not exactly an attractive choice for reader identification and the narrator, throughout the entire novel, silences the Kid by barely granting him a voice and from the beginning weakened him as a character because he wasn't even granted a true name.

## Conclusion

So, in all of this constant play during which the narrator's voice sounds so similar to Holden's, the novel is demonstrating how inescapable the Judge's worldview is at the time period during which the narrative takes place. Judge Holden exploits almost all discourse imaginable in his rhetoric—colonialism, literature, biblical allusions, science, philosophy, astronomy, history, nationalism, storytelling, superstition, even magic—in the interest of coveting this war and condoning the genocide of the Native Americans. We, as readers, have the predisposition to judge it with retrospective eyes and thus are at an advantage as to whether or not we can be so affected by it. But the population in the 1850s that opposed exterminating the Natives from the American West—like many contemporary Americans, in hindsight, claim they would have advocated—was either scarce or entirely silent in believing so. Therefore, within the *Blood Meridian* universe and the novel itself—keeping in mind the milieu of 1850s expansionist America—arguably the only way to escape from this universal rhetoric that Judge Holden wields is choosing the option to believe in nothing, which is precisely in what the Kid believes; he is, after all, a nihilist. And in the power struggle between he and Judge Holden, the Kid's voice, presence, and worldview has literally lost on all levels. Thus, by the end of the novel and after he kills the Kid, there is no outlet within the text to resist the Judge's voice; through this complex struggle for power through voice, *Blood Meridian* is not necessarily demythologizing the American West as so many scholars have concluded. Rather, it offers an explanation for why it has been viewed this way: the voices that wielded the rhetoric that so mythologized the West were hegemonic and thus all-powerful during America's nineteenth century expansion. *Blood Meridian* is making a statement that the composition of history is nothing more than a struggle for voice; that political rhetoric like Manifest Destiny was so successful because of the power of the discourse it employed: religious discourse, nationalistic discourse, economic discourse, etc. And those that opposed it—like the Kid opposing the Judge—were silenced by its dominance. And language will always overpower silence, and meaning—even if the meaning is false, rhetorical, and for the purpose of justification alone—will always overpower the absence of meaning.

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