



The Historical Writing of *Blood Meridian*

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Abstract— Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, set against the backdrop of the American Westward Expansion, narrates the story of a young boy who follows a gang of scalp hunters and undergoes a series of bloody and violent experiences. Within its fictional narrative, the novel incorporates real historical figures and events from the era of westward movement. Drawing upon historical sources, McCarthy reflects "History with a capital H" through the accurate depiction of events, while simultaneously focusing on "histories with a lowercase h"—the destinies of marginalized groups—to reveal their states of survival within the grand sweep of history. Through the interweaving of fact and fiction, McCarthy exposes the violence and darkness underlying the Westward Expansion, interrogates the American faith in Manifest Destiny, contemplates the tensions between nation and individual, and conveys his ethical concern for the human condition.

Keywords— *Blood Meridian, Historical Writing, Violence, Westward Expansion*



I. INTRODUCTION

Cormac McCarthy is a renowned American novelist. In the 1980s, he turned his attention to the West and published a series of western novels, including *Blood Meridian*, *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, *Cities of the Plain*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *The Road*. *Blood Meridian* is regarded as McCarthy's first western novel (Sepich, 2008). Harold Bloom praised it as a genuinely American post-apocalyptic novel (Bloom, 2001). The novel provides a profound reflection on violence and raises doubts about both the frontier thesis and Manifest Destiny. In *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy narrates real historical events, presenting History with a capital "H," while simultaneously focusing on the fates of marginalized groups and individuals, thereby constructing histories with a lowercase "h." Through this interweaving of fact and fiction, McCarthy

articulates his reflection and resistance toward the history of the American West.

II. HISTORY WITH A CAPITAL "H": THE AUTHENTIC REFLECTION OF HISTORICAL EVENTS

2.1 National Expansion

The Westward Expansion was a crucial stage in American history, profoundly influencing territorial growth, demographic restructuring, and the shaping of national identity. Western films of the past often constructed romanticized cowboy heroes, celebrating their resilience and sense of justice. In its quest for territorial enlargement, the U.S. government vigorously encouraged citizens to take part in the movement westward. Many Americans, driven

by their yearning for a better life and the allure of the unknown, set forth with little understanding of what awaited them. Often, they were guided only by the government's calls for expansion, blindly joining the westward march. McCarthy, through his narrative strategies, reconstructs this history within the novel.

Many episodes and characters in *Blood Meridian* can be traced to Samuel Chamberlain's memoir *My Confession*. Chamberlain, once a Union officer during the Civil War, had taken part in military operations in Mexico during the mid-19th century. His memoir begins with his departure from the East at age fifteen and recounts his experiences in northern Mexico: joining the U.S. Army, then becoming a scalp hunter under John Glanton, and ultimately surviving the massacre at Yuma Crossing. McCarthy's narrative resonates strongly with these events: the nameless protagonist, "the Kid," leaves Tennessee at age fourteen, drifts into the Mexican borderlands, joins Glanton's gang in pursuit of Indian scalps, and eventually participates in the Yuma massacre.

The most remarkable character in the novel is undoubtedly Judge Holden. He appears not only in *My Confession* but also in other historical and fictional sources as a polyglot, omniscient and omnipresent, physically immense, and seemingly invulnerable. A ruthless warmonger, he orchestrates battles that lead Glanton's gang to destruction, yet he himself survives every calamity, immortal and unchanged. McCarthy introduces him as "a huge man in an oilcloth slicker... bald as a stone, with no trace of beard, brows, or lashes... nearly seven feet in height, a cigar clamped in his teeth" (McCarthy, 2001, 10). Chamberlain similarly recalls him as "a massive Texan called the Judge... six feet six, grossly fat, with a dark, greasy, expressionless face devoid of hair" (Chamberlain, 2023, 271). Based on historical record, McCarthy intensifies Holden through artistic stylization, layering the canvas of history with darker hues, thereby embedding his own political vision within the figure.

The novel's complexity is epitomized by Judge Holden. His identity and origins remain enigmatic, and critics have never reached consensus. McCarthy endows Holden with boundless knowledge and embodies him as the principle of violence itself (Xia, 2022). Holden masters multiple disciplines and employs rhetoric according to his

interlocutor: speaking in specialized jargon before governors, conversing in Latin with doctors, persuading enemies with cunning eloquence, and even engaging a Mexican sergeant in such commanding discourse that he is left speechless. Fascinated with artifacts of ancient peoples, he constantly sketches, records, and catalogues them—only to destroy them afterwards. As he himself declares: "Whatever exists, whatever in creation exists without my knowledge, exists without my consent" (McCarthy, 2001, 175). His hubris is emblematic of the national psyche during the Westward Expansion. As historian, linguist, botanist, and military strategist combined, Holden becomes the embodiment of the nation itself.

The United States declared independence in 1776, and by the late 18th century had already embarked upon westward expansion—like a child not yet steady on its feet, eager to play the role of an adult. Holden likewise embodies this paradox of immaturity and maturity. His skin is smooth like an infant's, yet his colossal body exudes menace: "immense of frame, bald as a child, his great dome gleaming white, perfectly spherical, as if drawn with compass and rule" (McCarthy, 2001, 80). This uncanny dissonance provokes unease. Bloom (2011) pondered: "As principle, as the eternal war, he does not die. But is he a man, or something else?" (Bloom, 2001, 371). In *Blood Meridian*, the Judge personifies national ideology, both the incarnation of 19th-century American violence and the spokesman of state power. By contrast, "the Kid" represents the individual swept along blindly by historical currents. Time and again, Holden manipulates, tempts, and admonishes the Kid toward violence, seeking to fashion him into a loyal disciple. Yet the Kid repeatedly resists due to remnants of "mercy" within him, and for this defiance, he is ultimately annihilated by Holden's violence. McCarthy closes the novel with the Kid's death, underscoring the futility of individual resistance against social and national forces (Fathi, 2020).

Holden never sleeps, symbolizing the ceaseless ambition for conquest. Decades later, when the grown Kid encounters him again, Holden remains unchanged. In a sordid tavern outhouse, the Judge casually murders him, signifying how an individual life is negligible before the nation: once exploited, the individual may be discarded without recourse. Without direct opposition, authoritarian

ideologies such as Holden's will persist unchecked (LaMothe, 2005). Finally, the immortal Judge "dances in the light and in the shadows, and he is adored" (McCarthy, 2001, 295). At any time, he can gather followers by the power of speech, embodying both evil and justice, light and darkness. Even when the nation commits atrocities, it may still win the people's devotion. This compels reflection: how much moral discernment remains once human beings are subsumed by the will of the nation?

2.2 The Fur Trade

The fur trade laid the early foundations for the economic development of North America. From the moment European colonizers first set foot on the continent, the trade in animal pelts began. As the commerce expanded, furs grew beyond their practical function of warmth and became symbols of fashion and status. At the time, European aristocrats prized luxurious fur garments: an extravagant coat was a passport into high society. To display wealth and prestige, nobles purchased furs in vast quantities, causing prices to soar. This demand led to the reckless slaughter of wild animals. Fur also became a marker of class, distinguishing elites from commoners. Sumptuary laws were even issued to regulate which kinds of fur individuals of particular status could wear.

As the fur trade flourished, formerly isolated regions became integrated into an increasingly interdependent world. Yet this integration came at the expense of ecological catastrophe, as numerous species faced near extinction.

Among them, the American bison was the largest mammal of the continent, reaching 2.1 to 3.5 meters in length and weighing up to a ton. Historically, bison roamed across the Great Plains, the Rocky Mountains, the eastern forests, and into northern Mexico—an area covering nearly one-third of North America. Their population once numbered around seventy million, with thirty million on the Plains alone. Bison were essential to the survival of Indigenous peoples and crucial to sustaining North American ecosystems. Because Indigenous communities adhered to principles of harmony with nature and because hunting bison required immense time and labor, the herds remained in relative balance for centuries. Moreover, the bison held sacred meaning for Plains tribes: a primary source of food and clothing, but also a spiritual bond linking

humans and nature. McCarthy captures this cultural presence in *Blood Meridian*, describing how the Native warriors ambushing the Kid's company wore "headdresses of cranes' feathers and rawhide helmets adorned with the horns of bulls or bison" (McCarthy, 2001, 57).

Before the arrival of Europeans, Indigenous peoples hunted animals primarily for subsistence. But with the advent of the fur trade, the nature of hunting transformed. Steamboats and firearms made both transport and hunting easier, attracting more participants to the trade. Both Native peoples and settlers began slaughtering bison on a massive scale: "The rifles crackled continuously, the air hissed with bullets, and the hides of thousands of cattle were pegged across miles of ground. The skinners worked in shifts day and night, week upon week, month upon month" (McCarthy, 2001, 278).

The devastation was catastrophic. Prior to European colonization, the bison population stood at roughly seventy million. By 1889, only 541 remained within the United States (Fu & Yao, 2020). Once a vital resource for Indigenous sustenance and culture, the bison were driven to the brink of extinction under the pressure of economic exploitation, becoming casualties of imperial expansion.

III. HISTORIES WITH A LOWERCASE "H": MARGINALIZED VOICES AND INDIVIDUAL FATES

3.1 The Kid's Experience and Fate

Escape signifies the act of fleeing from adverse circumstances or hostile environments. Throughout history, escape has always been a means by which humans sought survival, spiritual liberation, dreams, and freedom (Liu & Feng, 2016). The protagonist of the novel—the "Kid"—is a youth plagued by misfortune. In order to flee a life of hardship, he sets out westward in search of his own destiny, only to witness firsthand the violence and darkness of the American frontier. After joining a gang of scalp hunters, he experiences a succession of brutal massacres, yet even amid the blood-soaked landscape of the West, faint glimpses of humanity and redemption surface in him.

McCarthy's West is depicted as a realm of chaos. Here, no signs of order, morality, or regeneration are to be found—only amorality and immorality (Zhang, 2016).

Violence constitutes the most conspicuous feature of *Blood Meridian*. Its portrayals of carnage are so vivid and extreme that many readers find them nearly unbearable. Through rhetorical techniques such as focalization, exaggeration, and repetition, McCarthy amplifies both the cruelty of the characters and the horror of the scenes, imbuing the events with a devastating impact.

The unnamed Kid receives only minimal biographical detail: he is from Tennessee, loses his mother in childhood, lacks formal education, and leaves home at fourteen. Quick-tempered and prone to violence, he is introduced in a tavern brawl where he threatens to slit another man's throat—already foreshadowing the darkness within him. After joining Glanton's gang, his latent propensity for violence is fully unleashed, drawing him into an endless cycle of slaughter.

Within the gang, Judge Holden emerges as its central figure and ideological leader. Under his guidance, the gang reaches an agreement with the governor of Chihuahua: to indiscriminately massacre not only Native Americans but also Mexicans, exchanging scalps for gold. Thereafter, the gang roams Mexico, committing mass atrocities in which neither the elderly, women, nor children are spared.

Amid such carnage, however, the Kid occasionally demonstrates flashes of humanity. When David Brown is severely wounded in the thigh by an arrow during a clash with Native warriors, the Judge mocks him with chilling indifference. At this moment of dire need, the Kid unexpectedly steps forward, performing a difficult surgical procedure and successfully saving Brown's life. This marks the first time the Kid displays the glimmer of human compassion. Later, after another savage battle with Mexicans, Glanton orders the Kid to execute Shelby, a fellow gang member of Mexican descent. Yet despite Shelby's threats, the Kid refuses to shoot, instead giving him water from his own canteen.

Following yet another massacre, the Kid and ex-priest Tobin confront the Judge in the desert. Tobin urges the Kid to kill Holden, arguing that the gang's downfall is entirely his doing. But the Kid hesitates, ultimately sparing him. After enduring countless acts of violence, the Kid gradually distances himself from further killing. While many of his companions persist in embracing violence until death, he

instead demonstrates mercy and restraint, returning to an instinctive form of human compassion.

3.2 The Oppressed Native Americans

In 1848, the Mexican-American War concluded with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The treaty stipulated that Texas would belong to the United States, while Mexico ceded California, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, and Utah. The establishment of this border gave rise to complex ethnic issues. The treaty also required the United States to prevent Native peoples from crossing into Mexico to launch raids. Consequently, after 1848, both Mexico and the United States sought to eliminate the Indigenous populations along the frontier. "At the end of the Mexican-American War, there were nearly 150,000 Native Americans in California. By 1860, that number had been reduced to around 30,000" (Foner, 2013).

In Chihuahua, the Mexican government issued bounty orders to accelerate territorial expansion, offering \$100 for each Native American captured. In pursuit of such profit, scalp hunters employed every means of cruelty, carrying out massacres that spared neither women nor children. Human life was thus reduced to a commodity, devalued into an animal-like existence (Wing, 2022). In response to U.S. and Mexican violence, Native groups often retaliated. The novel's first large-scale battle is launched by the Comanche: suddenly charging down from the heights, they overrun a company of soldiers. McCarthy's narrative depicts the grisly slaughter: "They stripped the clothes from the dead, seized the hair of living and dead alike, circled scalps with their blades, and lifted bloody trophies high. They hacked and chopped at naked corpses with unbridled ferocity" (McCarthy, 2001, 58).

Scalping, an ancient practice, is one of humanity's most brutal responses to alterity. It is not only an act of physical mutilation but also a symbolic appropriation of another's soul (Zhang, 2017). In the aftermath, the Kid emerges as the sole survivor, while the company's near-total annihilation reveals the violent backlash provoked by U.S. aggression against Native peoples. Behind the atrocities of the scalp-hunting gang lies the ideology of Manifest Destiny. Americans considered themselves God's chosen people, divinely entitled to conquer the continent. By contrast, Native Americans were cast as "the Other"—a savage and

backward race to be exterminated or assimilated.

Rejecting traditional grand narratives, McCarthy attends to the lives of historical “little people” and marginalized groups, highlighting their significance. Women, children, people of color, non-Christians, and others long silenced deserve their own voices in history (Wang, 2022). Mainstream American discourse has often portrayed early relations between colonists and Native peoples as harmonious and mutually beneficial, commemorated in the celebration of Thanksgiving. Yet this narrative obscures the reality that once colonists secured stability and prosperity, they quickly embarked upon systematic displacement and massacre of Indigenous populations. This violence, largely erased from official memory, resurfaces in McCarthy’s fiction, where he consistently foregrounds Native peoples as an oppressed community, offering a counternarrative to dominant U.S. history.

IV. CONTEMPORARY RESONANCE: A RESPONSE TO THE VIETNAM WAR

Blood Meridian was published in 1985, when the impact of the Vietnam War still lingered in American society. To interpret the novel apart from the context of Vietnam and the cultural reflections it provoked in the United States is inadequate (Gow, 2005). Since its founding, the United States has clung to the myth of the frontier, believing its territorial conquests and campaigns against foreign peoples to be innately justified. Yet the military’s repeated setbacks in Vietnam shook Americans’ faith in these myths. Rising casualty numbers and an ever-lengthening war shattered national illusions, compelling reflection upon the violence embedded in U.S. history and the legitimacy of colonial expansion.

The Kid in McCarthy’s narrative can be seen as a counterpart of the American soldier in Vietnam. From the outset, he is depicted as inclined toward violence: upon entering a tavern, he quickly instigates conflict and even attempts murder. Later, as a member of Glanton’s gang, he participates in pillage and massacre across the borderlands. These scenes recall the atrocities committed by U.S. troops in the My Lai Massacre of 1968, when Lieutenant William Calley, following orders, led the killing of more than 500

unarmed Vietnamese civilians, including women and children. Veterans later recalled photographs: in one, a soldier displayed a severed ear; in another, ears were strung together into a grotesque necklace he called his “love beads”; yet another showed a naked girl with her legs splayed upward (Gow, 2005). The carnage inflicted by Glanton’s gang upon Indigenous peoples is thus mirrored in the atrocities of American troops in Vietnam, with the corpses of women, children, and the elderly evoking equally brutal wartime imagery.

Through detailed depictions of frontier violence, McCarthy allegorizes the bloodshed of Vietnam, condemning the United States government for disguising imperial conquest as the propagation of democracy. His narrative thus situates the violence of the 19th-century frontier within a continuum of American military aggression, exposing its persistent ideological justifications.

V. CONCLUSION

Blood Meridian is a text in which memory and fiction intertwine (Gao, 2012). By blending historical fact with personal imagination, McCarthy adopts a detached perspective to expose the brutality that accompanied the process of territorial expansion, thereby critiquing the myth of Manifest Destiny. Within its historical context, the novel conveys McCarthy’s critique of American imperial practices and his anxieties regarding the power of national ideology, while simultaneously articulating his humanistic concern for marginalized groups.

The portrayal of Native Americans in *Blood Meridian* bears profound historical significance. Far from being savages, they are depicted as peoples with their own cultures and traditions. Yet under the tide of Westward Expansion, they were cast as obstacles to progress and civilization, subjected to ruthless slaughter and displacement, and ultimately erased from history.

Through the figure of Judge Holden—ostensibly a symbol of law and order, yet in reality an embodiment of cruelty—McCarthy unveils the colonialist essence of the Westward Expansion. *Blood Meridian* is thus not only a profound reflection upon American history and culture but also a deconstruction of the traditional western myth. By vividly portraying the violence of westward conquest, the

novel exposes the hypocrisy and brutality of American national ideology during the 19th century.

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