

Blood Meridian and the “Creation” of Historical Narrative

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Each age tries to form its own conception of the past. Each age writes the history of the past anew with reference to the conditions uppermost in its own time.

-Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of History*

History is a strong myth, perhaps . . . the last great myth. It is a myth that once subtended the possibility of an ‘objective’ enchainment of events and causes and the possibility of a narrative enchainment of discourse. The age of history, if one can call it that, is also the age of the novel.

-Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*

In one sense, Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West* is a book about the West; it is a book that bridges the gap between the “old” mythological and the “new” revisionist Western and creates a new direction for the genre to follow—that of a more realistic myth. It uses and inverts several classic aspects of the cliché western and pairs them with themes and issues associated with modern historical interpretations of the West, generating a new type of Western. It is an example of what Richard Slotkin would term a productive revision of myth.

In another sense, *Blood Meridian* is a book about much more than the West; it is a book about history and the representation of history. It is a critique on the process in which “history,” (the textual representation of past events where thematic sequence and significance are artificially imposed) is created—and continuously recreated—to fit the hegemonic cultural narrative. The character of judge Holden serves as an instrument by

which McCarthy shows us the subjective nature of the process of documenting history and how it can be misused. In the context of Western American historiography, McCarthy holds a mirror to both the “old” and “new West” movements to show them for what they truly are—competing historical “myths”(or narratives) that are consistent with their respective cultures’ value systems.

This paper attempts to look at *Blood Meridian* in relation to two aspects of Western American studies: literature and historiography. In essence, McCarthy’s book is both an examination and a synthesis of these two competing Western movements as well as an assessment of the process by which they were both created. *Blood Meridian* is an example of historical narrative—a “neo-dime novel”—that also contains a postmodern critique of history embedded within its text.

Frontier Symbolism: The Dime Novel as Keeper of American Ideology

In order to understand *Blood Meridian* in relation to the “old” and “new West” movements (and in relation to the larger picture of Western American history), it is essential to examine the genre of the Western and the role it has played as a cultural myth that helps create and sustain the national identity of America. Richard Slotkin, author of *Gunfighter Nation*, argues, “The mythology produced by mass or commercial media has a particular role and function in a cultural system that remains complex and heterodox. It is a form of cultural production that addresses most directly the concerns of Americans as citizens of a nation-state” (9). He also argues that major breaks or reforms within the

development of these mass-culture myths “may signal the presence of a significant crisis of cultural values and organization” (8).

In the second half of the 19th century, stories of people and events in the frontier made their way eastward from the frontier to the living rooms of New York and Boston through word of mouth and sensational news stories. With the advent of the penny press and other forms of mass printing, authors and publishing companies began producing hundreds of “dime novels” that told romantic tales of heroes and villains in the western wilderness (Slotkin 144). These dime novels were wildly successful, selling millions of copies internationally. They provided a place where moral, class, and philosophical issues could be laid out and resolved without the complications and ethical ambiguity of contemporary, urban civilization (Slotkin 127).

With the immense popularity of dime novels, authors began to look toward real people and events for their inspiration; people like Jesse James, Wyatt Earp, Calamity Jane, and Billy the Kid became household names by the beginning of the 20th century. Though the stories that were told about these heroes were largely based on actual events, most dime novels were partly embellished or written by authors who based their writing on second- and third-hand accounts (Slotkin 74). So these novels, which went on to aid the creation of Western myths—myths like the infamous gunfight at the O.K. Corral—were already part fiction; they were retold so many times that they became archetypal with the good guy (always dressed in white) and the bad guy (always dressed in black) squaring off in the dusty street for the gunfight at high noon. These pulp novels tended to share the same ideological underpinnings: manifest destiny, the importance of

individualism, civilization vs. wilderness, social Darwinism, pastoral escapism, morality, and the possibility of wealth through hard work and Christian values (Slotkin 351).

After being repeated over time, first through dime novels, then later through Hollywood films, the stories told about Western heroes took on a “centaurlike mythical-historical makeup: supposedly authentic accounts of heroic masculinity endlessly repeated in terms of romanticized formulas” (Johnson 106). At some point, these fictional simulations of events and formulas were repeated and fetishized so much that they often became more compelling than factual history and began to be what cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard calls “hyper-real,” or the simulation of something that never really existed (Baudrillard 1).

The Competing Cultural Identities of the “Old” and “New West” Movements

By the time *Blood Meridian* was published in 1985, the genre was almost 150 years old. Most of the Western novels written up into the early 80s are typically categorized as “old West” and fit into the paradigm of Western American history stemming from Frederick Jackson Turner’s influential 1893 essay, *The Significance of the Frontier*, in which he argues that the frontier, as the foundation of American exceptionalism, no longer exists and that the “West” is a process that is finished (Johnson 104). Turner studied and interpreted the history of the West and produced a “grand-narrative of America in which social evolution was spelt out in the very development of the Frontier itself” (Campbell *Liberty* 219). Historians throughout the 20th century used

Turner's grand narrative as the basis for their own scholarly work and as a starting point for their own attempt to explain the American West.

In opposition to (and currently vying for hegemony with) the Turner-influenced "old West" movement, is the so-called "new-West" movement. Barclay Owens, in his essay, "*Blood Meridian* and the Reassessment of Violence," argues that the relatively new movement emerged out of the cultural revolution of the 60s and the post-Vietnam/Civil Rights era (33). The "new West" movement was influenced, he says, partially by the televised images of Americans committing acts of violence at home and abroad, and it attempted to re-evaluate and deconstruct the nation's most sacred creation myth—the Western.

Owens traces the emergence of the "new West" school through several scholars who call attention to America's history of brutality and begin to question the moral rationalization of its current foreign policy. T.R. Fehrenbach, author of the seminal 1974 book *Comanches: The Destruction of a People*, is one of the historians that Owens cites as an important figure in the beginning of this movement. Fehrenbach was important because he was one of the first historians to analyze the role violence has played and continues to play as a historical force in American society. According to Owens, Fehrenbach's book was also a major source for McCarthy when writing *Blood Meridian*. Owens found this to be a central theme within McCarthy's book:

History is brutal; only future peril lies in omitting or obscuring man's continuing brutalities. Generations that have been sheltered from the brutalities of the past are poorly equipped to cope with those of their own times. The story of the People is a brutal story, and its judgments must also be brutal. These judgments may offend those who would have man be a different kind of being, and the world a different sort of place. (Quoted in Owens 34)

Many members of “new West” school felt that the biggest problem with the “old West” movement was that it tended to be reductionist because it over-simplified and generalized complex historical processes, and it reduced “parties in the American cultural conversation to simple sets of paired antagonists” (Slotkin 655).

Likewise, the “old West” school of thought failed to incorporate other important narratives that the “new West” school felt were underrepresented. According to Neil Campbell author of *The Cultures of the American West*, the “new West” movement was an attempt to create awareness of the brutality and alternative narratives that existed before they were completely erased from history books and painted over with the hyper-real myth of the “old West”. He called the movement:

not just an academic game, but a political act concerned with survival, especially for all those previously omitted or silenced in the old histories. It is, therefore, vital to discuss the New West in relation to the wider context of changing values and critical alliances . . . The voices of women, ethnic Americans and the marginalized play a very significant part in this process of cultural revision, broadening the discourse through which the West is defined and expressed.
(*Cultures* 9)

“New West” historians, in response, drew from post-modern theory, gender and cultural studies, and postcolonial critique to create a more diverse history of the West.

But Slotkin argues that the “new” West movement has not done enough to cement itself outside of the academic realm. He criticizes the movement for merely deconstructing the popular-culture Western myth and not creating a new one in its place, which he believes is necessary:

So long as the nation-state remains the prevalent form of social organization, something like the national myth/ ideology will be essential to its operations.

We are living in a 'liminal' moment of [American] cultural history. We are in the process of giving up a myth/ideology that no longer helps us see our way through the modern world, but lack a comparably authoritative system of beliefs to replace what we have lost. (Slotkin 654)

Because the "new West" movement has not stepped up to offer anything in return for what it has taken apart, it is only "part of the process through which existing myths are creatively revised and adjusted to changing circumstances" (ibid); it is a historiographical necessity in the process of adapting myths to a more contemporary world view. What is needed next, according to Slotkin, is a "productive revision of myth."

***Blood Meridian* as Productive Revision of Myth**

Blood Meridian is a productive revision of the Western myth because it parallels several aspects of the dime novel and recreates the mythic patterns of the "old West" to create a historical narrative that is also relatively verifiable (*Liberty* 217). He accomplishes this in a number of ways. First, by writing a historical novel, McCarthy is able to return the reader to a time before Western history was written and subsequently influenced by the cultural values of the people who wrote it. Using primary sources, he allows the readers to see first hand the violence and chaos of the West. Second, McCarthy blends factual history with fiction and literature with both the characters and events in the book; many of the characters, both central and peripheral, are actual historical individuals, and likewise many of the events are based on true incidents.

According to John Sepich, who traces many of McCarthy's historical sources in the essay "What kind of Indians was them?," *Blood Meridian* is historically accurate in

its depiction of several events – most notably scalp hunting. Sepich outlines the history of scalp hunting in the Southwest and argues that McCarthy’s portrayal is very precise. He explains how bands of mercenaries were hired by certain governors of north Mexican states to stop what they felt to be violent incursion on the Mexican settlers, and the taking of scalps came out of the need to show proof to the government how many Indians had been killed (124). Glanton’s gang is a verifiable historical example of this practice (Sepich 126). The use of violence by Europeans towards the pre-existing tribes has always been a point of contention between the two movements. The “old West” school tends to defend the violence somewhat as a necessity against the unprovoked attacks of Indians, whereas the “new West” often takes the position that it was form of genocide with its sole intention to free up the land for the settlement of ravenous Western imperialists.

Blood Meridian is unique in relation to other Westerns novels because there is a marked absence of moral hierarchy throughout the book with regard to the motivations of the characters and their many uses of violence. McCarthy gives no distinction between the good guys and the bad guys—there is only sophistic rationalization amid chaos and brutality. Both the Indians and the Anglos inhabit the same level of moral righteousness for McCarthy, and neither group is painted as “hero” or “victim.” Glanton’s gang and the native tribes (Apache, Delaware, Yuma and Comanche) are equally violent. For example, in his third epigraph, McCarthy shows that there is evidence of scalp hunting almost 300,000 years before the arrival of whites, but he also shows that Glanton’s gang had a tendency to take the scalps off not just Indians, but of anyone whose hair could pass for an Indian (Sepich 125). McCarthy is remarkable in his ability to remain unbiased

toward either the “new” or “old West” movement. He abstains from either defending or criticizing scalp hunting; he just shows it in all its violent, amoral starkness.

In a 1985 book review for the *New York Times*, Caryn James astutely points out, “*Blood Meridian* makes it clear that all along Mr. McCarthy has asked us to witness evil not in order to understand it but to affirm its inexplicable reality.” In other words, it is as if he is forcing the reader to acknowledge the moral ambiguity of history and not allowing anyone to easily take sides or justify the brutality while reading the novel. Therefore, the book occupies a space that exists within both Western movements and, at the same time, transcends them. There are many instances where McCarthy refuses to take sides on some of the more contested issues in Western studies—issues like scalp hunting or violence. In 1992, McCarthy publicly defended the novel’s extreme portrayal of violence by saying:

There’s no such thing as life without bloodshed . . . I think the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea. Those who are afflicted with this notion are the first ones to give up their souls, their freedom. Your desire that it be that way will enslave you and make your life vacuous. (quoted in Woodward)

The tendency of historians to look at these events through normative assessments (either negatively or positively) is more a reflection of the historians’ own cultural values and is a luxury that comes from the temporal and spatial separation from that which they are studying. Jarrett, in the essay “Rewriting the Southwest: *Blood Meridian* as a Revisionary Western,” argues that:

Our postmodern detachment from our own history assumes a superior, ‘uninvolved’ angle of vision that McCarthy suggests may be an illusion of our historical distance (or ignorance). *Blood Meridian*’s attempt at the reenactment of history through fiction is all the more tragic in its failure – for it is finally only fiction – but as a dramatic fiction it may more successfully express the bloody tragedy of Western history than any historian. (93)

It is as if McCarthy is taking the readers back to a time before the narrative of the Western history was written to present a more morally ambiguous alternative. By doing so, he removes the metaphorical moral-value filter that historians have placed on the looking glass of history with regard to their interpretations of issues like violence and scalp hunting.

McCarthy’s treatment of “old West” values and ideas that have shaded its history for the past 80 years is also very complex. He does not reject themes like the Turner thesis or Manifest Destiny outright, but instead he deconstructs them in a way that allows the readers to see these themes through the eyes of the characters—how the people of this time period would have seen them. For example, at one point in the novel, as the group reaches California, the character Toadvine rhetorically asks the kid, “You wouldn’t think that a man would run plumb out of country here, would ye?” (BM 285). From the point of view of the character as he is running from the law (and the encroachment of civilization), his question is pertinent and sincere, and any reader can identify with that. However, as seen in the context of 100 years of Western American history, the question becomes ironic and tongue-in-cheek as a foretelling of Turner’s Frontier thesis. The novel uses the themes of the “old West” to give some perspective into the thoughts and

motivations of his characters, but does so in such a way that anyone familiar with the “new West’s” relentless attack on the Turner thesis will recognize these references—like Toadvine’s question—as clever double-entendres.

Nevertheless, McCarthy’s goal isn’t simply the deconstruction of the historical West; it is also an attempt at re-mythologizing it. McCarthy breaks down the past myths of the West and begins writing them anew from a completely different perspective. He begins with historical characters and events and weaves them into a story that is both epic and poetic. John Sepich’s extensive analysis of McCarthy’s sources show that the gang’s leader, John Joel Glanton, as well as judge Holden are discussed in what appears to be McCarthy’s main historical source: *My Confessions*, a recently found personal narrative of Samuel Chamberlain during his time as a scalp hunter in the 1840s (122). *My Confessions* begins with Chamberlain as a fifteen year old leaving home in the East, and follows him as he wanders around northern Mexico: first as part of the U.S. Military, then as a scalp hunter in Glanton’s gang, and ends almost immediately after his escape from the Yuma ferry massacre (Moos 26). The plot of *Blood Meridian* is almost structurally identical to Chamberlain’s narrative: it follows the character known as “the kid” as he leaves his Tennessee home at 14, travels west through Texas, fights with the Army as they are attacked by Comanche, joins up with Glanton’s gang of scalp hunters, and in the climax, participates in the Yuma ferry massacre.

While McCarthy stays true to the spirit of historical accuracy throughout the book, he does take several liberties with characters and events to make the book come across as more myth-like. In addition, McCarthy’s use of language is astounding in its

ability to create the quality of a mythical epic. Take for example the following passage and notice how he gives the men in Glanton's gang a larger-than-life quality:

They were men of another time for all that they bore christian names and they had lived all their lives in a wilderness as had their fathers before them. They'd learnt war by warring, the generations driven from the eastern shore across a continent, from the ashes at Gnadenhutzen onto the prairies and across the outlet to bloodlands of the west. (*BM* 138)

He takes the skeleton of the story from historical sources but fills in the flesh of the story with vivid metaphors and poetic descriptions to create a novel that is both literature and history.

The Nature of "History": Singling out the Thread of Order

As a critique of the historical process, McCarthy's novel echoes many of the themes discussed by such relativist historians as R.G. Collingwood and Edward H. Carr. The themes of *Blood Meridian* are particularly reminiscent of Carr's 1961 examination of historiography, *What is History?*, a radical attack on the perceived absolute objectivity of history as a field of study. Carr argues that history, to some extent, has been "pre-selected and pre-determined for us, not so much by accident as by people who were consciously or unconsciously imbued with a particular view and thought the facts which supported this view worth preserving" (12). Carr also argues that history is not a fixed entity; it is a continuous process of interpretation and interaction between historians and

the facts they use. He calls it “something still incomplete and in process of becoming—something in the future towards which we move... and, as we move forward, we gradually shape the interpretation of the past” (161). The nature of “history” and the goal of historians is to take past events and order them in a coherent structure and consign upon them significance for the sake of understanding so that they are in accordance with the contemporary cultural identity. There can be no perfect knowledge of events in their totality—there can only be human understanding of those events. As judge Holden tells the members of his party, “Even in this world more things exist without our knowledge than with it and the order of creation is what you put there, like a string in maze, so that you shall not lose your way. For existence has its own order and that no man’s mind can compass, that mind itself being a fact among others” (BM 245). Truth, in the context of human understanding, comes more from the narrative and interpretation of events than the actual experiences themselves. Linda Townly Woodson, in the essay, *Leaving the Dark Night of the Lie: A Kristevan Reading of Cormac McCarthy’s Border Fiction*, agrees that meaning in history is more a product of those who write it rather than some intrinsic property. She argues that the brutalities of the West were, in many ways, glossed over or justified by many historians so that they could fit into a cause/effect system of logic that would support the underlying cultural theme of Manifest Destiny. This happened, she argues, because:

Humans can perceive the world only through patterns of thought inherent in the human brain, they can never know the world exactly as it is. Patterns such as cause/consequence may not exist in the outside world but function for the human to make sense of otherwise chaos. Humans call up stored images of experiences in various combinations based on the workings of the brain by what we call

“memory” and apply these combinations to the storing of new images. (Woodson 268)

For McCarthy, this idea problematizes the notion of absolute history because there is no longer one *true* history, but a collection of several competing versions. Human understanding is subjective and the same event can be interpreted in many different ways—it just depends on whose version of the “facts” you go by.

The character of Judge Holden is central to this discussion of history because he is a way for McCarthy to comment on the process of historical representation and to show how those who are in control over language are the ones in control of so-called objective facts—the building blocks of history. The judge and his actions throughout the course of the novel are an observation on how humans wittingly and unwittingly reinforce historical narratives based on selective gathering and interpretation of facts and thereby “create” history through language and the textualization of events. This is a central theme throughout the book, and the judge serves as its vehicle: those who control the past and its facts can impose their will on the future’s understanding of the past (*Liberty* 222). Thus, McCarthy, in his productive revision of the Western, creatively weaves in a message that serves as both a critique of the historical process and warning to those who take its infallibility for granted.

The judge, as an embodiment of post-structuralist epistemology, shows his power over the interpretation of facts and his skill at creating “history” many different times throughout the novel. In one particular example, he talks his way out of an altercation with a detachment of Mexican soldiers who have come to arrest one of the gang’s members. After speaking with the sergeant of the company for only a few minutes, the judge was able to convince him that nothing had happened. In fact, whatever the judge

said was so effective that not only did the army leave Glanton's gang of scalp hunters alone, but also the sergeant, of his own accord, saluted the man he had come to arrest. Because the judge has an unparalleled command of language and can easily influence people's interpretations of facts, for all intents and purposes he then controls those facts. Hence, he says to the men: "these facts – to the extent that they can be readily made to do so – should find a repository in the witness of some third party. Sergeant Aguilar is just such a party" (BM 85). In a sense, the sergeant, as a military commander, acts as a metaphor for those in authority who hold and transmit "official history." As a neutral party, he represents one of those who will pass along Glanton and Holden's deeds for later scholars to uncover. For the judge, it is imperative that the sergeant's story of this particular event is exactly what the judge wants it to be—if it is not, then the judge is no longer in control of the facts and no longer has the power to shape his history.

The judge is the personification of what Carr calls the "dead hand of vanished generations" because he has the ability to alter the facts of the present (or, more specifically, their interpretation) in order to propagate a certain history for the future (Carr 13). He has an idea of what he wants the history to be, so he "preserves" these facts selectively by giving them to the sergeant. This is why the judge says, "Men's memories are uncertain and the past that was differs very little from the past that was not" (BM 330). He knows that facts are subjective and that any one event can be interpreted a number of ways; it is just a matter of then convincing the right people—people in authority, like Sergeant Aguilar, who are the keepers of facts. Consequently, his wholly evil actions will either be forgotten (as he has destroyed anyone and anything that could

have stood witness against him) or be forgiven (by those historians who would rationalize what he has done in the name of Christianity, Manifest Destiny or scientific exploration).

Because he can recognize his role within the historical process, he is in a better place to dictate his own existence and influence future generations. Though we never learn how Holden gets the title of “judge,” the moniker is fitting. In the West—a land without law or order—he is the one that is defining and putting judgment on that which surrounds him. He is not like any of the other characters who passively react to the events that happen. Instead, he actively imposes his will on the objects, people and ideas around him; he bends and molds them to his own purposes. In one particularly revealing passage the judge explains to the gang his motives:

The man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear. Superstition will drag him down. The rain will erode the deeds of his life. But that man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone will have taken charge of the world and it is only by taking charge that he will effect to dictate the terms of his own fate. (BM 199)

This is the motivation for everything the judge does; he wants to become immortal and he believes that the way to do this is by taking charge of the world and “choosing” which thread of order (or historical narrative) to single out and then doing everything in his power to make sure everyone else follows this thread. In another passage he says, “Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent...Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth” (BM 198). The judge feels that an object existing independent of his knowledge and exists outside his thread of

order and somehow contradicts his philosophy. It is only through understanding something—or textualizing it—that he can own it and be in control of it.

As the judge goes West, ahead of civilization into the yet “unknown” frontier, he destroys without discretion, but he chooses what he copies and what he lets fade back into non-existence. By recording plants, fossils, artifacts and pictographs in his ledger and then destroying them, the judge’s reproductions become the only proof of the original artifacts’ existence (BM 141, 173). They become Jean Baudrillard’s simulacra; the reproduction replaces the original and becomes history (Moos 31). Thus the survival of the artifact in the memory of mankind is completely at the judge’s discretion. In this way, he becomes the narrator, dictator and “creator” of history. He doesn’t willfully change any aspect of the objects that he textualizes; instead he attempts to recreate them to the best of his ability. From the point of view of history, his representations are almost identical to the originals, but he has imprinted his presence on each of them, and, as a result, has achieved his desired immortality. At one point in the novel, the judge explains his mission to the gang while pointing at the vast landscape surrounding them: “This is my claim, he said. And yet everywhere upon it are autonomous pockets of life. Autonomous. In order for it to be mine nothing must be permitted to occur upon it save by my dispensation” (BM 199). The only way for the judge to ensure his interpretation of the facts prevails for the future is to simulate the artifacts in his ledger and destroy the originals. In this way the judge gains control of his story and ensures that no one else can create a competing interpretation. He has effectively become the suzerain of everything around him and everything that is to come after. He is like a puppeteer, with his “threads of order” for strings, dictating the future like a marionette.

Another clue as to McCarthy's understanding of history can be found in the book's epilogue. The short, cryptic parable tells of a lone, mysterious and promethean-like figure striking fires and making holes in the ground as he moves along the plain.

Following in his path are

the wanderers in search of bones and those that do not search and they move haltingly in the light like mechanisms whose movements are monitored with escapement and pallet so that they appear restrained by a prudence or reflectiveness that has no inner reality and they cross in their progress one by one that track of holes that runs to the rim of the visible ground and which seems less the pursuit of some continuance than the verification of a principle, a validation of a sequence and causality as if each round and perfect hole owed its existence to the one before it there on the prairie . . . He strikes fire in the hole and draws out his steel. Then they all move on again. (BM 337)

The epilogue serves as a self-reflexive inquiry into the process of creating history.

Literally, the epilogue tells the story of a hole digger and the mysterious group of people who follow. Metaphorically, it tells the story of those who participate in history and those who tell about it. This lone figure making holes seems to stand for those who moved west first and participated in events that we call the history of the West. Those who follow the digger ("the wanderers in search of bones") are the historians looking for facts and piecing together the events, or "holes", that make up the trail of the digger. The "searchers" go about their job with a false sense of objectivity, wrapped in an academic cloak of detachment so that they "appear restrained by a prudence or reflectiveness that has no inner reality." However, as Carr and Woodson argued, there is no absolute

history, only the interpretations of those who collect the facts and those who piece them together. Historians, even McCarthy himself, are forced to tell history through the linear channel of a narrative—of “sequence and causality.” This is why McCarthy says that these “wanderers in search of bones,” or historians, are not really looking for continuance of events in the way that they actually occur—that is impossible. What they are trying to do instead is to mold these events to a “verification of a principle” and impose thematic order on the universe. McCarthy, as a historian, is both participant and commentator on this process.

The differing “old” and “new West” movements are an example of the unfixed, malleable nature of “history.” Though the movements are based more or less on the same “facts,” the story they tell is completely different. One tells a story of a nation going west to fulfill its Manifest Destiny while the other tells a story of brutal imperialism and a legacy of conquest. The stories of the West—the old and the new—are reflective of their respective cultural values. Both the “old West” and the “new West” movements have different narratives of the history of the West that correspond to their respective ideals, values and goals for the future (Slotkin 655). Historians, like the judge, build narratives (or, in their more basic form, myths) that correspond to their society’s vision of the future and these narratives are called ‘history.’

Conclusion: Pulling Back the Silver Screen

In conclusion, *Blood Meridian* is a unique piece of Western literature. It simultaneously critiques and utilizes aspects from both the “old” and the “new West”. In response to what he felt to be the evening of one movement and the beginning rise of another, McCarthy has created a novel that takes positive features from both factions and combines them to stand as a new historical narrative for a new cultural era. It is an example of what Richard Slotkin calls a productive revision of myth because it uses the traditional, myth-like formula of the classic Western dime novel but inserts a history more closely related to the contemporary, politically correct “new West” movement. He has created a book with factual historical events and characters within a mythological setting.

But *Blood Meridian* is much more than a piece of literature. It is a book that blurs the lines between the two West movements as a way to make a larger comment about the nature of history itself. David Holloway calls it a book “that is more about a crisis in writing and thinking historically than it is a historical novel as such. It is axiomatic that if historical “memory” in a sense fails the writer in *Blood Meridian*, then this is because of the historylessness of the historical moment in which he writes the history” (*Late Modernism* 97). *Blood Meridian* is not simply a Western, nor is it an anti-western. It stands as a “kind of straining on the limits of contemporary aesthetic practice, a pushing against the barriers of the mode of intellectual production in which McCarthy finds himself situated” (“Ideology” 191). The Western, as a genre, only serves as a relevant stage or setting for McCarthy’s larger discussion of history because, within the spheres of

academia and pop culture, the West is an area of history that is currently being deconstructed and re-interpreted to fit a new American cultural identity.

It is as if the American public is presently in a movie theater watching their cultural narrative as a metaphorical Western double feature. They are currently at the intermission, having just finished watching some “old West” film (like *Shane* or *Hondo*,) and are just about to sit down again to start watching the latest “new West” film (probably something like *Dances with Wolves* or *Brokeback Mountain*.) McCarthy is taking the opportunity, while the lights are on and the projector is off, to pull back the silver screen of America’s Western history to show the audience that what they are watching is not “real”; it is only a two dimensional simulation—a story being told to them to reinforce a sense of cultural identity and for the sake of entertainment. But McCarthy is not trying to ruin the magic of the next film, nor is he trying change or even judge the historical process. There is no ulterior motive to this action other than pointing it out with an air of informed apathy. He knows that as soon as the lights start to dim and the opening credits begin to roll, the audience become so absorbed in this story that everything else—including what he has just revealed—will fall away from their collective conscious as if a previous night’s dream. Everything that came before the current movie will be forgotten because the “wanderers in search of bones” have traced a new line between the digger’s holes; there is a new cultural narrative to follow. It is no coincidence then that the last six words in *Blood Meridian* read as follows: “Then they all move on again.”

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