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ARTICLE

Cormac McCarthy's Racial Fictions: Race in *Blood Meridian*'s Colonial Imagination

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Abstract

Situated within contemporary studies of Cormac McCarthy's work, this article argues that existing discourse around Cormac McCarthy's novel *Blood Meridian* suffers from a lack of critical engagement with the novel's racial and colonial politics. Using racial capitalism as a framework, the article posits that McCarthy's novel can be read not only as a story *about* American storytelling traditions, but how these traditions are themselves contingent on the reproduction and reification of white supremacy. This rereading of *Blood Meridian* additionally takes into account how the novel's narrativization of white supremacy and settler colonialism manifests in both the novel's form and content, arguing that the novel stages encounters with blackness and Indigeneity to mimic the mechanisms through which white supremacy was (violently) produced.

Keywords: Settler colonialism; racial capitalism; Cormac McCarthy; *Blood Meridian*; race

Reading much of the discourse around *Blood Meridian*, one could easily be forgiven for thinking that the novel has little to do with race. When the novel was first published in 1985, critic Caryn James avoided any mention of race, citing the novel's "witnessing of the ugly reality of American history" as one of the primary reasons it was, if not a *great* text, then certainly a "spectacular failure."[1] Decades later, in his introduction to the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of the novel, critic Harold Bloom similarly hailed the work as the "quintessential Western, not to be surpassed,"[2] particularly in its transformations of a violent

[1] Caryn James, "Is Everybody Dead around Here?" *New York Times*, April 28, 1985, archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/05/17/specials/mccarthy-blood.html.

[2] Harold Bloom, "Harold Bloom on Cormac McCarthy, True Heir to Melville and Faulkner," *Literary Hub*, October 16, 2019, lithub.com/harold-bloom-on-cormac-mccarthy-true-heir-to-melville-and-faulkner/.

landscape—and history—into "terrifying art, an art comparable to Melville's and to Faulkner's."[3]

For these critics, *Blood Meridian* is a renarrativization of dominant tropes in the western genre: its fixation on violence marks it as an "anti-Western Western" that reveals the violence of Manifest Destiny.[4] Narratively, the text follows the life of its unnamed white male protagonist, introduced only as "the kid," as he joins a renegade militia that commits horrific acts of genocide across the Southwest during the Mexican-American War. McCarthy narrates these acts explicitly, describing at length the scalpings, murders, and rape that the militia enacts, but also does so without commenting on the morality of this violence; as critic Mark Eaton claims, "McCarthy appears neither to condone nor condemn the horrific action he describes, refusing to editorialize or explain away the violence."[5] The text—even though it is fiction—presents a record of the *what* of Manifest Destiny, avoiding the *how* and *why*.

Several contemporary scholars have additionally argued that McCarthy's writing style is inherently "anti-hierarchical," suggesting that *Blood Meridian* possesses a fundamentally democratic ethos that manifests via narrative form, particularly in McCarthy's use of syntax. Phillip and Delys Snyder describe this syntax as McCarthy's "unmarked style," where McCarthy "lists noun-phrases, prepositional phrases, and even main clauses without imposing hierarchical relationships among them."[6] This form, Snyder and Snyder further argue, is not only value-neutral but almost *egalitarian* in its ethos: "His minimal use of punctuation, especially the lack of quotation marks to set dialogue apart from narrative, also adds to this leveling effect."[7] McCarthy merely dictates the events that occur; he refuses to establish hierarchies between clauses and, more broadly, between individuals.

To take these critics at face value is to read *Blood Meridian* as a novel that—in its open, unflinching descriptions of settler colonial violence—stages a potential criticism of settler colonial logic by rejecting the notion that Manifest Destiny could have been morally justified. Few deny that the book is difficult to read, due in no small part to its graphic descriptions (James and Bloom both admit this much),[8] but its difficulty, critics argue, acts in service of a greater philosophical inquiry into not only American history but the darker elements of human nature itself,[9] such as the willingness to commit wholesale acts of genocide in service of the acquisition of land and the construction of a national identity. Oddly enough, however, almost no critic links this criticism to race—a feature of both *Blood*

[3] Bloom, "Harold Bloom on Cormac McCarthy, True Heir to Melville and Faulkner."

[4] Mark A. Eaton, "Dis(Re)Membered Bodies: Cormac McCarthy's Border Fiction," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 49.1 (2003): 155–80, https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2003.0003.

[5] Eaton, "Dis(Re)Membered Bodies."

[6] Phillip A. Snyder and Delys W. Snyder, "Modernism, Postmodernism, and Language: McCarthy's Style," *Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Steven Frye (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013, 34.

[7] Snyder and Snyder, "Modernism, Postmodernism, and Language," 34.

[8] Bloom, for his part, claims it took him three attempts to finish reading *Blood Meridian.*

[9] Steven Frye, ed., *Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the American West* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 7–8.

Meridian and Manifest Destiny that is so flagrantly obvious that its omission was immediately apparent.

In other words, to read *Blood Meridian* without addressing its figurations of race is to commit two vital interpretive errors. The first is to imagine a version of the text where race is only ancillary at best, and therefore wholly separate from questions of narrative form. The second error, which results from the first, is to fail to recognize how such figurations of the text as largely nonracial contribute to the text's afterlives in other literary and artistic works that reinforce an ideology of settler colonialism. Both of these errors reflect a broader critical practice that consistently understates the importance of race for the creation of any text—not only in terms of its narrative content but also specifically narrative *form* (i.e., spacetime) in texts like *Blood Meridian.*

Race is, in other words, central to any understanding of *Blood Meridian.* Not only does the text repeatedly fabricate racial hierarchies in both its form and narrative content, but these fabrications complicate any effort to read the text as race neutral. Through its syntactic subordination of racial otherness and narrative framing of spacetime, the text portrays western frontier settlement as an inherently *racial* project and subsequently demonstrates the extent to which racial capitalism inherently colors the West's formal constructions of space and time.

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Despite these latent critical assumptions that might suggest otherwise, race—or, more specifically, whiteness—permeates the literary and symbolic landscape of *Blood Meridian.* In its most obvious figurations of race, *Blood Meridian* presents a vision of the fabrication of whiteness focalized through Judge Holden, who quite literally embodies whiteness as an omnipresent force that transcends space and time:

> None could take their eyes from the judge who had disrobed last of all ... He shone like the moon so pale he was and not a hair to be seen anywhere upon that vast corpus, not in any crevice nor in the great bores of his nose and not upon his chest nor in his ears nor any tuft at all above his eyes nor to the lids thereof.[10]

In this scene, the judge has entered a public bath to cleanse himself following a scalping raid; the first immediately visible feature is that his body "[shined] like the moon so pale"—his paleness figures centrally to the description of his body.

Even though *Blood Meridian*'s language verges into high lyric diction as it compares the judge's "paleness" to the moon, however, the text does not describe the judge's body as beautiful. Immediately following this simile, the sentence moves into an extended description of the judge's almost unnatural hairlessness, itemizing the various parts of the judge's "vast corpus." Here, the narrative gaze fixates on parts of the body—even orifices—whose innards are

[10] Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 174–75.

rarely visible to even more intimate observers. These, the text suggests, are a feature of the judge's monstrosity and grotesqueness: "[His] eyes slightly crinkled, as if he were smiling under the water like some pale and bloated manatee."[11]

Beyond the unnatural and the grotesque, however, the judge's hairlessness—coupled with the fact that he is, quite literally, submerged in water—also evokes imagery often associated with birth and pregnancy, a motif which McCarthy furthers later when he compares the judge to an "enormous infant."[12] Not only does McCarthy describe him here as pale and hairless like a baby, but the judge is also surrounded by water, not unlike a baby submerged in amniotic fluid. Moreover, the context for the judge's entrance to the bath is inseparable from the broader anti-Indigenous violence that haunts this scene: he arrives at the bath following a scalping raid. Given this context, one powerful implication that the text leaves us with here is that the birth of whiteness itself is not only grotesque and unnatural, but inseparable from literal settler colonial violence. The judge enters the bath, after all, to cleanse himself of the blood of the Indigenous people he has killed.

This notion of whiteness and (or even whiteness-as-) constant rebirth recurs constantly throughout *Blood Meridian*,[13] particularly as the text characterizes the judge as a figure who is not beholden to conventional laws of space and time. The most prominent feature of his separation from linear time is agelessness: in the novel's final scene, McCarthy describes the judge as he dances on a table in a bar; his body, here, appears not to have changed in the years that have passed: "Towering over them all is the judge and he is naked dancing ... huge and pale and hairless, like an enormous infant. He never sleeps, he says. He says he'll never die."[14] Whereas the kid—now described as a "man"—has aged in the time that has passed since the end of the preceding chapter (the final chapter is set several decades after the previous chapter's events conclude), the judge's body remains the same: we again see him as "huge and pale and hairless," and the addition of the simile that he is "like an enormous infant" emphasizes his agelessness.[15] This is the same judge as the one we encountered several chapters, pages, and decades before; he has remained unchanged even as time has passed.

[11] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West*, 175.

[12] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West*, 348.

[13] Here, I also want to point to two additional contextual sources. First, legal scholar Cheryl I. Harris's 1993 *Harvard Law Review* article "Whiteness as Property" argues that parallel systems of domination employed by white settlers to subjugate Black Americans and Indigenous people transformed whiteness from a purely racial construct to one that was materially constituted via property relations. Following the establishment of chattel slavery and of the US-as-settler-colony, Harris writes, legal regimes emerged that codified whiteness as a material form of property. Then, in his monograph *Unworthy Republic*, historian Claudio Saunt further links this notion of whiteness as property relation to the financial mechanisms underwriting Indigenous dispossession and forced removal, particularly land speculation on the potential crop value of Indigenous territories that would be transformed into plantations.

[14] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West*, 348.

[15] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West*, 348.

Most contemporary readings of the judge as a figure interpret these features—agelessness, separation from space and time—as an indication of his status as a supernatural figure. In one widely cited article, for instance, McCarthy scholar Leo Daugherty compares the judge to the demonic figure of the archon in gnosticism; others, such as Brian Edwards and Dana Phillips, are inclined to view the judge as a pastiche of literary tropes and characters—and the novel itself as an extended engagement with literary mythologizations of America—echoing McCarthy's original assertion that books are "made out of books." To his credit, Edwards's reading focalizes the central role that race plays in such mythologizations: blackness, he writes, "marks the desert landscape as a place of threat, savagery, and death."[16] The judge, as a character in this landscape, is therefore also a *raced* figure.

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These figurations of race provide a lens through which *Blood Meridian* reads the history of the West as one of settler colonial conquest.[17] Through the judge, *Blood Meridian* casts whiteness as an ideology whose existence can only be entrenched through settler colonial violence, most prominently via the judge's meditations on epistemology and the production of historical knowledge. As scholars Budd L. Hall and Rajesh Tandon elaborate, a central foundation for the establishment of hegemonic whiteness is the destruction of existing, Indigenous forms of knowledge through a process they term *epistemicide*,[18] which occurs as a consequence of violent land dispossession.[19] Though *Blood Meridian* was written before "epistemicide" was officially coined, the text demonstrates a deep awareness of the violence that underwrites not only history itself, but the creation of a historical archive. In one scene, we can read the judge's meditations on history and knowledge as a genocidal justification for an epistemology premised on domination:

[16] Brian Edwards, "History, Fiction and Mythopoesis: The Power of Blackness in Cormac Mccarthy's 'Blood Meridian,'" *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 20.1 (2001): 31–40, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41053840.

[17] Such readings square directly with contemporary discourses around the formation of the West and of modern racial hierarchies. In *Race and America's Long War*, for instance, historian Nikhil Pal Singh argues that race-making in the US West is inseparable from the project of westward settlement, which demanded the fabrication of distinctions between "friend" and "enemy." Historian Nancy Shoemaker provides more complex reading that locates the agency of Indigenous tribes such as the Cherokee within narratives of racial formation, arguing that the category "red" emerged not only as a white settler imposition but also as a means for various Indigenous tribes to delineate their newfound positionality upon first contact with white settlers.

[18] Within postcolonial studies, "epistemicide" as a violence is also closely linked to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of "epistemic violence." In her 1988 essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?," Spivak describes epistemic violence as a "remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other" — a project that involves not only the enforcement of certain regimes of knowledge, but the violent enshrinement of certain *ways* of knowing as inherently superior to others.

[19] Budd L. Hall and Rajesh Tandon, "Decolonization Of Knowledge, Epistemicide, Participatory Research and Higher Education," *Research for All* (2017): 6–19.

> He looked about at the dark forest in which they were bivouacked. He nodded toward the specimens he'd collected. These anonymous creatures, he said, may seem little or nothing in the world. Yet the smallest crumb can devour us. Any smallest thing beneath yon rock out of men's knowing. Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth.[20]

The end goal of the judge's knowledge-seeking is domination—to become, in his words, "properly suzerain of the earth."[21] In order to accomplish this task, he collects specimens of "anonymous creatures" and catalogs them in a ledger; more often than not—as is the case, for instance, with several small birds he encounters—he kills these creatures. Yet the judge himself never acts as if his reasons for producing knowledge are humane or nonviolent: "Whatever exists, he said. Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent."[22] Crucially, he recognizes that he not only inflicts violence against the landscape but creates a system of knowledge and archiving history that demands destruction. Anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot offers a framework that further elucidates the colonial nature of the judge's methods in *Silencing the Past*, noting that silences—or, in this case, erasures—enter the historical record at four critical junctures, including the creation of a historical archive, or "moments of fact creation."[23]

Employing Trouillot's framework, we can read the judge's monologue in *Blood Meridian* as reflecting a mode of knowledge production that deliberately creates silences throughout the archive of history. First, the moments of fact creation—the making of sources—are almost always violent: the judge not only destroys countless flora and fauna,[24] but also the *individuals* (natives and, eventually, even the members of his gang) who might be able to present an alternative record of history.[25] Because of these systematic erasures in the moment of fact creation, the judge can therefore monopolize the historical narrative itself.

This hegemony, as scholar Gardner Seawright further elaborates, epitomizes a settler colonial tradition of knowing and being, cultivating a relationship to the places where history occurs that invariably centralizes the white male settler

[20] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West*, 207.

[21] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West*, 207.

[22] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West*, 207.

[23] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (United Kingdom: Beacon Press, 1995), 26.

[24] Certain anticolonial authors such as Professor and Potowatomi Nation Citizen Robin Wall Kimmerer might even argue that these living creatures constitute a source of knowledge in and of themselves; they are not merely objects to be studied, but subjects capable of agency and knowledge production.

[25] Several scholars have also speculated that the judge's desire to monopolize history also provides a source of motivation for his systematic murder of all remaining members in the Glanton gang; the novel concludes with his murder of the kid.

actor.[26] In *Blood Meridian*, the judge's knowledge production is not only deeply violent—he does, after all, kill many of the creatures he seeks to catalog—but explicitly exists *in service of* the settler colonial project. The judge's project can thus be read as one of rewriting the landscape and its requisite history altogether; to enshrine himself as the unassailable deity of a violent landscape.

Returning to Edwards's argument, here it becomes a necessary want to expand on the implicit claim that spacetime merely exists to help characterize whiteness via negation (i.e., the judge is "white"; spacetime and the landscape are "Black"): what is equally important in my reading is the *relationship* between the judge and the temporalities he inhabits. As evidenced by the judge's meditations on history, the violence that the judge and his followers inflict on the landscape is not "senseless," as critics such as Bloom are inclined to argue, or divested of any higher symbolic meaning, as Phillips writes, but an integral component of the settler colonial project.

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Blood Meridian, however, does not appear invested merely in documenting the anti-Indigenous violence that underwrites the production of whiteness and the subsequent whiteness of the historical record: whiteness, *Blood Meridian* suggests, is a vital component of the American project of nation-making. Here, the figure of Captain White emerges as one of the text's most powerful symbols for the creation of white supremacist nationalism. Critic Timothy Parrish specifically reads the narrative trajectory of Captain White, a US soldier who leads several scalping raids, as a harsh criticism of the "American arrogance that the land was ours before we were the land's";[27] his eventual death at the hands of the Comanche reflects the failures of such arrogance.

Despite what his early death in the narrative may suggest, however, White is not merely an auxiliary character. When we first encounter Captain White, he is pontificating at length about the enduring need for westward expansion—even if such expansion is not directly sanctioned by the treaties that have been signed by the US government:

> I don't think you're the sort of chap to abandon a land that Americans fought and died for to a foreign power. And mark my word. Unless Americans act, people like you and me who take their country seriously while those molly-coddles in Washington sit on their hind sides, unless we act, Mexico—and I mean the whole of the country—will one day fly a European flag. Monroe Doctrine or no.[28]

[26] Gardner Seawright, "Settler Traditions of Place: Making Explicit the Epistemological Legacy of White Supremacy and Settler Colonialism for Place-Based Education," *Educational Studies* 50.6 (2014): 554–72, doi: 10.1080/00131946.2014.965938.

[27] Timothy Parrish, "History and the Problem of Evil in McCarthy's Western Novels," in *Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, 69.

[28] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West*, 37.

White's monologue here is noteworthy for several reasons. First, the monologue marks a set of racial hierarchies that elucidate the workings of race in the frontier. Elsewhere, White characterizes Mexicans as "a race of degenerates … a people manifestly incapable of governing themselves."[29] The persistence of Indigenous raids on the territories that the Spanish have since claimed as "theirs" signals, for him, the failures of Spanish colonial governance. But Mexicans, in White's imagination, also occupy a particular liminal space between full white settlerhood and a more debased indigeneity. Referencing "enlightened Mexicans" who see the benefits of a colonial government that can combat the Indigenous tribes attempting to repossess their land, White further positions Mexicanness as tied to a fundamental idea of *governability*: Mexicans are racial subjects who can be assimilated *into* the United States and its political structures,[30] but are also inherently subordinated in White's imagination as a "race of degenerates."[31]

Beyond the racial hierarchies White's monologue delineates, however, *Blood Meridian* also situates the creation of these hierarchies within the broader context of settler colonialism. For White, the project of settler colonialism is one of preserving national identity: "unless we act, Mexico—and I mean the whole of the country—will one day fly a European flag."[32] The framing, here, suggests that the United States' colonial project is *defensive*, and that Europe, rather than the United States, is the aggressor. By this logic, any acts of conquest are justified in the name of preserving the United States' national character.

Blood Meridian then explicitly retraces the formation of these ideologies to racial capitalism: Captain White offers the kid a "section of land … A land rich in minerals, in gold and silver I would say beyond the wildest speculation" in exchange for his participation in the scalping raids, in addition to the financial compensation each soldier receives for each scalp taken.[33] As he describes the underpinnings of what appears, outwardly, to be a racially motivated source of violence, the text leaves ample evidence for the reader that the gang's outwardly imposed ideas of racial otherness are neither coherent nor stable. Glanton's gang eventually takes Mexican scalps and passes them off for Indigenous ones; as the aforementioned passage indicates, one of the primary motivations for this violent westward migration—particularly for characters like the kid—is the desire to seek land and profit, both of which are sources of capital accumulation. What emerges from this fluidity of racial otherness is, again, a vision of white power dominance where the pursuit of capital by white settlers molds the fabrication of race on the western frontier.

[29] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West*, 36.

[30] As White's monologue itself demonstrates, this *assimilability* also achieves coherence via negation—the *un*assimilable subject, for him, is always native and remains unassimilable by virtue of their nativeness. The territorial expansion of the United States is, after all, a genocidal project that demands Indigenous erasure, and *Blood Meridian* acknowledges this explicitly through Captain White.

[31] Claire F. Fox's *The Fence and the River* provides a deeper analysis of how these racial politics reflect dominant racial attitudes both in the 1850s, when the novel is set, and the 1980s, when the novel was published.

[32] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West*, 37.

[33] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West*, 37.

But besides Parrish, who himself merely asserts that White is a kind of racial parody, few critics take the fabrication of whiteness to be a central component of *Blood Meridian*, much less a feature of racial capitalism; nor do they understand the production of whiteness and race (e.g., Mexicanness) in *Blood Meridian* to be coterminous processes. Captain White implicitly fabricates a version of whiteness even as he explicitly defines "Mexican" identity; the aforementioned judge is a literal construction of whiteness that simultaneously delineates a relationship to space and time. Whiteness, in *Blood Meridian*, is inescapable, even if only a small number of critics have acknowledged its presence—let alone its centrality—in the text.

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Yet *Blood Meridian*'s investigation of race extends beyond its mythologization of whiteness as a construct created via anti-Indigenous and anti-Mexican violence; what complicates any attempt to investigate the role of race in *Blood Meridian* are its descriptions of racial otherness—and its characterization of otherwise-subjugated racial others who are simultaneously complicit in settler colonial acts. Perhaps the most prominent example of this tension arises in the novel's descriptions of the character John Jackson, where the text's explicitly anti-Black language often borders on quasi-eugenicist rhetoric:

> In the company there rode two men named Jackson, one black, one white, both forenamed John. Bad blood lay between them and as they rode up under the barren mountains the white man would fall back alongside the other and take his shadow for the shade that was in it and whisper to him. The black would check or start his horse to shake him off. As if the white man were in violation of his person, had stumbled onto some ritual dormant in his dark blood or his dark soul.[34]

Even as the passage itself provides a seemingly detached account of a white man provoking a Black man to violence, its language belies a subjectivity that is anything but race neutral. The descriptions, here, are especially telling: the white Jackson is described three times as "the white man"; the Black Jackson, however, is only ever called "the black" even after he has been introduced by name. The narrator refuses to acknowledge the Black John Jackson's personhood, while simultaneously emphasizing the white Jackson's whiteness, masculinity, and humanity. The anti-blackness then emerges even more explicitly several sentences later, where the narrator explicitly uses the phrases "dark blood" and "dark soul" to describe the Black Jackson's interiority, parroting anti-Black, eugenicist language to underscore the Black John Jackson's apparent inhumanity.

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Blood Meridian's depiction of settler colonialism verges further into potentially problematic territory in its descriptions of indigeneity. Here, locating any sort of

[34] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West*, 85.

nuance or complexity in the text is far more difficult; the language seems flagrantly, uncritically eugenicist. In one scene, the novel's narrator dehumanizes an Indigenous character entirely:

> The judge sat with the Apache boy before the fire and it watched everything with dark berry eyes and some of the men played with it and made it laugh and they gave it jerky and it sat chewing and watching gravely the figures that passed above it. They covered it with a blanket and in the morning the judge was dandling it on one knee while the men saddled their horses.[35]

The narrator's consistent use of "it" to describe the native Apache boy reflects an inherently problematic racial politics that refuses to acknowledge indigeneity as human. The boy—who is described explicitly as "Apache," a racial marker that delineates his indigeneity—is referred to using a pronoun often reserved only for objects even after he is introduced as a human being, even though *Blood Meridian* refers elsewhere to non-Indigenous children using personal pronouns.[36] To call only the Indigenous boy "it" is to reject not only his agency and subjectivity, but to deny his very humanity. In doing so, the narrator thus reproduces the dehumanizing logic of Manifest Destiny that constructs indigeneity as subhuman and therefore deserving of colonial violence.

Such incidents occur repeatedly in *Blood Meridian.* Elsewhere, the narrator describes various Indigenous tribespeople as a "horde" and "savages"; he also repeatedly uses the n-word to refer to the novel's Black characters. The language, in those passages, consequently presents the Indigenous tribespeople as a force of mindless, shapeless destruction rather than a group whose violence is only made necessary by the presence of settlers who are threatening them with genocide. And even after a group of Delawares joins the Glanton gang, they are only referred to in the plural as "the Delawares." Thus, while the novel's white characters carry personal names, the Delawares are referred to only under an ethnonym: in the process, their indigeneity is totalized and, more broadly, instrumentalized as a projection of white fears of racial otherness. Those who enter the Glanton gang and its genocidal project of racial capitalism do so not as individual unraced or even *nameable* selves but rather as stand-ins for an entire race that is repeatedly described as *in-* and *sub*human.

Despite its (often surprisingly) nuanced portrait of race in the American frontier, then, the language in *Blood Meridian* ultimately proves to be anything *but* racially egalitarian in its ethos. *Blood Meridian* undeniably toys with the fabrication of social roles; labels such as "the kid" and "the judge" and, with another character, "the ex-priest" mark individuals as possessing certain social roles, but the text's racial others are almost uniformly referred to in terms of their racial identity—as "the Black John Jackson," in one instance, and "the

[35] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West*, 170.

[36] When introducing the novel's protagonist, for instance, McCarthy consistently uses he/him pronouns even though he routinely refers to him as "the Child."

Mexican McGill"[37]—as if to suggest that the social role these characters perform can *only* be defined through the particular lens of race. Yet its racial others are undeniably subordinated within the larger matrix of violence that the West produces, but they are not *just* collapsible into some vague category of "otherness." Each character is also complicit in the fabrication of violence against racial others, even as they are subjected to oppression by virtue of their otherness: the Black John Jackson, for instance, participates in various scalping raids, as does the Mexican McGill, even though both are constructed as subordinated racial others.

In light of this engagement with questions of the complicity of racial others, *Blood Meridian*'s portrait of the fabrication of race grows more complicated. One potential reading is that all racial Others—the Mexican McGill, the Black John Jackson—are portrayed as equally guilty of settler colonial violence as their white counterparts; in this reading, racial others become mere instruments of settler colonialism, thereby lending its violence a universal justification. Yet this reading also feels too simplistic, too reductive for a text whose racial politics are often more complex than one might expect: if this were the case, then why would the text dedicate so much time and space to describing the acts of anti-Black violence that occur concurrently with Indigenous genocide?

More generously, perhaps, is the reading that the text here reflects the real-world processes through which racial otherness is coopted to reproduce settler colonial violence. Rather than insisting that all parties are equally guilty, *Blood Meridian*, in this reading, creates a vision of the frontier defined instead by the instrumentalization of race in service of producing systems of domination. To survive in these systems, racial Others must participate in such violence—the alternative for the Delawares, McGill/Miguel, and John Jackson, all of whom join the Glanton gang is death under a system whose existence is predicated on the exploitation and destruction of racial otherness.

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Whiteness and its concurrent fabrications of racial otherness manifest not only in the text's content and syntax, however, but also in its narrative constructions of space and time. Here, the important observation to make is not to distinguish between "form" and "content," but rather to suggest that the fabrications of racial hierarchies that surface within the plot itself (e.g., through the genocidal acts and racist rhetoric of its characters) also emerge in the particular language the text itself uses to describe land.

The text's racial imagination becomes explicitly colonial when describing the landscape itself. In one of the text's opening passages, the narrator delineates an overtly antagonistic relationship between (white) man and (nonwhite)

[37] McGill as a character is particularly fascinating—his name is a bastardization of "Miguel," but even though the text includes grammatically complete and coherent representations of Spanish language and speech, it chooses, with McGill, to use the bastardization the gang employs to refer to this racial Other.

landscape—an antagonism whose logic implicitly justifies the violent conquest of Manifest Destiny:

> Only now is the child divested of all that he has been. His origins are become remote as is his destiny and not again in all the world's turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay.[38]

Here, there is no room for a mutualistic relationship with nature; either the "stuff of creation will be shaped to man's will or … his own heart is … another kind of clay." Furthermore, in describing the violent (and, in *Blood Meridian*, inevitable) processes of colonization, the narrator racializes the landscape as Indigenous, describing it as "barbarous." As the *Oxford English Dictionary* explains, the word *barbarous* carries inherently anti-Indigenous connotations: "barbarous" originally signified language that was "not Greek," and then eventually not Greek *or* Latin, denoting a people who were "unpolished."[39] Not only did "barbarous" inherently draw a line between self and other, then, but also implicitly categorized the "selves" as somehow superior to the non-Greek others. Such logic already provides justification for a kind of colonizing, "civilizing" mission.

In the United States, these connections between colonialism and "barbary" are rendered even more explicitly, as the word *barbarous* has often been explicitly associated with justifications for Indigenous genocide: writing in the late nineteenth century about the need to "Americanize" the Native Americans, Tennessee Congressman J. D. C. Atkins asserted that "[the natives'] *barbarous* dialect should be blotted out and the English language substituted [italics my own]."[40] The narrator may not, admittedly, intend for the reader to make such connections—*barbarous* could very well be an arbitrary word—but the parallels are there. More problematically, the assertion that the landscape is "wild and barbarous" assumes that the landscape is either uninhabited (which is categorically false given the novel's own acknowledgment of the Indigenous tribes that live there) or, alternatively, that the people who inhabit the landscape are subhuman, merely a feature of the "threatening" landscape. What the text thus stages is a conflict not only between man and landscape, but whiteness and indigeneity: either whiteness will *conquer* the Indigenous landscape or find itself subsumed *into* it.

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One potential counter-reading to these outwardly problematic tropes is that *Blood Meridian* is writing against a politics of objectivity: even the narrator—who,

[38] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West*, 4–5.

[39] "Barbarous, adj." *Oxford English Dictionary*, December 2021.

[40] J. D. C. Atkins, "The English Language in American Schools," *Americanizing the American Indians: Writings by the "Friends of the Indian" 1880–1900*, ed. Francis Paul Prucha (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978).

by all other accounts, is a non-actor in the historical events of the novel—participates in racial violence, simply by writing a history of the West. Critic Dana Phillips offers another perspective on this framing, toying with McCarthy's own assertion that "the ugly fact is that books are made out of books." In Phillips's reading, *Blood Meridian* narrates a kind of tension in the act of making history: "For McCarthy, the history of the West is natural history. This is a history of forces, and the processes by which these forces evolve into the forms to which we give names are not our own."[41] The narrator, in this reading, must confront natural destruction and even racial violence—which, in Phillips's interpretation, is a natural-historical force that will outlive and outlast any individual being.

To expand on Phillips's reading, race then becomes an *a priori* fact of frontier settlement; in other words, the birth of the frontier in *Blood Meridian* is the birth of race and racial violence. Some critics might object to this as an overly generous reading of *Blood Meridian*'s apparently racist narrator; certainly, there must be ways of writing about the West without reproducing such racially charged language. But the particular set of characters—and the particular history—that *Blood Meridian* interrogates is one that confronts the wholesale genocide underwriting the production of American history (and, by extension, American literary history) while simultaneously acknowledging the narrator's complicity in these acts. *Blood Meridian*, in other words, demonstrates that any history of frontier settlement is *inevitably* a history of racial violence and that it is arrogant, perhaps, to assume that one can separate themselves entirely from this history. Even the narrator, here, becomes not a detached observer of an objective history but an individual telling a *subjective* story about that history: one that reveals and investigates the violence that underpins the production of whiteness in the American frontier.

Returning to the earlier passage describing John Jackson, even Jackson himself is not merely defined by his racial subjugation. Not only does he eventually murder the white John Jackson who "[took] his shadow for the shade that was in it," but he also remains a member of the Glanton gang and participates in their scalping raids; he, too, is complicit in the acts of racial and settler colonial violence that the gang perpetuates against the Indigenous people of the West. Here, again, *Blood Meridian* offers a surprisingly nuanced, complicated portrait of race in the American West. As historian Quintard Taylor elaborates in *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528–1990*, the historical role played by African Americans in the settlement of the American West troubles the overly simplistic Black/white binary that often arises in historical analyses of the American South:

> What does it mean, for example, when we assess the role of African American soldiers on the frontier that they protected as an emerging political order inimical to the interests of western Native Americans, who throughout the post–Civil War decades fought to defend their families,

[41] Dana Phillips, "History and the Ugly Facts of Cormac McCarthy's Blood Meridian," *American Literature* 68.2 (1996): 433–60, https://doi.org/10.2307/2928305.

> homes, and way of life? … How does one reconcile the dedication of African American soldiers who risked their lives to defend lands that would soon be populated by settlers determined to deny other blacks the similar opportunity to settle and prosper?[42]

In *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy takes these questions to a certain logical extreme: How are we to evaluate the role that John Jackson plays via his participation in certain acts of anti-Indigenous violence? At no point does the text insinuate that the gang operates under any pretenses of racial equality: the white John Jackson is not the *only* individual who demonstrates any racism toward John Jackson. Yet Jackson—despite being given multiple opportunities and, in some cases, veiled warnings to leave the gang—not only chooses to stay with the Glanton gang but continues to participate in acts of violence.

The portrait of race that *Blood Meridian* thus moves beyond a simple Black/white binary; rather than insisting that one's subjugation renders them incapable of causing harm, McCarthy's characterization of John Jackson complicates the racial hierarchies that are produced in the American West. As Taylor himself might have observed, Jackson himself is not a settler in the strictest sense of the word. Nonetheless, he repeatedly risks his life to conquer "lands that would soon be populated by settlers determined to deny other blacks the similar opportunity to settle and prosper."[43] Even as a nonsettler, he remains implicated in the matrices of settler colonial violence.

Here, again, we return to the text's complicated instrumentalization of racial otherness: the presence of the Black John Jackson in the text's discourse troubles the text's otherwise nuanced portrait of the fabrication of whiteness. Jackson is the only named Black character in the entire text; although the text repeatedly calls attention to his blackness, it does little to trouble the assumption that his race is nothing more than a phenotypic, biological feature (as opposed to a part of his appearance that only becomes significant *because of* settler colonialism). In the process, Jackson risks becoming a prosthesis for the justification of a kind of settler colonial ideology wherein Black violence becomes an inherent part of settler colonialism rather than a signal of how settler colonialism itself demands the cooptation of racial otherness to survive. Read generously, this instrumentalization reflects, again, the narrator's own investment in settler colonial violence; the story no longer passively describes racial hierarchies but instead takes an active investment in their reproduction.

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Almost no McCarthy critic takes the racial politics espoused by *Blood Meridian*'s narrator at face value, but few, if any, have engaged with the overtly racist language that the narrator used to fabricate racial hierarchies in both character and landscape. By contrast, popular discourse around McCarthy

[42] Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West 1528–1990* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 9.

[43] Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 9.

frequently alludes to the subject of race in his works. Much of this discourse, however, is composed of speculation as to whether McCarthy himself is racist, using his works as the primary evidence for his racial politics. One Reddit thread from just three months ago began when a user posed the simple question "So, is McCarthy racist?"; the thread has since garnered nearly seventy comments.[44]

Some individuals, such as educator and columnist T. Elijah Hawkes, have taken a more measured approach in interrogating the place that race holds in *Blood Meridian.* Hawkes's essay—published in the *Huffington Post* under the title "Ta-Nehisi Coates and Cormac McCarthy walk into a bar"—is a personal account of his reading of *Between the World and Me* and *Blood Meridian* for a book club that he hosts. Though several of his book club members object to the possibility of reading a writer whom they deem "a sick man" with a seemingly pathological fixation on violence, Hawkes chooses to pursue a more generous reading. The essay consequently provides a comparative treatment of the racial worldviews Coates and McCarthy espouse in their works.[45]

Like Hawkes, I am not interested in questions of whether McCarthy himself is racist; instead, I am more curious about the question of what race *does* in his work, and why certain critics have found it possible to read *Blood Meridian* without reading race as a central aspect of the novel. In my reading, race is not merely one theme of *Blood Meridian*, but rather a subject that permeates the novel's entire symbolic and discursive landscape. Instead of saying, for instance, that race is one of the novel's many fixations, along with violence, religious faith, and the construction of morality, I am arguing that these fixations are invariably racialized by virtue of the historical context in which they have been placed. Violence in *Blood Meridian*, for instance, almost universally exists either in service of or, in rarer cases, as a rejection of, the project of constructing and reifying white masculinity. Conversations about faith, likewise, are also framed via a conflict between the Judeo-Christian (white) settlers and the "heathen" natives.

What troubles me, however, is not necessarily the presence of a critical lacuna itself, but rather that this lacuna might continue to reflect certain problematic habits and assumptions in contemporary reading practices. Even though *Blood Meridian* was only a moderate commercial success upon its initial release, for instance, it has continued to hold an outsized presence in the literary imaginations of various artists ever since, many of which provide a far less critical and nuanced approach to investigating the role of race in the Western frontier.

For a text so fixated on the violence that produces historical silences, *Blood Meridian*, it seems, has also fallen victim to a kind of historical silencing in the repeated misreadings and bastardizations of it that have emerged since its original publication. If complicity in violence is one of the central concerns that

[44] u/No_Travel2529, "So, is McCarthy a Racist?" *Reddit*, May 13, 2022, https://www.reddit.com/r/cormacmccarthy/comments/up69tm/so_is_mccarthy_a_racist/.

[45] T. Elijah Hawkes, "Ta-Nehisi Coates and Cormac McCarthy Walk into a Bar," *The Huffington Post*, August 5, 2015, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/tanehisi-coates-and-corma_b_7903918.

McCarthy himself surfaces in *Blood Meridian*, perhaps the relevant question to consider is how are, then, we also complicit in fabricating these silences? What new critical perspectives or reading habits might these silences demand?

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