

The Intertwining of History and Text - A New Historicism Perspective on *Blood Meridian*

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Abstract:

Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* describes the journey of a group of mercenaries and scalp hunters at the U.S.-Mexico border. The novel, renowned for its dark violence, is based on historical events and truthful records. This paper draws from Louis Montrose's concepts of the historicity of texts and the textuality of history to explore how history and texts intertwine in *Blood Meridian* and the impact of such intersection on McCarthy's literary creation. Based on historical records and autobiography, *Blood Meridian* represents the Indian massacre and the turbulent relations between the U.S. and Mexico in a more objective and comprehensive way. As a historical novel, it reproduces and rewrites history by complementing the gaps in the existing historical narratives. The entanglement between history and texts in *Blood Meridian* conveys McCarthy's skepticism toward the traditional historical narratives and modern civilization.

Keywords:

Blood Meridian, New Historicism, Historicity of Texts, Textuality of History

1. Introduction

Cormac McCarthy, widely regarded as one of the greatest American novelists, is renowned for his graphic depictions of dark violence, sparse use of punctuation, and stylistic complexity. During his lifetime, he wrote twelve novels, five screenplays, two plays, and three short stories, spanning the post-apocalyptic, Western, and Southern Gothic genres. *Blood Meridian*, the most violent, bleak, and unsentimental western novel by McCarthy, tells a story set in the American frontier with a historical context. The narrative follows a teenager, referred to as "the kid", who devotes most of his life to the Glanton gang, a historical group of scalp hunters who massacred American Indians along the U.S.-Mexico border from 1849 to 1850 for bounty. The role of antagonist is filled by Judge Holden, the backbone of the gang, who is a physically giant, highly educated man with pale and hairless skin. After the vengeance of the Yuma Indians, nearly all members of the scalp hunters died. The novel ends with that "the kid", now "the man", being killed by the Judge in a bar.

McCarthy's literary achievement lies in his novels with distinct styles, which have been regarded as parallel to the writing styles of Ernest Miller Hemingway and William Faulkner. Critic Harold Bloom compared McCarthy's literary skill in *Blood Meridian* to Shakespeare. *Blood Meridian* is not only a book about the American westward expansion but also an intersection of history, myth, philosophy, and religion. Researchers regarded *Blood Meridian* as an epic historical novel based on real historical events that happened in the 1850s at the U.S.-Mexico border, as admitted by McCarthy, "the ugly fact is that books are made out of books. The novel depends for its life on the novels that have been written" [1]. According to Dana Phillips, *Blood Meridian* is made out of McCarthy's research about Mexican and American historical records "detailing the bloody exploits of Captain Glanton and his band of scalp hunters (including the historical figure Judge Holden) in the years following the Mexican-American War" [2]. John Emil Sepich focused on the relationships between characters based on historical events. He analyzed the "possible motive for the Judge's treatment of the kid" by considering the "historical accuracy of McCarthy's presentation of the kid's and the Judge's dispositions toward each other, as based on sources of in the literature of the period" [3]. Apart from that, the relationship between violence and ethics is also presented to reveal the universal meaning in the authentic American apocalyptic novel: "the entanglements of biological evolution and human ethics go throughout the entire human community" [4]. Furthermore, many researchers argue that McCarthy rewrites the history along the U.S.-Mexico border to achieve historical revisionism. David Holmberg wrote that *Blood Meridian* manages to "undermine traditional notions of historical record and national mythologies, while simultaneously validating their existence" by setting the story in a heterotopian world [5]. The conflated zone where both prehistory and the coming apocalypse intertwine suggests that the future is foretold in the past, as "the child the father of the man" [6]. From this point of view, this novel can be regarded as a reversal of the westward expansion myth. Similarly, Chen and Ren wrote in their essay that *Blood Meridian* conveys the criticism and deconstruction of American exceptionalism, which "was utilized by early American politicians as a defense of nineteenth-century American expansionism" [7]. However, Jay Ellis supposes that *Blood Meridian* "is too violent to be boiled down to revisionist history" because the word "history" used by the Judge embodies the force of philosophy, and the Judge is based on the "historical figure of a 'Judge Holden' in Samuel Chamberlain's *My Confessions*, a memoir that includes a stint with the real Glanton gang" [8]. Thus, it is necessary to analyze the Judge simultaneously from historical and ahistorical perspectives. Based on existing research, this paper aims to explore the relationship between the text of *Blood Meridian* and the historical reality and how the interaction among them impacts on McCarthy's literary creation.

In 1980, Stephen Greenblatt defined "new historicism" in his *Genre*, and he is therefore regarded as the founder of New Historicism. From the perspective of new historicism, no discourse can sufficiently explain the complex and dynamic social power because there is no universal spirit of an age, and there is no explanation that can provide an answer to all aspects of a given culture. Later, other leading figures, including Hyden White, Lisa Jardine, Louis Montrose, and Stephen Orgel, respectively made contributions to the development of New Historicism [9]. Among them, Louis Montrose puts forward important concepts: historicity of texts and textuality of history. He explains that the historicity of texts is "the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing" [10]. When it comes to the textuality of history, there are two ways to think about it. Firstly, readers cannot have access to

“a full and authentic past, a lived material existence” without the “surviving textual traces of the society in question”. According to Montrose, such traces should be regarded as the consequence of “social progress of preservation and effacement”. Secondly, all textual histories that are influenced by subsequent textual mediations always “incompletely constitute in their narrative and rhetorical forms the ‘History’ to which they offer access” [11]. According to the concepts mentioned above, new historicism eliminates the binary opposition between history and literature because it no longer treats history as an objective and accurate background of literature but views literature as a force participating in the construction of history. In other words, new historicism emphasizes the historicity of texts but places much more emphasis on the textuality of history. It is necessary to acknowledge that historical texts also have the nature of literary narratives and that there can be no historical texts or history without human narratives. Moreover, new historicism dismantles the traditional deterministic view of history. Instead of treating geography, economic base, individual talent, or other single factors as the dominant force in determining history, it views the elements of history as something that influences and shapes each other, emphasizing a cultural interpretation of history.

2. The Journey of Scalp Hunters — a Representation of Indian Massacre

2.1. Response to the Genocidal Policies

In the nineteenth century, American incessant westward expansion seized a large amount of land which had originally belonged to Indians. In 1830, the Indian Removal Act was signed by President Andrew Jackson, calling for “the removal of American Indians residing within state borders in the East to a newly created Indian Territory in present-day Oklahoma and parts of Nebraska” [12]. The “glorious” goal of this act was to free up state lands for white settlers who desired agriculturally rich land on which to grow cotton. After that, those who would not give up their land were savagely killed. The westward movement was officially celebrated as the “glorious history” of the United States, but the process of advancing “civilization” was filled with savagery. Massacres of Indians by Americans were frequently seen at that time.

Presented as an epic novel, *Blood Meridian* is filled with abundant descriptions serving as the response to the genocidal policies towards Indians. In *Blood Meridian*, Toadvine tells the kid that the leader of the scalp hunters, Glanton, had “a contract with Trias, and they’re to pay him a hundred dollars a head for scalps and a thousand for Gómez’s head” [13]. In history, there are the real Glanton gang and the leader of an Indian tribe, Gómez. The former is recorded in the memoir of Samuel E. Chamberlain, *My Confession*, and the latter is the leader of an armed force among the Mescalero Apaches in the mid-19th century. The scalp hunters led by Glanton, who scalp Indians in exchange for bounties, are in fact monsters bred from the Indian genocide policy. It is the governor that makes a deal with the gang and gives them the right to kill Indians recklessly and inhumanely. Artistic creation and historical truth intertwining together, McCarthy does not make moral judgment in this regard, but only seeks to objectively and realistically present the journey of scalp hunters, which constitutes a response to the genocidal policy.

2.2. Replay of Indian Persecution

In the nineteenth century, as mentioned above, Indian lands were taken away by Americans and Mexicans. Indian people, who refused to give in easily, fought the U.S. and Mexican government tenaciously. However, at that time, some state governments responded by encouraging Indian massacres through trades at high prices for Indian scalps. The tragedy of Indian massacres revives repeatedly in *Blood Meridian*, as McCarthy wrote, “the slaughter had become general”, and “women were screaming and naked children and one old man tottered forth waving a pair of white pantaloons” [13]. The once calm and peaceful village has become as horrible as hell, with huts being afire, victims hacked and decapitated, and naked infants swung by the heels and bashed against the stones until their “brains burst forth through the fontanel in a bloody spew” [13].

What’s more terrifying is that as the scalp hunters’ scope of killing extends gradually, more and more Indians are subjected to unexpected catastrophe. One day they pass a peaceful Tiguas camped on the river, while in three days the hunters would “slaughter them every soul”, “as if the fate of the aborigines had been cast into shape by some other agency altogether” [13]. *Blood Meridian* is just like a historical documentary unveiling the brutal slaughter suffered by American Indians in the mid-19th century. Among the novel’s epigraph, McCarthy includes the *Yuma Daily Sun* report recording that “a re-examination of a 300,000-year-old fossil found in the same region earlier shows evidence of having been scalped” [13]. Thus, McCarthy aims to remind us that we should not read this story merely as the specific history in the American West and Mexican North but as the whole history of human beings.

2.3. Representation of U.S.-Mexico Turbulent Relations

Apart from the relations between Americans and Indians, the U.S.-Mexico turbulent relations are also represented in *Blood Meridian*. Captain White in the novel is based on an American military adventurer, William Walker, who assembled a group of militarists in 1853 to enter Guaymas, Mexico, in an attempt to extend the border of the U.S. to the Mexican state of Sonora. On the surface, it was just a personal adventure, while in essence, it was guarded by official consent and plans for invasion. Captain White tells the kid that they “are to be the instruments of liberation in a dark and troubled land” and “to spearhead the drive” with “the tacit support of Governor Burnett of California” [13]. However, in the context of westward movement, this immoral act has been selectively forgotten as it is historically legitimized by the shield of White Supremacy and racism. What Captain White says in the novel suggests that through American history of westward movement, the history of the Indians, Mexicans, and other minorities is ignored.

McCarthy adopts third-person perspective, which unveils the misery suffered by people other than Americans that has long been neglected. The kid follows Glanton to kill Indians after Captain White is killed by a Mexican. After the gang almost wipes out Apache Indians, they ride into “the city of Chihuahua to a hero’s welcome” “through that fantasy of music and flowers” [13]. However, the situation is getting out of control as the gang is engaged in all sorts of atrocities, including arson, murder, looting, and raping. So it follows logically that “within a week of their quitting the city there would be a price of eight thousand pesos posted for Glanton’s head” [13]. The Glanton gang is no longer the honored guests of Governor Trias, and they eventually become a nightmare for all Mexican people. Such a change in attitude of the Mexican people towards those outlaws represents the turbulent U.S.-Mexican relations in the mid-19th century.

3. The Past of the Border — a Field of Reproduction of Literary Narrative

3.1. Justice for the Slaughtered Indians

Just as McCarthy once acknowledged that “our reality comes out of narratives we create, not out of the experiences themselves” [14], the history of westward expansion depends on how historians record and reflect it. In the early 20th century, many American historians referred to people of color as stumbling blocks to westward movement, while extensively objective and historically reliable descriptions of bounty hunters’ journeys of scalping in *Blood Meridian* reveal the immoral nature of the expansion at the expense of the massacre of countless Native Americans, including Yumas, Maricopas, Apaches, Papagos, Chiricahuas, Yaquis, and Tiguas. The American official history often replaces “massacre” with “battle,” “event,” “conflict”, etc., in order to whitewash the brutal reality [15]. The U.S. government’s treatment of the Native Americans has always been treacherous and unscrupulous, which many conscientious historians strongly condemn. It can be said that there are many gaps in the official history of the westward movement that the government has intentionally left to create an illusion of American exceptionalism and white supremacy. This novel fills in that historical gap by writing about the persecution of the American Indians to claim the justice and historical presence they deserve.

Moreover, the scalp hunting trade mentioned in *Blood Meridian* is based on historical reality; however, such barbaric acts often understated or omitted in traditional historical narratives. A series of descriptions regarding the trade reveals the industrial chain behind it: the governor purchases the scalps of Indians, and the mercenaries then make a living out of the slaughter. This bloody economic motive, which is presented clearly to readers, points out the commercialized nature of the seeming “civilized pioneerin” of the westward movement.

3.2. Recreation of the History on the U.S.-Mexico Border

There is no doubt that *Blood Meridian* plays an important role in rewriting the history of the U.S.-Mexico border. In McCarthy’s writing, the border is a morally ambiguous zone where civilization and barbarism coexist. All sorts of atrocities along the border, such as the massacre of indigenous peoples and Mexicans by the scalp hunters, show that the “expansion of civilization” is actually primitive violence. In *Blood Meridian*, images of Mexicans are portrayed in a complex and realistic manner. Although there are depictions of the collaborative oppression of the Indians caused by Americans and Mexicans, the vulnerability and struggles of Mexican people are also displayed in the novel. In U.S.-Mexican border society, not only the Indians but also the Mexican people suffer from white supremacy and racial oppression.

4. McCarthy’s Violence Writing — The Intersection of History and Texts

4.1. The Judge’s Evil -- Skepticism to the Traditional Historical Narratives

The intersection between history and texts has exerted an influence on McCarthy’s violence writing in *Blood Meridian*. Judge Holden, the embodiment of violence, is a historically verifiable character in Samuel Chamberlain’s autobiographical *My Confession*, which “recounts Chamberlain’s days with the Glanton gang”. In regard to their relationship, Chamberlain writes, “I hated him at first sight, and he knew it, yet

nothing could be more gentle and kind than his deportment towards me; he would often seek conversation with me”. However, the seemingly gentle Judge turned out to be an evil man who would steal Chamberlain’s horse as they plodded across the desert after the massacre, shoot at him, and “denounce” Chamberlain and other survivors as robbers and murderers [3]. Compare to the real Holden, the Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian* appears immortal and inhumane, with a strangely childlike face and hairless skin. Through the voice of the Judge, McCarthy conveys his view of history: “In any event the history of all is not the history of each nor indeed the sum of those histories and none here can finally comprehend the reason for his presence for he has no way of knowing even in what the event consists” [13]. However, Judge Holden is not completely the spokesperson for McCarthy, as the Judge holds a relatively immoral attitude that morality can yield to civilization and history when it is necessary. He says that “moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak”, and that “historical law subverts it at every turn”. In the Judge’s eyes, he regards himself as the master or “overlord” of the land where “nothing must be permitted to occur” without his dispensation [13]. The Judge even scrapes a picture carved into the stone with small gravel to remove the history that the Indians had recorded in a unique way, so that they could not pass down their own history. Through the Judge’s words and actions, McCarthy seriously examines the authenticity of documentary sources of history, which highlights the discursive nature of historical narratives, dismantles the power of traditional historical narratives, and reveals the hidden ideologies and operations of power behind them.

4.2. The Kid’s Death -- Skepticism to the Modern Civilization

The protagonist of the novel is the nameless kid, who “can neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence” [13]. It is such a character who never exposes his inner thoughts but only acts as an emotionless camera recording what happens in front of him. As mentioned above, “the child the father of the man”, and this might be read as a commentary on the novel itself. The kid is a witness to the relentlessness and cruelty of American history, just as the novel explores the misinterpretation of the history of westward movement. Both of them serve as an objective camera lens recording and reflecting what happens in the world.

However, it is such a character that meets his death at the hands of Judge Holden. The kid, now the man, is killed in the jakes by the Judge who is dancing forever and “will never die” [13]. Everything goes smoothly as the Judge wishes; all those not permitted by him to live are dead. The Judge, the embodiment of wisdom, science, philosophy, and civilization, survives till the end. Yet it remains a question whether civilization and history move forward at their own pace regardless of morality and conscientiousness. The answer could be inferred from the epilogue of *Blood Meridian*, “in the dawn there is a man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground” followed by “wanderers in search of bones and those who do not search”. All of them “appear restrained by a prudence or reflectiveness which has no inner reality”, and the perfect hole made by the man “owed its existence to the one before it there on that prairie upon which are the bones and the gatherers of bones and those who do not gather” [13]. It seems that history still evolves at its own speed, as it has done in the past and as it will do in the future. Perhaps there will be other kids caught up in the dust of the wheels of history. Through the description of violence and human nature in the nineteenth century, McCarthy expresses his skepticism about the legitimacy and ethical foundations of modern civilizations. *Blood Meridian* reveals that modern civilization never gets rid of violence and barbarism; and it just continues

these qualities in a more insidious way. The so-called progress of civilization and historical development may be just an illusion, a cycle, and the essence of civilization has never changed.

5. Conclusions

This paper studies *Blood Meridian* based on Louis Montrose's historicity of texts and textuality of history. With historically verifiable records, McCarthy adds authenticity and reliability to *Blood Meridian* by responding to the genocidal policy, replaying the Indian persecution, and representing the turbulent relations between the U.S. and Mexico. Based on historical events and records, McCarthy interweaves history and texts to reveal the textual and cultural nature of history. *Blood Meridian* is used to fill in the gaps in the official historical narratives, and McCarthy claims justice for slaughtered Indians and complements the history of the U.S.-Mexico border. Such intersection of history and texts has great impacts on McCarthy. He conveys his skepticism towards modern civilization and traditional historical narratives. The "Manifest Destiny" and the "White Supremacy" are just excuses for the so-called history of westward movement, while violence, brutality, and imperial hegemony are the essence of it. By incorporating the discourse of Mexican and Indian people into the frontier narrative, *Blood Meridian* challenges the traditional historical view and the nature of modern civilization.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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