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Deconstructive Destruction

Violence and Representation in *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West* by Cormac McCarthy and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left-Handed Poems* by Michael Ondaatje

Christina Pernille Årst

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Thesis abstract

Violence is not outside the limits of representation; it remains intertwined in its very textual fabric. This thesis investigates the inherent violence of representation in *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West* by Cormac McCarthy and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left-Hand Poems* by Michael Ondaatje. The thesis' main objective is to compare the thematic violence *in* the text to the rhetorical violence *of* the text in order to illuminate how both novels use the backdrop of US westward expansion to underscore the broader issue of the innate violence of representation altogether. Each novel critically engages with the myth of the American Frontier, a myth built into the fabric of American self-identity, revealing this identity to be inherently rooted in misrepresentation. Challenging conventional beliefs, *Blood Meridian* and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* assert that violence is not external to representation but it is fundamentally woven into its very structure. Through a Derridean lens of deconstruction this thesis aims to help the reader gain further insight in how both novels encode and enact the inherent violence of representation, language and the meaning-making process.

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Death ... is like the setting of the sun that only seems to be devoured by night, but in truth, as the source of all light, burns without pause, bringing new days to new worlds, forever rising and forever setting.

- Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*

1 Introduction

This master thesis will focus on the representation of violence and the violence of representation in *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West* by Cormac McCarthy and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left-Hand Poems* by Michael Ondaatje. The thesis' main objective is to compare the thematic violence *in* the text to the rhetorical violence *of* the text in order to show how both *The Collected Works* and *Blood Meridian*, through the thematic representation of the westward expansion, highlight a larger problem of the inherent violence in representation altogether. It is through the thematic focus of the physical representations of violence, the content itself, that this other violence emerges, namely the violence of representation.

To clarify these different strands of violence, there is on one hand the thematic violence represented *in* the novel, which includes the historical backdrop of the westward expansion as well as the physical portrayals of violence and brutal content. On the other hand, there is the rhetorical violence *of* the novel. This is the more generic idea of violence, seen in the form of the novels and which functions on an abstract, figurative level. As Benjamin Noys asserts:

We could summarise the approach of theory to the problem of violence as the movement through a chiasmus: from 'the representation of violence to the violence of representation'. The interventions of theory suggest that instead of remaining at the level of the representation of violence, we have to consider that a form of violence is intrinsic to the very act of representation itself. Theory, which refers to those positions that were inspired by paying attention to the sign and the signifier, directs its attention to this 'primary' violence at work in the sign. In this way it undermines, or deconstructs, the usual distinction made between violence and representation, which places violence as exterior to, or beyond, representation. (12)

Making violent imagery such an integrated part of the text itself, both Ondaatje and McCarthy create a discourse on violence that goes beyond the literal, physical depictions of violence represented in the texts, thus thematizing the violence of representation. The main objective of this thesis will be to explore how the connections between the thematic violence depicted in each of the texts is connected to the more figurative, rhetorical understanding of violence that the texts enact. This will include an examination of the violence inherent to representation and the process of differentiating or classifying within a hierarchical structure of language. When we engage in a discourse on violence, the problem of inadvertently

overlooking what is inherently violent in discourse, could become a problem itself. As demonstrated in the Western genre, with its biased binary oppositional apparatus, the structures behind this apparatus often remain concealed. Consequently, this thesis aims to explore the Western genre and how it operates within the violent structure of representation.

1.1 The West

The ideology of the West and Westerns is predicated on notions of freedom and boundless opportunity. This conceptual framework not only creates a particular narrative surrounding the myth of the American Frontier but creates a set of binary oppositions within it. These oppositions transform abstract ideas like “possibility” into unequivocally positive terms, often without considering what kind of consequences such possibilities entail. As this thesis will soon argue, the figure of the judge in *Blood Meridian* serves as such a symbolic representation of the extremities of Western possibility and potentiality.

The myth of the American Frontier, rooted in the westward expansion and Manifest Destiny, has subsequently created the genre of the Western. This genre is inextricably bound in a myth created through binary oppositions of law/lawlessness, good/evil, savagery/civilization, and the like. As Richard Slotkin contends in *Gunfighter Nation*, the myth of the American Frontier is one of the oldest and most definable myths of the American West, created as a way to distance and separate America from the European countries and the European “metropolis.” In this process of developing the nation and the mythos of the West, “the colonies were linked from the beginning to a historical narrative in which repeated cycles of separation and regression were necessary preludes to an improvement in life and fortune” (111). As Slotkin further explains in *Regeneration Through Violence*, man functions as a myth-making animal, seeking understanding of the world in order to control it, (7) which parallels the judge’s quest to become “suzerain of the earth” (McCarthy 207) through sketching the world in his ledger. In order to rule the narrative, the judge must create his own myth, thus also creating a structure of binary oppositions within it, creating a system of difference, where one thing takes privilege over another. The myth of the American Frontier holds the same structure of good/bad and right/wrong. As Slotkin asserts, what lies at the core of the American frontier myth are “the symbolic formulations of the American experience which carried the world view of the first colonists from generation to generation” (23) cyclically creating clichés as a way of justifying and explaining the violence of the American colonies. When history transitions into myth, complexities become simplified. The myth creates a moral landscape divided by clear distinctions. The judge, in his quest for dominance,

is trying to confine the world within his own mythology. As he declares, “That is the way it was and will be. That way and not some other way” (McCarthy 259). The judge emphasizes the unyielding belief in his own hegemonic rule.

The American view on violence is not necessarily defined by “the amount or kind of violence that characterizes our history but the mythic significance we have assigned to the kinds of violence we have actually experienced, the forms of symbolic violence we imagine or invent, and the political uses to which we use that symbolism” (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 13). The myth of the American Frontier, a myth that justified the colonies and the creation of “the new world,” is a myth that justifies other types of violence, such as territorial conquests and international military interventions. Such a mythic basis was vividly used during the Vietnam War when the American troops referred to Vietnam “as ‘Indian Country’ and search-and-destroy missions as a game of ‘Cowboys and Indians’ (3). Both *The Collected Works* and *Blood Meridian* grapple with this notion built into the fabric of American self-identity, revealing this identity to be based on misrepresentation rather than representation.

Over time, the notion of the traditional Western was challenged, and its conventions subverted, which inadvertently led to other mythic reproductions of the West. This introduces the paradox of the revisionist Western, namely, as David H. Evans points out, that “Each new account plunders and dispossesses its source, existing by figure of the very damage it does to previous accounts, and no rewriting, and revising can carry us back to the original virginity before violence or violation” (430). With each revisioning and recreation of this myth, a regenerative violence happens that only erases what was originally there, leaving nothing but a trace of the original itself behind, highlighting the impossibility of any accurate representation in revision. In this sense, one could argue that *The Collected Works* and *Blood Meridian* are both about this impossibility. Neither novel is trying to give structure and historical understanding; rather, they try to encode the inherent violence within said structure. With this in mind, Evans also points out that in *Blood Meridian* the search for the meaning of violence is not the point, but rather “the real subject is the violence of all meaning” (429). The same goes for *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. The mythic discourse of Westerns results from the fact that they dehistoricize and try to naturalize one binary opposition over another, inherently claiming one version holds more truth than another. As Benjamin Noys explains, “In this way mythic discourse does violence to language by dissimulating its arbitrary form into the ‘unity’ of myth. This false unity also dissimulates the violence of this mythological operation, which passes itself off as necessary and natural” (15). However, this way of using language to create this false pretense is itself a violent operation, illuminating the violence

inherent in representation. Both *Blood Meridian* and *The Collected Works* focus on this operation. On the one hand, *The Collected Works* fragments Billy's identity and myth into the unrecognizable, showcasing the impossibility of creating a coherent idea of who Billy the Kid was. Similarly, *Blood Meridian* also illuminates the impossibility of the kid morphing into a mythic figure, while it at the same time pushes the judge's mythic status to its most appalling extreme. Eliminating all room for any other discourse than the judge's, *Blood Meridian* destroys all possibility of revisionist discourse, and highlights the paradox of revisioning as well as the impossibility of any absolute truth. As *The Collected Works* shift between the binary oppositions, showcasing the arbitrariness inherent in language, *Blood Meridian* removes binary oppositions altogether, pushing the judge into a perversion of the Western Enlightenment values. As Dan Moos points out, "In McCarthy's West, there are no white hats and no redemption. The carnage of the text and the various permutations of representations, both within the novel and the novel itself, effectively destroy any sense of acceptable order in the popular memory of a mythic frontier West" (36). Both novels reveal the inherent issue of the violence of representation, particularly illuminating the paradox of the revisionist Western. Using this genre and historical background as a backdrop, they simultaneously cast a larger web, directing attention towards the fundamental violence inherent in representation as a whole.

1.2 The Collected Works of Billy the Kid

Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* is a collection of poems, prose, and photographs, revolving around the infamous character Billy the Kid. The form of the novel itself is a hybrid, or what one might call a verse novel or a documentary-collage, compiled of different fragments from Billy the Kid's life. For simplicity sake, I will refer to it as a novel throughout the thesis. Sometimes the narrative is told from Billy's point of view, sometimes from the viewpoints of other characters such as Billy's nemesis and friend, Pat Garrett, Sallie Chisum, or just an ambiguous "I". This uncertainty about who is narrating reverberates throughout the novel, decontextualizing the narrative itself, and using the empty shell of Billy the Kid as a way for the reader to project their own preconceptions into the narrative fabric. In this sense, the reader also becomes complicit in creating and recreating the myth of Billy the Kid.

Published in 1970, Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* has many similarities to Ondaatje's later works. The exploration of identity, memory, and historicity we see especially with *Anil's Ghost* (2000) and its backdrop of the Sri Lankan Civil War,

problematizes national identity and misrepresentation. In a sense, *The Collected Works*, as well as *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), could be considered thematic precursors for *Anil's Ghost*, with its links between identity, creation and destruction. The overarching tension in *The Collected Works* is the hunt for Billy himself. As an historical figure, and one of the most prominent figures of the "Wild West," Billy's imminent demise lurks over the novel. However, he will never allow himself to be "captured", either in the sense of physically being caught or the representational sense of being put in any definable category within the narrative structure. This intersection is where the thematic violence *in* the text mirrors the rhetorical violence *of* the text. The text rejects the possibility of creating a coherent sense of Billy's identity. He cannot be put into a definable construct, and any such attempts only lead to the textual unraveling of *The Collected Works* itself. Morphing Billy's historical essence into the realm of myth and representation symbolizes a profound rhetorical transgression against the historical person William H. Bonney or Henry McCarty, also known as Billy the Kid. The quest to encapsulate him within a generic archetype, as in the Western genre, proves to be an impossible task as he remains as an unfixed entity throughout the book. Since *The Collected Works* starts with an undeveloped picture of him, thus removing Billy as a referent, there is no original article to return to, no anchorage to safely stabilize his essence. This foundational absence grows significantly with each new reiteration of his myth. As illustrated in the 2023 Norwegian theatre production "Billy the Kids samla verk" at Thorsovteateret, the actors – all playing Billy at some point – were crawling over a mountain of old, ragged clothes. Each incarnation of Billy stands at the peak of the mountain for a split second, getting their 15 minutes of fame, before giving their spot to another version of Billy. Similar to the mad dogs of Livingstone in the novel, the different myths of Billy are also fighting (and reproducing) within themselves for a moment in the spotlight. In this sense, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* enacts the violent process inherent in signification and revisioning. This is further emphasized by the form of the novel itself, which is a fragmented hybrid that mirrors the rhetorical violence produced in trying to create a "unity" in the myth of Billy. However, there can be no unity in the sign because the referent is absent. In further perpetuating the myth of Billy, this highlights the reader's complicity in trying to create a coherent Billy, while simultaneously encoding the violent structure of representation, truth-telling and memory.

1.3 *Blood Meridian*

Critics have varying approaches to *Blood Meridian* (1985), depending on their specific reading of the novel. There is the historical perspective, seen with John Sepich, and partly Dana Philips, even though Philips also focuses more broadly on the cultural aspects, including language and philosophy. Some critics like Rich Wallach and Steven Shaviro focus on the language and the literary aspect within the novel. Wallach takes a particular interest in figuring the judge in Derridean terms as the dance of writing's simultaneous creation and effacement of meaning (132). While Barclay Owens sees *Blood Meridian* as the pinnacle of American naturalism, critics such as Vereen Bell recognize the novel as having an anti-metaphysical bias, binding the reader to a purely phenomenal world without foundational truth. Dwight Eddings also adds Schopenhauer into this metaphysical mix, claiming the judge functions like a noumenon flickering between reality and representation. Because of *Blood Meridian*'s inherent elusiveness, which defies any confinable construct, this thesis has chosen to focus particularly on its flux state, its tendency to resist any easy categorization, to highlight the inherent violence in representation.

Blood Meridian tells the story of a nameless protagonist, known as "the kid", as he sets out on a journey across the American frontier during the 1840s. The kid ultimately ends up joining the Glanton gang, a band of scalp hunters, one of whom is an enigmatic figure known as Judge Holden. The judge will end up controlling not only the path the gang follows, but also the narrative of the story itself. As the gang travels further West, the amount of violence increases, both in volume and intensity, and blurs the definition of what violence may be. This becomes highlighted through the judge's continuous creation and effacement of the natural world around them. The representations of violence in the novel consist of detailed, brutal accounts of the worst imaginable violent acts that can be committed. Including sexual assault, animal cruelty, cannibalism, torture, scalping, mass murder and genocide; the novel does not shy away from the brutality of physical violence. The judge's mission to turn everything into a representation makes him the link between the two different strands of violence found in the novel, using the thematic violence in the novel to showcase the violence inherent to representation. In this way, Judge Holden functions on a meta-level, with his ledger being a parallel to the novel itself. He is turning the natural world around him into a construct, while at the same time being a construct himself, a symbol of the inherent violence of representation and rhetorical violence. By becoming the omnipotent beast of knowledge referred to in the novel's epigraph, the judge also turns the ideals of the Enlightenment into a perversion, by pushing his imperialist views and totalitarianism to the very edge, highlighting

what is inherently wrong with the western “lust for knowledge,” and what the ultimate consequences of this could become. The prelude – marked in my italics – to *Blood Meridian*’s epigraph from Paul Valery, states:

You have neither the patience that weaves long lines nor a feeling for the irregular; nor a sense of the fittest place for a thing... For you intelligence is not one thing among many. You... worship it as if it were an omnipotent beast... A man intoxicated on it believes his own thoughts are legal decisions, or facts themselves are born of the crowd and time. He confuses his quick changes of heart with the imperceptible variation of real forms and enduring Beings... You are in love with intelligence, until it frightens you. For your ideas are terrifying and your hearts are faint. Your acts of pity and cruelty are absurd, committed with no calm, as if they were irresistible. Finally, you fear blood more and more. Blood and time.

(Valery qtd. in Fraser 139)

In *Blood Meridian*, the project of the West is thus represented through two different paradigms. On the one hand, it is seen through the myth of the American Frontier, while on the other, it is rendered through a broader lens of Western culture. As the omnipotent beast of knowledge, the judge’s perversion of the Enlightenment ideals of Western culture shows how, when taken to the extreme, they are both a foundation for great achievement, while at the same time opening multiple terrifying aspects of human nature and human capabilities. Between this balance of thematic and rhetorical violence, the reader is faced with one of the most important questions in the novel, and what Stacey Peebles calls the novel’s thesis (xix), “whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man’s will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay” (McCarthy 5). Is violence an inherent part of mankind’s nature, or are we shaped by the society that surrounds us? Can we change our violent ways? However, this is not a yes or no question. Rather, *Blood Meridian* tries to encode the violent structure of representation itself, showing it as part of the way we think, and how we create meaning, and in this way, it exposes language and meaning-making as a violent process.

1.4 Theoretical grounding

The prevailing notion that violence is a preexisting thing that functions outside the realm of signification and somehow outside the limits of representation, is a misconceived one. Violence is not an external thing, irrelevant to the world of representation. Rather, it is intertwined with it, so that any discourse about violence inherently partakes in the very violence it seeks to describe. This is evident in the way Western culture often grapples with the

abstracted notion of violence. As Noys articulates “The Western metaphysical or ideological form of violence treats it as ‘natural’, pre-social, and pre-signifying. In this way violence is seen as the limit of representation – both beyond and before representation” (18). Jacques Derrida disputes the Western notion that violence somehow exists outside, and before, the limits of representation. For Derrida language and writing is what creates the very definition of violence itself, and is summarized in what he refers to as arche-violence:

The structure of violence is complex and its possibility – writing – no less so.

There was in fact a first violence to be named. To name, to give names that it will be possibly forbidden to pronounce, such is the originary violence of the language (langage) which consists of inscribing within a difference, in classifying, in suspending the vocative absolute. To think the unique *within* the system, to inscribe it there, such is the gesture of arche-writing: arche-violence, loss of the proper, of absolute proximity, of self-presence, in truth the loss of what has ever taken place, of a self-presence which has never been given but only dreamed of and always already split, repeated, incapable of appearing to itself except in its own disappearance.

(*Of Grammatology* 121)

This first violence – or original violence – to be named creates a hierarchy within language. It is not the use of the proper names themselves which creates this hierarchy, rather it occurs through how people become differentiated within a system of thought and language, which is a system that values one thing over another. It is the system itself that is inherently violent, causing what Derrida refers to as arche-violence, the violence that occurs when one thing takes presence over another, displacing the other, and in that sense making it less worth. Derrida’s point here is not to claim that there should not be any differences in the world. Rather, to understand how we understand, it is important to take note of this process, especially when we are faced with the question of power structures and knowledge. As Noys draws attention to the challenges of studying violence, he claims that violence as a subject “resists signification and easy categorization” (2). As he suggests, the various definitions of violence “should be regarded as fluid rather than fixed since they are engaged in a continuous relationship with a range of identities, attitudes, and representations. Indeed, rather than perceiving violence as a fixed constant, it is more productive to conceive of violence as a mutable category, which is preventable through considerations of social, cultural, and political contexts” (3). This fluidity and elusive nature of violence is encapsulated in the figure of *Blood Meridian*’s judge Holden, who works like a noumenon within the text, always operating outside any definite and definable boundaries, constantly redirecting and deferring

interpretation. Much like the judge, Ondaatje's portrayal of Billy the Kid also remains unfixed and fluid, resisting all attempts to box him in and categorize him. Both characters, in their respective narrative, challenge readers to re-evaluate and face their preconceived notions of violence, identity, and representation.

Through the thematic violence represented in each novel, these texts illuminate the larger problem of the violence of representation. It is only by examining the generic and general idea of what violence is that we can "truly capture the forms and specificities of violence; otherwise we cast out violence as only ever secondary and accidental to some primary innocence" (Noys 13). By shifting or erasing binary differences both *Blood Meridian* and *The Collected Works* resist any easy classification and categorization. In *The Collected Works*, the intertwining binary oppositions of "good mixed in with the bad ... and bad mixed in with the good" (Ondaatje 93) challenge the notion of conventional moral binaries while in *Blood Meridian* the removal of all moral judgement and (almost) all forms of grace and mercy, disassembles the very binary apparatus, thereby allowing the problem of evil come into focus. This draws attention to the original violence inherent to classifying and differentiating, illuminating the inherent violence within the representational structure. Through exposing the violence that occurs through imposing categories and implacably attaching things to words through signification, both novels show how the project of the "West" is inherently violent. They function as a critique of the West in two interconnected registers. First, they shed a light on the paradox of the revisionist Western, which reinforce the foundational myth of the West by reiterating it, thus feeding into the original myth founded on misrepresentation. Secondly, through encoding violence on a rhetorical level, both novels thematize how we participate in violence on a larger scale. They show how violence is infused within all representation, and is a part of everyday communication as well as political, historical, and philosophical discourse.

In Michael Fried's consideration of Stephen Crane's "The Upturned Face," he shows how the text represents, and in a sense enacts, the very act of writing "The Upturned Face" itself (99). This focus on the materiality of writing has inspired this thesis to inquire what happens when the materiality of writing enters the prose on a rhetorical level, and how this affects the text on a thematic level, especially when we look at the inherent violence of representation. Just as Fried claims "The Upturned Face" to be "a sustained if displaced representation of the act of writing" (99) this thesis would also argue that *The Collected Works* and *Blood Meridian* function in a similar manner by examining the very fabric of textuality itself and becoming a meta-commentaries on the act of writing's double nature of

effacement and creation. Both novels *enact* the very process of signification, thus demonstrating the operation to be inherently violent. *The Collected Works* mirrors its thematic violence, with The Lincoln County War as a contextual backdrop, to the rhetorical violence and inherent paradox of the revision Western, which consists of perpetuating a myth based on misrepresentation. *The Collected Works*' Billy the Kid and *Blood Meridian*'s kid are similar in the aspect that they both reject the confines of the Western genre. Since there is no original Billy the Kid, what remains is a pure construction. Amidst the texts' incessant mythologization, the quest to find the "real" Billy the Kid – his true essence – becomes elusive because there is no material signified, which only contributes to making his myth further obscured. Similarly, the kid rejects the generic construct of the Western with his inverted Bildung, which will be further explained in chapter 3. He too has no original article, as he has seemingly fallen from the skies like the Leonids (McCarthy 3). Because of this lack of referent, and because the judge stands in his way, the kid fails to assume any dimension as a character. He remains stagnant, unable to evolve into or beyond the generic archetype of the "mythic kid".

While *The Collected Works* shatter in its assembly of Billy's myth, *Blood Meridian* uses the judge as a hierarchical bias pushed to its extreme, while simultaneously resisting the attempt to put him into any finite definition. On the one hand, the judge becomes a symbol of Western Enlightenment values pushed to their most extreme, while on the other works as a noumenon within the text. By turning everything into a representation in his ledger, the judge subsequently illuminates the double nature of inscription and representation. Central to this thesis is the unfixed flux at the center of both *The Collected Works* and *Blood Meridian*. In order to examine the violence inherent to representation, both novels encode and enact the very meaning-making process of signification. They show how easy representation can turn into misrepresentation, and concurrently serve as a critique of the established Western paradigm.

In the following chapters I will examine how *The Collected Works* and *Blood Meridian* grapple with the representation of violence and the violence of representation in various ways. Chapter 2 is dedicated to Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. I will examine how Billy's absence and the text's lack of referent points to the reader's complicity in trying to recreate a coherent of Billy's myth. The analogy of reader complicity is demonstrated in the sun's rape of Billy, peeling him like an onion, only to reveal there is nothing inside. As Billy's myth is perpetuated, parallel to how Livingstone's dogs are bred into madness, the reiterating cycle of violence mirrors the paradox of the revisionist Western,

namely the inherent violence of a myth when it is being endlessly perpetuated founded on misrepresentation and a false narrative. The chapter will conclude with Pat Garret possibly shooting the wrong man. As truth-telling is often compared to straight-shooting, this notion makes the reader question if – in their quest to capture Billy – they too have “shot” the wrong man. Chapter 3 will focus on Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West*. The notion of straight-shooting and truth-telling is made evident in this chapter as well. However, in *Blood Meridian* the riders do not miss their mark, they completely obliterate it. This reveals the problem of hegemonic truth. The kid’s inverted Bildung highlights the impossibility of growing into a mythic figure, because the judge stands in his way as the archon of textuality. With his mission to make everything a representation in his ledger, the judge parallels the novel’s very nature, and subsequently the very nature of inscription’s dual effacement and creation. As a perversion of the Enlightenment ideals of Western culture, the judge symbolizes a binary pushed to its uttermost extreme, turning the representations of his ledger into misrepresentation. Finally, I conclude by enhancing the connection between the two novels. With their unfixed, flux center, both novels vividly enact the process of signification.

2 *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will show how the thematic violence depicted in *The Collected Works* mirror the rhetorical violence within the deconstruction of Billy. Billy does not emerge as the composer of the text; rather, by being composed of the text, he experiences the same violent function as the meaning-making process which is inherent in representation. As the myth of Billy the Kid gets told and retold, it gets caught in an endless cycle of deferral, becoming a construction without any sense of coherency with its original article, leaving only a trace behind. This reiteration of Billy's myth will lead to the reader's involvement in perpetuating his myth within the violent structure of signification. By creating a copy of a copy, the reader becomes complicit in the reiteration of his myth, which also alludes to another problem in question, namely the paradox of the revisionist western. The title of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* creates a question of what Billy's "collected works" are; is Billy's legacy the murders he committed, or is something else at stake here? Due to the nonlinear and fragmented way the story is told, the narrative gets challenged. There is an ambiguity underlying the narrative voice, which makes the reader question who is speaking, and at what time, which also renders the question of who Billy the Kid was, and is now, unfixed in both time and space. The self-reflexivity of the text makes the reader aware of how the text enacts the process of recreating the myth, as the very textual fabric of Billy's identity gets pulled apart. In this way the novel encodes the violent structure of representation, truth-telling and memory.

In his afterword to *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, Michael Ondaatje expresses his surprise at the amount of violence in the book when he heard the novel read out loud for the first time. He writes, "As I listened I was for the first time shocked at the violence of it, almost scared of it. My God, was that written by me?" (118). *The Collected Works* is filled with brutal, realistic, and sometimes humorous depictions of violence. Such portrayals of violence include "leaked brain gases" (6), "the liver running around ... like a headless chicken jerking" (8), "dragging out the stomach to get the bullet" (24), and eventually Billy's head being sliced off, leaving "a necklace of blood on me all my life" (2). The physical depictions of violence come in bits and pieces, merged in poetry and prose, as both a natural and unnatural part of life. The infusion of the violence within nature is like a "river you could get lost in," (23) which is complemented by the rhetorical violence of the text as a "maze to begin" and "be in" (17). The immediacy of this violence, be it fluid as a river or intricate as the maze, creates a presence which, when disrupted, descends into fragmentation. This

fragmentation in turn leads to an absence or void within the text that both completes, as well as shows the incompleteness, of the novel.

One of its most violent features, besides the depictions of physical violence, is the fragmentation and hybridization of the book itself. The lack of narrative created through a mixing of genres, shifting between prose and poetry, photographs, a fictional interview with Billy and even pages from a comic book (only without the drawings), creates an amalgamation of confusion and highlights the constant deferral of meaning. Even though the theme of “Billy the Kid” and the setting of the poetic prose is in the West, *The Collected Works* does not function as a traditional Western. The text seems more like an experimental documentary, or what Manina Jones calls “documentary collage” a new version of the documentary poem that quotes historical documents but does not portray them in a linear form (27). The amalgamation of historical facts and fragments, mixed with fictional elements, makes the text resist the appearance of an objective account of truth. Instead, this hybridity serves as a meta-commentary on the text’s own process. As Jones asserts, the form of the documentary-collage requires “a self-conscious re-reading of the documents of the past in a present context” (28). This genre has a dualistic nature, operating both as realistic and/or representational, as well as making a self-reflexive commentary on the very act of documentation itself. By participating in this process, as Linda Hutcheon puts it, “The representation of history becomes the history of representation too” (qtd. in Jones 28). It is clear that this documentary-collage is not, by any means, trying to give an historical account of *the person* Henry McCarty, also known as William H. Bonney. Rather, it clearly dissects historical accounts based on the myth of Billy the Kid, which Ondaatje then reinforces, mixes, and revisions into the unrecognizable, even to the point where it sometimes becomes unclear who is even conducting the narration. Is this Billy’s voice, or Pat Garrett’s, or perhaps even the voice of Ondaatje himself?

The choice of Billy the Kid as the protagonist, not only a notorious criminal, but a figure that has been presented both as villain and hero throughout the myth of the American West, reinforces the sense of ambiguity, both in narration and linguistically. However, it does not seem to present itself as an ethical issue. Rather, Ondaatje’s Billy emerges as “a hero of representation, for these documents are his ‘collected works’ not because he composed them, but because he is composed *of* them.” (28). In other words, Billy is not a hero in the traditional sense; he is not representing the dichotomy of right/wrong or good/evil. He is not the creator, he is the creation, the representation itself, only there to illuminate the impossibility of creating a coherent representation of him.

What Billy the Kid represents, depicted in a myriad of films, books, comic, and other forms of media, accentuates his status as one of the most portrayed figures of the American West in popular culture. A notable example of this is Sam Peckinpah's 1973 rendition, "Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid," which stood out in its time due to the amount of violence portrayed in it. However, despite Billy's status as one of the most recognizable figures of the West and the Western, his myth has transformed into a figure of ambiguity. While undeniably violent, Billy is also a symbol of freedom and justice, becoming a sort of Robin Hood character. Representing the quintessential outlaw, his search for freedom is created through violence, also in Ondaatje's rendition. Yet, Ondaatje focuses less on the physical violence done by Billy the Kid, and more on the metaphysical, figurative violence surrounding him as a figure. He plays with Billy's myth, or what Manina Jones calls his "legendary" figure, and draws the reader's attention into another sphere which again adds another focus to the text:

The root of the word legend, *legenda*, means 'what is to be read'; Billy the Kid is a legendary figure in the rhetorical sense, constructed in readings and in writings.

Because of the multiple, unstable and potentially contradictory nature of readings and writings (and readings *as* writings), however, Billy the Kid is subject to a kind of de-constructive drama that the text also enacts: he is both encoded by it and refuses to stick to the script. (Jones 28-29)

Just as the reader understands one aspect of Billy, he slips away and enters another form, deferring from one definition into another. This constant deferral of meaning, which results from making Billy come into the focus, then showing the ambiguity and arbitrariness of that focus, makes it clear that it is a representation supplementing a representation, supplementing a representation. This supplementation creates an interesting question; where do we find the real Billy the Kid? Put in other words, does a version of a "real" Billy the Kid even exist? By extracting the referent, the novel points out that this coherency or unity in the sign does not exist. It cannot exist. Ondaatje's Billy enacts this very problem. As he is trying to find unity within himself, this quest will only reveal the impossibility of a historical, objective identity. The historical person Henry McCarty, also known as William H. Bonney, has turned into a purely fictional figure and effect of the text. He has become an empty signifier to which the reader can attach any form of significance they themselves chose to. This notion is further enhanced through the uncertainty of who is even being portrayed and whose voice is actually narrating the story. The inherent ambiguity surrounding the identity of the speaker serves to question the reliability of the narration itself. Yet, the fact that there really is not a narrative at all, at least very little, encodes the whole structure of signification in its totality. The notion of

historicity and truth becomes completely unraveled the further we get into this “documentary-collage” and reveals the impossibility of an objective truth and our understanding of history and historicity.

2.2 Billy’s absence as the precondition for discourse

The physical violence that happens *by* and *to* Billy parallels the violence of language and representation. While travelling through the desert, the sun violently unpeels him and Billy’s identity gets turned inside out, revealing there is nothing inside; he has no fixed identity. Kathleen I. Bethell claims this “sun-rape” of Billy echoes the reader’s complicity in the rhetorical violence that is being enacted (86). As the reader traverse *The Collected Works*, they set out on a quest to capture Billy, and within the narrative there is a point where Billy physically gets captured by Pat Garrett. As Garrett is taking him to prison, bound up and stuck on a horse, they travel across the country, through the desert, until “the sun turned into a pair of hands and began to pull out the hairs in my head. Twist pluck twist pluck ... drawing back each layer of skin” (Ondaatje 79). As the sun pulls Billy apart, plucking him like a chicken, this dissection of Billy’s character threatens to expose each hidden layer of his core, only to reveal that there is nothing there. As he is being peeled like an onion, the sun continues this violation of him: “Then he brought his other hand into play ... one hand white as new smelling paper the other 40 colors ochres blues silver from my lung gold and tangerine from the burst ear canals all that clung to him as he went in and came out” (81). This hand, “white as new smelling paper,” emerges like a deity from the sky, representing the omniscient writer who creates the story. The violations this hand inflicts on Billy are parallel the process of signification: to create meaning in the production – or rather reproduction – of Billy, a violent process must happen. As the brutal unraveling of Billy continues, both writer and reader become complicit in the process. However, in trying to get to the core of him, they quickly realize that there is no center to unravel, no fixed identity at his core. This process culminates when the hand pulls Billy’s genitalia out, peeling his foreskin “back back back down” (81), wrapping him in it. As Billy shouts, “I’ve been fucked I’ve been fucked” (81), it becomes clear that the incestuous re-coupling with himself and the sun’s rape of Billy, echoes the re-breeding of his myth. Leaving nothing but a trace behind, the reader must let go of their current version of him, only to start again. In their quest to capture him, to bring him into presence, the reader only creates an absence illuminating how his true essence can never be encapsulated. The physical violence inflicted on Billy parallels the rhetorical violence in perpetuating the myth of him, which occurs when we try to find a core, a center that contains

meaning. In the reader's persistent attempts to create context, they are doomed to repeat their quest, like some Sisyphus searching for meaning. As they continue, on and on, the legend of Billy the Kid gets uprooted more and more, becoming increasingly fluid and shifting. The pattern of Billy's subsequent capture and escape thus mirrors this cyclic pattern of signification. Just when the reader thinks they have found the "silver key" (17) to unlock it all, the textual maze reshapes itself again, forcing the reader to dive back into the labyrinth of Billy, which proves to be nothing more than an empty shell.

One reoccurring motif that runs through the text, is that of photography. The text's use of photography challenges the notion of truth-telling and objective reality, leading the reader to question whether representation and language could have the capacity to capture and mirror reality. By redacting the "proofs," or the referents, the narrative serves not just as a reflection about Billy the Kid as it does about the very nature of representation itself. *The Collected Works* opens with an undeveloped picture, or rather a square with nothing in it; black lines frame nothing and nothingness. Accompanying this image there is a text which starts, "I send you a picture of Billy made with the Perry shutter as quick as it can be worked" (1). The credits attribute this quote to "the great Western photographer L.A. Huffman" (121), some of whose pictures we actually get to see throughout this book. Yet, the reader's first encounter with Billy is through this empty frame. In this context, the speaker gives "you" – the reader – the power to develop this empty picture of Billy. By inviting the reader to become proactive in the novel, the text grants the reader authority, and complicity, in the revisioning of Billy the Kid, both as mythical figure and as symbol. It is precisely this power of creation that gets illuminated as highly destructive as well. Due to the lack of representation the undeveloped picture in the novel sets up, Billy is absent, both in the photograph and as referent. As Manina Jones points out, Ondaatje – as well as the "I" in the text – takes on the role of compiler, editor and author (30), promising to provide evidence later on. "I will send you proofs sometime", the narrator says (Ondaatje 1), while in the meantime, the reader must make do with imagining and filling out the blanks for themselves. Delaying these "proofs" thus expels the objective truth from the very start, turning objective truth into fictional proof (Jones 30). By doing this, Ondaatje sends the reader into a quest for meaning, as we try to assemble a coherent picture of a myth in a maze with no exit and no answers, only more questions. The meaning the reader aspires to, gets constantly deferred at each turn throughout the novel.

The wording connected to the empty frame suggests that there is a mystery to uncover. The "I" is telling the "you" to take notice in receiving "*the specimens* that they were made with the lens wide open and many of the best *exposed* when my horse was in motion"

(Ondaatje 1, my italics). This reference to truth seeking and criminology, found in the word choice of specimens and exposing “relates to two other related ‘truth-seeking’ activities: the detective's investigation of a crime, and the process of legally trying a criminal” (Jones 31). Yet without any evidence, how is one supposed to investigate? What is there even to investigate? Perhaps the very notion of the investigation itself. Instead of becoming detective, one could argue that the reader becomes an active participant in the violence. Connecting the notion of shooting – both with a gun and a camera – the reader is also on the quest to “shoot” Billy, to complete the picture of him. As Susan Sontag asserts in *On Photography*:

To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as the camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder—a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time. (14-15)

The connection between the camera and the gun that Sontag makes offers a profound insight. The act of photography, akin to the act of writing, can serve as a form of violation, reducing individuals to mere objects. Like the Greek word for photograph translates into “light-writing,” the process also threatens to erase or ignite the essence of the thing itself. As witnessed in the scene with Sallie Chisum, where she closes and opens the “shutters” of the windows, it also reflects the opening and closing of the shutters of a camera-lens. In that sense Sallie and Billy could be considered stuck inside the camera itself, with its shutters opening and closing. In the attempt to capture Billy, he gets caught inside the camera with Sallie walking around “like some ghost” (Ondaatje 32) demonstrating the impossibility of capturing the true sense of a thing itself. This essence will continuously remain “inside” the camera, slowly dying there like Billy and Sallie, only to turn into a simulacrum. As “the sun and the moon taking over from each other,” (32) with the moon becoming a pale replica of the sun, Billy the Kid also becomes a pale replica of his own “legenda,” a mere simulacrum of an original article now disposed of. This representation, now turned into misrepresentation, highlights the impossibility of relaying objective historical truth on a larger scale. In the meaning-making process of signification, Billy’s essence is like his “picture now sliding ... crushing me against the wall” (33). He gets crushed and fragmented until he is “blacking out of clarity” (33). The reader, like Billy looking into Angela’s split arm, is looking for some sort of clarity:

look at it, I’m looking into your arm

nothing confused in there

look how clear

Yes Billy, clear (68)

However, there is no real clarity or resolution to be found in the text. This is further emphasized by removing the pictures of the comic book of “Billy the Kid and the Princess” (103), leaving only words, taken out of context without their pictures or, in other words, leaving only the signifiers as markers, but without the intended meaning, only to show the meaning making process as incomplete, violent, and absurd. Investigating the absent referent and trying to see what is hidden in plain sight will prove to be a nearly impossible task. Due to the absence of the proofs, the dots the reader will try to connect are constructed entirely within their own subjective framework. The reader’s quest then, parallels what Billy says in his faux interview, namely that his mistreatment in the Lincoln County War was never based on any solid proof, just stories and theories, that he “could only be arrested if they had proof, definite proof, not just stories” (84). Even though judge Houston “understood that both sides were guilty” (86) they still decided to come after Billy for a murder that happened during the war, despite the fact that others were granted amnesty. Proof is exactly what *The Collected Works* does not contain; there is no proof, only stories. From the very start, as seen with the undeveloped picture, the absence of the proofs makes it apparent that any complete interpretation or analysis will be futile. This is further emphasized when the narrative progresses and the story becomes fragmented into oblivion. As Billy explains in his interview the “evidence used was unconstitutional” (86). These fragmented stories, bits and pieces of an imagined Billy, also seem to be at war with each other, echoing the “unconstitutional” Lincoln County War. The term here serves a dual purpose, not only is it alluding to a breach in the legal system, but it is also pointing out the lack of a coherency within the text. No matter how hard the reader tries, the fragmented pieces of Billy will never constitute a whole. As Billy’s idea of death is that “they’ll just put you in a box and you will stay there forever” (87) the notion of being boxed in and categorized is precisely what *The Collected Works* contests. The novel digs Billy out and revitalizes him, leaving the reader with the ironic question, “Two wrongs make a right, right?” (86).

However, the revisioning of Billy does not merely to shift the dichotomy, freeing Billy and claiming his innocence. Rather, it highlights the inherent paradox of the revisionist western, where the goal is not to invert the binary oppositions of right or wrong but to try to

expose the process within these dichotomic differences. Like Derridean deconstruction, *The Collected Works* also points to an ambiguity in language and the meaning-making process. The essence of deconstruction, especially with historical revisioning, is not merely to present one side as good and the other as bad. Trying to understand that both sides can be a little guilty and a little right points to the interdependency of a coherent comprehension, rather than a shifted one. Deconstruction is important because it does not let representational accounts dictate how we view history and how we understand the world. The point is not to state that there is no meaning, but rather to always question the very meaning-making process, especially when it is dictated by those in power. Like Hayden White states:

In proper history, the element of construct is displaced to the interior of the narrative, while the element of “found” data is permitted to occupy the position of prominence in the storyline itself. In speculative philosophy of history, the reverse is the case. Here the element of conceptual construct is brought to the fore, explicitly set forth, and systematically defended, with the data being used primarily for purposes of illustration or exemplification. I conclude, therefore, that every philosophy of history contains within it the elements of a full-blown philosophy of history. (427-28)

The Collected Works makes the reader aware of how with every historical account, there is a little bit of speculative history as well – and vice versa. The text’s deconstruction reveals this inherent violence. In decentralizing the stability of myths, stories, history, and memory, one sees the importance of always revisiting the past, in order to understand the present more fully.

2.3 Deconstructing Billy

The myth of Billy the Kid becomes deconstructed and pulled apart like the chicken pulling Gregory’s vein 12 feet from his body making his body a kite:

still tugging at the vein
till it was 12 yards long
as if it held the body like a kite
Gregory’s last words being
get away from me yer stupid chicken (Ondaatje 11)

In a similar manner, the novel is also unraveling the threads of the text, until its meaning becomes so distant that it is only visible like a kite in the wind. The reader is, like Billy

himself, watching the “diagram of watch or star” (7). Yet, when we attempt to reconstruct the meaning, the outcome is always a little different each time, prompting the question, what truth does that leave the reader with, then? Just as Billy dissects watches, gets into “the stomach of clocks” (7) to “watch inside,” (99) the text is engaging in a deconstruction of the narrative. This is made evident as it uses the same scenes and motifs, examining them from different perspectives, only to repeat them, with minor alterations, “Again”:

Down the street was a dog. Some mutt spaniel, black and white. One dog, Garrett and two friends, stud looking, came down the street to the house to me.

Again.

Down the street was a dog. Some mutt spaniel, black and white. One dog, Garrett and two friends came down the street to the house, to me. (46)

This reiteration creates a narrative understanding of Billy not as a singular sense of self, but rather develops a myriad of different contexts in which for him to be understood. As the text connects the dissection of an “unnatural,” mechanical object, like watches, with the “natural” objects of humans, birds, and flowers, the distinction between man and the man-made become clear. The human body might also function as a complex system of mechanics; however, our memory does not function in the same way. The parallel between the dissection of watches and the dissection of humans collapses during the incident where Angela’s arm gets shot to pieces. As Billy examines the wound, he looks through it, wanting to make it “clear” (68). Craving clarity, Billy wishes to decode the human mechanics just as he decodes the mechanics of watches. Yet, when dealing with a human body, there are no answers in the flesh. Billy finds no clear-cut answers within Angela’s sinews and blood. Since as the human essence is fragmented, there is no reversal when natural objects die. Unlike a watch, which can be reassembled again, biological life holds no such abilities. Neither the physical confines of the human body or the figurative part of our existence, such as memory and representation, make it possible to accurately revive and revise such characters as Billy the Kid.

The second important parallel between Billy’s deconstruction of watches and the text’s deconstruction is that both stop time. They both remove temporality, dismantling it before the reader’s very eyes. Pulling apart the watches, like the textual deconstruction, leaves Billy in state of flux and timelessness. He can both be here, *now* – or there, *then*. He is fluid, like language, constantly moving between the space of presence and absence. By dismantling

him to “(watch)” (76), to “watch inside” (99) the reader must then search the white pages to fill in the blanks themselves. What Billy’s incoherent identity reveals is the inherent duality of textuality. By bringing one aspect of him into the light, the text thus moves another aspect out of the way, making Billy’s identity, itself without a center, the unfixed center of his collected works. By trying to force a singular version of who Billy the Kid was, one would enact the dangers of the violence of representation, because by categorizing and compartmentalizing him, one only differentiates him. In this context, the lack of pronouns throughout *The Collected Works* creates an ambiguity that questions not only Billy’s identity, but the project of the novel as a whole because it relates not only to Billy, but to the very core of textuality itself. With the text omitting the referent, the essence of the thing itself, Billy is left in an interconnected play of signification, which refers and defers back and forth, leaving less and less of a trace of Billy behind. In trying to decode who Billy was, and who he has become in representation, the text takes part in perpetuating the violent structures in language and meaning-making.

As the story progresses there emerges a poem which exposes the very textuality of Billy’s collected works:

Not a story about me through their eyes then. Find the beginning, the slight silver key to unlock it, to dig it out. Here then is a maze to begin, be in.

Two years ago Charlie Bowdre and I criss-crossed the Canadian border. Ten miles north of it ten miles south. Our horses stepped from country to country, across low rivers, through different colours of tree green. The two of us, our criss-cross like a whip in slow motion, the ridge of action rising and falling getting narrower in radius till it ended and we drifted down to Mexico and old heat. That there is nothing of depth, of significant accuracy, of wealth in the image, I know. It is there for a beginning. (17)

The maze “to begin” and to “be in” parallels the maze of textuality. Since the text does not have a linear structure and lacks narrative, the reader can “begin” and “be in” the text at any given point. They can start at the start, read it backwards, or jump in and read it in bits and pieces. Just as the passage above tells us, by “criss-crossing” the Canadian border with Charlie Bowdre, the reader also criss-crosses the text, leaving the reader with a nonlinear way of understanding time, memory, and Billy’s identity. The text then gives a new perspective not only on the myth of Billy the Kid, but on storytelling and representation in general. Thus,

through the metaphor of criss-crosses the US-Canadian border, the reader finds themselves in the maze of textuality, being caught in a chain of signification that signifies signification itself, because the labyrinth of textuality is one that is impossible to get out of.

The presentation of the maze with the deictic phrase “Here then” illuminates the temporal and spatial connections of the past and the present. The shifting relationship between the spatial here and the temporal then “gives past writings a ‘new beginning’ in our ‘finding’ of them as ‘a maze to begin’, ‘be in’” (Jones 29). The phrase enables an understanding of the maze-poem’s present reading as bound between past and present, and perhaps even future readings of the text, referring to a reality outside itself where time is understood as shifting, as expanding and contracting, like a sort of breathing entity. Because of the text’s narrative – in entering the text like a maze – it yet again challenges the notion of the detective novel, of a mystery that is there to be solved and resolved. However, it becomes clear early on that this is not a detective novel where the truth will be revealed, because the “proofs” are long gone and absent. When the reader enters the maze which is the text, they look for “the slight silver key” (Ondaatje 17) to unlock it all. Yet, the reader is “looking less for keys than keyholes” (Jones 29). The reader will not be granted a cathartic clarifying moment when the “truth” will be revealed. Navigating through the maze will ultimately leave the reader in cul-de-cac after cul-de-sac, as readers starts again, finds a new beginning, a new entrance to understand the text, and creates another meaning. Jones compares this way of entering the text to “the entrance to the Boot Hill cemetery, literally a place one might enter to visit those who have passed/past away” (29). Rummaging through the gravestones, looking at the markers of their absence, is reminiscent of biographical graverobbing (29). This becomes a disturbing image of searching through historical facts to turn them into fictional representation. It also raises a poignant question of appropriating the narratives of the deceased for our own purpose. The text is in its own way appropriating Billy for its own use. Exhuming the dead from their graves to give them new life again also serves as a significant metaphor for the violent cycle inherent to revision and storytelling. As the text states, in Boot Hill cemetery:

300 of the dead in Boot Hill died violently

200 by guns, over 50 by knives

Some were pushed under trains – a popular

and overlooked form of murder in the west.

Some from brain hemorrhages resulting from bar fights

at least 10 killed in barbed wire (Ondaatje 5)

What does this passage tell the reader? It is just relaying facts of violent deaths, nothing more. The dead are simply material referents such as Billy's imagined dead corpse, who refuse to give up their meaning. The image of the dead from Boot Hill cemetery will reverberate as the reader is told to imagine digging up Billy:

Imagine if you dug him up and brought him out. You'd see very little. There'd be the buck teeth. Perhaps Garret's bullet no longer in thick wet flesh would roll in the skull like a marble. From the head there'd be a trail of vertebrae like a row of pearl buttons off a rich coat down the pelvis. The arms would be cramped on the edge of what was the box. (101)

As the reader digs him out to reconstruct him, only Billy's physical signifiers become visible. When the reader reimagines him, Billy is resurrected like some Frankenstein's monster, or as will later be seen, Livingstone's mad dogs. The very nature of revisioning and recreating ensures that each time a story is told, or a memory is revisited, it will mutate and become slightly different.

2.4 Becoming aware of textuality

The Collected Works makes the reader aware of its own textuality in many ways, most prominently by being self-reflexive. Such self-reflexivity is reminiscent of how Toni Morrison many years later would end her novel *Jazz*: "Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because, look, look. Look where your hands are. Now" (Morrison 229). The reader of *The Collected Works* also becomes aware of their hands. On multiple occasions, Billy is told to "watch your hands" (Ondaatje 8, 19). On other occasions, the hands are linked to the process of creation and destruction as we see with Livingstone's mad dogs which will be examined shortly, as well as the "sun-rape," where the hand of God comes down "one hand white as new smelling paper" (81). This focus on hands is a prominent feature and has multiple functions, both encapsulating the effect of stagnation, as well as suggesting fluidity within the textual realm. First of all, as Billy asserts in a poem, he is "unable to move / with nothing in my hands" (78). The stagnation with nothing in his hands, with neither pen nor gun, makes the reader aware of how they are unable to progress in the story without the book in their hands. The reader becomes very much aware of the text and the textuality. Functioning like a voyeur and destructor, the reader becomes complicit in

perpetuating Billy's myth into oblivion, which not only complicates the reader's relationship with the text but also challenges the very act of reading as a form of perpetuating mythical constructs.

Secondly, the fluidity of words is linked to motion. By contrast with the lack of motion with nothing in one's hands, writing is compared to fluidity and the sliding motion of damp glass sliding over a wooden bar: "and my fingers touch / this soft blue paper notebook / controls a pencil that shifts up and sideways / mapping my thinking going its own way / like light wet glasses drifting on polished wood" (75). The motion of sliding like a wet glass along the bar counter is also similar to the motion of the riders, back and forth, criss-crossing the Canadian border, and also the motions that occurs when Billy is travelling with Pat Garrett, outside the set path "back and forward, side to side over the country, avoiding people and the law" (79) thus avoiding the set structures, or in this case the rigid right/wrong, black/white dichotomy seen in most Westerns. Rather, the fluidity of writing mirrors the fluidity of a "river you could get lost in" (23). The text shows the impossibility of "mapping my thinking going its own way" (75), an endeavor similar to mapping the flow of water. Bethell contends that any attempt to construct a linear narrative for Billy is "as seductively absurd as trying to return the drops of water dribbled from a horse's face back into their original position within the river's flow" (87).

Returning to the image of hands, one of the most prominent features of the reference to hands is found in the original title of the novel. The full title of the novel, even though it is removed in newer editions, was *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left-Handed Poems*. As Kertzer asserts, the novel is called *Left-Handed Poems* "because Billy's hand is more skilled with a gun than with a pen" (86). However, this thesis renders that understanding a misconception, because Billy "used a fork and knife alternately - always with his right hand, he never used his left hand for anything except of course to shoot" (Ondaatje 42). It is indicated that *The Collected Works*' Billy is left-handed and used his left hand to shoot. Simultaneously, with the same hand, the supposed compositions of his works are compiled. This only furthers the connection between shooting and writing – the hand holds both the power to create and destroy. Further development of the connection between the destructive power of both words and bullets can be found as the reader criss-crosses along the page in hope of connecting the dots. But the dots go stumbling across the page like "a pencil / harnessing my face / goes stumbling into dots" (89). Both the words and the bullets have the same mission: to destroy Billy. When trying to harness the essence of Billy, the text evaporates and goes stumbling into dots. The text becomes fragmented and violent in its

pursuit of representation. As the text deconstructs, the reader becomes complicit in the act of trying to put the pieces back together. By trying to give the text meaning, the reader is enacting the violent process inherent in meaning-making, becoming a part of the text's overarching project of encoding the inherent violence in representation.

Arguably, the driving force of *The Collected Works* is the ultimate violent confrontation between Pat and Billy, which serves as the narrative's ultimate coda. Just as Pat is trying to capture Billy, so is the reader. In a joint mission, the reader lives vicariously through Pat, trying to "get" Billy and put him in a box (both literally and figuratively). But just as Pat is shooting at him, trying to catch him – essentially to kill and destroy him – the words of the page parallel the movement of the bullets:

and suns coming up everywhere out of the walls and floors
Garrett's jaw and stomach thousands

of lovely perfect sun balls
breaking at each other click
click click click like Saturday morning pistol cleaning
when the bullets hop across the bed sheet and bounce and click (99)

This clicking of the bullets echoes the click of the camera just as much as it mirrors the words on the page. The aim, for the bullets, words and pictures, is that they are all trying to hit their target, to capture their mark, seeking to encapsulate said moment or concept in time. They all aim to destroy, to stagnate, to make something fixed. Yet because of the diachronic, nonlinear, and unfixed way the book is presented, the connection between creation and destruction become more apparent, highlighting the inherent paradox found in revisionist Westerns, as well as all revisionist histories and representation. It answers the fundamental question which arises, whether the retelling of the myth of Billy the Kid actually brings the reader closer to any essence of him or whether such representations simply push him further away. Evidently, it is the latter.

The story of Livingstone's mad dogs is one in which Livingstone started off with two spaniels and "literally copulated them into madness" (62). The two dogs and their pups "were bred and re-bred with their brothers and sisters and mothers and uncles and nephews. Every combination until their bones grew arched and tangled, ears longer than their feet, their

tempers became either slothful or venomous and their jaws were black rather than red” (62). Starting with only two dogs, Livingstone bred these two into “40 mad dogs, clinically and scientifically breeding the worst with the worst” (63) until “heaps of bone and hair and sexual organs and bulging eyes and minds ... pressed out of shape by new freakish bones that grew into their skulls” (63). The story of the dogs parallels how the story of Billy gets bred, re-bred, and inbred, again and again throughout this novel – until he is unrecognizable, even to himself. The analogy of Livingstone’s mad dogs works as an example of inscription’s double nature, its dual effacement and creation, operating in an endless cycle of repetition and revision. This scene becomes a parallel to the myth of Billy, culling itself again and again each time it gets told. Being itself a story within a story, a tall tale in the midst of tall tales, makes it thus a reflection of storytelling itself. What happens with the dogs happens in revision and writing as well: the origin gets lost, and what remains is a defected, incestuous representation of a representation, which perhaps once was founded on truth, but now is merely a sad replica of its original state.

Livingstone, the creator and father of these inbred dogs, is eventually devoured by them. “When they found Livingstone there was almost nothing left of him” (64), only his bones, his watch and “his left wrist - the hand that held the whip when he was in the pen” (64). The hand that created the dogs, that whipped them into submission, into rebreeding, the hand that controlled these monstrous creatures, the hand that both did them damage and gave them life, is all that is left. This story functions as a parallel to the writer and creator. The connection between the pen (a fenced in place to keep animals) and a pen (to write with) cannot go unnoticed. The pen serves a dual purpose, functioning both as *an arena* and as *an instrument* of destruction and creation. This duality encapsulates Billy both *in a pen*, and *with a pen*.

Another version of the coupling of Billy’s myth can be seen with the crazed rats in the barn. When the ambiguous “I” is in the barn, waiting out a fever, the “I” is abandoning all thought and all human interaction, becoming non-violent to the point where “I avoided the cobwebs who had places to grow to, who had stories to finish” (14). As it has been described before, the process of creation is a violent one. Becoming non-violent would in this sense mean that the process of creation has become stagnant. It is not until the crazed rats appear, becoming demented and killing each other, that in the end the narrator takes out his gun and fires at them, “Till my hand was black and the gun was hot and no other animal of any kind remained in that room but for the boy in the blue shirt sitting there coughing at the dust, rubbing the sweat of his upper lip with his left forearm” (15). This is yet another reiteration of the process of writing as a violent process. The destruction, both with gun and pen, occurs

when making one point of focus present ultimately has to make another one absent. The various constructions of Billy, akin to Livingstone's inbred dogs, engage in a self-perpetuating cycle like the crazed rats in the barn. They metaphorically feed of each other to create nutrition so that they themselves can live.

In addition to Billy's identity and self-reflection, this re-breeding can be seen in the hybridization of the novel's form as well, where the form of the text itself at times copulates into madness. As each part of Billy gets further and further bred into madness, he himself experiences nightmares and living dreams where his sense of reality is crazed. His thoughts are described as "floating barracuda in the brain" (37) and having "a rat fyt in my head" (37). In a poem towards the end, Billy is shifting the perspective with his finger in a living nightmare, sitting on the edge of darkness, witnessing "a world that's so precise / every nail and cobweb / has magnified itself to my presence" (77). Shifting between reality and fantasy, Billy feels "the heat / floating his brain in fantasy" (78) until he is:

here on the edge of the sun

that would ignite me

looking out into pitch white

sky and grass overdeveloped into meaninglessness (78).

The contrast between the undeveloped picture of Billy on the first page and the world being "overdeveloped into meaninglessness" explains the notion of representation and the paradox of the essence of a thing not being able to become fully present in representation. This mirrors Plato's cave allegory, where the sun – symbolizing ultimate reality or absolute truth – burns so bright that it threatens to "ignite" him, to overdevelop him into meaninglessness. The sun's illumination of Billy could be seen as a way to enlightenment, but also, in accordance with the sun-rape, it threatens to ignite him and to dissolve his very essence. This image again brings back the notion of overexposure with the camera, to render Billy so devoid of meaning it culminates only in a blank whiteness: the same blank whiteness the reader is supposed to recreate Billy from. In the same manner, the act of representation simultaneously threatens to destroy Billy's true nature and identity, thus showing the impossibility of language mirroring an absolute truth. Just when you think you see the thing itself, it vaporizes before your very eyes and loses its meaning.

2.5 Narrative ambiguity

In the reader's quest for truth and the essence of Billy, it is noteworthy that so much of the novel is ambiguous about the identity of the speaker. Sometimes the reader gets accounts that are clearly from someone else, as we see with Sallie Chisum's thought on Billy's boyish charm, when she notes that he seems like a "good-looking clear-eyed boy" (53). Even though she first "pictured" (53) Billy as evil, Sallie gives Billy the characteristics of the "pink of politeness" with a flower in his lapel, the most "courteous a little gentleman as I ever met" (91). Yet, most of the time, the ambiguity of who is speaking is predominant. One clear example of this, as Kathleen I. Bethell points out (84), is the question of who actually shot Gregory:

After shooting Gregory

This is what happened

I'd shot him well and careful

Made it explode under his heart

So it wouldnt last long and

Was about to walk away

When this chicken paddles out to him (Ondaatje 11)

Since Gregory is not mentioned in the list of killings at the start, it begs the question, does that mean he is not killed by either Pat or Billy? Who then, is this ambiguous "I" that has shot him well and careful? Ondaatje himself? *The Collected Works* lack, or mix, of pronouns especially highlight this ambiguity. Other poems leave out pronouns altogether, like "One morning woke up" (49) and "Am the dartboard / for your midnight blood" (89). This uncertainty only goes to show that the decontextualization of the speaker creates more questions than it answers. It creates not only one, but multiple universes where the reader themselves might even be involved in the shooting of Gregory. This question is raised multiple times throughout the novel, especially with the very last poem of the book, when the ambiguous "I" in the hotel room can "smell the smoke still in my shirt" (110). The smoke could be either remains of the nicotine smoke from the night before as the writer meticulously types away at Billy the Kid's *Collected Works*, or perhaps gun smoke, from all the shooting – or possibly both. The question of whether it is Billy, Pat, Ondaatje, or even the photographer

Huffman narrating, leaves all possibilities for interpretation open. In *The Collected Works* nothing is fixed in time. Each sentence could contain a little part of each narrator, or perhaps, a little of each part of Billy the Kid's identity and mythology.

The narrative ambiguity reverberates into the hierarchical understanding of binary oppositions in the text and creates uncertainty about the different dichotomies presented in the book. As this thesis has already presented, there is a connection between destruction/creation, found also in the binary opposition of life/death. The text constantly shifts the hierarchy and shows the interdependency of the different dichotomies in the text. Thus the blossoming of flowers reminds both Billy – as well as the reader – of death (56), as well as of the constant cycle of creation and destruction. The very notions of good/bad and right/wrong are constantly in flux and shifting. This underscores the connection between presence/absence, which makes the white space between the markings of *The Collected Works* just as important as the text itself. This can also be seen with the description of Billy's hand as "virgin white" (42) echoing the blank pages of the book, waiting to be filled. This blankness mirrors how meaning can be found in the absence and the blank space, in what is left unsaid, just as much as the violent representations – or misrepresentations – in the text.

This constant shifting of the binaries in focus show how life would not have any meaning or significance without death, likewise with creation and destruction. As the text shifts the hierarchy of who is speaking and in control, and what they are saying as well as the significance of the words they use, one specific meaning is never fixed. As Kertzer points out, it is through the abrupt lines with little to no punctuation that the scenes and poems seem like "halting thoughts," which "come in spurts, with each line a fresh idea or sensation often not clearly related to the preceding one" (86). Even though it is understandable what Kertzer's point is here, one could still argue there is an associative connotation running throughout the text. There is a chain of signification present from most poems to the following ones. This functions as a sort of associative train of thought that runs wild within the text, even though the meaning of said words is shown to be arbitrary. The image of crooked birds is such a phrase that runs through the text with double meaning. This mirrors the pharmakon with its double meaning of poison and cure. Meaning both remedy and poison, and containing both malevolence and goodness, the play on the pharmakon is a play on opposites. When Charlie Bowdre's death is described, there is a simile of his liver being "like a headless hen jerking / brown all over the yard," then the poem's "I" (presumably Billy) has "seen that too at my aunt's / never eaten hen since then" (Ondaatje 8). In the following poem, the poems I "Crossed a crooked river ... shot a crooked bird" (10). With the text's use of the word

crooked, it can either be interpreted as an act of vengeance or of sympathy. Like the pharmakon, the bird is either crooked because it is damaged or hurt or the bird is crooked because it is evil. This bird association continues on into the next poem, where during the murder of Gregory, the chicken digs into his neck and walks away. The combination of humor and horror encapsulates both the absurdity and significance of the different representations of birds. Using Gregory's vein as a kite, this violent image is simultaneously a humorous and absurd affair. It contains both trauma and play. As an associative thought, it also highlights the ambiguity and arbitrariness of language and imagery, and in this case the arbitrariness of birds. As the reader also witnesses, Billy gets plucked like a chicken in the sun-rape. This connection begs the question, which type of crooked bird is Billy, then, captured or free, damaged or villainous? Meanwhile, Pat Garret is described by Sallie Chisum as having a "crooked mouth, crooked smile, crooked face," yet he is still a "remarkably handsome man" (93). This is opposed to Billy's boyish charm, which Sallie Chisum firmly established before. However, just like the crooked bird, none of them remain in the categories Sallie, or the novel, set out for them, because, as we see in another poem, the dichotomy of both the good and bad that is inherent in both Billy and Garrett, gets "captured" by an ambiguous narrator:

I knew both of these men intimately.

There was good mixed in with the bad

In Billy the Kid

And bad mixed in with the good

In Pat Garrett.

No matter what they did in the world

or what the world thought of them

they were my friends.

Both were worth knowing. (93)

This ambiguous narrative "I" who saw some good in Billy and some bad in Pat demonstrates the dangers of violence in trying to portray one specific reading or version of a person. That is also why the narrative is so unsure, why the reader is never certain of who is actually

speaking. In the absence of definitive evidence, seen with the removal of the referent and the “proofs,” it is important to recognize the dual qualities of both Pat and Billy. This constant flux within the dichotomy, the interconnectedness of the binary differences, which would in another setting help create Billy as a whole individual, becomes here, by showing the interplay and instability, a demonstration of how absolute truth and “true” essence cannot be captured. To have Billy disintegrate and disappear right before the readers very eyes show how this constant interplay can continue, and why Billy will never die. In this sense, Ondaatje’s Billy, with his constant deferral and absence, functions as the very precondition for discourse. In order for there to be a maze, i.e. the text, Billy has to be just as much gone as he is present. The significance of the physical violence, seen with the destruction of Billy, is there to establish a discourse on discourse itself.

2.6 Shooting the wrong man

The fact that the motivation for “all this violence” is never explicitly given, points to the fact that the theme of violence is the very motive at large. Ondaatje renders the question of a motive, before quoting a passage about the Lincoln County War:

A motive? some reasoning we can give to explain all this violence. Was there a source for all this? Yup –

“Hill leaped from his horse and, sticking a rifle to the back of Tunstall’s head blew out his brains. Half drunk with whisky and mad with the taste of blood, the savages turned the murder of a defenseless man into an orgy.” (55)

While the Lincoln County War and the murder of John Tunstall is used as a backdrop for the historical events portrayed, in the narrative context of *The Collected Works* they are used as a site to explore larger questions about representation, interpretation and memory. Tunstall’s murder, which is described as “ghastly, meaningless” (55), as his body is left as a marker in the middle of nowhere, is depicted almost as a sidenote in this story – a meaningless marker, mirroring a word without significance. The same sense of meaninglessness occurs in all the murders represented in the book, proving they are founded on something baseless and without any real justification. In this context, *The Collected Works*’ revisioning of Billy is not really a revisioning, it is a deconstruction. The futility of recreating a coherent Billy exposes the paradox of all revisionist westerns: they turn representation into misrepresentation. By

shifting the binary oppositions in the novel, *The Collected Works* encodes language's inherent violence and exposes the paradox of reproducing yet another version of Billy the Kid. The text highlights the paradox of revisionist westerns, while simultaneously rejecting the notion of participating in any definite perpetuation of Billy's myth. As a contrast to this PBS' documentary series "American Experience" portray events and people in American history. Their sum up on their broadcasting platform is literally boxing Billy's life into fragments, giving a timeline to the "Life and Legend of Billy the Kid":

December 31, 2010

Governor Bill Richardson of New Mexico, who had been considering a posthumous pardon for Billy the Kid on the premise that it would follow through on the purported 1879 promise made by Governor Lew Wallace, announces on his last day in office that he will not pardon McCarty. He cites "historical ambiguity." (PBS)

As a parallel to real life and Richardson's denial of Billy's pardoning, *The Collected Works'* Billy the Kid can never be posthumously pardoned. There is not sufficient evidence. He will always carry the burden of historical ambiguity, especially as a myth and legend. As a "legenda," a representation, he will never have justice, there will never be any resolution, because his myth will continuously defer elsewhere, it will "be with the world till she dies" (Ondaatje 88). His myth will be a continuous replication of a copy of a simulacrum, and so forth. There can never be an "end" to Billy's legend, because it has no "beginning." He remains perpetually ensnared within his own absent figure, a simulacrum distanced from its original article. Devoid of any direct point of reference, his true essence remains elusive, forever subjected to endless reiteration, "again," and "again."

The Collected Works interrogates the elusive nature of truth-telling, a theme which reaches its climax as Pat Garrett is accused of shooting "the wrong man" (108). This serves as a catalyst for the reader's own self-examination, prompting them to question whether they too have "shot" the wrong man. In the aftermath of Billy's murder, the question of accurate representation is raised when Garrett proclaims, "I *think* I got him," to which Poe replies "I *believe* you have killed the wrong man" (108, my italics). This exchange casts doubt on whether or not Garrett has hit his correct mark, both in the content of their conversation, as well as with the ambiguous wording both Garrett and Poe use. Reflecting on their own conceptualization of Billy, the reader is also granted the opportunity to question the very notion of representation. As straight-shooting is often compared to truth-telling, this doubt regarding hitting the right man or not, also encapsulates the question of Billy's representation

in *The Collected Works*. Does the text hit its mark, or has it, like Pat, shot the wrong man? The text shows how there is no “real” Billy to capture. He is merely an empty shell to project whatever significance his current creator – or reader – wishes onto. This leaves readers with a confused realization: after the completion of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, what remains? Readers are still stuck in the maze, still without the promised “proofs,” and even after turning Billy inside out, the uncertainty of his identity is still what predominates. Presented as a misrepresentation, the doubt caused by Garrett’s murder leaves the reader without any form of clarity, resolution, satisfaction, or catharsis. As the novel starts with the undeveloped picture, it has in fact become overdeveloped and overexposed into meaninglessness. Even though the novel is fragmented, there is a cyclic pattern of returning to a place which is very much the same, but slightly different, leading the reader to focus on the text’s status as text, the very fabric of signification as the text itself enacts the very process of signification. This will in the end leave the reader with more questions than answers. Billy’s undeveloped picture still remains blank, yet instead the last picture in the novel is a child in a cowboy outfit. Is this child Ondaatje himself? Or perhaps the “blank page” of innocence, waiting for the generational cycle of violence to hit? Perhaps the readers should see this child as a symbol of the empty signifier of Billy the “kid” the actual child, someone they project our own image onto. Nevertheless, like Billy’s last request in his fictional interview, the representation of Billy the Kid will be with the world “till she dies” (88). As long as the myth gets repeated, Billy still lives on.

2.7 Chapter conclusion

As this chapter has illuminated, the connection between the thematic, physical violence *in* the text gets merged with the rhetorical violence *of* the text. As the novel sets out with the undeveloped picture of Billy, its missing referent, it is lacking the very essence of what the story is based on. The readers set out on a quest to find some sort of meaning in the lack of narrative and fragmented structure that is the consequence of this missing referent. However, as the reader continues, they get lost in the maze of textuality, a maze leading to cul-de-sac after cul-de-sac, without any exit or way to get out. Without any form of resolution, the reader remains stuck in this maze which represents Billy, both as physical *and* textual element. Travelling through the maze the reader violates Billy, as demonstrated in the sun rape, in the process of trying to find the center of the maze and the core of his identity. The reader is also violently pulling his skin off and plucking him like a chicken, practically raping him to get to the bottom of his identity. This dissection and deconstruction of Billy is mirrored in the

multiple images of dissected clocks and captured and taxidermized birds. Nevertheless, the dissection of Billy's identity reveals there is nothing there, no fixed identity; rather it is fluid and ambiguous. The unfixed identity of Billy is a reflection of the flux and ambiguous identity found in representation and language. When the reader tries to get to the bottom of his identity, there ends up being nothing there. The maze, just like the story, inverts. This inversion underscores a deictic approach to language, reflecting on itself as well as an outside reality. As Billy contends "I think now" (72), the reader is compelled to introspection, what they think "now," to examine their own complicity within the context of the story, "Here then" (17).

The text shifts between poetry, prose, and photographs, as well as the interview and comic book. This fragmentation of the text, both in style and genre, is another aspect of the fragmentation of Billy's identity and how the reader themselves become a part of the violent reconstruction of him. The self-reflexive nature of the text is both commenting on its own textuality as well as showing said textuality as a violent process. In order to create, one must destroy another thing, which is the violence of representation. The reader becomes aware of the inherent violence of representation through the nonlinear, fragmented structure of the novel, as well as the temporal and spatial ambiguity of when and where the narrative occurs. The nonlinear approach to storytelling prompts the reader to grapple with the question of what, indeed, is the core of the story? Coupled with the persistent ambiguity about the identity of the speaker, the reader is left questioning the motivations and authenticity behind the narrative presented. The fact that there is no real narrative leaves the reader constantly grasping for the meaning and trying to find keyholes in the maze. Yet the tension between Pat and Billy seems to be the real narrative driving force, a binary with mutually annihilating terms, like writings double nature of effacement and creation. The hierarchical binary underlines these power dynamics and raises further questions of morality; who is good, and who is bad within this narrative structure? The text's deconstructive approach dismantles these binaries, shifting between good/bad, right/wrong, thus exposing the problem of searching for a historically objective truth. Consequently, this notion challenges the reader, by making them complicit in the reiteration of the myth of Billy, and creates an insight which functions as a means to make the reader question myths and the meaning-making process in its broader terms.

Starting without a referent with the underdeveloped picture, the myth of Billy gets culled like Livingstone's mad dogs. The more the myth is perpetuated, the more and more abstracted it gets, caught within a play of signification and representation – or rather

misrepresentation. Like the allegorical rats, this metaphor connects the process of physical violence to the act of writing, illuminating the inherent paradox of revision, because with each revisioning, the original gets further and further away, until it turns into something unrecognizable. Removing Billy as referent creates the precondition for discourse itself as it creates an absence in the presence that constantly defers meaning back and forth. In the culmination of *The Collected Works*, the idea that Pat Garrett might have shot the wrong man underscores the pivotal notion that there is no “right” man to shoot, as there is no sense of true self or ultimate truth to uncover. The historical person William H. Bonney, also known as Henry McCarty, is not the referent to the myth of Billy the Kid any longer. The myth of Billy the Kid stands as an empty signifier the creator, as well as the reader, can project anything they like onto. As I mentioned, the tension between Pat and Billy, the hunt for Billy, the destruction of him, is what is ultimately at stake here. Even though Pat hits his mark, the mark is still (possibly) wrong. The doubt inserted at the end creates what this thesis finds to be at the center of the maze, the very essence of what *The Collected Works* is about, namely the impossibility of hitting the mark head on and being right. There will always be an element of uncertainty, of questioning, as the notion of straight shooting is connected to truth-telling. By drawing comparisons between straight-shooting and truth-telling, the novel suggests that Garrett’s potential misfire is emblematic of larger discrepancies in the portrayal of Billy. The absence of any resolution – not in the sense of the camera’s ability to reflect an accurate portrayal, nor in the sense of any narrative closure – only leaves the reader with more questions. This ambiguity not only challenges the conventions of the Western genre, but it also functions as a meta-commentary on the challenges faced in representation altogether. Using the legend of Billy, the thematic violence represented in the novel enacts the violence inherent to signification and meaning-making, especially in regard to memory and national identity. The legend of Billy becomes a microcosmos of the Western paradigm, the illusion of freedom and sense of fullness is revealed to be founded on nothing, on a missing referent, turning representation into misrepresentation.

3 *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West*

3.1 Introduction

Blood Meridian's thematic focus on violence is notably one of its most prominent features, perhaps only paralleled by its profound poetic and archaic language, which effectively places the reader in an almost otherworldly dimension. By being extremely graphic in its depictions of violence, yet also eerily prophetic and complex, *Blood Meridian* reaches a level of sublimity, being both beautiful and terrifying at the same time. Critics and readers have been rendered repulsed and seduced by this effect and its polarizing reception has left some readers paralyzed by its beauty, while others cast it away, dismissing it as vulgar and without morals. The criticism largely revolves around the detailed and realistic portrayals of physical violence, as well as the lack of a moral center. However, the lack of moral in the novel is a necessity in the novel's project of encoding its violence rhetorically. To highlight how the thematic violence represented *in* the text encodes the rhetorical violence *of* the text there needs to be an absence of moral bias, neutralizing any attempt to fall into easy categorizations. The text itself enacts the double nature of writing works, portraying the destruction of the original article in order to create a simulacrum of the thing itself. The connection between these two stands of violence is primarily found in the character of judge Holden. Even though some critics have claimed that *Blood Meridian* advocates nihilism or deterministic cynicism, this thesis will argue that its main goal is to provoke constant questioning of those in power and the narratives they create. This chapter will analyze how *Blood Meridian* uses judge Holden's violent rhetoric to expose what lies beneath the overarching physical violence in the novel. Holden is not just the villain of the story; he personifies textuality, or perhaps is textuality itself.

Grounded on real historical events and basing some its prime characters – such as judge Holden and Glanton – on Samuel Chamberlain's autobiography, the brutality depicted in *Blood Meridian* reveals the terrifying aspect of historical events in 1840s westward expansion. Yet, as Søvting claims, the questions of genre and historicity are indeed more complex in *Blood Meridian*, as the reader is “invited to deal with a historical novel that has at its core a view of time and history that appears ahistorical” (14). Even though the backdrop for the story is very specific, the timelessness and universality transcend the confines of naturalism. Like *The Collected Works*, *Blood Meridian* uses the myth of the American West to show how easily representation can turn into misrepresentation. By exposing biases within the text, or rather, by dissolving the apparatus of binary opposition, *Blood Meridian*

highlights the constructedness of any representation. As we see in *The Collected Works*, this novel also rejects the notion that there can be any form of objective truth in (hi)story-telling, with the judge representing the amalgamation of the dire consequences such an attempt might have. The focus on discourse and language is apparent from the very first page. Constantly reminding its readers about its own self-referentiality as a text, the novel uses intertextuality and genre conventions to explore a larger theme of representation. The judge's mission to turn everything into a representation by destroying it echoes the novel's passages depicting grotesque and extreme violence, making the reader grapple with the text's inherent self-reflexivity. By having the judge try to impose his order of signification upon the world, and obliterating the original article in the process, the novel itself becomes a parallel for the inherent violence in any form of representation.

The novel's introduction to violence differentiates between thematic violence and rhetorical violence. First, there is the "mindless violence" of the kid, a character we meet at the beginning of the novel, who "can neither read nor write" (McCarthy 3). Then there is the rhetorical violence perpetrated by judge Holden, which functions as a parallel to the rhetorical violence of the novel itself. This gives rise to two different but connected types of violence: the physical violence depicted *in* the text, and the calculated, rhetorical violence *of* the text. The former type of violence is raw, savage and primal, reflecting the harsh reality of Western expansion under the guise of Manifest Destiny. The novel explicitly details the atrocities committed by America's pioneers, such as scalping, rape, and pillaging. Yet at the same time, the novel resists the hazard of the revisionist Western by refusing to make the Native Americans and Mexicans heroic in any way. This is seen when Captain White grimly smiles and states "We may see a little sport here before the day is out" (54) as the Comanches come vaulting upon them like hordes of hell:

A legion of horribles, hundreds in number, half naked or clad in costumes attic or biblical or wardrobed out of a fevered dream with the skins of animals and silk finery and pieces of uniform still tracked with the blood of prior owners, coats of slain dragoons, frogged and braided cavalry jackets

(...)

all of the horsemen's faces gaudy and grotesque with dablings like a company of mounted clowns, death hilarious, all howling in a barbarous tongue and riding down upon them like a horde from hell more horrible yet than the brimstone land of

christian reckoning, screeching and yammering and clothed in smoke like those vaporous beings in regions beyond right knowing where the eye wanders and the lip jerks and drools. (54-55)

This narrative is contrasted with the imperialist language and rhetoric of Captain White, as well as the other riders. Their actions, including the scalping and brutal treatment of not only Native Americans but also Mexicans, further enhances the novel's critique of so-called civilized behavior. As neither side is portrayed as exclusively innocent, there emerges a representational challenge which ultimately rejects the paradigm of the Western genre. By shifting the dichotomy of right/wrong, and removing any ethical bias regarding the violent acts it depicts, the text opens a possibility to focus on the latter strand of violence found in the novel, namely the rhetorical violence, which is more insidious and operates on a figurative level.

Though the use of thematic depictions of the physical, mindless violence which occurs in the novel, the violence operating on a rhetorical level could almost go unseen, were it not for the judge and his imperialist way. It is through judge Holden's mydriatic cul-de-sacs and contradictions that the inherent violence in representation becomes apparent. His physical actions of destroying the original article and replacing it with a copy, a simulacrum, parallel how the novel itself operates within the same violent structures. By exposing the meaning-making process through the use of rhetorical violence, *Blood Meridian* exposes the latent violence residing in language and representation, which can be traced back to Derrida's notion of arche-writing. Using ideology to manipulate, the judge stands out as a prime rhetorical force of human capacity for evil. Under the guise of a man of the Enlightenment, the judge forces his violent will upon the world. The transformation of the natural world into a realm of signification reveals how easy representation can turn into misrepresentation, especially when there are ulterior motives lurking underneath. The two distinct strands of violence converge in the character of judge Holden, who serves as the novel's "evil archon" and "the archon of textuality" (Wallach 132). Holden's rule, both of the text and the characters, stem from his physical brutality, as well as his extraordinary rhetorical skills. He dominates the narrative, becoming the focal point of the story, leaving only a trail of destruction in his wake. The novel parallels the judge's ledger and challenges the paradoxical relationship between creation and destruction, thus revealing the inherent violence in all acts of representation and the process of creation.

3.2 See the child, the father of the man

At the outset of *Blood Meridian*, the narrator urges readers to “See the child,” (McCarthy 3) which Barley Owens claims is “an ironic echo of Alexander Pope’s ‘Behold the child, by Nature’s kindly law / Pleased with a rattle, tickled with a straw’” (3). The passage goes on to describe the child as “pale and thin,” adding: “He can neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence. All history present in that visage, the child, the father of the man” (McCarthy 3). Additional layers of irony emerge with the phrase “All history present in that visage, *the child, the father of the man*” echoing the idiom from Wordsworth’s “My Heart Leaps Up,” where “The Child is father of the Man.” The stark contrast between Wordsworth’s celebration of childlike innocence, seething with Romantic sensibility, and the Enlightenment values embodied by the judge, creates a discourse on intertextuality from the very beginning. This interplay also subtly suggests that the “West,” as in US westward expansion, may not refer solely to the American Frontier, but also to the broader Western intellectual and cultural tradition. In addition, the novel challenges the notion that signification is a fixed process, and proposes that even with illiteracy, the intertextuality of “poets whose names are now lost” (McCarthy 3) can still seep in and create an interconnectedness and ambiguity inherent in language, whether it is written, spoken, or thought. As judge Holden reminds the reader later, “Whether in my book or not, every man is tabernacled in every other and he in exchange and so on in an endless complexity of being and witness to the uttermost edge of the world” (147). This metaphor for intertextuality connects the mindless violence of the illiterate child to the violence inherent in language and intertextuality and immediately makes the reader aware of the linguistic and self-reflexive nature of the novel. The novel also creates a discourse on discourse itself, making the reader aware of the connection between the mindless violence of the kid, which works on a thematic level, and the rhetorical violence demonstrated by the judge. The idea that violence is a preexisting phenomenon, prior to signification and somehow outside the limits of representation, is false. Violence is not exterior to representation, and this novel demonstrates this connection by seamlessly weaving the two together. Furthermore, the deictic directive to “see” the child holds both figurative and literal weight. Since the child is represented through writing, it thus highlights the impossibility of witnessing him in any other way than an abstract representation. This point is made even more evident as he vanishes more and more as the narrative unfolds. As the judge takes control of the narrative, the disappearance of the kid, both in long passages throughout the novel and the final disappearance in the end, will prove to be essential in any reading of *Blood Meridian*.

The most crucial point is that the reader is told to see the “child,” not “the kid,” whom he quickly morphs into. The transformation, or mythologization, of the child – to kid – to man, operates as an inversion of the traditional Bildungsroman. Instead of demonstrating growth and development, the kid remains stagnant and passive throughout his travels. Even when he is granted an opportunity to kill the judge, he remains passive. This play on the Bildungsroman builds up the reader’s expectations of what is to come yet subverts them at every turn. As he enters the myth-making process from child to “the kid” – a play on reader’s expectations of what “the kid” is according to the myth of the American West – the sort of Billy the Kid-figure he was supposed to morph into never comes into fruition. This failed Bildung is similar to how Ondaatje’s Billy the Kid never grows into the generic representation the reader might expect him to be; they both reject this narrative. As McCarthy’s kid remains illiterate, passive, and even though he tries to grow into his own narrative, he in the end falls short every time. The kid’s inverted Bildung could also be considered a failed hero’s quest. Contrary to the conventional trajectory where one expects moral and psychological growth, there is none – or at least very little. Each time the kid attempts any form of internal growth or tries to show any acts of mercy or grace, such attempts end up stagnated. One such incident of stagnated growth is seen with the Abuelita, to whom the kid tells his life story and wishes to aid to safety:

He spoke to her in a low voice. He told her that he was an American and that he was a long way from the country of his birth and that he had no family and that he had traveled much and seen many things and had been at war and endured hardships. He told her that he would convey her to a safe place, some party of her countrypeople who would welcome her and that she should join them for he could not leave her in this place or she would surely die.

(...)

He reached into the little cove and touched her arm. She moved slightly, her whole body, light and rigid. She weighed nothing. She was just a dried shell and she had been dead in that place for years. (328)

The kid experiences a series of potential epiphanies. However, each time it appears that a long hoped-for insight might occur, it halts and stagnates, leading to a stasis in the kid’s development. The inversion of this mythic Bildung thus creates more of a misrepresentation

than a representation. The reader's expectation of a narrative about "the kid" travelling through the Western Frontier, quite rapidly proves to expose how these expectations could be used in order to manipulate and control any narrative. The novel's misguidance mirrors how the judge operates and misleads his fellow riders. Not being self-conscious yet, the kid is not able to recognize this violent pattern in the signification the judge inscribes on the pages of his ledger, as well as the novel, thus making the kid's identity just as fixed and stagnant as the judge wants him to be.

In addition to this, the witnessing of the child is perhaps also a request to see the generational violence inherently rooted in him from childhood, passed down from generation to generation. The thematic violence represented in the kid's animalistic, childlike consciousness, parallels the protagonist's journey in the traditional *Bildung* before awareness and growth, before moral consciousness and psychological insight, or, as it is made especially apparent in this novel, before language. However, this violence is not more insidious than representational violence. What is missing and lost in this inverted *Bildung* is what is at stake for the kid. The fact that his ability of growth gets lost and subverted at every turn creates a sense of loss and absence in the text, highlighting the impossibility of a coherent sense of self. This absence also highlights the impossibility of turning into the generic representation of "the kid" seen within the Western genre.

The cycle of violence is a reoccurring theme in *Blood Meridian*. It can be seen in the structure of the novel, as well as the lifeline of the kid, which works as a metaphor for cyclic violence, not only of the individual but of society. It is a generational violence inherited from the creation of the "New World," the mythologization of the American West, and this cyclic violence is one of the things that *Blood Meridian* tells its readers to see and be aware of. The reader is not only able to recognize the violent pattern of the child, but also how society has become the way it has through this violence. By shifting from child to kid, the creation of a new identity – through violence – parallels the creation of a new American identity, an identity founded on violence and misrepresentation.

As Richard Slotkin claims in *Regeneration Through Violence*, myths work as a process of knowledge and power; they define and limit the possibilities for the human response to the universe (7). Man is a myth making animal who creates myths in order to understand and control the world. This idea is similar to the judge's mission of becoming "suzerain of the earth" (207) his desire to gain complete control of the world by cataloging everything in it, making his markings both *in* and *of* the world. He wants to create *his* myth of the world – the world according to him. However, in *Blood Meridian*, this use of the westward expansion as a

backdrop for the story is not an effort to revise the myth of the American West. As Evans maintains, *Blood Meridian*'s preoccupation with violence "is not a matter of one or another way of describing the world or history; it is not a matter of true or distorted representation":

The novel investigates the possibility that all language is inherently connected to violence, and that there is, consequently, no meaning without a violent imposition of signification on the surface of the world, a process of 'marking,' to use the term repeatedly invoked by the text, which precedes and makes possible language. (419)

This thesis will agree that *Blood Meridian* is not a revisioning of the genre of the Western or the history of the American West, and even though it comments on both, it draws its philosophy of violence even further, telling the reader to recognize the violent pattern, not only of the individual and society, but also of language and how we create meaning. The cyclic violence of the *child, the father of the man*, is a violent pattern found not only in Western society, but in all civilization, in the birth of marking and signification, of language and of memory. As one of the three epigraphs points out, scalping – a form of marking – has been found in "a 300,000-year old fossil skull" in northern Ethiopia.

Without getting too much into Oswald Spengler and *The Decline of the West*, it is worth noting that "the full title of McCarthy's first western, *Blood Meridian: Or the Evening Redness in the West*, echoes the German title of Spengler's book, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, which, according to Spengler, was meant to suggest a slow decline akin to sunset" (Crews 130-31). Spengler's book was a way of "predetermining history, of following the still untraveled stages in the destiny of a Culture, and specifically of the only Culture of our time, and on our planet which is actually in the phase of fulfilment - the West-European-American" (Spengler 3). Spengler claimed that the process by which cultures become civilizations, works like the individual life span of childhood, youth, manhood and old age. And very much like the kid, one might claim that his lifeline works as a parallel to the Western-European-American culture – or the "West" – and thus makes *Blood Meridian* not only about the violent birth of a nation, but just as much about the decline of Western civilization and what lies beyond that. *Blood Meridian* revolves around an originary violence that has existed as long as the human race – and will continue to live on as long as humans exist. As judge Holden says, "The way of the world is to bloom and to flower and die but in the affairs of men there is no waning and the noon of his expression signals the onset of night. His spirit is exhausted at the peak of its achievement. His meridian is at once his darkening and the evening of his day" (McCarthy 153). However, the judge continues, "these ruins wondered at by tribes of savages, do you not think that this will be again? Aye. And again.

With other people, with other sons” (153). The cyclic pattern of violence seen in *Blood Meridian* is not only generational or historical. It symbolizes the very process of signification and representation. And at the very center of this cyclic patten, the judge emerges as the unfixed center.

3.3 Judge as unfixed center

Judge Holden works within this theme of cyclic violence both as an instigator as well as the unfixed center. He is the connection between the thematic and rhetorical violence happening in the novel. Even though most of the physical violence that happens in the novel is mindless, the judge works as an instigator that can create this type of violence through the process of signification, creating physical actions based on his cunning and manipulation. His goal is to make everything a representation, to put everything down in his ledger, thus destroying it in the process. The judge functions as the unfixed center of *Blood Meridian* in several ways. First, he has no origins, he merely appears out of nowhere. Taking on multiple – and contradictory – roles, namely of the learned man, the magician, the all-knowing writer, and so on; he contains multitudes. The way he is portrayed, as well as how he portrays himself, illuminates the fact that he cannot be put into one single category; he cannot be boxed in, he is constantly shifting shape. This is similar to Ondaatje’s Billy the Kid, who also cannot be boxed into a specific category. However, in the judge’s case, he is on the one hand impossible to fit into any category, while on the other, he is the one seemingly creating categories to reduce the conception of the world. Secondly, the judge’s physicality mirrors the unscribed page, which he himself inscribes. He creates an absence with his destruction, with his writing in the ledger, a form of arche-violence which contains the double nature of writing, both the effacement and creation inherent in signification – thus, making him and his ledger mirror the novel as a whole in its take on representation and signification, as well as the whole the process of meaning-making. When the judge privileges writing over speech, which is a part of his game, his goal to become “suzerain of the earth” becomes apparent, turning him into the “archon of textuality” (Wallach 132). The means to his goal of making everything a representation is that he works through language. However, it is important to note that what the judge is saying does not always match with what is happening, showing the importance of differentiating the judge and the novel. Even though the judge’s goal is to make everything a representation, and even though he promotes the idea that “There is room on the stage for one beast and one alone,” (McCarthy 345) he at the same time functions as this unfixed center which makes it impossible to pin him down, mark him as one thing. Once you think you have

understood who or what the judge is, he shifts form. He works like a noumenon, like Schopenhauer's Will, like the thing itself which cannot be pinned down. He constantly defers. His markings, his trace, is what is left as he too vanishes before the reader's very eyes.

Explaining how the judge operates is very hard indeed, both because he has no origin, and because he always defers somewhere else. Because there is no real beginning, it is hard to know where to begin. Nevertheless, let us start with the *lack* of beginning:

Whatever his antecedents he was something wholly other than their sum, nor was there system by which to divide him back into his origins for he would not go. Whoever would seek out his history through what unraveling of loins and ledgerbooks must stand at last darkened and dumb at the shore of a void without terminus or origin and whatever science he might bring to bear upon the dusty primal matter blowing down out of the millennia will discover no trace of any ultimate atavistic egg by which to reckon his commencing. (322)

The judge seemingly has no origins. Trying to find his origin, whether through "loins or ledgerbooks," biological or textual, will leave the reader dumbfounded. It is pointless to find some sort of beginning or origin for the judge, because there is none, which makes his current, physical status, what Rick Wallach refers to as the judge's "*in vivo* ontic status" (125) even less certain than his origins, precisely because he seemingly has no origins. He merely shows up with "his rock there in that wilderness by his single self," in the middle of nowhere, sitting on "a merestone for to mark him out of nothing at all" (McCarthy 131). The term "merestone," as Evans points out, refers to stones historically used for setting boundaries (427). In the context of the novel, these boundaries are set both in the physical realm as well as the abstract realm, alluding to the spatial territories of the westward expansion, while at the same time highlighting categorization of the hierarchy that functions within the narrative fabric of the text. The judge's uncanny knowledge of each man's destiny, where he operates as a puppeteer as he sets out a "new course" (McCarthy 128, 132) for them, both directly and indirectly paves their paths and also has this same pattern. He takes control of the gang, as well as the narrative, to make his mission complete. The judge's mission is to create boundaries and borders, to create difference. By privileging his way of thought over everything else, he wishes to destroy the natural world and make it a representation in his ledger:

Whatever exists, he said. Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent. ... 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. (207)

Throughout the novel, the judge finds old artifacts, ruins, flowers, etc., and sketches them in his notebook. He chooses what to include, and what not to. After the process, he destroys the items, crushing them, throwing them into the fire. The other riders observe this, and one night Webster asks the judge what he is doing with his sketches and notes, to which the judge replies he intends "to expunge them from the memory of man" (147).

Through the judge's mission of making everything into a representation, the link between destruction and creation emerges, paralleling not only the novel as a whole, but writings continuous effacement and creation. The judge's declaration "The freedom of birds is an insult to me" (208), is the epitome of his desire for omnipotence. Anything, be it living or dead, that exist without his consent or understanding, needs to be destroyed, to be conquered and subdued to his will. His ultimate wish is not just to gain insight and mastery of the world, but to gain total domination over it, making him, as Evans asserts, the most violent marker of them all (427). Because the judge begins this process of signification and claims his markings on the world are absolute truth, he functions under the guise of a man of the Enlightenment, seemingly on a quest for knowledge. Using the other riders as his agents of destruction, a tool to aid him in his mission, the landscape they travel thought gets altered, cultures eradicated, and history rewritten. Yet, the unresolved question remains: what implication arise from the representation that the judge wishes to contain?

As a satire of deconstructive criticism the judge favors inscription over speech (Wallach 132). His wish to erase man's memory through sketching the world in his ledger, mirrors a reversal of the Theuth myth, and subsequently challenges the previous phonocentric thought of Western philosophy, the idea that the oral tradition is somehow closer to any absolute, authentic truth. However, during the westward expansion, the oral traditions of the Native Americans were marginalized and downplayed. As a continuation of this effacement of oral tradition led by imperialist Americans, the judge also suppresses the notion of oral traditions and phonocentrism, not only by eradicating the oral traditions of Native peoples, but by perpetuating the Western bias towards logocentrism at the same time. To accomplish

his goal of becoming suzerain of the world through the expulsion of man's memory, he rewrites the previous notion that oral traditions are more superior. In his view, it is only what he himself puts down in his ledger that hold any superiority and value.

As the illiterate kid begin his travels through the west, he "sees a parricide hanged in a crossroads hamlet" (McCarthy 5). This witnessed parricide, combined with the word "hamlet", not only gives associations with a little town, but perhaps more importantly to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, especially in the context of a parricide. And as Derrida claims in *Dissemination*, "Writing is parricidal" (164). Unlike the archetypal parricide we see with the Oedipus-myth, the kid fails to kill the judge when he has the opportunity: "Shoot him, [Tobin] called. The kid spun about to look for the judge but the expriest called again in his hoarse whisper" (301). Granted the opportunity, the kid fails to put an end to the judge's hegemonic reign. This further enhances the subversion of the kid's Bildung. As the judge concludes in his story of the harnessmaker: "For it is the death of the father to which the son is entitled and to which he is heir, more so than his goods" (152). In the kid's inverted Bildung, he fails to destroy and replace the father figure which the judge symbolizes, thus refusing to perpetuate cyclic violence of the myth further. As a foreshadowing of the ultimate confrontation they will have in the end, the kid walks straight into the judge's mission to make everything a representation, allowing himself to be shaped within the mythologization of the nameless and non-autonomous "the kid" – an identity culminating in his eventual disappearance from the narrative. As we see with Ondaatje's version of Billy the Kid, he too resists the generic identity of "the Kid," seen within Western genre. However, *Blood Meridian*'s kid passively resists, as more of an unconscious quality. The novel places the judge in his way for this personal growth, forcing him to become The Man with No Name, without any real autonomy or choice. This dilemma mirrors the collective experience of individuals in a nation whose national myth is supposed to define them. Ironically enough, with the myth of the American West, this leaves little room for individuality and freedom.

Notably, the witnessing of the parricide happens right before meeting the judge, who then goes on to expose the Rev. Green, accusing him of holding "no papers," only "committed to memory a few passages from the good book" (McCarthy 7). The judge thus tries to undermine Rev. Green by prioritizing writing over speech, the written word as more powerful than speech and memory. As the judge privileges writing, he shifts the hierarchy previously known in logocentric thought, this bias in Western philosophy, commonly privileging speech as closer to an ultimate truth. In doing so, the judge sets in motion Derrida's notion of arche-violence, a process of categorization, differentiation, and creating a

hierarchy of value. With the destruction of the thing itself, the judge creates a replacement, a supplement. This is where his rhetorical power mirrors the novel's inherent violence. Holden does not only challenge phonocentrism and create a hierarchy of value, he also marks Rev. Green as a guilty man, based on nothing more than false allegations. By marking Rev. Green, the judge makes him a target for the physical violence of the enraged mob. This scene is the very first instance where the judge's representations turn into misrepresentation, and as Evans claims, "pure fiction" (419), where his misrepresentation manifests as physical violence. Or in other words, where rhetorical violence manifests as thematic violence.

Nevertheless, the judge's shift of privileging writing over speech, is merely one of his many rhetorical cul-de-sacs and diversions, where he can turn representation into misrepresentation. As one of many instances where he contradicts himself, this stance exemplifies his paradoxical nature, as it is through his rhetorical mastery, both of the written as well as the spoken word, where he holds his power. Rather than a simple shift in the dichotomy of writing over speech or vice versa, the judge's motivation for this upheaval in the revival tent seems to be rooted in a far more sinister motive. As the judge seemingly wishes to exterminate any other false prophets so he can take the stage alone, his capacity for contradiction is highlighted by Evan's characterization of him as a "confidence man," (419) mastering adaptability and working like a chameleon within the realm of textuality. The use of his rhetorical skills will grant him the power to manipulate the other riders, making them tools in his mission of destruction and hegemonic reign. The view of Holden as a "con-man" makes his multiple roles impossible to pin down or be narrowed down. On the surface, the judge seems to be an advocate for science and knowledge. His mission to become the suzerain of the world mirrors "the self-transcending project of Enlightenment" (Shaviro 149) summarized by prioritizing intellect and progression. Represented in his vast knowledge of linguistics and his ability to speak five languages (McCarthy 129), as well as citing from the classics and being "eitherhanded as a spider" (140), the judge emerges as "a learned man" (128), paving a new path for the riders, a path seemingly leading to enlightenment and transcendence. However, the path he paves out is riddled with ulterior motives. Though he effectively serves as an embodiment of "a new imperialist scientific world order sprouting from Enlightenment rationality and the firm establishment of capitalist principles as transcendent in American and European culture" (Dodds 28), there is reason to doubt his ways. With this urge to civilize and claim the unknown – to gain ownership of it – the judge uses the guise of Enlightenment rationality to mold the gang into "disciples of a new faith" (McCarthy 136). The judge takes Enlightenment values to the extreme, pushing them towards

perversion. He himself becomes a representation of the ultimate consequences for Western civilization when these boundary-seeking values are pushed to their limits. The judge is not only creating boundaries within the land, but also within language.

In a historical context, it is noteworthy that the signal for the pilot to drop the atom bomb on Hiroshima was “Judge going to work.” (Thomas and Witts 326) If one were to view the atomic bomb as the symbolic peak of modern knowledge, as “an omnipotent beast of knowledge” so to speak, this analogy of the judge and the bomb works as a marker within human history. This marker signifies not only the technological advances of human capability, but also its devastating consequences. The text itself points to this notion as the hermit proclaims that man can “Make a machine. And a machine to make the machine. And evil that can run itself a thousand years, no need to tend it” (McCarthy 20), adding also that “You can find meanness in the least of creatures, but when God made man the devil was at his elbow” (20). It might not be a far stretch to think that splitting the atom –the least of creatures – has made the West the “omnipotent beast of knowledge” mentioned in Valery’s text from the epigraph, especially considering the judge’s dance of destruction at the end. As mentioned earlier, *Blood Meridian* could be read as a story of the birth of a nation, while simultaneously predicting Western demise. Somehow, like textuality, as long as there is human will, the judge will continue his dance of effacement and creation, “compounded by Shiva’s dance and the Derridean trace it parodies” (Wallach 134). This allusion to Shiva as the destructor, and the judge being “eitherhanded like a spider,” dancing the double nature of effacement and creation, adds another parallel to the physical and figurative violence of the text. It is perhaps also (though very speculatively) echoing Oppenheimer’s (in)famous quote “Now I am become death, the Destroyer of Worlds,” itself a misquotation from the Bhagavad Gita. With his dance of victory, the judge “poses a figure of cyclic perpetuity, awaiting the garb of the next epoch with its own horrors” (131). With the cyclic perpetuity of violence ringing in the back of the readers heads we wonder, what is next?

For the judge to make everything a representation according to him, it is necessary to destroy competing narratives. It is the judge who decides who takes the stage, and how they do so, because “It makes no difference what men think of war, said the judge. War endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate trade awaiting its practitioner. That is the way it was and will be. That way and not some other way” (McCarthy 259). Using his rhetorical power, his manipulation and cunning, he keeps the riders ensnared within his web of ambiguity to mold them into his agents of destruction, until he leads them to destruction themselves, to make them too a

representation in his ledger, while they simultaneously get inscribed within the narrative of the novel.

As the judge's physical whiteness and albinism becomes the mirror to the whitened pages he himself inscribes, judge Holden is "the fulcrum of *Blood Meridian*'s recursively, an allegory of the text itself" (Wallach 133). When he emerges as the ruler of the narrative, Holden's very *emergence* wavers "like Derridean *différance* ... flickering between the marks he self-inscribes" (133), making it impossible to narrow him down to just one thing. Nevertheless, out of all his multiple titles, it is his status as judge which stand out. Tobin's silence when the kid asks him what the judge is the judge of only underscores the fact that "nothing exists until the judge judges: he does not judge preexistent things according to preestablished law; rather, his judgements create those things that can be subject to law" (Evans 427-28). However, in my opinion the novel might answer the enigma of Holden's jurisdiction. As Chapter X ends with this pivotal question lingering in the air, the headnotes in the next chapter suggest an answer. Holden is the judge of "Representation and things" (McCarthy 142).

As the gang traverses through an "unmarked," wild world, they nevertheless seem to find ruins of people before them. These previous markings of the Anasazi, the ruins of churches and old bones, all witness of existence in "a time before nomenclature was and each was all" (180). It is from this pretense which the baseless Holden emerges as the judge of representation and things, where he differentiates and destroys the original, marking everything he deems noteworthy into his ledger. From this the judge functions as an original ur-violence, forming a new age seemingly based on science and truth. However, as Dodds points out, "the judge's new world does not operate on the level of the original article, but in a world built upon representation only. More precisely, he builds a world based on simulation as he has effectively destroyed all the originals: he builds an economy of signs" (29). By asserting dominance over people and things, claiming "Words are things ... Their authority transcends his ignorance of their meaning" (McCarthy 89), the judge appears to have first-hand knowledge of something which the others are not in possession of. Holden molds people into things, signifiers into signifieds. By turning scalps into currency, the Glanton gang also engage in the violent process of signification. Yet for the judge his world of simulation runs deeper than pure capitalist needs. He embodies the very nature of signification, where all his markings are drenched in blood. Highlighting the paradox of revisionist Westerns, he builds representations on misrepresentations, only to move further from the truth, because truth is not what is important to him – winning is. The illusion of truth is revealed to be another one

of the judge's rhetorical cul-de-sacs, because "The mystery is there is no mystery" (263). What the judge *does*, and what he *is*, are two very different things. As the expriest Tobin says, "As if he were no mystery himself, the bloody old hoodwinker" (263). His duplicitous nature is also captured in the various references to him as a "great ponderous djinn" (101), "an icon" (153), and a "great pale deity" (97). Evoking his mythical status, these references also confuse and mislead the reader. His deceitful antics, such as the coin trick, where the coin itself disappears, only to reappear, points more to his power as master manipulator than any actual supernatural abilities. This coin trick happens multiple times throughout the novel. First the judge demonstrates it to a young boy, before he continues on to murder a pack of dogs: "The boy stared at the coin. The judge made a fist and opened it. The coin was gone. He wove his fingers in the empty air and reached behind the boy's ear and took the coin and handed it to him. The boy held the coin in both hands before him like a small ciborium and he looked up at the judge. But the judge had set forth, dogs dangling" (200-201). He also performs a similar coin trick with the riders:

Watch the coin, Davy, he said. He flung it and it cut an arc through the firelight and was gone in the darkness beyond. They watched the night where it had vanished and they watched the judge and in their watching some the one and some the other they were a common witness. The coin, Davy, the coin, whispered the judge. He sat erect and raised his hand and smiled around. The coin returned back out of the night and crossed the fire with a faint high droning and the judge's raised hand was empty and then it held the coin. There was a light slap and it held the coin. Even so some claimed that he had thrown the coin away and palmed another like it and made the sound with his tongue for he was himself a cunning old malabarista and he said himself as he put the coin away what all men knew that there are coins and false coins. (257)

As coins and their counterfeits exist, the judge creates a simulacrum, a false coin to manipulate the riders. He even preforms a smaller coin trick right before the scene above, where the coin circles around the fire, to which speculation occurs, that it must have been "fastened to some subtle lead, horsehair perhaps" (257). To this the judge only replies, "Moons, coins, men" (257), suggesting they are all replicas in the larger scheme of things. While the smaller deception of the coin captivates his audience, there is a larger deception happening. The riders are so enamored with the judge's trick that they overlook the larger evasion playing out before them. Similarly, the reader also risks the same oversight. By

fixating too much on the thematic violence, the representation of physical violence in the novel, they do not see the rhetorical violence that the novel is enacting before their very eyes. The text's multiple layers and cul-de-sacs serve to confuse and obfuscate the reader. As the judge presents as the omnipotent beast of knowledge, what the novel simultaneously does is question this illusion and stretch the limits of Enlightenment. Is the seemingly pure reason of judge Holden a quest for illumination, or simply just an instrument of control and domination? Rather than merely holding firm Holden's beliefs, and substantiating them, the novel itself challenges if *his* heart is "made out of another clay". What then does Holden's rhetorical mission of making everything a representation lead to? The novel would point that it leads to misrepresentation. The enigma of judge Holden is what binds the violence of representation to the representation of violence in the novel, making the two intertwined and paralleled as in inscriptions double nature, its continuous effacement and creation. Whatever role the judge takes on, it is still not a representation of what he is. At his core there is nothing; he himself is unfixed in time and space. In this sense, the novel is not just critiquing imperialist history, but the very notion of writing and representation of such a history.

3.4 Differences between Holden and the novel

It is important to distinguish between judge Holden and the overarching narrative voice. Even though Holden appears to control the narrative, and even though he positions himself as the focal point, a more elusive "vanishing I" frames the story. Holden's victorious dance in the end is not really his, it is "of another narrator's making; he dances to that narrator's tune, not his own, even as his rhetorical and other powers seem to make everyone in the novel dance to his tune" (Snyder 132). Even though judge Holden emerges as the archon of textuality, he does not have complete control of the text. There is another narrator pulling his strings, and though the reader might forget this due to Holden's overarching dominance, he is himself nothing more than a representation. It is precisely because of his nature as a construction, that his very essence remains enigmatic. The importance of separating the rhetorical violence of Holden and the novel itself could be seen in the parallel scene where the judge is accusing Rev. Green of sexual misconduct against an eleven-year-old girl and a goat (McCarthy 7). Holden manipulates Green's followers to the point where a full-blow riot ensues, which as he will admit to later, was all founded on baseless lies. The fact that the judge's allegations mirror what the novel itself alludes to the judge doing with both a Mexican girl (250) and an Apache boy (170) is a crucial element of separating the judge and the novel. By becoming aware of the misrepresentation the judge infuses the text with, the reader also becomes aware

of how easily one can judge and become influenced by any work of fiction. This notion is especially true as the character of judge Holden himself is based on Samuel Chamberlain's autobiography *My Confessions*. The allegations of pedophilia are intertextually intertwined with Chamberlain's account of judge Holden:

Who or what he was no one knew but a cooler blooded villain never went unhung; he stood six feet in his moccasins, had a large fleshy frame, a dull tallow colored face destitute of hair and all expression. His desires was blood and women, and terrible stories were circulated in camp of horrid crimes committed by him when bearing another name, in the Cherokee nation and Texas; and before we left Fronteras a little girl of ten years was found in the chaparral, foully violated and murdered. The mark of a huge hand on her little throat pointed him out as the ravisher as no other man had such a hand, but though all suspected, no one charged him with the crime. (Chamberlain 271)

Even though the novel might be based loosely on historical events, this scene is echoing how the novel itself is a work of fiction and is just as unreliable as Holden himself. The biographic accounts of Chamberlain, where he portrays himself as the hero to judge Holden's villainous nature, are illustrative of this. Without delving too deep into an intertextual analysis of *Blood Meridian* and *My Confessions*, it is nevertheless important to note that the novel clearly shows how easily such an account may be biased, bringing the very concept of historicity into question.

The narrative ambiguities that permeate throughout *Blood Meridian* are specially made apparent with the use of headnotes. By molding the reader's expectations of what is to come, they constantly defer elsewhere, creating a myriad of possible interpretations. One example of this is found when the judge holds a geological lecture and creates a "queer powder" (McCarthy 140) that allows the riders to slaughter aborigines. The headnotes refer to this incident as "the matrix," (128) meaning both 1) the cultural, social, or political environment in which something develops, and 2) a mass of fine-grained rock in which gems, crystals, or fossils are embedded. The novel merges these two meanings into one, thus creating a scene where the physical act of what the judge is doing, and the metaphysical act of what he is creating, are being played out side by side. Through the use of "all good things within" mother earth (136), the judge combines sulphur, urine, nitre and charcoal to create more gunpowder for the gang. By doing this he also converts the riders like "disciples of a new faith" (136), leading them into a new socio-cultural era of science and knowledge. By

telling what is literally happening, as well as what is figuratively happening the narrative's play on textual violence and its inherent ambiguities get illuminated, reminding to the reader that nothing is ever as it seems.

The title of the novel itself – *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West* – holds the same multiplicity of meaning. The contrast of *Blood Meridian*'s harsh brutality and *the Evening Redness in the West*'s more poetic gloss highlights the double nature of the novel itself. It is both utterly terrifying and violent, while at the same time rendered with the most beautifully written sentences in contemporary American literature. This duality also positions the novel in a space between highbrow and lowbrow literary traditions. As rendered in *The Cambridge Introduction*, when Derrida holds his nameless “double session” he claims that:

Any title is therefore at least double: it announces what a text may mean, but introduces an unavoidable, not always unwelcome degree of suspense. It refers to what will come, while also deferring it; and at this point Derrida might well have gestured, by the way of example, towards the old-fashioned chandelier in the room where he was speaking: a dominant presence, certainly, but one that cast both light and shadow over everything below. (Hill 34)

This phenomenon mirrors both *Blood Meridian*'s title as well as its use of headnotes. Riddled with homonymity and double meaning, they disclose what is happening on the literal as well as figurative level at the same time, casting both light and shadow on everything that is happening in the text. As we see with the headnotes, which “confuse more than they enlighten” (Evans 423), the headnotes also work structurally as the decapitated head of the body of text (423). In one way they are supplementing the text with new insight, while on the other, they are highlighting what is missing in the text to come. The decapitation metaphor is repeated throughout the novel and could also be used to show how the novel plays with binary differences to highlight that meaning is flux and unstable. One prime example of this is the shifting, volatile relationship of the black and white Jacksons.

Within the novel there are multiple occurrences where binary oppositions are deconstructed. As previously mentioned, the judge seems to be privileging writing over speech, echoing the historical context where imperialist Americans marginalized Native American oral traditions. However, there are continuous contradictions of this throughout the novel as well, especially in the judge's many verbal speeches and trials, where he successfully disentangles himself from any challenging situations. These contradictions and fluidity continuously happen within multiple dichotomies of the book. One of the clearest examples being the two John Jacksons in the Glanton gang: “two men named Jackson, one black, one

white, both forenamed John” (McCarthy 85). The bad blood between them places them in this constant battle of wills and serves as a microcosm of a larger ideological struggle. As they ride through the desert, “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” (85). The shifting relationship between black and white John Jacksons functions as a mutual mirroring of each other, to a point where they are literally shadowing one another. This dynamic serves as a continuous powerplay between the two, right until the point where “Black Jackson takes the stage” (85) and removes white Jackson from the equation by decapitating him. As Snyder asserts, the “fireside decapitation of his white counterpoint, as a referent or signified, only enhances his status as the shadowy trace of that vanished other throughout the rest of the novel, as he is defined fundamentally by an absence he himself effected” (135). This decapitation not only remove the binary opposition of the black and white Jacksons, but it also creates a vacuum, linking black Jackson’s presence to a void he himself created. Ironically enough, white Jackson’s decapitated body sitting like “like a murdered anchorite” (McCarthy 113), parallels the description in the headnotes as “another anchorite,” referring back to the first anchorite, which was the hermit. At first sight, it might be easy to presume that the decapitation of “another anchorite” might function as a form of poetic justice, since the hermit was wearing a “nigger’s heart” to the price of 200\$ (19). However, looking beyond this act of racial retribution, this shift in the dichotomy of the black and white Jacksons is only transient. As black Jackson is granted the stage, the text also reminds its readers that “There is room on the stage for one beast and one alone” (345) – who will ultimately turn out to be the judge. The shift and deconstruction of the any binary oppositions in the text, only hint at their limited and transient nature. Ultimately, the narrative suggests that any removal or shift in binary oppositions is in an evolving state of flux, a constant play of signification. This shift, even though it might seem fixed and significant in some aspect, is nevertheless one of many shifting poles, one of many destinies being part of something larger. As the judge reminds black Jackson as he pulls the tarot card of The Fool, “I think she means to say that in your fortune lie our fortunes all” (97).

Contrary to many revisionist Westerns, as Søfting points out, *Blood Meridian* does not invert the traditional canonical binaries of the Western genre; rather it “dissolves the oppositional apparatus by giving exclusive attention to one side of the binary only. There can be no tension between the masculine and the feminine when there is no femininity; there can be no tension between wilderness and civilization when there is no civilization” (18). The

illusion of civilization represented in the judge is subsequently exposed when the reader witnesses his acts of pure malevolence, vividly illustrated by his cruel act of hurling a bag of puppies into the river. Before this gruesome act, the narrative captures the reaction from one of the puppies as he “squirmed and drew back in his fist like an animal backing down a hole, its pale blue eyes impartial, befrightened alike of the cold and the rain and the judge” (McCarthy 200). This animalistic reaction to the judge serves as an unfiltered touchstone to his underlying malevolence. Even though he presents as a man of Enlightenment, his cruel acts of violence cannot be justified to the reader. This masked civility represented in the judge makes the reader question his motives of destruction, especially with making everything into a representation. The importance of destroying the original for the judge is to destroy the evidence. However, for the novel, deconstructing binaries in the novel exposes the larger narrative at hand. Removing femininity does not make it about men, but about mankind. Thus, removing kindness and mercy makes it about the inherent capacity for evil that lies within all humanity. This constant deferral that is happening throughout the novel, seen with the black and white Jacksons, creates textual void, a space of nothingness which has an equal importance to the narratives left behind. Though “history is written by the victors,” the fact of the matter is that what is written, the markings themselves, cannot hold any absolute truth. Their meaning remains in an ever-evolving state of flux, and the exposure of this creates a discourse on the very notion of discourse itself, highlighting the impossibility of any ultimate truth-telling. This realization subsequently makes the microcosmos of the American Frontier to be a space to examine the problem of Western culture, as well as all civilization. As the judge represents a figure of the Enlightenment taken to the extreme, his actions and ideology expose the dark underbelly of rationalism and the hunger for knowledge, highlighting the problem of absolute hegemonic discourse.

Within the narrative structure of the novel, there emerge several disappearances in the text, highlighting the difficulty of truth-telling in the meaning-making process. One such instance is the very framing of the narrative itself, with the “vanishing I” only appearing on the first page, never to be revealed again. After the narrator disappears, the rest of the story is in past tense. This temporal dissonance creates distance within the body of the text, and evokes an eternal, unfixed element, casting a subsequent light and shadow over everything narrated. This concealed narrator, pulling at the judge’s stings – as the judge subsequently pulls on the other riders’ strings – frames the story with the present tense, only when revealing him- or herself in the very beginning, as well as when the judge dances his dance of victory in the end: “His feet are light and nimble. He never sleeps. He says that he will never

die. He dances in light and in shadow and he is a great favorite. He never sleeps, the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die” (349). This compares to a passage found in Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation*, which reads, “The will never tires, never grows old . . . and is in infancy what it is in old age, eternally one and the same . . . it is eternal becoming, endless flux” (qtd. in Eddins 31). This comparison is relevant to why, even though the judge presents himself under the guise of the Enlightenment, he operates like a noumenon, the thing itself. Will, “the essence of man” (Durant 315), is a thing which can never be captured or boxed in.

The challenge of absolute representation is further illustrated by other disappearances, in particular the vanishing cat. This demonstration of the impossibility of truth-telling – as straight-shooting – can be seen when Glanton fires his new Colt at a nearby ca: “The explosion in that dead silence was enormous. The cat simply disappeared. There was no blood or cry, it just vanished” (McCarthy 86). There are no markings after the cat, no trace of its existence; it simply disappears. Unlike Pat Garrett who is accused of missing his mark, of shooting the wrong man, Glanton does not miss his mark. He completely obliterates it. This utter destruction of a living entity is precisely the same as the judge’s notion of destroying the original article before sketching it down in his ledger, thus making the example of Glanton and his annihilation a metaphor for how the imposition of hegemonic truth is always violent. The novel displays the vanishing cat as an allegory of how the riders try to impose their hegemonic truth, under the judge’s spell, yet there is only a void created by their destruction. The notion that “sign systems tend to mark or mediate the absence rather than the presence of things” (Snyder 128) makes absolute hegemonic discourse impossible. This incident, as Evans also remarks, makes “all questions of accuracy impossible” (423).

The gap between the judge’s mission to turn everything into a representation and the judge himself being a representation in the novel, underscores the peril of attaching significance to a deceptive unity or a singular hegemonic truth. By destroying the original article and creating a false unity in the sign, the judge’s mission to make everything a representation reflects this danger, which again parallels the danger inherent in all types of representation. Drawing from Noys, who points out the dangers of mythic discourse, I claim that myths alter the basic structure of language in how they present as timeless truths taken out of their historical contexts in a way that “does violence to language by dissimulating its arbitrary form into the ‘unity’ of myth” (Noys 15). This is precisely what the judge is doing, and what the novel itself enacts in order to highlight the dangers of this type of discourse. To

blindly accept the unity between a sign and what it signifies, the reader would aspire to become like the judge.

As the narrative disappearances become more and more apparent as the story progresses, so too does the gang's physical status. Holden's reign as he strikes out a new course for the riders is seemingly leading them to the same fate as the Anasazi, where they will simply disappear. Mirroring the fates of the peaceful Tiguas whom they will slaughter every soul of, they will also be gone, as "in the circuit of few suns all trace of the destruction of these people would be erased. The desert wind would salt their ruins and there would be nothing, *nor ghost nor scribe*, to tell to any pilgrim in his passing how it was that people had lived in this place and in this place died" (McCarthy 182, my italics). Becoming representations in the judge's ledger, as well as the novel, the gang themselves are turning into specters as "They crossed before the sun and *vanished one by one and reappeared again* and they were black in the sun and they rode out of that vanished sea like *burnt phantoms* with the legs of the animals kicking up the spume *that was not real*" (115 my italics). The novel makes them into figures that seem "remote and without substance" (157) the notion of the riders themselves disappearing then reappearing underscores a certain uncertainty, making them into markers or "merestones" within the narrative space. The kid also becomes a witness to this disappearance, "Then he saw the riders ahead of him. They' not been there, then they were there" (227). This process of absence and presence which ensnares the riders, mirrors the process of signification and deferral, and shows the very intricacies of language itself. In the process of marking the world, it is the judge who gives it signification. Holden is masterfully manipulating the gang into his web of textuality, and as the riders are caught within his narrative weave, they gradually morph into mere representations themselves.

This focus on disappearance also makes the reader aware of the self-reflexivity of the text. Similes such as "like shades of figures erased upon a board" (48) and "like some fabled storybook beast" (143-44) have a dual function. On the one hand they vividly paint the landscape of the narrative, while on the other hand they simultaneously draw attention to the text's fictional status. This is further underscored by the mentioning of "paper" in a myriad of instances, as we see with "black paper mountains" (226) and "like paper birds upon a pole" (222). This focus of self-reflexivity, as well as the multiple disappearances therein, propels the narrative beyond a mere recounting of events, forcing the readers themselves to become self-aware. Paralleling the kid's journey, where he follows "the trace" (225) of blood and the dead to find the gang again, his journey also becomes the reader's journey through the text. Like Derrida's notion of the trace, the idea of following something already gone, being

brought back, only to have it disappear again, further ensnares the novel within the theme of cyclic violence. This cyclic nature will in the end culminate in the kid's ultimate erasure from the novel, marking it as both an end, as well as continuation, because as Søvting observes, the text is "repeatedly testing the limits for discourse and language itself" (25). *Blood Meridian* does not simply tell a story; it challenges the very notion of storytelling. Readers themselves become active participants, not just passive consumers, in testing the boundaries of language and representation.

Numerous critics have posited that *Blood Meridian* lacks a moral center. While some find this off-putting, it is precisely the lack of a moral center which creates the possibility for encoding the violence of representation without getting stuck in the arbitrary dichotomy of good and evil. As the judge himself proclaims, "Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak. Historical law subverts it at every turn. A moral view can never be proven right or wrong by any ultimate test. A man falling dead in a duel is not thought thereby to be proven in error as to his views" (McCarthy 261). In this sense, the judge's immoral rule of the text creates a moral vacuum which removes any ethical stance the reader might take. It is not about right or wrong, but rather that the amorality of *Blood Meridian* grants the reader the opportunity to focus on representation and signification itself, and how the process of creating meaning is inherently violent. Similar to Derrida's notion of arche-writing, *Blood Meridian* "cannot be judged according to moral categories, since it precedes and makes possible those categories" (Evans 424). Rather than being an exploration of conventional morality, defined in most Westerns, the novel delves into the inherent volatile structure of signification, which is constantly moving and ever expanding. While many critics have claimed that the reason for the judge to get rid of the kid is because of his empathic nature, this perspective seems reductive when viewed through a Derridean lens. Rather, the kid's disappearance acts as the very precondition for discourse, epitomizing *différance*, which creates ambiguity and removes closure, thus negating any absolute and finite truth. The kid's vanishing act might even be considered a theatric display of this notion, where the judge as a writer, finally gets to act out his coin trick, on a much grander, metaphysical scale, demonstrating once and for all the double nature inherent in inscription.

3.5 You aint nothin

The relationship between the kid and the judge works as a central driving force of the novel, much like the relationship between Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid in *The Collected Works*.

However, while Pat and Billy work as mutually annihilating binaries within the text, the judge works as the self-annihilating force of textuality. Driven by a desire to destroy, he pushes the binary oppositions to their extremities, to the “uttermost edge of the world” (McCarthy 147). At the heart of the judge’s unfixed center lies the enigma which threatens to expose his very textuality. As the kid gets closer to his own end, his inverted Bildung finally reaches a space of sudden insight. Coming closer to the realization that the judge is the one controlling the narrative, the kid calls him out, telling him, “it was you and none other who shaped events along such a calamitous course” (318). This moment can be seen as the climax of the kid’s inverted Bildung, where he gets close to gaining insight, not of himself, but of the world and the forces that control it, represented by the judge. In their final confrontation the kid tells the judge, “You aint nothin,” to which the judge replies “You speak truer than you know” (345). When the kid tells the judge, “You aint nothin,” he cuts right to the heart of the judge’s unfixed core. As Rich Wallach asserts, “the kid threatens to comprehend what lies behind these manipulations, which would shatter the judge’s exaggerated and perhaps illusory fullness of presence. As Borges had observed, any book which does not contain its own anti-book is incomplete” (134). With this ambiguous exchange, “they complete *Blood Meridian*’s anti-book” (134). This paradoxical core of Holden’s unfixed center not only highlights his resistance to any definite interpretation, but the novel’s resistance to it too. With his elusive reply, “You speak truer than you know” (McCarthy 345) the judge acknowledges the kid’s close proximity and the danger of his insight, which would “like a deconstructive reading unravel the judge’s very textuality” (Wallach 134). In order to defer away from this anti-book, the kid must disappear. The kid’s disappearance thus becomes a testament to the unrepresentable. In order to fulfill the double nature of inscription, the kid must disappear to complete the absence to the judge’s presence, thereby facilitating the deferral of signification. As the kid enters his final resting place in the jakes, the judge awaits him: “The judge was seated upon the closet. He was naked and he rose up smiling and gathered him in his arms against his immense and terrible flesh and shot the wooden barlatch home behind him” (McCarthy 347). This raises an important question; Why is the reader not privy to the disappearance of the kid? Why is the disappearance in the jakes omitted from the narrative, a narrative that so effectively has described every other heinous act thus far? The reader is intentionally left out of witnessing the absence occurring in the jakes, because bringing into the presence of such an act would negate its very essence as absence. The kid’s disappearance thus becomes the very precondition for discourse itself. As Derrida claims, “*Either* play is *nothing* ... Or *else* play begins to *be* something and its very presence lays it open to some sort

of dialectical confiscation. It takes on meaning and works in the name of seriousness, truth and ontology” (*Dissemination* 156). The Derridean thought of writing under erasure becomes relevant here. When something is eradicated, it paradoxically is both present and absent on the page, leaving a ghostly remnant to haunt the very void it created. Notably, the kid’s ultimate disappearance proves that Judge Holden will never achieve complete hegemonic discourse. As the judge will never encapsulate everything, the kid’s act of disappearing proves that there will always be gaps and voids in representation. With his terrifying embrace, “gathering” the kid up into oblivion, the judge once again creates a textual void, like the true archon of textuality that he is. However, as a last effort of resistance, the kid’s unseen, unrepresented disappearance could be seen as a refusal to become a representation in the judge’s ledger. This notion also resonates within the text, as the kid’s demise is erased from it as well. At his journey’s end, perhaps the kid’s last lesson, his final stance, is leaving an open ended, ambiguous meditation on the limits of representation. Ultimately, the judge will succeed in his mission in turning everything into a representation. Every element succumbs to his transformation, with the sole exception of the kid who up until the very end manages to elude the judge’s hegemonic, textual rule and now remains absent from the narrative’s climax.

Anticipating the Border-trilogy to come, Snyder contends the epilogue predicts the “nuclear testing and other representations of the destruction of the natural world” (133). As the epilogue opens a world of interpretation, the holes that are made have become a much-debated topic of signification:

In the dawn there is a man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground. He uses an implement with two handles and he chucks it into the hole and he enkindles the stone in the hole with his steel hole by hole striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there. On the plain behind him are the wanderers in search of bones and those who 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 which 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 sequence and causality as if each round and perfect hole 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. He strikes fire in the hole and draws out his steel. Then they all move on again. (McCarthy 351)

Whether these mystic holes are perceived as holes for fence poles, creating borders and boundaries, mirroring the hierarchical values and systems that fence in meaning-making process – or perhaps graves, where the “gatherer of bones” can be seen rummaging through the historical past, picking up the bones to revise another story – the void in the holes seems to be a physical representation of the markings human beings inflict on the world. They are a literal symbol for the textual violence of signification and markings. Perhaps if they are symbolic of the craters left over by nuclear bombs, they paradoxically signify the peak of human invention as well as human capacity for utter destruction, simultaneously echoing the double nature of inscription. As the essence of truth remains perpetually elusive, the epilogue serves as both a summary of the overarching project of the novel, as well as it presents a myriad of textual interpretations. It creates a loop of constant deferral and differentiation, ultimately culminating in the absence of definitive resolution. It also demonstrates the ambiguity about *The Evening Redness in the West*, which can be both immensely beautiful while at the same time absolutely terrifying.

3.6 Chapter conclusion

The cyclic perpetuity of violence found within the narrative structure of the novel also gets thematized and represented through numerous acts of brutality and physical representations of violence. As the Glanton gang travels through the western landscape during the American Frontier period, they travel through a sort of evolution of violence – moving through the thematic backdrop of the westward expansion and into the rhetorical violence which lingers like an invisible, intangible web around the novel’s very textuality. This journey becomes emblematic of their ensnarement in the web of textuality, which is one of the ways the novel enacts the very violent structure inherent to representation. In contrast, the judge works outside this premise, serving as the novel’s unfixed center. By presenting himself as a man of the Enlightenment, the judge operates under a misrepresented guise. However, as he is both a constructor as well as a construction himself, his true nature can never be captured or boxed in.

The judge’s unfixed center is seen through his lack of origins and his constant deferral. With his mission to inscribe the world according to him, thus making him the overlord of the world, he imposes a set of categories on the world, creating differences and escalating

hierarchical dichotomies to their uttermost extreme. This pursuit of textual dominance, his compulsion to transform every original article into a simulacrum, mirrors the very act of inscription, highlighting the impossibility of absolute hegemonic dominance. As the novel shows the original violence or arche-violence of the judge creating the world in his image, the paradox of further representation becomes illuminated. The notion of building a myth on top of a myth, already founded on misrepresentation, parallels how the American identity has been constructed on the misrepresentation of the myth of the American Frontier. As the judge states in his story of the harnessmaker: “The world which he inherits bears him false witness” (152). In this way, the novel rejects the notion of the Western genre, as well as it illuminates the paradox of the revisionist Western – how further reiteration of the myth only contributes to further obfuscation of said myth. The novel shows how any absolute truth only evaporates when one tries to capture it, just as truth-telling as straight-shooting only vanishes before the reader’s eyes. As Holden is striving for narrative hegemonic rule, the novel itself exposes the impossibility of such a thing. Holden’s myriad of cul-de-sacs and contradictions never lead to any ultimate resolution or absolute truth. Rather, meaning evaporates just as the reader thinks they have grasped the core of the matter. The novel reminds its readers that there is another narrator, superior to the judge, pulling his strings – some invisible force, larger than this larger-than-life character. By positioning Holden as a noumenon within the text, with his contradictions and multiple rhetorical cul-de-sacs, the novel casts him as the very embodiment of textuality. This only illuminates the violent process of signification, especially by those in power – becoming a meta-commentary, not only on the novel itself, but on all forms of representation. Without moral justification for the gang’s violent actions, the narrative reveals this violent structure of language in its entirety. The absence of resolution or catharsis rejects the notion of the Western genre, as well as becoming a critique of the whole established Western paradigm, as violence is not outside the realm of representation, but rather, it is woven into its textual matrix.

The judge serves as the connection between the thematic, physical representations of violence depicted in the novel and the more abstract, rhetorical violence of the novel. It is through the character of the judge the novel enacts writings double nature of effacement and creation. Operating as a living allegory of the text itself, the judge’s actions encapsulate this process, personifying him as both the archon of textuality, as well as demonstrating man’s inherent disposition for violent dominance. As a contrast to this, the kid’s inverted Bildung not only serves as a rejection of the generic Western genre, similar to *The Collected Works’* Billy the Kid, but it becomes a larger stance towards the inherent violence of signification. As

the kid's resistance is a passive resistance, he provides the reader with a feeling of human inconsequentiality within the world. When confronted with the novel's sublime nature, the failed Bildung has perhaps not been so failed as one might think. By looking at Schopenhauer's notion of the sublime, where the end goal is to transform "sufferers" into more enlightened "knowers," the novel's trajectory might as well reflect this transformational process, mirroring the very odyssey undertaken by its readers. Schopenhauer states, "when he looks over the course of his own life with all its misfortunes he will not see his own individual fate so much as the fate of humanity in general, and thus he will conduct himself more as a knower than as a sufferer" (231). Perhaps the kid's inverted Bildung grants the reader this opportunity, to become knowers rather than sufferers. In a way, one could argue that the novel serves as a profound revelation, urging the reader to transcend their immediate circumstance and "see" the broader human condition. In its intricacy, *Blood Meridian* reads both like a threat, a promise, and a prediction. Yet, it is not merely a passive reflection of historical events. By critiquing how history writes itself, and how the writers of history insert their own subjectivity into said writing, it makes the reader aware of the subjective violence coloring every historical account, thus, removing the possibility of objective accounts of the past (as well as future predictions). The novel only hints at the looming demise yet to come, for the West, as for all humanity.

4 Conclusion

As this thesis has illuminated, the violence thematically represented in *Blood Meridian* and *The Collected Works* reveals the violence inherent in all representation. Through enacting and encoding the inherent structure of violence within representation, they both cast a light (as well as a shadow) on the hidden complexities of language. Just as *The Collected Works* has no beginning, nor does *Blood Meridian*'s judge Holden; he has no origin. There is no origin to mark where it all began. The lack of beginning in both texts, parallels the lack of origin of the myth of the American Frontier. Mentioned in this thesis' introduction, Slotkin asserts that in the myth-making process – a process in order to understand and control the world – representation has turned into misrepresentation. This process has imposed a hierarchy of binary oppositions, only deferring meaning back and forth without truly unraveling the violent structure it operates within. This resonates with the Derridean notion of arche-violence, suggesting that the original violence occurs when one imposes categories and rigidly attaches things to words through signification. This is especially evident through the judge's notion of signification. His continuous effacement and creation, in order to create a simulacrum of the world in his ledger, parallel *Blood Meridian*'s overarching project. Namely it creates a discourse on discourse itself to reveal the hidden structures of rhetorical violence. Both *Blood Meridian* and *The Collected Works* have a flux at their center that problematize the idea that violence is somehow outside the limits of representation. Violence is not a definable construct that exists outside the limits of representation; rather, it is intertwined within its very textual fabric, functioning as its fluid, unfixed core.

As the reader enters the maze of textuality, both novels reveal cul-de-sac after cul-de-sac. The judge feeds readers a "string in a maze," (McCarthy 256) luring them into his web of rhetorical violence which represents the very essence of textuality. However, like the maze in *The Collected Works*, there is no way out. Both novels show the complex system that language is, and how easily meaning gets deferred and manipulated. There is no ultimate truth, even though the judge tries to fool readers into believing there is, because, as he paradoxically claims: "The mystery is there is no mystery" (263); he is revealed to be a mystery himself "the bloody old hoodwinker" (263). This paradoxical insight becomes the big question in both novels, as neither has any "real" objects of signification. Both novels resist any easy classification and categorization. Yet, instead of building on the myth of the Western Frontier, they highlight the violent structure on which it is built, exposing the myth as a misrepresentation, thus illuminating the paradox of revisionist Westerns. Both *The Collected*

Works and *Blood Meridian* grapple with the myth of The American Frontier, which is built into the fabric of American self-identity, revealing this identity to be based on misrepresentation rather than representation. The notion of perpetuating a myth founded on misrepresentation parallels the problem we see not only in the Western genre, but also in all meaning-making processes. Challenging the logocentrism of the Western centering-principle, the novels de-center this meaning-making process. By decentering meaning in each novel, both texts expose the violent structures inherent in language and the meaning-making process. By revealing this process, they also challenge biased binaries in the Western tradition. As *The Collected Works* constantly unravels and shifts binaries to reveal that writing is a fluid and flux operation, *Blood Meridian* removes the binary apparatus altogether. By removing all sense of good, mercy, and morality, the novel makes everyone “bad” to ask the question of whether if man’s heart can be shaped of another clay. However, *Blood Meridian* does not answer this explicitly. Instead, the novel enacts the process of violence inherent to representation, showing its readers that this process is inescapably interwoven in the very way we understand the world around us.

Being based on historical accounts and using historical figures, the interplay between intertextuality and historical accounts in both novels blurs the lines between reality and fiction. *The Collected Works* focuses on identity and historical memory and the difficulty in transcribing a fixed meaning or accurate account. However, the text’s focus on the Lincoln County War and the myth of the “Wild West” is not the focal point. Neither is the historical person Henry McCarthy, also known as William H. Bonney. Rather, by deconstructing the myth of Billy the Kid, the text illuminates the gap between history and fiction, and the problem of obtaining a sense of truth. There can be no resolution – not within the text or the undeveloped picture the reader has of Billy. The “real” historical figure of Billy the Kid has long since vanished and remains absent. By perpetuating his myth, the violent structure which creates a false hope of capturing the essence of him becomes a devious affair. The text illuminates the illusion that there is a “real” essence to capture and reveals Billy to be nothing but a fragmented construct without any material referent. This notion is also paralleled in how the text fragments and dissolves in its very form.

While *Blood Meridian* focuses on the same idea, it also shines the light a larger scale. The kid’s lack of a definable essence is why he refuses to assume any dimension as a character. His inverted Bildung and impossibility of growth also highlight the rejection of his growing into any generic representation of the mythic kid of the West. Instead, he shows no growth or autonomy. The judge (as a symbol of textuality) stands in his way. This dichotomy

serves to critique the very processes by which certain figures are elevated to “legendary” status, while others are marginalized or erased. In this sense, the judge holds two different roles. He is both archon of textuality, as well as a perversion of the Enlightenment ideals pushed to its most appalling extreme. Portraying not only America’s imperialistic history, which serves as the very foundation of the myth of the American Frontier, *Blood Meridian* also challenges the paradigm of the established Western culture. The westward expansion can be viewed as a microcosm reflecting the broader tendencies of Western culture and history at large. As the judge inscribes the world in his ledger, a simulation is formed, paralleling not only the myth of the American Frontier, but the very process of signification. As we see with the “300,000-year old fossil skull” in the novel’s epigraph, the violence of transforming people into signs is not unique to Western culture: it will happen again with “other people, with other sons” (153). As a form of arche-violence, the judge enacts the violent process of signification, by effacing the original to create a simulacrum and creating categories and differences within. He operates like a noumenon within the text, and as an effect of the text, he can never be pinned down or put into any easy categorization. Just as in Benjamin Noys’ definition of the violence of representation, the judge also resists any form of easy categorization making the reader aware of this process and the perils of representation. Likewise with *The Collected Works*, by perpetuating the myth of Billy the Kid, the violence of representation can be seen in the analogy of culling his myth like Billy’s culling of Livingstone’s mad dogs. The reader becomes complicit in perpetuating this myth. The text makes readers witness the violent structure they are participating in. In this way, both novels encode the violent structures inherent in language, representation, and the meaning-making process, showing that violence is not exterior to representation. It is an inherent part of the way humans understand the world and make sense of it, a natural part of our unnatural representation of it.

Further inquiries

This thesis has ventured into the intricate fabric of violence and representation. However, given the expansiveness of the topic, there are still a myriad of potential threads to be untangled. For further inquiries, I would explore the complex theory of language and compare the inherent violence of representation to other complex systems. Cormac McCarthy was an avid member of the Santa Fe Institute, where he wrote his only academic contribution “The Kekulé Problem.” In this essay he touches upon the idea “that language had acted very much like a parasitic invasion.” It would be interesting to investigate further into this notion, as well

as compare language to other complex systems and how they operate in the world. A discourse of the violent structure inherent in representation and language is a study of things hidden in plain sight, which encompasses the very principle of complexity theory. While I will not be going into this in depth in this paper, one might consider delving into this for further research. As David Krauker, president of the Santa Fe institute, explains complexity theory and complex phenomena:

These are adaptive, interacting, many-body systems that include populations of cells, societies, economies, cities, human cultures, and technological networks—all phenomena with long histories and adaptive components, and they have a tendency to change as soon as we have come to understand them. (231)

Complex phenomena work in a similar manner to *Blood Meridian*'s judge Holden or *The Collected Works*'s Billy the Kid: just when you think you understand them, they shift shape. This process of changeability is what remains at the unfixed center of *Blood Meridian* and *The Collected Works*. The novels' enactment of signification, representation, and the meaning-making process, which is inherently violent in its function, suggests that the act of ascribing meaning or interpreting narratives can be an act of dominance or subjugation. Therefore, these novels not only narrate events but also encode the very modalities through which narratives assume significance. In order to create, one must destroy. This it is the original violence of inscription.

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