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In this thesis I argue that Cormac McCarthy’s 1985 novel Blood Meridian serves as a critique of the American Western mythos by collapsing aspects of myth, ideology, and the sublime into the question of violence’s relationship to language. In explicating the novel, I demonstrate how the ironies staged between the character of the kid and the novel’s narrator and the ironies represented in the language and characterization of Judge Holden reveal McCarthy’s critique by pointing toward the violence inherent in the language of myth. Along with this discussion of myth and ideology, I also analyze how the figuring of violence as sublime in the novel gets coupled with moments where characters exhibit either an unconscious desire for language or a marked absence of language. The significance of these moments, I contend, extends McCarthy’s critique of the American mythos by undermining the Western genre’s trope of the stoic hero while also exposing the ways in which the novel draws together the nature of language and the nature of violence. Blood Meridian thus serves not as a libratory revisionist critique that seeks to re-write the American mythos but as a much darker meditation on the ubiquity of violence—a violence that manifests itself all too often in textual form.
Codified into the Word: The Intersections of Language and Violence in Cormac McCarthy’s Blood Meridian

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Matthew T. Hagan, Author
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“The man threw down the bottleneck and unsheathed an immense bowieknife from behind his neck. His hat had come off and his black and ropy locks swung about his head and he had codified his threats to the one word kill like a crazed chant.”

-Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*

**Introduction: Violence and Language in Context**

In what appears to be a stereotypical confrontation between two drunken ruffians, McCarthy stages a scene toward the beginning of *Blood Meridian* between the novel’s nameless protagonist, known only as the kid, and a man walking out of a saloon outhouse. Both characters in this scene are moved to physical violence for the simple reason that they present obstructions to each other on a set of “boards laid across the mud,” which lead to “the batboard jakes” at the bottom of an empty lot (9). When the man demands of the kid that “You better get out of my way,” the kid promptly decides that “he wasn’t going to do that and he saw no use in discussing it” (9). This leads to the next simple, declarative sentence from the narrator: “He [the kid] kicked the man in the jaw” (9). Here, McCarthy appears to highlight physical violence and illustrate a rejection of language use as a viable means to resolve the situation (the kid’s “no use in discussing it” and perhaps even his kick to the very apparatus of language, the man’s “jaw” [9]). From this portion of the scene, it seems that language and physical violence maintain a kind of stark separation. Despite this initial separation between language and violence, the scene quickly escalates into a knife fight in which the man’s response to the kid’s kick draws language and violence together: “The man threw down
the bottleneck and unsheathed an immense bowieknife from his neck. His hat had come off and his black and ropy locks swung about his head and he had codified his threats to the one word kill like a crazed chant” (9). The notion that the man “codified his threats to the one word kill [my emphasis]” yokes language and violence (9). Readers get not only a description of ensuing physical violence; they also get a representation of language use, the word “kill,” metaphorically bound via the word “codified,” to that violence (9). In a kind of impulse to speak, the man’s desire to do harm to the kid comes out not just from the wielding of his bowieknife, but it comes out of his mouth over and over again: “Kill kill slobbered the man wading forward” (9). McCarthy’s choice of the word codify, meaning “to reduce laws (rules) to a code” or “to reduce to a general system; to systematize,” even suggests that violence’s codes, rules, and perhaps even deep underlying structures might take form within or somehow be systematized within language (“codify, v”). In this short but important scene, language and physical violence are not so easily separated. They are curiously and suggestively bound with one another. 1

This scene from the pages of Blood Meridian suggests a relationship between language and violence, but linking such a subject to McCarthy’s commentary on his own work presents a bit of struggle for the simple fact that McCarthy, popularly known

1 In the scene directly following, McCarthy introduces the character Toadvine, a character whose ears are missing and who also bears the crudely burned letters H, T, and F on his forehead. When the kid stares up at him from the ground, he “could see that [Toadvine] had no ears” and he could see that “the markings” on Toadvine’s head “were splayed and garish as if the iron had been left too long” (11). In standing with my reading of the kid’s fight with the nameless man, Toadvine’s missing ears signal a similar negation of language while the burned letters on his forehead suggestively bind language with a form of physical violence.
for his reclusiveness, rarely talks about his own work. Richard B. Woodward’s seminal 1992 interview, “Cormac McCarthy’s Venomous Fiction,” however, serves as one of only a handful of personal interviews conducted with the elusive author from which one might draw substantive comments. Woodward, in a notable moment of the interview, questions McCarthy about his choice to move from the Southern-gothic themes and landscapes of earlier novels like *The Orchard Keeper, Outer Dark, Child of God* and *Suttree* to the landscapes, genres, and thematics of the Southwest and the Texas-Mexico border. McCarthy’s answer to this question is straight and to the point: “‘I’ve always been interested in the Southwest. There isn’t a place in the world you can go,’” he says, “‘where they don’t know about Cowboys and Indians and the myth of the West’” (Woodward). Following up this comment with perhaps his most oft-cited quote, McCarthy comments more directly on the meaning behind *Blood Meridian*’s graphic depictions of violence:

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

These two comments, one concerning the universality of a particular mythology and the other concerning the ubiquity of violence and the naivety associated with denying such violence, provide a useful starting point for looking at a text like *Blood Meridian* in terms of the intersections between language and violence. They do so because they not only comment on the nature of violence, but also place *Blood Meridian* into a myth
tradition known more for its celebration of violent action and stoic, taciturn heroes rather than peaceful negotiations and smooth talkers.

According to McCarthy, everyone knows the myths of the American West, and we all live with violence whether we like it or not. In some senses, then, McCarthy’s commentary on *Blood Meridian* links the tradition of American mythology with the realities of violence. McCarthy’s notion of violence as a ubiquitous phenomenon, a violence which Christian Kiefer declares “appears to teach nothing, that imparts no message, other than that violence itself is the great and terrible solution to all,” however, raises questions about just where and in what one might locate the presence of violence (42). Stemming from such a view of violence, McCarthy’s notion of the myth of the West as a universal myth also prompts questions about how the very language of this myth in turn shapes or colludes with such violence (42). In other words, if there “‘isn’t a place in the world you can go’” without the myth of the West and there is “‘no life without bloodshed,’” one might rightly ask whether McCarthy’s appeals to American myth work to meditate on types of violence that go beyond just physical or immediately recognizable violence and whether the very language used in the creation and propagation of such myths is implicated in this violence (Woodward). In the case of this analysis, I argue that the subjects of the language of myth and the operations of language as a narratological and ideological device are paramount in a reading of *Blood Meridian*. The question of how McCarthy’s novel focuses not just on forms of physical violence but on the complex relationships between such violence, and the abstraction
and operations of language, therefore, serves as the operative point of query. It is in such questions concerning language and in such queries about *Blood Meridian* as a text which meditates on language and its intersections with violence that a set of critical contexts come to the fore.

Throughout this introduction, I aim to situate issues of myth and ideology as central to a reading of *Blood Meridian* as a novel about the relations between language and violence. In order to do this, I discuss at length a set of critics whose post-Vietnam era reassessments of the myth of the American West are contemporaneous with McCarthy’s own 1985 publication of *Blood Meridian*. In addressing critics like Richard Slotkin, Jane Tompkins, and Henry Nash Smith, I hope to set a context for how their reassessments of the myth and ideology of the West speak to my own concerns about issues of language and violence at work in *Blood Meridian*. As an important corollary to this discussion concerning myth and ideology, I also discuss very briefly toward the end of this introduction how more contemporary theories concerning the relationship between language and violence extend the ways in which one might read

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2 My argument can in some respects be read in light of critics like Steven Shaviro and Robert Jarrell who concentrate on the tensions between McCarthy’s representations of graphic violence and reader reactions to the aesthetic qualities of his prose. In a summary of such perspectives, Susan Kollin, in her “Genre and Geographies of Violence: Cormac McCarthy and the Contemporary Western,” notes how “*Blood Meridian* has been accused of being both ‘pornographically’ violent and ‘terribly beautiful'” (563). Kollin points out that the novel “has been criticized for its obsessive detailing of the horrific depravity of [the Glanton Gang]…while also overindulging in Faulknerian prose” (563). While my analysis does take into account the aesthetics effects of McCarthy’s representations of violence in varying degrees, my focus on language is less concerned with the pleasures/displeasures of reading or the politics of reading itself. My concerns lies more centrally in the internal logic and intentionality behind McCarthy’s self-reflexive fore-fronting of language and how this fore-fronting stands as a critique of the Western mythos as well as a philosophical comment on the nature of language and violence.
McCarthy’s focus on language and violence. In my subsequent readings of the novel, in chapter 1 and chapter 2 respectively, I apply issues from Slotkin, Tompkins, and Smith that I raise in this introduction more intently to the text in order to show how McCarthy, in an effort to highlight the ways in which myth and ideology constitute forms of violence through language, develops his own critical reassessment of the West that centers itself on the subject of language. In these chapters, I outline how McCarthy’s novel stages tensions and develops ironies both between and within the seemingly mythic protagonist, the kid, and the language of both the narrator and Judge Holden. I place such readings first in the chapters that follow in order to set a precedent for my reading in chapter 3 of how more contemporary theories on violence and language illuminate McCarthy’s figuring of violence as a sublime ineffability as well as his linking of positions of silence in the novel with positions of emasculation and weakness. Such an approach to *Blood Meridian*, I contend, pushes McCarthy’s reassessment of the Western mythos into a meditation on the collusion between the nature of language and the nature of violence.

As many critics of McCarthy’s work have pointed out, Richard Slotkin’s three-volume study on violence in American mythology, published between 1973 and 1992, provides some essential contexts for explorations of *Blood Meridian* as a novel about myth and violence. Slotkin’s notions of regeneration through violence as a mythic

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3 For a strong example of this type of scholarship, see Neil Campbell’s application of Slotkin in “Beyond Reckoning”: Cormac McCarthy’s Version of the West in *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West*. Campbell uses Slotkin in his reading of the novel to show how McCarthy deconstructs the violence and ideological function of Frederick Jackson Turner’s thesis of Manifest Destiny.
construct, his notion of violence within the motif of border conflicts, and his notion of violence as inherent in the frontier mentality’s attendant need for acquiring space all, sometimes directly and sometimes ironically, find resonance within McCarthy’s work. However, the connections Slotkin draws out between American myths and violence and my own focus on the intersections between language and violence in *Blood Meridian* require some more nuanced layering than simply applying Slotkin’s discussion of myth to McCarthy’s texts. While these issues are certainly present, a discussion of violence’s relationship to language in *Blood Meridian* stems from a complex of interrelated issues. These issues do include Slotkin’s formulations about the role of violence in American myth, but they also include discussions of the Western genre’s typically taciturn or stoic hero (an “anti-language” character at the heart of the myth) as well as discussions of the politics of representation and the ideological operations of the language of myth that go along with such politics.

A separation between myths as foundational texts—authoritative texts that affirm beliefs one has about their own culture or cultural identity—and understandings of the implicit cultural force that a phenomenon like violence has within such texts is ultimately what Slotkin adds to a reassessment of American myth within the post-Vietnam era. Slotkin’s notions of regeneration through violence, border conflicts, and open space in relation to the frontier all work to expose how a narrative of constant renewal or evolution through violence illuminates the force and meaning violence takes on in the American cultural consciousness. The idea of regeneration through violence, for example, represents a form of the archetypal myth of the heroic quest, which Slotkin
notes in *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier* as “perhaps the most important archetype underlying American cultural mythology” (10). “The quest,” says Slotkin, “involves the departure of the hero from his common-day world to seek the power of the gods in the underworld, the eternal kingdom of death and dreams from which all men emerge” (10). The necessity of violence enters the stage in that the “motive” for the quest “is provided by the threat of some natural or human calamity which will overtake his [the hero’s] people” (Slotkin 10). On a basic level, Slotkin contends that a narrative of conflict between the forces of man and nature or men and other men provides a structure of conflict and renewal in an American context. In American cultural mythology, the Puritan’s errand into the wilderness, the wars between native and colonial peoples, and the subjection of oneself to the elements in the process of westward expansion all fit Slotkin’s notion of regeneration through violence because they all equate conflict, either with nature or with man, as a test that births or renews the self. In American myths, to be subjected to the violence of nature or to approach death at the hands of other men, usually Native Americans, assures the hero a kind of authority of experience—a closeness to nature or to the limits of experience that either develops their moral stature or fundamentally changes them. In effect, violence takes the shape of a means which justifies the ends of establishing identity. As a kind of rudimentary effect of conflict within storytelling, violence in American myths of regeneration through violence continually and cyclically achieves this goal. For the Anglo-American, identity gets affirmed again and again in each new violent conflict. For example, violence resulted in the revelation of one’s moral authority, as with the
Puritans in their rejection of European culture and America’s native peoples, and it resulted in a similar notion of authenticity of experience, as with the later development of a uniquely American ethos that paradoxically triumphed in its moral authority over newly conquered land and native peoples while also locating its identity in a closeness to nature and the native (Slotkin 4-5).

Slotkin also points out that violence gains meaning in American mythology through the motif of border conflicts (a motif embedded in the concept of regeneration through violence) that rely on particular racial and culture divides. Slotkin, in *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, argues that establishing a new, uniquely American ethos resulted from border conflicts on perceived racial and cultural divides in which one boundary illustrated how “Anglo-American colonies grew by displacing Amerindian societies and enslaving Africans to advance the fortunes of White colonists” and how the “other boundary was defined by the emergence of conflicts between colonies and the ‘mother country,’ and later between the regional concerns of the ‘borderers’ and those of American metropolitan regimes” (11). For Slotkin, the “complete ‘American’ of the Myth was one who had defeated and freed himself from both the ‘savage’ of the western wilderness and the metropolitan regime of authoritarian politics and class privilege” (11). In essence, the mythic American hero continually engages in conflict on the borderline between primitive/civilized so as to not identify his or her self so completely with the native and the primitive as to descend into moral and spiritual corruption, and not to identify with the civilized as to descend into the political and cultural corruption of European rule and
urbanization. Representations of border conflicts with native peoples and European culture in American myths of regeneration through violence provide a coherent narrative for the perpetual establishment of a unique cultural and political position of American identity. Through the violence of constant border conflicts, the American ethos emerges.

As an important addition to the motif of the border conflict with native and European cultures, it should be noted that the above positioning of American identity also signals how violence in American myth effects both a rejection of and familiarity with the native and, vice versa, a rejection of and familiarity with the civilized. Because heroes of American lore represent “characters whose experiences, sympathies, and even allegiances fall on both sides of the Frontier,” such a position oscillating between native and civilized allows them to be “mediators of a double kind who can teach civilized men how to defeat savagery on its native grounds,” says Slotkin (14). To be at once familiar with the primitive by rejecting the civilized paradoxically becomes a means to imposing the civilized; it is knowledge of the enemy on their own terms. The opposite dynamic of being familiar with the native and the landscape they are associated with, however, aids in the moral and political conflict with the mother country and its later metropolitan counterparts. Because the Anglo-American settler is familiar with the landscape, he retains the native ethos that gives recourse to the moral high ground in the conflict with the corruption of European and urban society. The Anglo-American settler, then, becomes more authentic, less corrupted by urban civilization, by the way in which his identity is supposedly shaped via the physical land and its associations with
the native. Here, the motif of border conflicts allows the American ethos to retain an air of civility apart from the native as well as gain a status as native (i.e. American) in opposition to European culture and urbanization.

According to Slotkin, violence also plays a central role in American myth since it often serves as a means for acquiring the physical and psychological space necessary to achieve the ethos generated by a cycle of regeneration and the embedded motif of border conflicts. In order for American identity to assume the actual as well as mental position of both a primitive and civilized ethos, the need for open and unoccupied space becomes essential. Slotkin’s explanation of the symbolic meaning of the frontier as “a reservoir of natural resources sufficient to requite the ambitions of all classes without prejudice to the interests of any” helps explain what is meant here (13). The frontier, an open space imagined as devoid of people but rich in terms of natural resources, allows for the construction of a new identity both intimate with the landscape and of an identity able to build a new civilization. The recourse to acquiring this mythic space, however, entails the violence of occupation, war, and genocide. Space, in American mythology, gets acquired through what Slotkin calls the “mythic trope” of “‘the savage war’” in which “struggles inevitably become ‘wars of extermination’ in which one side or the other attempts to destroy its enemy root and branch” (12). Complete eradication, all out war, then, becomes a means to acquiring the mythic space of the open and unfettered frontier, which in the end provides the necessary space, both physical and psychological, for the development of an American identity outside of its native and European antagonists.
Related to a discussion of violence within American myth and essential to broaching more directly the issue of language in relation to violence that my analysis will focus on, a certain characteristic of the hero who typically lies at the heart of the myths Slotkin discusses requires attention. The heroes at the center of many of Slotkin’s formulations of myths of violence are often characterized as taciturn, stoic figures. Figures like the mountain man and the cowboy typically get characterized not by their loquaciousness but by their choice to remain silent and accomplish tasks or exert violence through physical means rather than verbal. In the genre of the Western, for example, the cowboy almost never uses language to get things done. In fact, the use of language to solve problems, to negotiate with enemies, or to establish one’s dominance marks a weakness in character rather than strength. When language does get used, it almost invariably gets used by a villain or effeminate character, and it ultimately gets shut down, rooted out, or ignored because it locates power in what the ideology of the Western genre typically seeks to reject. Published in the same year as Slotkin’s 1992 *Gunfighter Nation* yet ultimately pushing a feminist reading of the derision of language in the Western genre, Jane Tompkins’ chapter “Women and the Language of Men” in *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* explains the politics surrounding this rejection of language use. The “Western is at heart antilanguage,” says Tompkins (50). The genre, in its celebration of male physical prowess and stoic dominance “distrust[s] language in part because language tends to be wielded most skillfully by people who possess a certain kind of power: class privilege, political clout, financial strength” (Tompkins 51). “The positions represented by language,” notes Tompkins, “always
[get] associated with women, religion, and culture” and “in the end, that position is deliberately proven wrong—massively, totally, and unequivocally—with pounding hooves, thundering guns, blood and death” (55). The ability to narrate a story, choose the perfect words, to win a battle of intellectual wits, or to engage in a debate do not generally constitute the actions of the American hero. “Silence is a sign of mastery,” says Tompkins, and American heroes “would rather die than settle an argument by talking to each other” (64). The stoicism and taciturnity of the American hero and his being characterized as having a propensity for physical violence instead of language seems all too fitting for a set of myths in which the central narrative arch is comprised of violent conflict. Through the hero’s characterization, physical violence and brute force become central modes of operation for both the character and the story itself. The rejection of language in the myth’s central character figures the most important events of the myth, the events that essentially move the story forward, as physical acts of violence, not the language being employed.  

In my examination of *Blood Meridian* as a novel about language and violence, the concepts of regeneration through violence, border conflicts, and open space that

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4 Here one might note the implied realism of the Western genre. As implied in descriptors like gritty or rough, typical descriptions of the aesthetics of the Western tend to promote how Westerns, despite their varying ranges of mythic hyperbole, are realistic narratives rather than narratives that forefront their own linguistic or discursive nature. As Micheal Kolwalewski notes in his exploration of the tension between authors’ aesthetic choices and their representations of violence in *Deadly Musings: Violence and Verbal Form in American Fiction*, the effect of realism “is that we feel we are operating by ourselves, moving off and away from language toward something real” (29). We are encouraged, says Kolwalewski, “to see and feel life somewhere beyond” the words on the page (29). While my analysis, at its core, is not an exercise in reader response criticism, the centrality of the stoic, taciturn hero in the Western does add to the implied or assumed aesthetic effects of realism in the genre, which in turn adds further support to the idea that the Western downplays the role of language.
Slotkin discusses and the attendant notion of a taciturn hero that Tompkins outlines do not function in *Blood Meridian* in ways that affirm or celebrate the evolution of an American self. While Slotkin and Tompkins usefully develop an understanding of the cultural (and sometimes moral) force behind myths of violence and their protagonists, McCarthy’s appeals to these same myths bespeak of something else. In *Blood Meridian*, the myths of violence are instead revealed as closely bound to the very operations of language that speak the myth or to anti-heroes who reverse the image of the myth’s taciturn heroes. McCarthy certainly recognizes the power of myths (“everybody knows them” [Woodward]), but he does so almost exclusively in an ironic sense, which, for critics like Susan Kollin, positions the novel as a kind of mythic parody or “anti-Western” (561).\(^5\) In fact, as I will argue later in both chapter 1 and 2, both the narrator and the character of Judge Holden reflect these myths not so much in the results of their physical actions as in the results of their distinctly verbal ones. This is not to say that Slotkin himself ignores ties between violence and issues of language or that Tompkins’ discussion of the taciturn hero is somehow a moot point (Slotkin in fact discusses these quite clearly, as will be illustrated in a moment, and Tompkins’ formulation of the hero is essential to understanding the irony of Holden’s character). The point is, however,

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\(^5\) Following Judith Butler, Kollin notes that “parody always relies on a prior affiliation with the object one parodies” and that “in subverting the logic of a text, parody itself is a destabilized critical practice” (561). In describing *Blood Meridian* as an “anti-Western” engaging in a kind of parody, Kollin argues that “anti-Westerns do not necessarily avoid the problem of self-subversion, as they are often unable to escape the very thing they seek to dismantle but instead are drawn into an intimacy and affiliation that destabilizes the critical effort” (561). While Kollin’s contention that *Blood Meridian* is potentially a self-subverting text has application toward the end of my analysis, I find her definition of anti-Westerns as texts that simultaneously recognize and undermine elements of the genre in an effort to challenge the genre’s implicit codes useful in relation to McCarthy’s ironic attention to language.
that McCarthy engages these myths in ways that ultimately empty them of their power.

McCarthy ironizes these myths of violence by showing how they are constructs of language.

To push the subject of language as constructing violence even further, it is worth pointing out that the myths of violence that Slotkin presents and the actions of the taciturn heroes they tend to celebrate, in the end, do not directly translate into actual historical events. They are something else; they are the *codification*, to borrow McCarthy’s word, of the subjective and material experience of violence into narrative, metaphor, and language. The above discussion will serve to illuminate the ironies McCarthy stages in his appeals or recognitions of myths of violence, yet it is important for the purpose of exploring the various levels of connection between language and violence in *Blood Meridian* to clarify the distinction Slotkin himself makes between the real violence of material history and the meanings the language of American myth attaches to that violence. In other words, it is important to understand Slotkin’s point that violence in American myth narratives does not attempt to represent real, historical violence. Instead, violence embedded in mythic narratives serves the purposes of certain political and ideological positions and through the voices of the narrator as well as characters like Holden, McCarthy’s novel also works to reveal this dynamic. In his introduction to *Gunfighter Nation*, Slotkin makes an important distinction between the symbolic violence in American myth and the actual material violence of history: it “is not necessarily,” says Slotkin, “the amount or kind of violence that characterizes our history but the mythic significance we have assigned to the kinds of violence we
imagine or invent, and the political uses to which we put that symbolism” (13). In other words, the actual violence of material history takes a backseat to the production of myth narratives that seek to explain and draw meaning out of violence. A case in point is Slotkin’s own thesis of regeneration through violence as a mythic narrative in which the hero goes through a violent conflict and comes out the other side renewed. Slotkin establishes this narrative of violent conflict and renewal as “the structuring metaphor [my emphasis] of the American experience,” (3) and he argues that such a “myth can be seen as an intellectual or artistic construct that bridges the gap between the world of the mind and the world of affairs” (7). “It draws on the content of individual and collective memory,” says Slotkin, and “develops from it imperatives for belief and action” (7). With this distinction between real violence and what Slotkin says constitutes the “significance” and “political uses” of a mythic narrative, one can discuss the relationship between mythic language and the material realities of violence as an exercise in ideology (13).

In classical as well as neo-Marxist terms, the language of myth functions ideologically by offering a means to either mask material violence or further encourage it (13).\textsuperscript{6} For Slotkin and other scholars of American literature like Henry Nash Smith, the language of American myth and its connection to ideology as either a false consciousness (a masking of material relations) and ideology as an engine of history (an incitement of material action) serve as crucial points of debate. Slotkin, in an essay

\textsuperscript{6} For a discussion of language in relation to ideology, see Raymond William’s “Language” in \textit{Marxism and Literature}. William’s argues that language amounts to a “means of production” (38) and “historically and socially constituting” force (43).
titled “Myth and the Production of History,” notes that myth serves as “the primary language of historical memory” and “collective history” that “assign[s] ideological meanings to that history” (70). Myth, along with other discourses like science and economics, says Slotkin, lies at the top of a “spectrum of intellectual responses to reality, which co-exist both in individual minds and the culture’s battery of interpretive weapons” (78). He later comments on the power of such mythic language to euphemize the horrors of war into a digestible narrative as well as the power of such language to incite and justify action. In Slotkin’s example of the Vietnam War, he argues that “the language of the Cowboys and Indians ‘game’” served as a common language between “grunts” and their “military and bureaucratic superiors” (71). It was language for both parties that served as a “way to get a handle on experiences too terrible, too upsetting to be morally acceptable” (Slotkin 70). Citing the words of General and Ambassador Maxwell Taylor before Congress on the war effort, Slotkin demonstrates that the language of myth provided metaphors that helped “define the difficulty and suggest the likelihood of final success” in dealing with the enemy: “‘It is very hard,’” said Taylor, “‘to plant corn outside the stockade when the Indians are still around. We have to get the Indians further away…to make good progress’” (71). Whereas figuring the Vietcong as “Indians” justified and euphemized the slaughter and displacement of war, Slotkin also points out that because the language of myth “has become part of our common language,” it also proves as a way to incite or engender material action (72). Describing the Vietcong as Indians seemed to justify their destruction and displacement, but
considering the U.S. as cowboys also justifies present and future actions. Slotkin argues that while

mythic accounts do recognize the elementary sequences of ‘before and after,’ their most meaningful units are not so organized. When a ‘before’ event, such as the creation of the universe by the gods, is invoked in a mythic telling, it is rendered as if it were a ‘present’ happening, an event that is somehow still going on. (79)

The language of myth, suggests Slotkin, often “justifies the social and political arrangements of the present” (79).

Smith’s re-thinking of Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (1950) in his 1986 “Symbol and Idea in Virgin Land” raises similar issues about the effect of the language of myth on material action. In discussing Slotkin and John G. Cawelti’s Adventure, Mystery, and Romance, Smith argues that these scholar’s conclusions about the American West and its “cult of violence—legitimized violence” raise important questions about the effects of “non-material force[s] on actual events” (29). In an astute point of self-revision, Smith discusses his own scholarship as something influenced by the non-material forces of American myth: “I realize that my own attitudes were influenced by the basic myth and ideology of America to a greater extent than I had realized” (27). Smith then notes key portions of his analysis that may have benefitted from a clearer explanation and emphasis on the language of myth as an ideological force on material action. In one particularly illustrative section of the essay, Smith quotes his own analysis of the 1862 Homestead Act in Virgin Land, and argues that the Republican effort “to capture the myth of the garden and the symbol of the hardy yeoman, and thus to command the imaginations of the Northwestern farmers”’
qualifies as a form of “the influence of symbolic structures on group behavior” (31).

Nash quotes himself at length:

The seizure of this symbol [of the yeoman] by Republican orators in the campaign of 1860 enlisted in their cause the undefined but powerful force which the imagination of the masses of voters always exerts in political crisis. Advocates of the Homestead Bill sincerely believed that the yeoman depicted in the myth of the garden was an accurate representation of the common man of the Northwest and this belief was evidentially shared by thousands of voters. (30-31)

Here, as with Slotkin’s analysis of the rhetoric of the Vietnam War, the language of myth not only euphemizes material action, it actually drives it forward. The Homestead Act, according to Smith’s revision of himself, constitutes a particularly salient example of how a non-material force, like the language and imagery of myth, can enter the public sphere and drive material behavior.

For McCarthy, the ideological operations of language as emphasized by Slotkin and Smith are very much at work in Blood Meridian. The narrator and especially Holden serve as examples of how language masks violence as well as incites and engenders it. As will be demonstrated in chapter two, McCarthy shows how Holden’s rhetorical abilities not only mask the forms of material violence that Holden himself and the Glanton gang perpetrate, but McCarthy also develops a link between Holden and the narrator that demonstrates how the mystifications of Holden fit into an equally as ideological incitement of violence. Both Slotkin and Smith help in explaining the potential for the language of myth to influence material outcomes, and they provide some essential frame-working for how McCarthy ultimately writes this aspect of violence’s relation to language into the novel.
In distinction from my focus in chapter one and chapter two on how myth and ideology illuminate the operations of language that give violence its meaning, mask it, or even engender it within the novel, more contemporary explorations on issues of violence such as Slavoj Žižek’s 2008 *Violence* and Elana Gomel’s 2003 *Bloodscripts: Writing the Violent Subject* are worth mentioning briefly here in that they help open up yet another layer in the novel concerning the intersections between language and violence. These more recent critical approaches to violence—approaches that concentrate on the subjective, material experience of violence as a sublime, ineffable experience—something that disrupts and defies language—expose how McCarthy’s commentary on myth and ideology extends into a discussion of the ways in which the very nature of language and the nature of violence are intimately bound with one another. While Slotkin, Tompkins, and Smith serve my arguments in chapter one and two on how myth and ideology illuminate forms of language as violence within *Blood Meridian*, the issue of how violence as a kind of sublime experience that creates certain effects within language will be dealt with more fully in chapter three. Such effects, I argue, are demonstrated by McCarthy most poignantly in the way *Blood Meridian* reflects moments of unconscious and excessive responses in language to violence and in the way silence figures as a position of objectification and weakness. As my examination will hopefully make clear, McCarthy uses various scenes in which characters confront overwhelming violence as a means to show how the arguably excessive languages of the narrator and Holden are interrelated aspects of an unconscious need for symbolic order. Additionally, a reading of how McCarthy figures
the role of silence in the novel as a position of objectification and weakness that belies characterizations of the taciturn, mythic hero reveals how Holden represents an embodiment of both the ineffable sublime and the excessively textual. This final aspect of language’s relation to violence as applied to *Blood Meridian*, in the end, reveals a world in which language originates and ends with sublime violence, and silence, instead of signaling strength as in the characterization of the mythic hero, gets forever linked to a position conflated with the silent bodies of the very victims of this violence.

Ultimately, McCarthy merges the myriad aspects of violence’s relation to language discussed in this introduction in ways that tend to cut across one another. By collapsing aspects of myth, ideology, and the sublime into the question of violence’s relation to language, *Blood Meridian* serves as a meditation on the dynamic processes of language as a mythopoeic, instigative, and sometimes fallible force in relation to violence, something McCarthy claims there is “no such thing as life without” (Woodward). McCarthy’s novel at once demonstrates the codification of violence into the language of the myth of the West while simultaneously demonstrating how this very process of shaping the meaning of violence through language becomes an ideological process that masks and incites an otherwise inexpressible or ineffable violence. Often times ironically and sometimes directly, *Blood Meridian* consistently points both toward the processes of language that give violence meaning and perform a kind of violence in and of themselves as well as toward the gaps, fissures, and excesses in language that the sublime material reality of violence tends to produce. Described by some critics as “anti-myth” or “anti-Western” rather than revisionist in orientation,
McCarthy’s focus on the relationship between language and violence in *Blood Meridian* serves as an important element of the novel that adds to critical discussions of this nature. McCarthy’s focus on the relationship between language and violence is not an attempt to re-tell the story of the West in a way that liberates or allows for the voicing of the margins. It is not an attempt to give voice to the silenced victims of violence or to those that history tends to ignore. As a novel about the relations between language and violence, *Blood Meridian* attempts to tell a much darker story about the story itself—a story that perpetually mythologizes, falsifies, and incites violence and a story that can never quite reach or make sense of the sublime and terrifying reality that lies at its center.

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7 Along with Kollin’s labeling of *Blood Meridian* as an anti-Western, Inger-Anne Softing, in “Desert Pandemonium: Cormac McCarthy’s Apocalyptic ‘Western’ in *Blood Meridian,*” argues that “it is tempting to conclude that *Blood Meridian* comes closer to being an anti-Western than a revisionist Western” in that revisionist texts tend to give voice to a marginalized or silenced other (18). Softing notes: “A feminist revision will give preference to the previously feminine other as self; and a Native American revision will give preference to the previously Native American other as self. This strategy cannot possibly be ascribed to *Blood Meridian* as it makes no pretense of speaking for the other (18). I contend that the temptation to consider *Blood Meridian* an “anti-myth” or “anti-Western” is indeed a correct one in that McCarthy’s focus on language in relation to violence lays bare a kind of futility in any attempt to transcend the violence of the Western mythos, either in its textual or physical forms.
Chapter 1:

**Telling the Myth in the Language of Lost Poets: The Kid and Blood Meridian’s Narrator**

Suggested in the fight scene between the kid and the man outside of the saloon jakes, the relation between language and violence in *Blood Meridian* begins as early as the novel’s opening sequence. On one level, McCarthy introduces readers to a protagonist (the nameless kid) in this sequence that seems to unconsciously enact aspects of Slotkin’s criteria for an American archetype of mythic violence while also bolstering this unconscious drive in the kids’ lack of language and engagement in physical violence. The kid reflects, albeit unconsciously, Slotkin’s mythic tropes of American myth as well as the typical characterization of the myth hero as an anti-language figure. On another level equally important, *Blood Meridian*’s opening sequence also introduces a narrative voice whose verbosity and excesses of language calls attention to itself in ways that complicate and disrupt assumptions about the rejection of language in American myths of violence. McCarthy uses this opening sequence to introduce readers to a protagonist who will presumably enact the violence of American myth, yet he does so through a narrator whose language use is anything but terse or opaque. McCarthy sets up certain expectations for the reader about the mythic quality of the novel’s protagonist and the violence the kid engages in, yet he also begins to highlight through the narrator the central role that language itself will play in the novel.

When considering how McCarthy uses this sequence to introduce readers to the nameless kid, several links to Slotkin’s mythic hero of violence should be noted. In
typical fashion, the kid is described as a young man fleeing an eastern Tennessee home toward the western frontier. Eventually ending his trek in the town of Nacogdoches, Texas, which lies coincidentally on the 98th latitude, the kid enters a typical American myth scenario of a quest. However, in a move by McCarthy that appears to naturalize this flight westward as a kind of instinct, readers are denied any access to the kid’s motives for heading to the particular locality of the West and simply see him run away at fourteen in order to flee from a “schoolmaster” father who “lies in drink” and “quotes poets whose names are now lost” (3). Suggestive of Sloktin’s concept of the American hero establishing a new identity and of the mythic notion of open space, the kid here functions as a kind of deadly serious avatar of characters like Huckleberry Finn or Natty Bumpo who, like him, unconsciously play out such scenarios of western flight. Not only does McCarthy have the nameless kid make the symbolic gesture of heading westward, he also has the narrator describe the kid’s eastern flight as an exercise in Slotkin’s central myth of regeneration through violence. Aptly described by the narrator as a “fairybook beast,” the kid interacts with men who “fight with fists, with feet, with bottles, or knives,” and later, after the kid survives two gunshot wounds, one in the back and one near his heart, the narrator proclaims how “Only now is the child finally divested of all that he has been” (4). “His origins,” claims the narrator, “are become remote as is his destiny” (4). In effect, the kid seems to unconsciously enact Slotkin’s “structuring metaphor of the American experience” from within the very first pages of the novel (3).
The absence of language, however, also marks an important aspect of how McCarthy characterizes the kid in this opening sequence, especially when this lack gets linked with his propensity for physical violence. Not only does the kid presumably reject the “lost” poetry of his father, but the kid gets described by the narrator as an illiterate, “neither” able to “read nor write,” who “broods already” with “a taste for mindless violence” (3). Here, physical, unconscious violence takes precedence over the language acts of reading and writing. Violence in its physical and bodily manifestations becomes the default setting for the kid in opposition to any consciousness or influence provided via language. Pointing to the kid’s propensity for this tactile, physical violence rather than articulate verbalized encounters, the narrator calls attention to the kid’s “big wrists, big hands” and to the men, the men who fight “with fists, with feet, with bottles, or knives,” “whose speech,” rather than being of any articulate nature, “sounds like the grunting of apes” (4). Illiterate, devoid of language, and lost in a world in which language is opaque, the kid “walks in the streets and hears tongues he has not heard before” (4). Careful to point out this absence of, or perhaps default-aversion, to language in the characterization of the kid as well as in the world in which his quest begins, McCarthy quickly establishes this apparent protagonist of the novel as someone who engages in acts of purely physical violence rather than verbal or spoken encounters. The kid, essentially, gets established as a sort of primal, “anti-language” hero of action whose violence is natural and instinctual rather than a hero of words who steers clear of physical violence in favor of language.
While this opening sequence introduces readers to what appears to be an unconscious enactment of Slotkin’s mythic archetype of violence and to a protagonist whose violence remains distinct from the operations of language, McCarthy also introduces readers to a narrator whose language use in describing this archetype calls attention to itself in some rather marked ways. Rather than sticking with conventional third person, past tense narration, the narrator of *Blood Meridian*, from the very first lines of the novel, demands the reader’s attention via an imperative and then launches into a present tense description of the kid and the father he rejects: “See the child,” demands the narrator, “He is pale and thin, he wears a thin and ragged linen shirt. He stokes the scullery fire. His folk are known for hewers of wood and drawers of water but in truth his father has been a schoolmaster. He lies in drink, he quotes from poets whose names are now lost” (3). After this initial imperative and description of the kid and his father, the language then shifts into an ambiguous poetic musing that arguably conflates the voice of the father, the man who “quotes poets whose names are now lost,” with that of the narrator (3). In McCarthy’s now signature style of omitting quotations that demarcate the voices of characters from that of the narrator, readers are presented with the following passage immediately after the description of the kid’s father drunkenly reciting poetry: “Night of your birth. Thirty-three. The Leonid’s they were called. God how the stars did fall. I looked for blackness, holes in the heavens. The Dipper stove” (3). The ambiguous poetry of this passage, if read as both the voice of the narrator and the voice of the kid’s father, presents a language fused with the very figure the mythic hero of violence rejects. There are important implications in this
positioning of the narrative voice as potentially one and the same as the lost poetry that
the father speaks and that the kid unconsciously flees. Here, McCarthy presents a
fundamental tension between the expectations readers may have about the mythic
content and languageless world of *Blood Meridian*’s characters and action and the
controlling voice, or more precisely language, in which that myth will be
communicated. For as much as McCarthy uses the opening sequence to present a figure
that will unconsciously enact and fulfill expectations concerning Slotkin’s concepts of a
violent rejection of eastern society and of a myth of regeneration through violence,
McCarthy also presents a narrative voice associated with the rejected poetry of the kid’s
father as the very engine that will drive the story. The language of the kid’s father, the
poetry of men “whose names are now lost,” in other words, functions as the controlling
voice of *Blood Meridian* (3). Thus, the very language of the novel’s controlling voice,
from the very start of the novel, carries with it an ironic association with the language
represented in the father’s drunken revelries. The language of the narrator becomes
symbolic of that which the protagonist, the American myth hero, has unconsciously and
naturally rejected.

This tension McCarthy establishes between the mythic characters and action of
the novel and the language being use by the narrator to relay the myth becomes even
more apparent when one looks at the myriad Biblical, poetic, and literary epic
tendencies within the narrator’s highly stylized language. For instance, when the
narrator uses the phrase “being known for hewers of wood and drawers of water” to
describes the kid’s lineage, the narrator employs an archaic Biblical adage from the
book of Joshua (3). Additionally, in the line “All history present in that visage, the child
the father of the man” the narrative voice again blends with the “lost” poetry of the
father by using a line from Wordsworth’s “My Heart Leaps Up When I Behold” (3).
Later in the novel, in a scene shortly before the kid embarks on a disastrous mission
with Captain White’s troops, the narrator (in another noticeable shift into present tense)
describes the kid and two other young men being warned by a Mennonite in a tavern:
“The Mennonite watches the enshadowed dark before them as it is reflected to him in
the mirror over the bar. He turns to them. His eyes are wet, he speaks slowly” (40). The
warning, reminiscent of Coleridge’s opening stanzas in “The Rime of the Ancient
Mariner” in which “The bright-eyed Mariner” (28) warns one of three wedding guests
“with his glittering eyes” (3) again suggests a blending of Blood Meridian’s narrative
voice with the poetry of the father so rejected by the kid in the novel’s opening
sequence (Hungerford). 8

Examples like the ones above appear throughout Blood Meridian, but the most
referential and clear example of McCarthy’s invoking through the narrator a language
use that the kid presumably rejects occurs in what critics and scholars of the novel often
refer to as the “death hilarious” passage (53). Shortly before Captain White’s troops are
massacred by a band of Comanche warriors, the narrator gives the following lengthy
description of the charging warriors:

Already you could see through the dust on the ponies’ hides the painted
chevrons and the hands and rising suns and birds and fish of every device

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8 For further discussion on the intertextuality of Blood Meridian see Amy Hungerford’s lectures on Blood
Meridian available through Yale’s open lecture series online at www.oyc.yale.edu.
like the shade of old work through sizing on a canvas and now too you could hear above the pounding of the unshod hooves the piping of the quena, flutes made from human bones, and some among the company had begun to saw back on their mounts and some to mill in confusion when up from the offside of those ponies there rose a fabled horde of mounted lancers and archers bearing shields bedight with bits of broken mirrorglass that cast a thousand unpieced suns against the eyes of their enemies. 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, one in a stovepipe hat and one with an umbrella and one in white stockings and a bloodstained weddingveil and some in headgear of cranefeathers or rawhide helmets that bore the horns of bull or buffalo and one in a pigeontailed coat worn backwards and otherwise naked and one in the armor of a spanish conquistador, the breastplate and pauldrons deeply dented with old blows of mace or sabre done in another country by men whose very bones were dust and many with their braid spliced up with the hair of other beasts until they trailed upon the ground and their horses' ears and tails worked with bits of brightly colored cloth and one who horse's whole head was painted crimson red and all the horsemen's faces gaudy and grotesque with daubings like a company of mounted clowns, death hilarious, all howling in a barbarous tongue and riding down upon them like a horde from a hell more horrible yet than the brimstone landing 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. (52-53)

Though certainly a breathtaking piece of prose in its own right, the “death hilarious” passage (53) provides evidence for discussing how the narrator’s language carries the associations of “lost” poetry because it deliberately invokes and employs the formal features of the classical literary epic (3). The passage is unique in calling attention to the disparity between the languageless violence of the kid and the significance of the narrator’s language because the presence of not just one or two notable similarities but myriad linguistic and literary features comparable to the linguistic and literary features of the epic takes place in the language being used. In this passage alone, McCarthy
inserts the use of archaisms, the use of kennings combined with alliteration, the use of paratactic and hypotactic syntax, and the employment of the epic simile. It is through the combination of these multiple elements of the narrator’s language, then, that a certain register of language antithetical to the characterization of the kid appears in full force. McCarthy constructs a very conscious use of language in the narrative voice, as opposed to an unconscious recourse to physical action or violence, in an attempt to garner a particular ironic effect.

The use of archaisms in the “death hilarious” passage, on one level, lends the language of the narrator a particular diction that evokes the epic as it uses outdated words to attach a historical or mythical weight to the prose. David Crystal, in his discussion of archaisms in The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language, notes that archaisms often “feature…an older state of the language which continues to be used while retaining the aura of its past” (185). Additionally, says Crystal, “Not all archaisms are ancient. Many…evoke Victorian or Edwardian times, and include a great deal of slang and social usage, as well as outmoded technical names and notions” (185). 9 “[B]edight” and “dragoon,” two archaisms that appear in the “death hilarious” passage (52), serve as helpful examples of Crystal’s explanation of the way archaisms tend to function. Bedight, the older of the two words, gives the passage an “aura” of the past as Crystal might say (185). According to The Oxford English Dictionary (OED), bedight is

9 Crystal also notes that archaisms are also often found “in many historical novels”—a category that Blood Meridian certainly falls under (185). For a reading of the novel that takes into account actual historical events in 1849 as well as McCarthy’s research into the history of the Southwest Texas-Mexico border, see John Emil Sepich’s “‘What kind of Indians was them?’: Some Historical Sources in Cormac McCarthy’s Blood Meridian”.
a word first recorded circa 1400, and it is a word constructed of the prefix be and the verb dight (first recorded circa 1000), which means “to dictate, appoint, ordain, order, dispose of, deal with, treat” (“dight, v”). Dight can also be traced back in its etymology to the Old English diht-an and the Middle English diht-en (“dight, v”). Bedight, however, means to “equip” or “furnish” (“bedight, v”), and Blood Meridian’s narrator uses the word in this sense to describe the armament of shields while simultaneously evoking a sense of the past: “archers bearing shields bedight with bits of broken mirrorglass” (52). Such a usage of the word bedight to denote the wearing of armament dates back to 1559 in W. Baldwin’s Myrroure for Magistrates in the phrase “A troope of men…in armes bedight” as well as alludes to even more ancient descriptions of armament like Achilles’ shield in Homer’s Iliad (“bedight, v”). Dragoon, while not as old as bedight, evokes a sense of the past, but it is also presents a usage of an older technical term for a type of soldier. According to the OED, a dragoon (first recorded in 1622) originally meant a kind of “carbine or musket” and then eventually went through a slight semantic shift to mean a “species of cavalry soldier” that carried the specific weapon (“dragoon, n”). This term, while later than bedight by a nearly a century and dight by nearly 600 years, performs a similar evocation of the past yet also represents the use of an outdated technical term in the same way Crystal mentions the use of less ancient archaisms. Despite the subtle differences here in word choice, by simply employing the use of archaisms, McCarthy uses the narrator of Blood Meridian to elevate the diction of the language in a way that seems to contradict the kind of rejection or absence of language readers find in the novel’s protagonist.
As an important addition to McCarthy’s invoking of the epic in terms of lexical choices in the narrative voice, “death hilarious” (53), the actual phrase itself, functions as a kenning-like construction. Kennings, important to Old English epics like Beowulf, are defined by Crystal as “vivid figurative description[s]” of experience used for poetic effect (23). More specifically, kennings often come in the form of compound nouns that rework, with “a considerable compression of meaning,” an object, idea, or concept into figurative language (Crystal 23). By applying Crystal’s definition of kennings to the phrase “death hilarious,” one can see that aspects of the purpose and poetic effect of kennings certainly hold true (53). The phrase attempts to capture in a figurative compound the overwhelming mass of imagery taking place in the rest of the passage (53). Not marked off with the typical hyphen to signify a compound, “death hilarious” functions almost identically to a kenning because of the way it appears at the end of the long, elaborate description of the charging Comanche (53). It appears at the end presumably to help condense and give name to the frightening yet comically and absurdly dressed warriors. “[D]eath hilarious” gives name to something that the narrator paradoxically goes to great lengths in order to evoke a sense that the image being described defies explanation. The phrase, or kenning rather, “death hilarious” attempts

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10 For a detailed comparison of Blood Meridian with Beowulf, see Rick Wallach’s “From Beowulf to Blood Meridian: Cormac McCarthy’s Demystification of the Martial Code” in which he argues against nihilistic and naturalistic readings of the novel. Wallach argues that “Blood Meridian possesses a precise moral compass whose poles are the postures of the narrative voice and the voice of the monstrous Judge Holden” (113). Wallach argues that the narrative voice, when compared with the narrative voice of Beowulf, resists the mimetic violence of a character like Judge Holden. While I find comparing Blood Meridian with the epic genre and texts like Beowulf a fruitful approach to the novel, my analysis in chapter 2 ultimately departs from Wallach in that I argue for a conflation rather than split between the narrator and Judge Holden’s voices.
to capture and give a kind of biblical or apocalyptic resonance to the carnivalesque smorgasbord of warriors, weapons, horses, and strange and ancient armor charging towards White’s troops. In epics like *Beowulf*, Crystal says, the use of kennings mark “a leap of imagination,” arguably elevating what the kenning describes into a realm of the mythic or transcendent, which marks a consistent feature of the epic mode (23). In the same way kennings like battle-light (sword) and battle-sweat (blood) were used in *Beowulf* to elevate and mythologize violent or warrior-like ideas or activities (Crystal 23), the phrase “death hilarious” uses figurative language in a strikingly similar manner (53). All of a sudden, the overwhelming terror and violence of the scene is given its name.

The kenning-like construction of “death hilarious,” while certainly a figurative compound, also functions within the passage in order to emphasize the use of alliteration. Crystal, in discussing the variety of uses that kennings serve in epics like *Beowulf*, notes that kennings were often used in tandem with alliteration in many classical epics. “Kennings,” says Crystal, “were often chosen to satisfy the need for alliteration in a line, or to help the metrical structure” of the verse (25). In other words, kennings did not necessarily serve some overriding practical purpose; rather they often served an overriding poetic purpose in terms of highlighting and emphasizing particular poetic rhythms in the language. Crystal’s example from *Beowulf* comes from the words “sincgyfan (“giver of treasure”)” and “goldgyfan (“giver of gold”)” in which “there is presumably no particular reason” for including these kennings “other than the need to alliterate with a following word beginning with s in the first case and beginning with g
in the second” (23). The connection to alliteration that Crystal points out can certainly be applied to the way in which McCarthy carefully places the phrase “death hilarious” within the passage (53). McCarthy surrounds this kenning with alliteration that employs the same consonants within the phrase. For example, the repetition of the consonants \( d \) and \( h \) in lines like “deeply dented with old blows of mace or sabre done in another country,” “legion of horribles, hundreds in number, half naked or clad in costumes attic or biblical,” and “all howling in a barbarous tongue and riding down upon them like a horde from a hell more horrible” all serve to emphasize the \( d \) and \( h \) constant sounds of “death hilarious” (52 & 53). While “death hilarious” certainly compresses meaning and renders the terrifying horde of warriors into a figurative compound, the consonant sounds of “death hilarious” and how those consonant sounds align with the employment of alliteration already present throughout the passage mark a key way in which McCarthy has two features of the epic work together in the narrator’s language. McCarthy employs the conscious use of alliteration in the narrative voice and adds the use of a kenning in both its common functions within epic verse. “Death hilarious” provides both a poetic “compression of meaning” and an emphasis on the very rhythm of the language (Crystal 23).

As some scholars of McCarthy’s work have pointed out, paratactic syntax and hypotactic syntax are key features of the author’s prose. These syntactical structures, indeed, are important for examining the meaning behind the language of Blood Meridian’s narrator in the “death hilarious” passage because they often appear in the
language of classical literature and epic verse for particular dramatic effects.\footnote{Crystal defines paratactic syntax as grammatical constructions that are “joined without the use of conjunctions,” and he defines hypotactic syntax as a grammatical construction that links “dependent clauses to another part of the sentence using conjunctions” (463 & 466).}

Throughout the “death hilarious” passage, both of these syntactical structures seem to dominate. In the lines that first begin to describe the charging Comanches, paratactic syntax links several phrases through the repetition of commas rather than coordinating conjunctions: “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” (52). Following through the rest of the sentence, hypotactic syntax is employed:

one in a stovepipe hat and one with an umbrella and one in white stockings and a bloodstained weddingveil and some in headgear of cranefeathers or rawhide helmets that bore the horns of bull or buffalo and one in a pigeontailed coat worn backwards and otherwise naked and one in the armor of a spanish conquistador. (52)

Here, the linking of images connects through a series of repeating coordinating conjunctions rather than commas. The combination of moving directly from parataxis to hypotaxis in the same sentence moves the rhythm of the language along in a particularly powerful way. First, the parataxis works to isolate and lend importance to each individual phrase between commas, and then the sentence switches to hypotaxis and gives the feeling of an amassing of imagery piling up on top of each other with the repetition of the coordinating conjunction and. Essentially, McCarthy takes the
terrifying image of these charging warriors and mimics the intensity of such an image with the choice of syntax.

In order to understand the syntactical dynamic outlined above, it is worth discussing the particular effects associated with each type of syntax, first parataxis and then hypotaxis, in turn. Seth Lerer, in his book *Inventing English*, discusses how the use of parataxis in texts like the Bible, *Beowulf*, and *The Song of Roland*, and Archbishop Wulfstan’s 1014 address entitled *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* use such syntax for particular dramatic effects (34-35). Lerer also notes that Eric Auerbach “considered parataxis one of the defining devices of early literature” (35). According to Auerbach, paratactic syntax allowed writers to “‘express the impulsive and dramatic,’” and “‘explain nothing …with a paratactic bluntness which says that everything must happen as it does happen, it could not be otherwise, and [that] there is no need for explanatory connectives’” (qtd. in Lerer 35). Echoing the relationship between language and violence that the present analysis seeks to expand, Auerbach even describes the use of parataxis as a “‘weapon [my emphasis] of eloquence’” for authors “‘so inspired’” by their themes that it “‘fills’” them “‘completely’” (qtd. in Lerer 36). Referencing Auerbach, Lerer, in his analysis of Wulfstan’s address, notes that the parallel constructions in his use of parataxis allowed his words to “build to power” (35). This same kind of dramatic effect that Lerer and Auerbach attribute to the use of parataxis can be seen in the “death hilarious” passage (53). The image of the charging Comanche, clad in all kinds of garb and armed with all amounts of weapons, would not be as powerfully transcribed on the page had McCarthy
not written into the narrative voice the use of a very old syntactical structure connected
with epics such as *Beowulf* and the *The Song of Roland*.

Even though Lerer does not discuss the effect of hypotaxis, one can argue that a
comparable, or at least complementary, dramatic effect occurs via McCarthy’s
employment of hypotaxis in the narrator’s voice. Parataxis might build the power of the
language, but hypotaxis in the “death hilarious” passage might be viewed as a kind of
culmination of that building power. It might be viewed as a syntax that begins to
compress and blend the images deliberately highlighted via parataxis. In Arthur
Bingham’s “Syntactic Complexity and Iconicity in Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood
Meridian*,” his comparison between McCarthy’s use of the coordinating conjunction
*and* in passages considered non-violent and passages considered violent may help
explain the effect of hypotaxis at work here (Bingham does not give a reading of the
“death hilarious” passage, but it perhaps goes without saying that the passage contains
an image of violence). Bingham, in his comparison of different passages, argues that
“the coordinating conjunction *and* in the non-violent passages…help convey a sense of
temporal duration” while *and* in passages that forefront violence convey “a sense of
compactness” given that they “connect shorter T-units” (27). Relatively short T-units
(T-units meaning short, grammatically allowable clauses) appear one after the other in
the hypotactic portions of the “death hilarious” passage: “one in a stovepipe hat,” “one
with an umbrella,” “one in white stockings and a bloodstained weddingveil,” “one in
the armor of a Spanish conquistador” (52) Therefore, what Bingham later calls the
“temporal compactness” of McCarthy’s violent passages can be read into the use of
hypotaxis in the “death hilarious” passage (30). The constant repetition of and to connect shorter T-units closely bonds each individual image, and this compacting of imagery complements the use of parataxis in that it begins to compact, or blend, the separate images that are highlighted in the paratactic portion of the passage. While hypotaxis does not have a direct relation to epics like Beowulf or The Song Roland, it certainly adds to the dramatic effect of the language that the narrator’s parataxis achieves.

McCarthy’s combination of epic elements in the use of archaisms, kennings, alliteration, parataxis, and hypotaxis all work to evoke the epic tenor of the narrator’s language, yet a final feature of the “death hilarious” passage that captures the broader movement and trajectory of the whole passage lies in the use of an epic simile. Epic similes, defined by M.H. Abrams as “sustained similes in which the secondary subject, or vehicle, is elaborated far beyond its point of close parallel to the primary subject,” (84) take place in the last several lines of the “death hilarious” passage (53). Abrams also notes that writers who used epic simile often used this metaphorical tactic to “enhance the ceremonial quality and wide-ranging reference of the narrative style” (84). In the last portion of the “death hilarious” passage, both of these qualities of epic simile are present. The charging band of warriors appears like a company of mounted clowns…all howling in a barbarous tongue and riding down upon them like a horde from a hell more horrible yet than the brimstone landing 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 (53).
Here, McCarthy’s range of comparison moves between two extremes. It moves between the comical “mounted clowns” to the terrifying “horde from hell more horrible…than the brimstone landing of christian reckoning” (53). In the same way that Milton in Part One of *Paradise Lost* “describes his primary subject, the fallen angels thronging toward their new-built palace of Pandemonium, by an elaborate comparison to the swarming of bees,” the band of Comanche warriors stretches the wide gap between demons and clowns (Abrams 84). The subjects of the simile, the mounted warriors, are pushed far into the limits of absurdity by comparison with clowns, and they are pushed far into the limits of terror by their comparison with demons. The use of such a simile in the narrative voice, then, gives the image of the charging warriors “a wide range” of metaphorical reference (Abrams 84). This range, one might argue, tries to position the images of the warriors into a continuum so large it seems almost cosmic and overwhelming in proportion (Abrams 84). The simile McCarthy employs through *Blood Meridian*’s narrator features two extremes that seem so far apart in character that a sense of entirety, totality, or a sense of everything terrifying and absurd that anyone might possibly comprehend gets encapsulated in the image at hand. In short, the narrator’s simile becomes epic in scope.

On one level, examining the “death hilarious” passage in terms of its formal features demonstrates how the controlling voice of *Blood Meridian* embodies a very conscious use of a language. This language, however, calls attention to the disparity at work between the unconsciously violent, language-less protagonist and the verbose, conscious language of the narrator even more when considering the very thing it
attempts to describe. The “death hilarious” passage, while certainly a strong example of the use of an ancient literary style of language (a “lost” poetry), works to describe an instance of the unconscious, “mindless violence” readers are presented with via the kid from the very start of the novel (3). While the “death hilarious” passage describes a band of Comanche warriors, it also describes them as initially appearing through “a pall of yellow dust” tossed up by a herd of “rangy slattribbed cattle with horns that grew agoggle” (51) and through a “herd of several hundred ponies” (52). The notion that this band of warriors emerges from a herd of animals makes the classic link between Native Americans and a kind of unconsciousness embodied by the natural elements.

Furthermore, no discernable or articulate speech comes from the Comanche warriors. Instead, the only sounds described by the narrator are “the pounding of unshod hooves,” “the piping of the quena, flutes made from human bones,” “howling[s] in a barbarous tongue,” and a guttural “screeching and yammering” resounding out of a “hell more horrible than the brimstone land of christian reckoning” (52-53). Perhaps serving as an even stronger affirmation of the distinction between an unconscious violence and the consciousness provided via language in the opening sequence, the sounds described in the “death hilarious” passage re-affirm a world similar to the one at the start the novel, one in which men’s voices “sound like the grunting of apes” (4). Here, they take readers to a place where “tongues” have not been “heard before” and into a place where sounds come from the depths of hell and from something as macabre yet very material as “human bones” (52). In essence, the “death hilarious” passage revels in the descriptive power of language as much as it relays a world of physical, material violence essentially
devoid of it. McCarthy develops a key irony here in that the language being used by the narrator, the “lost” poetry, does the work of creating the absence of language in the violent world it so vividly describes (4).

While mythical tropes and aspects of the American hero’s characterization are affirmed in the kid and the importance of language to the novel is affirmed in the narrator, the relationship McCarthy draws out between the two ultimately exposes more complex dynamics at work between language and violence. McCarthy’s choice of an irony embodied in the relation between character/action and narrator/narrative voice suggests that part of the relationship between language and violence in Blood Meridian has to do with the politics of representation and the politics of myth creation in a way ultimately linked to critics like Slotkin and Smith’s discussion of ideology. The kid’s functioning as a mythic construct and as a figure of physical violence conflated with the violence of the death hilarious scene is all too acutely shaped by a narrative voice that begs for attention, sometimes verging on and sometimes out rightly engaging in hyperbolic excesses of language. McCarthy has the language of the narrator denote the violence of the kid as natural, which correlates to the ideological operations of language that mask or euphemize violence, but at the same time McCarthy has this very voice belie any sense of the natural (most notably in the example of the death hilarious scene) in its very trajectory toward explaining violence in the language of epic. The language
of the narrator, in essence, performs a kind of masking of violence while at the same
time producing it.\textsuperscript{12}

Because the tension between the kid and the narrator points toward the
ideological operations of language in relation to violence, one of the pressing political
undertones of the novel becomes the question of who has representative power and
whether this representative power does a kind of violence through language. If at the
very beginning of the novel readers are presented with a conflation of the voice of the
kid’s father with that of the narrator, this suggests that the storyteller in \textit{Blood Meridian},
the narrator, uses the same language, and therefore becomes symbolic of that which the
typical American hero of violence, the kid, rejects. This irony strikes with some force
because the kid’s primal, natural violence and world devoid of language can only occur
through the frame working of a rather verbose narrator whose language use revels in
itself. \textsuperscript{13} When reading \textit{Blood Meridian}, McCarthy’s readers do so through a narrative

\textsuperscript{12} Elana Gomel’s discussion of violence as sublime and the effects it produces in language also begins to emerge when concentrating on the narrator’s voice. McCarthy’s insertion of first person, third person, presents tense, past tense, literary allusions, and various linguistic features of the literary epic suggests a possible excess (perhaps incoherence) of language that circles around rather than explains violence in any uniform or consistent manner. The narrative voice, in its bewildering array of language techniques, might be read as McCarthy’s attempt to reflect Gomel’s contention that the sublime materiality of violence produces not just a silence or a “lacuna in the symbolic order” but an excess of language that compulsively attempts to order it (xxvii). This discussion of the narrator’s voice as a reflection of an excess of language in reaction to sublime violence will be developed more thoroughly in chapter 3. It is worth mentioning here in a footnote, however, for the simple fact that the present analysis highlights so many different features of the narrator’s voice.

\textsuperscript{13} For another argument that addresses the ethos of \textit{Blood Meridian}’s narrator, see Jonathan Pitts’ “Writing On: \textit{Blood Meridian} as Devisionary Western” in which Pitts argues for the primacy of the visual in \textit{Blood Meridian}. The narrative voice, for Pitts, embodies an ironic version of Emerson’s all seeing eye. Pitts argues that through the voice of the narrator, \textit{Blood Meridian} serves as “a parable of American seeing, a critical account of the ‘American religion of vision’”— a “tyrannical ambition”, he notes, “of the American eye to see all” (8). Such an argument aligns with my own reading in that the
voice whose reveling in language Ironically symbolizes the opposite of the story’s
mythic affirmations. Such a conscious irony on McCarthy’s part perhaps demonstrates
that it is not the actual material history of “mindless violence” that is important when
trying to understand violence but rather the operations of language that make meaning
out of that material history (3). As Slotkin says, it is not the “amount or kind of
violence that characterizes our history but the mythic significance we have assigned to
the kinds of violence we imagine or invent, and the political uses to which we put that
symbolism” (13). If meditating on the relationship between language and violence,
Blood Meridian might very well be asking who is telling us these myths and whether or
not the language being employed to tell them performs violence in its own right. To get
a closer look at this dynamic within the world of Blood Meridian, one should turn to the
novel’s most violent yet loquacious character, Judge Holden.

narrator’s voice contains a register (and recourse to textual reference) that borders on Emersonian.
Furthermore, it also posits the voice of the narrator as a primary arbiter of a violence, like a “tyrannical
ambition” to see all, through language (Pitts 8).
Chapter 2:

Violent and Ideological Orations: Judge Holden’s Language

The character of Judge Holden presents the best example of the link McCarthy draws between violence and language in terms of characters internal to the world of *Blood Meridian*. Holden, the novel’s true central character as opposed to the nameless kid, gets defined in a key sense by how McCarthy depicts his acts of physical violence as symbolically linked to his characterization as a conscious user and manipulator of language. On one level, the distinction between physical violence and the consciousness provided via language gets deliberately conflated in McCarthy’s characterization of Holden rather than deliberately separated as in the characterization of the kid. Rather than having Holden fit the mold of the Western’s taciturn, antilanguage hero, McCarthy has this true central figure of the novel as almost the exact opposite—an anti-hero character whose loquaciousness serves as a notable sign of power rather than weakness. Instead of Holden’s physical acts of violence as the crucial acts in which a particular ethos is asserted or the empty space of the frontier gets realized, McCarthy has Holden’s language ironically perpetrate the violence. In effect, the operations of language ironically *do* the violence that the language of myth typically only assigns meaning *to*. On an even deeper level, Holden’s language use finds parallel with the politics of representation embodied in the language of the narrator because his language also shapes his own and other’s acts of physical violence. As Joshua Masters puts it, “we see the violence of authorship” through Holden because his language “provides the coherence, the order, the *meaning* that defines the scalp hunter’s pilgrimage west” (25).
14 In this sense, Holden euphemizes and mythologizes the violence of the narrative with his language abilities while also propelling the violence of the narrative forward. In relation to Slotkin’s and Smith’s discussions of the mythic and ideological operations language, Holden’s language ironically commits mythic violence itself while also acting as a conscious means to justify and incite it in its physical forms. Unlike the divide McCarthy establishes between the kid’s “mindless violence” and the consciousness and influences of language, the divide between physical violence and language gets deliberately conflated in Holden’s character (3). Distinct from the description of the kid’s “big hands, big wrists” as a symbol of his instinctual propensity for physical violence, descriptions of Holden’s hands are given due attention throughout the novel in ways that link violence and language. In many scenes in which Holden’s use of language or physical violence get described by other characters or by the narrator, the symbol of his hands appear in order to link Holden’s language with violence rather than divide them from it. This detail of Holden’s hands marks the connection between Holden’s use of language and physical violence because his hands often function as

14 Masters’ article “‘Witness to the Uttermost Edge of the World’: Judge Holden’s Textual Enterprise in Cormac McCarthy’s Blood Meridian” provides one amongst several readings of Holden that label him as a particular character type. Masters contends that Holden embodies “the roles of trickster, ethnographer, and Adam” while critics like Wallach, Sepich, and Emily J. Stinson read Holden as a kind of mythic Mephistophelean or Tarot’s Fool character who dictates the Glanton gang’s violence via an ability to manipulate language (25). See Wallach’s “Judge Holden, Blood Meridian’s Evil Archon,” Sepich’s “A ‘bloody dark pastryman’: Cormac McCarthy’s Recipe for Gunpowder in Blood Meridian,” and Stinson’s “Blood Meridian’s Man of Many Masks: Judge Holden as Tarot’s Fool”. I stand with these critics in a reading of Holden’s language as an influence on the gang’s violence, but I am less concerned with casting Holden as a particular character type in order to reach this conclusion. My interests lie in seeing how McCarthy’s characterization of Holden inverts certain power relations embedded in the Western genre and of seeing how McCarthy implicates such ironies and inversions within Holden into his critique of the ideology of American myth.
extensions of expression in language or apparatuses of language use as in writing.

Holden’s hands often enact physical violence, no doubt, but these acts of violence are often charged with deliberate or metaphorical connections back to language.

Often the details of Holden’s hands appear in scenes in which Holden speaks, is about to speak, or even in scenes that reference his hand-writing. Thus McCarthy associates the detail of Holden’s hands on one level with Holden’s acts of language use. When Holden first appears in the novel and addresses Reverend Green’s congregation, McCarthy describes Holden’s features while making sure to single out how his hands compared to the kid’s “big wrists, big hands” (3): Holden’s “face was serene and strangely childlike. His hands were small. He held them out” (6). From here, Holden proceeds to stir up the crowd with his oration and effectively lead them into a mad rush for Green’s neck. Afterwards, Holden rests in the nearby saloon “with his hands placed flatwise on the wood, leaning slightly, as if about to give another address” (8).

Additionally, in a lengthy, pseudo-scientific and pseudo-theological explanation of a character known as Black Jackson to one Sergeant Aguilar, Holden’s hands are described “drafting with a marvelous dexterity the shapes of what varied paths conspired” (84). Similarly, when meeting Angel Trias, the governor of Chihuahua, Holden and the general shake “hands cordially” and fall “into conversation in a tongue none other in that room spoke at all saving for vile random epithets”(169).

Furthermore, in a discussion with a man appropriately named Webster, Holden raises “his hand and call[s] for amnesty” in order to gain control of the conversation and explain away, in a sense defining, Webster’s anxiety about having his portrait drawn
(141). Directly after this and after having launched into a long parable about the murder of a harness maker, Holden’s “hands” are seen “rested palm down upon his knees” as his audience “grew cautious and spoke with circumspection among themselves as if they would not awaken something that had better been left sleeping” (147). Likewise, before Holden’s verbose monologue in which he describes his desire to be “suzerain” of the earth, a word that demands a definition from the illiterate Toadvine, Holden “press[es] his hands together” and “pass[es] them down over his nose and mouth…palm down on his knees” (198). Finally, in the ex-priest Tobin’s story of the Glanton gang’s first encounter with Holden, Tobin explains how Holden is “eitherhanded as a spider” and “can write with both hands at a time” (134).

As much as Holden’s hands are associated with language use and acts of expression, McCarthy also has them enact physical violence. These acts of violence, however, often follow descriptions of Holden’s language use, or they reflect a metaphorical connection to the power of language. For example, after the ex-priest Tobin describes Holden as ambidextrous and able to write with both hands, he also, within the same sentence, describes how Holden drew his pistols “one in each hand” as “he commenced to kill Indians” (134). What may be the best example takes place in a skirmish between the Glanton gang and a group of Mexicans in a cantina. In this scene, Holden kills a man by “picking him up by his head” and gruesomely disfiguring his skull (179). The scene describes the man’s brutal death while including the crucial detail of Holden’s hands: “He [Holden] put him against the wall and smiled at him but the man had begun to bleed from the ears and the blood was running down between the
judge’s finger’s and over his hands [my emphasis] and when the judge turned him loose there was something wrong with his head and he slid to the floor and did not get up” (179). Here, Holden’s hands literally kill the man, but the fact that he crushes the man’s head, literally disfiguring his brain (a source of consciousness), contains the metaphoric suggestion that Holden’s violence perhaps does more than physically maim.

Holden’s hands mark a connection in his character between language and material, tactile violence due to their image reoccurring in key moments tied to his language use and key moments in which he exercises some kind of physical violence. To add a third layer to this use of symbolism, McCarthy has Holden’s hands also reoccur several times in conjunction with another symbol—a coin. The coin, conceivable as both a medium of exchange comparable to language and a material object, again marks the connection between language and the violence so essential to understanding Holden’s character. There are several scenes in which Holden performs a slight of hand using a coin. On a symbolic level tied closely to the reading of Holden’s hands as linking language with violence, these sleights of hand with the coin show Holden’s ability to use a medium of exchange in order to obscure a material reality. In one such scene, Holden places “the palms of his hands upon his chest,” and after the trick raises his “hand…empty” only to reveal the coin’s appearance immediately after in his other hand (245-246). This scene includes the important details of Holden’s hands, which separate him from the characterization of the kid, but the scene also shows Holden manipulating reality (masking it in a way), and of course doing so with a piece
of money, something that often justifies, drives, and incites the material actions of history.

McCarthy’s careful attention to the links between Holden’s hands, language, and symbols that literally signal or metaphorically stand in for language, demonstrate that Holden’s language use figures as a power rather than weakness in *Blood Meridian*. Holden is ambidextrous and crafts illuminating explanations with the body language of his hands, but he also wields guns and crushes people’s skulls with these same hands. In such a characterization, McCarthy suggests that language, for Holden, represents a tool for enacting violence in much the same way a gun is a tool for doing so. Comparing Holden to the image of the effeminate, loquacious talker in the Western genre, Thomas Pughe comments how “[u]nlke talkers in traditional Westerns,” Holden “does not represent effeminate, untrustworthy Eastern civilization but the opposite: the radicalization of the death-hauntedness of the genre” (379). McCarthy has this “death-hauntedness” (379)—the pursuit of death, destruction, violence etc. in the myth of the West—figure as a product not just of Holden’s physical acts of violence but of his language, which ironically inverts someone like Tompkins’ assertion that the “positions represented by language” in the Western always get “proven wrong-massively, totally, and unequivocally—with pounding hooves, thundering guns, blood and death” (55). Rather than define Holden through acts of physical violence and prowess, McCarthy details Holden’s language as an ironic source of violence.

One way in which McCarthy depicts Holden *exacting* violence through language lies in a parallel to the political positioning that Slotkin maintains underlies the purpose
of conflict in American myth. Holden’s command of foreign languages and a variety of discourses associated with Manifest Destiny and 19th century expansionism enact a linguistic violence similar to Slotkin’s contentions about the continual positioning of the American ethos on the border between native/civilized. Holden primarily uses this command of foreign language and discourse to deliberately alienate those he sees as inferior to himself. Through language, Holden commits a kind of intellectual terrorism or bullying deliberately meant to position himself above the primitive and the native, enacting violence similar to that which characterizes the border conflicts between native/civilized. For example, when Holden explains Black Jackson’s presence to the Spanish speaking Sergeant Aguilar, not surprisingly during a weapons deal, a deft maneuvering of language on the part of Holden intentionally alienates Jackson from the conversation. As the narrator points out, Holden, in a “laborious introduction in Spanish,” outlines Jackson’s origins to the sergeant and his men:

He adduced for their consideration references to the children of Ham, the lost tribes of Israelites, certain passages from the Greek poets, anthropological speculations as to the propagation of the race in their dispersion and isolation through the agency of geological cataclysm and an assessment of racial traits with respect to climatic and geographical influences. (84-85)

Because Holden speaks in Spanish here, the discourses of religious racism and social Darwinism presumably being spoken by Holden conflate with the notion of a language beyond understanding. The discourses Holden uses to explain Jackson to Aguilar literally and figuratively appear as a foreign language inaccessible to Jackson. That this entire conversation takes place in a foreign language outside of Black Jackson’s understanding and that it contains an almost bewildering array of pseudo-scientific and
racist-theological discourses suggests a kind of violence consciously enacted by Holden through his command of language. The language and discourse Holden uses here implicitly claim his status as superior to Jackson, and it re-enacts the drama of the kind of political positioning of American identity above the native and primitive.

When Jackson promptly asks, “What did you tell him, Holden?” Holden’s response is perhaps just as alienating as his double use of Spanish and pseudo-scientific and racist discourse. Holden says to Jackson:

It is not necessary…that the principals here be in possession of the facts concerning their case, for their acts will ultimately accommodate history with or without their understanding. But it is consistent with notions of right principle that these facts—to the extent that they can be readily made to do so—should find a repository in the witness of some third party. Sergeant Aguilar is just such a party and any slight to his office is but a secondary consideration when compared to divergences in that larger protocol exacted by the formal agenda of an absolute destiny. Words are things. The words he is in possession of he cannot be deprived of. Their authority transcends his ignorance of their meaning. (85)

Here, McCarthy portrays Holden shifting out of a doubly alienating language use and into a language rife with legal and philosophical jargon deliberately meant to obfuscate. Holden at once causes deliberate confusion but also links a position of authority with the right to knowledge that enters via command of language. “Words are things,” says Holden, and the “authority” of words in this case “transcends…ignorance of their meaning” (85). As McCarthy carefully points out, such a deliberately confusing response alienates Holden’s listeners. Immediately after the response, Jackson begins to sweat with enraged bewilderment as a “dark vein in his temple pulsed like a fuse” (85). In tandem with Jackson stifling rage, “the company listened to the judge in silence” as “a halfwitted killer from Missouri,” unable to catch his breath enough to
speak, “guffawed softly like an asthmatic” (85). It can be inferred here that Holden sees himself as having some kind of possession over words in the sense that they are both “things” and that they possess some kind of “authority” that he, and only he, understands (85). Words, according to Holden, are that which “accommodate history without or without…understanding,” and they engage in the “larger protocol exacted by the formal agenda of an absolute destiny” (85). By making such a claim about language via a use of language meant to deliberately alienate his listeners, Holden doubly elevates himself to a place of transcendence and authority. Holden claims his status as the “principal” in possession of knowledge, and he does so in a way that makes language do the violent work of political positioning essential to Slotkin’s claims about how violence in American myth often elevates one above the native and the primitive (85).

McCarthy has Holden not only positioning himself in opposition to his inferiors through language use; he also has him coming to know them through it. Through language, Holden also gains intimacy with the native and primitive other, and as Slotkin suggests in his notion of American heroes being “mediators of a double kind who can teach civilized men how to defeat savagery on its native grounds,” Holden uses this intimacy in order to assert his own dominance and enact the “‘savage war’” of complete annihilation that Slotkin claims as inherent in the connection between violence and the need for an open space of the frontier (Slotkin 12-14). Above all of Holden’s uses of language to enact violence, Blood Meridian’s central text within the text stands as perhaps the best example of how Holden’s language abilities familiarize and then allow
him control over that which he sees as inferior. Holden, throughout the novel, is often seen “scribbling in his ledger” (243). This ledger book, one of the novel’s most powerful symbols of an act of language use (in this case written language) by a character, serves as a tool for Holden to both know the native and primitive and in effect destroy it and erase it.

In one of several scenes surrounding Holden’s ledger book, readers see Holden first sketching and noting descriptions of native artifacts into his book “with a practiced ease” and an “economy of pencil strokes” (140). The narrator even interjects briefly to describe Holden as a “draftsman as he is other things” and as someone “well sufficient to the task” (140). Immediately after this description, Holden tosses the objects he has recorded into a fire: “When he had done he took up the little footguard and turned it in his hand and studied it again and then he crushed it into a ball of foil and pitched it into the fire. He gathered up the other artifacts and cast them also into the fire” (140). When asked “what he aimed to do with those notes and sketches” of artifacts by Webster, Holden replies that “it was his intention to expunge them from the memory of man” (140). In a parallel scene some thirty pages later, this same erasure occurs again with symbolic force when Holden traces a set of cave paintings into his ledger and then, “with a piece of broken chert,” “scrapple[s] away one of the designs, leaving no trace of it only a raw place on the stone where it had been” (173). These two scenes reveal Holden’s intentions to use his ledger to lay claim to the objects and artifacts symbolic of the native and primitive, to claim them as his knowledge, and to subsequently eradicate
them. They present a way in which Holden uses a language skill, in this case writing, to both gain knowledge of and combat his perceived inferiors.

As an addition to the scene described above, McCarthy has Holden reveal his intentions and self-awareness about the purpose of his ledger quite explicitly. When asked by Toadvine “what his purpose in all this” writing and recording was, Holden replies: “Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent” (198). Holden then launches into an explanation of this statement that lays bare his intention to become “suzerain of the earth” by employing the powers of description and recording to erase history:

> These anonymous creatures…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. (198)

> “Everywhere upon it are pockets of autonomous life,” Holden continues, and “[i]n order for it to be mine nothing must be permitted to occur upon it save by my dispensation” (199). When Holden claims that “[o]nly nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him,” he makes a claim about the powers of description and recording he enacts in his ledger (198). Here, Holden asserts that his powers of description and recording arrest power from nature and place it into his own hands, thus enacting the conflict between native/civilized that requires on one level an intimate knowledge with the native and on another level the converse desire to use that knowledge to wage a war of eradication, Slotkin’s “‘savage war,’” against it (12).
Concomitant with McCarthy’s ironic literalizations of myths of violence in Holden’s language use, a fundamental violence of language finds affirmation in Holden’s Nietzschean explanation of the nature of reality. In response to a question from the Glanton gang about life on other planets, Holden gives a response reminiscent of Nietzsche’s will to power and the notion of truth as a “mobile army of metaphors” (878). The narrator notes that when the question “was then put as to whether there were on Mars or other planets in the void men or creatures like them…the judge who had returned to the fire and stood half naked and sweating spoke and said that there were not and that there were no men anywhere in the universe save those upon the earth” (245). Holden then elaborates on his claim by explaining the link between the absurdity of nature and the imposition of one’s will: “The truth about the world…is that anything is possible. Had you not seen it all from birth and thereby bled it of its strangeness it would appear to you for what it is, a hat trick in a medicine show, a fevered dream, a trance bepopulate with chimeras having neither analogue nor precedent” (245). “The universe is no narrow thing,” Holden asserts, “and the order within it is not constrained by any latitude in its conceptions to repeat what exists in one part in any other part” (245). “[T]he order in creation which you see is that which you have put there,” says Holden (245). Holden’s explanation, in essence, constitutes a declaration of truth vis-a-vis the subjective imposition of language onto an otherwise nonsensical or ineffable material reality. In a way, Holden affirms that the only truth one might know lies in the language being spoken, and when such an affirmation gets paired with the way Holden ironically enacts myths of violence in and through language, it becomes apparent that
such a violence of language, rooted in Holden’s Nietzchean philosophy, is at work. Holden affirms his belief that human knowledge of the material truth cannot be known, and that human language represents nothing more than a re-presentation, something all together different but still naively believed in, of that material world. Textual endeavors, therefore, make reality and are reality for Holden. As Dan Moos puts it in his reading of Holden, Holden “creates his own epistemology by forcing representation to stand as truth” (29). “The judge’s dispensation,” says Moos, “is precisely the act of destroying the original, the autonomous object, in favor of its textual placement within his books and kitbag” (30). In having Holden self-create and dictate his own epistemology, McCarthy allows a circular logic to emerge for Holden that self-affirms the myths of violence he enacts through language. They are true acts of violence because they are acts of language.

The relationship between language and violence in McCarthy’s characterization of Holden is not limited solely to the registers described above. Holden’s language use and abilities ironically enact mythic violence as represented in Slotkin’s border conflicts and the trope of the “‗savage war’” of extinction, and even more fundamentally through a Nietzchean violence of language, yet McCarthy also has Holden’s language operate on a distinctly ideological level by masking and inciting acts of physical violence.

15 Taken up more directly in the following chapter, Žižek’s argument that language itself constitutes a fundamental form of violence also applies here. “What if,” Žižek asks, “humans exceed animals in their capacity for violence precisely because they speak?” (61). In reference to Hegel, Žižek claims that “there is something violent in the very symbolization of a thing, which equals its mortification” (61). “Language simplifies the designated thing, reducing it to a single feature. It dismembers the thing, destroying its organic unity, treating its parts and properties as autonomous. It inserts the thing into a field of meaning which is ultimately external to it” (Žižek 61).
central to *Blood Meridian*’s narrative movement. In scene after scene Holden often speaks for someone else without their permission and abruptly shifts the type, tone, or register of the language being used. In Holden’s first appearance in the novel as well as in certain situations in which the Glanton Gang’s march of violence gets resisted or threatened, Holden usurps the operative language at work. These moments of usurping the discourse read as moments that reflect Slotkin and Smith’s discussion on the power of mythic language as either a false consciousness or engine of history. Through Holden’s speaking acts and linguistic abilities, McCarthy shows how acts of language function as a way to mask violence as well as drive violent, material actions. In a crucial parallel to the narrator, Holden’s acts of usurping function as moments where readers see both a displacement of the horrors of violence and the incitement of continual violence (embodied in the Glanton Gang’s genocidal rampage across the land) through language.

Holden’s first appearance in the novel demonstrates these ideological operations of language at work in that his speech both incites the novel’s first scene of mass violence and also displaces a central component of Holden’s own physical violence—his characterization as a child rapist. After a dramatic entrance into Reverend Green’s revival tent, Holden usurps the stage by pushing “his way forward as far as the crateboard pulpit where the reverend stood” in order to begin a lengthy accusation:

> Ladies and gentlemen I feel it my duty to inform you that the man holding this revival is an imposter. He holds no papers of divinity from any institution recognized or improvised. He is altogether devoid of the least qualifications to the office he has usurped and has only committed to memory a few passages from the good book for the purposes of lending to his fraudulent sermons some faint flavor of the piety he despises. In truth,
the gentleman standing here before you posing as a minister of the Lord is not only totally illiterate but is also wanted by the law in the states of Tennessee, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Arkansas. (7)

As Green replies with a frantic “Lies! Lies!” and a “reading feverishly from his opened bible” in order to counter Holden’s statements, Holden continues without acknowledging the rebuke: “On a variety of charges,” Holden says, “the most recent of which involved a girl of eleven years—I said eleven—who had come to him in trust and whom he was surprised in the act of violating while actually clothed in the livery of his God” (7). From here, the reaction of the crowd escalates, women fall to their knees and cries to “Hang the turd” ring out (7). Holden replies to the escalations in a final gesture that ultimately sets off a slew of gunfire and a mob chase after the reverend: “Not three weeks before this he was run out of Fort Smith Arkansas for having congress with goat. Yes lady, that is what I said. Goat” (7). In this usurpation of the speaking position and an appeal through language (at this point readers have no background information to assess the truth of Holden’s claims and presumably neither do any of the spectators that listen to him), Holden engenders violence. Holden incites a riot based solely on the authority of his word. In replacing specifically a Christian preacher in this first scene, McCarthy allows the bond between truth and the word to fall almost seamlessly into Holden’s hands. It is as if Holden’s language imperceptibly replaces the reverend’s sermon, a genre know for its delivering of the truth through the word, and offers an agenda for morally justified violence rooted not in any physical evidence but merely in his language.
As readers come to find out only a page later, Holden’s accusations against Green are in fact complete falsehoods. Holden, when asked how he “came to have the goods” on Green, replies, “I never laid eyes on the man before today. Never even heard of him” (8). What is striking about Holden’s accusation of Green is not just how it insights physical violence through a lie but how this lie can be read as a conscious enactment of language that displaces aspects of Holden’s own identity onto Green. In other words, Holden’s accusations can be read as a partial, perhaps intentional description of himself. Holden, who throughout the novel expresses self-awareness about language’s power to manipulate, describes Green as exactly this type of manipulator. He describes a sophist who self-consciously uses language in order to manipulate an audience. Holden accuses Green of being an “imposter,” a fraud, and most importantly, a usurper of authority (7). Furthermore, the accusation of pedophilia, which insights the crowd most violently, is later suggested in Holden’s violation and murder of a young Mexican boy, his being found “naked” with “a girl of perhaps twelve years” toward the end of the novel (275), and in his last confrontations with the kid, one in a San Francisco jailhouse in which he says, “Come here” and “Let me touch you” (307), and finally in his presumable rape and murder of the kid in a saloon outhouse. Holden’s language in this first scene reveals a kind of truth about his own character as much as it does a lie about another man. McCarthy essentially depicts Holden’s language as an enactment of the very sophistry supposedly being denounced, yet McCarthy also illustrates in Holden’s language a strange displacement of the very real types of violence that Holden actually commits.
McCarthy’s choice to have readers introduced to Holden through such a usurpation of a speaking position and then displacement of his own physical violence onto Green sets the tone for how his character parallels the violence of language introduced via the narrator. By embodying the ideological operations of language in relation to violence, both masking it on one level and engendering it on another, Holden’s modus operandi gets established right from the start. Not unlike the narrator’s elevated diction in opposition to the mindless violence of the kid, Holden elevates his diction in this initial speech, almost lending his words an aura of authority or gravity that belies his own confession of not knowing Green at all (words are not the material truth here) while also contrasting with the unconscious, mob mentality of his audience (words can move material action). In terms of the ideological operations of language to mask violence, Holden certainly shows an ability to misdirect by describing aspects of himself as aspects of Green, yet he also demonstrate in this initial scene an important parallel to the narrator because his language does not just mask violence, it propels it into action. In parallel with the narrator’s function as the engine of action through language, the very violence produced by Holden’s speech is, in many cases, the very action of Blood Meridian’s narrative. Like the narrator, violence becomes manifest through Holden’s language.

The novel is rife with examples. The scene involving Aguilar and Black Jackson demonstrates the dynamics of masking and engendering violence through language in the way Holden explains the existence of Black Jackson and in the way Holden usurps authority of the gang from John Glanton, the assumed leader of the group. As noted
above, the scene involves a weapons deal in which a group of Mexican soldiers
confronts the gang over their suspicious activity. Glanton, at first, tells Aguilar and his
soldiers to leave: “Andale, said Glanton. You and Your halfassedlookin niggers” (84).
From here, Aguilar gets defensive, steps “forward,” and assumes “a posture of
authority” (84). Holden, however, quickly usurps Glanton in the situation: “The judge,”
says the narrator, “had already crossed the space between them and…took the sergeant
aside and fell to conversing with him” (84). Holden, says the narrator, “spoke warmly
with Aguilar” and “gestured with a great expansiveness of spirit” (84). Ignoring
Glanton’s order to not “give that son of a bitch any money,” Holden is depicted
“already bringing the man forward for a formal presentation” (84). The exchange here,
of course, leads into Holden’s public humiliation of Jackson by using Spanish and a
variety of pseudo-religious and pseudo-scientific discourses, yet it also demonstrates
another deliberate usurpation on Holden’s part via language. Instead of resorting to
insults, Glanton’s slur of “halfassedlookin niggers” or the “muttering obscenities” of the
rest of the gang, Holden deliberately steps in for Glanton, ignores him in much the same
fashion he ignores Reverend Green, and begins speaking to Aguilar in a way that
garners control of the situation (84). Holden, instead of asserting power through
physical violence, deliberately shifts the tone and nature of the language being spoken
during the exchange, and this shift allows the exchange of weapons to continue. The
masking of violence certainly occurs in this scene in that Holden creates a false
consciousness by euphemizing and justifying years of racial oppression through his
explanation of Black Jackson to Aguilar, yet his language abilities here also serve as a
crucial moment in which the actions of the Glanton Gang are allowed to continue. Holden, through his language abilities, procures the necessary armaments for the gang’s eventual campaign of slaughter. He, in essence, moves the narrative forward with his language, which parallels quite directly the basic role of the narrator as locus of the novel’s action via language as well as the ideological operation of language as engine of material history and action.

When Holden speaks to Angel Trias, the governor of Chihuahua, after the gang’s first scalp hunt, readers get another instance in which Holden speaks on behalf of the gang in this manner. The scene takes place after the gang has returned to Chihuahua City, and they are beginning a celebration that eventually digresses into a drunken riot. At the formal dinner which starts the events, the narrator points out that Holden and Trias’s dialogue contrasts with the rather discordant, incoherent, and vulgar din of other voices around them: “Trias had already taken his seat when the judge made his appearance but no sooner… the governor had him seated at his right and they at once fell into conversation in a tongue none other in that room spoke at all saving for random vile epithets drifted down from the north” (169). In a similar fashion to the shift in tone and language in the weapons exchange with Aguilar, Holden and Trias converse in a language notably different than the one circulating around them. As far as this being read as another act of usurpation on Holden’s part, it gets noted in this scene that “Patriotic toasts were drunk” with “the governor’s aides raising their glasses to Washington and Franklin and the Americans responding with yet more of their own country’s heroes, ignorant alike of diplomacy and any name at all from the pantheon of
their sister republic” (169). It is as if Holden and Trias’ conversation, the one deliberately obscured and hidden from readers and members of the gang alike, represents the true instance of diplomacy. Again, violence gets masked in this case by both Holden and Trias through the language of diplomacy, but the implied, clandestine pact between the two also allows for the Glanton gang to continue their slaughter. The brutal genocide becomes the subject of a pleasant conversation over dinner while the conversation itself implicitly gives further sanction to the Glanton’s gang actions.

The scene in which Holden clears Glanton’s gang of a store owner’s murder, a murder they do, in fact, commit, serves as another case in point. The scene highlights Holden’s use of language as a means to mask violence as well as further allows it in that it illustrates him speaking like a lawyer on the Glanton gang’s behalf. In parallel to the scene with Aguilar and his Mexican troops, the exchange gets off to a rough start when Glanton attempts to speak for himself. When asked if he’ll deny the charges, Glanton replies abruptly and antagonistically: “Deny ever goddamned word of it,” he says (237). Immediately after this exchange, Holden steps in for Glanton saying “Kindly address your remarks to me, Lieutenant…I represent Captain Glanton in all legal matters” (237). After this stepping in to speak for Glanton, Holden later sits together with the Lieutenant going over “points of the law with him” while translating “latin terms of jurisprudence” and citing “cases civil and martial” (239). Holden again usurps authority over the gang via his ability to shift the tone and nature of the language being spoken. Holden shifts from the antagonistic “goddamned” of Glanton’s response to his own, rather forceful assertion of the elevated register of legal debate and legal discourse...
The narrator even notes that Holden quotes the likes of “Coke and Blackstone, Anaximander, [and] Thales” in an effort to clear Glanton and his men of the storekeeper’s murder (239). In the end, Holden presumably succeeds in clearing Glanton of any charges because nothing more is mentioned about the above discussion. The gang just moves on without further conflict. The significance of this murder is that readers know Glanton and his men to be truly guilty. Holden speaks like a lawyer in order to deliberately obfuscate the truth. Such a use of language again creates a gap between the language being spoken and the material violence that occurs, and Holden, indeed, is fully aware of this. Holden appears to know that discussing the charges in such a manner will mask the reality of the murder that both he and readers know has taken place only a few pages earlier. This again illustrates the ideological operation of masking violence, but it also, again, allows the Glanton gang to continue their escapades.

Toward the end of the novel, in the scene in which the kid sits imprisoned in a San Diego jail cell, Holden again enacts this deliberate masking and engendering of violence when he explains the “truth” about who masterminded the Yuma ferry massacre (306). After Holden notes that “I believe it is their intention to hang you” and the kid replies asking “What did you tell them?” Holden says:

Told them the truth. That you were the person responsible. Not that we have all the details. But they understand that it was you and none other who shaped events along such a calamitous course. Eventuating in the massacre at the ford by the savages with whom you conspired. Means and ends are of little moment here. Idle speculations. But even though you carry the draft of your murderous plan with you to the grave it will nonetheless be know in all its infamy to your Maker and as that is so shall it be made know to the least of men. All in the fullness of time. (306)
What occurs in this scene, one might argue, is an immortalization—a kind of mythologizing—of the kid. However, this mythologizing being clearly a lie again highlights Holden as a figure who self-consciously utilizes disconnects between signifier and signified in language. Holden, by explaining to the law the kid’s guilt in the Yuma massacre rather than his own or Glanton’s, enacts a similar move as in his clearing Glanton of the storekeeper’s murder earlier in the novel. He in effect utilizes the same disconnect between language and material truth that forever places the blame on the kid. This, in effect, shows how Holden uses language to mask the material truth in both cases. Holden shapes Glanton as an innocent man through his use of language and conversely shapes the kid as a violent criminal. In an echo of Slotkin’s notion of the difference between real, material violence and the stories, narratives, and ultimately myths that attempt to give meaning to violence, McCarthy, through Holden, shows us the kind of evil perpetuated through such a disconnect. In mythologizing the kid, though, Holden also ironically creates a classic storyline that one might read or encounter in a Western. He in essence makes a myth of the outlaw out of the material violence he actually masterminded. In knowing that the “fullness of time” will make the “truth” of the kid’s guilt known to all, Holden implicitly entrusts the ideological power of myth to both obfuscate the true nature of events while also anticipating his own continued existence, an existence characterized by the violence of language, genocide, rape, war etc. The myth Holden creates will perpetually serve as a distraction as well as lay claim to violence being the truth of the West (306). By creating a myth out of the Yuma massacre, in effect re-narrating the past events of the text, Holden not only enacts
the ideological operations of false-consciousness but he more or less usurps the function of the narrator. McCarthy has Holden literally tell the story of *Blood Meridian* at this point.

Despite the multi-tiered relations between language and violence in both the narrator and Holden, McCarthy’s meditations on these intersections are not fully exhausted in their language alone. Whereas readers are introduced to key ironies in regards to the function of language in the novel via the narrator’s contrast to the kid’s “mindless violence” and they encounter many of the mythic and ideological operations of language in Holden’s ironic literalizations of myths of violence and in his usurpations of the operative language, the effects of violence within language—the way a figuration of violence as a sublime experience rooted in the materiality of the body and as something that either silences language or generates its excess—still remains to be examined. It is here where one begins to see how the voice of the narrator and the language of Holden serve less as isolated examples and more as voices complementing McCarthy’s ultimate and darkly ironic vision of a world defined as much by an ineffable violence as it is by the language that emerges from it.
Chapter 3:

**A Clamoring for Representation: Sublime Violence and the Origins and Inverse of Narrator/Judge**

In the previous two chapters, my intention was to situate McCarthy’s focus on the relationship between language and violence in *Blood Meridian* into the context of myth and ideology. While my readings of the text in these chapters indicate how McCarthy ironically works language itself into a form of violence, both through the language of myth and through understandings of the ideological operations of language, my argument in this chapter aims to uncover the ways in which McCarthy’s novel also focuses on the effects that violence *produces* within language. Though shifting focus in some respects, this distinction or turn in my argument ultimately relates to the previous two chapters in that it draws out how McCarthy’s commentary on American mythology and ideology potentially extends into even darker territory concerning the very nature of language and the very nature of violence. Before my reading of the text, however, I will first discuss in more detail a set of contemporary perspectives on language and violence that have received only passing mention in my introduction and throughout the previous chapters. These perspectives ultimately set the basis for the analysis that follows.

As argued in his 2008 book *Violence*, Žižek notes that a fundamental violence of language lies in its tendency to simplify material realities by “reducing” them “to a single feature” (61). In relation to a material reality or event, language, argues Žižek, “dismembers the thing, destroying its organic unity, treating its parts and properties as autonomous,” and it “inserts the thing into a field of meaning which is ultimately external to it” (61). For example, “[w]hen we name gold ‘gold’,” says Žižek, “we
violently extract a metal from its natural texture, investing into it our dreams of wealth, power, spiritual purity, and so on, which have nothing whatsoever to do with the material reality of gold” (61). Žižek’s point about language’s ability to place something into an “external” “field of meaning” explains the disparity between material realities and their symbolic ordering, but as even he himself notes, subjective, material violence (i.e. the clashing of physical bodies, the tearing of limbs, rape, terror, war, genocide, etc.) has a special relationship to symbolic ordering through language because it tends, unlike gold, to resist it much more vigorously. Violence, to Žižek, constitutes a traumatic experience that disturbs or disrupts the means of organizing it, and this disruption or resistance to symbolic ordering actually attests to the violence more so than something too clean or orderly. As an example, Žižek argues that “what renders a report of raped woman (or any other narrative of trauma) truthful is its very factual unreliability, its confusion, its inconsistency” (4). “If the victim were able to report on

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16 Žižek outlines an important distinction between what he calls subjective and objective violence that illuminates some of the key differences between the material realities of violence and its encoding via language. “The catch,” says Žižek, “is that subjective and objective violence cannot be perceived from the same standpoint: subjective violence is experienced as such against the background of a non-violent zero level. It is seen as a perturbation of the ‘normal,’ peaceful state of things” (2). For Žižek, subjective violence like “acts of crime and terror, civil unrest” and “international conflict” are easy to identify and label as violence, but they lack easy explanations within the dominate order and seem to disrupt this sense of order whenever they occur (1). They are moments of disruption, in other words, that break the order of a systemic violence that attempts to keep them in check. Objective violence, therefore, “is precisely the violence inherent to this ‘normal’ state of things” (2). Objective violence, argues Žižek, “is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent” (2). For Žižek, then, Slotkin’s argument about the use of cowboys and Indians as metaphors during the Vietnam War might figure as a form of objective violence which attempted to cast the shocking violence of the war as a normal state of affairs, something that kept the disruption of order in check. The actual subjective, material realities of the war, the death of hundred and thousands of citizens and soldiers alike, however, would figure in Žižek’s argument as “perturbation[s] of the ‘normal’” (2).
her painful and humiliating experience in a clear manner, with all the data arranged in consistent order,” Žižek contends, “this very quality would make us suspicious of its truth” (4). The “very factual deficiencies of the traumatized subject’s report on her experience bear witness to the truthfulness of her report, since they signal that the reported content ‘contaminated’ the manner of reporting it” (Žižek 4). This intense resistance of violence to symbolic ordering is arguably as close as one can come to getting a grip on material violence. Only in identifying and discussing the ripple effects, excesses, disruptions, negations, and silences that ultimately emerge in language from the reality of violence can one really say anything meaningful about violence as a material phenomenon. Violence’s effects within language rather than language’s effects on it, therefore, become the most useful subject of discussion.

Similar to Žižek, Elana Gomel’s *Bloodscripts: Writing the Violent Subject* (2003) focuses on this relationship between the subjective, material experiences of violence and the effects it produces in language and narrative. Casting the experience of material violence as a “sublime experience,” Gomel links her discussion to a range of texts including the Hellenistic treatise of Dionysius Longinus and to a range of theorists and philosophers such as Burke, Kant, Lyotard, and even Žižek. “From the beginning of history,” Gomel argues, “the sublime has been linked both to transcendence and to violence” (xxvii). Quoting Burke’s notion that “‘the idea of bodily pain, in all the modes and degrees of labour, pain, anguish, torment, is productive of the sublime; and nothing else in this sense can produce it,’” and Lyotard’s contention that the “aesthetics of the sublime is still more indeterminate: a pleasure mixed with pain, a pleasure that
comes from pain,” Gomel claims that “a nexus of transcendence and violence persists in the discourses of the sublime” (xxvii). The materiality of violence, its being rooted in the physical body rather than language, aids in Gomel’s contention that the raw experience of violence produces a sublime transcendence beyond the symbolic order of language. Quoting Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain*, Gomel notes how “the inexpressibility’ of pain, the way in which ‘in serious pain the claims of the body utterly nullify the claims of the world,” marks both violence’s connection to a gap in language and to transcendence (xxiv). “Pain destroys language,” says Gomel: “And through this destruction the body in pain emerges absolutely, uncompromisingly real, real beyond the construction of language and discourse” (xxiv). Citing what many see as the 20th century’s defining moment of violence, Gomel quotes Jean Amery’s comment on “the giant factory of pain that was Auschwitz”: “‘nowhere else in the world did reality have as much effective power as in the camp, nowhere else was reality so real’” (xxiv).

Because of the violent sublime’s rootedness in the physical body, its relation to language, Gomel argues, both negates language and produces it in a kind of feverish excess. In Gomel’s summation of Kant and Vijay Mishra, the sublime experience produces

the sense of the unspeakable and unrepresentable, an interruption of language, a suspension of thought. For Kant, the sublime is produced ‘by the feeling of the momentary inhibition of the vital forces followed immediately by an outpouring of them that is all the stronger.’ The sublime is a lacuna in the symbolic order: ‘what [the sublime] leads to is a failure in representation through a massive disturbance as the texts, in trying to present the unrepresentable, veer toward collapse’ (xxvii-xxviii).
Material violence, therefore, as a transcendent, sublime experience disrupts and negates language as well as compels it. It is “the unrepresentable that clamors for representation; it is that which exceeds language but provokes speech,” says Gomel (xxviii). A strong contemporary example of this relationship between language and material violence would be the seemingly contradictory imperatives to negate language and to quickly assign meaning to the September 11th terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. In one sense, the media response to the events was an effort to characterize the event as beyond words, something so horrific that speaking about it does it no justice, yet it can also be argued that the media response was an explosive effort to quickly assign meaning to the event. The refrain of the attacks being beyond words and inexplicable often times coincided with contradictory and confusing explanatory narratives of terror, conspiracy, religious wars, nationalism, freedom, patriotism, anti-capitalism, jihad, apocalypse, etc. It was an event of violence on such a scale that it both defied language and produced it in a rapid, sometimes contradictory and incomplete influx. In terms of the effects that violence produces in language, then, the sublime materiality of violence produces the effect of silence and the cacophony of incoherence.

McCarthy’s illustrations of the effects sublime violence produces in language, at their core, stem from what might be described as a interrelationship between an unconscious need for and a marked absence of language in Blood Meridian. Regarding this need for language, McCarthy places several moments in the text where characters exhibit or the narrator describes in characters a compulsive need for symbolic order
through language. McCarthy, however, provides such examples of this function of language exclusively as a reaction to violence, which implicates such responses in Gomel’s contention that one “clamors for representation” when faced with violence (xxviii). In a sergeants’ instinctual reaction to the image of the Comanche (the “death hilarious”), in a character named Sproule’s death howl, and in a group of squatters’ talking over a raped and murdered child, McCarthy illustrates how such spontaneous and unconscious uses of language constitute a rather ineffectual desire for language and symbolic order when confronted with inexplicable, sublime violence. Related to this instinct for language and desire for symbolic order, a notable absence of language in the text (Gomel’s “sense of the unspeakable and unrepresentable” or the “interruption of language, a suspension of thought” (xxvii)) also appears in relation to physical violence as well as in relation to Judge Holden, a character who arguably embodies a sublime form of textual violence. Absences of language in the form of silences in reaction to overwhelming physical violence, and similarly in moments when characters are rendered mute by that which they cannot or sometimes fearfully will not attempt to speak of or explain provide key gaps in McCarthy’s highly textual world. Through characters like the idiot (a literally language-less character) and in situations where the kid confronts Holden as a kind of sublime figure, McCarthy effectively creates a language-less space in Blood Meridian.

This need for and absence of language in the text are important to examine in their own right, yet in the end must be read alongside the lengths to which McCarthy illustrates the narrator/ Holden’s systemic violence through language (what I argue in
chapter one and chapter two) as both an excess of language as well as domineering, or overriding, force in the novel. In terms of the need for language, the narrator/Holden’s conscious use of language to mask and incite violence on one level reads as a kind of opposite to an unconscious recourse for language in the face of sublime violence. However, because the narrator/Holden’s language presents a potential excess of language that also exercises a similar function in providing order to violence, the distinction between the unconscious drive for order and the conscious use of language to mythologize or mask violence embodied in their voices begin to conflate. In fact, one might read the narrator/Holden’s language under this light as logical extensions of the unconscious need for language, thus exposing the very instinct for order through language as a parallel to the narrator/Holden’s language use. In other words, McCarthy demonstrates that the natural impulse for symbolic order finds its logical conclusions in our mythic ideologies and struggles for power via representative control whether they be conscious or not. In terms of the absence of language in figures like the idiot and the kid, Blood Meridian’s silences and muted positions, the language-less spaces of the novel, play an important role in illuminating the power of the narrator/Holden’s language. Rather than suggesting the strength and control of the stoic, taciturn Western hero and therefore establishing an answer to the ironic power of language as a form of systemic violence, McCarthy has the silences and muted positions within Blood Meridian ultimately emerge as places of objectification and powerlessness. Rather than construct a triumph of silence and justified physicality, McCarthy structures the anti-myth of Blood Meridian as a narrative in which these silenced positions become the
silenced bodies, the very victims of material violence, at the core of the narrator/Holden’s distinctly textual worlds. In this way, both the word and the ineffable nature of violence remain constants, and they remain constants in such a way that they inevitably feed off of one another.

McCarthy stages a key moment of a need for language in reaction to violence immediately after the death hilarious scene. After the narrator ends the epic simile of the passage and White’s troops are confronted with the “horde from a hell more horrible yet than the brimstone land of christian reckoning,” the sergeant of the company replies to his impending slaughter at the hands of such a carnivalesque image with what one might figure as a universally relatable and appropriate response: “Oh my god, said the sergeant” (53). This immediate and relatable reaction to impending slaughter hints at an unconscious need for a sense of order in that it gets reinforced by an ironic description of a sublime force beyond knowledge or description (Gomel’s “unrepresentable” [xxvii]). McCarthy has the narrator describe the Comanche as “vaporous beings in regions beyond right knowing where the eye wanders and the lip jerks and drools,” and thus the sergeant and the troops are faced with something they cannot fully know or explain (53). In such a description, the ability to know is absent (“beyond right knowing”) along with the ability to speak coherently (“the lip jerks and drools”) (53). The sergeant’s response in the face of the inexpressible and in the face of his own impending death can be read as an immediate recourse toward language in response to a sublime violence. Faced with what cannot be explained, the sergeant unconsciously vies for order. The phrase itself, oh my god, embodies this sense directly because, if
anything, it appeals to a deity, to a god, and if figured as the god of Christianity, a God who according to the Bible and Christian theology is synonymous with \textit{the word}, the function of the sergeant’s reaction becomes even more apparent. The sergeant, without pause to consider his situation, speaks the name of the word itself.

In another notable moment after the kid and Sproule have fled the scene of the slaughter of White’s troops by the Comanche, the wounded and bleeding Sproule gets attacked by a vampire bat at night:

Sproule was clawing at his neck and gibbering hysterically and when he saw the kid standing there looking down at him he held out to him his bloodied hands as if in accusation and then clapped them to his ears and cried out what it seemed he himself would not hear, a howl of such outrage as to stitch a caesura in the pulsebeat of the world. (66)

The vampire bat’s attack on Sproule, an attack which McCarthy roots in the imagery of carnal bloodlust, produces a similar unconscious impulse for order in the face of violence. When faced with the horror of the bat feeding off his blood, Sproule quickly scapegoats his situation and assigns unwarranted blame on the kid, reaching out his “bloodied hands as if in accusation” (66). Furthermore, Sproule’s conscious awareness of such a response is negated in that his senses appear to betray him: he “cried out what it seemed he himself would not hear” (66). Aptly described as a “howl of such outrage as to stitch a caesura in the pulsebeat of the world,” Sproule’s screams at the horror of the bat feeding off his blood transform via the metaphor of a “caesura” into both a stop in language, implying a break in order, as well as a specific demarcation of order in a line of poetry (the definition of \textit{caesura} meaning a complete stop in classical metered poetry) (“caesura, \textit{n}”). Described as such, Sproule’s screams confirm the violence’s
disruption of order while at the same time producing an unconscious response and need for order (66). Here, McCarthy stages a scene that reflects Gomel’s point about the violent sublime as “the unrepresentable that clamors for representation” or “that which exceeds language but provokes speech” (xxviii). In McCarthy’s apt choice of metaphor, he illustrates how something in the carnal, material bloodlust of the bat on Sproule’s neck propels at once a gap in language’s ability to order and an incoherent, compulsive excess of language—a literal scream.17

The presumable sexual violation and murder of a young Apache child by Holden also provokes an initial silence and subsequent unconscious need for language in a group of squatters who find the dead body. After the squatters find the child “lying face down naked” amongst “a great number of old bones,” the narrator explains that the child looked “[a]s if he like others before him had stumbled upon a place where something inimical lived” (118). From here, says the narrator, the “squatters crowded in and stood about the corpse in silence” and began “conversing senselessly about the merits and virtues of the dead boy” (119). Because of the implied sexual violation (the child lying face down and naked, and the narrator’s comparing the scene to something

17 Softing’s comments on the naturalistic descriptions of violence in Blood Meridian are worth noting here because they align with a reading of this scene that emphasizes the materiality of violence and the materiality of the body in relation to the sublime. Softing argues that the image of Sproule’s infected arm provides a notable instance of “showing naturalistically the results of violence” (26): “He took off the shirt. It stuck to the skin and a yellow pus ran. His arms was swollen to the size of his thigh and it was garishly discolored and small worms worked in the open wound” (67). In connection with Gomel’s argument that the genre of horror relies heavily on depictions of violence as a sublime materiality rooted in the body (see her chapter “The Visible Man” in Bloodscripts), Softing also notes that McCarthy’s naturalistic descriptions of violence, like the example of Sproule’s arm, often times have “as much in common with the horror genre and with splatter films as with the Western” (26). As naturalistic descriptions that border on the genre of horror, “the decomposition of the body [in Blood Meridian] is freely shown and the human being is reduced to organic matter,” says Softing (26).
like the den of an unknown monster, “a place where something inimical lived”), the repressed nature of Holden’s crime and its violence, rooted in the unspeakable materiality of the body, becomes relatively clear (119). Much like the sergeant’s response and Sproule’s response, the unspeakable violence of the child’s violation and murder provokes in the squatter’s an unconscious, both a figurative and literally senseless, reaction of “conversing …about the merits and virtues” of the dead child (119). The initial reaction of silence by the squatters informs the senselessness of their response because the initial reaction to the violated body provokes an absence of language. It is as if they first revert to the unconscious place where “the lip jerks and drools” (53) and then begin “conversing senselessly” (133), or in Gomel’s terms, the image of child’s body at first “exceeds language” and then “provokes speech” (xxviii). Read under Gomel’s notion of sublime violence rooted in materiality, the scene becomes an image of the group of squatters’ need and unconscious desire to assign an order of “merits and virtues” to a dead child, or corpse rather, that signals a sublime violence rooted in the body no matter how literally or figuratively senseless the endeavor might be (119).

This unconscious need for order in the face of sublime violence via language and its accompanying senselessness (both its ineffectuality and its literally unconscious, senselessness) occurs with notable repetition beyond the above examples. When the father in a family of gypsies the gang escorts accidently loses his tent to the desert winds, he is seen looking “out upon the wrathful blackness” and speaking “to it…with his fists” as if to challenge nature’s decisions to expose him to the elements (91). In a
similar situation near the settlement of Yuma, a Mexican couple and grocer are accosted by Glanton’s men and later “found tied and lying in their own excrement in an abandoned hut at the edge of the ocean eight miles south of the settlement” (271). After being subjected to such degradation, the narrator then explains that they had “been left a pan of water from which they drank like dogs and they had howled at the booming surf until they were mute as stones” (271). Additionally, in the final flight from the judge, the kid witnesses the ex-priest Tobin “stumbling among the bones holding aloft a cross he’d fashioned out of the shins of a ram…holding the thing before him like some mad dowser in the bleak desert and calling out in a tongue both alien and extinct” (289-290). Here, the ex-priest wards off his death by calling on an order and a dead language, presumably Latin, which he at some previous point disavowed. Toward the end of the novel, even the kid, once the novel’s presumed protagonist, succumbs to a similar gesture when despite his illiteracy he carries with him a fetishized symbol of order that harkens back to the sergeant’s and Tobin’s appeal to God. The kid carries with him a “bible that he’d found at the mining camps…no word of which could he read” (312). Finally, in the very last scene between Holden and the kid, the judge explains the futility of raging against the “gods of vengeance and of compassion alike” and how both must “evoke only the same silence” (330). Afterward, Holden points to a man mumbling to himself and asks of the kid, “To whom is he talking, man?” (330). The kid looks only to discover that “The man was indeed muttering to himself and peering balefully about the room wherein it seemed there was no friend to him” (330). It seems, in the face of man-made, natural, and sometimes even divine violence, violences rooted
in materiality and violences one cannot explain, the unconscious impulse for some sense of order appears time and again and the language it produces gets rendered senseless in both a figurative and literal fashion.

The impotency and unconsciousness of such gestures certainly contrast to the narrator/Holden’s language use, yet because they both attempt to provide order to violence such a clear distinction becomes less tenable in the end. On one hand, the narrator’s language can certainly illustrate a very conscious use of language that orders violence. McCarthy’s use of archaisms, hypotaxis, parataxis, epic simile, and subtle literary allusions employed in the narrative voice of the novel all attest to a very deliberately crafted use of language for dramatic and ironic effects relating to myths of violence. Holden, too, can easily be described as a conscious user and manipulator of language in that McCarthy creates in him a character that is all too aware of the gap between language and reality (“Books lie” and “Words are things” etc). Holden deliberately masks and incites the violence of the gang with the language of religion, law, and science amongst other discourses, and towards the end of the novel even fabricates a myth that absolves him from any blame for the takeover and massacre at the Yuma ferry.

The narrator and Holden as conscious, deliberate users of language that highlight McCarthy’s attempts to ironize myths of violence and demonstrate ideological mystification does, in one sense, describe the type of language use they are engaged in. However, another word describes their language use just as significantly: excess. This excess of language becomes the focal point where one might draw important
connections between McCarthy’s focusing on an unconscious need for language in relation to violence and the language of the narrator and Holden in relation to violence. Because the narrator’s language contains an almost bewildering array of formal features, elaborate metaphors, and literary allusions and because even the overall structure of *Blood Meridian* is wandering, picaresque, and episodic in nature, one might read the general sense of language that McCarthy writes into the narrative voice as one of excess, repetition, and relative incoherence. Similarly, Holden’s use of multiple foreign languages and the discourses of religion, law, science, myth etc. all in the name of masking and inciting violence also hold as a potential excess of language, which in the end only amount to a kind of mystification rather than clarity or consensus in his audiences. As illustrated above and in the previous section, such mystifications may indeed be conscious choices to manipulate or do violence through language on Holden’s part, but within the whole scope of McCarthy’s characterization and shaping of Holden, one is hard pressed to locate a truly concrete or rational reason for such manipulations. McCarthy never reveals in Holden something like a desire for monetary gain, a past in which Holden tries to deny or cover up, or even a past trauma or violation that Holden attempts to assuage by repeatedly experiencing or replicating violence. Beyond the closed logic of status, self-preservation, and the notion of violence as an immutable law of nature, Holden lacks any rational or pragmatic motive for his actions. Holden’s excesses of language and his manipulations within this excess have at their core an empty space, something that in the end, much like the moments of inexplicable violence that prompt unconscious responses in language, defies explanation.
Gomel outlines a corollary between a lack of discernable motives for violence and the excesses of language as a response to violence’s inexpressibility in the profusion of narratives (usually a combination of sociological, scientific, criminological, psychological, and popular media narratives) that get offered as explanations for a serial killer’s motives. Like Žižek’s example of victims of trauma, Gomel posits that this excess of explanations actually creates a kind of incoherence that attests to the inexplicable nature of the killer’s acts. Much like the narrator’s attempt to describe the image of death hilarious through exaggerated rhetoric and much like Holden’s excesses of language that lack a clear center, the very form of which the multiple discourses that purport to shape a killer’s motives confirm the gap in language it creates. Gomel says, “it is precisely the resistance of the serial killer to representation that acts as incitement to representing him again and again” (36). “In his encounters with an array of forensic specialists, psychologists, medical examiners, criminologists, scriptwriters, and authors,” argues Gomel, “the serial killer functions as a figure of the Real, soliciting explanations and defying and reflecting them” (36). Gomel notes that the question of why a killer does what he does marks a gap in language with such force that an excess of explanations, narratives, and language usually proceeds. Holden, in some measure, relates to what Gomel says here because he at once serves as a figure of violence (both linguistic and physical) that lacks a motive as well as a figure in which a profusion or excess of means to explaining violence emerge.

Essentially, the language of the narrator and Holden, in their excess, can be read as a similar “‗outpouring’” of language whose center is the sublime inexpressibility of
violence (Gomel xxviii). Under this light, the language of the narrator and Holden effectively become the hyperbolic, excessive extensions of the sergeant’s “Oh my god,” Sproule’s howl, and the squatter’s senseless conversing. In a sense, McCarthy shows language in *Blood Meridian* beginning in the moments of unconscious response to violence, and he shows language culminating in a similar manner through the excesses of the narrator and Holden. Additionally, if the moments of an unconscious need for language in *Blood Meridian* display the origin point of the narrator/Holden’s language by relating them to a dynamic of excess and at the same time the narrator/Holden’s language function as a kind of violence in and of themselves in the text, then it stands to reason that McCarthy represents on a more universal level than just the narrator/Holden’s language the very instinct for language as a form of violence.

This universal formulation, language as violence or violence as language, has important implications when considering how McCarthy provokes a discussion of the politics of representation and the politics of myth creation in relation to the myth of the West through the narrator/Holden pair. As noted in my earlier examination of the role of the narrator, the question of representative control comes to the forefront of *Blood Meridian* in that the narrator, the controlling voice of the novel, marks a key irony between what the very language that tells the myth of violence signifies (the ethos of the myth teller) and what ideologies the myths of violence tend to affirm. Additionally, Holden’s language use relates to the issue of the politics of representation given that his manipulations of language both mask violence, the very ineffable material of the Western myth, and sustain the myth in order to perpetuate such violence. The narrator
and Holden perhaps raise these issues in a way where the agent of such manipulations and ironies can be located in a single voice or in a single character, but their language’s ultimate relationship to an unconscious need for language via the way in which their excesses of language circumnavigate (and for Holden lacks motive) rather than directly explains violence casts a much larger shadow. Via these relations, McCarthy implicates all language into the very same violence of representation and the perpetuation of myth in the name violence that the narrator and Holden more clearly represent. In effect, single perpetrators to the violence of language that constitutes the myth of the West cannot be so easily located. The violence of language lies within the sergeant’s “Oh my God” as much as it does in Holden’s philosophic speeches and the narrator’s use of the epic simile. For McCarthy, all language formulates the myth, even the unconscious desire to order violence, and all language plays a part in the masking and perpetuation of that violence.

In conjunction with the implications of a universal violence of language McCarthy draws out in comparing the unconscious need for language in relation to violence with the narrator/Holden, one needs to look at places where a negation of language, either a silence or muted position, occurs. A starting point for an examination of such silences and muted positions can begin by looking closely at Blood Meridian’s one truly language-less character, the character of the idiot (or the “The Wild Man Two Bits” as he is described on a show sign), whom Holden procures from a store owner looking for passage to California (233). The idiot, as a language-less character, connects back to the final description of the Comanche in the death hilarious scene as well as the
description at the scene of the violated and murdered Apache child by representing a more concrete image of an absence of language. As noted above, the narrator explains in the last sentence of the passage that the Comanche appear “like those vaporous beings in regions beyond right knowing where the eye wanders and the lip jerks and drools” (53). In allusion to this description, the idiot is at one point described in the following terms: “The loose neck swiveled and the dull jaw drooled” (291). The idiot, here, becomes a literal image of the narrator’s description. In addition to this connection to the final description of the death hilarious scene, the idiot as concrete manifestation of this language-less space also lies in a parallel between his at one point being described as “sitting motionless in a bower of bones…watching like a wild thing in a wood” and the description of the place where the squatter’s find the violated corpse of the Apache child—a place with “a great number of old bones” and “a place where something inimical lived” (118). Here, the idiot literally becomes like the “inimical” thing that defies explanation and thus provokes the initial silence of the “senselessly” conversing squatters (188).

The above descriptions literally link the figure of the idiot to the language-less space that so prompts the responses of the sergeant and the squatters, yet his function as a manifestation of this language-less space becomes even more important when read against what he represents to those that speak for him. What the idiot means to the likes of his initial owner, Holden, and to other characters shed light on what a language-less position constitutes in Blood Meridian. Upon the idiot’s first introduction, he appears as nothing more than a commodity. To his initial owner, who happens to also be his
brother, the idiot is displayed under a sign reading “See the Wild Man Two Bits,” and he is locked in a cage like an animal on show: “They [Glanton and Holden] passed behind a wagonsheet where within a crude cage of paloverde poles crouched a naked imbecile. The floor of the cage was littered with filth and trodden food and flies clambered about everywhere” (233). Immediately following this image, Glanton, Holden, and the idiot’s brother engage in a conversation about adequate payment for safe passage to California:

   How much have you got? said Glanton.

The image here of the caged idiot and the subsequent conversation over money suggests that part of the brother’s income comes from the display of his brother. To Holden, on the other hand, the idiot enters into a taxonomy of the human species, which alludes to his ledger book and his use of pseudo-science to explain the origin of Black Jackson to Sergeant Aguilar. When Holden discovers that the idiot is the owner’s brother, he immediately begins examining the brother’s head like an anthropologist:

   The judge reached and took hold of the man’s head in his hands and began to explore its contours…narrowed an eye at the man and studied him and then reached and gripped him again, holding him by the forehead while he prodded along the back of his skull with ball of his thumb. (238)

Here, the family of the idiot and his brother become objects of study and classification to Holden. They become like objects he so carefully puts into his ledger so that he might become “suzerain” of the earth (198). In the purview of both the brother and Holden, the idiot, in his lack of language, becomes object rather than subject. He is spoken for rather than speaking for himself.
In addition to the brother’s commoditization of the idiot and Holden’s regulating him to an object of study, a group of women during the Yuma ferry episode also speak for him in a way that at first seems to contrast with the brother and Holden’s objectification. During this scene, the women crowd around the idiot and treat him as if he were a helpless child: “By daylight the women at the crossing had discovered the idiot in his cage. They gathered about him, apparently unappalled by the nakedness and filth. They crooned to him and they consulted among themselves” (256). Directly after this, the women then take the idiot to be bathed in the river: “The Borginnis woman waded out with her dress ballooning about her and took him deeper and swirled him about grown man that he was in her great stout arms. She held him up, she crooned to him” (258). After his washing, the women cloth and feed him: “His thin neck turned warily in the collar of his outsized shirt. They’d greased his hair and combed it flat upon his skull so that it looked painted on. They brought him sweets and he sat drooling and watched the fire greatly to their admiration” (258). The women in this scene are also admit that the idiot be called by his real name, James Robert. When calling out him out of his cage, the Borginnis woman uses his name, “James Robert come out of there,” she says (257). This scene of the women’s cleansing of the idiot in the river reads as both a literal cleansing and figurative cleansing reminiscent of a Christian baptism, which also happens to be a ritual in which one receives a Christian name. The idiot thus goes through an implicit baptism in this scene and transforms into both a subject and a symbol of purity. To the women, the idiot serves as an innocent child in need of a name
and in need of subjectivity—things otherwise denied via his brother’s treating him as a commodity and Holden’s science of man.

While this scene might be read as the women’s attempt to purify and recognize the idiot’s subjectivity, McCarthy ends the scene in a way that ultimately conflates the women’s infantilizing of the idiot with Holden’s taxonomy. After the idiot strips his new clothes and flees from the women in the middle of the night, he stumbles back into the river and begins to drown. By sheer coincidence, though, Holden finds and rescues him. The description that follows blends metaphor and imagery in a way that ultimately links the women with Holden:

[He] stepped into the river and seized up the drowning idiot, snatching it aloft by the heels like a great midwife and slapping it on the back to let the water out. A birth scene or a baptism or some ritual not yet inaugurated into any canon. He twisted the water from its hair and he gathered the naked and sobbing fool into his arms and carried it up into the camp and restored it among its fellows. (259)

On the surface of this description, much of the same imagery of the idiot’s initial washing (the river, the ringing of hair, shameless nudity, his being placed in his proper place etc.) reappears under cover of night. Here, one might read Holden’s rescue as a simple reversal of the women’s washing in that it is even described as kind of aberrant “baptism or…ritual” that somehow negates the implicit baptism and transformation the women enact (259). The narrator’s metaphor of Holden as midwife, however, complicates such a reading. On one level, describing Holden as midwife marks a link between the maternal instincts of the women to smother and infantilize the idiot and Holden. Additionally, at the same time Holden appears as a midwife, an occupation that speaks to the practice of women facilitating and regulating the processes of birth,
Holden is also described “snatching it aloft by the heels” and “slapping” the idiot “on the back to let the water out” (259). Hence, a much more complex image seems to emerge. While Holden appears as midwife, his rough handling of the idiot in the same sentence appeals to the practice of slapping children at birth and arguably bridges the gap between the ritualizing of birth as a feminine endeavor through the practice of midwifery and masculine, 19th century views of medical procedures as science. Such a conflation in this image shows less of a stark dichotomy between the women’s speaking for the idiot and Holden’s taxonomy and instead pieces together a web of interrelated practices. Here, the women’s morally driven infantilizing and Holden’s taxonomy become enmeshed.

A reading of the idiot that collapses his brother’s, Holden’s, and the women’s speaking for him ultimately establishes his lack of language as a kind of base materiality subject to a variety of narratives. Such a formulation echoes Slotkin’s contention that the material violence of the West only achieves significance through its mythologizing, through its entering into language, and it also reflects Gomel’s contention that the ineffable nature of violence is rooted in a sublime materiality. Whether it be in the language of commodity exchange, the language of science, or the language of religion and morality, the idiot is subject not to his own language but to the language of others. His status as a truly language-less character in a text that in many ways equates language with power, then, becomes a place not just of unconsciousness but powerlessness. If silence or muteness figures as one and the same with perhaps the weakest, most animalistic, and most literally domesticated and controlled figure in the
novel, then one finds recourse to begin examining similar situations of silence and muteness as informed by the idiot’s presence as a kind of perpetual object.

Silence and muteness has the most at stake in the characterization of the kid, especially due to his presumed role as protagonist in the beginning of the novel as well as his role as an antithesis to Holden. The kid’s silences and muted positions ultimately reverse the role of the stoic, taciturn hero (a hero in control of his body, emotions, and environment) and ironically transform a lack of language into a veritable weakness. The first signs of silence/muteness as a place of powerlessness come when the kid spends the night with a hermit toward the start of the novel. When asked by the hermit, “But where does a man come by his notions. What world’s he seen that he liked better?,” the kid replies, “I can think of better places and better ways.” The hermit, however, responds directly, “Can ye make it be?” he asks. “No,” replies the kid (19). In an affirmation of a lack of ability to make what he purports to know a reality, the kid in effect recognizes what can ultimately be read as a lack of the powers of language to mythologize, a power that Holden executes in his mythologizing of the kid’s role in the Yuma ferry massacre and throughout much of the novel (19). After the kid’s self recognition of this lack, the hermit then launches into an apocalyptic prophecy that blends Christian imagery with Baudrillard’s simulacra:

It’s a mystery. A man’s at odds to know his mind cause his mind is aught he has to know it with. He can know his heart, but he don’t want to. Rightly so. Best not to look in there. It ain’t the heart of a creature that is bound in the way that God has set for it. You can find meanness in the least of creatures, but when God made man the devil was at his elbow. A creature
that can do anything. Make a machine. And machine to make the machine. And evil that can run itself a thousand years, no need to tend it. (19)  

This speech serves as a kind of warning about the nature of violence as well as the nature of Holden’s linguistic violence. The hermit’s contention that men’s hearts are something one often desires to avoid and something one cannot know through any conscious process links the heart of man with Gomel’s notion of violence as an ineffable sublimity. Additionally, the hermit’s description of the devil, an entity capable of making a “machine to make the machine,” alludes to the notion of a completely textual world that perpetuates itself, pointing to Holden and his manipulations of language. In light of this initial failure of the kid to exercise the power of language and the hermit’s prophecy of a supernatural force not unlike a simulacrum, other moments of silence/muteness in the kid can be read as moments which empty the notion of the stoic hero of its symbolic potency. Rather than moments in which the hero’s stoicism illustrates a sense of power and control, the kid’s silences and muted positions reveal a special kind of powerlessness rooted in the lack of language. The kid, as an image of the hero, gains no power through his silence. His silences only affirm his status as object within the simulacra embodied by the narrator/Holden’s matrix of language.

McCarthy certainly ironizes Tompkins’ notion of silence as “a sign of mastery” quite thoroughly with the loquaciousness of Holden, but he also destabilizes this notion of silence as power in the way he positions the essential irony of the kid’s silence in

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18 See Baudrillard’s “The Precession of Simulacra” in which he describes, in fitting apocalyptic tone, “the age of simulation” as a “perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes” (1733).
relation to what Tompkin’s claims structures the Western’s hero’s confrontation with their antagonists (64). Tompkins claims that the Western typically structures this confrontation by building up to a violent act that satiates the need for moral justice through physical rather than verbal action:

The hero, provoked by insults, first verbal, then physical, resists the urge to retaliate, proving his moral superiority to those who are taunting him. It is never the hero who taunts his adversary; if he does, it’s only after he’s been pushed ‘too far.’ And this, of course, is what always happens. The villains, whoever they may be, finally commit an act so atrocious that the hero must retaliate in kind. He wants to, and we want him to, and, if there’s a crowd of innocent bystanders, they want him to, too. At this juncture, the point where provocation has gone too far, retaliatory violence becomes not simply justifiable but imperative. (228)

Tompkins’ formulation shapes the final confrontation between the stoic hero and the loquacious antagonist in the typical Western as a moment of decisive retribution where the hero’s rejection of language in favor of physical power and action becomes absolute. The act of physical violence must occur, and when executed by the hero it “fills a visceral need” in the audience by marking what Tompkins calls “the moment of moral ecstasy” (229). In essence, a controlled version of Gomel’s notion of violence’s sublime ineffability takes place through the careful construction of the narrative. Here, language fails with a sense of finality, and the hero’s stoicism, his silence, triumphs as a controlled and justified experience of physical violence in which the denial of language becomes essential. The final moments of Blood Meridian and the kid’s final confrontations with Holden are of a much different nature. Rather than shaping the end of the novel as the moment of language’s ultimate rejection by and the celebration of the hero’s decisive and morally justified physical retribution, McCarthy constructs a
narrative that ends in the triumph of simulacra and the hero’s silence as a complete lack of power. The end of the novel is not the kid’s final exercise of some morally justified physical violence. The end is his inability to narrate, his being rendered mute, and his final decent not into justified physicality but into his own dead, emasculated flesh and the flesh of the judge.

In terms of the kid’s inability to narrate, McCarthy correlates the kid’s one attempt to tell his own story with a particular trope of the Western genre that symbolically sanctions violence. As will be illustrated below, McCarthy quickly empties this trope of its power in an effort to link the kid’s lack of language with a lack of power. In the Western, figures like women, children, and sometimes the elderly often function as de-sexed, fetishistic figures of moral authority or purity, and they are often depicted sanctioning a hero’s violence upon the revelation of the hero’s story, either prompting its being put into action or justifying it after the fact. The hero either appeals to the symbolic figure through a narrative of their trials or their story is made known through the defeat of the antagonist and thus justified by witnesses. For the hero and for the audience, then, violence gets symbolically placed in a moral order. For McCarthy, the kid’s moral sanctioning of violence via the pact or allowance with a figure of moral order does not play out in typical fashion. In almost comic fashion, McCarthy moves from an initial recognition of the trope to a total ironizing of it. Released from jail at the end of the novel, the kid wanders the countryside and eventually comes across a group of slain and butchered pilgrims. In passing through the dead bodies, the kid sees an old woman whom he initially believes to be alive: “The kid rose about and looked at this
desolate scene and then he saw alone and upright in a small niche in the rocks an old
woman kneeling in a faded rebozo with her eyes cast down” (315). Here, McCarthy
renders the image of the old woman as something akin to the Virgin Mary—a kneeling,
praying figure that represents both purity and moral authority. From this point,
McCarthy then proceeds to have the kid narrate his experience to the woman: “He
spoke to her in a low voice. He told her that he was an American and that he was a long
ways 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” (315).
McCarthy also writes in a heroic gesture as the kid promises to “convey” the woman “to
a safe place” and return her to “her countrypeople who would welcome her” (315).
Immediately after this confession and promise, however, McCarthy negates the trope:
“the kid reached into the little cove and touched her arm” only to find out the woman
“was just a dried shell and she had been dead in that place for years” (315). McCarthy’s
choice to have the kid’s narrative literally falling on deaf and dead ears recognizes and
then empties how the typical Western hero symbolically receives either the sanction to
commit or the sanction for having committed violence. The kid seeks the moment in
which the symbol of moral order, in this case an elderly woman, sanctions his acts of
violence both in the past and the potential future. However, the notion of a moral order
is essentially rendered false and illusory. McCarthy has the kid speak to an empty shell,
and seek moral sanctioning from something that no longer exists. At once, McCarthy
re-affirms the kid’s failure to make a “better world” be through language, and through
the gesture of affirming and then negating a typical trope of the Western genre,
ironically denies the kid the ability to codify violence into a language of myth. In lieu of Tompkins’ notion of a carefully constructed narrative that sanctions violence, McCarthy’s narrative here effectively silences his own character and leaves the kid at the mercy of a language and narrative that is not his own.

McCarthy continues this theme of the kid’s lack of language in a series of final confrontations between the kid and Holden. In a conveniently placed scene towards the end of the novel, the kid, Tobin, and Toadvine flee the Yuma ferry massacre and confront Holden and the idiot in the desert. McCarthy shapes their silence in the face of Holden in way that highlights a lack of language as a lack of power:

They were both of them naked and they neared through the desert dawn like beings of a mode little more than tangential to the world at large, their figures now quick with clarity and now fugitive in the strangeness of that same light. Like things whose very portent renders them ambiguous. Like things so charged with meaning that their forms are dimmed. (282)

Immediately after this, the narrator describes the kid, Tobin, and Toadvine’s reaction to their approach: “The three at the well watched mutely this transit out of the breaking day and even though there was no longer any question as to what it was that approached yet none would name it” (282). In the three’s confrontation with the inexplicable figures approaching, one might read an allusion to the kid’s earlier affirmation that he can know something yet is unable “to make it be” (19). The approaching figures of Holden and the idiot in essence become so real yet so fleeting, like a thought or dream, as to become ineffable. The description of Holden and the idiot as fleeting images of light and shadow as well as “things so charged with meaning that their forms are dimmed” positions Holden as a kind of knowable yet ultimately inexpressible image (282). Thus
the kid is faced with an image of Holden that renders him mute. He knows what
approaches yet will not name it, for to speak its name would make it that much more
real.

McCarthy has this image of Holden as a sublime, inexpressible object repeat
twice more in a way that figures him as a kind of singularity in which language seems
to both orbit and dissolve. In the kid’s haunted dreams, McCarthy has Holden appear as
a figure whose very existence both prompts and negates the possibility of language:

In that sleep and in sleeps to follow the judge did visit. Who would come
other? A great shambling mutant, silent and serene. Whatever antecedents
he was something wholly other than their sum, nor was their 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. (310)

Directly following this description, the kid also dreams that “he saw his own name
which nowhere else could he have ciphered out at all logged into the records as a thing
already accomplished” (310). In this dream sequence, the narrator’s initial question of
“Who would come other?” shifts the tone of the description toward the apocalyptic tone
of the hermits’ warning at the beginning of the novel, and the description of Holden as
an irreducible object shapes him in what Gomel calls the metaphor of sublime
violence’s black hole. Gomel argues in the final chapter of Bloodscripts that the “black
hole has become the master trope at the intersection of history, memory, and trauma”
and that the black hole as metaphor for the trauma of violence carries with it certain
paradoxes that when applied to discourse and language reveal language’s presence and
absence in regards to violence (163). She notes that when a black hole collapses a star in on itself, it produces a “singularity” that “‘wraps’ gravity around itself, allowing neither light nor matter to escape” (165). As a collapsed star, a star being the origin of all matter, the black hole figures as both the origin and end to language. The black hole as metaphor for the trauma of violence becomes the point at which narratives both continually orbit and the place where they disappear altogether. Holden as a kind of metaphorical black hole in this dream sequence seems to both compel narratives, through history, ledgerbooks, science, and to negate it at the same time in his leaving these narratives at “at the shore of a void without terminus” and “blowing” in the “dusty primal matter” (310). The kid’s sight of his own name “as a thing already accomplished” adds to his silencing as it alludes to Holden’s mythologizing of him at the Yuma ferry and McCarthy’s narrative silencing of his one attempt to narrate and gain sanction. Furthermore, the mere presence of the kid’s name, which McCarthy never uses in the text, seems to place the narrative of the kid directly into the hands of Holden, a figure whose language proliferates throughout the text yet whose gravity subsumes language in the end. Thus the kid’s silence figures again as a lack of power, and Holden as the sublime center and destroyer of language retains a seemingly cosmic mastery over it.

In the final confrontation between Holden and the kid, this irreducible image of Holden appears again, but this time with a symbolic force that links him more directly to the mythology of the West. Within the “dimly seething rabble” that “had coagulated” and through the “layered smoke” and “yellow light” of the tavern scene in which they
meet for the final time, the kid spots Holden, and the description that McCarthy gives again writes Holden as a singularity, something surrounded by language and narrative yet something never subject to language and narrative’s temporality:

He was sitting at one of the tables. He wore a round hat with a narrow brim and he was among every kind of man, herder and bullwhacker and drover and freighter and miner and hunter and soldier and peddler and gambler and drifter and drunkard and thief and he was among the dregs of the earth in beggary a thousand years and he was among the scapegrace scions of eastern dynasties and in all that motley assemblage he sat by them and yet alone as if he were some other sort of man entire and he seemed little changed or none in all these years. (325)

The types of men that surround Holden, herdsmen, bullwhackers, miners, gamblers, thieves, etc. all seem to fit some archetype character of Western American mythology. Holden appears amongst the everyman of the mythological West and appears as sublime object of the totality of the myth. Furthermore, the highlighting of Holden’s individuality, his appearing “alone as if he were some other man entire,” fits into the fundamental paradox of Western mythology (325). Holden, both amongst “every kind of man” and “alone” by himself, appears both within the radical equality of Western mythology as well as within Western mythology’s ideology of radical individualism (325). For McCarthy, Holden embodies the totality of the myth. In addition to this totality, Holden also appears unaffected by any sense of temporality. To the kid, Holden “seemed little changed or none at all in all these years” (325). Readable as an affirmation of the unchanging nature of Western mythology and readable as an affirmation of the language of myth’s ability to render material history static, Holden’s lack of change, his timelessness, may also read as McCarthy’s attempt to figure Holden in a way that exempts him from narrative’s attempt to illustrate change or development.
Holden remains unaffected, un-captured, by the language of myth while simultaneously encompassing it all.

In this final confrontation, the kid’s lack of language as a position of weakness and Holden’s powers of language are prompted first by Holden’s questioning and then by the kid’s apparent violation and murder. In a query that challenges the trope of stoicism as strength, Holden asks the kid, “Was it always your idea…that if you did not speak you would not be recognized?” (328). After the kid replies “You seen me,” Holden ignores the response saying, “I recognized you when I first saw you and yet you were a disappointment to me. Then and now. Even so at last I find you here” (328). Then, when the kid reveals his reasons for being in the tavern, “the same reason as any other man,” which is to simply “have a good time,” Holden begins “to point out various men in the room and to ask if these men were here for a good time or if indeed they knew why they were here at all” (328). When the kid combatively snaps, “Everybody don’t have to have a reason to be someplace,” Holden replies, “They do not have to have a reason. But order is not set aside because of their indifference” (328). “Let me put it this way,” says Holden, “If it is so that they themselves have no reason and yet are indeed here must they not be here by reason of some other? And if this is so can you guess who that other might be?” (328). “No, can you?” asks the kid (328). “I know him well,” says Holden (328). The implications in this dialogue of Holden’s acquaintance with the reason for the men being there blend Holden with the very narrative voice of the novel. In a very literal and practical sense, the narrator, McCarthy’s disembodied voice, provides the very reason for these men being there. McCarthy’s bloody, ironized
myth of the West, in all its focus on the intersections between language and the ineffable nature of material violence, arguably becomes that with which Holden so cryptically says he is acquainted. The very knowledge of language as a manipulable means toward representative control, its tendency to incite and drive violence, and a knowledge of the terrifyingly ineffable nature of material violence uncannily coalesce in Holden’s statement. Holden, not much later, aptly describes the scene before them as a dance, which serves as a metaphor for a narrative in which the participants lack agency and play out their assigned roles:

This is an orchestration for an event. For a dance in fact. The participants will be appraised of their roles at the proper time. For now it is enough that they have arrived. As the dance is the thing with which we are concerned and contains complete within itself its own arrangement and history and finale there is no necessity that the dancers contain these things within themselves as well. (329)

As a dance, the scene appears as a carefully choreographed and arranged event, but it is also, like material violence, an event of the physical body. Thus the characters (the dancers) move their physical bodies mindlessly to the composition of the music and metaphorically to the composition of the narrative. The composition of the music, or metaphorically the language of the narrative, sustains the action of the participants more so than anyone’s will, desire, or individual influence. In dance, the body moves in rhythm with the composer’s music, and in myths of violence the destruction of physical bodies moves according to the language of the myth teller.
The final silencing of the kid occurs during his presumable violation and murder at the hands of Holden.19 Holden, by violating and murdering the kid, places him squarely into the ineffability of violence. Holden’s murdering of the kid transforms him into a base materiality, a lifeless corpse only to be narrated or reacted to via an immediate, unconscious response. In a scene that closes the gap between the kid’s initial fight on the boards leading to a set of jakes at the beginning of the novel with the end of novel, the kid walks out towards another set of jakes only to find Holden “seated upon the closet” and ready for him: “He [Holden] was naked and he rose up smiling and gathered him [the kid] into his arms against his immense and terrible flesh and shot the wooden barlatch home behind him” (333). The narrative of the kid finally descends into the black hole of Holden’s “terrible flesh,” an image of flesh both physical and metaphoric (333). Holden’s body appears literally naked and waiting to violate him in a place associate with abjection and the literal disposal of physical waste, yet his body is also placed by McCarthy in the very same location, a set of jakes, where readers see the bulk of the kid’s narrative begin. Thus Holden figures again in this scene as a singularity in which narratives seem to gravitate toward in circular, orbital fashion and as a singularity, or black hole, where narratives cease to exist. McCarthy has the kid return to the place where he began, which also happens to be into the arms, the hands,  

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19 Patrick W. Shaw, in “The Kid’s Fate, the Judge’s Guilt: Ramifications of Closure in Cormac McCarthy’s Blood Meridian” gives a convincing reading of this final scene as not just a murder but in fact a sexual violation of the kid by Holden. Shaw argues that the implicit sexual violations that Holden perpetrates earlier in the novel carries through into this final scene in that a forced act of homoeroticism constitutes the only viable form of malignant aggression within the hyper-masculine world of Blood Meridian—a world that essentially naturalizes all other forms of violence except homosexual rape. Shaw notes that “practically no other disclosure could humili ate the kid so thoroughly” (118).
of Holden. In essence, the image of the stoic hero standing over the slain antagonist gets reversed or emptied out here; the silence of the hero is produced by the narrative as a literally emasculated body. The kid becomes the object of Holden once and for all, and the language of the text itself, of Blood Meridian, closes off a circular pattern in which the silent body of the hero, the hero who much earlier “saw no use in discussing” things, becomes a violated, mute corpse that prompts nothing more than an unconscious response from nearby bystanders (9). Ignoring the warnings to “not go in there if I was you,” one bystander peers into the jakes only to respond in a fashion not unlike the sergeant’s response to the image of death hilarious: “Good God almighty” (334). McCarthy does not provide a description of the body here to correlate with such a response but the similarity between the sergeant’s “Oh my god” is telling (53). Instead, McCarthy deliberately leaves things to the imagination of the reader. McCarthy leaves the kid in the ineffable space of material violence, illustrating the futility of codifying violence into language, yet he undeniably constructs a text, a complex of language and narrative, which leaves the kid in this very space. At once, a sublime violence that defies language paradoxically gets generated by it. In a final ironic gesture, McCarthy ends the narrative of Blood Meridian in two senses: the language culminates and completes its orbit, closing off the story for good and in a way affirming language’s ability to codify and order—the very violence of language—and it also ends, or rather collapses, into the very ineffable violence, the black hole, where language goes to die.
Conclusion: At the Shores of a Void

In the world of *Blood Meridian*, language and violence stand as towering equals for McCarthy, and as I have argued throughout this analysis, they collude in ways that move from the violence inherent in the language of myth as ideology to the language that unconsciously arises or emphatically disappears in the face of a visceral and overwhelming experience of the violent sublime. Within this scope, McCarthy’s novel essentially illuminates abstract and systemic forms of violence as well as the most palpably material, subjective and concrete forms of violence—all the while implicating and binding each one into the other. Such a reading of the novel, of course, does not leave much room for hope. Distinct from revisionist texts that purport to speak for the “other” or seek to uncover a marginalized voice within a dominant narrative or discourse, McCarthy’s novel leaves little room for the capacity of language to liberate or break an individual free from ideological trappings, and it encourages no assumptions about the capacity of human nature to transcend violence. As McCarthy’s narrator might say, it leaves one standing “at last darkened and dumb at the shore of a void without terminus or origin” (310). Language begets violence and violence begets language in a perpetual cycle that never ceases. Such a dark conclusion about the novel necessitates at least a mention of a few final issues that concern both McCarthy as an artist and writer and the critical efficacy of *Blood Meridian* as an anti-myth.

McCarthy’s thorough binding of language with violence ultimately raises the issue of *Blood Meridian* itself as an act of language and perhaps even a kind of myth telling—which, as I have argued above, gets self-reflexively displayed as a form of
violence throughout the novel. This participation of *Blood Meridian* in the violence of myth and ideology ultimately leaves one faced with the notion that McCarthy comments on his own practice as writer and artist—as a user and manipulator language—in a way that self-questions at best and self-indicts at worst. This commentary amounts to the notion that McCarthy, in his gravity toward the myth of the West and in his own reaction to sublime violence, potentially views himself as perpetrating and perpetuating forms of violence within his own uses of language. While remaining in the realm of conjecture without authorial commentary, such an idea does speak to what I believe is McCarthy’s intensive paralleling of themes of language with those of violence. As John Cant asserts in his *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism*, McCarthy, like a wise old myth teller, at once displays a “mastery of language” that “makes clear his profound love of language” and “his confidence in its ability to do what he wants it to” (Cant 3). However, to cast a dark shadow on this confidence, such language for McCarthy often gets “deployed in the creation of texts that…express implications that are neither comforting nor, in some cases, fashionable” (Cant 4). These “implications,” under the auspices of my analysis, have as much to do with language as they do with violence and they of course double back in the end onto questions concerning McCarthy’s own uses of language (Cant 4). McCarthy’s concentration on language, while displaying a kind of postmodern veneer and consistently deft disruption of the grand narratives of the mythology of the American West, all too acutely empty out a potential celebration or transcendence in such language use in the way his work “makes it clear that he believes in an all too powerful
‘essential’ human nature and that violence is inherent to that essence” (Cant 5). In a way, McCarthy displays that we are creatures of the word and we are creatures of violence both in its physical form and its linguistic form. McCarthy’s blending of these two arenas of human activity in Blood Meridian arguably does not even allow himself, the very speaker of such ideas, to transcend them.

If McCarthy expresses himself, the writer, as participating in the very violence of myth and ideology, then what exactly constitutes the critical efficacy of Blood Meridian? What, in other words, does the novel purport to show us beyond the fatalistic idea that oppositional voices or voices outside or above the violence of one’s own myths are not possible? I believe that the answer is indeed “neither comforting nor…fashionable” (Cant 3). The answer, I contend, is that in the world of Blood Meridian, the oppositional voice does not and cannot exist. Like the violence of the narrator and Judge Holden, speakers and writers get implicated in the violence of myth telling, and like the muting of the kid toward the end of the novel in the very face of this sublime textual violence, remaining silent does no good either. Silence is and always will be a victimized, fatal silence. Additionally, as anti-myth, the very critical practice McCarthy exercises in Blood Meridian relies on what it seeks to dismantle in order to accomplish that dismantling, creating a circular logic that ultimately implicates Blood Meridian in the object of critique. As David Holloway puts it in his “‘A false book is no book at all’: The Ideology of Representation in Blood Meridian and the Border Trilogy,” Blood Meridian, in its “restless self-consciousness” (191), “necessarily inhabits the structures of what it opposes” (195) and in turn “raise[s] broad questions
about the difficulty in thinking and articulating an oppositional voice” (195). Under such ideas, McCarthy’s work, like Slotkin’s, Tompkins’, and Smith’s work, participate in a reassessment of the myth of the West in a 20th century context, but perhaps more like Smith’s own self-assessment and self-commentary, McCarthy pushes the envelope a little more by attempting to portray a kind of fatalistic inescapability from the very subject he sets out to dismantle.

This outlook as to Blood Meridian’s critical efficacy can most certainly be taken in a fatalistic sense as it appears to convey no potential for escape from the confines of violence, even in the language of the author himself. However, one particular slant on this fatalism arguably attests to the accomplishment of McCarthy’s seriousness, or perhaps his sense of intensity, in both language and theme in an age of when postmodern pastiche and irony can seem so ubiquitous as to appear like empty gestures. Holloway says that “McCarthy’s self-critique in Blood Meridian represents something more interesting than mere self-reflexive irony or postmodern conceit” (Holloway 191). “Interesting,” however, is not quite the right descriptor (Holloway 191). Blood Meridian does more than just interest; it transforms McCarthy’s representation of how language and violence collude into a particularly efficacious artistic endeavor, even if what that endeavor shows us is neither comforting, fashionable, nor morally affirming. Despite the suffocating pessimism that may emerge from this reading of Blood Meridian, McCarthy’s intensive focus on the intersections of language and violence, potentially in its very unwillingness to let us breathe, attests to its artistry and critical impact by achieving a stasis that is all too appropriately beyond words.
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