

BLOOD AND DOCUMENTATION:

Cormac McCarthy, Hampton Sides, and the Frontiers of History and Truth

Justin Wadland

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1.

Who would win in a fight, Judge Holden or Kit Carson? It may seem silly to pit Holden, a literary character based on a historical personage, against Carson, a historical figure who was later mythologized through fiction. Perhaps it is. But when I was younger, we boys often ripped similarly matched animals, people, and creatures out of their environments and sparred them against each other: grizzly bear vs. lion, school of piranhas vs. shark, Rambo vs. Terminator, Alien vs. Predator. On the playground, we approached these debates in deadly earnest, not so much to find the absolute truth but to test how well we argued the truth of our interpretation.

If Judge Holden and Kit Carson had actually met, the two unquestionably would have been enemies. In many ways, the two men had personalities that were polar opposites of each other. Erudite, multilingual, amoral, sociopathic, brilliant, and deceitful, Judge Holden never gets angry or upset. The only time he seems to express emotion is through his sinister grin. He possesses esoteric knowledge, such as how to make gunpowder from scratch, while at the same time he leaves a trail of dead, probably sexually-violated children in his path. In spite of his intelligence and size, he is fleet of foot and can dance better than anyone. He carries with him a ledger book in which he records the fauna, flora, and artifacts he encounters, then destroys. He explains his reason for keeping such a record: “Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent” (198). In many ways, Holden represents and embodies characteristics of the thinking men and explorers of his day. His analog can be in such

figures as John C. Frémont, whose “scientific” expeditions in the West were often veiled opportunities for conquest, inevitably leading to warfare and violence.

Kit Carson, on the other hand, was almost everything the judge was not: small in stature, illiterate, soft spoken, superstitious, eternally loyal to friends, a dedicated if often absent father. He lived according to a kind of frontier ethic and morality, often risking his life to defend or avenge the weak and vulnerable. He possessed innumerable skills for surviving the dangers and harsh wilderness of the American West, hard won from his years on the trail. His ability to track was unmatched: “Plenty of mountain men equaled or surpassed him in other skills, but no one was better than Carson at ‘reading sign,’ as it was called. There was a narrative on the ground if one had the knack for seeing it” (256). His knowledge was largely of an intuitive kind, and in this way he resembles the character of the kid in *Blood Meridian*. Yet there is one crucial difference: Carson did not hesitate to defend himself, and his violent acts were swift, resolute, brutal, and often far beyond what was necessary. “He practiced the code of swift reprisal that was almost universally practiced by the Indians themselves” (255). If he had a philosophy, it was the unified expression of thought and action; one of his favorite phrases when telling a story about himself was “Done so.” Carson would clearly have laid his unerring bead upon a man such as Judge Holden.

2.

Holden and Carson never met, but an imaginary battle illustrates how the mythology of the American frontier engenders and scuttles questions of actuality. Often the most powerful stories of the West originate in the sediment of bare facts, but the

telling of these stories often distorts and transforms what happened, sometimes into archetypes that embody American ideals, sometimes into outright lies that gloss over the brutal history of conquest. Thus, the Old West is an ideal place to examine the porous boundaries between historical fabrication and fact, between fiction and nonfiction.

The two books where these characters appear—Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* and Hampton Sides’s *Blood and Thunder*—both grapple with and embody the mythology of the American frontier. These texts share much in common. Both are set in the late 1840s and early 1850s but straddle a sweep of several decades before and after this pivotal mid-century mark. Both take place in what is now the American Southwest, a desolate, dangerous, and contested landscape that tended to scorch away any sense of law or government control. Both vividly recreate events related and yet peripheral to the Mexican-American war and depict numerous atrocities attendant with, and perhaps inherent to, Manifest Destiny. Both draw upon extensive research and documentation—primary source materials, such as memoirs, journals, and newspaper articles—to construct their narratives. Both represent, examine, and give voice to the many ways that fact and fiction collide in the construction of Western narratives. And at the heart of both works are characters who live—and flourish—through wit and violence, often against Native Americans. Both dramatize an aspect of the frontier first described by historian Frederick Jackson Turner, who expressed more than he was aware of: “The frontier is the outer edge of the wave—the meeting point between savagery and civilization” (3).

But *Blood Meridian* is a work of fiction and *Blood and Thunder* is a work of nonfiction. *Blood Meridian* is a novel about an unnamed “kid” who runs away from his

Tennessee home, drifts south and west, into Texas, and eventually joins a band of scalp hunters known as the Glanton gang. McCarthy obviously relied on research as extensive as any historian's to create his novel. Even though *Blood Meridian* is a work of fiction, many of the characters are based upon historically verifiable personages and events, and McCarthy seems committed to depicting the historically plausible. It is a rendering of a past so viscerally disturbing that the book kept me up at night, with characters like Judge Holden riding roughshod through the liminal zones of my mind.

Blood and Thunder, on the other hand, is a narrative history about Kit Carson and his campaign against the Navajo. In recounting how Carson broke the spirit of this indomitable tribe, Sides borrows many techniques from fiction—a strong storyline, scenes, and character development—to stitch together his documentation, so that I as reader never felt the immense weight of research behind it all. Instead, I glimpsed what it must have felt like for the Navajo to watch Carson and his troops chop down the sacred peach trees in the Canyon de Chelly.

I want to put these two works side by side, compare them, and find out what they have to say to each other.

3.

Like most American kids I absorbed the latent values about the Old West from the culture around me. I grew up in Michigan playing with my uncles' cap guns from the early 1960s, shiny metal six shooters that looked so real that a gunslinger could have held up a stagecoach—or maybe even a liquor store—with them. On my little toy record

player, I played a ballad that went “Davy, Davy Crocket, king of the wild frontier” and then had to ask my mom what it meant that “he kilt him a bar when he was only three.”

As I got older, my parents let me watch more and more Westerns. Clint Eastwood movies with Dad: *Pale Rider*; *Fist Full of Dollars*; *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. Or movies that were coming out in the late 1980s and early 1990s. One sticks out in my mind: *Young Guns*. In the movie, Emilio Estevez plays Billy the Kid, who leads a troupe of “young guns” on a murder spree. It is an otherwise forgettable film, but while watching it I began to sense something of the mythology of the West. Although I liked the movie at the time, I remember suddenly becoming aware of its artifice. Perhaps somewhere I had even seen a photograph of the real Billy the Kid and noticed the stark dissonance between the gaunt, greasy-haired teenager with bad teeth and the well-fed, neatly coifed celebrity playing him in the twentieth century. I wanted to know: *Who was the real Billy the Kid?* Which ultimately led to a much deeper question: *What was it really like in the Old West?* I had intuited that behind the powerful myths around me, behind the fiction of the film, there must be some bedrock of historical fact, but I didn’t know where to begin to find answers.

4.

I’m drawn to true stories, while at the same time I believe these two words together form a kind of oxymoron. I agree with John Raban, who is quoted in David Shields’s *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*: “There’s a good case for arguing that any narrative account is a form of fiction. The moment you start to arrange the world in words, you alter its nature” (65). Roland Barthes in his study of historical discourse

makes a similar claim, commenting on how historians tend to rely on narrative to organize the past, without recognizing the irony: “Narrative structure which was originally developed within the cauldron of fiction (in myths and the first epics) becomes at once the sign and proof of reality” (18). Yet these narratives are fundamental to how humans understand their world, their history, and themselves. “We tell stories in order to live,” writes Joan Didion. “We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the ‘ideas’ with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria that is our actual experience” (185). This trait has become so embedded in our consciousness that we take these stories as representations of how things are.

I refuse to put quotes around the word true, however, because acknowledging that art and selection goes into a story doesn’t deny the potential for truth in that story. Some stories are moored in actuality like *Blood and Thunder* and seek fervently to be faithful to their sources. Others, like *Blood Meridian*, take historical characters and events as inspiration but transform them for dramatic, fictional purposes. Both kinds of stories possess kinds of truth, even if they’re somewhat different than each other.

5.

Can I legitimately compare nonfiction and fiction? “It’s like comparing apples to oranges,” people might say. And as we all know, “Comparisons are odious,” or as Dogberry says in *Much Ado about Nothing*: “Comparisons are odorous.” Perhaps Dogberry’s malapropism gets at something about the nature of comparisons: they do help us understand the world and can lead to insight. Knowledge begins by comparing new

evidence and experience to what we have already seen and learned, generating a fragrance of difference we must inhale and accommodate. Also, comparing an apple grown and cultivated in the same climate, landscape, and time period as an orange may yield data about nutrients and seasons that might not otherwise have been apparent.

An example from my own experience with two historic sites in the American West: Wounded Knee (a National Historic Landmark) and Little Big Horn (a National Monument). On my first trip out west, I stopped at the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota and visited the site of the Wounded Knee Massacre. By the side of the road, before an empty dirt parking lot, a historical marker described how the soldiers fired Hotchkiss Guns upon the Lakota Sioux camped there, killing nearly 150 men, women, and children. In a chipped and rusted metal frame, the sign was faded as if the seasons were trying to erase the white letters printed on the green background. I walked up to the cemetery on the hill and stood before the stone memorial for the victims. Wind blew tattered ribbons tied to the chain link fence and bobbed desiccated flowers left on gravestones. I felt that I should not be there, while at the same time I wanted to witness the history of this place. A Sioux boy rode up on his bike and stopped outside the fence. “Can you give me some money for my baseball team?” he asked. I doubted the money would be spent on baseball, but what else could I do but pull out my wallet?

On my way back, after spending the summer in Washington State, I stopped at Little Bighorn Battlefield. Here, I paid the entrance fee to enter the National Park. I drove along the paved roads and stopped at the visitor center. Inside, I found a wealth of history: a diorama of Custer’s last stand, detailed chronologies of what preceded and followed the event, photographs of soldiers and Indians, display cases of rifles, clothing,

and other artifacts. Outside, white gravestones dotted the hillsides and interpretive signs designated significant sites along the side of the road. Even as I stopped and read these markers—which not only had explanatory text but dramatic images showing US soldiers in retreat or the agony of death—the events that happened there seemed distant and untouchable, coated with a veneer of interpretation that I could not penetrate.

Having visited these two places, I could not help but to compare them. If attention and funding are any indication, my country neglects the events that happened at Wounded Knee but commemorates and honors what happened at Little Bighorn. But the act of remembering at Little Bighorn seems more like fiction to me and the act of forgetting at Wounded Knee seems more like a fact.

6.

All of this reminds me of something Judge Holden says in *Blood Meridian*: “Men’s memories are uncertain and the past that was differs little from the past that was not” (330). Anyone who has attempted to understand and engage with historical events, people, or ideas has brushed up against this uncertainty. Whether writing fiction or nonfiction, one must struggle with the maddening question: How does the past that was differ from the past that was not? Elsewhere in the book, Holden says other things that might apply to the writing of history and the blurring of fictional and factual narratives. Holden tells his fellow scalp hunters one evening, “Even in this world more things exist without our knowledge than with it and the order in creation which you see is that which you put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way” (245). Perhaps

the difference between works of fiction and nonfiction that explore the depths of history is the way the authors lay the string in the maze.

The problem with quoting Judge Holden, however, is that it gives him even more power. This enormous, hairless, fat man is as believable as he is abhorrent. In his perverse amorality, he manifests what he states as truth: “War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate trade awaiting its ultimate practitioner. That is the way it was and will be” (248). I’m not sure how to reconcile the horror of who Holden is with the veracity of what he says.

7.

Kit Carson, whose life forms the backbone of *Blood and Thunder*, poses a different kind of conundrum. He was a man of stark ironies. Mountain man, tracker, friend and foe of Indians, rancher, soldier, and finally general in the Army—he experienced the settling of the American frontier firsthand and in many ways acted as an agent of Manifest Destiny. Sides writes of how Carson viewed the frontier in 1849, the same year that most of the events in *Blood Meridian* take place: “From Carson’s point of view, the West was filling up fast with what he took to be untrustworthy characters—outlaws, charlatans, religious zealots, opportunists, schemers, boosters, empire-builders” (259). Carson’s primary achievement to date had been working as a guide for the vainglorious Charles Frémont, a lieutenant in the newly formed US Army Corps of Topographical Engineers. With Carson’s invaluable help, Frémont led several expeditions into the frontier and wrote widely read reports that spurred further expansion and settlement, but Carson didn’t seem to grasp his role in the process. “He seemed

scarcely to recognize that by guiding Frémont all over the West, he had been an important catalyst in bringing about these changes; in a sense, Carson had unwittingly fouled his own nest, luring to the West the very sorts of people he loathed” (249).

Carson’s knack for showing up at the right place at the right historical time, often through some kind of dramatic act of heroism, made him famous. It began with Frémont’s reports, which featured colorful stories of Carson’s skills and thirst for vengeance, but continued with novels, precursors to the Western—“blood and thunders” the genre was called—which blended fact with hyperbole.

It was difficult to exaggerate how hungry the nation had become for a single heroic character who could personify the surge of Manifest Destiny that was so dramatically changing the country . . .

Kit Carson, more than any figure on the Western stage, filled the role. Honest, unassuming, wry around a campfire, tongue-tied around the ladies, clear in his intentions, swift in action, a bit of a loner: He was the prototype of the Western Hero. Before there were Stetson hats and barbed-wire fences, before there were Wild West shows or Colt six-shooters to be slung at the OK Corral, there was Nature’s Gentlemen, the original purple cliché of the purple sage.

Carson hated it all. Without his consent, and without receiving a single dollar, he was becoming a caricature. (252)

As he brushed against his own myth, as people who met him began to doubt whether this small, soft spoken man before them was the *real* Kit Carson, he tried to take control of this narrative and dictated his own memoir, titled *The Life and Adventures of Kit Carson*,

the Nestor of the Rocky Mountains, From Facts Narrated by Himself, which itself was larded with exaggerations. As the illiterate and unsophisticated frontiersman first tasted the bitterness of his own myth, he would have agreed with the judge about the uncertainty of men's memories.

8.

Given these questions about the nature of historical fact, I want to sketch the sources used to create the two works under consideration. First and foremost is the authors' own experience of the landscape and the documentation itself.

In both books, the narrator is invisible and never uses the first person pronoun, but there are clues that point to the monumental research that informed both works. In the early 1990s, McCarthy spoke to *The New York Times*, which offered this glimpse into his process: "McCarthy doesn't write about places he hasn't visited, and he has made dozens of similar scouting forays to Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and across the Rio Grande into Chihuahua, Sonora and Coahuila. The vast blankness served as a metaphor for the nihilistic violence in his last novel, 'Blood Meridian.'" In an interview for the magazine *El Pacio*, Sides describes similar peregrinations for the sake of the work: "Just about every place in *Blood and Thunder* that I could go to I went to. I traveled the length of the Santa Fe Trail and the Oregon Trail. I went to Sutter's Fort in California and the site of the battle of the San Pasqual from the Mexican war near San Diego."

Both McCarthy and Sides originally grew up in Tennessee, but, following paths similar to the characters they would later write about, transplanted to the Southwest. I suspect that both McCarthy and Sides were driven by an impulse to intimately know a

landscape that was both foreign and fascinating to them. In *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, a book that has many connections to their own works, N. Scott Momaday articulates the feeling that may have motivated both authors:

Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth, I believe. He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience, to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, to dwell upon it. He ought to imagine that he touches it with his hands at every season and listens to the sounds that are made upon it. (83)

As Americans in the West, both authors concentrated their minds on the “remembered earth” by honing in on the raw elements of frontier stories and the legacies of violence. “I’ve always been interested in the Southwest,” McCarthy said in the *New York Times* interview. “There isn’t a place in the world you can go where they don’t know about cowboys and Indians and the myth of the West.”

9.

An intimacy with “remember earth” leads to sensual descriptions of a landscape that is as hostile to human presence as it is stunning. The size and scale of the Southwest deserts tend to dwarf humans and their concerns, creating an immense space where individual strength and wile determine survival. Choosing a passage at random from *Blood Meridian*, I come upon the scene where the kid has become separated from the gang and is now wandering through the mountains on the verge of starvation and frostbite. Below, he sees two armies fighting on the plain:

He watched all this pass below him mute and ordered and senseless until the warring horsemen were gone in the sudden rush of dark that fell over the desert. All that land lay cold and blue and without definition and the sun shone solely on the high rocks where he stood. He moved on and soon he was in darkness himself and the wind came up off the desert and frayed wires of lightning stood again and again along the western terminal of the world. (213)

Even as I type this passage, I get shivers not just for the kid but for the jarring unity of beauty, violence, and perspective. Although McCarthy is famously tight-lipped about his writing process, I can envision him atop a horse on a mountain in Mexico, looking down and seeing such a view, imagining armies on the plain.

Sides has similar passages, and one that impressed me describes the Jemez Mountains twenty miles outside of Santa Fe, where the author now lives. Sides has probably gazed upon these mountains innumerable times, and I wonder how his own experience shaped his re-creation of the morning on August 16, 1849, when the US Army launched an expedition into Navajo country:

The Jemez were twenty crow-miles away, rising steeply from the parched mesas beyond the green declivity of the Rio Grande, but in the morning freshness, the mountains seemed close enough to touch. They were splashed with piñon and juniper, and, in the upper reaches, cloaked in distinct bands of ponderosa and quaking pine. Long fingers of hardened lava reached out from the mountains' eroded flanks, a series of narrow escarpments canted in the runoff patterns of an ancient eruption. For the

soldiers now leaving Santa Fe, the Jemez loomed as a magnificent but vaguely unsettling landscape. Summer's lightning storms always came from that direction; in the afternoons the clouds would build and blacken on the Jemez, and then tails of virga would drop from the mountain thunderheads as they snarled east toward Santa Fe, igniting the evening with jags of electricity. (198)

Though the mountains and their weather are real—Sides has likely watched it approach in this way—they serve as a powerful symbol for what lays beyond them: the as yet uncharted and unconquered lands of the Navajo.

In both books, the landscape is a dominant presence, so much so that it becomes an omnipresent force that influences all of the characters' actions. "The wilderness masters the colonist," wrote Turner, pointing to the way that frontier narratives are always stories about the land and its inhabitants. "At the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept his conditions which it furnishes, or perish, and so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows Indian trails" (4).

10.

As much as the authors' familiarity with the landscape influences their work, neither would have been able to write without visiting libraries and archives, collecting the extensive documentation that vivifies the epoch in which the narratives are set.

One striking and immediately apparent difference in the use of this material in fiction and nonfiction is whether the author cites or acknowledges his sources. In some ways, I am stating the obvious: when intertextuality exists in a literary work, no one

expects footnotes or a bibliography. Those of us who want to fully appreciate the subterranean connections must rely on our knowledge, as well as the work of scholars who do the excavations for us. For *Blood Meridian*, I must rely on John Sepich, who for his PhD dissertation identified and analyzed most of the book's major historical sources. In *Notes on Blood Meridian*, Sepich—with the patience and determination of a paleontologist—sifts through the layers and sediments of documents, tracing their influence on McCarthy. The materials include memoirs, diaries and journals, personal narratives, period novels, obscure history books, and newspaper accounts, especially of the massacre of the Glanton gang at Yuma ferry. “*Blood Meridian* is built upon ‘facts,’” observes Sepich (2). “A review of source texts displays both McCarthy’s devotion to historical authenticity and the audacity with which he tailors sources to his own end” (3).

Since Sides writes in the nonfiction tradition of narrative history, which derives its methods of documentation from literary journalism as much as it does from academic historiography, he is expected to cite his sources. At the end of the book, forty pages are dedicated to citations, creating an intricate spider’s web of relationships and reliance upon other texts. Each chapter has extensive notes pointing to places where Sides found various facts and quotes, and a “Selected Bibliography” lists academic and popular histories, biographies, anthropological studies, encyclopedias, plant catalogs, letters, personal papers, government reports, and even an army cookbook. By his own count, Sides consulted approximately 500 sources. If this documentation had been omitted, the book would not have garnered as much praise as it did. “‘Blood and Thunder’ is a full-blown history and Sides does every part justice,” wrote N. Scott Momaday in his review of the book in the *New York Times*, explaining how Sides’s original desire to write about

the Navajo's Long Walk led him down one of the major tributaries of American history: the conquest of the American Southwest. "By telling this story, Sides fills a conspicuous void in the history of the West."

11.

Blood Meridian is lodged like a meteor in the bibliography of *Blood and Thunder*. Sides never quotes directly from the book. But in many ways I felt the novel's influence, such as when I came across the word "tatterdemalion" in this sentence describing a group of Missouri soldiers venturing into Navajo lands: "Schooled by experience rather than any formal training, and still wearing the threadbare gray trousers and blue crush caps they started out with, this tatterdemalion army of volunteers was, despite all appearances, hardened, disciplined, and skilled" (201). *Tatterdemalion*, meaning "ragged or disreputable in appearance," is one of those words that stick out, perhaps because it is so rarely used. It seemed like a word McCarthy might use, and I went back to *Blood Meridian* and found this sentence: "The squatters stood about the dead boy with their wretched firearms at rest like some tatterdemalion guard of honor" (119). Although the usage here is slightly different, Sides—unconsciously or not—seems to follow McCarthy's lead in constructing his phrasing. What this tells me is that the endnotes and extensive bibliography of *Blood and Thunder* still leave an enormous blank spot in terms of Sides's own creative process.

12.

Of the myriad sources used in these two books, none are more important than memoir and its close cousins, autobiography and personal narrative. Although both books reference numerous memoirs, autobiographies, and personal narratives, each has a text based on personal reminiscence that lies at its roots like a nurse log in an old growth forest. This particular “memoir” nourishes and sculpts the work, and without it the later book might not have been written—or would look significantly different.

Samuel Chamberlain’s handwritten personal narrative *My Confession* inspired many of the scenes and characters in *Blood Meridian*. Found by a bookseller in 1956 and published in *Life* magazine and then in full by Harper publishers, the text recounts his experiences as a soldier in the Mexican-American War, travelling with the Glanton gang, and surviving the Yuma Ferry Massacre. Sepich catalogs Chamberlain’s numerous contributions, but the most significant is Judge Holden. Chamberlain (as quoted by Sepich) describes the original Holden in ways that strikingly resemble McCarthy’s character:

Who or what he was no one knew but a cooler blooded villain never went unhung; he stood six feet six in his moccasins, had a large fleshy frame, a dull tallow colored face destitute of hair and all expression. His desires was blood and women, and terrible stories were circulated in camp of horrid crimes committed by him when bearing another name. (15)

Yet there are more than just physical details described by Chamberlain that are echoed in *Blood Meridian*:

Holden was by far the best educated man in northern Mexico; he conversed with all in their own language, spoke several Indian lingos, at a

fandango would take the Harp or Guitar from the hands of the musicians and charm all with his wonderful performance, and out-waltz any poblana of the ball. He was “plum centre” with rifle or revolver, a daring horseman, acquainted with the nature of all the strange plants and their botanical names, great in Geology and Mineralogy, in short another Admirable Crichton, and with all an errant coward...I hated him at first sight, and he knew it, yet nothing could be more gentle and kind in his deportment toward me. (15-6)

Of course, Chamberlin never appears as a character in *Blood Meridian*, but, given his antagonism toward the judge, the kid in many ways takes his place.

For Hampton Sides, Kit Carson’s *Autobiography* is an essential text. Certainly there is an array of material out there about Carson and his adventures, and Sides himself recognizes the shortcomings of this source: “His autobiography, dictated in the mid-1850s (and turned into a biography by a tin-eared writer who has charitably been described as an ‘ass’), is a bone-dry recitation of his life and leaves us few clues” (8). Yet the book appears frequently in the endnotes, often as the origin of snippets of dialogue and insights into the character of Kit Carson. Take for example Side’s description of Carson’s cold-blooded ruthlessness:

When called upon to narrate his exploits, which he did reluctantly, he spoke with a clinical lack of emotion, and with a hit man’s sense of aesthetics. He liked to call his skirmishes *pretty*—as in “that was the prettiest fight I ever saw.” He spoke of chasing down his enemies as “sport.” After participating in a preemptive attack—others called it a

massacre—on an Indian village along California’s Sacramento River,
 Carson pronounced the action a “perfect butchery.” (7)

All of the quotes above, such as “prettiest fight,” tracking enemies as “sport,” and “perfect butchery” come directly from Carson’s *Autobiography*.

Reaching past the documentation, the narratives of both books are ultimately based on human memory. Of what were Chamberlain’s narrative and Carson’s autobiography constructed but their own limited, fickle, and selective memories? This is not a criticism of either man but the recognition that they, like all humans, had imperfect memories. “Memories have a quasi-narrative structure, constituting a story or a scene, an inbuilt successiveness strong enough to keep the narrative the same on each act of remembering, but not strong enough to ensure that the ordering of events is the ordering that originally took place,” asserts David Shields in *Reality Hunger*, acknowledging that the act of remembering is a creative act (57). Just as memories shaped the narratives of their own lives, the spirits of Chamberlain and Carson haunt—sometimes quietly, sometimes loudly—the works they influenced.

13.

As a novelist, McCarthy has the latitude to base his characters and scenes in fact but also to change them according to his own fictional goals. An example of how he does this can be found when the Glanton gang stays for several days in the mountain hamlet of Jesús María, in Mexico’s silver mining region. One of the definite sources for the description of the town comes from the diary of John Woodhouse Audubon’s travel journal (as quoted by Sepich):

Four hours and a half of most precipitous descent brought us to a luxuriant growth of pine and spruce, and passing through one of the wildest and most picturesque gorges I have ever seen, we came to the extraordinary little town of Jesus Maria, situated at the junction of two little torrents of clear, beautiful water, tumbling in noisy, joyous splashing from rock to basin, and carrying away the rubbish from this half-civilized settlement of miners as it passes through the town. (61)

Compare this to the gang's entrance in *Blood Meridian*:

They descended by rocky switchbacks and across the beds of streams where small trout stood on their pale fins and studied the noses of the drinking horses. Sheets of mist that smelled and tasted of metal rose out of the gorge and crossed over them and moved on through the woods. They nudged the horses through the ford and down the trace and at three o'clock in the afternoon in a thin and drizzling rain they rode into the old stone town of Jesús María. They clattered over the rainwashed cobbles stuck with leaves and crossed a stone bridge and rode up the street under the dripping eaves of the galleried buildings and along a mountain torrent that ran through the town. (188)

Even if McCarthy's prose is much more lyric than Audubon's, he borrows details, movement, specific words (such as "gorge" and "torrent"), and sentence construction from Audubon.

Even though Audubon served as a source, his stay in Jesús María was much more peaceful than the Glanton gang's. While the son of the famous naturalist spent ten days

in July, 1849, exploring the surrounding area, sketching buildings, conversing with the Americans and other foreigners who ran the mines, and noting the indigenous fauna and flora, the Glanton gang quickly wears out its welcome. Filthy and “ornamented with human parts,” the gang essentially occupies the town, drinking and carousing. Glanton himself is “taken with a kind of fit” and begins “to open fire with his pistols,” and the judge must bind him to his bed. Later, Judge Holden buys two puppies from a boy and throws them “into the swollen waters.” When Glanton breaks free, he cuts down the Mexican flag, ties it to the tail of a mule, and drags it through the mud. It is no surprise then that locals rise up, and the gang must leave under duress: “Gunfire was now continual in the street and two Americans lay dead and others lay calling out. When the company rode out thirty minutes later they ran a gantlet of ragged fusil fire and rocks and bottle and they left six of their number behind” (189-194).

On the trail out of town, the gang encounters a train of “one hundred and twenty-two mules bearing flasks of quicksilver for the mines” (194). McCarthy renders the scene in exquisite detail:

They could hear the whipcrack and cry of the arrieros on the switchback far below them and they could see the burdened animals plodding like goats along a faultline in the sheer rock. Bad luck. Twenty-six days from the sea and less than two hours out of the mines. The mules wheezed and scabbled in the talus and the drivers in their ragged and colorful costumes harried them on. (194)

Again the source here is Audubon, who wrote: “We did not leave camp until nearly noon, waiting for a train of one hundred and eighty-two mules packed with nothing but flasks

of quicksilver” (Sepich, 76). While Audubon patiently waits, Glanton and his gang just shoulder the whole train off the trail, creating what for me was a notable depiction of atrocity among the many that can be found in *Blood Meridian*:

The riders pushed between them and the rock and methodically rode them from the escarpment, the animals dropping silently as martyrs, turning sedately in the empty air and exploding on the rocks below in startling bursts of blood and silver as the flasks broke open and the mercury loomed wobbling in the air in great sheets and lobes and small trembling satellites and all its forms grouping below and racing in the stone arroyos like the imbreachment of some ultimate alchemic work decocted from out the secret dark of the earth’s heart, the fleeing stag of the ancients fugitive on the mountainside and bright and quick in the dry path of the storm channels and shaping out the sockets in the rock and hurrying ledge to ledge down the slope shimmering and deft as eels. (194)

Through this act of violence—and McCarthy’s own imagination—the quicksilver that Audubon first described becomes much more. Like an alchemist himself, McCarthy transmutes it into the kind of image that is as slippery to analysis as the element it describes but resonates with me as reader on deeply emotion level.

Writing of this particular scene, Sepich comments dryly that McCarthy inverts “Audubon’s patience to satisfy his own narrative requirements” (76). This doesn’t mean that he just fills in the blanks for convenience. Even though McCarthy is essentially “inventing” characters, scene, and plot that never happened, the historically plausible

both inspires and restrains the narrative. Audubon's journal establishes a channel into which quicksilver flows from historic fact into metaphor and archetype.

14.

As a nonfiction writer, Sides has to negotiate the distortions of numerous fictions and exaggerations about Kit Carson. No other story in *Blood and Thunder* demonstrates fiction's powerful influence on both the person and myth of Carson than the murder of Ann White. It is recounted in Chapter 35, which shares the title "Blood and Thunder" with the book and is a good example of how Sides skillfully creates narrative out of a welter of fact and fiction.

In brief, here's what happened: in October 1849, Apache Jicarilla Indians attacked a group of travelers on the Santa Fe Trail, killing the men and kidnapping Ann White and her infant daughter. The local authorities recruited Kit Carson, then thirty-nine years old and trying to settle down as a rancher, for the job of tracking down the captives. The group began searching almost a month later, and Carson claimed in his autobiography that it "was the most difficult trail that I ever followed" (Sides 256). After several days, he began to find clues—discarded women's clothing—and eventually located the Jicarilla camp. But a miscommunication between the dragoon commander and Carson stymied the surprise attack, and the tribe dispersed before the soldiers could save Anne White. "About two hundred yards from the campsite, a figure was sprawled on the hard-baked plain," writes Sides. "The men rode over to inspect and found to their dismay that it was the corpse of an American woman. Ann White had been shot through the heart with a single arrow" (258).

If Sides had focused simply on the action, he could have told this story in a few paragraphs, much like Carson does in his own autobiography, but he relies instead on several techniques to create depth. First, he wisely selects from a wide variety of sources—diaries, letters, oral histories, history books, memoirs, popular novels—and deftly embeds them in his narrative to generate dramatic tension or to elucidate differing points of view. Then, he interweaves his own commentary, which either links this material externally to larger historical trends or points internally to quirks of character or circumstance that motivated the actors in the narrative. When Sides writes of the Jicarilla, for example, he describes why this tribe might have attacked the travelers. Other larger and stronger tribes, such as the Comanche, had been pushed into Jicarilla territory by American expansion. “The Jicarillas were a cornered people living in the interstices, in the shadows of stronger nations,” Sides writes and then quotes from a modern spokesperson from the tribe: “‘At the first sound, even a shout, they made for the bush,’ he recalled. ‘And whenever they went out on the plains, they were afraid to stay there’” (253).

The murder of Ann White occurred the same year that Charles Averill’s *Kit Carson: The Prince of the Gold Hunters* was published. This was the first “blood and thunder” novel written about Kit Carson, a fiction that grossly exaggerated his exploits and strength. The soldiers discovered among Ann White’s belongings “a paperback novel starring none other than Kit Carson” (258). In one of the rare instances that Sides uses the gift of “perhaps,” Sides imagines one of the soldiers reading a passage from the book to Carson, who was illiterate. To open a window into how Carson felt about this, Sides selectively quotes from primary source material, in this case Carson’s own

autobiography, but deftly weaves his own informed commentary to push the narrative toward larger ideas and issues:

This was the first time that the real Kit Carson had come in contact with his own myth. “The book was the first of its kind I had ever seen, in which I was made a great hero, slaying Indians by the hundred,” Carson said. At first he was vaguely amused by this colorful novel, but then he began to think of Ann White. He imagined her reading it while enduring her miserable captivity. In Averill’s story, Kit Carson finds the kidnapped girl and saves the day, fulfilling his vow to her distraught parents back in Boston that he would scour the American West until she was found. But in this instance the real Kit Carson had failed to avert disaster; he feared Averill’s fiction may have given Ann White false hope. (259)

It is impossible to know how people felt in the past, but Sides uses source material like this to direct the reader’s view toward the conflicted heart of Kit Carson. By doing this, Sides knocks away the crust of mythology that forms around figures like Carson, revealing his humanity and his frailty. His tragic failure stands in stark relief to the cruel “success” of his campaign against the Navajo later in the book.

15.

How readers approach fiction and nonfiction can in part explain the difference between the ways *Blood Meridian* and *Blood and Thunder* use documentation. A section in *Reality Hunger* comments on this issue:

We must always take the novelist's and the playwright's and the poet's word, just as we're almost always free to doubt the biographer's or the autobiographer's or the historian's or the journalist's. In imaginative literature we're always constrained from considering alternative scenarios; there are none. This is the way it *is*. Only in nonfiction does the question of what happened and how people thought and felt remain open. (132)

In his novel, McCarthy is free to start with his source material and wield it to serve the narrative momentum. The comparison with Audubon reveals McCarthy's creative process, but doesn't undermine the reality of his novel. Sides must weave together an enormous patchwork of sources and marshal them into a suggestion of what *probably* happened and how people *probably* felt. Arranged artfully and embedded in insightful narration, all these sources point toward the unknowable void of another person's experience.

16.

Nowhere does the difference between fiction and nonfiction come across more clearly than in the use of language. In prose that has been described variously as baroque, Biblical, and Faulknerian, McCarthy scavenges obscure terminology. *Kerf, farrier, jacal, bistre, vandose, rachel, careta*—these are just some of the words in the first hundred pages of *Blood Meridian* that sent me to the dictionary, along with others later that seemed of mid-nineteenth-century vintage: *mountebank, suzerain, holothurians, thamaturge, tyrolean, thrapple*. Some references I didn't appreciate until I read *Notes on Blood Meridian*. Sepich points out that place and person names come directly from the

era. San Antonio is called Bexar, and Tasmania is Van Diemen's Land, "as if to emphasize, after all, that the transience of 'nomenclature' is one of McCarthy's preeminent themes" (41). These words, as well as the sentences in Spanish, just squat there in the text without explanation, commentary, or translation, like rare stones I have to identify myself. And I wouldn't want it any other way: they imbue the narrative with an archaic rhetoric that seems of the time it describes, as if the text itself had been an aged document moldering in a desert alcove, waiting for discovery.

Sides also uses period terminology, but he usually places it in context, often translating directly or obliquely, so that contemporary readers might understand. Describing the origin of the name of the place where Carson grew up, Sides writes: "It was known indelicately as 'Boone's Lick,' for the salt deposits that attracted wild game and which the Boone family successfully mined" (8). Or sometimes Sides defines a phrase before using it: "A new term came into vogue for those leaving the settlements for Santa Fe, a term that conveyed the excitement of piercing the unknown: Upon departing the familiar world of Missouri, travelers were said to be 'jumping off'" (10). All of this sets up the usage a page later: "And so Carson jumped off" (11). Refreshingly, Sides also introduces, defines, and uses tribal terms: Diné for Navajo, Blue Bead Mountain for Mountain Taylor, Rope Thrower for Kit Carson. This approach later allows Sides to explore how "the transience of 'nomenclature'" is not a neutral process but often connected to conquest.

Verb tense also demonstrates the ways that these two books approach material differently. *Blood Meridian* begins in the present tense: “See the child. He is pale and thin, he wears a thin and ragged linen shirt. He stokes the scullery fire” (3). It remains in the present tense for another two pages, until a section break, and the kid finds himself in Nacogdoches and encounters the judge. Chapter two also starts off in the present tense until the kid meets an old hermit. From there until the end of the book, the narrative remains in past tense until the final scene at Fort Griffin where the judge “is naked dancing, his small feet lively and quick and now in double time and bowing the ladies, huge and pale and hairless, like an enormous infant” (335). The epilogue that depicts a man planting fence posts in the plain is also in present tense. The shifting verb tense operate as different registers, as described by critic James Wood in *How Fiction Works*: “A ‘register’ is nothing more than a name for a kind of diction, which is nothing more than a certain, distinctive way of saying something—so we talk about ‘high’ and ‘low’ registers (e.g., the highish ‘Father’ and the lower ‘Pop’), grand and vernacular diction, mock heroic diction, clichéd registers, and so on” (196). In this case, the present tense resembles a mythic register, where stories of the distant past are told as if they’re happening now. While the shift to past tense, especially as the kid ventures into the world, aligns the diction with the register of historical narration: this happened.

Perhaps because of the expectations and constraints of the narrative history genre, Sides does not change verb tenses or registers very often. *Blood Meridian* is written largely in the registers associated with literary journalism, which enjoins contemporary vernacular with short, unobtrusive sentences patterns. Diction doesn’t stand out and for the most part remains largely subordinate to overall narrative. The only time that Sides

uses present tense is when quoting spoken words or oral traditions. For example, as he concludes a section on the revolt at Taos Pueblo, Sides comments in parentheses about the Pueblo Indian side of the story: “Even today, if you visit the lovely Pueblo, with its old mission church still moldering in ruins, the locals will gently admonish you for even asking if such an account exists. ‘Everything is oral here,’ they say, the old days are not open for study” (184). These verb tense changes don’t alter the register of the overall narrative. The only moments when Sides presses against and reaches the verge of breaking into a different register is when he expresses complex ideas with compressed lyricism, such as in these sentences early in the book:

As the forerunners of Western civilization, creeping up the river valleys and across the mountain passes, the trappers brought smallpox and typhoid, they brought guns and whiskey and venereal disease, they brought the puzzlement of money and the gleam of steel. And on their liquored breath they whispered the coming of an unimaginable force, of a gathering shadow on the eastern horizon, gorging itself on the content as it pressed steadily this way. (16)

In sentences like these, Sides shows the potential of narrative history to shake off musty and dry analysis through vivid language, image, and metaphor.

18.

Another facet of language usage and narration is what Woods calls “time signature,” which he describes as the possibility of witnessing “in one visual gulp as it were, sensations and occurrences that must be happening at different speeds at different

times” (43). The approach to time signature imposes differing narrative structures in each book.

Various time signatures are present in *Blood Meridian*. Each character and scene carries its own sense of time, and they collide into each other, such as when the kid finds himself in a jail in Chihuahua City:

He'd taken up a pallet between Toadvine and another Kentuckian, a veteran of the war. This man had returned to claim some darkeyed love he'd left behind two years before when Doniphan's command pulled east for Saltillo and the officers had to drive back hundreds of young girls dressed as boys that took the road behind the army. (76)

The man speaks of battles survived, gutters filled with blood, “how the brittle old spanish bells would explode when hit,” how they'd taken Chihuahua City, “an army of irregulars that fought in rags and underwear” (76). The chronologies of major and minor events jostle against each other in this single paragraph, mixing together the durations of time in prison, in love affairs, in conquest and warfare. But most of the shifts in time signature are internal to the narration, and, as rich as the layering of time signatures is in this scene and others, the narrative movement is always relentlessly forward. Even during the few instances of present tense, there is very little shifting back and forth in time. The narration barrels on as if it were a single camera capturing the events—sometimes zooming in and other times panning—but never intercut with shots from alternate angles.

Given the array of sources and the complexity of events he's recounting, Sides must constantly shuffle between different time periods. The overall structure of the book resembles a frayed rope with three strands wrapping themselves into a single cord. Early

on the three strands are established: the biography of Kit Carson; the mustering of the Army of the West and the invasion of Mexican territory (i.e., New Mexico and California); and the ongoing war between the Navajo and the New Mexicans. Each of these strands is separate, with the chronology often shifting backward and forward to create context, but they gradually wind tighter around each other until reaching the final confrontation between Carson and the Navajo. Within each section, Sides often cuts between time periods, first establishing narrative tension, then providing background information that elucidates or heightens the drama. For example, in the chapter titled “Blood and Thunder,” Sides dedicates several paragraphs to profiling the leader of the caravan in which the ill-fated White family was travelling. “Francis X. Aubry had won national celebrity a year earlier when he broke the record for the fastest crossing of the Santa Fe Trail” (241). Thus begins a thumbnail sketch of the event and a description of its larger implications: “If a single man could traverse the country in under six days, the trek was clearly not the impossible adventure it once had been” (242). Here Sides backs off from the primary narrative arc to insert an overview of a colorful event, opening up the contemporary sense of time as it related to the Santa Fe Trail.

Interestingly, in both examples, McCarthy and Sides use the past participle to reveal a larger historical past within the present of their narratives about history. “The man *had* returned to claim some dark-eyed love . . .” “Francis X. Aubry *had* won national celebrity. . . .” On one level these shifts in time signatures resemble each other, but there is one key difference. With the novel, this past enters through the perspective of the kid, as if the reader is sitting alongside him in the Chihuahua prison, listening to the man’s

story. With the narrative history, Sides submits the past of Aubry directly to the reader, using the past participle to easily provide relevant background information.

19.

The differences in the use of language, register, and past participles point to the way that readers approach fiction and nonfiction, as explained in *Reality Hunger*:

Unlike a fiction reader, whose only task is to imagine, a nonfiction reader is asked to behave more deeply: to imagine, and to believe. Fiction doesn't require its readers to believe; in fact, it offers its readers the great freedom of experience without belief—something real life can't do.

Fiction gives us a rhetorical question: “What if this happened?” (The best nonfiction gives us a statement, something more complex: “This may have happened.” (60)

As I have read in the genre of narrative history, I have noticed a verbal tic that sometimes creeps into the use of the past participle and illustrates this claim. At times writers like Sides will slip in the modal auxiliary verb “must” to imply certainty, usually in the cases where there is limited documentation. On juvenile Kit Carson: “The bedraggled tribe of men in their musky animal skins and peltries *must* have impressed the young boy mightily, and one senses how the worm of his imagination began to turn” (10). Or on the Navajo leader Narbona: “It *must* have been a shock for him to learn that these strange white men were now trespassing in Dinetah, as the Navajo called their ancient lands” (134). Notice how these sentences try to get at the feelings of historic figures.

Some nonfiction writers talk about the gift of “perhaps” as a way of bringing the inventive imagination to bear upon uncertainty. Those writing narrative history tend to go in the opposite direction, whipping out the gift of “must have” when they hit the hardpan of the unknown, especially as it comes to how people perceived the historic past. Fortunately, Sides doesn’t overuse this gift but sprinkles it into his narrative sparingly and with good judgment: the technique seems to work best when the author makes an informed guess about how a person felt in a particular circumstance.

This tendency to use “must have” reminds me of something Roland Barthes wrote: “The historical fact is linguistically associated with a privileged ontological status: we recount what has been, not what has not been, or what has been uncertain” (14). Barthes then goes on to compare the historian to a psychotic who can only affirm and never negate. Fiction has no psychosis about removing the “must have” and sliding right into what “has not been, or what has been uncertain.”

20.

Roland Barthes and Judge Holden would have had a lot to talk about if they’d had the pleasure of meeting each other. Their philosophies of history are remarkably similar to each other. Barthes argues that any history is a form of fiction: “Historical discourse does not follow the real, it can do no more than signify the real, constantly repeating that *it happened*, without this assertion amounting to anything but the signified ‘other side’ of the whole process of historical narration” (18). Holden has a much simpler way of stating this: “Men’s memories are uncertain and the past that was differs little from the past that was not” (330).

I have been putting off these questions because I don't have good answers to them: How can I agree with these statements and still believe that truth exists in historical narrative? What's the point of tracking down all this documentation—either in fiction or nonfiction—to verify the historical record? If I doubt that facts exist, how can I believe in the higher truths that books like *Blood Meridian* and *Blood and Thunder* say about the past and the present?

21.

Back to the other difficult question that I've been putting off: Who would win in a fight, Judge Holden or Kit Carson?

I want Carson to win this battle. For all his weaknesses, he is the more likeable of the two. Folks tended to trust Carson: "It was not only his honesty, but his attention to concrete details; in an oral culture like that of the American frontier, paramount importance was placed on the hard accuracy of memory, and that was what struck Benton the most: Carson's recollection seemed fundamentally reliable" (189). No one who knows the judge in *Blood Meridian* trusts him: Holden enters sowing anarchy through distortion and outright lies when he accuses an itinerant preacher of pedophilia, and throughout the book, the few people who trust the judge do so at their own peril. For example, when the Glanton gang finds itself short of food, the judge decides to butcher a horse. "He led it past the fire and called for someone to hold it. No one rose." Only the kid, who says brashly, "You think I'm afraid of him," is willing to risk going alone in the darkness with the judge (219). Later, he will pay the ultimate price for it.

If we are talking about the historical Judge Holden, the one that Samuel Chamberlain met and hated, then I could make a case for Carson's victory. When I pit the historical Kit Carson against the literary Judge Holden, however, the later will always win. I don't want to admit it, but here's why:

Judge Holden as he is constructed in *Blood Meridian* becomes more than a man. "The vast abhorrence" of the judge incarnates the human lust for war. Near the book's end, when the kid meets the judge at Fort Griffin, the judge speaks of the dance of war:

As war becomes dishonored and its nobility called into question those honorable men who recognize the sanctity of blood will become excluded from the dance, which is the warrior's right, and thereby will the dance become a false dance and the dancers false dancers. And yet there will be one there always who is a true dancer and can you guess who that might be? (331)

"You ain't nothing," says the kid in response, and the judge replies:

You speak truer than you know. But I will tell you. Only that man who has offered up himself entire to the blood of war, who has been to the floor of the pit and seen horror in the round and learned at last that it speaks to his inmost heart, only that man can dance. (331)

When I first read *Blood Meridian*, I questioned its depictions of violence and the judge himself—too extreme, I told myself—but then I remembered the wars throughout the world, imagined Judge Holden alive and well, working for a military contractor or intelligence agency somewhere in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Even if Kit Carson could have defeated the person of Judge Holden—and would not have hesitated to kill him like the kid does in *Blood Meridian*—his life demonstrates that he was an able, avid, and willing participant in the dance of war. In the end, it was what killed him. While carrying out his campaign against the Navajo, an aneurism brought on by high blood pressure swelled in his chest, growing as he endured the stresses of warfare. When the aneurism finally burst, he lie waiting to die as his doctor read him exaggerated tales of his exploits: “He had stopped fighting the fictions of the dime novels. The phenomenon was much bigger than he was—why not enjoy it?” (392).

22.

But it is not really Carson who must take a stand against the judge, but us, as readers of *Blood Meridian*. John Sepich writes in *Notes on Blood Meridian*: “It’s a book so true I can’t stand it. It’s a book everyone should read. Face the judge. Find a way to stop him” (152). It is troubling that at the end of *Blood Meridian* only the judge and I remain to know the history of the kid and the Glanton gang. The novel proper concludes with the judge boasting of his own immortality: “He says that he’ll never die” (335). As a reader, I am left as a witness to this terrible tale, and I must struggle with the dilemma of whether or not I believe the judge. What will I do?

I will keep reading other books to uncover connections and perhaps find a way to stop the judge. *Blood and Thunder* itself concludes with an actual event that demonstrates that in spite of atrocity, in spite of the blood and horror of war, humanity endures. In May 1868, General William Tecumseh Sherman visited the Bosque Redondo, the reservation where the Navajo were held for five miserable years, hundreds

of miles from their homeland. Investigating conditions there, Sherman saw that the reservation was failing and considered various options. The Navajo leader Barboncito spoke to the General:

Our grandfathers had no idea of living in any other country except our own, and I do not think it right for us to do so. Before I am sick or older I want to go and see the place where I was born. I hope to God you will not ask me to go to any other country except my own. This hope goes in at my feet and out at my mouth as I am speaking to you. (401)

Touched by these words, Sherman replied, “I have listened to what you said of your people, and I believe you have told the truth. All people love the country where they were born and raised. We want to do what is right” (401). The same general who led the notorious march to the sea during the Civil War also decided to allow the Navajo to return to Dinétah, even if the boundaries were greatly reduced from the original territory. A month later, the Navajo were walking west. “When they reached the Rio Grande and saw Blue Bead Mountain for the first time, the Navajo fell to their knees and wept” (402).

This moment does not so much defeat the judge as demonstrate the limits of his power, and, because I know that it happened, I am left with hope.

23.

A difference remains in how Sides and McCarthy reanimate the past, one which ultimately shapes the truths I, as a reader, take away from these books.

I recently came across three notions of truth in literature that will help to express what I’m getting at. Woods in *How Fiction Works* writes: “In our own reading lives,

every day, we come across that blue river of truth, curling somewhere; we encounter scenes and moments and perfectly placed words in fiction and poetry, in film and drama, which strike us with their truth, which move and sustain us, which shake habit's house to its foundation" (244). For Woods, this truth is something we know when we read it, an intuitive response that upsets our narrow, habitual perspective of the world. All of his examples—fiction, poetry, film, and drama—are typically associated with the imagination, but I would argue that the “blue river of truth” can flow through nonfiction as well. Quoting Vivian Gornick, Shields in *Reality Hunger* fills out how this truth functions in narrative: “Every work of literature has both a situation and a story. The situation is the context or circumstance, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the window, the thing one has come to say. The facts of the situation don't much matter, so long as the underlying truth resonates” (41). Notice that she says that the facts “don't much matter” rather than “don't matter much”; I take her to mean that the situation doesn't matter as much as a story's ability to communicate an underlying truth. This opens the door to the various ways that nonfiction and fiction can express truth. But there still remains a sticking point that comes from the different ways that we respond to something we believe actually happened. Richard Slotkin, in an essay titled “Fiction for the Purposes of History,” articulates this difference when he explains the value of historical fiction:

The truth the novel seeks is poetic rather than historiographical: it sacrifices fidelity to *non-essential* facts in order to create in the reader a vivid sense of what it may have been like to live among such facts—and also a sense of what those facts mean in some larger sense—and to

achieve that in a flash of recognition, rather than the conclusion to a necessarily laborious argument. (225)

I assert that the best narrative nonfiction can also seek poetic truth and create “a vivid sense of what it may have been like to live among such facts,” but the crucial difference between it and fiction is that the author does not sacrifice “fidelity to *non-essential* facts.”

Genre determines the degree of fidelity—defined as “the quality or state of being faithful”—that the writing will have to the historical record. It also influences what expectations readers will bring to the writing.

24.

What is the nature of the truth that both these two books carry? They express something at the core of American history. They characterize on many levels the consequences of conquest. Richard Slotkin describes this recurring tendency in westward expansion: “The first colonists saw in America an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of their church and nation; but the means to that regeneration ultimately became the means of violence, and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience” (5). The blood in both of the titles surely refers in part to blood spilled in the process of American westward expansion.

Specifically, *Blood Meridian* animates the world that Turner in his famous essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” relegated to a footnote because he didn’t want to dwell on the frontier’s lawlessness: “The gambler and the desperado, the regulators of the Carolinas and the vigilantes of California, are types of that line of

scum that the waves of advancing civilization bore before them, and of the growth of spontaneous organs of authority where legal authority was absent” (33). McCarthy delivers a terrible vision that the “waves of advancing civilization” will always bear this “line of scum”—they cannot be separated from each other. In 1849, President James Polk pushed the western border of the United States to the shores of the Pacific, and into this land rode the Glanton gang.

Blood and Thunder explores and recognizes an aspect of the frontier that Turner doesn’t even mention in a footnote: the experience of Native Americans. Slotkin writes that the “founding fathers” of the American myth of the frontier are those who “tore violently a nation from the implacable and opulent wilderness” (4). Among these he identifies “Indian fighters” and the “Indians themselves, both as they were and as they appeared to settlers.” Sides illuminates the complicated figure of Kit Carson, undermining his mythology as a hero or a villain, while showing the destructive consequences of American expansion on the Navajo and other tribes. Although Sides relies on countless documented sources, he also taps into oral traditions that speak of another history that lies outside of books, a past that remains alive to those who speak it. The book ends in the present-tense with a song chanted by the Navajo returning to their homeland: “Beauty before us / Beauty behind us / Beauty around us / In beauty we walk / It is finished in beauty” (402).

Blood and Thunder and *Blood Meridian* are both true stories, but one is nonfiction and the other fiction. Both use verifiable evidence in different ways, but it is not source material alone that generates the truth these books contain. Both authors selected, organized, and absorbed the facts so that seemingly dead history returns to life. A heart

beats, blood pulses and flows around and through documentation, and the past speaks to the present.

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These Blood Sample Collection Guidelines expand upon the World Anti-Doping Agency's (WADA's) International Standard for Testing and Investigations (ISTI). The processes outlined in this document promote good practice moving forward, assisting Anti-Doping Organizations (ADOs) in the development of systems and protocols to support intelligent, effective Testing programs. Withstanding exceptional and justifiable circumstances, No Advance Notice Testing shall be the method for Blood Sample collection. Prospectus Elements: Standardized Blood Transfusion Documentation Kelly Hill. University of San Francisco N653: Internship: Clinical Nurse Leader. T Gallo, DNP, RN, FNP, CNL August 8, 2016. Statement of the Problem Currently, the documentation of blood transfusions is not standardized within the microsystem. There is no guideline or criteria dictating what the documentation for blood transfusions should include or where it is to be documented. should carry documentation (blood component collection form, prescription chart or the patient's notes, according to local policies), containing the patient's core identifiers (see section 8.1). These details must be checked against the patient identification details on the laboratory produced label attached to the blood component pack. 13.3 Documentation of blood component collection The BSQR (SI 2005 No.50 as amended) require that, for all blood components Blood is a body fluid in humans and other animals that delivers necessary substances such as nutrients and oxygen to the cells and transports metabolic waste products away from those same cells. In vertebrates, it is composed of blood cells suspended in blood plasma. Plasma, which constitutes 55% of blood fluid, is mostly water (92% by volume), and contains proteins, glucose, mineral ions, hormones, carbon dioxide (plasma being the main medium for excretory product transportation), and blood cells...