

A Geology of Fear: The Prospect of Language in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian, No Country For Old Men, and The Road*

by

Nicolette Anna Clark

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Committee Members:

Chair, Dr. Anne Goldman

Dr. Thaine Stearns

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ABSTRACT:

Violence is a fundamental truth in the works of Cormac McCarthy. More than just violence for the sake of violence, McCarthy employs violence in a way that is productive within his works: *Blood Meridian: Or the Evening Redness in the West*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *The Road*. This study examines the productive nature behind violence, which I argue, manifests through language. Beginning with *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy's judge appropriates language through the manipulation of referents re-shaping truth, informing all violence throughout the novel. *No Country For Old Men* brings us to the language of the law and how it caters to the objectivity of the law, using it as a guiding principle, without the scope of morality. Through the characters of Chigurh and Flannery O'Connor's *The Misfit*, we are asked to judge the validity of the state's versus the vigilante's truth, which are ultimately synonymous. Leaving us with Sheriff Bell, who relinquishes his position as sheriff because he is unwilling to be an accessory to a morally corrupt system. Then, in *The Road*, the ultimate violence occurs through the disintegration of language, resulting from the indifference of man. With the perspective as perceiver of violence throughout this range of McCarthy's works, we are in the position to judge this violence and consider its productivity. Its productivity lies in the fact that great violence must occur for redemption to manifest—as in *The Road*, the preciousness and life of language is not discernible until it faces its own mortality.

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A Geology of Fear: The Prospect of Language in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*,
No Country For Old Men, and *The Road*

Historicizing violence fetishizes the short and bloody history of man. The fetishization encourages the perpetual distortion of past violence, confining its appearance as lukewarm, compared to present-day violence which is more acute because of its orientation to the present. In the perspective of the Christian Bible, Cain and Abel bore witness to the world's first act of evil. Cain murders his brother, Abel, and then God asks Cain: "Where is your brother Abel?" to which Cain responds: "I don't know... Am I my brother's keeper?"¹ Here, we see the deception of Cain, who murdered his brother out of jealousy because he was not looked upon in favor by God. Cain's words "I don't know" are significant in their indifference, because he hides his deed in silence, manipulating the truth. Then Cain was cursed and began a new life, though his deed remained bloodied on his hands. Fast forward to the Christian scriptures, and we are introduced to Jesus, who is the sacrificial lamb God requires to redeem humanity of their sins, saving them from death and restoring God's favor in man. For humanity to obtain this redemption, however, Jesus must experience an excruciating and humiliating death by crucifixion. Why is it, that for redemption to occur, disturbing and shocking acts of violence must coincide?

Cormac McCarthy's work stands as a formidable example of shocking violence. Three of McCarthy's works that are diachronically situated in terms of their progression

¹ Genesis 4:9

of violence are *Blood Meridian: Or the Evening Redness in the West* (1985), *No Country For Old Men* (2006), and *The Road* (2009). In many ways this trilogy echoes the passion. Each world of McCarthy's entertains the portrayal of shocking violence that leads to the physical death of language, creating a reconstructed version that depicts an absence of morality within the language. It is not until *The Road* that we see a resurrection of language, which brings a resurgence of meaning to the world. Similar to the passion, Jesus must die in order to create equilibrium; in other words, the sacrifice must suffice the price of death in order to, in a sense, rise from the ashes and experience redemption.

McCarthy asks us to consider the prospect of how language's manipulation is violent because it is harmful to the perceiver who holds the concept/mental image. In this sense, philosophical nominalism provides a helpful lens to view the progression of violence in these three works; it focuses on how "there are no "real" referents [and] referents and concepts are completely collapsed into mental concepts...In terms of violence, any harm done to a perceiver (a person), harms or destroys all the concepts that person held."² However, in terms of referents, my argument operates on the notion that "referents" exist.

Throughout *Blood Meridian*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *The Road* we witness the harm done to the perceiver (which also includes the audience of these novels).

Anyone who must be accounted for by the judge or Chigurh usually encounters that their "fortune lie our fortunes all," in other words, death.³ Then we reach *The Road* where

² In a conversation with Dr. Benjamin Fischer, a former professor of mine, he kindly gave me a gloss on "nominalism" in response to my question of whether a referent can be a concept. I am grateful for Dr. Fischer's guidance in this area, as it has given me a better understanding of how the referent and concept are inherently tied together.

³ Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* (New York: Vintage, 2010), 97.

violence has caught up with the world, extending beyond its threshold, leaving the world almost meaningless because of the loss of the referent and damage to language.

There are patterns of violence that cross into each novel, surrounding the notion of principle or adherence to a truth. The judge looks to own the world through the manipulation of truth. He uses language and humanity's bloody history as a means of influence—harming the perceiver's knowledge of truth. Chigurh holds to his word despite its barrenness of empathy and morality. This adherence Chigurh displays is a worthy lens to view the workings of how language operates as guiding principle within the law, as deviating from the language of the law would dissolve the institution as enforcer. Similarly, Flannery O'Connor's "The Misfit" holds the same disposition. These concepts of the vigilante versus the State (Sheriff Bell) bring in to question the validity of justice. And, as witnessed in *Blood Meridian*, justice is molded by the judge, the entity that enforces truth. In this sense, are not the state and the vigilante synonymous? Regardless, both reject morality in the bounds of redemptive language, which again, is a kind of violence toward language as well as the perceiver.

Furthermore, *The Road* is the actualization of conglomerated violence and what it has done to the language and to the perceiver. The language on the page that tells a story is sparse, indicating some level of trauma the perceiver has experienced (the father and the son). In terms of nominalism, language and meaning should be dead, but the son is able to see redemptive qualities in humanity (Ely, for example) which is only known through the concept, meaning that hope remains embedded within language despite the violence against the perceiver and the language itself.

Additionally, there is a commonality between McCarthy's work and O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" in terms of historicizing violence. The grandmother from O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" fetishizes the plantation as well as the antebellum south. Of course, this is problematic because the grandmother's fetishization of the past creates a microcosm of dissociation as she readily relinquishes and ignores the history of the plantation. Moreover, the grandmother's move toward disconnecting the evils of slavery from the plantation allows her the space to unwrite the evils and replace it with an idealistic beauty of the structure (similar to how individuals have "plantation" weddings today). Similarly, Sheriff Bell believes Chigurh and drugs to be the sole catalysts of evil—that these are the means by which evil has arrived. This viewpoint, however, discredits and categorizes evil as a novelty that is associated with progress. Even the judge notes that evil has always existed, and that it merely passes from hand to hand, through the ages. Evil remains evil yet adapts to the shape of time. As *The Road* stands, "there is no past," which is terrifying in its truth because language has been destroyed, and therefore all the world's transgressions are erased in the process—good and bad—which is the ultimate evil against humanity.⁴

⁴ McCarthy, *The Road*, 54.

“Words are things”: The Judge’s Appropriation of Referents

Blood Meridian or *The Evening Redness in the West* is the beginning of the prediction McCarthy unfolds in *The Road*. The judge, *Blood Meridian*’s protagonist notes, “what is to be deviates no jot from the book wherein it’s writ. How could it? It would be a false book and a false book is no book at all.”⁵ The judge assumes the position of the proprietor of truth when he casts things in his ledger book, only to destroy them afterward. Moreover, the judge is a judge of “truth”: “It is this the false moneyer with his gravers and burins who seeks favor with the judge and he is at contriving from cold slag brute in the crucible a face that will pass, an image that will render this residual specie current in the markets where men barter. Of this is the judge judge.”⁶ McCarthy uses the judge to develop a notion of principled violence through the judge’s willingness to rewrite truth for the sake of maintaining power and control. The judge’s violence is principled because he uses his knowledge in a deliberate and systematic manner to preserve his power narrative as the dominant narrative, confining all other narratives to unfreedom and death. Through the exercise of his power, the judge’s position of suzerain becomes irrefutable and informs all violence throughout *Blood Meridian*.

The meaning of the world is contingent upon referents that define and give the world its structure. Considering the judge’s incredible influence and knowledge, McCarthy uses these sources of power as a driving force of the judge’s will, the vision the judge has for how the world ought to exist. In her article “McCarthy’s Heroes and the Will to Truth” Linda Woodson argues that, symbolically, “the judge can be seen as

⁵ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 147.

⁶ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 322-323.

Language, Law, the Father.”⁷ Silence is shaped through the judge’s influence over language and his rebranding of referents brings him into the position of proprietor of truth.⁸ The judge, therefore, controls all aspects of society because he manipulates and changes language’s meaning, constituting all physical and conceptual entities. The judge states, “whatever exists in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent,” informing the “principle” of the violence enacted against language.⁹ The judge’s megalomania lends him to tall heights of influence as the molder of men’s hearts, and for his own desires of security and advancement; he believes as his guiding principle, “all existence [should] exist in [his] image alone.”¹⁰

As McCarthy’s puppet, the judge serves as an ironic foil to critique the evils of his own manipulation of truth. In “History and the Problem of Evil in McCarthy’s Western Novels,” Timothy Parrish suggests that confining the judge to evil alone is misleading for readers. He argues that

one may be tempted to interpret the judge as a fictional incarceration of evil [and] the problem with such an interpretation is that it either demands that readers find a ‘good character’ to oppose to the judge, or, to find such a character encourages one to view McCarthy’s fiction as nihilistic and his stunningly beautiful language to be merely the glorification of violence for its own sake.¹¹

⁷ Linda Woodson, “McCarthy’s Heroes and the Will to Truth.” *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, 2.

⁸ My understanding of the term “referent” is derived from Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*. In this novel, in reference to the destruction of language resulting from human violence—perhaps indifference—causes the “sacred idiom [to become] shorn of its referent and so of its reality” (89). Instead of adhering to a more typical Saussurean lens by using the terms of sign/signified, McCarthy’s example of the referent denoting an idiom (the sign/signified equating to the referent/concept), I think, gives a fuller understanding and underscores how violence against the language and therefore humanity, strips the language of its truth, leaving it vulnerable to tampering and manipulation by the judge.

⁹ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 207.

¹⁰ Frederick Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2002.), 10.

¹¹ Timothy Parrish, “History and the Problem of Evil in McCarthy’s Western Novels,” *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, 7.

As Parrish notes, the perception of the judge as the “incarceration of evil” lends *Blood Meridian*’s audience to view McCarthy’s work as nihilistic. With this said, the judge is a magnetic character and pulls the audience in, which is disorienting because the judge only exists in the pages of *Blood Meridian*. This is where it is important to foreground the judge as a manipulation of words, by McCarthy, to examine an evil that is caused by the destruction of referents and therefore the manipulation of the truth. Through this lens, *Blood Meridian* is a critique of power in the ways the judge amasses control of things that possess their own existence.

Decoding the Power of Language

Language is a point of power in *Blood Meridian* and, within the context of the novel, is more clearly outlined as what Benjamin calls the “linguistic being of things.”¹² Benjamin indicates that the physical existence of the referent’s “linguistic being, not its verbal meanings, define its frontier”¹³; in other words, the referent is a thing that denotes the concept. For example, let’s consider the judge’s manipulation of truth surrounding Reverend Green. In the very first chapter, the judge is introduced while listening to Reverend Green’s sermon. Everything stood still, as Reverend Green’s sermon halted at the sight of the judge who claimed Reverend Green to be an “imposter,” attributing to him crimes of rape among other charges.¹⁴ In rebuttal, “cried the reverend, sobbing... This is him. The devil. Here he stands.”¹⁵ Though the Reverend proclaims his innocence, the will of the judge is enough to sway all onlookers and listeners at the

¹² Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” 316.

¹³ Benjamin, 317.

¹⁴ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 7.

¹⁵ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 7.

gathering. Yet the judge says “I never laid eyes on the man before today. Never heard of him.”¹⁶ The great influence the judge possesses allows him to displace the perception of Reverend Green to his audience through deliberate manipulation of information. Here, the judge displaces the referent of Reverend Green, who is known to be a man of God and a preacher. In the judge’s claim against Reverend Green, the judge underscores him as a pedophile, inverting the congregation’s conception of Reverend Green. This inversion is a violence against the man (referent/concept), and the language (the linguistic entity). What makes the judge’s destruction of referents evil is that he attempts to create a “concept” that is universal through the manipulation of referents. Thus, tampering with the “linguistic being of things” allows the judge ultimate control of truth and infliction of violence unquestioned.

Since there are many interpretations of what language is, for this paper’s purpose, it aligns with the definition of the “naming” quality of words utilized by human beings. Language is the expression of a thing, something’s existence or shape within the world that it exists within. Acknowledging language as a “mental entity” and also as a “linguistic entity” allows room for the referent (physical entity) to coexist with its conception (mental entity). Moreover, the existence of the linguistic entity and the mental entity are not mutually exclusive; the linguistic entity exists as the word (which cannot be manipulated) but, the mental entity is something that can be manipulated as it is specific to each person's conception of the linguistic entity. When conceptualizing language, Benjamin asserts, “language...communicates the mental being corresponding to it. It is fundamental that this mental being communicate itself *in* languages and not *through*

¹⁶ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 9.

language.”¹⁷ If “mental being” were able to be conveyed “through language” alone, any type of language would suffice for the expression of “mental being.” Since “mental being” is, instead, communicated within the language itself, the “mental being” is contingent upon the known referents of words, or rather, the language as a whole.

The judge uses his knowledge of the world and of things as a mechanism to inform referents and their concepts. For example, the great scale of killing Native Americans is one way the referents of things become null. Native Americans are categorized as “other” and threaten the development of the American West and the judge’s power narrative. The judge and his crew of men are contracted “for the furnishing of Apache scalps.”¹⁸ In this scenario, the Native American is the referent for the concept of the heathen (“A legion of horribles”), which equates unruly savages ordained with bloodlust.¹⁹ The referent of the scalp, which coexists with the term heathen, is impregnated with the concept of reward and justice, erasing any truth that was known before the concepts of savage or heathen. The referent becomes fixed through a productive violence that is serving for the dominant narrative (the judge) and destroys the individual (the person whom the scalp belonged), creating a truth that is merely a reflection of the dominant narrative’s values.

Likewise, the violence of man is also projected unto the animals, further exposing a referent whose concept has been manipulated and distorted. The referent is especially sinister for the conception of “the bear’s long muzzle [which] swung toward them in a stunned articulation, amazed beyond reckoning, some foul gobbet dangling from its jaws

¹⁷ Benjamin, 315-316.

¹⁸ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 213.

¹⁹ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 54.

and its chops dyed red with blood. Glanton fired.”²⁰ The bear’s description does not match how the bear is described; the bear is described as elegantly expressing its genuine surprise to the readers (it is elegant in its bear-ness), yet the men’s interpretation or rather, Glanton’s, is the sight of a thing that is foul. The men are projecting their own nature upon the bear, who simply exists as a bear. The men try to inscribe an evil associated with the nature of the bear that ultimately resides within themselves. This deflection of evil unto things outside and peripheral to the self, indicates how life and man’s disposition might indeed be “a mystery. [Yet] 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.”²¹ The destruction of others suffices the need to know one’s heart, as the action reflects the perpetrator’s nature. Further, the disposition of men’s hearts within them become neutral because there is no means by which to know it: “If much in the world were a mystery the limits of that world were not, for it was without measure or bound and there were contained within it creatures more horrible yet not alien none of it more than their own hearts in them, whatever wilderness contained there and whatever beats.”²² Aligning with what the judge expressed, the heart is not a mystery and all of the world can be explained, therefore all of the evil can be explained through its foundation in production. Violence, moreover, is the cause of this unknowability of one’s own heart. The referents are destroyed and replaced with new ones, imposing and influencing “truth,” and this is the evil that runs itself: it keeps men from knowing their own hearts, thus creating monsters.

²⁰ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 143.

²¹ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 20.

²² McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 144.

The Claim to Power and the Problem of Fear

The judge's ultimate goal is to control fate in order to control all else, resulting in a gross conglomeration of power. His prerogative is to conquer all "creation [that] exists without [his] knowledge [because it] exists without [his] consent."²³ In a conversation with Toadvine, the judge explains:

these anonymous creatures may seem little or nothing within 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 properly be suzerain of the earth.²⁴

His fixation rests on those things that lie outside the ruling sphere of men and anonymity, betraying the fragility of his power. Indeed "all power structures are contingent; that is, they lack a logical ground or a natural foundation and are dependent on assistance from cultural narratives that assure their legitimacy."²⁵ Despite the essence of the judge's power residing in the realm of facade, it is real in its displays of devastating destruction, nonetheless.

With the knowledge of the judge's power being rooted in contracts, words, and violence, anything that exists beyond his border--or rather, his ledger book—is potentially damaging to his omnipotence. In order for the judge to claim his position of "suzerain," the origins of thought, existence, theology, God—among others—must be explained and demystified.²⁶ Moving away from the superstitions of religion, the judge states:

²³ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 207.

²⁴ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 207.

²⁵ Rivkin and Ryan, "Starting with Zero," *Literary Theory: an Anthology*, Wiley Blackwell, 2017, 713.

²⁶ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 207.

The man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear. Superstition will drag him down. The rain will erode deeds of his life. But the man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate.²⁷

Not only does the judge acknowledge the structures that are set in place by societal power structures, he has the answer to obtain infinite power. To ascend to this power, one must take it “by singling out the thread of order from the tapestry.” Moreover, the one who can identify the fatal string that informs all structure can manipulate the systems of power and order and claim to providence. As Toadvine’s and the judge’s conversation about origins of power closes, Toadvine states “I dont see what that has to do with catchin birds.”²⁸ As the judge sketches life and objects of historical significance in his ledger book, the judge responds that “the freedom of birds is an insult to me. I’d have them all in zoos.”²⁹ Autonomous life threatens the judge’s position of power, compromising his position of “suzerain.” Seeing that autonomous life possesses agency, for a suzerain to acquire power, the suzerain would require dominion over all other things that operate within its jurisdiction. This autonomy, moreover, is what the judge cannot allow and is dangerous to his power narrative; he must be the master of all, else his power is undermined through agency.

The single thread of order of the tapestry in *Blood Meridian* is language itself. When the truth is molded by the judge’s control over referentiality, all within that world still remains within the bounds of his truth. There are no ties and there is no loyalty and

²⁷ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 207.

²⁸ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 208.

²⁹ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 208.

all men are for themselves: “Here beyond men's judgements all covenants were brittle.”³⁰ Yet, to an extent all are loyal to the judge, even the kid, and the judge is afforded no ties because he is the truth keeper, he controls or rather, has a hand in fate.

The crucial exponent of the judge's power is that its existence coincides with the elimination of autonomous life. Although the judge laughs at the idea of birds flying free, his acknowledgement is an invocation of fear surrounding the instability of his power, which can only be corrected through a principled violence in the way that it is designed to preserve the judge's order of power. The judge's violence resides in the sanctioning of things and destroying the freedom of a thing's being—the way it ought to exist within the world, without the pressings of alternative power structures. By disturbing the referent of bird—which is done through the judge's sketching it in his ledger book—and says, or rather, sketches, how they should all be thrown in zoos, the conception of bird inevitably shifts from freedom to a thing that is caged. And thinking of this in the grander scheme, anything that is autonomous is threatening because “godly wisdom resides in the least of things so that it may well be that the voice of the Almighty speaks most profoundly in such beings as lives in silence themselves.”³¹ Benjamin asserts that language serves as the means by which things communicate themselves to God, and when the judge inserts his will, destroying autonomous life, he keeps things from communicating themselves to God, in other words, how they ought to exist.

³⁰ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 111.

³¹ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 130.

The Victims of Truth

Because the judge transcribes “truth” he puts himself in the position of a master of fate. He ascribes truth to peoples’ passions for which he has molded to align with his own, to do his bidding. The judge even says that “War is god,” accounting for the existence of man and the world.³² The civilizations that are destroyed throughout *Blood Meridian* attests to this fact within the story. War determines the winners and dominant narrative; this is the ultimate test of the will. To further illustrate his point of life as a game, the judge explains how “moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak. Historical law subverts it at every turn. A moral view can never be proven right or wrong by any ultimate test.”³³ Not only does this acknowledge the judge’s stake in warring or, rather, in games, it is the clearest indicator of his stake in obtaining power.

The judge’s perception of knowledge and war is an indication of how he understands the nature of power. As noted previously, the judge “is...the most learned and civilized” character within *Blood Meridian*, though he is also the most corrupt.³⁴ He is cognizant that the only means of truth is through producing it, to make it recognizable for others: “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 have put there.”³⁵ It is clear that all that exists is “only an arrangement of the world...and not an explanation of the world” and the judge “above all...wants to discharge [his] strength [and his] will to power,”

³² McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 261

³³ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 261.

³⁴ Parrish, 4.

³⁵ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 256.

through his manipulation of knowledge.³⁶ The knowledge the judge possesses, furthermore, puts the judge in the position of, not only the creator, but the performer of truth.

Knowledge, as the judge has illuminated, is contingent and it is easily swayed. Things are “determined by the length of their tether...Moons, coins, men,” as all are bound to their opposite.³⁷ Similarly, the judge’s conception of war is also paved among the thought of contingency: “it makes no difference what men think of war... War endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate trade awaiting its ultimate practitioner.”³⁸ For the judge, war is humanity’s destiny and it is the foundation of humanity itself. In this sense, “all history present in that visage, the child [is] the father of the man.”³⁹ In other words, the instinct of a child (Freudian “Id”), denotes war as the instinct of the judge, who takes something because he wants it and has the power to do so. The judge’s instinct of war does lend the him to view people, or those he instructs or has power over, as his pawns. He explains that war “endures because young men love it and old men love it in them...Men are born for games. Nothing else. Every child knows that play is nobler than work. He knows too that the worth or merit of a game is not inherent in the game itself but rather in the value of that which is put at hazard.”⁴⁰ Through the judge’s stake in the order of things, he orients himself as a practitioner of war, where men’s lives constitute the survival of his narrative.

³⁶Nietzsche, 15.

³⁷ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 257.

³⁸ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 259.

³⁹ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 3.

⁴⁰ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 260.

The result of principled violence leads to the victimization of truth, as outlined in the kid's narrative. Woodson notes "as the kid increasingly understands the truth about the judge...the kid tries to use language" and his attempts at understanding are silenced.⁴¹ Considering ideology or any dominant cultural narrative, silence is the ultimate destroyer of "truth," so the judge will always win because he has the power to manipulate the language, distorting and displacing "truth." The true foundation of the judge's world "[is] not stone but fear,"⁴² and further shows all beginnings of power to be illegitimate. Establishments are known or recognized because of how they are perpetually at risk and depending on the strength of their will to power, their reign is contingent upon the narrative. This contingency is purposeful in its display of violence, especially when it can erase destruction from its existence: "out of that whirlwind no voice spoke and the pilgrim lying in his broken bones may cry out and in his agony he may rage, but rage at what? And if the dried and blackened shell of him is found among the sands by travelers to come yet who can discover the engine of his ruin?"⁴³ This invocation of nature being the ultimate destroyer of destruction echoes P.B. Shelley's "Ozymandias"; though nature is the ultimate leveler and eraser of events, it itself is not the engine of the ruin of evil—it sustains itself. Nature, being a usurper of all power and empires, is used to the judge's advantage. The judge employs the samsara-like qualities of nature to erase the misdeeds which he falsifies as truth within his ledger book.

The only use for power is to dispose of what is dangerous to the judge's status. As the kid is never identified as a member of the group, he is first introduced by the

⁴¹ Woodson, 2.

⁴² McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 49.

⁴³ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 117.

differentiation that “the only thing that might have distinguished him in that crowd was that he was not armed.”⁴⁴ Though the kid “can neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence,”⁴⁵ he would ride “in that communal soul,”⁴⁶ of men, as a singular entity, distinguishing himself from the “single resonance”⁴⁷ of the group when he asked Tobin “What’s [the judge] a judge of?”⁴⁸ This is the “transgression” that can unravel the judge’s providence, as this action of the kid identifies a thread of order. Affirming the danger of questioning the judge’s position, the judge attempts to reason with the kid by claiming: “you’ve not the heart of a common assassin...No assassin...There’s a flawed place in the fabric of your heart. Do you think I could not know? You alone were mutinous. You alone reserved in your soul some corner of clemency for the heathen.”⁴⁹ This is the lurking danger of which the judge is cognizant and names as the flaw in the kid’s nature. Though the judge has the same origins of all, the kid’s curiosity and willingness to question is the ultimate threat to the judge’s position of suzerain because it reveals the kid’s nature as autonomous.

In McCarthy’s writing of *Blood Meridian*, he critiques the “liberators” of the land who are constantly referred to as apes throughout the entirety of the novel. This reference, or the referent of the word “ape” that surfaces, is a thing or person that is lacking civilization or perhaps morality. The term “ape” is used in relation to their killing because the judge is never really seen killing anyone besides the crushing of one’s skull—it is described in an eloquent manner that further insinuates his “civilized” demeanor. The

⁴⁴ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 6.

⁴⁵ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 3.

⁴⁶ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 158.

⁴⁷ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 236.

⁴⁸ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 141.

⁴⁹ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 311-312.

descriptions of men as apes, furthermore, depicts men who “fight with fists, with feet, with bottles or knives. All races, all breeds. Men whose speech sounds like the grunting of apes,” acknowledging violence as the sole destruction of what is “civilized” and how people lose control, emanating from their loss of language (or truth), which cannot be set right.⁵⁰ This is where the judge is able to capitalize on his knowledge because the words that are thrown around have become obscure when “speech sounds like the grunting of apes,” leaving space for the violent words or “uncivilized” words to become molded by someone or something else that can calculate and create referents, informing the essence of truth.

As witnessed in *Blood Meridian* “good” and “evil” are not mutually exclusive, and they simply exist. The judge is a central figure to the pandemic of violence throughout *Blood Meridian*, where violence manifests itself through the sober decisions of the judge—a puppet of McCarthy’s—, who capitalizes on widespread fear through his manipulation of the language and its referents. As the judge is picturesque evil, he subverts referents and their concepts, and reconstructs their meanings. With this in mind, the judge is the ultimate producer of violence and stands as a caricature of evil. His will overpowers all other counter narratives and he is a raging sun, compelling others by a sinister gravitational pull.

⁵⁰McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 4.

Chigurh and The Misfit: Men of Principle

Language and the law are two points married to principle within Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* (NCFOM). Through the characters of Chigurh and Sheriff Bell, McCarthy examines the structure of principle--a guiding truth or set of rules--one ought to follow in accordance with the higher power. McCarthy shows that there is no difference between the state and the vigilante in terms of justice, as they both produce the same outcome, only by different individuals who are presumed legitimate because of their affiliation. For Anton Chigurh, his words are his unbreakable covenant, while Sheriff Bell's words are presented as less substantial a vow in the adherence to the principle of the law. Bell's conception of words brings him to a supposition of the morality of the law and his work in law enforcement. As Lydia R. Cooper suggests in "He's a Psychopathic Killer, but So What?": Folklore and Morality in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*," "this novel explores the relationship between story-telling and morality by evoking archaic tropes and modes of narration more typically associated with the folktale," illuminating the nature of Chigurh as "not much of an individual."⁵¹ Instead he seems to be a blue-eyed, vaguely ethnic version of *Blood Meridian*'s Judge Holden, who himself is more a caricature of evil than a complex individual [and similarly] Chigurh [is] a typed character."⁵² While Cooper also encourages a reading of "nihilism (represented by Chigurh) and morality (represented by

⁵¹ Lydia R. Cooper, "He's a Psychopathic Killer, but So What?": Folklore and Morality in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country For Old Men*." *Papers on Language & Literature*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2009, 38, 43.

⁵² Cooper, 43.

Bell),” I will argue that Chigurh is not the representation of “nihilism” because he follows a set of principles that are a portrayal of his “typed” character’s morals or truth.⁵³

Identifying and naming “evil” is an essential focal point of this chapter, yet evil is obscure. Is it fair to separate the object of evil from the perpetrator? Or can they be separated at all? I will address this question as it is not very clear, though as unspeakable as Chigurh’s actions are, he does possess some type of moral code that act as a set of rules and regulations that his character follows, which can be viewed as his personal truth. And, some scholars argue that evil is an objective truth within its full conception and reality. Moreover, the perpetrator and the law are synonymous and operate from the same standard of principle. For example, before the execution of Wells, Chigurh explains the reasoning behind his choice of gun to kill Wells: “the reason I used the birdshot was that I didnt want to break the glass. Behind you. To rain glass on people in the street.”⁵⁴ As disturbing as this death scene is, is it fair to attribute immorality to Chigurh, who clearly does not feel it right to injure bystanders, yet he judges it as necessary to kill those who are accountable and are a means to an end?

I will argue that “evil” is shaped by the principles of the law and of the language, portrayed in many instances and references to chance or fate. The law is not the typical law that binds society; it is the principle of the outlaw who cannot be governed because he is not “good.” Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man is Hard to Find” will be used as a lens to examine the character of Chigurh, as both Chigurh and The Misfit are men of unwavering principle in terms of following through on their given words. Another note of similarity between Chigurh and The Misfit is that fate is the leading governance and

⁵³ Cooper, 39.

⁵⁴ Cormac McCarthy. *No Country For Old Men* (New York: Vintage, 2005), 201.

“god” in their lives, as they both refuse to “second say the world,” evidenced in their actions.⁵⁵ Furthermore, they both act as witnesses of “confession.” Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* brings insight into the roles of Chigurh and The Misfit as the sole witnesses of the confessor. Foucault notes:

Confession frees, but power reduces one to silence; truth does not belong to the order of power, but shares an original affinity with freedom: traditional themes in philosophy, which a ‘political history of truth’ would have to overturn by showing that truth is not by nature free—nor error servile—but that its production is thoroughly embed with relations of power. The confession is an example of this.⁵⁶

In this position, both Chigurh and The Misfit are judges of “truth,” much like the law, with the competency to control fate pertaining to the subject of the confession. This power exists within the Perpetrator’s adoption of the power structure’s principles while relinquishing their own. To this regard, this is why Sheriff Bell resigns from his position as Sheriff; he is unwilling to mold his principles to that of the law, which would force him to abandon his personal morals. Furthermore, the principle of the law or vigilante creates a critical distance between the perception of one’s humanity and the act of murder and the subject undergoing the confession, becomes an object or a thing, that either is exonerated or convicted.

Sheriff Bell attests to the law’s lack of morality when he quits his position as Sheriff, because the risk of following and enforcing the “law” is that one must be willing to give up their life, and “it is more of what you are willin to become...a man would have to put his soul at hazard.”⁵⁷ As Cooper further illuminates, “the novel consistently suggests that violence is born in a single human choice, but once born it spreads like a

⁵⁵ McCarthy, *NCFOM*, 260.

⁵⁶ Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality* (Random House Inc., 1990), 60.

⁵⁷ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 4.

disease, and its infection spreads beyond national and temporal boundaries.”⁵⁸ And, McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* bears witness and gives insight to this epidemic of evil, within *NCFOM*, through the words of the judge: “do you not think that this [evil] will be again? Aye. And again. With other people, with other sons.”⁵⁹ As Sheriff Bell would like to believe that “evil” is a simultaneous emergence and product of modernity, it exists and molds itself to the shape of time and through the language and the law.

The Truth of Principle

Principled violence does not equate to nihilism; it is productive in its use by McCarthy to illustrate the principle of the state and of the vigilante as similar. As previously mentioned, Cooper examines Chigurh as the personification of nihilism within the world of *No Country for Old Men*. Chigurh’s systematic executions, as gruesome as they are, exhibit no tolerance, except for giving his victims the opportunity to wager their life in the act of a coin toss. Chigurh’s use of language, in comparison to Lewellyn Moss’s, depicts the difference in principles each “individual” has set for themselves (and to echo Cooper, is one an individual if they are bound to a higher principle? Would this compromise choice?). Language even adheres to a set of principles or a certain objective “truth.” Its meaning can mold to context, while the phonetics and sound of the word relay a weight of value to its listener or receiver.

Similarly, the worth of language as currency, or rather, certainty, demonstrates a person’s adherence to principle. Moss, in negotiating with his taxi driver to drop him off, tells the driver to “trust [him],” where the driver responds how he “hates hearin them

⁵⁸ Cooper, 55.

⁵⁹ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 153.

words [and admits] yeah I've said em. That's how I come to know what they're worth."⁶⁰ The driver's own experience with those same words ("trust me") reveals a possibility that the producer of these words, in this case, Moss, is using this phrase as a means to win trust and to provide comfort. As the driver explains, he knows this phrase all too well because he knows the meaninglessness of words spoken out of desperation, even though "meaning" is retained in the action.

Thelma J. Shinn, in her article, "Flannery O'Connor and the Violence of Grace," examines how violence is used as a tool of illumination by the author. Shinn argues that O'Connor, as an author, "use[s] violence to convey her vision because she knew that the violence of rejection in the modern world demands an equal violence of redemption—man needs to be 'struck' by mercy; God must overpower him."⁶¹ Shinn's perspective encourages readers to interpret the nature of violence as innately productive, both outside the work of the author and within the characters of the novel. If violence is indeed productive, it must follow guidelines or principle, a truth. In "A Good Man is Hard to Find," O'Connor (as well as McCarthy—within his works) uses shocking and unthinkable violence as a lens to "see the distortions of modern life."⁶² This "distortion" is clearly visible in the worth of The Misfit's words compared to the grandmother's words.

The grandmother wagers the lives of her family through her careless words, and because of who she is, The Misfit is her accounting. What occurred on the family's road trip to Florida was all chance, an accident. The one occurrence, the grandmother's

⁶⁰ McCarthy, *NCFOM*, 209.

⁶¹ Thelma J. Shinn. "Flannery O'Connor and the Violence of Grace." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1968, 58.

⁶² Shinn, 59.

unbreakable desire to see the plantation, was an act of deliberate will (as well as smuggling her cat on the road trip, which was a catalyst in the accident). She coats her words with thrilling exaggeration when she tells John Wesley and June Star that “there was a secret panel in this house [on the plantation] and the story went that all the family silver was hidden in it when Sherman came through but it was never found.”⁶³ These words create excitement in the grandchildren which provokes them to grossly beg their parents to find this misplaced plantation, where they end up rolling their car on the way to the site (“The horrible thought [the grandmother] had had before the accident was that the house she had remembered to vividly was not in Georgia but in Tennessee”⁶⁴). All of the simultaneous reactions toward this information with the hope for treasure and riches is also a lens into the family’s dynamic of “careless words” that is not only a component of the grandmother’s disposition.

Not only is *The Misfit* truthful and full of intention, the grandmother’s use of words is not intentional and become a sizable platform of disenchantment, depicting her self-centered nature. As *The Misfit* expressed to his accomplices after the murder of the grandmother, he said “she would’ve been a good woman...if it had been somebody to shoot her every minute of her life.”⁶⁵ The severity of this truth resides in the grandmother’s lack of awareness of how words convey truths, whether they are visible or not. The grandmother is molded throughout the entire scope of the story as a woman of a self-centered nature—one who foolishly glorifies the antebellum past, showcasing her carelessness around the choice of her words and failing to acknowledge the South’s past,

⁶³ Flannery O’Connor. “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” *Flannery O’Connor: The Complete Stories*. Ferrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995, 123.

⁶⁴ O’Connor, 125.

⁶⁵ O’Connor, 133.

invalidating the great trauma of slavery. The grandmother's attitude, in turn, is visible in the disrespectful behavior displayed in the characters of June Star and John Wesley. Sheriff Bell, who also glorifies the past, claims "I'm not the man of an older time they say I am. I wish I was. I'm a man of this time."⁶⁶ He believes that the past and present differ in the aspect of a person's bravery, along with violence being a novel occurrence that has been aroused by narcotics. Similarly, the grandmother idealizes the past and believes that violence and crime are cultivated through modernity. In a conversation with Red Sammy, the grandmother agrees with his statement, that "a good man is hard to find...Everything is terrible. I remember the day you could go oft and leave your screen door unlatched. Not no more."⁶⁷ Yet, the grandmother, about to meet her death at the hands of The Misfit, speaks counterfeit words; she tells him, "I know you're a good man," but The Misfit corrects her.⁶⁸ He further questions the grandmother surrounding her notion of principle, equating to what The Misfit uncovers as her fundamental truths. He explains that if she were indeed a "true" follower of Jesus, and "if He did what He said, then it's nothing for [her] to do but throw away everything and follow Him."⁶⁹ If indeed the grandmother is a follower of Christ, she must believe that the chains of death have already been broken by Jesus' sacrifice and that to covet her own life is sinful in comparison to what real "faith" could afford her. The Misfit unravels the grandmother's so-called principle or truth of being a Christian. Instead, the grandmother fears death, when what should matter to a "good" Christian woman is not her physical death, but if she undergoes a spiritual death. This statement deconstructs the principle of The Misfit,

⁶⁶ McCarthy, *NCFOM*, 279.

⁶⁷ O'Connor, 122.

⁶⁸ O'Connor, 128.

⁶⁹ O'Connor, 132.

as he has no loyalties but to himself. His indifference illuminates the truth of words by showing that words may convey a certain truth, but that there is the possibility of the presenter of “truth” feigning sincerity.

The Truth of a Coin Toss

Both Chigurh and The Misfit possess reputations of unwavering principle where their actions align with their words. For Chigurh, his use of language instills an atmosphere of finality and seriousness. When Chigurh slays Moss’s wife, Carla Jean, he explains the exact moment where her fate becomes fixed. Chigurh explains to Carla Jean how he made Moss an offer: in exchange for amnesty, Moss, in turn, would forfeit his own life along with the money. Yet, Moss is unable to escape Chigurh, and upon Chigurh’s accounting of Carla Jean, he tells her “But I gave my word.”⁷⁰ To further express his “lack of control” in her ensuing death, Chigurh attributes her fate to “bad luck,”⁷¹ and says:

I had no say in the matter. Every moment of your life is a turning and every one a choosing. Somewhere you made a choice. All followed to this. The accounting is scrupulous. The shape is drawn. No line can be erased. I had no belief in your ability to move a coin to your bidding. How could you? A person’s path through the world seldom changes and even more seldom will it change abruptly. And the shape of your path was visible from the beginning.⁷²

Chigurh relinquishes all responsibility for Carla Jean’s murder before it occurs and he attributes her death as a flaw within her will, as she is unable to choose the correct side of the coin which would allow her to live. Though this scene depicts the mercilessness of Chigurh, his words are formidable and resolute much like his own view of fate. In

⁷⁰ McCarthy, *NCFOM*, 255.

⁷¹ McCarthy, *NCFOM*, 257.

⁷² McCarthy, *NCFOM*, 259.

comparison to the weight of Moss's "word" to the weight of Chigurh's "word," Chigurh's speech is similar to and represents the objectivity of the societal law, or rather the outlaw's law.

It is a matter of personal and objective truth to how Chigurh and The Misfit mold their actions according to principle. For The Misfit, he holds himself to high standards of truth and he has no intentions of being dishonest or forgetting his crimes. The Misfit makes it a point of his crimes to "sign [him]self," because "then [he will] know what [he has] done and [he] can hold up the crime to the punishment and see do they match."⁷³ The Misfit's disposition leans toward transparency because, then, to the extent of his crimes, he allows himself to possess some control through the perception and the reality surrounding the truth of his transgression. We are left to assume—as the audience—the worst of Chigurh because his actions seem senseless. As Cooper notes, "the inexplicable evil of Chigurh" is presented, and, assuming as the audience we possess the capacity for differentiating and identifying "right" from "wrong," we are ultimately left to judge the actions of Chigurh as heinous.⁷⁴ However, Chigurh, as well as The Misfit reside outside of law-abiding "society," making them appear saturated with evil because their actions are not within the jurisdiction of the law.

Chigurh and The Misfit are both "outlaw[s]" and as Sheriff Bell illuminates, "it takes very little to govern good people. Very little. And bad people cant be governed at all," addressing the scope of the power of their judgement as it lies beyond the construction of "society" and resides within their scope as observers of "confession."⁷⁵

⁷³ O'Connor, 131.

⁷⁴ Cooper, 37.

⁷⁵ McCarthy, NCFOM, 157, 64.

Not all of their victims—specifically for *The Misfit*—are required to explain themselves, but it is more used as a tool of reason, which is ultimately futile. There is a sinister distribution of power in the scenario of the confessor and the one who listens. As Foucault lays out

The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile; a ritual in which the truth is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated; and finally, a ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation...the agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks (for it is he who is constrained), but in the one who listens and says nothing; not in the one who knows and answers, but in the one who questions and is not supposed to know.⁷⁶

Chigurh and *The Misfit* act as the interlocutors that Foucault identifies within the power dynamic of the “confessional” or moment of ritual, ultimately validating the “confession” or, perhaps, the pleading of their victims. This validation, however, is not a movement toward forgiveness or leniency; rather, it is a motion of power. Both Chigurh and *The Misfit* transform their humanity into caricature-like representations of power through their exercising of authority, utilizing their position as the ultimate instruments of judgement. Furthermore, they are the validation of one’s life through being the validator of the confession. Yet, given the odious circumstances of the novel and the enigmatic character of Chigurh, we are given very little of what motivates Chigurh’s violence toward others.

⁷⁶Foucault, 61-62.

Regardless of how unprompted Chigurh's acts of violence appear, there are always reasons behind his acts, connected within a web of fate. Chigurh claims that all transgressions of fate can be explained, "for things at a common destination there is a common path."⁷⁷ This is strikingly similar to the judge's perception of how all origins of the world and all secrets can be explained, and that mystery is tended to by the superstitious.⁷⁸ Nothing is disconnected and everything leads its path to where it must eventually end and show for itself. The one thing that is revealed about Chigurh's humanity is that he must always refrain from allowing himself to become fully human; in other words, allowing for leniency, tolerance, compassion, or forgiveness of wrongs: "You're asking that I make myself vulnerable and that I can never do. I have only one way to live. It doesn't allow for special cases."⁷⁹ The core truth that Chigurh binds himself to serves a purpose similar to a moral code, much like Lewellyn Moss or Sheriff Bell. For example, Moss affirms that he will not kill anyone, and Bell maintains hope despite the chaos of the world because he perceives it as the "right" thing to do. The relentless nature of Chigurh—despite any and all circumstances, favorable or unfavorable—reveals Chigurh is unwilling to compromise his word because it would compromise his truth, the guiding principle by which he lives his life. Chigurh's unbending will is what separates him from Moss and Bell. Their unwillingness to adhere to the power structure of the law, requiring them to relinquish the most crucial aspects of their humanity, shows that they are unwilling to put aside their emotions or feelings of

⁷⁷ McCarthy, *NCFOM*, 259.

⁷⁸ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 207.

⁷⁹ McCarthy, *NCFOM*, 259.

“right” and “wrong” and adhere to a guiding principle—maintaining the presence of their soul.

Chigurh is never made “accountable” for his actions and he is simply the dealer of fate. In two instances we see Chigurh give his victims a chance to determine their fate by allowing them the toss of a coin, echoing the judge from *Blood Meridian*, that “Men are born for games. Nothing else...the worth or merit of a game is not inherent in the game itself but rather in the value of that which is put at hazard.”⁸⁰ Chigurh possesses the same perception of the alternate positions of life. Within the dimension of Chigurh’s game of fate, he alludes to a value of fairness that is nothing more than a teasing of the victim, as seen in the progression of Carla Jean’s murder. This personal “truth” is a factor of folklore, according to Cooper, who uses Vladimir Propp as a point on perspective: “As Vladimir Propp points out in *Theory and History of Folklore*, characters in folklore differ from characters in literature primarily because, in folklore, characters are ‘types,’ not individuals.”⁸¹ The fairness Chigurh values is only on account of the coin toss, not considering how each participant’s life has led to this specific moment. Though Chigurh believes that “anything can be an instrument...To separate the act from the thing. As if parts of some moment in history might be interchangeable with the parts of some other moment. How could it be? Well, it’s just a coin. Yes. That’s true. Is it?”⁸² However, this fairness mirrors the status of the law within society. The “before” is no longer relevant, nor is “right” or “wrong,” it is the truth and wager of the game that assigns value to the act.

⁸⁰ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 260.

⁸¹ Cooper, 43.

⁸² McCarthy, *NCFOM*, 57.

Chigurh and The Misfit are the sole “individuals” who witness the confession and are the weighers of judgement. Chigurh’s only act or transition toward leniency is in the portrayal of the coin toss. Besides this seemingly little game of chance, he has already set his mind on his course of action. Similarly, The Misfit has an aptitude to extend an exception, yet the grandmother, June Star, John Wesley, the parents, and even the author herself all wager their lives with the construction of their words. The “accounting” for The Misfit is whether or not he is recognized, and from this, he does not stray. This leaves both Chigurh’s and The Misfit’s positions of truth or principle up to the confessors’ “actions,” which they believe has already been set, from the beginning of time.

Despite the seeming meaningless violence enacted in *No Country for Old Men* and within “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” by the characters of Chigurh and The Misfit, violence is not inherently nihilistic. “Evil” or violence is not an occurrence of novelty, though Sheriff Bell and the grandmother believe that days of yore were indeed better and safer times. This perspective, however, is significant only because of the distance associated with the past and the present. When Sheriff Bell weighs the morality of the law, he believes it to put the human soul at risk, evoking the true form of the system to surface. Although Bell does not fully constitute law enforcement, he is a representative and enforcer making him an accessory of the law, nonetheless. Bell is forced by the principle of the law to be a bystander and participant in the execution of a young man “who kill[ed a] state trooper [however, Sheriff Bell] dont believe he done it. But that’s what he’s goin to the death penalty for.”⁸³ Sheriff Bell, in this moment, has no power to

⁸³ McCarthy, *NCFOM*, 281.

determine fate and is forced to witness what he believes is a wrong-doing by the law. Again, *Blood Meridian* illuminates that “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.”⁸⁴ Sheriff Bell ultimately chooses to know his heart, because in order to do so, he must quit his position as sheriff. The law, along with other means of principle that force humanity as second-nature, shows what Sheriff Bells believes about the principle of the law: “You can’t corrupt it anymore than you can salt salt. You can’t corrupt it because that’s what it is.”⁸⁵ The act of putting the law before one’s own personal truth or morality, is a consummation of the law and body, creating pockets of evil and corruption because the human factor is erased.

Is there a distinction between the executions of Chigurh, The Misfit, and the law? They all adhere to an objective truth, a set of principles where all are judged, not according to human emotion or logic, but to a prescribed rule. Yet, they cannot stray from this order of truth, otherwise order itself would be broken. It is significant that Thelma J. Shinn pinpointed the productive nature of violence within O’Connor’s work, used to “convey her vision,” as she makes visible the violence of language. On the other hand, Cormac McCarthy’s work has similarities to O’Connor’s where the violence depicted is methodical and calculated, and still shocking, nonetheless.

As Chigurh and The Misfit are the interlocutors of the confession, as an audience we are the interlocutor of Sheriff Bell’s “confession.” *No Country for Old Men* especially underscores evil and violence as productions of principle. As the law works much the same way as Chigurh and The Misfit, the status of “outlaw” justice falls into the same

⁸⁴ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 20.

⁸⁵ McCarthy, *NCFOM*, 123.

category as capital punishment. In this sense, order and principle, despite the striking similarities between the outlaw and the law, reveals that the apparent goodness and order of human society within *NCFOM* is a direct result of corruption that puts one's humanity and soul at risk.

“The sacred idiom [has become] shorn of its referents”: Silence Within the Language of
The Road

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot comprehend it.⁸⁶

Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* describes the unfolding of a world that is “barren, violent, [and] godless.”⁸⁷ From first glance, this is a story about a father and his son, transients who traverse a dangerous and “wasted country”⁸⁸; and the simple front of “father and son against the world,” is something *The Road* surpasses. Embedded within the story of *The Road* is a narrative of hope through its attempt of rekindling referents that have been destroyed through violence. The father's memories are evidence of hope for something more substantial than fear. Although the father believes good or happy memories must be the final moment before death, the fear of hope and goodness is something he wants to believe in order to justify the nature of chaos and destruction that epitomizes their world. The physical road itself is both the end and the beginning: the existing silence dominates every corner and every recess of life, every flickering hope that arises.

Both the father and son remain nameless throughout the novel, despite the simplicity behind the name of their roles. They are “tattered gods slouching in their rags across the waste,” and do not fall to the silence that informs the world now which within they exist.⁸⁹ This loss of identity (the loss of their given names), presents in the language the loss of the referent, the ultimate indicator of violence against all living things. For the

⁸⁶ Jn 1:1-5

⁸⁷ McCarthy, *The Road*, 4.

⁸⁸ McCarthy, *The Road*, 6.

⁸⁹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 52.

son, this is the only world he has ever known; and, for the father, he knows what was before this destruction. The father “could not construct for the child’s pleasure the world he’d lost without constructing the loss as well and he thought perhaps the child had known better than he...he could not enkindle in the heart of the child what was ashes in his own.”⁹⁰ Violence created a rift within the language in terms of its referents and concepts, thus creating a loss of meaning in the world of *The Road*. The father knows the full extent of this loss and the son does not. Despite the loss of meaning, the son’s perspective allows him to hold onto compassion, curiosity, and love for others which the father tries to relinquish. Yet, it is not something that can be willed away, and the son, nonetheless, knows that the loss of compassion is the loss of light and is the loss of hope.

The ubiquitous and lurking potential of encountering death actualizes the entirety of the father’s and the son’s journey together on the road, where violence is “justified in the world,” even though the violence is “Senseless. Senseless.”⁹¹ The production of violence emanates from indifference and the relinquishing of empathy, where this hand of indifference coincides with the manifestation of silence through the loss of language:

The men poured gasoline on them and burned them alive, having no remedy for evil but only for the image of it as they conceived it to be. The burning snakes twisted horribly and some crawled burning across the floor of the grotto that illuminate its darker recesses. As they were mute there were no screams of pain and the men watched them burn and writhe and blacken in just silence themselves and disbanded in silence...each with his own thoughts to go home to their suppers.⁹²

The referent of evil, as conceived by the men, is the snake itself. With “no remedy for evil” violence becomes a pseudo-remedy to stall the progression of what is conceived as

⁹⁰ McCarthy, *The Road*, 154.

⁹¹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 182, 222.

⁹² McCarthy, *The Road*, 188-9.

evil. The destruction of the snake (which is the perception and not necessarily the truth of evil) illuminates the darkness of the senselessness of the act. The men, who wield the power of language and assigning of referents, watch in blank silence as the things without language “burn and writhe and blacken.” The cause and effect of fire is a universal indicator of pain—the smell of burning flesh, attempting to evade the fire, and change of color resulting from burns. Despite the snakes’ inability to verbally address pain, their movements suffice as language because, for the men, there is present knowledge of fire and how it destroys all flesh, regardless of its origin.

Silence results from a productive violence that operates on indifference. Frederick Nietzsche, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, uncovers the will that conducts violence within the world. Nietzsche notes that “it seems that all great things, in order to inscribe eternal demands in the heart of humanity, must first wander the earth under monstrous and terrifying masks.”⁹³ Within the context of *The Road*, these “great things” Nietzsche names, are composed of the language itself and those who carry the language. The frailty of the language correlates to the frailty of the world in its shambled state. For the language to reside within “the heart of humanity,” it must experience the brink of its extinction and mortality, as humanity does through its experience and conception through language. Furthermore, it must near the loss of the referent, visible in the father’s and the son’s journey on the physical road. The father and his son must “wander the earth under monstrous and terrifying masks” because the father believes that “maybe you should always be on the lookout. If trouble comes when you least expect it then maybe the thing to do is to always expect it.”⁹⁴ The father’s nihilistic outlook, which inevitably influences

⁹³ Nietzsche, 3.

⁹⁴ McCarthy, *The Road*, 151.

his son, evolves into harboring hope so that his son may survive when all else fails.

Nietzsche further illuminates that “Whoever fights with monsters should see to it that he does not become one himself. And when you stare for a long time into an abyss, the abyss stares back into you.”⁹⁵ Becoming the “monster” delineates the extermination of the referent and falling into the categorical indifference that plagues the world of *The Road*. The individual who loses the referent of the self—which the father uses the term “good guys” to combat becoming acquainted with the “abyss”—inevitably succumbs to death.

Despite the pervasiveness of death in *The Road*, it is an epic of hope. Hope resides in the language that is carried by the father, until the son must carry it on his own. The atmosphere created by this transference and sharing of language indicates its sacred conception and presence of the divine within the language, making it intrinsically embedded with the notion of hope or salvation. Furthermore, language has great capacity for either creation or destruction, and, in *The Road*, language has the power to create or annihilate the existence of empathy, which is inherently tethered to the condition of the world. The components of violence serve a purpose both within the text of *The Road*, within the novel’s world, as well as within the reader who experiences this world as an observer. Moreover, the productive nature of this violence creates pockets of silence reflecting the manifest truth that exists within the living world: death.

The truth of death in *The Road* plagues the father and his son and their world, with knowledge of death defining the proximity of the road. Following as a shadow does, the father holds onto the mantra that his son will not “face the truth. [He] will not,” and

⁹⁵Nietzsche, 69.

this provides further purpose for the father in a futile and violent world.⁹⁶ The world the father once knew is lost; it is a world that his son will never know, and “to the boy [the father] was an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed.”⁹⁷ In this “new world,” “the light was [in a state of constant] failing,” and “everything [is] as it once had been save faded and weathered...Nothing to see.”⁹⁸ Not only is death present in the physical world, but death has new prophets: “creedless shells of men tottering down the causeways,” “men who would eat your children in front of your eyes.”⁹⁹ This “new world,” which the father would “not have thought the value of the smallest thing predicted on a world to come,” possesses no creed and all things are fading out of their existence; and even “the earth [is] itself contracting with cold...the silence [and the father asks himself] What will you say? A living man spoke these lines? ...He is coming to steal my eyes. To steal my mouth with dirt.”¹⁰⁰

Many scholars view hope as intrinsic and embedded within the foundation of McCarthy’s use of language. For Ashley Kunsu, in “Maps of the World in its Becoming,” “it is precisely in *The Road*’s language that we discover the seeds of the work’s optimistic worldview [and suggests that it] is best understood as a linguistic journey toward redemption, a search for meaning and pattern in a seemingly meaningless world.”¹⁰¹ *The Road* is a “linguistic journey,” as Kunsu acknowledges, and the persistence of the language in its ability to survive the harshest conditions is a testament

⁹⁶ McCarthy, *The Road*, 68.

⁹⁷ McCarthy, *The Road*, 153.

⁹⁸ McCarthy, *The Road*, 161, 39, 8.

⁹⁹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 29, 181.

¹⁰⁰ McCarthy, *The Road*, 187, 261.

¹⁰¹ Ashley Kunsu, “‘Maps of the World in Its Becoming’: Post-Apocalyptic Naming in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*.” *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2009, 58-9.

of love between the father and his son. Kunsza also argues that the father, “out of love for his child and hope for some salvation...pushes himself to the point of death to preserve the child’s physical and spiritual safety.”¹⁰² Rather than physical and spiritual safety being the primary focus, the father attempts to save his son from the truth of death, as he seeks to redeem his son from a world that is dying as “The sacred idiom [has become] shorn of its referents and so of its reality.”¹⁰³

Language, in *The Road*, plays a critical role of describing the state of the world through construction of the language. In her article “Contractions in Cormac McCarthy’s THE ROAD” Lindsey Banco examines the role language assumes in *The Road*. Banco notes that

McCarthy’s use of contractions (which are themselves the syntactical cancellation of letters), and especially how he uses apostrophes in contractions, reveals possibilities for the subtle alleviation of the apparently relentless negation in *The Road*. His contractions, which often austere lack their apostrophes, reproduce visually the disavowed at the heart of much of McCarthy’s fiction and thus help underscore a broken, fragmented, and ultimately empty world. The occasional inclusion of an apostrophe in certain contractions, however, reveals a counterpoint to what is often read as unrelenting nihilism.¹⁰⁴

The “unrelenting nihilism” that some scholars attribute to McCarthy misunderstand his work. The amount of depth that lives in the relationships, appraisal of the land, and the conversation surrounding language supports a reading that transcends the grasp of nihilism. As Banco notes, “The lack of quotation marks, a striking omission from the novel as a whole, reminds readers that there is little left in this world outside these two characters—little left from which they require demarcation.”¹⁰⁵ Banco does not explicitly

¹⁰² Kunsza 58.

¹⁰³ McCarthy 89.

¹⁰⁴ Lindsey Banco, "Contractions in Cormac McCarthy's THE ROAD." *The Explicator* 68.4 (2010), 276.

¹⁰⁵ Banco, 227.

name the arbiter of decline of punctuation within *The Road*, she states “that there is little left in this world” and life is no longer a large presence of the world. As the sole truth of this world is acknowledged as “death,” it is also imperative that the journey to this point in time is acknowledged as a production of violence. Not only is every living thing extinct, dead, or dying but the world of *The Road* reflects death as an indisputable “truth”; and as Banco suggests, the little that is left in the world, because of this violence, the punctuation (but also the language itself) becomes unnecessary and soon will die off as well.

Considering *The Road* on its surface, it is about a father and his son who are “each other’s world entire,” with silence lurking as the destruction of their world¹⁰⁶; although it stretches into the abyss and the indefinable and shapeless darkness, *The Road* is an epic of hope, nonetheless. Its violence, productive in its composition, illuminates the silence of the dying language and further unveils indifference as another culprit of the world’s impending demise. Yet, this hope remains “lodged in the mouth,”¹⁰⁷ conveyed within the language as “the breath of God [that] pass[es] from man to man through all of time,” a communion of humanity shared through language.¹⁰⁸

Language: A Reflection of the World

The resulting trauma of violence propels the extinction of language within *The Road*. The father is losing a familiar language and the son is inheriting a

¹⁰⁶ McCarthy, *The Road*, 6.

¹⁰⁷ “Lodged in mouth” is a reference from A.E. Stallings’ poem, “Ajar.”

¹⁰⁸ McCarthy, *The Road*, 286.

language plagued by death. Following the procession of the world, even the word and concept of a “neighborhood” and possibility of community ceases to exist:

I'll be in the neighborhood. Okay?
Where's the neighborhood?
It means I wont be far.¹⁰⁹

This conversation, though innocent and simple in its unfolding, is a sinister reflection of their world:

“the world [was] shrinking down about a raw core of possible entities. The names of things slowly falling into oblivion...the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever.”¹¹⁰

Within this world, the violence has struck out phrases such as “I’ll be in the neighborhood” and further shows the disparity between the father and his son. The father and son are two contending narratives, where in their contest, one narrative is ultimately silenced. Usually, it is the narrative of the son. The father goes to extreme lengths to ensure the child’s safety, both out of love and the belief that “[He] was appointed to do that by God.”¹¹¹ Despite the father’s efforts to protect his son, the son wishes that he “was with mom,” hoping for a silence that the father translates into him “wish[ing] that [he] were dead.”¹¹² As the language has become “shorn of its referents and so of its reality” the world ultimately becomes meaningless. With the signifier dying within the language, surely the conceptual signified is fated to follow and the world is due to meet its end; this is

¹⁰⁹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 95.

¹¹⁰ McCarthy, *The Road*, 88-89.

¹¹¹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 77.

¹¹² McCarthy, *The Road*, 55.

the ultimate form of violence that unites the world's beginning and its end where "in the world's destruction it [is] possible at last to see how it was made," through the construction of language and naming of things.¹¹³

The language used to communicate between the father and his son extend mostly from a place of survival. Their conversations range from apologies, small encouragements, to the names of canned foods. Alongside the father's and the son's exhausted conversations, the land is constantly revealing itself to be dead, gray, and dark--an indicator and reflection of what cannot be expressed within the pair. Kunsu suggests that actions, not names, are the only discernable things throughout the text; she notes that "the confusion we might first feel (or at least expect) about pronouns and agency, about who is doing what, is subverted because the characters' actions make clear who they are."¹¹⁴ Although the father and the son do not always verbally express their interiority (the trauma of violence has forced them into silence), the language used within *The Road's* narrative reveals some of their feelings indirectly (e.g. "He'd had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair," and "The small dirty face wide with fear"¹¹⁵). Most acknowledgement comes from either the father's or the son's reactions to something, the "action" Kunsu acknowledges as the ultimate indication of disposition. Although the son expresses fear about darkness and entering abandoned homes, fear is the reality of the "new world" and the expectation, if one hopes to survive it. Furthermore, the text serves as a concrete

¹¹³ McCarthy, *The Road*, 274.

¹¹⁴ Kunsu, 61.

¹¹⁵ McCarthy, *The Road*, 88, 197.

visual (as Banco suggests) of the disintegration of language, and its decline is the final act of violence against humanity.

Language in *The Road* constitutes the beginning and the meaning of the world for the father and his son. In the “nameless dark,” of the world the father and his son stand as lights, carriers of fire, who “shap[e] the fire just so.”¹¹⁶ As long as they carry the fire, they carry the life of the language, and the life of God. Although the father dies at the end, Steven Frye notes that “before his death he encourages his son to talk to him when he is gone...His prayers resolve themselves in conversations with his father [and] speaking to the father who loved him unconditionally is a powerful form of prayer, because God was present in the relationship that bound them.”¹¹⁷ For God to be present in the relationship that binds the father and the son, the divine must be present within their spoken language. Those who carry the fire (the father and his son), are now the referent denoting “carriers of fire,” alluding to the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...In Him was life, and life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot comprehend it.” As carriers of the fire, and “shaping the fire just so,” the father and the son also carry the life of God, the life of language. Despite death, silence, trauma from violence, and darkness that the referent represents at times within *The Road*, hope persists within the language that persists beyond and despite the world’s climate of death.

¹¹⁶ McCarthy, *The Road*, 9, 72.

¹¹⁷ Steven Frye, “Histories, Novels, Ideas: Cormac McCarthy and the Art of Philosophy.” *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, 5.

The Dying of Referents

Although hope is possible in this bleak world of *The Road*, through the instances language, it is silenced and becomes muted, nonetheless, resulting from the world's circumstance of indifference. As Kunsza notes, the language used throughout *The Road* are "the seeds of the work's optimistic worldview"¹¹⁸; however, the character of Ely puts Kunsza's claim into question. The first encounter with Ely rattles optimism and the aspect of hope within the language when he says to the father: "There is no God and we are his prophets."¹¹⁹ Ely's perspective is not only that God is dead and no longer serves a hopeful and functional purpose, but that the value of the world and the value of people are held within the language itself. The father asks Ely if he had run across any people and he responds that "There's not any people," referring to those who have been consumed by the violence in the world, resulting in indifference. The slow death of God and language is evident in a conversation between Ely and the father:

Is your name really Ely?
 No.
 You dont want to say your name.
 I dont want to say it.
 Why?
 I couldnt trust you with it. To do something with it. I dont want anybody talking about me maybe. But nobody could say that it was me. I could be anybody. I think in time like these the less said the better.¹²⁰

Ely's mistrust of others with his words, his name—the thing that assumes part of his identity—, reveals the power language wields and the violence has undergone. Ely views language and others as too volatile, therefore, too dangerous. Ely tells the father again "there is no God," and the father asks, referring to his son, "what if I said he's a god?" to

¹¹⁸ Kunsza, 57.

¹¹⁹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 165.

¹²⁰ McCarthy, *The Road*, 171-172.

where Ely says, “where men cant live gods fare no better.”¹²¹ Ely’s skepticism is not unwarranted; his sight is nearly gone, and he travels the road alone, among all of the uncertainty. Ely, however, tells the father that he has “not seen a fire in a long time, that’s all. [He] live[s] like an animal.”¹²² Perhaps this is the point of Ely’s loss of hope, where in desperation those of the road change within becoming those “creedless shells of men tottering down the causeways”¹²³; after all, Ely’s transgressions are unknown as “there is no past”--what is forgotten is turned loose and freed, despite what it may have been.¹²⁴ Ely even expresses to the father “you dont want to know the things I’ve eaten”¹²⁵; maybe Ely, too, is one of those who have consumed humanity, unknowingly destroying God and language in the process.

Though Ely acknowledges desperation and measures taken as the source of violence, the son acknowledges the redemptive qualities within Ely because of Ely’s humanity. The son tries to hold his hand and attempts to come in communion with Ely, saying to his father “we could cook something on the stove. He could eat with us,” perhaps another rendition of the last supper.¹²⁶ Though the father believes Ely to have some sort of wisdom and asked him to “tell [them] where the world went,” a straight answer is never given¹²⁷; Ely responds that “Things will be better when everybody’s gone,” and “then there’ll be nobody here but death and his days will be numbered too.”¹²⁸

¹²¹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 170, 172.

¹²² McCarthy, *The Road*, 172.

¹²³ McCarthy, *The Road*, 29.

¹²⁴ McCarthy, *The Road*, 54.

¹²⁵ McCarthy, *The Road*, 172.

¹²⁶ McCarthy, *The Road*, 165.

¹²⁷ McCarthy, *The Road*, 166.

¹²⁸ McCarthy, *The Road*, 172, 173.

Despite Ely's take on how humanity will die off with language, "when [he] saw that boy [he] thought that [he] had died."¹²⁹ Within this instance, Ely recognizes the boy as a symbol of hope. Perhaps Ely assumed children were the first to die off, which is why he thought he had died. The son is a small emergence of hope within Ely, that sparks a reimagining of the past when a world coexisted with the sum of its parts, in a teetering equilibrium.

Contending Narratives, Another Violence

The father cannot protect his son's "spiritual safety" because he cannot see through his son's eyes, and he cannot listen fully when his son speaks. The father "knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke."¹³⁰ Yet, the father takes his son's sight of a little boy and the bark of the dog to be delusions from the past: "The dog that he remembers followed for two days... That is the dog he remembers. He doesn't remember any little boys."¹³¹ And when the son spoke to his father about having seen the little boy in the window, he pleads with his him:

I'm afraid for that little boy.
 We should go get him, Papa. We could get him and take him with us. We could take him and we could take the dog. The dog could catch something to eat.
 We can't.
 And I'd give that little boy half of my food.¹³²

The father unknowingly pushes his son further into silence because he is fearful of that which does not resemble the world. The hope the father instills within his son is a counterpoint to his actual disposition, and the son shows himself to intrinsically possess a

¹²⁹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 172.

¹³⁰ McCarthy, *The Road*, 5.

¹³¹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 87.

¹³² McCarthy, *The Road*, 86.

compassionate and curious nature. The father, however, questions hope “and the dreams so rich in color. How else would death call you?” and he believes the same of memories.¹³³ His dangerous view of memories is revealed at the gas station when “he picked up the phone and dialed the number of his father’s house in that long ago,” and he remains opaque to his son, revealing nothing.¹³⁴ The father takes the disposition of the dead land when he “said the right dreams for a man in peril were dreams of peril and all else was the call of languor and death...Siren worlds.”¹³⁵ Yet, to protect himself and his son, the father attempts to destroy his memories in order to silence prospects of hope.

Although death lurks throughout the father’s and the son’s journey on the physical road, the father tries to shield the truth from his son in the attempt to preserve his innocence. All nights on the road are “beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before,” and when the father “looked toward the east for any light there was none.”¹³⁶ The darkness of this post-apocalyptic state of what used to be the United States is inescapable, as

The world...largely populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes and the cities themselves held by cores of blackened looters who tunneled among the ruin and crawled from the rubble white of tooth and eye carrying charred and anonymous tins of food in nylon nets like shoppers in the commissaries of hell.¹³⁷

Despite this violence and lack of humanity, the son willingly embraces it when his father attempts to hide him from truth of the violence that constitutes their world. The father has hopes of sparing his son, but the son negates the father when he asks:

What you put in your head is there forever?

¹³³ McCarthy, *The Road*, 21.

¹³⁴ McCarthy, *The Road*, 7.

¹³⁵ McCarthy, *The Road*, 18.

¹³⁶ McCarthy, *The Road*, 3.

¹³⁷ McCarthy, *The Road*, 181.

Yes.
 It's okay Papa.
 It's okay?
 They're already there.
 I dont want you to look.
 They'll still be there.¹³⁸

The father is desperate to protect his son, though the son knows that it is better to accept what exists instead of casting it into the darkness. In a sense, the son, too, protects his father, by suggesting that the father's protection is unnecessary. The son is "so strangely untroubled," but as his father explains, the world that they live in is broken up between "good guys" and "bad guys."¹³⁹ And though the father says to the boy that they are not "likely to meet any good guys on the road" the son reminds him "we're on the road," posing the question of what differentiates the "good" from the "bad."¹⁴⁰ The good guys "keep trying. They dont give up," which both the father and the son struggle with throughout their journey, as this world seems futile.¹⁴¹ Although the father "bent to see into the boy's face [and] he very much feared that something was gone that could not be put right again," his son "fights with monsters [yet] he does not become one himself. And [though he stares] into an abyss" he does not become the abyss, persisting beyond the indifference and violence that is the ruin of the world.¹⁴² Furthermore, the boy carries the fire and the life of language, the light that "the darkness cannot comprehend."

¹³⁸ McCarthy, *The Road*, 190-191.

¹³⁹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 191.

¹⁴⁰ McCarthy, *The Road*, 151.

¹⁴¹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 137.

¹⁴² McCarthy, *The Road*, 136.

Conclusion

Violence, to some regard, is tethered to advancement and humanity. The violence may be illustrated as emanating from modernity, but the story of the past cannot be unwritten. Violence is depicted as inherently personal within McCarthy even though it follows a guiding principle that operates on indifference. Violence is utilized as a means to an end, which categorizes it as productive in its essence. When animals fight in the wild, there is no prerogative besides survival, and it is not to acquire a position of god. Though man is an animal, man uses violence in a personal way to acquire space, whether this is through the manipulation of truth by the means of deconstructing language or obliterating others who stand in opposition to their narrative.

The violence that is thought to be a biproduct of the new world is the same forged story of the past; it is bound in principle through securing a position of power, which is the narrative of human advancement. The “good old days” continue to grow older, yet the violence adapts to its surroundings, giving it the façade of a new type of evil. As it is depicted in McCarthy’s works, historicizing violence is a violence in itself because it encourages one to adopt a blindness toward an irrefutable reality, such as with Sheriff Bell and the grandmother. This indifference champions a past that has only evolved into a future with different perpetrators executing a translation of violence, which still suffices as violence, nonetheless.

Language, as portrayed in *Blood Meridian*, *No Country For Old Men*, and *The Road* is the indication of violence. We see how the judge disturbs the autonomy of things through capturing their essence within their referents and conception, and with Chigurh how the language of the guiding principle of the vigilante is synonymous with the

language regarding state law/justice and how it unwrites human agency because of its adherence to something that takes emotional bias out of “justice.” A system in which Sheriff Bell must abandon because it is damaging to his perception of truth, as he is unwilling to compromise his morals, though he too, historicizes violence. It well may be that historicizing violence makes it more palatable, or that there is no way to evaluate perspective. As Sheriff Bell stated, he “tried to put things into perspective but sometimes you’re just too close to it,” which allows for a very narrow vision that glorifies a past that is too dissimilar from the present.¹⁴³ It is not until we reach *The Road* until the weight of violence is actualized and comprises the new world. “The sacred idiom becomes shorn of its referents and so of its reality,” serves as a signpost to how much the indifference of man has damaged the perceiver of the world—in turn destroying the world, language, everything—abetting no escape. Echoing nominalism, because man is damaged and man is the carrier of language-- the life of God and goodness--all else suffers because the entity who names becomes unable to name resulting from the trauma of violence, and invoking Benjamin, no longer able to communicate themselves to God. Despite the entrenchment of violence, hope persists through those who carry the language in *The Road*. Language faces its mortality, and its near death is the near death of humanity and meaning of the world, which brings to the father the importance of preserving the life of language because it is the life of goodness.

It is important to consider why, for redemption to surface, that unspeakable violence must coincide. This notion of redemption springing forth from violence is central to the Christian Scriptures and also to *The Road*, but *why* is it necessary? Why

¹⁴³ McCarthy, *NCFOM*, 295.

must language, narratives, and humanity be damaged—almost destroyed—in order to regain a critical perspective regarding fragility and goodness? Thelma J. Shinn offers a perspective through the lens of Flannery O’Connor’s work, that is more than relevant for the works of Cormac McCarthy. Shinn claims that O’Connor’s work “must see the distortions of modern life” through its portrayals of violence.¹⁴⁴ Similarly, in McCarthy’s work, distortions of life as depicted in *Blood Meridian*, *No Country For Old Men*, and *The Road* are made visible through the violence and critical distance of being a perceiver of violence as the audience of McCarthy’s works. However, how violence equates to redemption remains a mystery, but it beautifully contends notions of nihilism, and exists despite the violence and trauma, persisting as hope.

¹⁴⁴ Shinn, 59.

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