



A LITERARY HISTORY OF MENTAL CAPTIVITY IN THE UNITED STATES

Blood Meridian, Wise Blood,
and Contemporary Political Discourse

On July 15, 2018, U.S. President Donald Trump and Russia President Vladimir Putin held a summit in Helsinki that immediately set off a chain reaction throughout the world.¹ Even though the summit was all but forgotten for the most part in a matter of months, superseded by the frantic train of events and the subsequent bombardment from the media that have become the “new normal,” the episode remains as one of the most iconic moments of Donald Trump’s presidency. While the iron secrecy surrounding the conversation between the two dignitaries allowed for all kinds of speculation, the image of President Trump bowing to his Russian counterpart (indeed a treasure trove for semioticians), along with his declarations in the post-summit press conference, became, for many observers in the U.S. and across the world, living proof of Mr. Trump’s subservient allegiance to Mr. Putin and his obscure designs. Even some of the most recalcitrant members of the GOP vented quite publicly their disgust at the sight of a president paying evident homage to the archenemy of the United States, as Vercingetorix kneeled down before Julius Cesar in recognition of the Gaul’s

Manuel
Broncano Rodríguez
Texas A&M
International University
USA



<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0570-2680>

1. The present article is partly based on a keynote lecture presented to the audiences of the “Captive Minds. Norms, Normativities and the Forms of Tragic Protest in Literature and Cultural Practice” International Conference of the Institute of English Cultures and Literatures of the University of Silesia in Katowice, held on September 20–23, 2018, in Szczyrk, Poland.

surrender to the might of the Roman Empire. The late Senator John McCain, the most outspoken critic of Mr. Trump in the ranks of the Republican Party, fell short of accusing the president of high treason in the statement he released immediately after the press conference:

Today's press conference in Helsinki was one of the most disgraceful performances by an American president in memory. The damage inflicted by President Trump's naiveté, egotism, false equivalence, and sympathy for autocrats is difficult to calculate. But it is clear that the summit in Helsinki was a tragic mistake.. . No prior president has ever abased himself more abjectly before a tyrant. Not only did President Trump fail to speak the truth about an adversary; but speaking for America to the world, our president failed to defend all that makes us who we are—a republic of free people dedicated to the cause of liberty at home and abroad. American presidents must be the champions of that cause if it is to succeed. Americans are waiting and hoping for President Trump to embrace that sacred responsibility. One can only hope they are not waiting totally in vain.

In this essay, I reexamine the Helsinki presidential summit through the lens of Cormac McCarthy's novel *Blood Meridian* (1985) and Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* (1952), two novels that anticipate the current political climate almost prophetically. In the process, I briefly revisit some key texts in the American canon that fully belong in the history of "mental captivity" in the United States, yet to be written. It is my contention that the Helsinki summit, and Trump's administration at large, represent a prime example of "mental captivity" as a driving force in U.S. domestic and foreign policy, as I hope to prove in the pages that follow.

SOME PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT CAPTIVITY
AND THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

That such a history should be written I have no doubt. The literature of the United States, and probably of the Americas at large, is a sustained chronicle of captivity in the guise of freedom, of imprisonment under the illusion of liberty, of entrapment in the delusion of agency. The foundational discourse of the United States articulates the American experience as the grand narrative of a people liberated from captivity and engaged in the construction of a community upon the pillars of freedom and unbound

opportunity. Both the Pilgrim Fathers and the Puritans inscribed their migration to the New World as a new chapter in providential history, a renewal of the covenant God made with the people of Israel by which God declared the Israelites his chosen people and granted them the Promised Land where they would flourish as a holy nation. God assisted them in their flight from Egyptian bondage, as He later assisted the Pilgrims and Puritans in their flight from European religious intolerance. In exchange, the Israelites and Puritans entered a new form of bondage, as made explicit in the commandments inscribed in stone that God delivers to Moses and in the covenants that the Puritans undersigned, first conceptually with the Lord, and then literally with the local church. In the so-called “theocracies” of New England, citizenship and the right to own property were dependent on church membership, and membership was only granted to those individuals who provided tangible proof of their sincere conversion and expressed their commitment to church and community through a sacred oath (see, for example, Miller). In the programmatic speech he delivers upon arrival in the New World, John Winthrop establishes the supremacy of the community over the individual as the cornerstone of their social contract:

It is by a mutual consent, through a special overvaluing providence and a more than an ordinary approbation of the churches of Christ, to seek out a place of cohabitation and consortship under a due form of government both civil and ecclesiastical. In such cases as this, the care of the public must oversway all private respects, by which, not only conscience, but mere civil policy, doth bind us. For it is a true rule that particular estates cannot subsist in the ruin of the public.

In these theocracies, the church became the state, its power and legitimacy stemming from the Bible, its visibility inscribed in the very design of the towns, invariably built around the church and the common, where all streets converged. As Nathaniel Hawthorne reminds us in his *Scarlet Letter*, a building housing the prison would usually stand next to the church and the churchyard, completing the symbolic nucleus of the town center. That central circle stands as the physical representation of the eye of God that sees the most recondite secrets of the human heart. A divine eye that observes through the eyes of the community, always

Manuel
Broncano Rodríguez
Texas A&M
International University
USA

watchful for any sign of corruption in any individual, an early version of Orwell's Big Brother subjecting each citizen to permanent scrutiny and always ready to apply harsh chastisement onto the deviants. In "Main Street," a sketch about the development of a Puritan town from a rude frontier settlement to a busy urban center, Hawthorne refers to the town church in quite sardonic terms:

Their house of worship, like their ceremonial, was naked, simple, and severe. But the zeal of a recovered faith burned like a lamp within their hearts, enriching everything around them with its radiance; making of these new walls, and this narrow compass, its own cathedral; and being, in itself, that spiritual mystery and experience, of which sacred architecture, pictured windows, and the organ's grand solemnity are remote and imperfect symbols. All was well, so long as their lamps were freshly kindled at heavenly flame. After a while, however, whether in their time or their children's, these lamps began to burn more dimly, or with a less genuine lustre; and then it might be seen how hard, cold, and confined was their system,—how like an iron cage was that which they called Liberty. (69)

It is little wonder, then, that the "captivity narrative" became the most popular of literary genres in Puritan New England and that its foundational text, Mary Rowlandson's autobiographical account of her forced sojourn among the Narragansett Indians (1682) became the first best seller in American letters. Furthermore, I have little doubt that captivity narratives contain the seed of genuine American fiction, distinct as they are from the European tradition. If Hemingway was accurate with his affirmation in *Green Hills of Africa* that all American writing comes from Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, the thesis I have just stated is equally accurate. Twain's novel tells the story of two characters, one white, the other black, who flee from their captivities and set out on a quest for freedom: Huck from Aunt Sally's asphyxiating morals and his father's murderous immorality, and Jim from his bondage as a slave. Together they embody the most archetypal of American experiences, as is the escape from forced confinement and the search for liberty. Illiterate as they are, they carry in their baggage the whole library of Western civilization, and most especially, all American literature, past and future. Huck is the putative son of Emerson and Thoreau, of Whitman and Paine, of Thomas Morton and Roger Williams, of Cervantes and of the Spanish picaresque, while Jim

is heir to Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, Olaudah Equiano and Phillips Wheatley, but also of Moses and the Israelites, etc.

If Mary Rowlandson is the putative mother of the American novel, Latin American novelists are the direct descendants of Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, whose prodigious experience as failed conqueror and enslaved European does indeed contain the seed of what we know today as 'magical realism' for lack of a better term. Their autobiographical accounts articulate symbolically the birth of the true "American" self and, as such, Cabeza de Vaca and Mary Rowlandson stand as the Adam and Eve of the New World, the forebears of a lineage born out of the clash between two worlds and two incompatible semiotic universes. For both, their traumatic captivity leads to a metamorphosis or rebirth. Rowlandson is the archetypal Puritan, and her ordeal as a true descent into hell through which her faith is put to the test. Cabeza de Vaca, on the other hand, embodies the imperial project of Catholic Spain, and his loyalty to God and the emperor remains steadfast despite the trial by fire of his nine years of wanderings in the wilderness of the American Southwest.

In their accounts, both Rowlandson and Cabeza de Vaca take pains to prove beyond doubt that, despite their prolonged cohabitation with the Indian other, they remained unwaveringly faithful to their call and duty, unblemished in body and soul. Their narratives become allegories of endurance and the resistance of the Christian soul, but also allegories of the gestation of the *homo americanus*, a new species peculiar to the New World, a symbolic hybrid of European and Indian characterized by not being, rather than being (neither white nor Indian). In her narrative, Rowlandson reveals—even if unconsciously—the extent of her transformation, or rather, "indianization," as she acknowledges quite candidly her increasing admiration for the natives, which some scholars have diagnosed as an early case of Stockholm syndrome. Cabeza de Vaca, on the other hand, undergoes such a radical metamorphosis that, upon his reencounter with Spanish soldiers at the end of his ordeal, those soldiers do not recognize him as one of them and neither do the Indians who escort him by the hundreds. Thus is the *homo americanus* born.

Manuel
Broncano Rodríguez
Texas A&M
International University
USA

“The freedom of birds is an insult to me,” exclaims Judge Holden in one of the most memorable passages in *Blood Meridian*: “I’d have them all in zoos” (196). The statement is a follow-up on Holden’s earlier verbalization of his totalitarian creed, by which he impersonates God and his almighty power to decide over the fate of every living creature: “Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent” (195). The Judge is an avid collector of the most varied objects and creatures he comes across in his wanderings, which he carefully records in his ledger or desiccates and then puts away in his wallets. As some scholars have suggested, Holden embodies the European Enlightenment and its scientific mentality, and in truth, he is engaged in the composition of an encyclopedia or comprehensive catalog of all things American. Oftentimes, he draws expertly on the pages of his ledger sketches of the artifacts he finds, accompanied by detailed notations of the what and the where and the how. Once his entry in the ledger is finished, he puts away the items, or more likely, just destroys them, in order to “expunge them from the memory of man” (134).

Holden seems to possess a great erudition and he quotes the classics as well as contemporary authorities in diverse disciplines, from philosophy to botany, from geology to law. He is also a polyglot who speaks several living and dead languages, and has engraved on his rifle the Latin proverb *et in Arcadia ego*, an inscription that acquires quite an ironic twist on the silver plate mounted on his weapon for it is an apt reminder of the inevitability of death, even in the most idyllic of gardens. The Judge ambitions to become the “suzerain” of the earth, the supreme ruler over life and death, and his project is to turn the world into an inescapable prison and confine all life inside: “In order for it (life) to be mine nothing must be permitted to occur upon it save by my dispensation” (195). Unchecked freedom must be eradicated, for it subverts order and induces chaos and resistance. Holden is the prophet of imperial USA, whose manifest destiny is to subjugate all nations and all peoples under its regime of absolutist democracy and its simulacrum of individual and collective liberty.

Blood Meridian is set in the aftermath of the Mexican War, and the main action begins in 1849, barely a year after the signature of the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which sanctioned the annexation of over half a million square miles of Mexican territory to the United States. The war and the resulting treaty represent the first episode of the American expansionist agenda, the response to Winthrop's call to build a city upon a hill and spread its civilizing light across the world. While it is an eminently historical novel, *Blood Meridian* is also an allegorical tale of the time-old fight between good and evil, of God and Satan, reenacted in the wastelands of the American Southwest. In this respect, Judge Holden finds his nemesis in the Kid, the unnamed protagonist whose life we follow from birth to death. Like the characters of a medieval allegory, the Kid (and later, the Man) lacks a proper name and acquires an archetypal dimension as the representative of the Christian soul in its journey to salvation, pretty much like Everyman in the morality play of the same title or Christian in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. In fact, Cormac McCarthy invokes in the novel a wealth of intertextual links that include the picaresque, the allegorical tradition, the parable, the Western, the captivity narrative and the Indian war narrative, among others. The result is a collage of literary genres and modes converging in a truly Bakhtinian text, a polyphonic and carnivalesque representation of a new world emerging from the ashes of an older one. In this respect, Holden's ledger becomes a surrogate Book of Genesis that intends to rewrite the biblical account in terms dictated by the Judge and the Judge alone. The novel is populated by transvestites, half-wits, impostors, freaks and a myriad other beings who compose a true exercise in grotesque aesthetics, as if it were a recreation of a painting by Brueghel or Bosch. Upon entering an unnamed town, the narrator describes the human landscape that Glanton and his men encounter in terms highly evocative of those post-medieval artists who portrayed the tensions and contradictions inherent to a world about to undergo a profound transformation:

There was a bazaar in progress. A traveling medicine show, a primitive circus. They passed stout willow cages clogged with vipers, with great limegreen serpents from some more southerly latitude or beaded lizards with their black mouths wet with venom. A reedy old leper held up hand-

fuls of tapeworms from a jar for all to see and cried out his medicines against them and they were pressed about by other rude apothecaries and by vendors and mendicants until all came at last before a trestle whereon stood a glass carboy of clear mescal. In this container with hair afloat and eyes turned upward in a pale face sat a human head. (65)

Cormac McCarthy takes the reader quite explicitly into a medieval landscape inhabited by malformed and infirm creatures who mirror the utter decay of a civilization about to be erased by both the “savage” Indians and the civilized invaders from the North. In fact, *Blood Meridian* displays a language remindful of the old crusades or the so-called “Reconquista” of the Iberian Peninsula during the Middle Ages. For the Mexicans, the Yankees are knights fighting the Comanche and Apache barbarians who are wreaking havoc in their towns and haciendas: “You are fine caballeros [...]. You kill the barbaros. They cannot hide from you” (96). However, the Mexicans who at first welcomed the Americans as true liberators soon realize the real nature of those mercenaries hired to hunt and kill Indians who prove to be even more destructive than them, and conclude: “Mejor los indios” (166). Categories are thus dissolved in a text with a highly subversive vein that fits quite notably Linda Hutcheon’s definition of historiographic metafiction. The reader—along with the Mexicans—soon realize the emptiness of the terms that have supported since antiquity the superiority of the white, Caucasian race over all other races, mere subalterns in need of the redemptive power of Judeo-Christian, European civilization. Such terms as “civilized,” “savage,” or “barbarian” prove to be mere signifiers devoid of a signified, words lacking meaning. If we extrapolate this and apply it to language at large, we can conclude that language is a useless epistemological and ontological tool, a simulacrum for communication. Furthermore, as Faulkner suggests through the character of Addie Bundren in *As I Lay Dying*, language becomes an obstacle or barrier between the self and the world, to the point that it is either the word or the thing, speech or experience. Motherhood, Addie claims, is a word needed by those who have never had the experience of being a mother, for those who have do not need the word to account for it. The same applies to love, or fear, or hate, etc.:

That was when I learned that words are no good; that words don't ever fit even what they are trying to say at. When he [Cash] was born I knew that motherhood was invented by someone who had to have a word for it because the ones that had the children didn't care whether there was a word for it or not. I knew that fear was invented by someone that had never had the fear; pride, who never had the pride (99).

This passage represents the precise moment in which the modernist Faulkner becomes the postmodernist Faulkner, anticipating the irruption of the postmodern in literature by several decades.

This unsurmountable gap between language and reality, between the word and the thing, lies at the heart of Judge Holden's sinister project to subject the universe to his will. Each time the Judge inscribes an object into his ledger book and then destroys the object itself, he is depriving the signifier of its signified, emptying the word of its meaning, or rather, returning the world to its original condition as text. God created the world through speech, his building materials mere words that were devoid of meaning, of signifiers that created their own signified through utterance: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (The Bible, *New International Version*, John 1.1). "Let there be light [...] and there was light" (Gen. 1.3). Holden pursues to reverse the process and, in so doing, rearrange the order of the universe, thus displacing God as the author and ruler of all that exists. And existence is only granted, as I mentioned earlier, to those who make their way into the ledger by the Judge's approval.

There is little doubt that *Blood Meridian* is a historical novel. After all, it recounts the story of real-life Captain Joel Glanton and his party of mercenaries, hired by Governor Trías of Chihuahua to cleanse the territory of marauding Indians right after the signature of the Guadalupe Hidalgo Treaty. A large amount of the information about the scalp hunting exploits of Captain Glanton and his twelve mercenaries McCarthy drew from Samuel Chamberlain's memoir, *My Confession: Recollections of a Rogue*. Chamberlain's manuscript is the only known source for the character of Judge Holden, who is briefly mentioned by the former member of Glanton's gang in his account. *Blood Meridian* also invokes the various filibusters who ambited to appropriate additional territories in Mexico in the aftermath of the war, through the fictional Captain White and his ill-fated campaign in Mexican territory.

Through *White*, McCarthy reproduces the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny and divine duty displayed by newspapers and politicians to justify and promote the war against Mexico:

What we are dealing with [...] is a race of degenerates. A mongrel race, little better than niggers. And maybe no better. There is no government in Mexico. Hell, there's no God in Mexico. Never will be. We are dealing with a people manifestly incapable of governing themselves. And do you know what happens with people who cannot govern themselves? That's right. Others come in to govern for them. (33)

When the Kid signs up with Captain White's doomed party of filibusters he becomes the unconscious agent of the expansionist creed that had led to the annexation of the Southwest and turned the territory into the testing ground of an empire that was in the making.² A creed that was articulated in racial, but also religious terms, as was the case with the totalitarian regimes that would emerge in Europe and Latin America some decades later. In his article "Wars and Rumors of Wars," John Wegner writes: "His [the Kid's] movement from Tennessee to Texas begins directly after the Mexican/American War (1846-1848), and he participates in various filibustering gangs whose goals are to rid the earth of the heathen tribes below the newly-formed border and make a little money while doing it. [...] In essence, the Kid actively participates in American expansion West and South." The Kid enlists unknowingly as a crusader in White's divine mission of recovering the holy land from a "bunch of barbarians" who represent a degenerated, "mongrel" race that is unable to govern itself, a people that needs to be Christianized and taught the basics of civilization. In exchange, every man in the company will get some of the best land in the world, in which gold and silver is as abundant as in the El Dorado of the conquistadors' chimeric

*Captive Minds
Normativities
and Protests*

RIAS VOL. 13, SPRING-SUMMER Nº 1/2020

2. In his article "Wars and Rumors of Wars," John Wegner writes: "His [the Kid's] movement from Tennessee to Texas begins directly after the Mexican/American War (1846-1848), and he participates in various filibustering gangs whose goals are to rid the earth of the heathen tribes below the newly-formed border and make a little money while doing it. [...] In essence, the Kid actively participates in American expansion West and South." In E. T. Arnold & D. C. Luce, *A Cormac McCarthy Companion: The Border Trilogy*. University Press of Mississippi, 2001, p. 74.

imagination (*Meridian* 33–34). Despite the time-gap between the events of the novel and those of history, Captain White is most probably based, at least partly, on Henry Alexander Crabb, a former U.S. senator, as well as former general of the U.S. army. A private enterprise without American official support, Crabb's plan was a failure from the beginning, since he was unable to recruit more than a hundred colonists for what he termed the Gadsden or Arizona Colonization Company. On the other hand, when Pesqueira took control of Sonora, he disengaged himself from the arrangement and turned against Crabb and his expedition. To make a long story short, Crabb and his men were ambuscaded by Sonorans in the vicinity of Caborca, and after a six day siege in the adobe house where they had sought refuge, the Americans surrendered. The next morning, April 7, Crabb and the other survivors were executed. Only fourteen-year-old Charles Edward Evans was spared, and perhaps this youngster served as the inspiration for McCarthy's protagonist in *Blood Meridian*. After his execution, Crabb's head is said to have been exposed in a jar filled with mescal or vinegar, like Captain White's in the novel. In his inflammatory discourse, White verbalizes the jingoistic vision underlying the "manifest destiny" assumption as formulated by journalist John O'Sullivan in his 1845 call for the annexation of Texas, as well as the Monroe Doctrine as announced by the U.S. president in 1823, which articulated the ideological principles that sanctioned the war against Mexico in 1846. His speech reproduces almost verbatim the rhetorical fallacies propagated by yellow journalism in the U.S. Thus, for example, in the May 1858 issue of *The United States Democratic Review*, an editorial titled "The Fate of Mexico" reads as follows:

[Mexico] became free and the world looked for another Washington Republic in the West. [...] She started with every chance in her favor except one—*her people were not white men—they were not Caucasians*. [...] They were a bad mixture of Spaniards, Indians, and negroes—making an aggregate containing few of the virtues of either, with most of the vices of all. [...] *Such men did not know how to be free*: they have not learned the lesson to this day, nor will they learn it, till they are taken into the district school of American Democracy, where the master will govern them till they learn how to govern themselves. They must pass their novitiate. [...] Mexico cannot govern herself. [...] The time has come when it is as imperatively our duty—made so by Providence—to take control of Mexico, and wheel her into the train of the world's prog-

ress, as it was ever our duty to plant the Caucasian race on this soil, and open its illimitable bosom to the sun. [...] No race but our own can either cultivate or rule the western hemisphere. [...] [It] is a work which the Almighty has given us to do. (340–343)

This editorial reveals the atmosphere of racial bias and territorial ambitions that still remained in the U.S. well after the official signature of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, which far from satiating the American appetite for expansion, became a call for further expansion into Mexican territory and even for the annexation of the whole country. White's speech is thus but an accurate reflection of what the newspapers stated about the ungovernable and unruly southern neighbor. Dianne Luce states: "A significant aim for McCarthy in these works [*Blood Meridian* as well as the *Border Trilogy*] is to waken his American readers from the cultural blindness that has long excused aggression against our southern neighbor and the cultural amnesia that allows us to see border transgression today as a uniquely Mexican sin." In other words, in the Southwestern cycle McCarthy confronts the official history imposed by the State with the apocryphal, or intra-, history of those who were victimized by the creed of Manifest Destiny, and therefore deprived of a voice.

During the 2016 presidential campaign, and throughout his presidency, Donald Trump has revived such rhetoric in quite undisimulated ways, awakening the most atavistic ghosts of racism and intolerance that currently pervade the political landscape of the United States, a dangerous turn that may lie at the heart of the mass shooting that took place in El Paso, Texas, on August 3, 2019, in which twenty-two people were killed and two dozen injured. Most of the victims had Hispanic last names, and eight were Mexican nationals. The suspect had allegedly published a manifesto on social media minutes before the attack, titled *An Inconvenient Truth*, in which he declared: "This attack is a response to the Hispanic invasion of Texas. They are the instigators, not me. I am simply defending my country from cultural and ethnic replacement brought on by an invasion" (Politi). And after his voluntary surrender, the suspect declared that he had intended to kill "as many Mexicans as possible" (Francescani). In the context of the political discourse prevalent during the Trump administration, which

demonizes Mexicans and Hispanics as a threatening horde ready to invade the United States, the whole El Paso episode acquires a sinister and ominous tinge, as if it were a conscious response to Trump's repeated calls to defend the country against the barbarian intruders at whatever cost, in what we can label as the "rhetoric of the wall" that the president has deployed quite effectively for his political ambitions.

BLOOD MERIDIAN, WISE BLOOD, AND AMERICAN MESSIANISM

Blood Meridian is a complex exercise in intertextuality, a narrative strategy characteristic of postmodernist metafiction. Furthermore, rather than history itself, it is the story of history, history turned into story, that lies at the core of the novel. Thus, the borderline between historical and fictional discourse is so blurry that it disappears, revealing both discourses as one and the same. For Linda Hutcheon, this is precisely the most distinctive feature of historiographical metafiction.³ The historical Glanton can be made accessible to us only through the fictional Glanton, and the historical invasion of Mexico by the United States can only be accounted by means of the story of that invasion. And if this is so, then we can conclude that the world itself can only be perceived through the narrative that we tell ourselves; we may even conclude that we can only figure out ourselves and our place in the world by means of a narrative in which we are both narrators and protagonists. In other words, we are an allegory of ourselves, and only thus can we find meaning in us and the world we inhabit. In one of his numerous speeches, Holden states:

The truth about the world [...] is that anything is possible. Had you not seen it all from birth and thereby bled it of its strangeness it would appear to you for what it is, a hat trick in a medicine show, a fevered dream, a trance bepopulate with chimeras having neither analogue nor precedent, an itinerant carnival, a migratory tentshow whose ultimate destination after many a pitch in many a mudded field is unspeakable and calamitous beyond reckoning. (242)

3. "The term postmodernism, when used in fiction, should [...] best be reserved to describe fiction that is at once metafictional and historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past. In order to distinguish this paradoxical beast from traditional historical fiction, I would like to label it 'historiographic metafiction'" (Hutcheon 3).

Judge Holden is a charlatan in the guise of a philosopher, a dictator in the guise of a theologian, and his gospel of war has the power to entice men as if Holden were the new messiah in this new world—the American Southwest—that is being created under his spell. Hence, for example, his quasi-miraculous fabrication of powder out of sulphur and human urine—a process through which the Judge reveals the alchemist he has in him—turns Glanton and his men into converts to his catechism of warfare and racial cleansing, true acolytes of Holden’s demoniac doctrine: once the “devil’s batter” is dried and ready, each man in the party of Indian hunters approaches the Judge and gets his share of the powder “like communicants.” Holden is the prophet announcing the new faith, but a faith that is as old as the world itself, and certainly older than men: “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. That is the way it was and will be. That way and not some other way” (245). Holden’s creed holds the sacred truth that “War is God” (246) and it demands from its acolytes full commitment to the holy dance that only true warriors can dance, those who have divested themselves of all mundane concerns and have purified their body and soul through the shedding of blood, theirs as well as their enemy’s: “Only that man who has offered up himself entire to the blood of war, who has been to the floor of the pit and seen horror in the round and learned at last that it speaks to his inmost heart, only that man can dance” (323). It is little wonder that Judge Holden adopts as his protégé, his most faithful disciple, a cretin who had been kept for years in a cage by his brother, until the Judge sets him free. Ever since, the cretin follows Holden wherever he goes, oftentimes both fully naked except for a hat, as if the cretin were a grotesque reflection of the Judge and his incoherent grunts a parodic repetition of Holden’s grand but empty speech.

Once the Kid is released from the San Diego jail, he becomes a lone wanderer who travels aimlessly from one place to another, hiring out at various jobs along the trail. Around his neck, he wears the “scapular of heathen ears that Brown had worn to the scaffold” (328). He carries with him a bible he found at a mining camp,

“no word of which could he read. In his dark and frugal clothes some took him for a sort of preacher but he was no witness to them, neither of things at hand nor things to come, he least of any man” (329). The Kid’s impersonation of a religious minister, even if involuntary, suggests a kinship between the Kid and Hazel Motes, the protagonist of Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*, who is repeatedly confused with a preacher because of his hat, despite his claims to the contrary, until he eventually becomes one, the preacher and only member of the Church Without Christ, “the church where the blind don’t see and the lame don’t walk and what’s dead stays that way. Ask me about that church and I’ll tell you it’s the church that the blood of Jesus don’t foul with redemption” (101). I have long held the suspicion that the appearance of “blood” in both titles is not mere coincidence, but rather McCarthy’s explicit acknowledgment of O’Connor’s presence in the midst of the intertextual universe invoked in his novel.

In truth, both *Blood Meridian* and *Wise Blood* recreate a farcical and grotesque world where the sacred turns into the profane, the serious into the inconsequential, the tragic into the comic, and vice-versa, all against the background of a cacophony of competing voices, or competing narratives, that signify nothing. A world of distorting mirrors holding only “smoke and phantoms” (BM 343), reflecting the true image of those creatures that play at being humans but are nothing beyond a deformed and hollow simulacrum, like the masks worn by actors in a tragicomedy, or like the “shadow behind” us (WB 166). Both Hazel and the Kid are war veterans, both are confused for a preacher, and both carry a bible with them (his mother’s bible and her silver-rimmed spectacles are the only possessions from his home village that Hazel takes along when he joins the army). Furthermore, both novels trace the lives of their protagonists from their adolescence to their death in quite explicit allegorical terms, even if the ultimate meaning of those allegories is opaque and resists univocal interpretation. Hazel and the Kid undergo a radical metamorphosis: from a sworn and militant atheist to a self-blinded witness to Jesus Christ in the case of Hazel; from a teenager with a “taste for mindless violence” (3) to a lone ranger in the Wild West who assists pilgrims in distress. At twenty-eight, fourteen years after his departure

Manuel
Broncano Rodríguez
Texas A&M
International University
USA

from his father's shack in Tennessee, the Kid describes a surreal procession of penitents, a "troubled sect" progressing slowly across the plain, some flogging themselves on their naked backs, others carrying heavy loads of cholla cacti on their shoulders, all escorts to a hooded man in a white robe hauling a heavy and crudely hewed cross. The following day, the Kid runs again into the party of penitents, now a collection of butchered corpses scattered around the fallen cross. While contemplating the carnage, he happens to notice in a niche in the rock a very old woman kneeling as if in prayer, her head covered by a shawl decorated with the "figures of stars and quartermoons and other insignia of a provenance unknown to him" (332). While the Kid is unable to recognize such iconography, for he lacks the knowledge of the semiotic system in which those icons acquire meaning, an informed reader will immediately relate the elaborate shawl to the Virgin of Guadalupe and her miraculous appearance to the Indian convert Juan Diego in the early stages of the Spanish conquest of Mexico. And to this old woman the Kid opens his heart and, in the longest speech he delivers in the whole novel (even if rendered in indirect style), he tells her in a low voice of his life of hardship and warfare, a lonely traveler far away from his country of birth with no family or home to return to. And like a gallant knight errant of old, he assures the ancient woman he will deliver her from sure death at that place. But the woman remains silent: "Abuelita [...] No puedes escucharme?" With his question, the Kid not only reveals his concern for the old woman, but also his command of Spanish, a fact that seems to have attracted little critical attention, despite its significance in the character's evolution. When he gently touches the woman's arm, she moves "slightly, her whole body, light and rigid. She weighed nothing. She was just a dried shell and she had been dead in that place for years" (332). Like the numerous dilapidated churches and missions that dot the landscape of the novel, and like the party of penitents slaughtered mercilessly while reenacting the Crucifixion, the old virgin-like Mexican mummified in her rocky shrine stands as a symbol of the unviability of Catholicism in the world that is being created anew by the Judge and his creed. Furthermore, the woman's dry shell is a fascinating representa-

tion of a signifier devoid of a signified, like Addie Bundren's empty words that create a simulacrum of experience.

Judge Holden, for his part, could well pass for an inhabitant of Taulkinham, the city where most of the action of *Wise Blood* takes place, a modern-day Babylon after the collapse of the Tower of Babel and the resulting dispersion of peoples and languages. Taulkinham is the city of talkers, as its name suggests, the residence of tricksters and charlatans, a carnival in which nothing is what it seems to be, a contemporary version of John Bunyan's "City of Sin," disputed by a throng of con preachers announcing the good news of their church: The Church of Christ, the Church Without Christ, the Free Church of Christ, the Holy Church of Christ Without Christ. In an early episode of *Blood Meridian*, the Kid attends the performance of an itinerant revivalist, Reverend Green, inside a large tent where a large and foul-smelling crowd has sought refuge from the heavy rain. The preacher's sermon is suddenly interrupted by the entrance of an "enormous man [...] bold as a stone [...] and no trace of beard and [...] no brows to his eyes nor lasses to them," This is the first encounter of the Kid, and the reader, with Judge Holden, whose sudden appearance in that "nomadic house of God" (5) hushes all voices into dead silence. Such a dramatic entrée paves the way for Holden's even more dramatic performance, the first of many instances of his ability to manipulate individuals and crowds at his caprice:

Ladies and gentlemen I feel it my duty to inform you that the man holding this revival is an imposter. He holds no papers of divinity from any institution recognized or improvised [...] In truth, [...] [he] is not only totally illiterate but is also wanted by the law [...] [o]n a variety of charges the most recent of which involved a girl of eleven years—I said eleven—who had come to him in trust and whom he was surprised in the act of violating while actually clothed in the livery of his God [...]. Not three weeks before this he was run out of Fort Smith Arkansas for having congress with a goat. Yes lady, that is what I said. Goat. (7)

The gravity of Holden's accusations turn the congregation into a rampaging mob that wreaks havoc both inside and outside the tent, which collapses like a "wounded medusa" amidst the stampede of desperate men and women seeking protection from the incessant gunfire. When the Judge is asked at the bar-

room how he came into the knowledge of the reverend's hideous crimes, he simply replies: "I never laid eyes on the man before today. Never even heard of him" (9). Holden thus reveals his true nature as a manipulator of the masses by the power of his word to propagate lies as if they were proven facts. The Judge does not tolerate competition from any preacher, for he is the preacher, and his sinister gospel of war the only gospel to be authorized in the new world order that he heralds, for Holden ambitions to be the zookeeper in which all extant creatures are to be confined. Holden's zoo echoes the Taulkinham zoo in *Wise Blood*, where Enoch Emory, Hazel's single and most devout follower, works as a keeper. Enoch makes his mission to provide the Church Without Christ with the "new Jesus" that Hazel demands, "one that's all man, without blood to waste" (140), which he fulfils by stealing a mummified corpse from the museum inside the zoo, the carcass of a "a dead shriveled-up part-nigger dwarf that had never done anything but get himself embalmed and then lain stinking in a museum the rest of his life" (176). Enoch and the Judge, both zookeepers of sorts, along with the virgin-like Mexican woman and the shriveled "new Jesus," reveal the shared concern of both writers with the disorientation and despair resulting from the collapse of (religious) symbols and myths that had provided Western civilization with a sense of hope and purpose for millennia. There are other links between McCarthy's and O'Connor's novels, too many in fact to be analyzed in some depth in this article. O'Connor's Taulkinham and McCarthy's Southwest are discursive loci, sites of competing voices striving to pass as the messengers of truth, the residence of mountebanks in the guise of prophets, of fake orators selling a fake divinity to a mass of individuals trapped in the existential anguish that infects contemporary life like a contagious disease. A new form of "mental captivity" that makes of individuals an easy prey to whoever promises to restore hope and order to the chaotic world we inhabit, be it in religious or political terms. *Blood Meridian* and *Wise Blood* certainly shed an almost prophetic light on the current geopolitical state of affairs, in these times when the notion of facts and truth have been deprived of signification, a true exercise of deconstruction of language (and reality) for political gain.

One of the side effects of Donald Trump's term in office has been the revival of George Orwell's *1984*, once again ranking high on bookseller lists. Orwell's "newspeak" seems to have transcended the book pages and entered the common parlance of Trump's administration. Furthermore, like the Ministry of Truth in Orwell's novel, the current president and his administration seem engaged in the systematic retelling of history with complete disregard for evidence and proven facts. If facts contradict the Party's goals, then "the facts must be altered," concludes Orwell's Big Brother. After all, past events "have no objective existence, but survive only in written records and in human memories. The past is whatever the records and the memories agree upon" (166). And, since the Party is in full control of the minds of its members (every citizen), and of the archives of history, "it follows that the past is whatever the Party chooses to make it [...] when it has been recreated in whatever shape is needed at the moment, then this new version is the past, and no different past can ever have existed" (166). Likewise, Trump and his aides do not hesitate to alter the narrative of past and present events to suit their needs, as journalists Christopher Cadelago and Andrew Restuccia denounced in an article published in *Politico* (09/12/2018):

From the moment Trump ascended to the nation's highest office, the former reality TV boardroom brawler has made a habit of rewriting history, challenging the public to ignore what people plainly see with their own eyes—often on television, where Trump is watching it, too [...] "If he doesn't like the reality, he changes it," said former Trump Organization executive Barbara Res. "He is able to take a reality and modify it and convince himself of that modified reality."

Donald Trump will pass down as the promoter of alternative facts and relative truths, which is perhaps defensible on the grounds that, in a universe of alternate narratives, no one has the right to claim preeminence over others, or so the Trump administration seems to take for granted. Hence, for example, his rotund and self-satisfied affirmation of how the response of the federal government to Hurricane Maria (which devastated the island of Puerto Rico and killed almost 3000 people in 2017) had been "an incredible unsung success," as Cadelago and Restuccia report

in their article. The Church Without Christ that Hazel Motes preaches seems to have found faithful acolytes among Trump's voters, for Hazel's gospel sounds like the guiding light of current U.S. domestic and foreign policies: "I preach there are all kinds of truth, your truth and somebody else's, but behind all of them, there's only one truth and that is that there's no truth, [...] No truth behind all truths is what I and this church preach!" (WB 165). President Trump will also pass down as the president who recovered the myth of the American frontier, but not as an expansive vanguard extending the reach of (European) civilization over an untamed wilderness, as was envisioned in past centuries, but a frontier turned into a defensive border in the form of a wall that, like Hadrian's Wall in the northern confines of ancient Rome, is meant to prevent any barbarian intrusion from the Mexican south. Trump's "rhetoric of the wall" is the reversal of President J. F. Kennedy's "New Frontier" rhetoric: while Kennedy's was meant to reawaken the pioneering spirit of the American self, Trump's seems meant to awaken the most primeval fears of the Other, and his envisioned Border, in theory meant as defense against hostile invaders, echoes Judge Holden's totalitarian zoo so vividly as to suggest that its real purpose may not be so much walling out the encroaching barbarians from the south, as to wall a whole nation, like Holden's birds, in an enclosure of dread and hatred for the foreigner.

The present article has undergone a series of revisions from the original paper I read at the "Captive Minds" conference organized by the University of Silesia back in 2018, precisely at the time of the publication by *The New York Times* of a long investigative article on the Russian factor in the presidential election that elevated Mr. Trump to the presidency. In it, Scott Shane and Mark Mazzetti stated, "there is a plausible case that Mr. Putin succeeded in delivering the presidency to his admirer, Mr. Trump, though it cannot be proved or disproved." Such a claim—the impossibility of ever demonstrating the suspicion that Trump became U.S. President through the agency of Russia President Vladimir Putin—certainly was a prophetic anticipation of where the long investigation into this alleged collusion carried out by Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller would end. At the time of writing this

conclusion, The U.S. Congress has formally initiated preliminary investigations that may lead to the impeachment of President Donald Trump on the grounds of a phone conversation he held on July 25, 2019, with the newly elected president of the Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, triggered by a formal complaint lodged on August 12 by an unidentified C.I.A. officer detailed to the White House at one point and with expertise on Ukrainian affairs, according to *The New York Times* (Barnes et al.). In the nine-page complaint, the unnamed whistle-blower expressed serious concern about the tenor of the phonecall, suggesting that the U.S. president used his public office quite forcibly for personal political gain. The days that followed brought to light growing evidence of Trump's wrongdoing, and at the time I compose these closing remarks, it is difficult to foresee the outcome of this case. One thing, however, has become evident: while the conclusions of Mueller's report, submitted to U.S. Attorney General William Barr on March 22, 2019, did not prove, according to Barr, Trump's personal involvement in the Russian affair, the current case appears to involve ample evidence to substantiate a process of impeachment against the U.S. President. Time will tell.

*Manuel
Broncano Rodríguez
Texas A&M
International University
USA*

WORKS CITED

- Barnes, Julian E., et al. "White House Knew of Whistle-Blower's Allegations Soon After Trump's Call With Ukraine Leader." *The New York Times*, 26.09.19. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/26/us/politics/who-is-whistleblower.html?module=inline>. Accessed 15 April, 2020.
- Cabeza de Vaca, Alvar Núñez. *Naufragios: La relacion y comentarios del governador Alvar nuñez cabeça de vaca, de lo acaescido en las dos jornadas que hizo a las Indias*, 1542, 1555, <https://es.wikisource.org/wiki/Naufragios>. Accessed 20 Feb., 2020.
- Cadelago, Christopher, and Andrew Restuccia. "Trump Tries to Rewrite History on Maria as Hurricane Florence Approaches." *Politico*, 12.09.18. <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/09/12/trump-tries-to-rewrite-history-on-maria-as-hurricane-florence-approaches-817801>. Accessed 10 Dec., 2019.
- Chamberlain, Samuel. *My Confession: Recollections of a Rogue*, edited by W. H. Goetzmann. Texas State Historical Assn; Unexpurgated edition, 1997.
- Faulkner, William. *As I Lay Dying*. Norton Critical Edition, edited by Michael Gorra. W. W. Norton and Company, 2010.
- Francescani, Christian, et. al. "Mass Shooting that Killed 20 in El Paso Investigated as 'Domestic Terrorism': Officials." ABC News, 5 Aug. 2019. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/police-el-paso-issue-report-active-shooter/story?id=64753896>. Accessed 20 May, 2020.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. "Main Street." *The Snow Image and other Twice-Told Tales*, James R. Oswood & Co., 1876.
- Hutcheon, Linda. "Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History." *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*, edited by O'Donnell, P., and Robert Con Davis. Johns Hopkins UP, 1989, pp. 3-32.
- Luce, Diane. "Doomed Enterprise at Caborca: The Henry Crabb Expedition of 1857 and McCarthy's Unquiet American Boys." Unpublished paper presented at the Cormac McCarthy Society Conference, Berea College, March 2013.
- Miller, Joshua. "Direct Democracy and the Puritan Theory of Membership." *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 53, no. 1, Feb. 1991, pp. 57-74.

- O'Connor, Flannery. *Wise Blood* (FSG Classics). Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Kindle Edition, 2012.
- Orwell, George. *Nineteen Eighty Four*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2017.
- Politi, Daniel. "El Paso Suspect Reportedly a Trump Supporter Who Wrote Racist, Anti-Immigrant Manifesto." *Slate*. 3 August, 2019. <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2019/08/el-paso-suspect-shooter-trump-racist-manifesto.html>. Accessed 20 May, 2020.
- Rowlandson, Mary. *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God, Together with the Faithfulness of His Promises Displayed*, edited by Neal Salisbury. Bedford Books, 1997.
- Shane, Scott, and Mark Mazzetti. "The Plot to Subvert an Election: Unraveling the Russia Story So Far." *The New York Times*, 20 Sept. 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/09/20/us/politics/russia-interference-election-trump-clinton.html>. Accessed 21 May, 2020.
- Wegner, John. "Wars and Rumors of Wars." *A Cormac McCarthy Companion: The Border Trilogy*, edited by Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce. UP of Mississippi, 2001, 73-91.
- Winthrop, John. "A Model of Christian Charity." The John Winthrop Society Archive, https://www.winthropsociety.com/doc_charity.php. Accessed 21 May, 2020.

Manuel
Broncano Rodríguez
Texas A&M
International University
USA

