Université de Montréal

The Violence of Bearing Witness
in Flannery O'Connor and Cormac McCarthy

par Alexander St-Laurent

Département de littérature et de langues du monde
Faculté des arts et des sciences

Thèse présentée à la Faculté des arts et des sciences
en vue de l'obtention du grade de Philosophiæ Doctor (Ph.D.)
en études anglaises

octobre 2019

© Alexander St-Laurent, 2019

Université de Montréal
Département de littérature et de langues du monde, Faculté des arts et des sciences

Cette thèse intitulée

The Violence of Bearing Witness in Flannery O'Connor and Cormac McCarthy

Présentée par

Alexander St-Laurent

A été évaluée par un jury composé des personnes suivantes

Terry Cochran
Président-rapporteur

Éric Savoy
Directeur de recherche

Caroline Brown
Membre du jury

Steven Bruhm
Examinateur externe

Résumé de synthèse

Les études présentées dans ce thèse, *The Violence of Bearing Witness in Flannery O'Connor and Cormac McCarthy*, portent sur les représentations narratives de l'acte de témoigner dans les textes des écrivains américains Flannery O'Connor et Cormac McCarthy. Plus précisement, j'identifie l'acte de témoigner comme étant une fonction essentielle du prophète et situe ensuite la représentation narrative de cet acte dans la tradition de la jérémiade américaine. Je débute alors mon étude de O'Connor en examinant son interprétation du rôle du prophète aussi bien dans ses textes que dans la société en générale et sa culture en particulier. Je place ensuite son corpus dans le contexte du mouvement des droits civiques des 1950s-60s et retrace l'évolution de ses personnages noirs à travers la progression d'un groupe de récits que je term « The Geranium Variations ». Mon analyse herméneutique de *Blood Meridian* emploie la typologie de la violence de Slavoj Žižek pour affirmer que, bien que le roman soit rempli de représentations vives de la violence, McCarthy démontre que la violence structurelle est à l'origine des flambées individuelles – c'est-à-dire de guerre, d'expansion territoriale agressive et de génocide sanctionné par l'État. De plus, mes études démontre que les descriptions excessives de violence du roman sont juxtaposées à une pénurie de description narrative dans la mesure où les représentations incessantes de violence tout au long du roman aboutissent à la mort non décrite du protagoniste, the kid. Enfin, je conclus que les allusions aux Écritures au tout début du roman prédit que the kid aura un rôle liminal dans le texte en tant que prophèt maudit qui a pour fonction de témoigner les horreurs indescriptibles de la nuit des temps.

Mots-clés: Flannery O'Connor, Cormac McCarthy, littérature américaine, grâce, maledictions, violence, prophète, psychanalyse, herméneutique, l'Ancien Testament.

Abstract

This dissertation, *The Violence of Bearing Witness in Flannery O'Connor and Cormac McCarthy*, investigates the narrative expressions of bearing witness in the fiction of two writers of the American South: Flannery O'Connor and Cormac McCarthy. I identify the act of bearing witness as an essential function of the prophet and locate the narrative representation of this act within the tradition of the American jeremiad. I begin my study of O'Connor's works by investigating her understanding of the significance of the role of the prophet in her writing as well as in modern society. I then situate O'Connor's literary art within the context of the civil rights movement and trace the evolution of her treatment of Black characters through the progress of a group of stories I have termed the "Geranium Variations." My hermeneutic analysis of *Blood Meridian* employs Slavoj Žižek's typology of violence to argue that though the novel is replete with vivid portrayals of violence, the true horror with which McCarthy reckons is the structural violence that fosters the individual outbreaks of brutality, i.e. warfare, aggressive territorial expansion, and state-sanctioned genocide. I demonstrate that the novel's excessive descriptions of violence are juxtaposed with an absence of description insofar as the relentless representations of gratuitous violence throughout the novel culminate in the unnarrated death of the protagonist, the kid. I conclude that the allusions to scripture in the opening sentences of the novel foretells the kid's liminal role in the text as a cursed prophet whose function is to witness the unspeakable horrors of history.

Keywords: Flannery O'Connor, Cormac McCarthy, American literature, prophets, curses, grace, epiphanies, violence, psychoanalysis, Old Testament.

Table of Contents

Résumé de synthèse………………………………………………………………………. i

Abstract……………………………………………………………………………………… ii

List of Abbreviations…………………………………………………………………... iv

Acknowledgements……………………………………………………………………….. v

Introduction…………………………………………………………………………………….. 1

Chapter 1

Investigating the Role of the Prophet in Flannery O'Connor's Late Texts……………………. 19

Part I
The Topical is Poison: Prophets Failed & False Converge………..………….......................... 20

Part II
The Geranium Variations..…..………………………………………………………..... 62

Chapter 2
Bearing Witness to Violence of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*……………………….. 117

Part I
No Such Thing as Life Without Bloodshed…………………………………………………... 118

Part II
The kid: A Cursed Specter Bears Witness…………………………………………………….. 150

Conclusion
"All That Beauty"………..…………………………………………………………………… 171

Works Cited…………………………………………………………………………………… 178

List of Abbreviations

BM	Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*
CW	Flannery O'Connor, *Collected Works*
CR	R. Neil Scott & Irwin H. Streight, *Contemporary Reviews*
GC	Karl-Heinz Westarp, *Flannery O'Connor, Growing Craft*
H	Amiri Baraka, *Home: Social Essays*
HB	Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*
HS	Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*
MM	Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*
RV	Library of America, *Reporting Vietnam*

Acknowledgments

I would like to begin by thanking my research supervisor, Dr. Éric Savoy. His support over the years, and in the wake of this dissertation's many formulations, has been unyielding. I will always be beholden to him for encouraging me to explore the work of Flannery O'Connor since it is my sincere belief that her writing has had a profound effect on both my creative and intellectual development. I strive to become a writer worthy of the lessons she has taught me over the course of countless hours spent immersed in her texts. Thank you, Dr. Savoy, for enriching my life with O'Connor.

I would also like to thank Dr. Steven Bruhm for his meticulous reading of the previous draft of the dissertation and for his generous comments and directives. This new version of the dissertation owes much to Dr. Bruhm's insights on O'Connor's artistic vision.

Thank you to Dr. Andre Furlani for his invigorating lectures on Hawthorn and Whiteman all those years ago in his undergraduate level American literature class. His love for the written word, and for art and ideas more generally, inspired me to nurture my own love for literature, and to devote my life, with reckless abandon, to reading and to writing.

A special thank you to professor Gail Scott for giving me the opportunity to continue to hone my craft in her class and in her workshops, and, more importantly, for pushing me to mature creatively.

I am eternally indebted to my parents for their endless support. Whether it be through music, theatre, film, or literature, they have always indulged and nurtured my creative curiosities. This dissertation is for them.

Finally, thank you to Sarah Ibrahim for love I do not always deserve, but which she graciously gives me every day. She exudes kindness, sweetness, and grace, and I would not have had the mental and emotional strength necessary for completing this dissertation without her.

Introduction

In his book entitled *The American Jeremiad*, Sacvan Bercovitch identifies the New England jeremiad as "America's first distinctive literary genre" (6) and notes the persistent presence of the jeremiad's rhetorical style "throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in all forms of [literature]" (10-11). Indeed, from Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman, to Martin Luther King and James Baldwin, the prophetic character of the jeremiad has subsumed not only American letters, but the American ethos altogether. Yet, these American prophets are preoccupied not with answering questions of national identity, but rather, as Bercovitch notes, "almost in deliberate evasion of that question, the old prophetic refrain: 'When is our errand to be fulfilled? How long, O Lord, how long?'" (11).

The "errand" here referenced is defined by Bercovitch, through Perry Miller, as "either a venture on another's behalf or a venture of one's own" (4). In the case of the Puritans, their errand began as a missionary venture on behalf of the Reformation, and then shifted, after the ousting of Cromwell's Protectorate and the social corruption that followed from their isolation, to the introspective venture of revealing a "meaning by themselves and out of themselves" (5). Thus, as the Puritans turned their focus inward, their errand became increasingly charged with self-condemnation.

As Bercovitch notes, however, despite the denunciations expressed in these jeremiads, the purpose of these sermons was not wholly one of reprimand. Bercovitch remarks that though the American jeremiad is rooted in the traditional European mode of lamentation whereby the depravity of man and the inevitable punishment to ensue was proclaimed from the pulpit, the sermon form practiced by the Puritans and beyond sounds "a different note" (7) insofar as the prophetic voices of the New World "joined lament and celebration in reaffirming America's mission" (11). The American jeremiad thus combines both threat and hope, both condemnation

and a prophetic vision of the good that is to come. As such, the rhetoric of the American jeremiad, continues Bercovitch, "posits a movement from promise to experience — from the ideal of community to the shortcomings of community life – and thence forward, with prophetic assurance, toward resolution that incorporates (as it transforms) both the promise and the condemnation" (16) with the goal of improving public life.

The present dissertation seeks to explore the ambiguity that proceeds from the double valence of the prophetic errand of revealing both promise and condemnation. To this end, my research will examine the works of Flannery O'Connor and Cormac McCarthy, writers who, despite both raised Catholic and thus denominationally segregated from the Christianity of the New England Puritans, emerge from the distinctive literary genre of the American jeremiad insofar as their works engage with the prophetic task of bearing witness. Let it here be noted that to bear witness is not simply the passive act of observation, but, more properly, the dispensation of testimony and repudiation. I am therefore interested in investigating not only the portrayal of prophetic characters in the texts of O'Connor and McCarthy, but also in how each writer performs the part of prophet his or herself as they bear witness through their works to their communities, to their culture, and to history. While their writing does not take the form of the jeremiad in the way that, say, some of James Baldwin's best writing does, both writers, I argue, nonetheless employ a prophetic vision that, like the American Puritan jeremiad, makes "anxiety its end as well as its means" (23). As Bercovitch writes,

> Crisis was the social norm [the American Puritan jeremiad] sought to inculcate. The very concept of errand, after all, implied a state of *un*fulfillment. The future, though divinely assured, was never quite there, and New England's Jeremiahs set out to provide a sense

> of insecurity that would ensure the outcome. Denouncing or affirming, their vision fed on the distance between promise and fact. (23)

I thus intend to show that the anxiety, or crisis, that the American jeremiad seeks to inculcate manifests itself in O'Connor and McCarthy's texts in the form of violence, which for the former is a violence that is steeped in mystery, while for the latter, violence is at once promise and fact.

O'Connor's Prophetic Vision

Given that O'Connor was much more forthcoming than McCarthy in her role as a public intellectual, my understanding of the prophetic function of both writers is largely contingent upon the former's work on the subject, and so I have laminated my study of the prophetic in O'Connor upon my reading of McCarthy. O'Connor's fascination with the role of the prophet is well documented in much of her writing, from her fiction to her personal correspondence, as she returned to the topic repeatedly over the course of her career as a writer and, to a certain extent, a public intellectual. Indeed, though she has only two novels to her name, *The Violent Bear It Away* and *Wise Blood*, both portray the lives of backwoods prophets, from Francis Marion Tarwater who is raised by his great uncle to inherit the role backwoods prophet, to Hazel Motes and his evangelising for the "Church without Christ." The character-type features prominently in her short fiction as well, particularly the late stories collected in her posthumous *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, suggesting that her interest in prophets amplified as she matured both creatively and intellectually. But the prophetic is not simply thematic fodder for her texts; O'Connor not only wrote *about* prophets, but wrote *as* a prophet, for she believed that writers, insofar as their "business is to contemplate experience" (*MM* 84), are characterized "not by

[their] function but by [their] vision" (47), which, as she notes in "Catholic Novelists and Their Reader", is a prophetic vision.

Karl Martin's "Flannery O'Connor's Prophetic Imagination" provides a thorough investigation of the development of the significance of the prophetic figure to O'Connor's philosophy and literary aesthetic, indicating that her understanding of the role of the prophet was cultivated through years of close study:

> O'Connor's fiction is closely related to, and informed by, her systematic study of the role of the prophet in culture, and her fiction exhibits prophetic tendencies in accordance with the writings of not only the significant theologians of prophecy whose works she read and often reviewed but also the writings of later theologians. (34)

Martin supports his analysis of O'Connor's prophetic imagination with the work of theologian Walter Brueggemann whose own study of the role of the prophet focuses on how prophetic texts from the Old Testament speak to modern problems, "a position," as Martin notes, "latent in the works of the scholars O'Connor reviewed and latent as well in O'Connor's own fiction" (35). Brueggemann further argues that there is a critical link between the Old Testament narratives of the prophets and social change insofar as "The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us" (qtd. in Martin 35). The prophet's responsibility is thus to articulate the suffering of the marginalized — or, viewed from O'Connor's perspective, of the grotesque freaks and the misfits. Martin goes on to summarize three tasks that follow this responsibility, as conceptualized by Brueggemann: to present symbols that adequately reflect the suffering that has been ignored and denied, to bear witness to said suffering, and to "speak metaphorically but concretely about the real deathliness that hovers over us and gnaws within us…" (qtd. in Martin

38). Yet, the prophet is not simply a political spokesperson or a star witness for the oppressed. Rather, as Martin notes, and as both O'Connor and McCarthy portray in and/or through their fiction, the prophet can more accurately be understood as a poet whose office is that of revelation. The prophet's message must therefore use language that simultaneously invigorates and amazes, which is to say language that incites affect. Or, as O'Connor famously puts it in "The Fiction Writer and His Country," "to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures" (*MM* 34). Only then can the writer of fiction attempt to portray "mystery as it is incarnated in human life" (176).

Consequently, the predisposition of modern man to worship reason, and thus to separate mystery from nature, is one of O'Connor's great grievances with the Age of Enlightenment. "Our age not only does not have a very sharp eye for the almost imperceptible intrusions of grace," she writes in "On Her Own Work," "it no longer has much feeling for the nature of the violences which precede and follow them" (*MM* 112). The writer of fiction who produces successful stories, insofar as success relates to producing affect through artistic mimesis, therefore must complete the three prophetic tasks outlined by Brueggemann: to symbolize, to bear witness, and to "speak metaphorically but concretely." In this sense, O'Connor's prophetic responsibility as a writer mirrors that of her prophetic characters — that is, the function of offering a gesture that transcends "any neat allegory that might have been intended [...]. It would be a gesture which somehow [makes] contact with mystery" (111). The contact with mystery that O'Connor here describes is a contact with the Divine life, a revelation of the presence of grace which, if recognized and if accepted, can only be earned "at a considerable cost" (112). In her fiction, this considerable cost is typically levied in some form of brutal violence, often leading to death. From the murders in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" to Tanner's defilement in "Judgment Day,"

violence erupts mysteriously, emerges from an unknowable evil, and is frequently "an action in which the devil has been the unwilling instrument of grace" (118). As she goes on to explain, "violence is strangely capable of returning [her] characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work" (112). Thus, due to the obduracy of her characters, and, by extension, of the masses made numb to mystery by modern life, the prophetic act of revelation is not to enlighten, but to provoke.

In a contemporary review of *Blood Meridian* for the *Sewanee Review*, Walter Sullivan notes that McCarthy shares O'Connor's understanding of the proper application of violence in literary art. "For O'Connor," he writes, "[violence] is engendered by a sense of good and evil [and the] same is true [for] McCarthy" (653). Like O'Connor, he adds, McCarthy understands "evil in all its dimensions, and this makes him a prophet" (653). Thus, the terra damnata that he portrays, and the fiends with which he populates it, coalesce to reveal to readers "the world in which we live" (653). As George Shulman observes in "Thinking Authority Democratically: Prophetic Practices, White Supremacy, and Democratic Politics," prophets are "firmly persuaded about the conditions they state, [and] in their frustrated rage at us, [are] punitive in their insistence that we will suffer because we refuse to face (the true meaning of) our situation" (726). Considered through the prism of the Southern Gothic, the artistic mode to which both O'Connor's McCarthy's work is often attributed, the true meaning of the situation entails the deeply troubling and haunting history of the South and South-West, from the generational trauma of chattel slavery and systematic genocide of Aboriginal peoples, to the long-lasting damage caused by the Mexican and Civil Wars. While O'Connor, for her part, refuses to classify her writing as being strictly Southern, she acknowledges that the South's social context "cannot be left out by the Southern writer" as he is "forced on all sides to make his gaze extend beyond the

surface, beyond mere problems, until it touches that realm which is the concern of prophets and poets" (*MM* 198, 45). The writer, as prophet, must wrestle with the force of the South's social context, the prophetic gesture thus serving a dual function: first, to make contact with mystery, and second, to voice the unspeakable—that which cannot be said, only represented. This dual function recalls Brueggeman's second prophetic task of bearing witness, a task that entails not only the act of testifying, but of repudiating that which is witnessed. As Shulman writes,

> [Prophets] testify not to an absolute truth but to what we forget, both a god of justice and those Toni Morrison calls "the disremembered and unaccounted for." Making present those we make absent and naming conduct whose meaning we deny, witnesses perform acknowledgments through testimony that can reconstitute a political body haunted by what and who it forgets. (720)

As witness, the prophet's position in society is simultaneously marginal and integral as he necessarily exists outside of the status quo, yet pronounces revelations that are meant for the masses. The prophet thus occupies a liminal space insofar as he bears witness to what has happened and announces what will (or can) happen if his testimony is not taken seriously. Further to this point, Shulman observes that in the Greek, Hebrew, and Islamic traditions, the prophet has a social role of mediating "between human beings and powerful realities they neither understand nor control to address the vicissitudes and fateful choices of a community" (712). In the works of O'Connor and McCarthy, the fateful choices of the community are both historical and spiritual, temporal and eternal, requiring of prophets, and, as O'Connor notes, novelists, to see "near things with their extensions of meaning and thus [to see] far things close up" (*MM* 44).

Wendy Piper notes in *Misfits and Marble Fauns* that O'Connor's writing, emerging as it does from the American romance tradition, strives to represent a "balance of inner and outer

worlds" (74). Piper elucidates that "the mimetic aim of the romancer [is] not to faithfully describe external reality, but rather to reveal mystery, conflict or contradiction, within the individual" (75). Like Hawthorne before her, and McCarthy after her, O'Connor's narrative art is thus concerned less with realism than it is with revealing hidden, or disavowed, truths. Indeed, according to O'Connor, a dogmatic demand for realism in fiction has the obverse effect of limiting "rather than [broadening] the novel's scope" (*MM* 39), and so "a literature which mirrors society would be not fit guide for it" (46). This predilection for producing narratives of revelation rather than of verisimilitude indicates that the aims of the romancer are therefore congruent with those of the writer with prophetic vision. O'Connor best describes the writer's prophetic role in her lecture "Catholic Novelists and Their Readers" when she discusses the prophetic vision necessary for writing about human nature:

> [The fiction writer's] kind of vision is a prophetic vision. Prophecy, which is dependent on the imaginative and not the moral faculty, need not be a matter of predicting the future. The prophet is a realist of distances, and it is this kind of realism that goes into great novels. It is the realism which does not hesitate to distort appearances in order to show a hidden truth. (*MM* 179)

The writer with prophetic vision writes not about that which *does* happen in the world, but about that which *can* happen; must show readers not only what they are, "but what [they] have been and what [they] could become" (118). O'Connor notes that this inclination towards portraying the possible rather than the probable is what demarks the orthodox Christian writer, insofar as he exists in a universe that contains both the natural and the supernatural, from the naturalist. Consequently, this means that the orthodox Christian writer's "obligation to portray the natural," she argues, "is [not] less; it means it is greater" (175). It is thus the orthodox Christian writer's

ability to discern the supernatural that is enfolded within the natural world that allows him to see "near things with their extension of meaning" (44), and, in turn, to reveal hidden truths through the distortion of appearances. Accordingly, O'Connor's narrative art strives for mimesis by means of distortions, achieving this ambition through the narrative mode of the grotesque. As she notes, however, the 'grotesque' is typically a pejorative term born of regional bias: "Of course, I have found that anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic" (40). Undeterred by such prejudices, O'Connor nevertheless understands the value of the grotesque to her narrative project, particularly with regards to the depiction of her backwoods prophets insofar as "her distorted characterizations have an 'inner coherence' that fits the frame of romance, if they do not cohere to a 'social framework' or to social expectations" (Piper 76). Further to this point, O'Connor emphasizes that her portrayal of backwoods prophets is in no way meant to be ironic or satirical, that their position on the margins of the society she exposes in her fiction does not mean that their function in her narrative structure is marginal. "When you write about backwoods prophets," she explains, "it is very difficult to get across to the modern reader that you take these people seriously, that you are not making fun of them, but that their concerns are your own and, in your judgment, central to human life" (*MM* 204). Prophets and prophecy are therefore not simply one of many narrative techniques that O'Connor employs in her texts, but are indeed central to her artistic ambitions, which, as I will show, are echoed in the works of McCarthy.

Prophets Failed, False, and Gone Wrong

Farrell O'Gorman's essay "Violence, Nature, and Prophecy in Flannery O'Connor and Cormac McCarthy" provides important critical support for my own research on the prophetic in

O'Connor and McCarthy. As the critic notes, much of the scholarship that engages with both writers is chiefly concerned with, on the one hand, their shared Southern provenance (O'Connor hailing from Georgia, and McCarthy from Tennessee), and on the second hand, with their "penchant for violence," and are consequently apt to "casually link them as practitioners of a "Southern Gothic" mode of fiction" (144). O'Gorman's work, however, provides a more in depth comparison of the two writers and suggests that much of McCarthy's writing owes as great a debt (if not greater) to O'Connor's work as it does to William Faulkner, Herman Melville, or Homer. Indeed, O'Gorman posits that some of McCarthy's characters, such as Chigurh from *No Country for Old Men,* or the kid from *Blood Meridian*, are counterparts to (if not rewritings of) O'Connor's Misfit or Hazel Motes. As O'Gorman writes, "understanding McCarthy's killer Chigurh in relation to O'Connor's Misfit—both insistently self-reliant males who engage in extended dialogues with their ultimate female victims—is crucial to understanding the role of the failed prophet therein" (145). O'Gorman further argues that McCarthy's prophets are consistently shaped in relation to O'Connor's, and suggests that *The Violent Bear It Away* is a "crucial intertext (or pre-text) for McCarthy's work" (144) and that the construction of *Blood Meridian's* the kid owes much to Francis Marion Tarwater, as well as Hazel Motes of *Wise Blood*:

> At the novel's beginning the protagonist, the kid, at least superficially resembles Hazel Motes as "his eyes lay dark and tunneled in a caved and haunted face" (*BM* 21); he is also like Motes in that he is homeless, a prodigal entering a new and nightmarish landscape where he seems hell-bent on doing some things he never has done before (*CW* 5*).* But McCarthy's kid is more insistently linked to Francis Marion Tarwater in his identity as a fourteen-year-old runaway whose mother has died in childbirth; his rape by a Satanic

> antagonist, the judge, at the novel's conclusion; and his persistent role in the failed baptism motif that runs throughout *Blood Meridian.* (147)

While my own research will not engage in a comparative reading of O'Connor and McCarthy's works, I am interested in exploring how each writer complicates, or disrupts, the prophetic figure in their texts. It is important to make the distinction, however, between the failed prophets that are the focus of O'Gorman's essay, and both the false prophets and the prophets gone wrong that I shall examine in the pages to come. Moreover, while O'Gorman views the kid as one such failed prophet, my work will show that *Blood Meridian*'s spectral protagonist does not fail to become a prophet so much as his prophetic impulses are futile. This is not to say that my reading absolves him of his participation in any of the horrific violence portrayed in the novel, but rather, that his demise is preordained, that he was never meant to actualize his prophetic purpose. In this sense, the kid embodies the state of *un*fulfillment inherent to the concept of the errand.

Grace Withheld

D.H. Lawrence posits, in his essay *Studies in Classic American Literature*, that art has two functions: "First, it provides an emotional experience. And then, if we have the courage of our own feelings, it becomes a mine of practical truth" (14). Emotional reactions to art, argues Lawrence, are commonplace: "we have had them ad nauseam" (14). The more difficult, more vital task is to examine these emotional responses and attempt to interpret the truths that they might reveal, truths about our societies, about our cultures, and, indeed, about ourselves. But audiences are not often receptive to the truth, and will indeed vehemently reject it when that which is revealed challenges the status quo. This impulse to disavow is what leads O'Connor to draw such large and startling figures in her fiction, and why McCarthy's prose is so relentlessly

poetic in its descriptions of the abhorrent—their narrative art commands strong emotional reactions from readers.

Aristotle writes in *Poetics* that the purpose of the reader's emotional reactions to artistic mimesis is to stimulate a state of catharsis: that is, the cleansing of excess emotional charges via the reaction to, and the interpretation of, narrative poetics. Consequently, artistic forms have the potential to be a source of moral and practical instruction whereby the faults and failures of characters reveal to the audience the universal truths of the human experience, in turn inspiring a redressing of social wrongs. Aristotle primarily treats the forms of epic poetry and tragedy, privileging the latter form for being more succinct than the former, which thus allows audiences to properly focus their attention on the nuances of the narrative content and thereby experience the principal emotions elicited from tragedy, which, he argues, are pity and fear and which are necessary for catharsis.

The Violence of Bearing Witness aims to demonstrate how O'Connor's short story "Judgment Day" and McCarthy's novel *Blood Meridian* actively interrupt the reader's cathartic release by omitting the culminating epiphanic moments of grace of their respective narratives. To this end, I claim that both the kid and Tanner provoke in readers emotions that overlap with the fear and pity that is meant to be elicited by tragedy, even if neither protagonist properly fits Aristotle's character model of the tragic hero—that is, being not only good, but better than the man of real life. Thus, while neither character is particularly likeable—the kid maliciously violent and Tanner an alcoholic squatter—both are nevertheless pitiful in their desolation. For example, both protagonists are wretches who live in varying degrees of squalor, both are confronted and defeated by the decline of their respective ways of life, and both die in an ignominious fashion. Moreover, Aristotle notes that one of the primary means of eliciting pity is

via the typical narrative progression of the tragic hero's fall from good fortune to bad fortune. The kid and Tanner, however, endure circumstances that regress from bad to worse, culminating in their deaths, which, significantly, both go unrepresented, or disnarrated, in their respective narratives, the reader thus denied access to each character's dénouement. I suggest that this narrative withholding magnifies the misery with which the kid and Tanner have been characterized: they are so pitiful that they do not even deserve a proper resolution. Yet, if their deaths are deliberately anticlimactic, thereby obstructing emotional reactions to the narratives, then how are readers of *Blood Meridian* and "Judgment Day" meant to achieve catharsis? The answer is that they are not, or at least not entirely, for, as I will show, these narrative omissions point to the anxiety of *un*fulfillment that is inherent to the concept of the errand.

Flannery O'Connor's Black Prophets

My first chapter is divided into two sections. The first half largely provides critical, theoretical, and contextual support for the second half, which is a close reading of a group of texts that I have termed the "Geranium Variations." I begin the chapter with an overview of the critical reception of O'Connor's fictional representations of the racial divide in the United States. My reference to said criticism is used to establish trends in O'Connor scholarship that I argue have limited the analysis and interpretation of her ultimate text, "Judgement Day." I put forth the argument that though her fiction rarely engages directly with the issue of the subjugation of Black Americans, her late texts do deal with the topic in a more nuanced fashion. Moreover, I note that representations of Black characters evolve over the course of her career from simple, tertiary characters that are little more than spectres of the cultural landscape, to men and women who not only have agency, but are often smarter, or at least shrewder, than the white protagonists,

culminating with the arrival of the Black prophet in her late works. I identify "Everything That Rises Must Converge," the opening and titular story of the collection, as a twin text to "Judgment Day," the final story of the collection, and analyze the narrative details that establish O'Connor's literary treatment of the tension between whites and blacks. I argue that the protagonist, Julian, is an illustration of one of O'Connor's favourite character types, which is the college-educated idealist who believes himself to be smarter and more politically progressive than he in fact is, and who, ultimately, is punished in some form for his arrogance.

My reading of Julian and his antecedents in Asbury and Rayber initiates an examination of the critical industry's imperative to either denounce or defend O'Connor's perceived racism. Consequently, I provide an analysis of the political and cultural posturing typical of the academic types that Julian, Asbury, and Rayber represent. I borrow from Michel Foucault's model of the economy of the perverse implantation, which he develops in *The History of Sexuality vol. 1*, to generate what I term the incitement to diagnose racism. My ensuing discussion of the patronizing attitude of the well-meaning educated class attempts to outline the superficiality of the moralistic condemnations with which the examined O'Connor's texts reckon, yet which are too often reproduced in critical investigations of her work.

"O'Connor and The Black Prophetic Tradition" examines O'Connor's collected letters to provide a historical context for her interpretation of racial politics and the Civil Rights Movement and her subsequent treatment of the topic in her fiction. Though many of her letters reveal her to have little time or patience for the most prominent voices of the Black community, including James Baldwin and Martin Luther King, I argue that her outlook has much in common with not only Baldwin and King, but with some of the more radical voices as well, such as Amiri Baraka and Malcolm X. Moreover, I note that her admiration for Muhammad Ali indeed

supports my premise insofar as Ali was Malcolm X's most famous and most vociferous student. Thus, while I do not draw direct, irrefutable links between the Black prophets of her time and the Black prophets depicted in her late texts, I propose that she was at least indirectly exposed to the revelations of Black prophetic fire, and that the fervour of their prophesying is captured in both the woman on the bus in "Everything That Rises Must Converge," and the New York actor in "Judgment Day."

The chapter's second section embarks upon a close reading of the evolution of what I term O'Connor's "Geranium Variations," so called for the original incarnation of "Judgment Day," which was the titular story from her master's thesis *The Geranium*. Using Karl-Heinz Westarp's *Flannery O'Connor: Growing Craft: A Synoptic Variorum Edition of: The Geranium, and Exile in the East, Getting Home, Judgment Day*, I trace the transformation of O'Connor's source material as she repeatedly re-writes the same essential story over the course of her career. I pay special attention to the growth of her characters, Black and white, and argue that as the fundamental story is refined, so too is her representation of the Black characters who shift from the happy-go-lucky caricature of the earlier versions to the street-smart hustler and angry black man of the later versions. I conclude, however, that her portrayal of Black characters in her late texts, rather than simply being stereotypes, are in fact manifestations of prophets gone wrong.

Bearing Witness to Violence in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*

My second chapter is also divided into two parts. The first part investigates the role of violence in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* and attempts to argue that the true violence with which the novel concerns itself is not the sundry descriptions of bloodshed and destruction, but rather the structural violence that enables and normalizes such brutality. To this end, I employ Slavoj

Žižek's typology of violence to parse through the McCarthy's representations of brutal violence to attempt to discern the narrative purpose of said violence. Consequently, I put forth that McCarthy's re-telling of the history of the American frontier has a dual purpose: on the one hand, it aims to de-romanticize the tropes of the American Western by revealing the barbarity of both the so-called Indians and the frontiersmen, or cowboys, as it were, while on the other, it draws a parallel between the cruelty of aggressive territorial expansion and genocide in the 19th century, and the horror of the American war in Vietnam roughly 100 years later, which, at the time of the novel's production (late 70s to mid 80s), was also beginning to be simultaneously disavowed and romanticized in popular culture.

The second part of the chapter explores how the novel's allusions to the curses of the Gibeonites and of Canaan, as described in the Old Testament, provide a backstory for the protagonist, the kid, who is otherwise a spectral figure who says very little and who functions mostly to shepherd the reader through the graphic and challenging narrative. Though the novel begins with his attempt to free himself of his family, and thus of his lineage, he is unable to completely divest himself of his inherited cursed and so wanders the terra damnata in search of a new identity. Lydia Cooper notes in *No More Heroes* that the kid "seems to make a journey that is a dark antithesis to the traditional pattern of the bildungsroman, which a young man leaves his father's identity and home and ventures into his own future and fortune" (53). Cursed as he is, though, the kid's departure from his father leads instead to an "unenlightening journey" (54). As a nameless participant of frontier violence, the story of his life is an allegory directed at all Americans who, though they may overtly oppose systemic violence, nevertheless benefit from it insofar as the economic and political infrastructures of their day-to-day lives are maintained by that very violence. As John Cant writes in *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American*

Exceptionalism, “the violence of *Blood Meridian* expresses an aspect of contemporary American life that many would have preferred to have suppressed” (159). The very purpose of *Blood Meridian*, and indeed of the kid, however, is to bear witness to that violence which most would prefer to disavow.

Chapter 1

Investigating the Role of the Prophet in Flannery O’Connor’s Late Texts

“Some people have the notion that you read the story
and then climb out of it into meaning, but for the fiction writer himself
the whole story is the meaning, because it is an experience, not an abstraction.”
–Flannery O’Connor (“The Nature & Aim of Fiction)

Part I

"The Topical is Poison"
Prophets Failed and False Converge

Precious few of Flannery O'Connor's texts engage directly with the delicate issue of racial politics in American culture and society, which is to say the historical, and continued, systematic subjugation of Black individuals and communities in the United States of America. While myriad critics, from Ralph C. Wood to Alice Walker to Mark Greif, have explored the topic of race in O'Connor's work and have offered insightful readings, most have engaged with the topic primarily as a sociological study, asking if the writer's depiction of Black characters is racist or if her treatment of their plight is sensitive and nuanced enough, or if she herself was a racist, and so on. The present study's critical interest is the evolution of O'Connor's handling of the topic in her fiction throughout her career, and, more specifically, in how her Black characters evolve from ciphers to prophets. Given that the role of the prophet in culture is a significant aspect of O'Connor's literary aesthetic, the emergence of Black prophets in her fiction invites close study.

While O'Connor recognized the plight of Black Americans and understood the underlying complexities of any praxis of reparation, she nevertheless thought it an undertaking of indulgence to participate in symbolic displays of moral superiority, in art or otherwise, under the guise of social activism and liberal idealism. Her treatment of the issue in her fiction is therefore typically ambiguous because, as Alice Walker observes in "A South Without Myths," her writing is "not about race at all, which is why it is so refreshing, coming, as it does, out of such a *racial* culture." "If it can be said to be "about" anything," Walker's thought continues, "then it is "about" prophets and prophecy, "about" revelation, and "about" the impact of supernatural grace on human beings who don't have a chance of spiritual growth without it" ("A South

Without Myths”). O’Connor would further argue, however, that her writing is not about this racial culture to which Walker alludes either, which is to say that her writing is not about the South, even if her texts are largely set in the South, and are peopled by Southerners with the distinct voices and habits of their region. “As a fiction writer who is a Southerner,” she notes in “The Teaching of Literature,” “I use the idiom and the manners of the country I know, but I don’t consider that I write about the South” (*MM* 133-34). The point O’Connor attempts to make here is that writing from the South is not by necessity about the South. She does, however, concede elsewhere that the South, and all its cultural and historical baggage, cannot so easily be discarded by the Southern writer: “The image of the South, in all its complexity, is so powerful in us that it is a force which has to be encountered and engaged. The writer must wrestle with it, like Jacob with the Angel, until he has extracted a blessing” (198). Consequently, while her writing is not overtly about racial politics, or about the South, or about racial politics in the South, it does nevertheless wrestle with these topics, and it is this very wrestling that is the basis of my study of O’Connor’s body of work.

So, if O’Connor’s writing is not about race, and she does not consider it to be, more generally, about the South, then what is her writing about? Must it be about anything? The abstract answer that O’Connor offers in “The Nature and Aim of Fiction” is that the writer of fiction’s goal is to contemplate experience (*MM* 84). She reiterates this idea, though very plainly, in “The Teaching of Literature,” stating that “the fiction writer writes about life” (122). In the same essay, a few pages later, she writes: “[good] fiction” deals not with the topical, but “with human nature. If it uses material that is topical, it still does not use it for a topical purpose” (126). To O’Connor, the production of stories that are preoccupied with the topical rather than with people or with the mysteries of life is a juvenile venture:

> [Beginning fiction writers] are conscious of problems, not of people, of questions and issues, not of the texture of existence, of case histories and of everything that has a sociological smack instead of with all those concrete details of life that make actual the mystery of our position on earth. (68)

If, however, we must hold fast to the notion that O'Connor's fiction is *about* any one thing in particular, if we must insist upon reducing her textual output to "literary [specimens] to be dissected" (108), then I would argue, and I feel fairly confident in saying that she would agree with me, that her fiction is about the fallibility of man. Of course, O'Connor would most certainly reframe my assertion to place her Catholic faith at the centre of her modus operandi, as she does in "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South": "[the Catholic novel] will see [man] as incomplete in himself, as prone to evil, but as redeemable when his own efforts are assisted by grace" (197). Nevertheless, our determinations are essentially assonant: her writing is preoccupied not with exploring topics, but with depicting the perils of the human experience. She therefore populates her texts with fallible, incomplete characters who are prone to evil, from the bumbling professor Rayber in her budding effort "The Barber," to the fish out of water that is Carver in her final masterpiece, "Judgment Day." Moreover, when she does make use of topics such as the racial divide in her country in texts such as "The Artificial Nigger," "Everything That Rises Must Converge," "The Enduring Chill," "Revelation," and "Judgment Day," it is because art cannot be created in a vacuum—it must take as inspiration that which is available and accessible to the artist, such as her faith, her values, her environment, and her culture. "Fiction," elaborates O'Connor in "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," "is about everything human and we are made out of dust, and if you scorn getting yourself dusty, then you shouldn't try to write fiction" (68). The topic of the racial divide, in the South specifically and in the United States

more generally, is therefore but part of the human dust with which O'Connor wrestles. Yet, as the topic is inarguably a significant feature of American history and culture, so must its treatment be significantly considered. O'Connor's verbiage in the above citation is revealing in this regard: she does not say "then you shouldn't write fiction," but rather that "you shouldn't *try* to write fiction." The lesson to be gleaned from the use of "try" is that one does not simply write—one can only ever but try to write, which is to say try to portray the truth of human experience, try to produce a story that says "something that can't be said any other way" (96). Writing, in the sense that I am exploring, is not simply the act of putting pen to paper, of finger tips raining upon keyboards, but is instead the artistic endeavour of investigating the mysteries of life. The creation of a story that wrestles with human dust, that plunges itself in the filth of the racial divide in America, thus requires nothing short of a Sisyphean effort.

The present chapter shall argue that "Judgment Day" is to O'Connor what to Sisyphus was his boulder. Completed only days before her death, "Judgment Day," the concluding story of the posthumous collection *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, is the final of many redrafts of the title story from her 1946 master's thesis *The Geranium: A Collection of Short Stories*. I believe that this collection of drafts—which I have termed the "Geranium Variations"—along with the final version's sister text, "Everything That Rises Must Converge", reveal a more nuanced, more sophisticated engagement with the topic of the racial divide than in any of O'Connor's other texts. As biographer Jean W. Cash observes in *Flannery O'Connor: A Life*, the topic occupies a central position in these two short stories, crafted as they were in the thick of the civil rights movement in the United States. "When Black characters inhabit O'Connor's other mature stories," writes Cash, "they appear in somewhat stereotypical roles like that of delivery boy in "Revelation," or farm workers, Astor and Sulk, being "displaced" by Guizac in "The

Displaced Person." Only in "Everything That Rises Must Converge" and "The Geranium" does race occupy a central position" (Cash 486). The narratives of the two texts in question are suffused by the social tension between Blacks and whites rather than merely decorated with it. For instance, the portrayal of the divide between the white and Black characters in "The Enduring Chill" is buttressed by their economic divide: the Black farmhands are the employees of the white protagonist's family. So is the case in "Revelation" where the Black characters, save for the delivery boy at the doctor's office, are Ruby Turpin's employees. With "Everything That Rises…" and the Geranium Variations, however, the white protagonists are the economic equals of their Black counterparts: Julian Chestny and his mother must take the bus from their haggard apartment to the free reduction class at the YMCA because of their limited income; Tanner's living conditions signal desperate economic means as he first squats in a shack with Coleman, his former employee turned roommate, and then moves into an integrated apartment building with his daughter and her lover in New York City. Thus, since the white characters in these stories are on the same economic level as the Black characters, the tension that simmers between them, and eventually boils over, is primarily born of the long history of the racial divide rather than of any kind of class distinction. Indeed, their shared poverty serves only to provoke the innate cultural schism between whites and Blacks in the United States of America.

This is not to say, however, that the white characters in these texts are malicious bigots and that the narrative arcs of each story are predicated upon the consequences of their racist behaviour. That these characters are not overtly bigoted is precisely O'Connor's point as she is not interested in following the relativist impulse of her peers to "continually [justify] the actions of [her] characters on a sliding scale of values" (*MM* 168). Rather, she views her fiction as concerned with a poverty that is "fundamental to man" insofar as she believes that "the basic

experience of everyone is the experience of human limitation" (131). The narrative detail of a shared economic hardship between Black and white characters therefore allows O'Connor to more acutely explore the experience of human limitation: "Just as in the sight of God we are all children, in the sight of the novelist we are all poor, and the actual poor only symbolize for him the state of all men" (132). Thus, while their material lack is secondary to a much more profound kind of poverty, their economic precarity makes them more susceptible to "the raw forces of life" (132).

Racial tensions between Black and white Americans in the mid 20th century certainly qualifies as such a raw force, yet, it is still but a detail of the human limitation explored by O'Connor in her texts, and not the impetus of the respective narrative arcs. Nevertheless, given the infrequency, over the course of her career, of her artistic engagement with the topic, it is a narrative detail well worth investigating. To this end, I shall explore how the "Geranium Variations" provide a useful timeline for the growth of these characters and of her struggle to find a satisfactory expression of the story's source material over the course of twenty or so years, finally culminating with "Judgment Day." I ultimately aim to demonstrate how this final variation, as well as "Everything That Rises Must Converge," represent the zenith of both O'Connor's artistic development and of her engagement with the topic of the racial divide in the United States of America insofar as these texts announce the arrival of her Black prophets.

Critical Interpretations of the Racial Divide in O'Connor's Fiction

The O'Connor texts that engage with the topic of the racial divide in the United States unfold the way most of her stories do—that is, chickens come home to roost. It is the characters who are the most stubborn and presumptuous who suffer the harshest fates in her stories, all those who

interfere in the lives of others, however well-intentioned they may believe themselves to be. Critic J.S. Kennedy, a contemporary of O'Connor, observed in his review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge* that "the interferers tell themselves that their motive is the very best, and they attempt to judge, direct, protect, straighten out, always with disastrous results" (*Flannery O'Connor The Contemporary Reviews* 234). Consider, for example, a bewildered and broken-hearted Julian cradling his fallen mother in the darkening streets at the end of "Everything That Rises Must Converge," or, Tanner's twist of fate in the stairwell of a New York City apartment building in "Judgment Day" when he attempts to finally make his escape back to the South. None of O'Connor's complacent characters escape her wrath, each dole of violence commensurate with their obliviousness.

I believe that Kennedy's description of these characters as interferers who judge, direct, protect, and straighten out can also be applied to many of O'Connor's critics. Given the writer's status as a white woman of privilege from the South, much of the criticism that explores any of the aforementioned stories is typically underscored by one of two sentiments: the texts either support the argument that O'Connor harboured some prejudiced points of view, or they contain enough nuance and depth to forgive her of any potential and perceived transgressions. Critics Ralph C. Wood, Mark Greif, Lorine M. Getz,[1] and Alice Walker[2] all struggle with this

---

[1] In recounting details of O'Connor's early years at Andalusia, Getz, in *Flannery O'Connor Literary Theologian* (1999), notes that "Blacks, unlettered and seemingly as enduring as the landscape," were an essential feature of daily life at the O'Connor dairy farm, responsible for much of the hard labour and living not too far off from the main house in a weathered shack. O'Connor was very familiar with the farmhands and developed a sense of empathy for the maltreatment beset upon them by her society, which Getz indicates was "somewhat out of character for the times." Getz goes on to resolve that O'Connor never tried to write from their perspective, however, because she was "'never able to understand how they think.' Nor did she indicate specific concern for their social, economic or political plight in her works. Rather, she seemed to have an almost romantic view of their unfallen nature" (57).

[2] From "A South Without Myths": "That [O'Connor] retained a certain distance (only, however, in her later, mature work) from the inner workings of her Black characters seems to me all to her credit, since, by deliberately limiting her treatment of them to cover their observable demeanor and actions, she leaves

predicament and express some variation of the opinion that O'Connor was sensitive enough to the plight of people of colour to avoid portraying their particular point of view in her fiction or to make any kind of assumption about their experience as second – or even third class – citizens. It is true that O'Connor does not write from the perspective of Black Southerners insofar as the protagonists of her stories are always white and her characters of colour rarely partake in any important exchange of dialogue. Black characters keep mostly to themselves and speak only when spoken to. In this way, yes, O'Connor has never pretended, through her fiction, to understand the condition of Black men and women in America. But I claim that O'Connor does in fact attempt to portray the inner lives of her Black characters in both "Everything That Rises Must Converge" and "Judgment Day." The manifestations of anger and violence, first by Carver's mother upon Julian's mother, and finally by the actor neighbour upon Tanner, are a portrayal of a particular type of resentment, that is, the simmering anger of Blacks felt for whites, a kind of idle frustration that lingers beneath the surface of any and all interactions, latent but not dormant, awaiting the opportune moment to manifest itself. But does O'Connor's attempt to portray the inner lives of Black characters automatically jeopardize her moral integrity?

Esteemed O'Connor scholar Ralph C. Wood begins "The Problem of the Color Line" with a stern reassurance that O'Connor was definitely not a racist. If anything, he argues, she "offered the one lasting antidote to racism" (94), that is, that we are created equal in the eyes of God. Wood takes his reasoning a step further and claims that O'Connor's criticism of white self-righteousness in her later writing required "considerable moral and artistic courage" (95). While

---

them free, in the reader's imagination, to inhabit another landscape, another life, than the one she creates for them. This is a kind of grace many writers do not have when dealing with representatives of an oppressed people within a story, and their insistence on knowing everything, on being God, in fact, has burdened us with more stereotypes than we can ever hope to shed." See: http://math.buffalo.edu/~sww/walker/south-without-myths.html

I agree that O'Connor's criticism of the figure of the white liberal is an essential element of her work, I believe that these accolades of moral and artistic courage are overwrought at best and that Wood's excitement over her perceived bravery reveals his own insecurities about the portrayal and synthesis of the racial divide in her fiction. I understand that Wood may have meant to argue that O'Connor's criticism exhibits moral and artistic courage within the sphere of her literary community, much of which typically operates further left on the socio-political spectrum, and that taking something of a contrarian position had the potential of alienating her from her peers, editors, publishers and so on. Yet, we know from her letters and essays that she had little patience for the self-satisfaction of "stupid Yankee liberals smacking their lips over typical life in the dear old dirty Southland" (*HB* 537), and so would probably not have lost much sleep over alienating any such lip-smackers.

Wood goes on to opine in a footnote that O'Connor's correspondence falls into two categories: unguarded confessions to friends and superficial opinions "tossed off in a trice and thus never meant for conclusion-drawing scrutiny" (94). Wood here overtly implies that the letters most fruitful for research are those from the former category and that we need not bother too much with anything that may sound indecent or untoward. The critic's approach to O'Connor's correspondence is therefore far too deferential to her artistic legacy. In "Where is the Voice Coming From?: Flannery O'Connor on Race," he laments that accusations of racism jeopardize the legacy of "the most important Southern writer since Faulkner" (*The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin* 90). Wood's impulse to consolidate O'Connor's literary accomplishments with her moral character into a testimony of her importance as a cultural touchstone of the South cheapens his advocacy for her status as Faulkner's heir. This is not to say that O'Connor does not deserve to be mentioned in the same breath as her Mississippian peer, but only that the means by

which Wood attempts to preserve O'Connor's legacy is flawed in that he makes of her an idol rather than let her work exist as a subjective attestation of a particular place at a particular time.

Wood is what Timothy P. Caron refers to in his essay "'The Bottom Rail Is on the Top': Race and 'Theological Whiteness' in Flannery O'Connor's Short Fiction" as a "True Believer," an O'Connor critic who believes that the Southern region, while shouldering tremendous historical guilt, "offers the nation its largest religious hope" (123). As Caron outlines, these critics view the world in much the same way as O'Connor did: "as a fallen world in which evil is a "mystery" that must be endured" (139). This premise of the unavoidable mystery of evil that pervades the fabric of society is of course an extension of the concept of original sin wherein we are all, as descendants of Adam and Eve, fallen creatures. Yet, to reckon the evil of racism in America as a mystery that must be endured is at best a reductive practice that perforce obviates any form of subjective responsibility. There is, in my view, nothing mysterious about the systemic subjugation of Black men and women in the United States of America,[3] and the insistence of True Believers to orient their readings of O'Connor's work along a vertical theological axis fails to understand, as Caron notes, "the network of horizontal relationships between and among Southern Blacks and whites" (160). We are here faced with the outlines of a predicament that in

[3] Nothing much has changed in this regard since O'Connor's time. In *Race in the American* South, David Brown and Clive Webb note that "Southern Blacks still experience numerous forms of institutional racism. The criminal justice system, for instance, discriminates against African-Americans in a number of ways. Per statistics published by Human Rights Watch in April 2003, African-Americans represent on average 21.6 percent of the Southern population, but 55 percent of all prison inmates across the region. It is worth noting that the disparity is even worse in the northern states such as Vermont or North Dakota, where Blacks are few in number but still form a disproportionate share of the prison population. Racial bias is also evident in the administration of the death penalty. Southern states continue to execute more prisoners than the rest of the nation put together. Between 1976 and 2006, 832 of the 1019 executions carried out in the United States occurred in the South. Southern states administer the death penalty most commonly in cases where the criminal is Black and the victim is white. In Georgia, 60% of murder victims are African-American. However, since 1973 more than 80% of executions have involved Blacks who committed crimes against whites" (325).

many ways defines the South: the preservation of ideals is prioritized over the ontic questioning of the material conditions of life. The True Believer's critical reading of O'Connor's work thus operates as a kind of dialectical analysis of history wherein the past is rewritten, or at the very least reframed, thereby delegitimizing any previously established accounts.

Toni Morrison, in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, makes a very similar argument when she writes about the predilection of literary critics to employ a "dehistoricizing allegory" (68) in their reading of American literature, and more specifically in their reading of Blackness in that literature. Morrison contends that through this "dehistoricizing allegory" the suffering of persons of colour is, in a sense, fetishized into a symbol for the suffering of the South in general. The plight of persons of colour is thus recast as a broad redemptive suffering that enables readers of O'Connor's work to, as Caron explains, "displace the messy topic of race from our readings and firmly fix our gaze upon heaven, for it is there that race will cease to matter" (162). This gaze upon heaven dismisses the material in favour of the ideal and reduces the evils of systemic racism to a mystery that must be endured until salvation. What is more, this ideal state of equivalence is never realized within O'Connor's fiction, but rather, "in the subsequent readings and interpretations" (163) of her work. Black characters then become little more than signposts on the uncertain path to salvation, helping to guide not only her white characters towards heaven, as Morrison implies, but, I argue, some of her critics towards a contained interpretation of her work, and by extension, of the South and its artists.

I thus contend that Wood's reading of O'Connor's fiction, and by extension the readings of all True Believers, is tainted by Morrison's notion of the "dehistoricizing allegory." His analysis is contingent upon the assumption that the South's dark past is concurrently the means through which it will be redeemed—that is, the cumulative weight of the region's socio-political

transgressions ipso facto produces the proportionate capacity for grace, as though grace were a reward, thereby delivering the necessary conditions for reparation and thus social, national, and even moral progress. The aim of Caron's essay, however, is to challenge this point of view and to unveil what he believes to be an orthodoxy that has shrouded readings of O'Connor's work over the course of the last fifty or so years, a shared conviction that only a culturally and socially conservative Catholic reading will yield the proper understanding of her texts. "Claiming this ground is a masterstroke for the True Believers," writes Caron, "because any other reading subsequently becomes a misreading, any other interpretation a misinterpretation" (147). I think this is a valid assessment of much of the critical work on O'Connor's oeuvre, and while I do intend to refute some of these readings in the present analysis, I also suggest pushing Caron's argument a step further and identifying a different, yet related, critical culprit: I suggest that there is a specific kind of liberal reading that percolates through much O'Connor criticism, one which is quick to offer apologias in order to secure O'Connor's position not only as a prominent literary and cultural figure. My aim is not to altogether dismiss theological readings of O'Connor's work in favour of cultural and political considerations of race and class, but rather to suggest that both points of view pose a very similar interpretive problem. I believe that the more meaningful question is not why was O'Connor reticent to make common cause, in her fiction or otherwise, with disenfranchised Black Americans, but rather, why are so many of her critics hasty to defend her moral integrity in the first place?

Mark Greif 's "Flannery O'Connor and Faith" from *The Age of The Crisis of Man* provides an overture for answering this question. Central to his analysis is the argument that O'Connor's writing produces "an interpretive problem, as well as insight into alternative possibilities, before the sixties, for the 'liberal' faith in a unity of man" (214). He explains that

O'Connor's texts, though principally critical of liberal ideals of progress, would not properly function as a critique if they did not to some degree adhere to the very traditional liberal structures and expectations that the author aims to refute. Moreover, Greif claims that this is the very dilemma that constitutes what he calls the crisis of man in the 20th century, which is, as he sees it, the near-impossible task of reconciling one's faith in the unity of man in the aftermath of the atrocities of the 1930s and 40s. For Greif, liberal faith in the "unity of man" is as much a secular enterprise as it is religious, and it is precisely for this reason that he believes O'Connor's work creates an interpretive problem for the liberal ideals of the 20th century:

> [O'Connor] juxtaposes her explanatory insistence on an orthodox religious fiction of symbolism and near-allegory, drawn from real theology and dogma, with her fiction's practical use of forms of psychological explanation, which are thoroughly liberal—liberal in the progressive and post-New Deal sense, defending progress toward the perfection of reasoned goals of equality and freedom, feeling compassion for outcasts because of their sociological circumstance and demographics and situation; liberal too in the sense of the church doctrine, both on the Protestant side (which surrounded her in the South) and on the Catholic side (her minority religion by birth and lifelong commitment). (205-06)

While O'Connor may attempt in her writing to pillory the supreme liberal vanity of rational improvement, she nevertheless operates within a political, social, and cultural infrastructure that is predominantly, in a Lockean and Kantian sense, liberal. She can thus profess to resist, as she does in a letter to Cecil Dawkins,[4] the basic tenets of the Enlightenment all she wants, but the

[4] From *Habit of Being*: "[The South] still believes that man has fallen and that he is perfectible by God's grace, not by his own unaided efforts. The Liberal approach is that man has never fallen, never incurred guilt, and is ultimately perfectible by his own efforts. Therefore, evil in this light is a problem of better housing, sanitation, health, etc. and all the mysteries will eventually be cleared up" (302-03).

fact remains that liberalism is the historically dominant orthodoxy of her culture, and thus of the world in which her characters come to life.

Unfortunately, Greif's analysis of O'Connor's life and work ultimately succumbs to the very same trap as do the True Believers whereby he then levies an appraisal of the writer's moral character. Much like Wood, Greif contends that O'Connor is more admirable than many of her white liberal peers because she

> goes out of her way not to suggest that she has any idea what her Black characters' inner lives and interior consciousnesses are like. She portrays them entirely from the outside, and lets her white characters talk about them without the Black characters assenting, and gives her Black characters autonomy, while still letting them seem human, not ciphers or symbols. (213-14)

I disagree with this assessment for I believe that O'Connor does in fact, to some degree, reveal the "interior consciousnesses" of her Black characters in both "Everything That Rises Must Converge" and "Judgment Day" by means of their violent reactions to her white characters. I maintain that the anger expressed by these Black characters through their violence upon their white counterparts is clearly motivated by the frustrations that derive from the racial divide and is not simply the manifestation of some mysterious evil that must be endured. Moreover, these violent outbursts reflect those of characters such as Mary Grace from "Revelation" who throws her textbook at Ruby Turpin's head, or the hitchhiker from "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" who lashes out at Mr. Shiftlet, which is to say that they reflect the outbursts of characters who fulfill the role of prophet in their respective texts. Thus, not only does O'Connor indeed attempt to portray the inner lives of her Black characters in these two late texts, she also elevates the import of their narrative function. Greif's impulse to laud what he perceives to be her

sensitive management of the topic of the racial divide therefore results in a stunted interpretation of what the writer in fact accomplishes with these two late texts.

I consequently return to Caron who gestures towards the most plausible source of the critical impulse to preserve O'Connor's moral integrity: Flannery O'Connor herself. Few writers, he argues, have had as much command, whether implicitly or incidentally, in shaping the reception and dissemination of their work as O'Connor has had with hers. One would not have to venture very far into the breadth of O'Connor criticism, Caron explains, before coming across assertions taken directly from her non-fiction and serving as the foundation for the critic's approach. Examples include understanding the South as being "Christ-haunted" rather than "Christ-centered," or, by extension, failing to analyze the bursts of violence common in her fiction as anything but "the mysterious workings of Christian conversion" (Caron 142). James M. Mellard makes a similar claim in his essay "Flannery O'Connor's Others: Freud, Lacan, and the Unconscious," noting that while writers such as Joyce, Woolf, and Faulkner likewise made efforts to set the terms of their reception, they were primarily motivated by the difficult nature of their work. O'Connor, however, depended "less upon the determinations effected by form than upon those achieved by instruction. [She] simply tells her readers—either through narrative interventions or by extra-textual exhortations—how they are to interpret her work" (Mellard 625). According to Mellard, the instructions in O'Connor's non-fiction, whether they be found in her essays or in her private letters, therefore become restrictive parameters of interpretation that leave little to no room for divergent perspectives, automatically dismissing any critic who strays from the well-lit path. The much more difficult and inconvenient interpretations, those that take account of the complexities and particularities of the history of the United States and the social

climate of American South during the period of O'Connor's writing career, are thus left largely unexplored.

I do not believe that being mindful of the racial undertones of her work leads to oversensitive, uncharitable readings, as George Cheatham reasons in "Jesus, O'Connor's Artificial Nigger" (*CR* 475). I argue that it is possible to examine the dynamics of the racial divide in O'Connor's texts, and more precisely the nuances of her treatment of the related issues, without falling into the presentist dialogical trap of retroactively moralizing. That O'Connor may have had certain ingrained prejudices should surprise no one: she was a woman of privilege whose family benefitted from the exploitation a Black underclass. This does not confirm that she was hateful, or felt threatened by the uprising of Black independence, but only that she was a product of her environment. It should be expected that great writers were familiar with, and possibly even shared, the same prejudices of the dominant culture of their time. Likewise, I am suspicious of this impulse to absolve O'Connor, or any writer, of whatever perceived moral failings as discovered in her texts.

Wood's criticism indulges this very impulse when he writes that charges of racism threaten O'Connor's legacy as a cultural figure of importance for the South. What is more, he maintains that the writer's attitude towards the racial divide was guided by the dominical directive that each person be treated with charity, and that though she was imperfect, she did her best to love her neighbour. To support his vote of confidence, he asserts that there is an important distinction between opinions and convictions. "Opinions," he writes,

> are often quickly formed and just as quickly abandoned, since they do not constitute the fundament of our lives. We often keep our opinions to ourselves, lest they give needless offense, and lest we be ashamed at their disclosure. Convictions, by contrast, are slowly

> acquired and firmly maintained. We do not surrender our convictions readily nor keep them private, no matter whom they may offend. They are the public verities upon which we stand, the truths by which we live and die. (100-01)

While I may not agree with Wood's contrived rationalization, I do believe that the tension between O'Connor's public omissions and private confessions indicates that she struggled to reconcile her prejudices with her ideals, or, in Wood's words, her opinions with her convictions, which, obviously, is natural and to be expected of anyone with as critical and curious a mind as she. Furthermore, I am far more interested in exploring how these struggles reveal themselves in the narrative details of her late texts, rather than what they disclose about O'Connor's moral integrity.

The Incitement to Diagnose Racism

> **"**It is neither a politic nor a popular thing to say, but a Black man facing a white man becomes at once contemptuous and resentful when he finds himself looked upon as a moral problem for that white man's conscience"
>
> –James Baldwin (*The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*).

Like all writers, O'Connor was a product of her place and time and so held the prejudices typical of her Southern environment. The critical urge to diagnose and then treat transgressions of perceived cultural impropriety, however, raises a much more compelling concern: why must this question be asked in the first place? Why is O'Connor's potential racism, or any other white Southern writer, important to the culture of the contemporary academy, and more broadly to the liberal class? What drives this impulse to inquisition? The answer, I propose, is found in the pursuit of canonical purity by critics and academics who feel a sense of responsibility toward the institutions which they serve, since they are expected, by themselves as well as by the institutional bodies that control the dispensation of funding, to lead by pedagogical example. As

historian and political analyst Thomas Frank writes in *Listen Liberal*, "educational achievement is, after all, the foundation of the professions' claim to higher status." We should therefore not be surprised, he continues,

> that the liberal class regards the university as the greatest and most necessary social institution of all, or that members of this cohort reflexively propose more education as the answer to just about anything you care to bring up. College can conquer unemployment as well as racism, they say; urban decay as well as inequality. Education will make us more tolerant [...]. (33-34)

According to Frank, then, the machinations of late capitalism have enforced the notion that the academy is the principal gateway to upward mobility and self-improvement. Never mind, however, that higher education is less accessible to the middle and lower classes via cyclical implementation of austerity measures,[5] or that student-loan debt makes up one-third of the national debt of the United States at $1.3 trillion.[6] The material reality of the academy's role, or lack thereof, in contemporary western society matters very little to those who have chosen to quarantine themselves to the poorly lit classrooms and offices of their respective institutions to analyze cultural output for traces of bigotry.[7] Mainstream liberalism in the academy, and

---

[5] From "By the Numbers: President Trump's 10 Biggest Proposed Cuts to U.S. Education, ranked": While the budget overall proposes spending increases for key Trump campaign promises, such as expanding the military and immigration enforcement, the president's proposal looks to slash the Education Department's budget by more than 5 percent, cutting back the agency's $63.2 billion in discretionary funding by $3.6 billion." See: https: //www.the74million.org/by-the-numbers-president-trumps-10-biggest-proposed-cuts-to-u-s-education-ranked/

[6] Statistics taken from February 21st 2017 Forbes article "Student Loan Debt in 2017: A $1.3 Trillion Crisis." Author Zack Friedman reports that: As of 2015, more than 42 million student loan borrowers have student loan debt of $100,000 or less. More than 2 million student loan borrowers have student loan debt greater than $100,000, with 415,000 of that total holding student loan debt greater than $200,000. The largest concentration of student loan debt is $10,000 - $25,000, which accounts for 12.4 million student loan borrowers."

[7] Social critic Irving Howe identified the atrophying of the intellectual's role outside of the academy in his 1954 essay "This Age of Conformity" from *The Partisan Review Anthology*: "The truly powerless people are those intellectuals — the new realist — who attach themselves to the seats of power, where

especially in the literary humanities, is galvanized by its opposition to racism. As Frank writes, "Nothing is more characteristic of the liberal class than its members' sense of their own elevated goodness, […] a combination of virtue and pedigree, a matter of educational accomplishment, of taste, of status… of professionalism" (224).

Though Frank's book is largely about the state of the contemporary American political spectrum, it provides a useful treatment of the state of contemporary liberalism. The members of this class, as Frank outlines them, are university educated professionals, innovators, and academics who seem to be "forever traveling on a quest for some place of greater righteousness, […] always engaged in a search for some subject of overwhelming, noncontroversial goodness with which it can identify itself and under whose umbrella of virtue it can put across its self-interested class program" (228). A liberal-class virtue-quest, however, is a far cry from progressive politics. It is, rather, an ersatz politics that feels political because it is exceedingly moralistic, and facilitates a comforting melodrama of absolutes, good versus bad. Ergo, the ego investment in the project of studying someone such as Flannery O'Connor, which is to say a white upper-middle class woman from the postbellum South, demands that, in an academic environment captivated by virtue-quests, there be procedures of checks and balances to diagnose the racism (or sexism, or homophobia) of the studied subject so as to absolve the critics themselves of any kind of guilt by association. For, there are few accusations that can be leveled at a member of the liberal class that can be as professionally damaging as that of racism. Such an allegation is a stigma that is nearly impossible to disprove once it has been dispensed since

---

they surrender their freedom of expression without gaining any significance as political figures. For it is crucial to the history of the American intellectuals in the past few decades — as well as to the relationship between 'wealth' and 'intellect' — that whenever they become absorbed into the accredited institutions of society they not only lose their traditional rebelliousness but to one extent or another *they cease to function as intellectuals*" (148).

racism is not about what one does, but, rather, is fundamentally about who one is and therefore the denunciation issues shame on the accused rather than guilt, where shame is bound to who or what we are, while guilt to what we do. This cycle of diagnosis and shame echoes the hermeneutics of suspicion that Foucault argues surrounded the sexually deviant subject in an earlier period: a constant kind of inquisition and surveillance that watches out for the signs of racism whereby every white person is equally suspect (*HS* 35). The policing of microaggressions thus becomes an obsession in academic culture and the critical industry of institutional micropolitics. Critics, in a sense, have come to serve the same purpose as Mary Grace, the college student visiting her mother in O'Connor's "Revelation," who physically attacks the story's protagonist, Mrs. Ruby Turpin, because of her racist and classist attitudes. What is of note is that Mrs. Turpin is attacked because of who she is, not because of what she does; it is her personality to which Mary Grace objects rather than her actions. By the story's end, she is faced with an unfamiliar sense of shame with which she has great difficulty deciphering: "'Why me?'" (*CW* 652).

Asad Haider takes this criticism of the culture of the liberal class a step further in a 2017 article for *Viewpoint Magazine* titled "White Purity," echoing Frank's denunciation of liberal virtue-quests. Haider argues that the most deceptive form of white pseudo-politics is "white guilt," an ideology that he argues is necessarily complemented by what he terms "white purity," which is, he continues, "a kind of ideology of racial hygiene which embraces multiculturalism and diversity, but attempts to eliminate undesirable elements from the white identity itself."[8] Haider's description of white purity echoes Frank's description of the liberal class: well-educated professionals who "listen to NPR, and have many POC friends." Yet, for this sense of white

[8] Asad Haider "White Purity." See: https://www.viewpointmag.com/2017/01/06/white-purity/

purity to properly function, there must be those whites who are not pure, that is, bad whites who did not go to university:

> They listen to country music and eat factory farmed meat. They are offensively overweight, and go to church instead of yoga on Sundays. Most disgusting of all, they work in dirty manual labor jobs and have a petty fixation on making more money, unaware that at Harvard an English major of color is being forced to endure the trauma of reading *Huckleberry Finn*.[9]

These bad whites exist to confirm the purity of the good whites who are of course soldiers in the fight for the integrity and dignity of oppressed people of colour. The success of white purity thus relies not only on the evils of bad whites, but on the romanticizing of non-whites as noble victims. Without these two necessary elements, the foundation of white purity collapses. Moreover, the entire point of view is incredibly suspect, as Haider notes, to non-whites who have experienced the soft racism of the mild-mannered liberal class as regularly as the more overt racism of the bad whites, "because," he writes, "we have never benefitted from the condescending and patronizing attitudes of white multiculturalists."[10]

The above arguments made by Frank and Haider provide a useful framework for introducing what I have termed, following Michel Foucault, the incitement to diagnose racism.[11] Following Frank and Haider's assessment of the manners of college educated liberals, I argue

---

[9] Haider, "White Purity."
[10] Haider, "White Purity."
[11] The concept of the incitement to diagnose racism was conceived in private casual conversations between Dr. Éric Savoy and Dr. Steven Bruhm, and was in turn suggested as a possible line of inquiry for my research by Dr. Savoy. My use of this concept in relation to my research on trends in O'Connor studies owes a great deal to the direction provided by both Dr. Bruhm and Dr. Savoy. Any future iterations of the present study will include no musings whatsoever on the concept of the incitement to diagnose racism.

that critics are controlled by a version of Foucault's model of the economy of the perverse implantation, as introduced in his seminal text *The History of Sexuality vol. 1.*:

> But this often-stated theme, that sex is outside of discourse and that only the removing of an obstacle, the breaking of a secret, can clear the way leading to it, is precisely what needs to be examined. Does it not partake of the injunction by which discourse is provoked? Is it not with the aim of inciting people to speak of sex that is made to mirror, at the outer limit of every actual discourse, something akin to a secret whose discovery is imperative, a thing abusively reduced to silence, and at the same time difficult and necessary, dangerous and precious to divulge? (34-35)

To ask my own rhetorical question, does this model not also describe the imperative to diagnose the secret of racism? Foucault's repressive hypothesis states that the relationship between power and sex is one of repression whereby power is exerted to suppress and control the discourse on sex. This regulation is the unavoidable result of the "will to knowledge," a theory developed by Foucault that posits that the more we know about something, the more power we have over it. But power also brings sex increasingly into discourse, into a broader and more analytic focus, and so this very act of learning is itself an exercise of power insofar as learning is a cumulative process and so is an application of a knowledge that is already held to a knowledge that is in the process of being acquired. Ergo, as the imperative to learn about sex has developed, the ways we can speak about it have become more firmly controlled.

Likewise, as general awareness of the racial divide in the United States has risen, so has the scrutiny of the discourse on race proliferated. It is of course not as simple as substituting sex and sexuality with race and racism in Foucault's work on the repressive hypothesis, but there is a notable consonance between the discourse on sexuality in the 17th century onward and the

contemporary discourse on racism. In other words, there reigns over contemporary culture and the critical industry a prohibition that consigns the discourse on racism to be regulated by strict conditions, which, in the enterprises of literary and cultural criticism, are conditions which are economically useful and politically conservative.[12]

Given that Foucault's model necessitates the existence of a normative group—the reproductive heterosexual married couple—who are not the object of scrutiny and who are free from the regulatory gaze, my adaptation of his model therefore requires an equivalent group, a group that believes itself to be above suspicion, but which is sharply scrutinized by O'Connor in her texts: the complacent white liberal. As we witness through the depictions of Julian in "Everything That Rises Must Converge," Asbury in "The Enduring Chill," and Rayber in "The Barber," the incitement to diagnose cannot be a neutral act. In other words, that which is scrutinized—in this case, the racial divide and the various forms of resulting racism—is not an objective specimen that will remain unaffected in the process. The more we know of something, or at least the more we *believe* that we know, and, more to the point, how we come about knowing it, has a direct effect on not only how that thing can then be discussed moving forward,

[12] This stance has been the attitude towards the racial divide in the United States since the Civil War. For example, as Howard Zinn demonstrates in his essay "Lincoln and Emancipation," Honest Abe's motivation to end slavery was not the belief that all men are created equal, but was rather the political hurdle that slavery presented: "I have not meant to leave any one in doubt. […] My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or destroy Slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could do it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that. What I do about Slavery and the colored race, I do because it helps to save this Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it would help to save the Union." As David Brown and Clive Webb show in *Race in the American South*, we see this very same attitude a hundred years later in President John F. Kennedy: "At the time of the Freedom Rides, President Kennedy was preparing for a summit meeting in Vienna with Soviet premier Nikita Krushchev. Her feared that his Cold War adversary would use the violence in Alabama to demonstrate the hypocrisy of American claims to leadership of the free world, and to portray Kennedy himself as a weak politician who could not maintain law and order. It was these pragmatic considerations, more than any principled recognition of the Freedom Riders' cause, that led the administration to intervene. Reluctantly forced to side with the activists, Kennedy nonetheless confided that 'this whole thing and the people behind it were a giant pain in the ass'" (300-301).

but on how it evolves and proliferates. Further to this point, the incitement to diagnose does not effectively engage with the evils that it sets out to remedy because its position is fundamentally one of reproof and censure, and as such, it is antagonistic in nature and thus cannot properly function as a reparative practice. The incitement to diagnose racism becomes instead a system of policing that fails to fully understand the underlying causes of the problems that it attempts to confront. Consequently, the authority that drives the pedantic conditions of a diagnosis is fundamentally underscored with the patronizing presumption that "I know better than you what you really want," where the "you" corresponds to the person, or group of people, whose dignity is ostensibly being protected. Racism, like sexuality, is therefore "not a thing which stubbornly shows itself, but one which always hides, the insidious presence that speaks in a voice so muted and often disguised that one risks remaining deaf to it" (*HS* 35). And if racism is not confessed, then it must be diagnosed, enabling the logic of the superego to take over—that is, the more we obey the commandment of the law, the more we are guilty. This guilt is then appropriated by the college-educated idealists, like Julian, Asbury, or Rayber, and implemented in their moral grandstanding as they preach, like false prophets, to those who have not yet had the privilege of being converted to the church of post-secondary education.

Complacent Idealists as False Prophets

In her essay entitled "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South," O'Connor makes clear that when she writes about backwoods prophets, she does so earnestly and is in no way mocking them. "Their concerns are [my] own" she continues, "and, in [my] judgment, central to human life" (204). Such is not the case, however, when she writes about college-educated idealists who wear their moral superiority on their sleeves, or, as I term them, her ersatz-prophets—that is,

characters who view themselves as holding some superior vision of the world and of the people in it, but who, in their self-idolization, need to be returned to reality by some violent prophetic intervention. O'Connor explores this character-type in a number of her texts, from Rayber in her novel *The Violent Bear It Away*, to Hulga, Julian, and Asbury in her short-stories "Good Country People," "Everything That Rises Must Converge," and "The Enduring Chill" respectively, and each of them is returned to reality at a considerable cost. But her interest in treating the character-type and exposing his modern bias for reason over mystery can in fact be traced back to one of her earliest texts, "The Barber," which is collected in her master's thesis entitled *The Geranium*.

"The Barber" is set in the fictional town of Dilton, presumably a play on the city of Dalton in Northwest Georgia, where a college professor by the name of Rayber, a nascent version of the character with the same name and profession in her novel *The Violent Bear It Away,* is overtaken by his political angst. Convinced of his intellectual and moral superiority, he becomes obsessed with the political disputes he has with the men at his local barbershop and spends much of the action of the story preparing a speech that he hopes will convert the men to his point of view. The story culminates with Rayber not only failing to express his carefully curated ideas, but in his resorting to physical aggression against his barber which ultimately only serves to amplify his humiliation as he escapes the barbershop. O'Connor's lampooning of academics and progressive idealists in this early text is heavy handed in her depiction of Rayber's condescension towards people who do not share his level of education. He is patronizing towards anyone who is outside of the academy, and, in his view, out of reach of reason and of logic. His disregard for the uneducated is emphasized by his adulation for his colleague Jacobs, a "philosophy man" whose approval Rayber seems to be pursuing like a dog

chasing a car. By contrast, he expresses nothing but disdain for the barber's intelligence, proven by his emphasis on wanting to discuss with him "sanely." For the discussion to proceed, it must be had on Rayber's terms, otherwise it is not sane, and thus void. This arrogance trickles into his condescension towards the barbershop's Black employee, George, when Rayber thinks to himself that he would like to "say something that George would understand" (715), later wondering whether "demagogue" is too obscure a word to use in his presence: "Should have said 'lying politicians'" (715). Rayber's incitement to diagnose is in full effect insofar as he attempts to control the discussion of the election, and by extension, of all the economic and racial politics involved, by regulating both the context of the exchange and the vocabulary used.

The story's opening sentence, "It is trying on Liberals in Dilton," thus serves two functions: first, it performs the basic task of establishing the story's setting and the political context in which the narrative will unfold. By the following paragraph, the reader learns that the town is in the midst of an election, the results of which have forced Rayber to find a new barber. We can thus infer that Rayber is the aforementioned liberal who is experiencing trying times. The second, more important function of the opening sentence, however, is to emphasize the protagonist's self-absorption: the reader is informed that the focus is on the liberals themselves rather than on the issues that they purport to champion—it is trying on liberals, and not on the unemployed, or the uneducated, or on those whose rights are supposedly at stake in the Democratic White Primary. Indeed, Rayber is so self-involved that he fails to recognize the social cues of uninterest exhibited by his colleagues, his wife, and, most significantly, George, whose attention and alliance he obsessively tries to gain. When, for example, Rayber attempts to discuss politics with his colleague Jacobs, "a man of his education" (*CW* 714), Jacobs tells him to "Skip it" before running off to supposedly teach a class: "His classes frequently occurred,

Rayber noticed, when Rayber was about to get him in argument" (714). But Jacobs' apathy does nothing to deter Rayber's appetite for intellectual sparring as he again tries to reel his colleague in with the written argument he has painstakingly prepared for his barber. Jacobs again responds with disinterest, though now he appears to also be veering toward annoyance: "'Well,' Jacobs said, 'so what? What do you call yourself doing?'" (720). Undeterred, or more properly, oblivious, Rayber insists that he is faced with a level of ignorance that Jacobs has never himself experienced. Jacobs' response to Rayber's claim is telling:

> Jacobs snorted. "Oh yes I have," he said.
>
> "What happened?"
>
> "I never argue."
>
> "But you know you're right," Rayber persisted.
>
> "I never argue." (721)

The ignorance to which Jacobs' snort refers is of course Rayber's inability to register that his colleagues have no interest in discussing politics with him, likely because they do not share his views. This possibility is lost on Rayber, however, because he assumes that men of his education must inherently share his logical reasoning, for he has already settled on the veracity of the inverse position with regards to the men at the barbershop: they do not agree with his political views because they are not as educated as he is. Jacobs ultimately succumbs to Rayber's pestering and tells him to leave the paper on his desk. "Don't spoil your complexion arguing with barbers" (721), he advises Rayber, though in light of his earlier assertion that he never argues, he is likely only placating his colleague so that he may move on with his day.

This pattern is repeated when Rayber demands that his wife listen to him recite his paper in preparation of its delivery to the barber. Though she has already made clear to him that

politics is a precarious topic of conversation by telling him, every time he mentions the election, that "Just because you teach doesn't mean you know everything" (721), he nevertheless persists in using her as a sounding board for his postulations. Resistant at first, she, like Jacobs before her, succumbs so to placate: "She came in wiping her hands and said all right; all right, she was there, wasn't she? Go ahead" (722). As Rayber begins to read his paper to his wife, her attention almost immediately shifts to a magazine on a nearby table, and when he pauses to take note of her reaction to his reading, she assumes his silence indicates that he has finished: "'That was very nice,' she said and went back to the kitchen" (722). Rayber's wife, like his colleague, accords him the minimum amount of her concentration before dismissing him and returning to her tasks. Yet, their combined minimal attention is still more than Rayber receives from George, the effigy for whom he believes himself to be advocating.

George's uninterest in the back and forth between Rayber and the men at the barbershop is emphasized, to Rayber's chagrin, by his reflex to agree with whatever position his employer has taken. Whether this impulse reflects his personal opinions, or is simply a safeguard against his employer's ire, is up for debate, but either way, Rayber is isolated in his crusade. Thus, when Rayber and the barber begin to argue about the integration of schools, George expresses uninterest in having to attend a white school before directly changing the topic of conversation: "'Wouldn't like that,' George said. 'We needs sommo powders. These here the las' in this box'" (718). As with Jacobs and Mrs. Rayber, the political discussion is but a distraction from his tasks at hand. Yet, again, Rayber is incapable of registering George's disregard and continues to vie for his attention and, more importantly, for recognition that he is an ally. Rayber's struggle to project himself as a civil rights activist receives its deathblow when, after finally delivering his prepared argument to the men at the barbershop, George reveals that if he could vote, he would

cast his ballot for the very candidate Rayber finds so revolting: the demagogue Hawkson. George's confession incites Rayber's fit of violence upon the barber, but even in this feeble attempt of ferocity does the college professor exude his ineptness, for it is he who must ultimately retreat both physically and intellectually.

While the story's narrative arc is constructed around Rayber's political disagreement with the men at his barbershop and the ensuing mania that overtakes him as he desperately tries to assert his moral superiority, the essence of the story is his total failure to deliver his message. His egotism is so acute that he fails to recognize that not one of the three people he assumes to have in his corner is interested in acknowledging his intelligence and thus humouring his self-idolatry. Though he believes himself to be bearing witness to the folly of the men at his barbershop, and by extension of all those who support Hawkson, he is revealed by story's end to be intellectually and socially impotent. It is this very impotence that makes of him an ersatz-prophet and, therefore, unequipped to be delivering the carefully curated revelations that he composes in his home office.

In consequence, I contend that the main distinction between O'Connor's early and late texts is the absence and presence, respectively, of prophetic figures, and thus of the moment of grace made possible by gestures of prophetic violence. Where no revelation is made, no moment of grace is accepted or refused. Thus, in "The Barber," Rayber, who, as I have shown, represents the self-deception of false prophets, is barred from earning the epiphanic moment experienced by self-deceived characters in O'Connor's late texts, such as Mrs. Turpin, Asbury, or Julian. Nor is the barber returned to reality as Rayber's violent interjection confuses rather than reveals. Moreover, it is Rayber who works himself up into a frenzy before ultimately accosting the barber — there is no outside force that interferes to return him to reality, no violent action except his

own hysterical outburst, and so he experiences no transformative moment save for a bruised ego as he escapes the barbershop humiliated.

O'Connor's career-long fixation with the character-type of the ersatz-prophet leads one to wonder about what provokes her repeated portrayals. Operating under the assumption that all fiction is to varying degrees biographical, I put forth that O'Connor's ersatz-prophets are farcical composites of not only the teachers, classmates, and peers she encountered during her time in college and at the Yaddo residency, but of herself as well. In "On Her Own Work" she notes that when a writer "has a freak for his hero, he is not simply showing us what we are, but what we have been and what we could become," and that, moreover, "[his] prophet-freak is an image of himself" (*MM* 118). Thus, if the prophet-freak is an image of the author, then I argue so can the ersatz-prophet be an honest representation of some less divine aspects of the writer's personality. So considered, Rayber, Asbury, and Julian become illustrations of who O'Connor was or who she could have become, if she had not nurtured her prophetic vision. As she writes in "Novelist and Believer," the security of her beliefs allows her to provide honest representations of her failures in her fiction, and as such, she does not seek to justify the actions of her characters on a "sliding scale of values" (168)—she simply lets her prophet-freaks, her prophets gone wrong, as it were, perform the prophetic operations that return the self-deceived to reality.

O'Connor and The Black Prophetic Tradition

Cornell West begins his introduction to *Black Prophetic Fire* by asking if we have witnessed "the demise of the Black prophetic tradition in present-day America" (1). He goes on to lament that since the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Black America has slowly shifted from a "we-consciousness" to an "I-consciousness" characteristic of the "seductive myth of

individualism in American culture" (1). To West, the Black prophetic tradition serves as an antidote to the contagion of individualism, and so, to this end, his book attempts to fan the dying flames of Black prophetic fire by investigating the prophetic roles of Black men and women such as King, Ida B. Wells, and Malcolm X. "Without the Black prophetic tradition," writes West, "much of the best of America would be lost and some of the best of the modern world would be forgotten" (2). I believe that West's anxiety over with the capitulation of Black Americans to the "individualistic projects in pursuit of wealth, health, and status" (1), insofar as this surrender relates to a kind of cultural depreciation, echoes that expressed by O'Connor with regards to the South when, in her speech entitled "The Regional Writer", she states that "prophets have already been heard to say that in twenty years there'll be no such thing as Southern literature" (*MM* 59). Where West decries an individualistic American society "ruled by big money" (1), O'Connor cautions the loss of individuality as everything is "reduced to the same flat level," further prophesizing that one day all writers will "be writing about men in gray flannel suits" (*Conversations with Flannery O'Connor* 30). While their points of departure obviously differ, O'Connor and West both acknowledge the social and cultural value of prophets, and, moreover, bespeak the prophetic vision required for bearing witness to a society hebetated by homogenization. Of course, their conceptions of the prophet are not entirely congruent: West sees the prophet as a positive force for social change, while prophets in O'Connor's texts are typically failed prophets, and so their prophetic gestures are liable to be shrouded in mysterious violence—though, as she observes in her speech "A Reasonable Use of the Unreasonable", "a prophet gone wrong is almost always more interesting [to readers] than your grandmother" (*MM* 110). Despite this divergence, both writers ultimately arrive at the same understanding that "the prophetic is predicated on critiques of idolatry" (*Black Prophetic Fire* 125), and that prophetic

interventions, or what West calls *parrhesia*,[13] are essential to the mission of offering gestures that transcend neat allegories, which is to say gestures that make contact with mystery so to provide the countermeasure to idolatry, or, as O'Connor would say, to return us to reality. What is more, I aim to show how, despite O'Connor's expressed skepticism towards some of the more prominent Black prophetic figures of her time, her late texts, including private letters composed in the final year of her life, reveal an affinity for Black prophetic fire.

In a May 21, 1964 letter to Maryat Lee, approximately two and a half months before her death, O'Connor writes:

> About the Negroes, the kind I don't like is the philosophizing prophesying pontificating kind, the James Baldwin kind. Very ignorant but never silent. Baldwin can tell us what it feels like to be a Negro in Harlem but he tries to tell us everything else too. [Martin Luther] King I don't think is the age's great saint but he's at least doing what he can do & has to do. [...] My question is usually, would this person be endurable if white? If Baldwin were white nobody would stand him a minute. I prefer Cassius Clay [...] Cassius is too good for the Moslems. You can have half interest in Mary Grace. (*HB* 580)

There is quite a bit to unpack here, from O'Connor's lukewarm recognition of Martin Luther King, to her admiration of Muhammad Ali despite her use of his forsaken birth name Cassius Clay, to her distaste for James Baldwin. The diatribe is a veritable hit list of the movement's most popular leaders, the 'philosophizing prophesying pontificating' kind that are never silent; the unruly, uppity kind who, as Julian's mother expresses in "Everything That Rises Must Converge," can very well rise, "but on their side of the fence" (*CW* 488). Curious that Malcolm X, a very public and very controversial Black rights activist whom West describes a "the great

[13] From West: "The term *parrhesia* goes back to line 24A of Plato's Apology, where Socrates says, the cause of my unpopularity was my *parrhesia*, my fearless speech" (112).

figure of revolutionary *parrhesia* in the Black prophetic tradition" (*Black Prophetic Fire* 112), manages to escape the list considering that his personality fits perfectly with O'Connor's profile of the "philosophizing prophesying pontificating kind." In fact, O'Connor does not discuss Malcolm X, or the Nation of Islam, in any of her collected letters, save for her assertion that "Cassius is too good for the Moslems" (*HB* 580). The omission could be the result of O'Connor simply not knowing all that much about either Malcolm X or "the Moslems." After all, Malcolm X only became a cultural icon after his murder, which occurred approximately 6 months after O'Connor's death.[14] Moreover, as Baldwin indicates in *The Fire Next Time*, few Americans[15] knew anything at all about Islam or the Black Muslims. Of his meeting the with members of the Nation of Islam, he writes:

> [in] a way, I owe the invitation [to meet with Elijah Muhammad] to the incredible, abysmal, and really cowardly obtuseness of white liberals. Whether in private debate or in public, any attempt I made to explain how the Black Muslim movement came about, and how it has achieved such a force, was met with a blankness that revealed the little connection that the liberals' attitudes have with their perceptions or their lives, or even

---

[14]As David Remnick notes in the April 25, 2011 issue of the New Yorker, though vivid, Malcolm was a secondary figure in his own time and it was not until the massive success of Alex Haley's biography of Malcolm that he became an icon. Between 1965 and 1977, "The Autobiography of Malcolm X" sold six million copies worldwide.

[15] With the exception of some more cosmopolitan Americans such as, for example, investigative journalist I.F. Stone who in an essay titled "The Pilgrimage of Malcolm X" displayed a sensitive and nuanced understanding of the appeal of the Nation of Islam to Black Americans: "There is a special reason for the efficacy of the Black Muslims in reaching the Negro damned. The sickness of the Negro in America is that he has been made to feel a nigger; the genocide is psychic. The Negro must rid himself of this feeling if he is to stand erect again. He can do so in two ways. He can change the outer world of white supremacy, or he can change his inner world by "conversion." The teachings of the Black Muslims may be fantastic but they are superbly suited to the task of shaking off the feeling of nigger-ness." (New York Review of Books, November 11, 1965). It should be noted, however, that Stone was considered to be a radical.

their knowledge—revealed, in fact, that they could deal with the Negro as a symbol or a victim but had no sense of him as a man. (*The Fire Next Time* 72)

O'Connor's potential obliviousness with regards to Malcolm X and the Black Muslim movement, however, is an unsatisfying and, I argue, unlikely possibility. The purpose of my reference to the above citation is thus not to align her with the described obtuse white liberals, but to posit the inverse argument: O'Connor was not obtuse in the least.

Given her cultured intellectual life, by which I mean not only her New Critical education at the University of Iowa, but also the vigour with which she kept abreast with contemporary writers and thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, François Mauriac, or Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, I believe it is fair to assume that O'Connor was also up to date with current events, including the rising popularity of the Nation of Islam and various other Black empowerment movements across the country. Surely she was aware of, for example, Elijah Mohammad's now famous speech in Atlanta in 1961, which had been advertised as a major confrontation between the Nation of Islam and the Ku Klux Klan[16] and which drew thousands of spectators. Louis Lomax describes the scene in *When the World is Given*: "With a seating capacity of only five hundred, the auditorium was jammed hours before the meeting began; another two thousand people lined up along the dirt road leading to the auditorium and heard the speech over loud-speakers" (110). In response to the fervour with which the NOI was received by Atlanta's Black population, the

[16] The rise of white supremacy, particularly in O'Connor's state of Georgia, served only to exacerbate these already volatile social tensions. As Stephen G.N. Tuck writes: "In parallel with the renewed dominance of the [Herman] Talmadge faction, the Associated Klans of Georgia remerged from a wartime low of 12 Klavern to over 110 Klaverns, with an estimated 100,000 members by the summer of 1949. At a time when Klan activity was decreasing across the South and even in Mississippi, Klan membership, therefore, almost equaled the number of Black registered voters across the state. The growth of the Klan translated into renewed racial violence. During the first six months of 1948, the Southern Regional Council documented an unprecedented dozen reported attacks in Georgia. The following year, Georgia led the South in extralegal racial violence" ("The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia" 314).

Klan organized a boycott of businesses run by Muslims, as well as a rally of its own in opposition, to be held on the same day and at the same time.[17] Thus, with such turmoil brewing in Atlanta only 100 miles away from her home in Milledgville, it is more likely than not that O'Connor was at least tangentially familiar with the uprising of the Nation of Islam and with the corresponding fear percolating in the country that the Black Muslims were a menace that exacerbated the already tenuous state of race relations.

But if O'Connor was not paying attention to the rise of Black Muslims in 1961, she is certainly aware of their influence by 1964 when she asserts, even if only superficially, that Clay is "too good for the Moslems." This assertion suggests that the writer shared the prevailing point of view that the Black Muslims were a band of derelicts who, as Lomax notes, represented "an extreme reaction to the problem of being a Negro in America" (*The Negro Revolt* 77) in the 20th Century. As historians Randy Robert and Johnny Smith detail in the finely researched biography *Blood Brothers: The Fatal Friendship Between Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X*, this understanding of the Black Muslims is also what leads many Americans to vehemently reject and deride Ali's decision to forsake his birth name:

> Muhammad Ali […] sounded too foreign and too subversive. Skeptical of his sincerity, the *Chicago Tribune* printed an editorial assailing his religious beliefs: "It needs to be made quite clear that the 'Islam' which heavyweight Champion Cassius Clay has adopted is a far, far cry from the religion practiced in the Arab world." (223)

A widespread distrust of the unknown other combined with an innate fear of Black revenge thus breeds a dismissive attitude towards Ali's self-affirmation.

---

[17] Imperial Wizard J.B. Stoner wrote a letter to the Honorable Elijah Muhammad on April 10 1961 to dissuade the Nation of Islam from holding their rally in Atlanta: http://mdah.ms.gov/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom/photo.php?display=large&oid=610

In the case of O'Connor's use of Clay over Ali, however, I would note that she deserves the benefit of the doubt, even if the general confusion surrounding the prize fighter's disavowal of a name that held direct ties[18] to slavery reveals how just detached many Americans were from the conditions of Black Americans. As Ralph C. Wood twice indicates, the name change had not yet occurred at the time of writing of the May 21 letter:

> O'Connor felt that the brash young boxer who later renamed himself Muhammad Ali understood [the complex matter of racial manners] as many others did not. In a televised interview with Eric Sevareid, Cassius Clay (as he was then called) had lamented the hatred of whites that the civil rights movement had spawned [...] (*Christ Haunted South* 111).

Moreover, many news publications[19] and radio broadcasters continued to use Ali's birth name for several years, in some cases out of negligence,[20] while in other cases out of resistance.[21] To make matters even more confusing, Cassius Clay was typically very misleading with reporters, constantly emphasizing that he was not a "Black Muslim" and that he was not a member of the Nation of Islam. But as Robert and Smith note, Clay had been intrigued by the "Black Muslims" since he was a teenager and had even travelled to Detroit to see Elijah Mohammad and Malcolm

---

[18] Ali's namesake was 19th Century Kentucky planter, journalist, and politician Cassius Marcellus Clay, a prominent emancipationist who, like many of the white liberal allies to the civil rights activists of the 1950s and 60s, was a pragmatist who favoured gradual emancipation over the immediate abolition of slavery.

[19] Although O'Connor did have little patience for journalists, calling them in a September '63 letter to "A" the "slobberheartedest lily-mindedest piously conniving crowd in the modern world" (*HB* 537).

[20] Victor Mather notes in a June 9, 2016 article for the *New York Times* that between 1964 and 1968 the *Times*, the perceived standard bearer for journalistic integrity, used 'Cassius Clay' almost ten times as often as they used 'Muhammad Ali'. In some cases, the negligence is almost laughable: "A Times article in 1966 noted that Ali balked at accepting an award because it was inscribed to Cassius Clay, not Muhammad Ali. The article's headline was "Clay Gets Award as Boxer of Year." On page 36 of the Feb. 6, 1967, edition, there were three stories about Ali. A preview of his fight with Ernie Terrell and a Sports of The Times column about the match referred to him as Clay. A news story about his speech at a Houston mosque called him Muhammad Ali in the headline, but Clay in the text."

[21] As Roberts and Smith note in *Blood Brothers*: "Mocking Ali, columnist Jim Murray referred to him as "Abdul the Bull Ameer." Sonny Liston also dismissed the champ's new name: 'Ahmed Mali, Mamud Wally, who's that? I met you as Cassius Clay and I'll leave you as Cassius Clay'" (223).

X speak in 1962. Privately, Clay became close friends with Malcolm X and his family, while publicly he deflected the growing suspicions of savvy reporters and developed a "nonthreatening image—an image of a smiling, jovial "Negro," an entertainer cracking harmless jokes and reciting poems, an act encouraged by his white managers" (Robert and Smith 140). Only after he defeated Sonny Liston for the world heavyweight championship in February of 1964 did Clay begin to publicly address his association with the Nation of Islam and his friendship with Elijah Mohammad and Malcolm X. Interestingly, it is precisely this empowered Ali for whom O'Connor expressed admiration in letters to A. (28 March 64) and Maryat Lee (21 May 64). Her claim that "Cassius is too good for the Moslems" is therefore ironic since it is through the teachings of the Nation of Islam that Ali developed the very rhetoric that she admired.

I suggest that there is a second layer of irony to O'Connor's take on the Nation of Islam insofar as she and Malcolm X shared some similar views with regards to the forced integration of whites and Blacks and the hypocritical nature of Yankee liberals in general.[22] Malcolm X regularly spoke of his distrust of government-sanctioned integration in his speeches, understanding it to be nothing more than token integration,[23] a few crumbs of social equality that did not solve any of the deep-rooted problems that affected the Black communities of the United States. Integration was to Malcolm X's mind but another method of social control, no different

---

[22] Malcolm X uses the term 'White Liberal' instead of O'Connor's 'Yankee Liberal', but I think it is fair to say that both terms more or less refer to the same group of people.

[23] Amiri Baraka describes tokenism thus in "Tokenism: 300 Years for Five Cents" *Home: Social Essays*: "Tokenism is that philosophy (of psychological exploitation) which is supposed to assuage my natural inclinations toward complete freedom. For the middle-class Negro, this assuagement can take the form it takes in the mainstream of American life, i.e., material acquisition, or the elevating of one "select" coon to some position that seems heaped in "prestige." [...] But the lower-class Negro cannot use this kind of tokenism, so he is pretty much left in the lurch. But so effective is this kind of crumb-dropping among the soi-disant Black middle class that these people become the actual tokens themselves, or worse" (98).

from the chains that bound his ancestors. [24] While their point of departure differs greatly, I believe that we find within the kernels of Malcom X's skepticism of the white liberal the very same distrust O'Connor feels toward liberal idealism. Let us remember the letter to Dawkins in which she grumbles that the "Liberal approach is that man has never fallen, never incurred guilt, and is ultimately perfectible by his own efforts" (303). O'Connor is strictly opposed to the notion of the perfectibility of man and views the ministrations of metropolitan intellectuals as self-serving gestures of vanity. In this sense, her point of view on the racial divide is much more aligned with that of Ali, Malcolm X, or even Amiri Baraka than might at first glance be obvious. Take as reference Baraka's objection to the delusions of progressive ideals in his 1962 essay "Tokenism: 300 years for five cents":

> Liberals, as good post-Renaissance men, believe wholeheartedly in progress. [...] The liberal is in a strange position because his conscience, unlike the conscience of his richer or less intelligent brothers, has always bothered him about these acts, but never sufficiently to move him to any concrete action except the setting up of palliatives and symbols to remind him of his own good faith. […] But, for me, the idea of "progress" is a huge fallacy. An absurd Western egoism that has been foisted on the rest of the world as an excuse for slavery and colonialism. (*H* 95-96)

Baraka's distrust of liberal ideals of progress echoes misgivings expressed by O'Connor throughout her life. The major difference is of course that while O'Connor expresses her distrust

[24] This is a sentiment that Malcolm X expressed in many of his speeches and interviews, usually using as reference point the difference between the wolf and the fox: "No, the South is no different from the North. Let me tell you the only difference. The white man in the South is a wolf. You know where he stands. When he opens his mouth and you see his teeth he looks vicious. Well, the only difference between the white man in the South and the white man in the North is that one is a wolf and this one is a fox. The fox will lynch you and you won't even know you have been lynched. The fox will Jim Crow you and you don't even know you're Jim Crowed. And this is the basic difference between the southern white man and the northern white man" ("The Old Negro and The New Negro).

of liberal ideals of progress from the point of a view that we are all fallen creatures and perfectible only by the grace of God in the afterlife, Baraka and company operate from a position that is fundamentally subversive. Perhaps it is this opposition of perspectives between Blacks and whites that leads O'Connor to state that harmony between the two races "requires considerable grace" and that the particular history of the South requires a strict adherence to a code of manners for people to get along and live their lives peacefully. "Formality," O'Connor expresses in an interview with C. Ross Mullins, Jr.,

> preserves that individual privacy which everybody needs and, in these times, is always in danger of losing. It's particularly necessary to have in order to protect the rights of both races. When you have a common code of manners based on charity, then when the charity fails—as it is going to do continuously—you've got those manners there to preserve each race from small intrusions upon the other. The uneducated Southern Negro is not the clown he's made out to be. He's a man of very elaborate manners and great formality which he uses superbly for his own protection and to insure his own privacy. (*Conversations with Flannery O'Connor* 103-04)

O'Connor's description of code of manners based on the Catholic virtue of charity, or 'caritas' which refers to the Christian love of humankind, bears a striking resemblance to one expressed in Malcolm X's autobiography where he urges for a spirit of mutual charity to help end "the basic causes that produce the racial explosions in America today."[25] Contrary to popular belief, brotherhood is central to Malcolm X's philosophy, particularly after he returns to the United

[25] From Alex Haley & Malcolm X's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*: "In our mutual sincerity we might be able to show a road to the salvation of America's very soul. It can only be salvaged if human rights and dignity, in full, are extended to Black men. Only such real, meaningful actions as those which are sincerely motivated from a deep sense of humanism and moral responsibility can get at the basic causes that produce the racial explosions in America today. Otherwise, the racial explosions are only going to grow worse" (384).

States from his pilgrimage to the Mecca in November 1964, three months after O'Connor's death, and 4 months before his murder. Thus, while there is no record of O'Connor engaging with Malcolm X's prophesying, and, conversely, Malcolm X likely never read a page of O'Connor's work, the two share synchronous points of view on two fronts: their distrust of liberal ideals of progress, and their belief in the healing power of mutual charity. With that said, O'Connor does engage with Malcolm X by proxy—that is to say, she engages with his ideas, or at least with versions of his ideas, through her admiration for his most famous student, Muhammad Ali.

In the aforementioned May 21 letter to Lee, O'Connor delights in Ali's answer to the question of whether he and his Muslim brothers and sisters hate white people: "Cassius Clay says he don't like all this talk about hate. Says a tiger come in the room with you gonna either run or shoot him. That don't mean you hate the tiger. It just means you know you and him can't make it out" (*HB* 571). Wood observes that O'Connor "obviously relished the colorful language of Clay [and] suspected that the uneducated ring-fighter from Louisville struck deeper truth than the cultured integrationists who had no real understanding of Southern Blacks" (*Flannery O'Connor and the Christ Haunted South* 111). The critic's phrasing suggests that O'Connor's preference for Ali over King and Baldwin appears to be predicated on his not being like the cultured integrationists—in other words, on his being uneducated and uncultured, and most importantly, on not being an advocate for integration. One may counter-argue that it is Ali's commonality with Southern Blacks as a Southern Black man that endears O'Connor to the prize fighter, but this argument would be inadequate since King was also a from the South, and Baldwin, though from the North, was raised by Southerners, and so was not exactly a stranger to the particularities of the Southern Black experience. I thus contend that it is O'Connor's distrust of, and distaste

for, cosmopolitan intellectualism, or what she perceives as such, that leads her to dismiss King and Baldwin's respective prophesying in favour of Ali's captivating street smarts. Indeed, his layman wisdom has more in common with that of characters like Coleman from "Judgment Day" or the farm hands in "The Enduring Chill" and "Revelation" than it does with the learned reasoning of characters like Rayber, Julian, or Asbury. Of course, Ali is much more verbose than Coleman and the farm hands, but it is their shared ability to outwit the white man that the writer finds so alluring.

Conversely, O'Connor decrees Baldwin a sophist and writes him off as an ersatz-prophet akin to her pontificating characters: "Baldwin can tell us what it feels like to be a Negro in Harlem but he tries to tell us everything else too" (*HB* 580). Blinded by her distaste for cosmopolitan intellectualism, she dismisses Baldwin outright and consequently deems his prophetic operations of bearing witness as the confabulations of someone who is "very ignorant but never silent." O'Connor thus likens Baldwin to Rayber, when, I would argue, he has much more in common with Mary Grace. You will recall that Mary Grace's attack upon Ruby Turpin in the waiting room of a doctor's office serves as the prophetic intervention by which Mrs. Turpin consequently experiences an action of grace as she later hoses down her hog pen. Thus, just as Ruby Turpin has difficulty accepting Mary Grace's prophetic message, so does O'Connor struggle with accepting Baldwin's prophetic role.

Interestingly, however, O'Connor seems to acknowledge this very struggle near the end of the May 21 letter. After declaring her preference for Clay over Baldwin, she concludes her meditation on philosophizing, prophesying, pontificating Black men with the following: "You can have half interest in Mary Grace" (*HB* 580). This reference to Mary Grace in the context of comments on Baldwin, King, and Clay is quite revelatory insofar as the writer here associates the

prophetic function of these three men with that of her own prophetic character, the pimple-faced college student who thrusts her *Human Development* textbook at the self-idolizing Mrs. Turpin. While this is the only reference to "Revelation" in the letter, O'Connor had written to Lee about the text a week earlier on May 15 (*HB* 577), seemingly in response to her friend's reading of the story, confirming that Mrs. Turpin does indeed experience a mysterious Jacobian vision. In fact, O'Connor adds that this purgatorial vision of the "vast horde of souls [rumbling] to heaven" (*CW* 654) is the entire point of her story. She further comments that Mrs. Turpin operates as a country female Jacob, and just like many an O'Connor character before her, she wrestles with her moment of grace, confused, bitter, and self-pitying before ultimately experiencing her humbling epiphany. Thus, while Mary Grace's prophetic intervention, in terms of narrative structure, is but the inciting incident that sets the story's true conflict in motion—which is to say, Mrs. Turpin's coming to terms with her spiritual conflict—it is nonetheless a critical element of O'Connor's narrative poetics: the prophet first bears witness to Mrs. Turpin's self-idolatry, and then, in her frustrated rage, repudiates that which has been witnessed with a violent gesture of provocation before finally revealing her prophetic message that Mrs. Turpin should "Go back to hell where [she] came from" (*CW* 646). This pattern, or a close variation of it, is repeated in both "Everything That Rises Must Converge" and "Judgment Day" in the comportment of her Black prophets, Carver's mother and Tanner's neighbour respectively: they bear witness to behaviour they deem unacceptable, respond to it with violence, and pronounce a revelatory message, the sum of these events suggesting that the protagonists have been offered a moment of grace, which, in both cases, comes with the "considerable cost" of their lives. O'Connor's Black prophets thus express a Black rage, or to return to West, a *parrhesia*, that, "viewed through the narrow lens of the American mainstream as Black revenge, sits at the center of Malcolm's soul"

(114). Thus, while O'Connor may only have had (at best) a half interest in the prophetic functions of Baldwin, King, or even Malcolm X, I put forth that the fire of the Black prophetic tradition nevertheless glimmers in these late texts as both Carver's mother and Tanner's neighbour, portrayed as prophets gone wrong, manifest an anger that returns the protagonists to reality.

Part II

The Geranium Variations

Though bits and pieces of Flannery O'Connor's oeuvre would trickle out in the years following her death, from her occasional prose and private letters to her cartoons and book reviews, there is something undeniably uncanny about her career beginning and ending with variants of her early story "The Geranium"—something that invites her readers to approach the different versions not simply as vaguely related drafts of the same thing, but rather as movements of a larger text. In her introduction to the final section of *The Habit of Being*, Sally Fitzgerald expresses a similar opinion when she writes that through her last few stories, O'Connor had "achieved her form as a writer, the realization of that potential body of work, uniquely her own, to which everything she had written before had contributed" (559-60). In the case of "The Geranium," Fitzgerald's claim becomes quite literal given the story's different incarnations over the course of twenty or so years, culminating in the aptly titled "Judgment Day." Yet, the stories to which Fitzgerald refers are "Revelation" and "Parker's Back," the latter having first been conceptualized in early January of 1961, and then completed an hour at a time twice a day in the last weeks of her life. I contend, however, that "Judgment Day," which, as Fitzgerald notes, would be completed alongside "Parker's Back" while "she was more or less in extremis" (*HB* 559), deserves to be included with

these form-achieving stories for two reasons: first, because of the complex nature of its poetics, and second, because it is O'Connor's most in-depth portrayal of the racial divide.

The protracted composition of “Judgment Day” is an atypical chapter in O'Connor's brief career, especially when we consider that the story is a complete re-write of “The Geranium,” her first published work[26] as well as the titular story of her master's thesis in creative writing for the University of Iowa. In fact, she would draft four versions of the story between the original 1946 publication and the 1964 version from *Everything That Rises Must Converge.*[27] Yet, despite the time and effort she devoted to the story, it would continue to lodge in the back of her mind like buzzards in a tree, evolving first from 1945's “The Geranium” to “An Exile in the East” sometime between late 1954 and early 1955. O'Connor submitted this second variation as part *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* with the conviction that draft had undergone enough changes to be considered a different story, further justifying her decision by pointing out that she had not been paid by *Accent* for the first version: “[...] I enclose both stories so [the editor] can see what she's doing. I don't want to go to the penitentiary for selling a story twice (but if I do I would like to get a good price for the story)” (*HB* 74). The story would ultimately be cut from the collection, leading O'Connor to retrieve the copies she had shared with friends but promising to send them “back in some better shape” (88) after injecting them with shots of ACTH.[28] Her attempts to breathe new life into the text would result in the third variation, “Getting Home,” which would never be developed beyond the manuscript phase.

[26] Published in *Accent: A Quarterly of New Literature* (1946).
[27] All four of which collected in *Flannery O'Connor: The Growing Craft* (1992).
[28] Adrenocorticotropic hormone. Used to regulate levels of cortisol. O’Connor was likely familiar the hormone due to her lupus, a disease which primarily attacks the body’s immune system. Low cortisol levels are typically an indication of a weakened immune system.

By the end of 1963 O'Connor's health had begun to deteriorate and she no longer had the energy necessary to produce new work, leading to the plodding composition of “Parker's Back,” which she describes in a 15 July letter to editor Catherine Carver as having been drug out of herself (*HB* 593). And so, with the turn of the new year she enlisted the help of editor Robert Giroux and set out to prepare a final collection, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, originally scheduled for a Fall 1964 publication. But as transfusions became more frequent and her condition continued to worsen, O'Connor's letters to Giroux began to reveal, on the one hand, a sense of urgency in wanting to complete and collect the strongest work possible, while on the other, a solemn awareness that she would not likely survive her deadline. Perhaps it was this dread of not producing enough suitable material for a new book that motivated O'Connor to return to her Geranium Variations a final time to see if she could at long last fashion the material into a well-crafted story worthy of inclusion in her last collection. In a letter to Giroux from May 21, she refers to a story, without mentioning its title, on which she had been intermittently working for several years that might be ready for inclusion, but claims that she “would rather have six or seven good stories than six or seven good and one bad....” (*HB* 579-580). Roughly a month later, once again omitting the title, she tells Giroux that she has completed a story that she believes can replace the inferior “The Partridge Festival,” but that she is still unsure about it and that she would like to ruminate on it a while longer before sending it along. Around the same time, she expresses in a June 17 letter to Carver that she continues to feel displeased with the story: “I've got one that I'm not satisfied with that I finished at the same time as “Revelation” and when I get home I'm going to send it to you as is, and ask you to let me know what you think of it” (*HB* 585). I believe that it is worth noting that O'Connor first mentions being at work on “Revelation” in a November 5, 1963 letter to playwright Cecil Dawkins. Four days later, in a

letter to her pen pal “A”, she declares that she has written a story about which she is undecided, but by November 29, she tells Maryat Lee that she is “pleased pleased pleased” (547-551) with it and submits it to the *Sewanee Review* for the Spring issue of 1964. The story takes O'Connor about eight weeks to complete and is published within six months, a germination period that stands in stark opposition to that of “Judgment Day.” It goes without saying that there is no accounting for the elusive spark that makes the production of one piece of work more expedient than another—for the perfect blend of luck and timing that converts the seed of an idea into a floret of fine art. In the words of Leonard Cohen, “If I knew where the good songs came from, I'd go there more often.”[29]

The amount of time devoted to “Judgment Day” in comparison to that given to “Revelation” suggests that the cause of O'Connor's discontent with the story must have been stirred by more than aesthetic dissatisfaction. In a June 27 letter to Carver, O'Connor asks the editor if she thinks the story is “fitten[sic] for the collection” or if she thinks it can at least be made so. “It's a re-write of a story that I have had around since 1946,” she continues, “and never been satisfied with, but I hope I have it now except for a few details maybe” (*HB* 588). In her final letter to Carver, she thanks the editor for her notes, explains a passage that she claims only someone born south of the Mason Dixon line can fully appreciate[30] and maintains that she will continue to work on the story when she is able to climb out of bed and sit in front of her typewriter. This is sixteen days before her death, and given that we know she wrote her last letter

---

[29] Leonard Cohen repeats a version of this in an October 2016 interview with *Billboard*: “I’ve often said if I knew where the good songs came from, I’d go there more often. Everybody has a kind of magical system… that they employ in the hopes that this will open up the channels.”

[30] O'Connor attempts to make clarification about the line: “You make a monkey out of one of them and he jumps on your back and stays there for life, but let one make a monkey out of you and all you can do is kill him or disappear.” According to O'Connor, this a cherished white Southern expression which, she explains, is true since the “Negro is on [the White man's] back” (*HB* 593).

on July 28 in what Fitzgerald calls "an almost illegible scrawl," we can surmise that not very much was accomplished between the promise to Carver to keep labouring away at "Judgment Day" and her passing on August 3. While "Parker's Back" and "Revelation" were, strictly speaking, the last two stories O'Connor conceived, "Judgment Day" remained in progress till nearly her last breath.

Giroux would complete the work on *Everything That Rises Must Converge* and ultimately decide to include "Judgment Day" as the final story in the book. O'Connor's last piece of work is thus the last story in her last collection, and, moreover, recounts the final hours of a sickly old man. With all of this in mind, the story's title is suddenly charged with considerable meta-textual force and the poetic parallels become almost too melancholy to bear.[31] The Variations reveal O'Connor's deep sense of artistic dissatisfaction, a disquiet she confesses regularly feeling to "A" on July 11 1964: "Would you mind casting your eye over ["Parker's Back"] and returning it on to me. I never know if what I do works until at least a year after it's written, at least I'm never *sure*" (*HB* 592). There are, of course, other examples of O'Connor revisiting early drafts of her work and developing them into something else altogether, such as her early story "The Train" becoming the first chapter of her first novel *Wise Blood*, or "You Can't Be Any Poorer Than Dead" becoming the first chapter of *The Violent Bear it Away*, but those edits are expansions rather than re-drafts or complete re-writes. And while her letter to "A" proves that a lack of confidence in her work was standard fare, her repeated re-examinations of the source material for the Geranium Variations confirms that this case of discontent was particularly acute. The source of these unabating feelings, however, remains unclear. There is certainly much to dislike in "The Geranium" from a stylistic point of view, from short staccato-like sentences and unfocused

[31] At no point in her letters does O'Connor refer to the story by this title, which, to my mind, suggests that Giroux gave the story its final title.

paragraphs to an inconsistent narrator, to a lazy deployment of narrative details, such as, for example, a grandson that is mentioned once near the beginning of the story and then discarded. It is unlikely, however, that her nagging discontent with the story was solely driven by the stylistic shortcomings of her earlier drafts. A comparative reading of the first and final versions could yield a convincing argument about the dubious characterization of her Black characters necessitating revision, yet, given her distinct Southern point of view, it would be surprising if this was the tell-tale fault that burdened her over the course of her career.

In a 1965 review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, Warren Coffey proposes that most writers, O'Connor included, have a paradigm story; that is, a story that they write again and again over the length of their careers, returning to the same themes, ideas, and character-types in an effort to at last express whatever it is that they feel they have struggled to properly capture. Coffey describes O'Connor's paradigm story as being a "kind of morality play in which Pride of Intellect (usually Irreligion) has a shattering encounter with the Corrupt Human Heart (the Criminal, the Insane, sometimes the Sexually Demonic)" (*CR* 385) and either learns from the errors of their ways, or else perishes, or, in some cases, both. Coffey is accurate in pointing out that O'Connor had a preferred set of themes and ideas to which she repeatedly returned in her fiction, as the formula applies to stories such as "Good Country People", "The Comforts of Home", and "Everything That Rises Must Converge." I believe, however, that his assessment of her paradigm story is wanting in that it does not adequately account for "Judgment Day," a story that I believe is not only the writer's most accomplished, but, more importantly, wholly distinct from any of her other writing, novels included. While certain details of the story do fit within the identified paradigm in a very general manner, the equation, PI + CHH= Transformation, is more complex. Pride of Intellect is present, yet takes the form of Tanner's daughter (as symbol for the

secular North and homogenization of the country in general) rather than the main protagonist, Tanner himself. Moreover, the Corrupt Human Heart is not readily identifiable, as it is, for example, in "The Comforts of Home" where Thomas (PI) is confronted by the "sexually demonic" Sarah Ham (CHH). The facile answer would be the (black angry) actor neighbour who refuses Tanner's camaraderie and ultimately expedites his downfall and death. But such a distillation would be a shallow and, quite frankly, lazy reading of the text. I argue that the figure of the Corrupt Human Heart is a much more abstract and all-encompassing spectre that haunts Tanner throughout the majority of the story; that is, the social and political changes sweeping over the country, for better or worse.

So, where does this position Tanner within O'Connor's paradigm story's algebraic equation PI + CHH= T? At the risk of exhausting the analogy, Tanner is a constant (*a*) which does not depend on the main variables (PI and CHH) of the studied problem, the equation thereby becoming *a*(PI + CHH)= T. In other words, unlike any of O'Connor's other stories, the variables of Pride of Intellect and the Corrupt Human Heart are compounded into a single value, rather than the regular protagonist *versus* antagonist, while Tanner functions in opposition to their conjoined narrative representations. Yet, from a narrative point of view, this is precisely the conflict that plagues Tanner and drives the action of the story: the constant nature of his purview and outlook directly results in his demise, insofar as he will not adapt to the changing South and thus opts to move North with his daughter, and then once North, cannot adapt to the inhospitable culture of the city.

Another element that sets this story apart from the rest of O'Connor's writing is her use of an intricate narrative temporal frame: an imbricated series of flashbacks bookended by Tanner's final moments before his hapless death. The flashback is interesting because it appears

late in her career and evolves rather quickly. Yet, it is not so much the complexity of the narrative frame that merits our attention as it is O'Connor's use of the flashback in general. It is a literary device uncommon to her usual narrative poetics, appearing exclusively in “Parker's Back,” *The Violent Bear It Away*, and “Judgment Day,” though used more conventionally in the two former texts than in the story in question.[32] We know from her letters that even in her dying days she was surrounded by a sea of redrafts and edits, desperate as she was to complete *Everything That Rises Must Converge* in the limited work time that remained. In this sense, “Judgment Day” becomes O'Connor's white whale, and the Geranium Variations her life-long chase after the perfect expression of an imperfect perspective, that of the Southern white in relation to her Black counterpart. Furthermore, since the device begins to appear only in her later work, and in a notably more experimental form in “Judgment Day,” there is reason to believe that these late texts provide her readers with a glimpse of the direction her writing may have taken had she not succumbed to complications from her surgery for fibroma. Her premature death[33] therefore robbed her readers of what appeared to be an evolving literary practice that became more complex and conceptual as her confidence grew and her sensibilities matured.

On “Everything That Rises Must Converge”

The placement of “Judgment Day” as the closing piece of *Everything That Rises Must Converge* establishes it as a kind of diptych to the titular story that opens it: both are centred on quarrels between ageing parents and thankless offspring; both delve into the complexities of race

---

[32] In his essay “In 'Parker's Back': A Technical Slip by Flannery O'Connor,” James J. Napier argues that O'Connor in fact misuses the device, but ultimately suggests that the author's mistake was a purposeful subversion of narrative conventions.

[33] Her 1952 diagnosis of systemic lupus erythematosus had estimated only five more years to live, yet she survived for another fourteen, and thus in this way her death was not premature at all. That being said, thirty-nine years old is an early death by any stretch of the imagination.

relations; both reflect Southern attitudes of the times and the clash between traditional values and social progress; and both conclude with violent deaths and guilt-ridden children. To take this point a step further, I claim that "Everything That Rise Must Converge" serves as an introduction to "Judgment Day" as it prepares the readers for stories that involve Black characters who serve as more than labourers, or children, or extras in a crowd; that is, Black characters with more agency than in any other of O'Connor's stories or novels.

The two texts share another crucial detail: in both cases, the white characters who are attacked are entirely unaware of their complicity in their undoing — that is, they fail to understand why their Black counterparts vehemently reject their social advances and confront them with violence. Moreover, the acts of violence in these stories differ considerably from many of the other acts of violence in the rest of her fiction. They are not of some random occurrence or unlucky encounter. The violence in these stories is not the same as that in, say, "A Good Man is Hard to Find" where the Misfit must kill the grandmother and her family because he is on the lam and has been recognized. Neither does it resemble the violence at the conclusion of "The Displaced Person" where the farmhand Shortley commits the first-degree murder of the Polish refugee Guizac by staging a tractor accident. The violence we witness in "Everything that Rises Must Converge" and "Judgment Day" is much more furious, much more profound; provoked by a sudden need of indemnification, of a quick, passionate response in the form of aggression. Or so it is, at least, from the perspective of a white Southern upper middle-class woman.

Jean W. Cash reveals in *Flannery O'Connor: A Life* that as O'Connor was working on "Everything That Rises Must Converge" in the spring of 1961, "she told several of her correspondents—Maryat Lee, Roslyn Barnes, and Brainard Cheney—that she was using Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's 'proposition' to "comment on a certain topical issue in these parts" (468),

referring to the racial integration of public services and, by extension, the various labours of the Civil Rights movement in general. John D. Sykes Jr. believes that an un-ironic reading of the title suggests that "racial reconciliation lies in the future," basing his reading on Teilhard's theory that "evolution and the progressive development of human consciousness [point] toward an ultimate unity in an Omega point in the future" (*CR* 137). The reconciliation between whites and Blacks fails to occur within the timeframe of the stories, leading Guy Davenport to counter that the title was in fact meant to be ironic: "All that rises does converge, but the risings she shows us are from such shallow and depressed beginnings that their convergences are merely pitiful" (271). Davenport's description of the risings' beginnings being "shallow and depressed" seems needlessly judgmental towards O'Connor's characters and offers no real critical insight beyond supporting his claim that the allusion to Teilhard must be ironic. The critic's negative appraisal of the characters is not all surprising since he has already established his opinion of the South earlier in his review: "[it] is not a place in the sense that France is a place; it is a disaster [without] natural law, gods, norms of honesty, dignity, and so on" (271). Davenport is himself from the South, so he is well acquainted with its undeniably dreadful history. Yet, his demonization of the region and its people serves only to reinforce the notion of the South as a repository for national shame, a phenomenon Teresa Goddu outlines in *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation*:

> Identified with gothic doom and gloom, the American South serves as the nation's 'other', becoming the repository for everything from which the nation wishes to dissociate itself. The benighted South is able to support the irrational impulses of the gothic that the nation as a whole, born of Enlightenment ideals, cannot. (3-4)

Goddu's argument is further supported by O'Connor's oft-quoted claim that "Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks" because they are still able to recognize one (*MM* 44). The claims of each woman are essentially congruent: where Goddu states that, culturally, the South can support the "irrational impulses of the gothic," O'Connor asserts that Southern writers can recognize these very impulses. Conversely, all that Davenport can contribute to the discussion is defamation. I thus contend that, at its strongest, O'Connor's poetics are above such banal applications of irony insofar as it would insinuate a certain degree of cynicism in the blasé, pejorative sense (rather than the philosophical sense). While O'Connor's writing is often acerbic in tone, her artistic vision is fundamentally sincere insofar as she believes that the writer's obligation is "to the truth of what can happen in life" (172). Thus, while she may portray dysfunctional, and sometimes even despicable, characters, she does so without judgment, and simply presents them as fallen beings that they are. Referring to her backwoods prophet characters, she writes, "it is very difficult to get across to the modern reader that you take these people seriously, that you are not making fun of them" (204). I believe that this sentiment applies to all of her characters, from the backwoods prophets to the stupid Yankee liberals smacking their lips, for though they may be incomplete and prone to evil, they are nevertheless redeemable when their "efforts are assisted by grace" (197). Walter Sullivan's September 1965 review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge* provides an insightful treatment of the complex condition of O'Connor's characters who, he writes,

> may not be distinguished as good or bad, or as guilty or innocent. All are guilty; all are evil. The distinctions are between those who know of God's mercy and those who do not, between those who think they can save themselves, either for this life or the next, and those who are driven, in spite of their own failings, to do God's purpose. In the general

> retreat from piety, man and the conditions under which he lives have been perverted. (*Flannery O'Connor: The Contemporary Reviews* 295)

Another contemporary reviewer, Richard B. Duprey, further acknowledges that her understanding of man's fallen nature is so profound that she can forgive every one of her characters even as she sends them off to the slaughterer's knife (*CR* 300). Thus, to return to Davenport's criticism, the convergences between O'Connor's characters, whether at the bus stop of "Everything That Rises Must Converge," or in the stairwell of the overcrowded apartment building in "Judgment Day," are not pitiful in the least; they are brief eruptions of pure authenticity, or, in psychoanalytic terms, interventions of the Real. By departing from a position of pity, Davenport restricts his appraisal of O'Connor's work, and so it is not the risings' beginnings that are shallow, as he suggests, but rather his criticism. If Davenport had resisted passing judgment on the various circumstances in which the characters exist and converge, he might have understood that O'Connor did not have much use for pity, either for her characters or for anyone else. What is more, his attitude epitomizes O'Connor's caricature of the self-important intellectual, a character type that she uses in "Everything That Rises Must Converge" with Julian Chestny, whom I will discuss in detail below. I hence insist that "Judgment Day" and "Everything That Rises Must Converge" masterfully depict the inevitable violence of the convergence of whites and Blacks within the particular context and atmosphere of the Civil Rights Movement of the mid 20th century.

While outbursts of violence may be typical of many of O'Connor's characters, they are completely out of the ordinary for her Black characters specifically. This is not to say that the actions of two characters are commensurate; the Black woman's attack upon Mrs. Chestny in "Everything That Rises Must Converge" is considerably less sinister in nature than the actions of

the Black Yankee neighbour at the end of "Judgment Day." But this is precisely the point: her swing of the purse, I argue, intertextually paves the way for the Yankee actor's defilement of Tanner's corpse. Within the context of the collection, and indeed within the scope of O'Connor's oeuvre, the Yankee neighbour's act of violence cannot occur, or at the very least cannot be taken as seriously, without the prefatory clash of the two mothers. Though the actions of both characters are presumably charged by similar cultural, social, and political frustrations, the Yankee actor's reaction to Tanner, compared to that of Carver's mother to Julian's mother, is so excessive, so malevolently gratuitous that, without the context of the collection's title story, it would be ridiculous.

Naturally, the aggressive behaviour of either Black character would have been outright shocking to most contemporary readers of O'Connor's work, the shocking nature of their outbursts twofold: on the one hand, such bold expressions of anger would be abhorrent to the typical racists who believe that non-whites are second-class citizens that belong in a permanent state of submission, while on the other, the outbursts are shocking insofar as they are reminders of a national burden—that is, they trigger a sense of cultural guilt for the historical, as well as ongoing, mistreatment of Black men and women. Both viewpoints germinate from the very same source of anxiety: the inevitability of retributive acts of violence by Blacks upon whites. The shock, therefore, is born not so much of the violent actions themselves, but rather of the realization of the advent of a reckoning.

"Everything That Rises Must Converge" culminates with Julian's attempt to explain this very reckoning to his mother after her confrontation with her Black double:

> He saw no reason to let the lesson she had had go without backing it up with an explanation of its meaning. She might as well be made to understand what had happened

> to her. "Don't think that was just an uppity Negro woman," he said. "That was the whole colored race which will no longer take your condescending pennies." […] "What all this means," he said, "is that the old world is gone. The old manners are obsolete and your graciousness is not worth a damn." (*CW* 499)

Julian sermonises that the Black woman's outburst is an augury of the changing social and cultural dynamics in the South, that "the whole colored race" is poised to rise and claim their sovereignty from the white race. Yet, the integrity of his sermon is compromised by his persistent fixation with teaching his mother a lesson and so it is difficult to ever be certain which of his opinions are sincere and which are affectations that he flaunts to spite his mother. His scant moments of authenticity come only in his day-dreams of his great-grandfather's bygone plantation, or in his desperate reaction to his mother's death at the end of the story; otherwise, his behaviour is laden with superficial posturing. Despite these strained efforts, Julian's actual temperament falls somewhere between the two poles of the racist and the rueful, for though he is quick to shame his mother for her perceived ignorance, he is unable to recognize his own faults, which are uncannily similar in nature. Julian's cultural and social consciousness is therefore stunted; he may be able to appreciate that they are on the precipice of a great reckoning, yet he has deluded himself into believing that he is exempt from any resulting consequences by virtue of the frustration he feels towards his mother and, by extension, his long-lost inheritance. O'Connor thus constructs Julian's character to be not merely the text's liberal gadfly, but, more astutely, the narrative representation of the convergence of the Old and New South, that is, of the culture of Jim Crow and the empowerment of the Civil Rights movement.

The setting for this convergence, that of the newly integrated public transit system, would have been immediately familiar to O'Connor's contemporary readers since the racial tensions of

desegregation were unavoidable at the time of the story's publication. Moreover, the Montgomery bus boycott has become an important cultural touchstone in American history, and Rosa Parks an icon of the Civil Rights Movement, so the implications of the story's setting and characters continue to be immediately recognizable to most readers. The very impetus of the story's action, that is, Julian accompanying his mother to the YMCA for her reducing class, is precisely her discomfort with the desegregation laws since "[she] would not ride the buses by herself at night since they had been [integrated]" (*CW* 485). As they travel from their decrepit apartment to the bus stop and finally onto the bus, her antebellum sensibilities excite his sense of moral superiority, which incites him to find ways to provoke her prejudices so as to flaunt his enlightened social attitudes and reprimand her for what he judges to be her boorish behaviour. Julian thus exhibits, in all his cultured glory, the typical character traits of one of O'Connor's favourite motifs: the intellectual who is not as smart or as good as he thinks he is and who will inevitably be humbled in some unexpected and mysterious way.

Much like Asbury from "The Enduring Chill" or Hulga from "Good Country People," Julian is college educated and fancies himself an intellectual, but has no sustainable means of income, forcing him to live with his mother, a widow who "[had] struggled fiercely to feed and clothe and put him through school and was supporting him still" (*CW* 485). Julian also has ambitions as a writer, yet in spite of his mother's encouragement and regular reminders that "Rome wasn't built in a day" (486), he believes that he is too intelligent to ever be successful and so has resigned himself to a life of bitter resentment. What exactly he means by success is vague, however, since he warns his mother that "some day [he'll] start making money" (486) and she will be able to buy whatever ridiculous clothing she wants whenever she sees fit. He intends this remark as an insult to her frivolous purchase of a green and purple hat that looks "like a

cushion with the stuffing out" (485), yet by implying that he will provide for his mother with his future income, he reveals that he might not despise her as much as he projects he does. In his subsequent daydreaming that his future revenue will also allow him to buy some property "where the nearest neighbours would be three miles away on either side" (486), he again includes his mother in his plans: "But first *they* would move" (486). Given that he expects one day not only to buy a home but also to provide for his mother's every need, Julian's claim that he is too intelligent to ever be successful must then refer to literary or artistic success. The depth of his pathology is striking here as his lament implies that he believes his talent is too prodigious to be properly appreciated by his contemporaries, a genius the likes of, for example, Edgar Allan Poe or Henry David Thoreau. Yet, unlike Asbury who is working on a play, or even Hulga who dreams of one day teaching philosophy at a university, Julian shows no indication of having any literary or intellectual pursuits. Instead, consumed with self-pity and resentment, he latches on to his mother's racism and his family's ties to the slave economy and tries desperately to fulfil his fantasy of martyrdom by appropriating the indignation of the Civil Rights Movement. He thus adopts the guise of the liberal idealist so that he is necessarily in opposition to his mother's nostalgic conservatism, a position that he secretly shares.

Further to this point, Julian believes that the true triumph of his education is that he is an autodidact; that is, that he has cultivated his intellect by his own determination, with no thanks to the college education financed by his mother:

> The further irony of all this was that in spite of her, he had turned out so well. Despite going to only a third-rate college, he had, on his own initiative, come out with a first-rate education; in spite of growing up dominated by a small mind, he had ended up with a

> large one; in spite of her foolish views, he was free of prejudice and unafraid to face facts. (*CW* 492)

Julian's account of himself is wildly inaccurate; his mind is sheltered rather than large, and he is not free of prejudice so much as he is guilty of the same mild-mannered soft racism as his mother, even if it may manifest itself in slightly different ways. But his delusions of grandeur are contingent upon his contempt for his mother; he cannot be the great mind that he dreams himself to be without the conviction that his mother is his inferior. He is thus quick to diagnose his mother's racism, yet is completely heedless of his own selfish behaviour. Moreover, his assertion that he is unafraid to face facts is as dubious as it is vague. What exactly are the facts he is brave enough to confront? His liberal intellectual persona might project the courage to face the fact of racial equality and the changing social dynamics in the South, and the United States more generally, but his behaviour and his daydreams suggest that the only fact of import to him is that of their poverty and of their family's lost legacy. Painfully aware of their insolvency though he may be, he is unwilling to accept the reality of their codependency.

The resentment he expresses for his mother throughout the text is rooted in his inability to properly establish his independence from her, rather than, as he struggles to convince himself, in what he perceives to be her moral short-comings. Julian only cares about her bigotry insofar as it can give him just cause to blame her for anything at all. This is evidenced by his belief that he would have had an easier time accepting his family's poverty if his mother had been a lesser parent, if "she had been selfish, if she had been an old hag who drank and screamed at him" (*CW* 486). Unfortunately for Julian's sense of victimization, however, she is and always has been, supportive, generous, and kind. Recognizing that he has no real reason to despise her, Julian becomes despondent since his mother's graciousness impedes the realization of his fantasy of

selfless sacrifice: “He walked along, saturated in depression, as if in the midst of his martyrdom he had lost his faith” (486). This is the second reference to martyrdom in the text, the first being his comparison to Saint Sebastian as he awaits his mother to leave for the YMCA, as though waiting for a storm of arrows to pierce him. O’Connor’s choice of Saint Sebastian is significant because the details of his sainthood emphasize Julian’s total lack of integrity or conviction. Saint Sebastian, as you may recall, is famous for being martyred twice, as he survived his initial persecution only to confront the authorities of the pagan majority with his sermonizing and be again persecuted and clubbed to death. Julian, on the other hand, is easily dispirited, by his mother’s graciousness no less, because, much like Asbury, his principles are entirely superficial. The ideals of the Civil Rights movement are but a convenient alibi for his contempt, and his mother’s racism little more than low-hanging fruit.

Julian’s only problem with his mother’s racist opinions is not the opinions themselves but rather the frequency with which she expresses them. In typical nostalgic conservative fashion, she believes that contemporary society is falling apart and that things were better off back in her day. Such is the essence of her lament that the world is in a mess, which refers specifically to the tumult of the civil rights efforts and the ensuing rise of racial tensions: “With the world in the mess it’s in,” she said, “it’s a wonder we can enjoy anything. I tell you, the bottom rail is on the top” (*CW* 487). Strictly speaking, for families like the Chestnys and the Godhighs and anyone else who profited from the slave trade, her assertion is dreadfully accurate; life was better for the upper class of Southern society before the ratification of the 13th, 14th, 15th, and 19th amendments, the federal rulings of the Brown v. the Board of Education, and Browder v. Gale cases, and so on and so forth. Mrs. Chestny’s opinions on matters relating to the Civil Rights Movement are therefore inextricably linked to her classist prejudice, for any allusion she makes

to the plight of Black Americans is quickly followed by a reminder that it is important to know who you are: "'Of course," she said, "if you know who you are, you can go anywhere'" (487). Mrs. Chestny repeats this conviction every time that Julian accompanies her to her reducing class, which she attends because it is free, because she believes that she is above the other ladies who attend: "Most of them in it are not our kind of people […] but I can be gracious to anybody. I know who I am" (487). It is not clear what she means by "our kind of people," but it can only really be one of two options: she is either referring to Black Americans specifically, or to anybody she perceives to be of a lower social class. Given her strong expression of confidence about knowing who she is, which is a descendant of former governors, prosperous landowners, and slaveholders, as well as the implausibility of her exercise class being integrated, the most likely conclusion is that her classist prejudices are more acute than any feelings of white supremacy, and that her racist attitudes are a product of her classism.

While her intention in reminding her son of who they are is to instill within him a sense of pride and belonging, her chorus instead serves to remind him of everything their family has lost and to reinforce the reality of their ongoing economic destitution:

> "Your great-grandfather was a former governor of this state," she said. "Your grandfather was a prosperous landowner. Your grandmother was a Godhigh."
>
> "Will you look around you," he said tensely, "and see where you are now?" and he swept his arm jerkily out to indicate the neighbourhood, which the growing darkness at least made less dingy.
>
> "You remain what you are," she said. "Your great-grandfather had a plantation and two hundred slaves." (*CW* 487)

Mrs. Chestny is proud to acknowledge how many slaves their family owned for it validates just how wealthy and important they had been in their community. The number of slaves owned is especially telling when you consider that in 1860, which is approximately when Julian's great-grandfather would have been living and operating his plantation, only "11,000 Southerners, three-quarters of one percent of the white population, owned more than 50 slaves [and that] a mere 2,358 owned as many as 100 slaves."[34] Now it could be that Mrs. Chestny is exaggerating their family's majesty given she has already demonstrated a propensity for conservative nostalgia, but even if the true number is half of what she claims it to be, the Chestnys/Godhighs would still be among the wealthiest families, not only in the state of Georgia (assuming this is where the story is set), but in the South as a whole. Julian and his mother's economic status is therefore not just a common case of working-class whites struggling to make ends meet in the postbellum reconstruction of the South's economy, but a dramatic downfall from excessive wealth to a life of penny pinching that has forced them to move homes regularly, to settle in dingy neighborhoods, to attend third-rate colleges, and so on and so forth. Julian mockingly reminds his mother that there are no more slaves, but she responds by claiming that Black Americans would be better off if slavery had persisted. She does not elaborate on her argument but one can assume that the implication is deeply paternalistic; if slavery still existed, the economy would still be thriving[35] and slaveholders would be in a position to care and provide for

---

[34] Statistics obtained from: http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtid=2&psid=3557
[35] According to the website digitalhistory.uh.edu, in the years preceding the Civil War, "the South was richer than any country in Europe except England, and it had achieved a level of wealth unmatched by Italy or Spain until the eve of World War II. The southern economy generated enormous wealth and was critical to the economic growth of the entire United States. Well over half of the richest 1 percent of Americans in 1860 lived in the South. Even more important, southern agriculture helped finance early 19th century American economic growth. Before the Civil War, the South grew 60 percent of the world's cotton, provided over half of all U.S. export earnings, and furnished 70 percent of the cotton consumed by the British textile industry. Cotton exports paid for a substantial share of the capital and technology that laid the basis for America's industrial revolution."

their slaves. In other words, Mrs. Chestny is a prototypical exponent of trickle-down economics. The reality is that it is the downtrodden elites of yore who would be better off if slavery had never been abolished, and not the emancipated slaves. If Julian were truly as outraged as he projects himself to be, he would here have had the perfect opportunity to serve his mother the lesson he has been fantasizing about, but his only criticism is that he knows her diatribe by heart.

> He groaned to see that she was off on that topic. She rolled onto it every few days like a train on an open track. He knew every stop, every junction, every swamp along the way, and knew the exact point at which her conclusion would roll majestically into the station: "It's ridiculous. It's simply not realistic. They should rise, yes, but on their own side of the fence."
>
> "Let's skip it," said Julian.
>
> "The ones I feel sorry for," she said, "are the ones that are half white. They're tragic."
>
> "Will you skip it?" (*CW* 487)

Julian does not want to listen to his mother's ramblings not primarily because they disturb him them, but because he has heard it all before. While her conventionally conservative interpretation of the Civil Rights Movement, her nostalgia for chattel slavery, and her complete lack of tact may indeed offend the ideals he garnered at school, his opposition to her behavior comes in the form of annoyance rather than indignation.

Mrs. Chestny's last comment in the above passage before her son implores her to "skip it" is very suspicious and cannot be but an off the cuff remark. As we know through Julian's impatience for her gift of the gab, Mrs. Chestny repeats herself often and always about the same general topic. Thus, if she is expressing empathy for "the ones that are half white" while they are

idly waiting for the bus to arrive, it is because she does so regularly. But why is this? Why are people of mixed race one of her returning concerns, along with the majesty of the Chestnys and the Godhighs, the importance of knowing who you are, and the bottom rail being on top? Furthermore, she emphasizes that she feels no deep-seeded rancour towards Black Americans by referencing her fond memories of her "old darky nurse Caroline" and her claim that she "always had a great respect for her colored friends" (*CW* 488). She even goes so far as to claim that she would do anything in the world for them, but before she can complete her thought, Julian interrupts her, again pleading with her to change subjects. At this point in the story, the narrator reveals that whenever Julian gets on a bus by himself, he makes a point to "sit down beside a Negro, in reparation as it were for his mother's sins" (489). Once again, Julian's frustration is suspiciously focused at his mother, and not at his heritage in general, and so the sins to which he refers must therefore not be the guilt by association to ancestors who profited from chattel slavery. So, what is the nature of his mother's sins then? He has already indicated that she has been a supportive and generous mother all his life and that her charity is a source of frustration for him because he would have had an easier time accepting their financial destitution had she been "an old hag who drank and screamed at him" (486). But she is not an old hag who drinks and screams at him and so the sins that he believes she is guilty of committing are not immediately clear to the reader and are only made decipherable through imagination and intuition.

I want to emphasize that the lineage to which Mrs. Chestny proudly refers throughout the text is strictly Julian's maternal family. This detail is important because, traditionally, a child takes the last name of his father, and so Julian is not, strictly speaking, a Chestny. But his mother insists that he is a Chestny, and nothing else, and is adamant about him behaving in a manner

appropriate to his name and class. She thus makes a concerted effort to fortify this identity by labouring to provide him with everything she believes a Chestny deserves:

> All of her life had been a struggle to act like Chestny without the Chestny goods, and to give him everything she thought a Chestny ought to have; but since, said she, it was fun to struggle, why complain? And when you had won as she had won what fun to look back on the hard times! He could not forgive her that she had enjoyed the struggle and that she thought *she* had won. (*CW* 491)

Julian's bitterness is further exacerbated by his mother's lax attitude towards their plight and her insistence that despite their reduced circumstances they have maintained the dignity of their blue-blooded descendants. But again, the emphasis is on their Chestny/Godhigh descendants, with no allusion at all to his paternal lineage. Further to this point, aside from the brief mention on the first page of his mother being a "widow who had struggled fiercely" (485) to raise him, there is no other allusion in the story of Julian's father. Though his mother speaks with deference and admiration about the other patriarchal members of the family, she never once makes any reference to the deceased father of her son. This omission is curious in very much the same way that her proclamation of empathy for those who are "half-white" is; that is, the detail, or in this case the omission of the detail, is a coded narrative device meant to draw the attention of the reader, even if subconsciously, to the peculiarity of the struggles of the characters. The implication, in my estimation, is that Julian's father, and by extension his family, are of at least second class, and perhaps lower than that. The following question therefore arises: could Julian's father be the source of his frustration towards his mother? His accusation that they were forced to make sacrifices because she had made "a mess of things" (491) through her lack of foresight is highly ambiguous, especially since we know that she has been a good parent who worked hard to

provide for her son. This lack of foresight, then, cannot refer to something as banal as poor financial decisions or the selfish prioritization of whatever vices. So, the question remains: what is the source of Julian's contempt? The assumption is that they are poor because their family, like so many formerly wealthy Southern families, have suffered the economic consequences of the postbellum restoration. But could it be that their poverty is instead the result of having been disowned by the Chestnys? Could it be that her lack of foresight was to couple with a man from the underclass? And finally, could it be that the death of Julian's father is a fabrication and that he is simply absent, for whatever reason? After all, Mrs. Chestny does claim that she can be gracious to anybody since she has the privilege of knowing who she is (487).

Unfortunately, this graciousness is not a trait that Julian has inherited. He is instead petty, self-absorbed, and hypocritical. In sum, Julian does not know who he is. As such, his acquisition of liberal-intellectual principles and his superficial judgment of his mother's conservative attitudes are particularly precarious, and, moreover, are compromised even further by his own feelings of longing and second-hand nostalgia for the lost Godhigh estate. He would of course never openly admit as much, but he believes that he is entitled to the Chestny/Godhigh legacy and is consumed with bitterness over what he believes is his unmerited penury. To make matters worse, Julian is haunted by the high-ceilinged halls of the plantation not only in his dreams but also in his waking life through his mother's incessant recollections of the double stairways and worn rugs and faded draperies. For example, when Mrs. Chestny attempts to shift their conversation to a more pleasant subject after their usual spat over the bottom rail being on top, her go-to topic is her reveries of visits to her Grandfather's as a young girl, which doubtless do little to quell her son's frustrations. Julian's only personal memory of the plantation is of visiting it once as a child, before the property had been sold, and finding it dilapidated and inhabited by

Black squatters. But Julian remembers it as his mother remembers it and constructs his fantasies from her memories. In fact, so seized is he by his longing for the regality of his family's past that he comes to believe that he would have appreciated it more than his mother did:

> It occurred to him that it was he not she who would have appreciated it. He preferred its threadbare elegance to anything he could name and it was because of it that all the neighborhoods they had lived in had been a torment to him—whereas she had hardly known the difference. (*CW* 488)

Julian believes his sensibilities are better suited for the majesty of the plantation, but he has again misjudged himself. As implied by his mother's objection to his removing his tie, he does not possess any of the manners of a gentleman. If he truly was as refined as he believes he is, he would take pride in the details of his constitution, would adhere to traditional Southern manners and demeanour. Mrs. Chestny is offended by her son's casual appearance because it obscures the social dignity she knows a Chestny should project. The offense is so serious that she threatens to stay home unless he puts his tie back on. Julian finally submits after some bickering: "Rolling his eyes upward, he put his tie back on. "Restored to my class," he muttered. He thrust his face toward her and hissed, "True culture is in the mind, the mind," he said, and tapped his head, "the mind" (489). Once again, Julian's assessment is off mark: culture is indeed of both our customs and our minds, which is to say, our shared ideologies. Mrs. Chestny strictly adheres to these small formalities because they reinforce her conviction of knowing who she is. Without these small rituals, she would be no different from any of the other ladies in her reducing class. Julian might believe that he would have better appreciated the spoils of the plantation, but he is without the proper manners and dignity of a Chestny, manners to which his mother, despite her reduced

circumstances, adheres. Thus, Julian is without not only his family's fortune, but their class as well, and so his fantasies about the Chestny legacy are totally superficial.

As Julian's fantasies are devoid of substance, so are his judgments of his mother. Though it is certainly justifiable for a child to feel frustration with his parent's limitations, particularly when those limitations include overt classism and racism, Julian's frustrations are counter-balanced by his complete lack of self-awareness. For example, when they finally board the bus, Mrs. Chestny promptly makes idle conversation with her fellow passengers by commenting on the weather, and once she establishes a rapport with the other ladies on the bus, quickly remarks that they have the bus to themselves, meaning, of course, that there are no Black passengers. A woman wearing red and white canvas sandals takes Mrs. Chestny's bate and bemoans a recent incident:

> "For a change," said the woman across the aisle, the owner of the red and white canvas sandals. "I come on one the other day and they were thick as fleas—up front and all through."
>
> "The world is in a mess everywhere," his mother said. "I don't know how we've let it get in this fix." (*CW* 490)

Julian reacts to their lamentations by retreating behind his newspaper and fading away into the comfort of his various delusions. Chief among them is his conviction that he is morally superior to Southerners like his mother by virtue of his willingness to befriend, or date, a person of colour. Mrs. Chestny, having fallen for her son's charade, believes that her son's radical ideas, that is those that he projects to have, come from his lack of practical experience and that despite his disenchantment with life, has not yet "entered the real world." Naïve though she may be, we must at least concede this point to Mrs. Chestny, for Julian is in fact totally delusional. His

intellectual quirks are but a disguise that he uses to retreat to his fantasies of the bygone elegance of his great-grandfather's estate. Ironically, Julian believes that it is his mother, and not he, who lives "according to the laws of her own fantasy world, outside of which he had never seen her set foot" (*CW* 491). Once again, Julian's assessment is incorrect. While it is clear that Mrs. Chestny is detached from the cultural moment insofar as she is entrenched in her traditional antebellum sensibilities, she is not detached in the same way that Julian himself is. That is, her detachment is generational, or cultural, whereas Julian's detachment is pathological. Mrs. Chestny does not live according to the laws of a fantasy world, as her son surmises, but of a real world the customs of which are rapidly disappearing. Julian, on the other hand, operates in a world entirely of his own imagining and fits in neither with the grandeur of the Chestny legacy nor with the progressive swell of his contemporary moment.

The frivolity of Julian's convictions is made most evident when a large well-dressed Black man carrying a briefcase boards the bus. To the horror of the white women on the bus, the new passenger sits near the woman with red and white canvas sandals with whom Mrs. Chestny had been chatting, and retreats to the privacy of his newspaper. Nevertheless, Mrs. Chestny is all at once perturbed and promptly notifies her son that this is why she refuses to ride the bus by herself. The woman in the canvas sandals, herself dismayed, straightaway changes seats, to which Julian's mother gives her an approving look. Julian's seizes the opportunity to take the vacated seat with the intent of striking up a conversation with the man, purely to aggravate his mother's antebellum sensibilities. Julian's action pays immediate dividends as Mrs. Chestny's face twists from approval to anger. Julian hopes to break into a discussion about "art or politics or any other subject that would be above the comprehension of those around them" (*CW* 492-93) yet his advances are ignored as the man does not look away from his newspaper, leaving Julian

to lament his inability to "convey his sympathy" (493). In his desperation to maintain his mother's distress, he asks the man for a light and the man acquiesces again without looking away from his paper. Yet, not only is there no smoking allowed on the bus, but Julian is not even a smoker in the first place since he cannot afford to buy cigarettes, so he is forced to sheepishly return the matches to the man who finally lowers his paper to reveal an annoyed glare. Julian is unsuccessful because his spiteful congeniality is the opposite version of the gesture his mother later makes when she offers the little boy a nickel: rather than condescendingly offer a favour, he condescendingly asks for one, establishing that he is in a position of disadvantage and that it is the turn of the Black man to help a white man. If O'Connor believed that the purpose of manners was to help mend the harsh realities of life, then Julian's vain behaviour is a complete disgrace to her aspiration. He is incapable of engaging with the well-dressed Black man in any meaningful way and, in his desperation to punish his mother, perverts the Southern code of manners. He missteps and fails because the interaction is predicated upon insincere intentions. Julian's code of manners is compromised by his vanity, and his liberal sensibilities are once again proven to be nothing but theatre.

After failing to engage with the well-dressed Black man, Julian attempts to console himself with various fantasies of teaching his mother a lesson. His first idea is to abandon his mother at her reducing class and leave her to fend for herself. Satisfied with the thought of making her realize that she ought not depend on him, he then retreats to dreams of his grandfather's mansion whereupon his soul momentarily expands before again being interrupted by his mother's glare of reproach. But Julian has convinced himself that he is completely detached from his mother's expectations, and so is not negatively affected by her disappointment, but instead thrives on it. Thus, in riposte to her reproachful glare, he returns to

imagining the “various unlikely ways by which he could teach her a lesson” (*CW* 494), and drifts into a daydream about becoming friends with a distinguished Black man. Julian’s fantasy is quickly interrupted by reality, however, as he is soon reminded of his previous failures to recruit the perfect candidate:

> He had tried to strike up an acquaintance on the bus with some of the better types, with ones that looked like professors or ministers or lawyers. One morning he had sat down next to a distinguished-looking dark brown man who had answered his questions with sonorous solemnity but who had turned out to be an undertaker. Another day he had sat down beside a cigar-smoking Negro with a diamond ring on his finger, but after a few stilted pleasantries, the Negro had rung the buzzer and risen, slipping two lottery tickets into Julian’s hand as he climbed over him to leave. (*CW* 494)

Julian is faced with a Goldilocks dilemma and fails to find the appropriate token Black friend, one of “the better types,” for his specific purpose. That he ranks people of colour based on their use to him incontrovertibly proves that the empathy he projects to have for their condition and his support for their fight for civil rights and liberties is a complete fabrication. He cares about the condition of Black men and women in the United States only insofar as it serves to feed the animus he feels towards his mother. He finally shifts his daydreams to “the ultimate horror” of meeting a “beautiful suspiciously negroid woman” (494) who is intelligent, dignified, and good. “Now persecute us,” he fantasizes telling his mother, fulfilling his earlier fantasy of martyrdom, “go ahead and persecute us.” The difference between Mrs. Chestny thinking that “little Negroes were on the whole cuter than little white children” (495) and Julian’s spiteful fantasy of one day having a distinguished Black friend, or a “beautiful suspiciously negroid” love interest, is ultimately marginal at best. Both outlooks objectify the Black other and are thereby equally

guilty of racial fetishization. Moreover, Julian's fantasy is an inversion of the unofficial, but swiftly punishable, Jim Crow offence of Black men having sexual interactions,[36] or, in the case of Emmett Till, even flirting with white women.[37] Every single one of Julian's interactions with people of colour is devoid of any of the charity O'Connor stressed was necessary for the maintenance of community between whites and Blacks.

Critic Richard Giannone sees things slightly differently. In *Flannery O'Connor: Hermit Novelist*, he writes,

> To Julian's credit, he sees the evil of racism and tries to correct its injustices. But Julian's works and actions, however well-intentioned, are the gestures of sentimental politics. […] Julian seeks in ideology the gratification he cannot find either in writing or in social relations. He rebels on principle and anxiously conforms [to] a prefabricated norm for virtue. The 1960s version of political correctness finds an adherent in Julian. (178)

Giannone's analysis of Julian is very gracious, yet his argument is inherently flawed: we cannot credit Julian for seeing the evils of racism if we already know that he longs for the inheritance he believes is due to him, an inheritance that was erected, and subsequently wrecked, by the rise and fall of the slave economy. Giannone's reading of Julian, much like Julian himself, is superficial.

---

[36] From Jennifer Ritterhouse's *Growing Jim Crow:* "In a Depression-era interview, one ex-slave described with particular eloquence (despite the transcriber's use of dialect) the stress that resulted from never knowing quite how whites would behave or what the consequences of one's actions, intentional or unintentional, might be. […] Black men had to be especially careful, especially around white women, lest they be accused of sexual impropriety in addition to "uppitiness," which whites found more threatening in Black men than Black women in any case. White southerners' intolerance for any sign of sexual aggressiveness on the part of Black men was, of course, abundantly obvious in events such as the Atlanta race riot of 1906" (40-41).

[37] *Vanity Fair* reported in the winter of 2017 that Emmett Till's accuser, Carolyn Bryant Donham, admitted that her accusation was entirely fabricated: "In a new book, *The Blood of Emmett Till* (Simon & Schuster) Timothy Tyson, a Duke University senior research scholar, reveals that Carolyn—in 2007, at age 72—confessed that she had fabricated the most sensational part of her testimony. "That part's not true," she told Tyson, about her claim that Till had made verbal and physical advances on her. As for the rest of what happened that evening in the country store, she said she couldn't remember."

It is as if the critic's goal is to fit Julian into his preconceived notions of politically correct liberals of the 1960s and on. Julian's fault is that moral struggle is performative insofar as his goodwill towards people of colour is merely a means of humiliating his mother to thereby enable himself to feel superior to her. But his charade falls apart when his mother suffers her stroke following her confrontation with her Black double. Desperate to save his mother, Julian, for the first time in the text, expresses his most genuine self, and, suddenly, no longer feels disconnected from her. Unlike Asbury or Mrs. Turpin, however, Julian arrives at his epiphanic moment without having to have suffered a violence himself. Instead, it is his mother who is sacrificed for his benefit, which is fitting given that, despite his being unappreciative, she has sacrificed her material comforts all his life so that he may build a life befitting a Chestny/Godhigh. Yet, in typical O'Connor fashion, Julian's epiphany comes a moment too late, and he is swept into "the world of guilt and sorrow" (*CW* 500). Perhaps he would have been a good son if there had been somebody there to whack his mother with a purse every minute of his life.

The Curious Case of Dudley/Tanner

What is it about "The Geranium" that drove O'Connor to revisit and remould the kernels of this story over a twenty-year period? There are a handful of texts in her bibliography that contain Black characters who remain on the periphery of the main action and who are passive in their roles as farmers or labourers or waiters. She could have redrafted the changing social dynamic between Blacks and whites in any of her early stories, making the Black characters either bolder, or less patient, or angrier—in short, give them more agency.

Take, for example, "The Enduring Chill" where Asbury, very much like Julian, is an aspiring writer who has returned to his rural roots, and who, despite his fumbling attempt at a

career, believes that he is smarter than he is. He also, like Julian, interacts with people of colour purely out of spite to his mother. But why is he not as clever as he thinks he is? Because by drinking unpasteurized milk in a failed attempt to goad the farmhands into disobeying his mother's orders, he is the author of his own misery. What he presumes to be his death rattle is nothing more than the consequence of his spiteful behaviour, of his efforts to aggravate what he perceives to be his mother's bigoted sensibilities—by feigning comradery with the farmhands, Morgan and Randall, by drinking raw dairy in a spectacle of communion. Asbury's compassion is insincere, which in turn transform Morgan and Randall into tools for his animus. Much like Julian's superficial request for a match, Asbury's pantomime of fraternity reveals the true nature of his character—that is, his actions reveal his narcissism. "The narcissistic subject," as Žižek notes in *Looking Awry*,

> "knows only the "rules of the (social) game" enabling him to manipulate others; social relations constitute for him a playing field in which he assumes "roles," not proper symbolic mandates; he stays clear of any kind of binding commitment that would imply a proper symbolic identification. He is a radical conformist who paradoxically experiences himself as an outlaw. (82)

Žižek's definition describes Julian and Asbury perfectly: both men manipulate their interactions with the Black characters to feed their sense of intellectual and moral superiority over their mothers and, by extension, over the lingering cultural traces of the antebellum South. More importantly, both men appear to remain unaware of their participation in the social order that they purport to reject, each satisfied with the spectacle of their attempted fraternizations with Black Americans. In this sense, they are conformists who paradoxically experience themselves as outlaws, that is as progressive-minded writers struggling with the antiquated social structures

from which they benefit. Asbury fails to realize that Morgan and Randall's refusal to drink the milk is not because of the iron fist with which his mother rules the farm, but because they know better than to ingest unpasteurized dairy:

> Asbury swung around and held the glass out to Morgan. "Here boy, have a drink of this, he said.
>
> Morgan stared at him; then his face took on a decided look of cunning. "I ain't seen you drink none of it yourself," he said.
>
> Asbury despised milk. The first warm glassful had turned his stomach. He drank half of what he was holding and handed the rest to the Negro, who took it and gazed down inside the glass as it contained some great mystery; then he set it on the floor by the cooler.
>
> "Don't you like milk?" Asbury asked.
>
> "I likes it but I ain't drinking noner that." (*CW* 559)

Were it not for the combination of his self-idolatry and his contempt for his mother, Asbury may have heeded her mother's observation[38] that "Those two are not stupid […] They know how to look out for themselves" (*CW* 551). Unable, or unwilling, to consider anything but his own point of view, however, Asbury gets his just deserts. What is more, his ignorance of the repercussions of drinking raw milk reveals that though he grew up on a dairy farm, he clearly was never expected to work on it, for if he had been, he would have known better. The only reason that he works on it upon his visit from New York is as research for a play he has been working on "about

[38] This remark by Asbury's mother echoes a sentiment expressed by Regina Cline O'Connor about one of her employees, as related by O'Connor in a letter to Sally and Robert Fitzgerald: "Regina has a policy which takes care of all his accidents but he has one too and never fails to collect on it at the same time. He made four dollars on his last cut. She says these niggers are smart as tacks when it comes to looking out for No. 1" (*CW* 915).

the Negro and he [wants] to be around them for a while to see how they really [feel] about their condition" (551). But the would-be playwright fails to learn how they "really feel" as his erratic actions do little more than puzzle the farm hands and earn him the undulant fever that will deliver his moment of grace.

We see a similar yet more nuanced dynamic between the Black and white characters in "Revelation." Yet, instead of being objectified for spiteful indulgences, the Black characters serve more actively to flatter the protagonist Ruby Turpin's ego, to reassure her of her good standing in society, and of her strong moral fibre. In short, they confirm and maintain Mrs. Turpin's understanding of her privileged position in the social hierarchy of her community. In Lacanian terms, they preserve the symbolic order, that is, the laws that structure and regulate the circuit of exchange in our relations with each other. The problem, however, is that the symbolic order has been disrupted by her violent and mysterious encounter with Mary Grace[39]—her convictions have been disrupted by a mysterious force that she does not understand and she is unable to return to the natural order of her life. Likewise does Asbury experience some kind of divine awakening that rattles the very core of his being and makes him realize the shallow nature of his performances of communion with both the dairy farmers and with God via the Jesuit priest:

---

[39] In other words, with the Lacanian real. The symbolic order is composed in terms of oppositions, such as presence and absence, inside and outside, and indicates the indefinite possibility of a lack or gap, that is, that something may be missing in the symbolic order. Conversely, there is no absence in the real as it is opposed to the symbolic and located beyond the imaginary. The real is outside of language and resists symbolization. It is thus impossible to imagine, and it is this impossibility that gives it its traumatic quality. Finally, the basis of the imaginary is the formation of the ego in the mirror stage through the process of identification; the turning-point in the mental development of a child, "the fundamental aspect of the structure of subjectivity." Identification is therefore a crucial aspect of the imaginary order, as are imagination, deception, and seduction, making it the order of surface appearances that conceal an underlying structure, which is the structure of the symbolic order. For Lacan, the three interdependent orders of the Borromean Knot, the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real, constitute the reality of the human being.

> The old life in him was exhausted. He awaited the coming of the new. It was then that he felt the beginning of a chill, a chill so peculiar, so light, that it was like a warm ripple across a deeper sea of cold. His breath came short. The fierce bird which through the years of his childhood and the days of his illness had been poised over his head, waiting mysteriously, appeared all at once to be in motion. Asbury blanched and the last film of illusion was torn as if by a whirlwind from his eyes. (*CW* 572)

Yet, while Asbury realizes that he will live out his days "in the face of a purifying terror," and Julian is wracked with the sudden onset of guilt at having helped to cause his mother's death with his selfish and self-righteous behaviour, Mrs. Turpin is caught in a kind of limbo: though she has been offered a moment of grace that has shaken her preconceptions of the social hierarchy of her society, she has not fully assimilated the message: "'Why me?' […] 'There was plenty of trash there. It didn't have to be me'" (*CW* 652). Moreover, Asbury and Julian are, more or less, the authors of their own misfortune insofar as they face the consequences of their selfish actions. Mrs. Turpin, however, is attacked because of who she is, not because of what she does. Strictly speaking, Mrs. Turpin does not do anything in the waiting room of the doctor's office besides chat with the other patients. Mary Grace attacks her because of her personality, because of her obnoxious and condescending attitude. Mrs. Turpin's air of Old South politesse does not fool Mary Grace who sees her for the casually racist and classist snob that she is and Mrs. Turpin quickly notices in the girl's eyes an air of mysterious reckoning: "She looked straight in front of her, directly through Mrs. Turpin and on through the yellow curtain and the plate glass window which made the wall behind her. The girl's eyes seemed lit all of a sudden with a peculiar light, and unnatural light like night road signs give" (637). Mrs. Turpin senses that all is not as it should be, or rather, as it has been, and so is haunted by the student's perspicacious gaze for the

remainder of the scene in the waiting room until the girl finally hurls her textbook and attacks her:

> The book struck her directly over her left eye. It struck almost at the same instant that she realized the girl was about to hurl it. Before she could utter a sound, the raw face came crashing across the table toward her, howling. The girl's fingers sank like clamps into the soft flesh of her neck. She heard the mother cry out and Claud shout, "Whoa!" There was an instant when she was certain that she was about to be in an earthquake. […] All at once her vision narrowed and she saw everything as if it were happening in a small room far away, or as if she were looking at it through the wrong end of a telescope. (*CW* 644)

Mary Grace's prophetic intervention ruptures Mrs. Turpin's smug, culturally sanctioned sense of self and society and lets emerge a sense of absence that affirms the frailty of her symbolic edifice. The idyllic texture of her life is disrupted by the unexpected change in the symbolic texture of intersubjective relations. But, as the attack occurs before we meet Mrs. Turpin's employees and before we get to observe the nature and tone of their limited interactions, the reader does not get to witness the heretofore version of their relationship where Mrs. Turpin still believes in her superiority. We are thus left to fill the void created by this rupture with the tone and context of Mrs. Turpin's present displeasure:

> "She sho shouldn't said nothing ugly to you," the old woman said. "You so sweet. You the sweetest lady I know."
>
> "She pretty too," thet one with the hat on said.
>
> "And stout," the other said. "I never knowed no sweeter white lady."
>
> "That's the truth befo' Jesus," the old woman said. "Amen! You jes as sweet and pretty as you can be." (*CW* 650)

After Mary Grace's attack, the flattery Mrs. Turpin receives from her employees no longer has the same affirming effect it once had on her sense of self. Her response to her employees reveals the sum of her fate, the collapse of the symbolic order of her classist understanding of the world: "Mrs. Turpin knew exactly how much Negro flattery was worth and it added to her rage" (*CW* 650). Mrs. Turpin ultimately finds herself powerless and confused as the altercation in the waiting room of the doctor's office has amplified her insecurities about her place in the world, thereby inciting an identity crisis. "Why me?" she laments to her pen of pigs,

> "How am I a hog?" she demanded. "Exactly how am I like them?" […] "Go on," she yelled. "Call me a hog! Call me a hog again. From hell. Call me a wart hog from hell. Put that bottom rail on top. There'll still be a top and a bottom!" […] "A final surge of fury shook her and she roared, "who do you think you are?" (*CW* 653-54)

But while her final exclamation is intended for Mary Grace, and perhaps by extension for God Himself, the spirit of the question is in fact most appropriate for Mrs. Turpin herself, as she is no longer sure of who she is. Her revelation at the conclusion of the story, that the Kingdom of Heaven has no concern for class or race and that it is the lame who shall enter first, reinforces Mary Grace's indictment that she is no better than any of the freaks and lunatics she believes are below her in the social order. Though Mrs. Turpin's spirituality may have matured, her sense of self, based on her classist and racist prejudices, has dissipated.

I began this section by asking what it was about "The Geranium" that led O'Connor to redraft the source material over a span of twenty or so years, and this, I believe, is the answer: Dudley/Tanner is neither an arrogant intellectual, like Julian or Asbury, nor a classist snob like Mrs. Turpin or Mrs. Chestny; he is but an out-of-touch elderly outcast. Though his earliest incarnation is hatefully racist, he is nevertheless as destitute as the poor Black men with whom

he interacts, or, as with Rabbie/Coleman, with whom he lives. I therefore argue that O'Connor's preoccupation with the material of the "Geranium Variations" stems from these significant differences. Dudley/Tanner is more complex, more sympathetic, and more tragic than any of the above-mentioned protagonists, and so filtering the topic of the racial divide through the experiences of his character makes for a more nuanced narrative representation of race relations in the South, and by extension, in the United States as a whole.

The Variations

Before we discuss "Judgment Day" in detail, let us first look at the story's first three incarnations, "The Geranium" from 1946, "Exile in the East" from 1955, and "Getting Home" from 1964. O'Connor's overwrought poetics in the first variation are the stylistic crutches of an ambitious young writer who has not yet mastered her craft. The integrity of the central story, that of the Old Dudley's struggle with his displacement, essentially remains the same throughout the drafts. What makes the character's conflict so compelling is that his sense of displacement is in fact the result of his social inertia; that is, the world has passed him by. Moreover, though subsequent versions of Old Dudley vary in their construction, the character is consistently tormented by this same failure to adapt. The magnificence of the final version of the story is that it synthesizes this theme of failing to adapt into a refutation of the very concept of having to adapt, or as put above, a refutation of the liberal ideals of social progress.

O'Connor's prose is predictably less polished in "The Geranium," her narrative poetics green with inconsistency and often overwrought in execution. For example, a teenage grandson, a detail which is excluded from all other versions, is mentioned early in the story but then abandoned altogether. O'Connor even specifies that the old man and the teenager share a small

bedroom and do not get along, but that is all. The only function of the grandson is to exaggerate the cramped nature of Old Dudley's new surroundings so to emphasize the theme of suffocation that persists throughout the story. O'Connor forces details like the proximity of Old Dudley's family, or of his neighbours, or of strangers in the street to create a claustrophobic atmosphere and to evoke the threat of suffocation that haunts the old man:

> Once she took him shopping with her but he was too slow. They went in a subway—a railroad underneath the ground like a big cave. People boiled out of the trains and up steps and over into the streets. They rolled off the street and down steps and into trains—black and white and tallow all mixed up like vegetables in soup. Everything was boiling. The trains swished in from tunnels, up canals, and all of a sudden stopped. The people coming out pushed through the people coming in and a noise rang and the train swooped off again. […] He felt like his tongue had slipped down in his stomach. (*CW* 19)

O'Connor belabours her descriptions of the tight spaces of the subway platforms and apartment buildings alike and so Old Dudley's anxiety increases throughout the story as he is overwhelmed by the "swishing and jamming" (*CW* 18) of the big city. She pushes this theme of claustrophobia even further by plaguing Old Dudley with regular fits of suffocation throughout the story, starting at the very beginning when the old man expresses his frustration over what he believes to be his neighbour's poor maintenance of a potted geranium: "Old Dudley felt his throat knotting up. Lutish could root anything. Rabie too. His throat was drawn taut. He laid his head back and tried to clear his mind. There wasn't much he could think about that didn't do his throat that way" (10). Old Dudley's primary reaction is a physical one as he feels his throat begin to tense up as if he were choking. The physical manifestation of his anxiety is then followed by nostalgic memories of his friends Lutish and Rabie, who we later discover are servants at the boarding

house in which Dudley had previously lodged. Lutish and Rabie are of course Black, and nearly every subsequent catalyst for Old Dudley's anxiety is in some way related to an interaction with a person of colour. Thus it would seem that Old Dudley's reservations with the northern Black Americans are more a question of culture or class than it is of skin colour; it is the context of his interactions with his neighbour(s) in New York that distresses him.

Old Dudley's anxiety towards city life is unsurprisingly rooted in a boyhood fantasy of big towns as being "important places [that] had room for him" (*CW* 17). The old man recalls this fantasy after he has already moved in with his daughter's family and has been overwhelmed by the stark contrast of his new home to his Southern heritage, concluding that he must have been sick to have agreed to the arrangement in the first place. The brutal conditions of the city do not match young Dudley's reveries, thus leaving Old Dudley to daily ruminate, regretfully and nostalgically, as he sits by the apartment window waiting for his neighbour to set out a potted geranium that reminds him of home. The symbol of the geranium in this first variation is contrived in its triple function as title, framing device, and catalyst for Old Dudley's nostalgic bethinking. O'Connor emphasizes its symbolic reference in two drafts of the story where Dudley jumps out of the window after the fallen flower. The detail of the geranium remains in "Exile in the East" yet is no longer a focal point for the old man's mix of nostalgia and neurosis, and by the time O'Connor drafts "Getting Home" and "Judgment Day," it is altogether removed from the story and the season is changed from summer to winter.

O'Connor also alters Dudley/Tanner's physical ailments between the variations, deemphasizing the symptoms of claustrophobia and anxiety in "Exile in the East," and then shifting completely to a series of strokes, a concussion, and the effects of kidney disease in "Getting Home" and "Judgment Day." The modification of Dudley/Tanner's ailments

corresponds to the modification of his personality. As the character's attitude towards people of colour becomes more nuanced and complex, the symbolism of social anxiety as represented by his claustrophobia and symptoms of suffocation is no longer appropriate.

There is also much more of New York in the first variation, as Dudley explores the city with his daughter while she runs her errands, accompanying her on the L train,[40] implying that they likely live in either Brooklyn or Queens, two of the city's most populous Black neighbourhoods in the 1950s and 60s, with Harlem being the other. Dudley's hard-headed ignorance and lack of awareness are cartoonish, and his failure to recognize the reality of his economic condition is much more severe than Tanner's recognition of the very same dilemma in "Judgment Day." In fact, Dudley's outburst over his integrated living conditions is almost the exact the same lecture the daughter gives to Tanner in "Judgment Day" when she discovers that he shares his shack with a Black man. In "The Geranium," Old Dudley tells his daughter that he did not raise her to live alongside people of colour:

> "You ain't been raised that way!" he'd said thundery-like. "You ain't been raised to live tight with niggers that think they're just as good as you, and you think I'd go messin' around with one er that kind! If you think I want anything to do with them, you're crazy." [...] He knew Yankees let niggers in their front doors and let them set on their sofas but he didn't know his own daughter that was raised proper would stay next door to them. (*CW* 21-2)

In the final variation of "Judgment Day" the scolding is reversed:

[40] "The went on an overhead train too. She called it an 'El.' They had to go up on a high platform to catch it." "The Geranium" *Collected Works* (19-20).

> "If you don't have any pride I have and I know my duty and I was raised to do it. My mother raised me to do it if you didn't. She was from plain people but not the kind that likes to settle in with niggers." (*CW* 537)

The expression of intolerance is thus shifted from the bigoted old man in "The Geranium" to the young integrated woman in "Judgment Day." We see the germs of this transfer in "Exile in the East," yet in this variation, the daughter's attitude is much more acrid: "'How do you stand that nigger?' she had wailed. 'How do you stand that drunk stinking nigger right there beside you? […] Do you think I want to see my own father living off a nigger?'" (*GC* 58). Her vexation is maintained in "Getting Home" save for a wording change here and there such as, for example, changing "drunk" for "the filthy stinking old nigger" (*CW* 58).

What is most notable about the first variation of the story is the difference in the characterization of all the Black characters compared to their equivalents in later variations. Where the neighbour in "The Geranium" is almost exhaustingly friendly, talkative, and charitable, his incarnation in the final draft is the complete reverse: antisocial and contemptuous. For example, whereas the neighbor in the first draft stops Dudley from falling down the stairs, the actor in "Judgment Day" defiles and mocks Tanner once he has already fallen. Interestingly, Dudley's neighbour across the alley, the man to whom the titular geranium belongs, and who we must assume is white given that he is referred to by both the narrator and Dudley as 'the man' and not by a slur, is a considerably less civil and amiable person than the Black neighbour. Furthermore, the impression is that most if not all of the neighbours are equally inhospitable since the very idea of leaving his daughter's apartment gives Old Dudley anxiety: "[He] was always afraid that when he went out in the dog runs, a door would suddenly open and one of the snipe-nosed men that hung off the window ledges in his undershirt would growl, 'What are you

doing here?'" (*CW* 22). Old Dudley is nevertheless completely shaken by his interaction with the Black neighbour, even though he is pleasant and attempts to relate to the old man by discussing hunting, a soft spot for the protagonist who day-dreams about hunting with Rabie in the South throughout the story. But Old Dudley is not in any way interested in the repartee and is immediately overwhelmed by the social interaction.

There is also a sharp difference between Rabie and Coleman. In "The Geranium," Rabie's attitude is deferential as he follows Old Dudley around like a pet and relishes all the things that this wise white man can teach him about the world. In "Judgment Day," Tanner and Coleman are portrayed on much more equal terms, even though their initial meeting is an absurd display of the mental gymnastics required of people of colour when interacting with whites. Aside from their convoluted introduction, however, the two men are more or less equals who establish a fellowship in their destitute circumstances. O'Connor makes this change in "Exile in the East" and trades Dudley's anxiety over interacting with neighbours for a deep sense of resentment and disappointment directed at his daughter whereby he even has difficulty looking her in the eye. Though the source of this resentment might simply be the impatience of old age paired with his forced displacement, it is also possible that he resents his daughter for implying that he was in the charge of Coleman, for when she exclaims disgust over their living arrangement he remarks to himself that "it was true that he had been on a nigger's hands more or less but he had not thought about it that way until she appeared" (*GC* 58). This revelation leads Dudley to justify to his daughter, as well as to himself, that the shack belongs to him and that even if it is Coleman who typically provides their meals, it is still he who provides the roof and gives the orders. Dudley/Tanner maintains this sense of domestic superiority in "Getting Home" and "Judgment Day" yet shifts to a slightly more inclusive tone by stating they he and Coleman built the shack

together. Moreover, by "Judgment Day" Tanner no longer seeks to justify Coleman's domestic responsibilities but rather understands them as being owed to him: "'Who you think cooks? Who you think cuts my firewood and empties my slops? He's paroled to me. That scoundrel has been on my hands for thirty years. He ain't a bad nigger'" (*CW* 679-680).

Another notable aspect of this draft is the sustained conflation between the narrator and the protagonist in the use of a racist slur over the course of the narrative. Take, for example, when Dudley walks by the neighbour's apartment:

> The door to the nigger's apartment was open and he could see a woman sitting in a chair by the window. "Yankee niggers," he muttered. She had on rimless glasses and there was a book in her lap. Niggers don't think they're dressed up till they got on glasses, Old Dudley thought. (*CW* 708).

Both the narrator and Dudley use the slur, blurring the two perspectives and complicating any kind of distinction between the prejudices of the characters and those of the narrator. In the three later variations, however, the narrator generally uses the term 'Negro' and only ever slips into the use of the aggressive variation when clearly echoing the protagonist's frame of mind, such as, for example when Dudley/Tanner is confronted by Dr. Foley: "He was everything to the niggers [….]" (*GC* 65). The narrator returns to the use of "negro" a few pages later once we are distanced from Tanner's initial frustration with the disintegration of his living situation and get a sense of Dr. Foley's ominous business acumen:

> "It don't pay to make this kind of mis-take," the doctor said.
>
> "I never found nothing that payed yet," Tanner muttered.
>
> "Everything pays," the negro said, "if you knows how to make it," and he remained there smiling, looking the squatter up and down. (*GC* 73)

It is worth noting that immediately before this exchange, Dr. Foley also refers to Coleman by the racial epithet: "'I know that nigger," he said. "Coleman Parrum—how long does it take him to sleep off that stump liquor you all make?'" (*GC* 73). This context, as well as Tanner's subsequent defensiveness, suggests that the vacillation between usages is directly related to class concerns. Thus, when Dudley/Tanner realizes upon Dr. Foley's arrival that the jig is up, his frustration gives way to his use of the racist slur, just as it does when he is defending his living condition to his daughter. Yet, when he is attempting to negotiate his board on Dr. Foley's land, Dudley/Tanner is considerably more muted: "'The governmint ain't got around yet to forcing the white folks to work for the colored,' Tanner said" (76). Further to this point, once Dudley/Tanner decides that he cannot go on living with his daughter in the strange and cold society of North, he decides that would have no problem working for Dr. Foley and that "He would have been a nigger's white nigger any day." Thus, in the variations, the slur signifies not necessarily race, but rather, social status.

On "Judgment Day"

"Judgment Day" does not represent the pride of intellect in the same way as it is featured in the titular story, or in "Good Country People," or "The Enduring Chill." One would be hard-pressed to label the protagonist Tanner as an intellectual, or as an artist, or even, in very general terms, a liberal. The old man, for better or worse, is very much representative of the Old South. What is more, Tanner's faith is one of his defining characteristics, and so irreligion must also be precluded from this iteration of the paradigm. Conversely, however, the story does portray encounters with characters who could be interpreted as the Corrupt Human Heart portion of the equation, the most obvious example being the actor who lives next door in the New York City

apartment. But then again, I believe that the actor is not so much a corrupt human heart as he is Tanner's opposite. He is not, for example, corrupt in the sense that Sarah Ham from "The Comforts of Home" or Mr. Shiftlet from "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" are corrupt; he is simply different from Tanner in every conceivable way, beginning with his secularism. As Tanner's daughter tries to warn him, "They ain't the same around here" (*CW* 688). In fact, a more accurate nominee for the Corrupt Human Heart character-type would be Tanner's daughter herself, since she is of the South but, in Tanner's eyes, has been spoiled by the North, or as O'Connor might say, secularized. It is only after her father's death, and moreover only after weeks of sleeplessness, that she delivers on her promise to return her father's corpse home to Corinth, Georgia, in turn ever so slightly re-establishing her ties to her homeland. But again, this is stretching out thinly the details of the story to adapt it to Coffey's premise.

So, if "Judgment Day" fails to meet the parameters of Coffey's paradigm, how can I claim that it is O'Connor's most important? It is precisely because the story does *not* properly fit into this framework that it is worthy of our attention. Because it diverges from O'Connor's usual narrative habits, it is arguably her most accomplished piece of writing. This is not to say that the story is a complete outlier. As I outlined above, "Judgment Day" nevertheless deals with O'Connor's favourite topics, such as heritage, want of self-awareness, and death, and is rich with the wit and gloom typical of her writing. But it is unlike any of O'Connor's other work in that it is suffused with the social and political tension between whites and Blacks in the South, and indeed the North as well. The characters of colour are not merely at the periphery of the story's action in the form of a fellow passenger in transit or a farm-hand or a pickaninny; rather, the three different Black men are the fuel that powers the engine of the story. Tanner's interactions with Coleman, Dr. Foley, and the actor are more than incidental encounters between protagonist and a

selection of tertiary characters: the three different relationships represent three different types of Black men in the American imagination, from the lackadaisical labourer, to the criminal hustler, to the angry Black man. As Tanner's daughter tells her husband in the "Getting Home" variation, her father "knows there's different kinds" of Black men: "'You haven't come from where there's lots of niggers' she said. 'A nigger is just a nigger to you" (*GC* 23). In the "Judgement Day" variation, she assures him that "it takes brains to work a real nigger" (*CW* 677), brains that her father has. Yet, Tanner was able to build a relationship with Coleman purely because the latter knew what was expected of him and was clever enough to play along. What is more, their relationship only develops beyond that of employee/employer because of their alcoholic co-dependency. With Dr. Foley, however, Tanner is unable to comply in like manner and opts to vacate the land on which he and Coleman are squatting and move North rather than be in the employment of a Black man. It does not matter to Tanner that Foley is "only part black" since a fraction is enough to dissuade him from accepting the role of subordinate. Interestingly, in one draft of the variation, the narrator notes that Dr. Foley's meanness comes from his white blood and "his shut mouth craft from the Indian" (*GC* 65). Finally, Tanner's punishment for his refusal of Dr. Foley comes in the form of the bespeckled actor with the barely visibly facial hair in the North who unequivocally rejects his Southern modus operandi and mocks him even in his final moments.

The life-blood of the story, as it is in most of her best work, is one of O'Connor's great annoyances, that is, presumptuous attitudes of superiority and the moral judgments of "stupid Yankee liberals" who smack their lips in satisfaction at the failures of the South. But what elevates this story above the rest of her work is that her critique is embedded in the narrative details of the story rather than in any kind of clash of ideologies between different characters.

For example, there is no arrogant college graduate or artist-type, no ersatz-prophet to have his presumptions thrown back in his face. Tanner has already been humbled when he suffers his final stroke; he has already given up on living in Northern society and has resolved to make his way back to Coleman in the South. He is neither outraged idealist nor disgruntled bigot. He is certainly prejudiced insofar as he refuses to be subservient to a Black man, even if it means turning down work and shelter, but he is not so intolerant that he is repulsed by the idea of living alongside Black neighbors if they are equally destitute. In fact, that he shared his dilapidated shack in Corinth with Coleman is an issue for his daughter more than it is for him, as noted above. Tanner has been squatting on Foley's land for an indeterminate amount of time and has been accused of illegally producing liquor on the property by his new landlord the "brown porpoise-shaped figure" of Dr. Foley.[41] Tanner's prospects are either to work for Dr. Foley, who it would seem is some kind of hustler in the Black community who serves as "druggist and undertaker and general counsel and real estate man" (*CW* 250), or to move to New York with his daughter. It is convenience that ultimately pushes Tanner to leave Coleman, not his daughter's moral outrage.

The integrated apartment building in New York is an important narrative detail as it reveals the material conditions in which Tanner and his daughter live. Though many different nationalities and communities converge in New York City, it has always been, and remains one of the most segregated cities in the United States. In fact, until the rise of Harlem as a cultural hub in the twenties, whites were quick to escape any neighbourhood that had a sudden influx of

---

[41] O'Connor makes a final edit for the version of the story that would end up in the *Library of America* edition of her *Collected Works* where Tanner is confronted by Dr. Foley a few months after his daughter's initial visit. The son in law accompanies the daughter to Corinth in this version, and leans against a tree smoking a cigarette as she castigates her father and his roommate.

Black Americans.[42] Thus, if Tanner's daughter and her husband live in a neighbourhood where people of colour can move in next door without causing a disturbance among the white residents, then the daughter's living conditions are, socially speaking, only marginally better than his shared shack with Coleman in Corinth. This is important because it immediately indicates that the quality of life is not fundamentally better in the North than it is in the South, that the hubs of industrialization offer, not a better life, but a different kind of poverty. Notice the daughter's sharp orders to her father to avoid any kind of interaction: “You keep away from them. Don't you go over there trying to get friendly with him” (*CW* 261). She does not make some kind of outcry as if the arrival of Black neighbours were an extraordinary occurrence, as if propriety had been abandoned and that their living space has been invaded, but instead keeps to herself and avoids making any trouble. The old man's fatal mistake is that he does not mind his business — he is not wary of the danger that could come with engaging the actor. His mistake is that he assumes that they are on equal footing because they are neighbours, and from this fact presumes that they are more or less of the same economic background and thus social standing. Tanner then constructs a Southern identity for the actor so that he can establish and impose a familiar code of interaction, much as he had done with Coleman several years prior.

Moreover, the exact source of the conflict between the characters in “Judgment Day” is much more mysterious than it is in “Everything That Rises Must Converge.” In the latter story, there is a clear, familiar context established with the setting of the recently integrated public bus, which O’Connor emphasizes with her portrayal of Julian's moralizing attitude, whether it be overtly directed at this mother or indulged privately in his daydreams. O’Connor also employs the gothic device of doubling in her characterization of the two mothers, implying an inevitable

[42] According to the statistics gathered at: http://blackdemographics.com/cities-2/new-york-nj-ny/

clash between the two women. The actor's outburst in “Judgment Day,” however, is not so easily explained. Certainly, Tanner's general tone and attitude are patronizing, especially when he insists on calling him Preacher, but the actor seems agitated before their interaction even begins. The actor is unlike any other Black man Tanner has ever met and for this reason, Tanner is totally unprepared to deal with him. His neighbour’s impatience is so potent that it is almost as if any engagement from Tanner at all would have produced the same result. He is Coleman’s complete opposite: he is fierce of nature, remorseless, and eager for confrontation. To make matters worse, Tanner’s Southern code of manners, it turns out, does not apply in the progressive North[43] where tensions are high because the population is dense and the material signs of poverty are barefaced in the downtrodden buildings, in the crumbling infrastructure, and in the violence of the law in both its constitution by politicians and its application by police officers.

Tanner's two previous encounters with Black men in the story establishes the historical context between white and Blacks in the South, while this final encounter suggests some uncertainties of the North’s counteroffer. Simply put, Tanner's relationship with Coleman represents the past, his refusal to comply with Foley represents the present tensions, and his clash with the actor represents a future for which he is fully unprepared. It is through the narrative progression of these three relationships that O'Connor attempts to confront what cannot be got at directly, that is, the racial divide in America. The material conditions of four hundred years of subjugation, humiliation, murder, and rape are unnameable, and so, O'Connor's inclusion of these

[43] I again turn to Baraka for a description of life in a Northern city: “For many Negroes, whether they live in Harlem or not, the city is simply a symbol of naked oppression. […] But this is one of the weirdest things about the American experience, that it can oppress a man, almost suck his life away, and then make him so ashamed that he was among the oppressed, rather than the oppressors, that he will never offer any protest.” From “City of Harlem” (Baraka 112).

truths cannot be portrayed directly. Instead, they are embedded in the anger felt and expressed by the actor. This is because the wounds of the racial problem run deep and the injustices are systemic. It is against Tanner as a symptom of a systemic problem that the actor revolts when he vehemently rejects any form of interaction. Perhaps Tanner's judgment day is a version of the day of judgment of which Malcolm X warns in many of his speeches—the reckoning the American people must face if they do not attempt to seriously and genuinely offer restitution for past injustices suffered by the Blacks at the hands of the white majority:

> History must repeat itself! Because of America's evil deeds against these twenty-two million "Negroes," like Egypt and Babylon before her, America herself now stands before the "bar of justice." White America is now facing her Day of Judgment, and she can't escape because today God himself is the judge. God himself is now the administrator of justice, and God himself is to be her divine executor! ("God's Judgment of White America")

That O'Connor and Malcom X knelt before different Gods is to me unimportant, for their principles are essentially the same: symbolic gestures of idealism are not enough to mend the wounds of history. A great injustice has been committed, and continues to be committed in new but familiar forms, and if conditions do not soon change, there will be a reckoning. As Malcolm X noted after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, "The chickens have come home to roost." This very sentiment is echoed at the conclusion of both the "Getting Home" variation, and an early draft of "Judgment Day" when Dudley/Tanner responds to the actor's mockery that there "Ain't no judgment day, old man. Cept this. Maybe this here judgment day for you" with "you'll find out its another one, nigger, when you begin to burn in hell" (*GC* 120). In the final version, Tanner does not respond so violently, and instead asks the man to help him up as he has not yet

given up on his plan to return South. Unfortunately, confused and desperate, he again refers to him as Preacher and seals his fate. The old man's moment of humility, however, is unlike that of other O'Connor protagonists who experience a violent encounter with a mysterious prophetic figure. Tanner's moment of grace, if indeed he has one, is not described in the text; the narrative simply cuts from his final interaction with the neighbour to his daughter discovering his body in the stairwell. The neighbour's message that "There ain't no judgment day, old man. Cept this" is thus directed at both Tanner and the reader insofar as the narrative omission of Tanner's death disrupts the cathartic moment of pity and fear whereby the reader levies his or her own judgment upon the protagonist. Moreover, Tanner's final words "I'm on my way home!" are ambiguous enough to suggest both his physical home in the South, and his spiritual home in the Kingdom of Heaven. Readers thus cannot know if the actor has been "the unwilling instrument of grace" (*MM* 118) and if Tanner's death is redeemed by an ultimate epiphany.

Such is the principle difference between the neighbour characters in "The Geranium" and in "Judgment day": in the first, the neighbour is a happy-go-lucky Uncle Tom[44] type who attempts to befriend the protagonist, yet in the second, he is an abrasive heretic with no interest whatsoever in humouring Tanner's gesture of Southern manners, ultimately performing upon him some mysterious violence. Where the original character is a caricature of a subservient Black man who is delighted to be of use to a white man, his incarnation in "Judgment Day" is the complete opposite—he is the manifestation of what Baldwin claims, in his essay "The White Man's Guilt," is the white fear that the Black man's fight for equality is in fact a mission of retribution for the crimes committed upon his race over the course of American history:

---

[44] Derogatory term for a person of colour who will do whatever it takes to gain the favour of whites. References the character of the same name from Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852).

> If black people fall into this trap, the trap of believing that they deserve their fate, white people fall into the yet more stunning and intricate trap of believing that they deserve *their* fate, and their comparative safety and that black people, therefore, need only do as white people have done to rise to where white people now are. But this simply cannot be said, not only for reasons of politeness or charity, but also because white people carry in them a carefully muffled fear that black people long to do to others what has been done to them. (*Collected Essays* 724-25)

The neighbour in "Judgment Day" is therefore a representation of the white guilt that haunts the collective imagination of Northerners and Southerners alike. He is a Christ-denying heretic who not only assaults an elderly man, but who shows no mercy whatsoever in Tanner's final moments, going so far as to ridicule Tanner's faith in the eternal court of judgment, and defile his body by shoving his head and arms through the spokes of the staircase's banister like some improvised pillory. He is O'Connor's final "prophet gone wrong."

Conclusion

In "The Teaching of Literature," Flannery O'Connor writes that the student of literature must search for the intentions of the writer not in the biographical information made available to readers, but exclusively in the work itself. "Psychology is an interesting subject," she continues,

> but hardly the main consideration for the teaching of English. Neither is sociology. […] Good fiction deals with human nature. If it uses material that is topical, it still does not use it for a topical purpose, and if topics are what you want anyway, you are better referred to a newspaper. (*MM* 126)

Given that the much of my analysis of O'Connor's texts has been filtered through each of the sociological, the biographical, and the topical, there is little doubt in my mind that my research has betrayed her artistic principles. Of course, such is the case for much, if not all, O'Connor scholarship, from Guy Davenport and Alice Walker, to Ralph Wood and Mark Greif. O'Connor might say that this is the natural result of "a generation that has been made to feel that the aim of learning is to eliminate mystery" (125). My intention, however, has not been to eliminate mystery, or to dissect the narrative properties of each text to apprise their sociological value as case studies, or even to reach a judgment on O'Connor's political leanings. Rather, my objective has been two-fold: first, to investigate the prophetic manifestations of said mystery and the corresponding violent epiphanies experienced by the protagonists; and second, to trace the evolution of her artistic expression as it relates to her portrayal of Black characters. I have thus made recourse to the topical and the sociological not because I prioritize the "examination of statistics rather than [the] examination of conscience" (*MM* 130), but because I believe that the topical, insofar as it relates to the racial divide in the United States, has heretofore been a neglected topic of research in O'Connor studies. Though I have shown and engaged with a number of critics who have explored the topic of the racial divide in O'Connor's texts, their work, in my estimation, has shown to be unsatisfactory in that it largely fails to recognize the achievement of the writer's late texts, insofar as they feature Black characters who have inherited the mantle of "prophet gone wrong." As such, these characters also represent O'Connor's most nuanced engagement with the topic of the civil rights movement and the associated racial tensions that may potentially emerge when Blacks and white converge.

Moreover, some of the criticism that does engage with the topic of the racial divide in O'Connor's work unfortunately reads as though it was composed by one of her self-idolizing

false prophets, such as Asbury or Julien, in that the studies are far too pre-occupied with determining the condition of the writer's moral integrity. As such, I have used these studies to establish what, borrowing from Michel Foucault, I have termed the incitement to diagnose racism. I have argued that the impulse of literary critics to either defend or to condemn an artist's perceived racism illustrates the elitist moralizing that O'Connor vilifies in her correspondence and lampoons in her fiction.

By then reading O'Connor alongside the work of Black prophetic figures such as Malcolm X, and Amiri Baraka, I demonstrated that her political and social sensibilities are surprisingly congruent with those of the more radical voices of the Civil Rights movement. I argue that this nuanced sensitivity to the racial divide reveals itself in her later work not only through her portrayal of Black characters, but through the self-deception of her white characters as well.

At last, I trace the evolution of her treatment of Black characters through the progress of the "Geranium Variations" and argue that the final variation, "Judgment Day," offers her most nuanced, and what is more, most insightful depiction of the racial divide in the United States.

Chapter 2

Bearing Witness to Violence in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*

My blood is all meridian; were it not
I had not left my clime, nor should I be,
In spite of tortures, ne'er to be forgot
A slave again of love,---at least of thee.
–Lord Byron (*Stanzas to the Po*)

Part I

No Such Thing as Life Without Bloodshed

Much of the critical attention that Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* has earned since its publication in 1985 has been preoccupied with the surfeit of violence described in awful detail throughout the novel. Given that the narrative is set on the American frontier in the period of aggressive territorial expansion of the 19th century, and that the timeline bookended by the Mexican-American war of 1846-48 and the American Civil War of 1861-1865, the book functions, in many respects, as an encyclopedia of violence. How a critic chooses to interpret the novel therefore becomes a question of his or her ability, or rather disposition, to bear witness to said violence, a question of whether one is prepared to reckon with the historical and social traumas of the United States of America. While there are useful and engaging readings of McCarthy's work by critics such as Justin Evans,[45] or most recently, Lauren Brown,[46] others, such as Peter Josyph or Mark Winchell, as I will show, get caught up in the idea that the novel itself enacts violence, or worse, that the point of the violence is that there is no point. As a rebuttal to these latter readings, the present study will use Slavoj Žižek's *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* to argue that the novel's relentless descriptions of horrible violence are but a fragment of the violence that McCarthy strives to portray in his re-telling of the history of the

---

[45] From "To Disenchant and Disintoxicate: *Blood Meridian* as Critical Epic": "By analogy with critical theory, we can read Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985) as a ''critical epic.'' It tries to make this most traditional literary form into a self-reflexive and self-critical but idealistic agent, one that respects the ideals of traditional literary forms but radicalizes them in order to criticize modern societies" (405).

[46] From "Existing Without Consent": "I seek to offer a New Americanist reading that unites the theoretical implications of this violence with its political effects. I do this to explain how some of the "othered," unassimilable populations not only survived violence similar to that which McCarthy chronicles in *Blood Meridian*, but persisted—even into the present—as living testimonials whose very existence contradicts the meaning conferred by the judge and the exceptionalist U.S. social, political, and historical narrative he symbolically records and controls" (76).

American frontier. I shall thus use Žižek's typology of violence to argue that readers of *Blood Meridian* must "disenchant [themselves] from the fascinating lure of "subjective" violence," which is to say, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent, [and] perceive the contours of the background which generates such outbursts" (1). Following this line of thinking, I argue that in order to mitigate the transfixing effects of the escalating horror of the sundry violent acts, we must, in Žižek's words, look at the problem of violence awry[47] rather than attempt a direct confrontation with it. The aim of this sideways glance is to answer how and why the novel beckons its readers, with every successive act of rape, defilement, and murder, to reckon not only with the national mythologies it subverts, but also with the national ethos it portrays.

Justin Evans's essay "To Disenchant and Dis-intoxicate: *Blood Meridian* as Critical Epic" provides a useful point of departure for my analysis of *Blood Meridian*, as it too expresses suspicion of critical readings of the text that focus too narrowly on the "supposed human propensity for violence."[48] In Evans's estimation, the conundrum with which the novel actually

---

[47] Žižek originally uses this term in his book *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*. He develops the term to justify his application of Lacanian psychoanalysis to an investigation of popular culture in order to "discern the features that usually escape a straightforward academic look" (3). In other words, to look awry is to observe from a particular perspective so as to not be distracted by the sublime appearance of that which is being observed.

[48] From Evans' footnotes to his discussion of the surplus of violence that surrounds Judge Holden, whom he compares to Milton's Satan and Conrad's Kurtz: "Many critics focus on the violence of the novel, understandably encouraged by McCarthy's claim in an interview that ''there's no such thing as life without bloodshed . . . the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea'' (Richard B. Woodward, ''Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction,'' New York Times, April 19, 1992). Hungerford, (Postmodern Belief, 90,) quotes this as evidence against the possibility that the novel might be critical of violence. It is less common for critics to quote the follow-up claim, that ''those who are afflicted with this notion are the first ones to give up their souls, their freedom'' (Woodward, ''Venomous Fiction''). McCarthy's stress on soul and freedom hardly squares with the claim that *Blood Meridian* is resolutely deterministic. The fear McCarthy expressed in this interview—that people will give up their freedom for the sake of avoiding violence—is bizarrely inverted by such critics, who seem to have read it as a demand that we give up the possibility of freedom for the sake of embracing violence. *My reading here is not concerned with a supposed human propensity to violence, which seems to me quite a superficial element of the novel. The human propensity to give up freedom, I think, is the real target here*" (421-422).

reckons is the "human propensity to give up freedom" in the name of avoiding violence, a reading of the text that he has culled straight from the horse's mouth, so to speak, as McCarthy expresses this idea almost exactly in an interview with Richard B. Woodward for the *New York Times*, which I will further address below. Following McCarthy's testimony, Evan's principal argument is that the novelist borrows from the narrative poetics of the epic, which includes devices such as cataloguing, parataxis, and extended similes, to "defend the ideal of human subjectivity against a metaphysics of positivism" (406). Through this lens, the kid, the novel's protagonist, is read as a symbol for the possibility of agency and idealism, while Judge Holden, the antagonist, is a logical positivist philosopher who commits himself to categorizing and then destroying everything he encounters, including eventually the kid, with the ultimate structuralist goal of disproving the existence of a gap between observation and theory.

Rather than ratify social norms and buttress the national myths that are vital to the project of nation-building,[49] the traditional forms of the epic instead work to unveil the nasty details of those very norms and myths in order to question not only their validity, but the very impulse to romanticise the history of American imperialism. I contend, then, that if, as Hegel believed, epics are tales a society uses to understand itself as a distinct and autonomous group,[50] then so too is McCarthy's novel, following not only the tradition of the epic, but that of the American jeremiad

[49] From Evans: "With the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century, critics came to read their own "national" epic as a founding text: Dies Nibelingenlied, Beowulf, El Cid, Roland, and so on could be taken to describe the essence of a nation. Critics of this bent tended to use social theory as interpretive tool; epics, which depicted simple and perfect societies (of the British or Germans or Franks or Spanianards), were considered to be as simple, and perfect as the societies they depicted" (407).

[50] From Hegel's Lectures on Aesthetics. Part 3, Section 3: "As such an original whole the epic work is the Saga, the Book, the Bible of a people, and every great and important people has such absolutely earliest books which express for it its own original spirit. To this extent these memorials are nothing less than the proper foundations of a national consciousness, and it would be interesting to form a collection of such epic bibles. For the series of epics, excluding those which are later *tours de force,* would present us with a gallery of the spirits of peoples." Accessed on the web at: https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/ae/part3-section3-chapter3.htm

as well, meant to help American society to better understand itself. As Evans writes, "the book's ulterior purpose, to echo Auden, is to tell the truth about, and thus to disenchant, the idea of the epic and of the society of which that idea is a part" (415). *Blood Meridian*'s ambition to tell the truth about American society is especially significant if one considers the time frame during which McCarthy worked on it, that being between 1978 and 1985 or, more precisely, the decade immediately following the end of the war in Vietnam.[51] This detail is noteworthy for, as I will elaborate, the twenty-year conflict in Vietnam had detrimental effects on how Americans viewed not only their government (and by extension their military), but their society and its place in the world as a whole. Thus, if *Blood Meridian* indeed functions as an epic, as Evans convincingly argues, then, following György Lukács, the narrative, while inspired by the carefully researched history of the American frontier in the nineteenth century, is "essentially realistic and attached to the present rather than to the past" (Evans 409), a present, as I suggested above, that was wrestling with the burden of bearing witness to the carnage committed by its government.

The present chapter shall therefore argue that readers must, like Odysseus stopping the ears of his crew with wax, avoid succumbing to the enchanting wail of the incessant violence described by McCarthy so that they may pay mind to the form of the novel as it pays homage to the traditional poetics of the epic, to the allusions to the Old Testament, and to the juxtaposition of detailed descriptions and narrative omissions. This is not to say that the scenes of violence must be ignored in favour of close a reading of the novel's narrative poetics; such a thing would be akin to ignoring all references to whales in *Moby-Dick* in order to study Herman Melville's use of the encyclopedic form. Violence, both described and omitted, is essential to *Blood*

[51] This is the time frame according to Daniel Robert King's research in *Cormac McCarthy's Literary Evolution* (2016).

Meridian's narrative structure insofar as the novel not only describes the violence of war and of nation-building, but bears witness to it.

Moreover, I believe that McCarthy's detached but detailed treatment of the brutality of American history is amplified by his narrative choice to omit the description of the kid's murder at the end of the novel. In light of my analysis of the operation of prophetic violence in the texts of Flannery O'Connor, I will argue that the kid's unnarrated death serves two separate but related narrative functions: on the one hand, it eliminates the protagonist's opportunity to experience an epiphanic moment of grace whereby he would be returned to reality at a considerable cost, while on the other, his anticlimactic demise interrupts the reader's cathartic payoff for having endured over three hundred pages of brutal, and often senseless, violence.

Critical Readings of the Violence in *Blood Meridian*

One of McCarthy's more effective narrative methods of complementing the moments of barbarity is by employing a dark sense of humour that festers throughout the novel, simultaneously attracting and repelling the reader, leaving them unsure of whether to reject or to empathize with the characters. Consider Toadvine whose wit provides comic relief for most of the novel before his unceremonious, anti-climactic death by hanging. Take, for example, when Toadvine and the kid meet again in a Mexican town where they are both prisoners: "How do you like the city life" he asks the kid after the latter has returned from cleaning filth and excrement out of gutters. "I dont like it worth a damn so far," answers the kid. "I keep waiting for it to take with me but it aint done it," replies Toadvine (74-75). As Patrick W. Shaw so eloquently puts it, "humour and violence have blended like blood in creek water" (138), insofar as that humour is

used not to mitigate the violence, but to intensify it in order to further challenge how the reader will react and engage with it.

Moreover, the pairing of humour with violence is progressive throughout the novel, evolving from seemingly harmless to deadly associations. The complete absurdity of the novel's final scene is the ultimate evidence of this noxious pairing of comedy and cruelty. The kid, now in his forties, visits a dwarf prostitute yet is incapable of stimulating his libido and must settle for humiliating consolations from her. Moments later, he witnesses the drunken murder of a dancing bear, foreshadowing his approaching death and (probable) molestation at the hands of the judge. The chapter culminates with the massive, naked judge pirouetting and playing the fiddle to an adoring audience, repeating over and over again that he will not die. As Barcley Owens notes, McCarthy's use of language and humour in such moments, much like the judge himself, "smiles at death and laughs at its own horrible truths" (14).

These horrible truths are too much for critic Peter Josyph who, in *Cormac McCarthy's house: Reading McCarthy Without Walls,* admits to initially feeling a strong resistance to the novel's amoralism. "Few readers, few authors," he writes,

> would feel at home in McCarthy's milieu, and fewer would not envy McCarthy's genius in rendering it. But when a highly charged, richly textured novel driven by some of the most impressive American prose of this century features no major figure who is not, quite literally, a slaughterer, and offers scarcely a single act to inspire hope for the race, it is natural to ask questions about that talent and to wonder whether one is perceiving it rightly and judging it fairly. One gluts upon a baroque of thieving, raping, shooting, slashing, hanging, scalping, burning, bashing, hacking, stabbing... (170)

While Josyph ultimately professes a great admiration for McCarthy's craft, he nevertheless cannot help himself from criticizing what he believes to be a lack of morality, and, moreover, pronounces the novel ethically bereft. The critic argues that due to what he terms a “sense of emotional stinginess” and aridity (186), McCarthy's work is difficult to take seriously. “For a novel about blood,” he goes on, “it seems to be written in little of it” (186). Part of Josyph's disappointment stems from his expectation that the novel ought to assume a greater, more responsible role in portraying such monsters since the streets of his beloved Manhattan, for example, has such monsters of its own, and so *Blood Meridian*, or works like it, should therefore offer some sort of solace and reprieve to its readers by explicitly condemning the brutality of its characters. Yet, it seems to me that Josyph is missing the point entirely. As Žižek would say, he is “enchanted with the fascinating lure of this directly ‘subjective’ violence” (1). His liberal humanist discourse has devolved to excessive moral outrage: “and when the behaviour of those meant to enlist our sympathies reminds us of the monsters we will encounter on the streets this afternoon when we take the book out for a walk with maybe our wives and daughters too, one's reservations become a matter of life and death” (Josyph 186). Josyph concludes that while the novel is one of the better pieces of American fiction to be written in the twentieth century, it is, to put it in vulgar terms, socially irresponsible.

In her book entitled *The Evil, the Fated, the Biblical: The Latent Metaphysics of Cormac McCarthy,* Hanna Boguta-Marchel points to another critic who is stunted by *Blood Meridian'*s excessive violence, Mark Winchell, yet in this case the critic’s aversion leads to a sense of detachment since, as he writes, “sustained and senseless violence [...] can shock for only so long before it begins to numb or even lead to a kind of boredom” (59). For Winchell, McCarthy's novel verges on camp as it delivers a type of exaggeration that cannot be taken seriously. Boguta-

Marchel disagrees with Winchell's reading and argues that the novel lacks the sentimentality and "tone of purely aesthetic playfulness and detached elite dandyism" of camp literature and concludes that while McCarthy's novel approaches camp, as defined by Susan Sontag in her essay "Notes on 'Camp," it does not quite reach it because it accomplishes in delivering the tale it set out to tell (59), that is, the integrity of the narrative does not drown in its own excess.

In spite of Boguta-Marchel's refutation, with which I agree, Winchell's reaction to the text, as well as that of Josyph, in my opinion, points to a more pressing concern. The cynical indifference that arises in much of the scholarship[52] on *Blood Meridian* seems to me to disavow the history with which the novel reckons, which is not only that of the American frontier and the consolidation of national power, but the recent history of American foreign intervention, as well. Lauren Brown believes that recent scholarship on McCarthy has attempted to remedy this trend of disavowal by endeavouring to "interpret the violence in *Blood Meridian* as the culminating manifestation of the *very search for* and *implementation of* meaning, order, and classification fundamental to the Western ontological tradition" (80). Brown's observation echoes Evans's reading of the novel as an epic narrative insofar as the implementation of meaning, order, and classification is the very function and purpose of the epic mode. The mimetic violence in *Blood Meridian*, then, is neither ethically bereft nor boredom-inducing, but revelatory.

---

[52] Lauren Brown makes a similar observation in her essay "Existing Without Consent," pinpointing John Cant, Dana Phillips, James Dorson, and Steven Shaviro, among others: "Yet the very descriptions offered by various critics of the novel's violence suggest that the novel deliberately undermines such endeavors. Take, for example, Dorson's claim that the "sheer accumulation of atrocities and their matter-of-fact representation tend to break down any semblance of a plot and make it difficult for readers to cognitively process the violence" (106), or Steven Shaviro's observation that "the orgies of violence that punctuate *Blood Meridian* . . . fail to constitute a pattern, to unveil a mystery or to serve any comprehensible purpose. Instead," Shaviro writes, "the book suggests that 'a taste for mindless violence' is as ubiquitous—and as banal—as any other form of 'common sense'" (147). The descriptions deliberately draw our focus, instead, to the means by which such large-scale violence was effected and disavowed, not only during the period of McCarthy's novel, but transgenerationally" (89-90).

Looking Awry at Violence

As Patrick W. Shaw writes in *The Modern American Novel of Violence*, "in no other novel can we find a rhetoric of violence so lovingly applied" (133), which is to say that though scenes of violence are unrestrained in their depiction of the barbarity of man, they nevertheless do so beautifully. There is no shortage of examples from the novel that might stick out to readers and haunt them for pages until the next mugging, or murder, or rape. In fact, one could likely open the book at random and find such a scene described with the horrible beauty typical of McCarthy's prose. Take for instance the Comanche attack on Captain White's militia in chapter four: "A man near him sat with an arrow hanging out of his neck. He was bent slightly as if in prayer. [...] Everywhere there were horses down and men scrambling and he saw a man who sat charging his rifle while blood ran from his ears [...] and he saw men lanced and caught up by the hair and scalped standing [...]" (53). Or again, only a few pages later: "They followed the trampled ground left by the warparty and in the afternoon they came upon a mule that had failed and been lanced and left dead and then they came upon another. The way narrowed through the rocks and by and by they came to a bush that was hung with dead babies" (57). The senselessness and gratuitousness of the violence in such scenes urges readers to consider the context in which this violence erupts in order to appreciate the conditions that sponsor the acts of slaughter, for the novel's narrative poetics ultimately reveal a much darker reality than any individual burst of violence.

Our first intimate encounter with John Joel Glanton occurs on the outskirts of Chihuahua City, not long after the kid has joined the gang. Glanton and his men have come to purchase revolvers from a Prussian by the name of Speyer to carry out their contract with Governor Trias to eradicate the Apache and their leader Gómez who have been raiding Mexican ranches. As

Glanton examines the particulars of one of the revolvers, he begins to take aim at various animals and objects scattered about the courtyard and shoots at them. A cat, some chickens, a small goat, and a finally a clay decanter all succumb to the bandit's ferocity, which he discharges with blessed indifference. Nearby soldiers emerge to investigate the violence but they are quickly assuaged by judge Holden's reassurance that he and the men are conducting business for the Governor. This scene is significant for two reasons: the first is that it establishes a baseline for Glanton's penchant for mindless violence as well as his complete disdain for authority. The second reason is that it reveals the machinations of the state that enable the mindless violence of, for example, semi-random shootings. The Glanton gang would not be terrorizing this courtyard were it not for Governor Trias's ambition to cleanse his territory of Apache. Moreover, the contractual nature of the bounty-hunting provides the men in the gang with a grotesque economic logic for their actions: they are being paid to kill. As Lauren Brown puts it in "Existing Without Consent," "the violence occasioned by the exceptionalist mythos and carried out by the gang is concealed by legal overwriting that accompanies this consolidation of the nation-state's power and authority" (81).

Yet, chickens and decanters are a pittance compared to the horrifying acts the gang will carry out thereafter, each subsequent act of violence more difficult to witness than the last. What is more, the gang's barbarity quickly escalates, and the motivations behind their actions become murkier, as the men violently and mercilessly slaughter not only all the Apaches they encounter, but any dark-skinned soul who has the misfortune of crossing their path. With each turn of the page, the reader is thus forced to become familiar with rape, genocide, infanticide, disembowelment, torture, and sundry acts of savage murder. The villainy of these subsequent acts of violence upon innocents, which is to say upon people who do not belong to the targeted

Apache tribes as well as upon animals, exceeds the terms of their contracts — in other words, it is surplus violence. Their indulgence in bacchanalian barbarity does not contribute to the original purpose of accumulating capital; it is but violence for the sake of violence. In this regard, the Glanton gang's violent demeanour recalls that of O'Connor's Misfit from "A Good Man is Hard to Find" when he declares, shortly before killing the grandmother, that there's "no pleasure but meanness." Indeed, the Misfit's uncanny charm and oratorical skills are traits shared by the judge, arguably the most dangerous of the men in the gang. Yet, unlike the judge, who reasserts his lust for grotesque violence upon the kid at the end of the novel, the Misfit seems to relent on his position when, after dispatching the last of the unfortunate family of travelers, he concludes that "it's no real pleasure in life" (*CW* 153). Despite his claims to the contrary, the Misfit's violence upon the family is entirely practical: he is on the run and cannot afford the risk of witnesses reporting his whereabouts to the authorities. In contrast, the judge's senseless killing of puppies in chapter 14, which mirrors the murder of young Mexican girl in chapter 16, serves no other purpose than to satiate some grotesque appetite for violence.

Our reactions to such acts of subjective violence are strongest only because they are the most visible of what Žižek identifies, in *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, as the three forms of violence, which include two objective forms: symbolic and systemic. The first, symbolic violence, is embodied in language and its application of definitions and meaning. It is the second form, however, which is of more interest to the present argument: systemic violence, or what Žižek terms as "the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems" (2). Yet, one cannot observe subjective and objective violence from the same standpoint since the former is experienced in relation to a moment of non-violence, or a normal state, while the latter sustains this same normal state and is therefore invisible. It is only

by emphasizing the analysis of this invisible violence that we can in turn understand what at first sight appears as random, irrational outbursts of subjective violence.

The crux of Žižek's argument is that the self-enhancing circulation of commodities is not the result of the antagonisms of "real life," but rather, it is the self-reproducing capacity of capital itself that maintains the system and produces the real-life developments and catastrophes that ensue**.** Glanton and his gang are hired guns, after all, contracted by a politician to eradicate the Texas-Mexican borderlands of the intrusive Apache. The inherent racism of the job they must carry out, I argue, is incidental, i.e., incidental to the national project. At the outset of their hiring, Glanton and his men are first and foremost interested in the accumulation of capital, as made evident by their collecting as bounty any dark-haired scalp that has the misfortune of crossing their path, whether Aboriginal or Mexican. However, after having accepted payment from Governor Trias for the delivery of 128 scalps and 8 severed heads, the marauders, in the haze of a Dionysian feast held in their honour, double-cross their employer and overtake his village. Trias finds himself powerless in the wake of marauders' celebrations and watches "like the sorcerer's apprentice who could indeed provoke the imp to do his will but could in no way make him cease again" (*BM* 171). As food and drink run out, violence erupts and Glanton's men kill and scalp thirty-six of the patrons they had previously been hired to protect. Having no other prospects, they move on and continue like this, plaguing village after village, collecting and consuming all that they can. By the close of the chapter, the men have negotiated a new contract with the governor of Sonora, and two weeks later, once again betray the terms of their agreement and massacre a Sonoran town. The men know that despite the recent conclusion of the Mexican-American war, there is high demand for dark-haired scalps and thus they operate their trade within the borderlands and collect bounty with total indifference for the consequences. They

drift, consume, and adapt. But while the riders are gruesome, it is the avarice of the Governors who have hired them that has implicitly established the violent nature of the marketplace**.**

Herein is the aforementioned type of objective-systemic violence, which is to say violence which is not attributed to any one person with selfish or evil intentions, but is instead anonymous and spectral. Though the individual acts of subjective violence are indeed committed by identifiable agents, that is, the various members of the Glanton gang, they are but expressions of an objective-systemic violence, state-sanctioned bounty-hunting, which fosters the violent climate. Žižek compares this distinction to the Lacanian difference between reality and the Real, where "reality" is the day-to-day interactions of people involved in productive processes, and the Real is the persevering logic of capital that determines social reality. Rather than attempt to remedy the "real problems of real people" we must instead examine the devious spectrality of the Real. Such is how we should approach *Blood Meridian*: by resisting the "fascinating lure" of the horrific violence, epitomized by the character of the judge, and focusing instead on the conditions that generate the hiring of the Glanton gang in the first place.

Trauma Theory

In her essay entitled "Through a Trauma Theory Lens: McCarthy's Violence Reconsidered," Christine Shearer-Cremean advocates for an application of trauma theory to *Blood Meridian* in order to reframe the epistemological foundations of the violent reality its narrative reconstructs. Shearer-Cremean's method is informed by Judith Herman's work in her book *Trauma and Recovery*, which provides analytical tools that help develop an understanding of the perspective of survivors of war and violence in order to make "meaning from such experiences in order to heal" (57). Shearer-Cremean's exploration of the boundary between trauma theory and literature

allows her to distinguish violence from trauma so as to separate the act of violence from its psychological effects. As a result, her reading focuses on the emotional trauma of McCarthy's characters rather than on the acts of violence they have committed or have suffered. Reframing our reading in such a way, she argues, impels us to examine our own humanity, as well as that of society as a whole. As Herman writes,

> The knowledge of horrible events periodically intrudes into public awareness, but is rarely retained for long. Denial, repression, and disassociation operate on a social as well as individual level. The study of psychological trauma has an underground history. Like traumatized people, we have been cut off from the knowledge of our past. Like traumatized people, we need to understand the past in order to reclaim the present and the future. Therefore, an understanding of psychological trauma begins with rediscovering history. (qtd. in Shearer-Cremean 58)

Cathy Caruth offers a very similar observation in "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History" where she argues that encounters with trauma, both experienced and observed, obfuscate any straightforward references to history. "Through the notion of trauma," she writes, "we can understand that a re-thinking of reference is not aimed at eliminating history, but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, of precisely permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not" (182). Caruth concludes that history is thus the means by which our traumas are linked. The impulse of some literary critics to reject the details of the history that *Blood Meridian* represents, then, is a rejection of the trauma both experienced and observed.

While the day-to-day details of the injustice committed by settler cultures upon Aboriginal peoples over the course of the last four hundred years are not common knowledge, is

it not safe to assume that there is a general concession within contemporary North American society, at the very least among the educated class, a class which includes Winchell, that colonizers and pioneers, to put it lightly, took advantage of Aboriginal peoples? The issue here is that Winchell's reaction to the trauma represented in the successive scenes of often senseless and brutal violence is indifference rather than, say, one of suspicion or analytic inquiry. This attitude of boredom differs from the dispassionate approach or sideways glance at violence I invoke above in that it avoids, or as Žižek would say, disavows a theoretical questioning of what causes the violence. Such a position leads us to question his zero-level outlook, the attitude that he fosters on a day-to-day basis towards the world in which he lives.

My aim is not to attack Winchell personally. I wish instead to address a problem that Herman describes as a denial, repression, and disassociation that operates on both social and individual levels with regards to the knowledge of horrible events, whether ongoing, recent, or long past. In the case of the events that *Blood Meridian* describes, it could be argued that the history it reconstructs is both too distant and too cruel for readers to fully comprehend. Yet, Shearer-Cremean adds that when faced with such a reality, readers are forbidden from remaining morally neutral. We are here presented with a kind of disjunction, an area of uncertainty where the events are too horrific for a reader to fully understand and accept, yet cruel enough to solicit a moral engagement or reaction. The reader, then, vicariously witnesses and experiences the trauma and is thereby forced into a position of discomfort that invites not a superficial sense of moral outrage, but a patient critical analysis of both the events portrayed and one's own uncomfortable and uncertain reaction to them. Trauma studies shift the reader's analysis, as Shearer-Cremean writes, "from the violent act itself to human reaction and psychological consequences occurring as its result" (58). Shearer-Cremean's use of trauma theory dictates that

readers, as vicarious witnesses to the trauma, resist making general interpretations of the traumatic experiences of others, given that an analysis of this type would impose a language and structure that would minimize the survivor's needs to construct their own meaning from their traumatic experiences. We might understand such an imposition of language as a form of what Žižek refers to as symbolic violence, but I will return to this below when I discuss the Christian, or Abrahamic, language that defines concepts of law and property rights in the 19th Century United States. Žižek offers a similar warning as Shearer-Cremean with regards to making general interpretations of violence when he discusses the power of horrific events to prevent us from clear thinking and argues that the only appropriate approach is "one which permits variations on violence kept at a distance out of respect towards its victims" (4). Shearer-Cremean notes, and I agree with her to a point, that the tendency to impose our own interpretations of the traumatic experiences of another might help to explain why McCarthy generally avoids writing about what his characters think or feel. By thus limiting narrative access to, in the case of *Blood Meridian,* historical reconstructions, readers are able to form their own understanding without the interference of the narrator. "From this perspective," she explains, "readers are as close to history as they can be" (58). To summarize Shearer-Cremean's argument, readers vicariously experience the trauma portrayed in the novel, but given the limited narrative access to the thoughts or feelings of the characters, the writer avoids the symbolic violence of imposing an interpretation of the victim's trauma, and thus positions the reader as close to the historical reconstructions as possible. Such an approach provides the tools for a critical analysis of not only the events but, more importantly, the conditions that permit such events to occur. Unfortunately, none of this adequately explains, or even excuses, the nagging problem of Winchell's boredom.

Culture of Impunity

I wish to offer an indirect explanation for such a banal reaction, which stems from what James A. Tyner terms, in *War, Violence, and Population: Making the Body Count,* a "culture of impunity." Tyner develops this notion as he explores the violence of exclusionary practices that exert power and discipline over populations. Essential to his argument is a re-theorization of population geography that demands an engagement with the body. He writes:

> Through our daily activities we encounter other peoples and other places; our thoughts and actions are influenced by these encounters. Concurrently, however, our presence, our interactions, likewise reflect back upon those spaces. Just as we are transformed through our daily activities, so too are the spaces that we inhabit transformed. In short, we produce and are produced by space just as we produce and are produced by discourse. (33-34)

The crux of Tyner's argument is that the manner in which spaces are used and defined are never separate from the contestations over bodies and populations. We hear echoes here of what Žižek defines as systemic violence through the implementing and enforcing of regulations for use of, and access to, certain types of spaces, which in turn represent the agenda of the ruling class. Our understanding of the representation of space is developed through a process of socialization that naturalizes and normalizes divisions of space, which ultimately exclude certain groups in favour of others. Yet, such groups are only defined in relation to other groups, which in turn leads to the inevitable process of marginalization. While concerns about rights and fairness determine our conduct towards others, not all social groups are privy to the same applications of justice, a point which I will further elaborate below when I explore the context of the treatment of Native American and Mexican peoples in the nineteenth century by white European Americans. By excluding certain groups from the scope of justice, we deem them as unworthy of the privileges

of which other groups may take advantage, and view these lesser people as disposable, exploitable, or irrelevant. Where Žižek defines this process as objective systemic violence, Tyner, via Susan Opotow, refers to it as structural violence, as compared to direct violence, which is understood to be immediate, physical, visible actions performed by and upon particular people — or, as defined above, subjective violence. Structural violence, which is much more encompassing, manifests itself in the form of social and economic inequality, involving, for example, the limiting of access to resources and social care upon which racial minorities and the working class often depend. As Tyner writes, referring to the work of Iris Young, a "whole category of people may be expelled from useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation and even extermination" (35). Both subjective violence and objective (or structural) violence are thus justified through the socialization and normalization of specific representations of difference between bodies in space.

Blood Meridian reveals the evils of American territorial expansion in the 19th century, from the systematic eradication of Aboriginal peoples from the frontier, to the noxious violence towards Mexicans in the wake of the Mexican-American war. The objections from critics such as Josyph that McCarthy's nihilist tone lacks a moral centre, paired with Winchell's dissatisfaction with McCarthy's narrative methods, suggest that their readings fail to recognize that the novel's strength is the manner in which it uses surplus violence to draw attention to the imperialist drive to commodify land, resources, and bodies — in short, the imperial history and the sociopolitical telos of the United States. McCarthy makes his point particularly clear in the novel's epilogue which describes a man walking across the barren landscape digging a series of holes, presumably in which will be placed fence posts for the demarcation of property lines or state limits or the like. With the herds of buffalo and packs of wolves (as described in McCarthy's *The Crossing*

(1994)) eradicated, the Aboriginal populations controlled and suppressed, and the Pacific coast claimed as land belonging to the United States of America, the spirit of appropriation disguised as progress is maintained in the mindless yet systematic action of physically dividing the land. The image of "the gatherers of bones and those who do not gather" (337) is especially haunting as it evokes, on the one hand, the compulsive need of the gatherers to clear the land for commodification fuelled by the inexorable logic of capital, and on the other, the spectre-like quality of those stragglers, possibly surviving Aboriginals, or simply survivors of the deadly frontier, who wander the plains abjectly. One gets the sense that the typically mythologized American frontier has, in McCarthy's estimation, died before even witnessing the turn of the twentieth century and entering the period of what is widely believed to be the country's ascension to greatness.

Rick Wallach's reading of the novel in "Judge Holden, *Blood Meridian*'s Evil Archon," supports this argument. Wallach posits that the notion of the American dream that drives collective social being has in fact "been a nightmare of genocidal appropriation involving the effacement of oral cultures" (135). "It is doubtful," Wallach laments, "whether any society, having chosen to pretend to a Christian ethos, could sustain the crushing burden of guilt such behaviour must entail without inscribing delusional histories to censor and repress its racist dream" (135). Wallach's point about the fallacy of the American dream and the "crushing burden of guilt" returns me to my previous argument regarding the link between Winchell's problematic boredom and the notion of 'cultural impunity'. In discussing the moral exclusionary practices of certain social groups towards others, Tyner refers to the individual's responsibility for, and response to, such practices, suggesting that one's engagement, or lack thereof, may include unawareness, active ignoring, facilitating, executing or devising moral exclusion. While the

notion of impunity, broadly speaking, refers to the exemption from accountability or punishment for the agent of violence, "cultural impunity" is institutionalized and systemic, where crimes against humanity, for example, can go unpunished and obliterated from the official historical record by amnesties or pardons, or even simply indifference. Tyner turns to Joseph Nevins who writes that "social distance and geographic distance combine to make the plight of others more peripheral and, by extension, less relevant" (qtd. on 40). An absence of engagement operates within, and simultaneously produces, a culture of impunity, which once established, legitimizes non-action. As Tyner writes,

> [this] occurs when impunity is institutionalized and widespread, when torture, crimes against humanity, and mass murder are overtly or tacitly condoned and unpunished as a result of amnesties, pardons, indifferences, or simply looking the other way. It is a culture of impunity that permits mass violence and genocide to continue unabated; it is a culture of impunity that allows other governments and global citizens to ignore — and consequently, condone — the continuation of direct and structural violence in other places. (40)

In the case of Winchell's reaction to *Blood Meridian*, we might say that he is disaffected — he literally experiences, at least in his written account, no affect — possibly due to the temporal distance of the events portrayed in the novel. His non-reaction is exemplified in the cynical detachment he sustains towards the genocidal events of the novel. Again, we must differentiate what Žižek refers to as a dispassionate, sideways glance at violence, and the reaction of boredom Winchell expresses. Rather, we might view Winchell's position as a violent exclusionary gesture of refusing to see, or to acknowledge, that the frontier was a horrible place and the pioneers of his country were violent bigots. Žižek terms this gesture of active forgetting *fetishistic*

disavowal: "'I know, but I don't want to know that I know, so I don't know.' I know it, but I refuse to fully assume the consequences of this knowledge, so that I can continue acting as if I don't know it" (53). The violence portrayed in *Blood Meridian*, I argue, serves to counter such gestures of active forgetting, and reveals to readers the brutal reality of American history in order to break the spell of the disavowal necessitated to carry on believing and espousing manifest destiny. Mark Eaton makes a similar argument in "Dis(re)membered Bodies: Cormac McCarthy's Border Fiction": "Real violence in the borderlands is followed by the virtual violence of a sort of willed forgetting. What gets forgotten are not only the violent acts themselves but also the bodies left for dead" (159). Consequently, it is essential to keep in mind the context in which the novel was written, which is the aftermath of the horrific conflict in Vietnam and, as Ciaran Dowd notes in "Cormac McCarthy's Cultural and Historical Contexts," during the Reagan administration's escalation of American intervention elsewhere in the world:

> A reading of the novel in the context of US foreign policy during the Reagan years is justifiable insofar as it redresses a critical overemphasis on the novel's historical roots in the nineteenth century, which distances the contemporary reader from the novel's violence by the implicit suggestion that the passage of time confines that bloodshed to the past, safely shunted off from the reader's immediate environs. (77-78)

The novel therefore bears witness not only to the disavowed history of the frontier, and to the more recent violence of the American presence in Vietnam that, at the time of the novel's writing, was already in the process of being mythologized, but to the renewal and repetition of the violence begotten by American imperialism.

Practices of Dehumanization

In *Murder State: California's Native American Genocide*, Brendan C. Lindsay explores in detail the dangers of mythologizing a national history that glorifies the pioneers and their destruction of Native American peoples, which in turn consolidated the ideology of white racial superiority over the 'savages,' while espousing, and indeed using as justification, the basic tenets of Christianity and a republican government. Lindsay cites the role of historians in the 1840s and 1850s in moulding their accounts of history to reflect the popular mood of the demand of American citizens to expand the western frontier to California. Motivated by an idealized understanding of the past, as well as specific concepts of how they viewed their place in human history, Americans of the nineteenth century wished to continue in the footsteps of their ancestors and continue to settle and colonize the land in order to prove to themselves, and to history, that they were of the same mold as the pioneers before them. Take, for instance, the story of the 1676 Bacon Rebellion which was incited on pretense of avenging Indian atrocities, yet which in reality had for its main goal to disregard treaties with First Nations tribes in order to take possession of their land under the belief that they were not making proper use of it, failing to exploit it to its full agricultural potential. We already see the dark spectre of capitalist ideology at work here, the self-engendering monster operating in total disregard of human and environmental concerns. Euro-Americans, faced with an indigenous culture and practices of ownership at odds with its own, saw no other solution but to pragmatically exterminate, physically and through practices of moral exclusion, Native American peoples in order to, as Lindsay notes, “clear the way for the full exploitation of the land and resources” (45).

The writings of prominent nineteenth-century American historians, such as George Bancroft or D.G.W. Leavitt, were imperative for the propagation of the belief that it was the

divinely directed fate of Christians to conquer the New World and, as Lindsay writes, "[to invoke] the dominion of Christians over an imperfect state of nature to justify their actions" (47). Bancroft, for instance, wrote that before the arrival of the Euro-American settlers on the continent "the whole territory was unproductive waste. Throughout its wide extent the arts had not erected a monument. Its only inhabitants were a few scattered tribes of feeble barbarians, destitute of commerce and of political connection" (cited in Lindsay 48). Lindsay notes that such beliefs founded in religion also informed legal definitions, which ultimately led to the conviction that Euro-Americans in fact held legal title to the land they occupied, given that non-Christian non-whites were not viewed as 'legal' occupants. As such, settlers, soldiers, and miners held jurisdiction for killing infants, children, and women, raping young girls, executing prisoners without trial, and murdering whole groups of people at a time to avenge the loss of livestock. The dehumanization of Aboriginal peoples stigmatized them as alien in their own land, facilitating practices of exclusion, oppression, discrimination, and violence. To return to Tyner, once dehumanized, "one's body possesses no meaning. It is a waste, and its removal is a matter of sanitation. There is no moral or emphatic context through which the perpetrator can relate to the victim" (37).

I put forth that *Blood Meridian*, as critical epic, reckons with such practices of dehumanization. Therefore, the violence with which the novel is primarily concerned is ultimately a systemic and symbolic objective violence, rather than the clearly identifiable acts of subjective violence that make up so much of the narrative. Though it is directed at Mexicans more so than Native Americans, we need to look no further than the speech Captain White gives to the kid upon drafting him to his militia, which, in its significance, requires being cited at some length:

> We fought for it. Lost friends and brothers down there. And then by God if we didn't give it back. Back to a bunch of barbarians that even the most biased in their favor will admit have no least notion in God's earth of honor or justice or the meaning of a republican government. [...] Given up their crops and livestock. Mines shut down. Whole villages abandoned. [...] What we are dealing with, he said, 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. [...] I don't think there's any question that ultimately Sonora will become a United States territory, Guaymas a U.S. Port. Americans will be able to get to California without having to pass through our benighted sister republic and our citizens will be protected at last from the notorious packs of cutthroats presently infesting the routes which they are obliged to take. [...] We are to be the instruments of liberation in a dark and troubled land. (*BM* 33-34)

Captain White has been wholly absorbed into the systemic, objective violence of the ideology of Manifest Destiny. He believes that his mission is one of liberation in a dark and troubled land. We see evidence here of Tyner's concept of moral exclusion: the "being" of the Mexicans is a socio-symbolic being. When they are treated by Euro-Americans as inferior, Žižek argues, it "does indeed make them inferior at the level of their socio-symbolic identity. In other words, the white racist ideology exerts a performative efficiency" (72). It is not simply an interpretation of what Mexicans, or Natives, or Black Americans are, but an interpretation that determines the very being and social existence of the interpreted subjects, enacting a symbolic objective violence. The Mexicans, who may stand in for any race that is not white, are dehumanized because of their inability to properly commodify the land, which runs counter to the Eurocentric

logic of capital. Finally, their concepts of property and government differ from those of Captain White, and so by default, they must be eradicated and their land must be claimed. The acts of subjective violence are thus the final step, the visible result of a culture and ideology that generate, and are generated by, the fundamental systemic violence of aggressive territorial expansion and predatory capitalism. Captain White's clash with Mexican (and First Nations) ideology and way of life is, in a sense, a precursor for the Western capitalist war against the divergent ideology of Soviet communism some 80 years later, the apex of which was occurring while McCarthy composed *Blood Meridian*.

The American War in Vietnam Reflected in *Blood Meridian's* Frontier Violence

On the morning of March 16, 1968, Charlie Company of the Eleventh Infantry Brigade of the United States Army entered the My Lai hamlet of Son My village with the explicit orders to eradicate the area of the vicious and spectre-like Viet Cong — that is, soldiers of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam. The soldiers had been in the field for 40 days without relief and the weeks preceding the offensive had been particularly deadly and demoralizing for Charlie Company.[53] Tensions were high within the company and the men were eager to enact some measure of revenge. Thus, within the four hours of warfare needed to sweep the area, including a brief break for lunch, American soldiers had claimed upwards of 507 casualties.[54] The problem,

---

[53] From Seymour M. Hersh's November 25, 1969 article "Ex-GI Tells of Killing Civilians at Pinkville": "The company had been in the field for 40 days without relief before the Pinkville incident on March 16, and had lost a number of men in mine accidents. Hostility to the Vietnamese was high in the company, Meadlo said." (*RV* 24).

[54] As reported by the *New York Times* on November 16, 1969, survivors of the incident claim as many as 567 Vietnamese were killed. See: https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/my-lai-charlie-company-and-massacre/

however, is that not even one of said casualties were soldiers of the Viet Cong; rather, the body count was comprised entirely of children, women, and elderly civilians.

The horror of the My Lai massacre was first publicly reported by investigative journalist Seymour M. Hersh nearly 20 months later in the November 13, 1969 edition of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*:

> The Army is completing an investigation of charges that [Lt. William Calley Jr.] deliberately murdered at least 109 Vietnamese civilians in a search-and-destroy mission in March 1968 in a Viet Cong stronghold known as "Pinkville." Calley has formally been charged with six specifications of mass murder. (*RV* 13)

Yet, while the American public had been progressively growing disillusioned with their government's involvement in the war, a poll conducted by *The Wall Street Journal* a few weeks after Hersh's first article on the destruction of My Lai revealed that most Americans did not believe a massacre had actually taken place.[55] This public disavowal would be short-lived, however, as photographs taken by military combat photographer Ronald Haeberle would confirm the accusations levied upon Charlie Company. A small selection of Haeberle's photographs first appeared in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, and within weeks several more were published in *Life* (December 5, 1969), organized to mimic cinematic montage. Before long, the images had circulated worldwide, and American citizens, who were already experiencing a crisis of national faith, became even more disillusioned and disgraced.

The atrocities of the war in Vietnam, witnessed in graphic detail by American civilians via the unprecedented access to television, newspapers, and magazines, had a profound effect on American consciousness and self-perception. Moreover, Christian G. Appy argues in *American*

---

[55] From "Charlie Company and the Massacre" (https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/my-lai-charlie-company-and-massacre/)

Reckoning: The Vietnam War and our National Identity, that no event in American history, aside, perhaps, from the Civil War, has required as much critical self-analysis than the U.S. aggression in Vietnam. As Appy indicates, the reasons for American disillusionment were manifold:

> The false pretexts used to justify our intervention, the indiscriminate brutality of our warfare, the stubborn refusal of elected leaders to withdraw despite public opposition, and the stunning failure to achieve our objectives — these harrowing realities provoked a profound national identity crisis, and American reckoning. (*American Reckoning* x)

U.S. involvement in the war in Vietnam therefore invalidated the fundamental principle of American national identity, that is, the conviction that the United States is an influential source of justice and goodness in the world, "superior not only in its military and economic power, but in the quality of its government and institutions, the character and morality of its people, and its way of life" (Appy xi-xii). The revelations from the reports on the My Lai massacre served only to exacerbate this invalidation, for the actions of the American soldiers were not relegated exclusively to the unjustified killing of civilians. As Appy details,

> They exercised every imaginable form of barbarism. GIs threw hand grenades into homes and underground shelters. They herded large groups of people together and forced them to lie on roads or in drainage ditches, where they were executed en masse with automatic rifles. Other civilians were shot individually. Some Vietnamese were killed only after being clubbed, tortured, stabbed, and raped. Some GIs mutilated their victims after killing them. It was not a spontaneous spasm of violence. (146)

In an interview with Hersh, Sgt. Michael Bernhardt concludes that his fellow soldiers in the Eleventh Infantry Brigade had been conditioned to behave so barbarously. "The treatment was lousy," he admits. "We were always out in the bushes. I think they were expecting us to run into

resistance at Pinkville and also expecting them (the Viet Cong) to use the people as hostages" (*RV* 19). Sgt. Bernhardt further explains that hatred for the Vietnamese had reached a boiling point in the weeks before the My Lai massacre due to casualties suffered in a minefield. Paul Meadlo, the first soldier to confess his complicity in the massacre, corroborates Sgt. Bernhardt's assertion, revealing to Hersh that commanding officers Calley and Medina had told the soldiers before entering the hamlet that "if we ever shoot any civilians, we should go ahead and plant a hand grenade on them" (27). "Meadlo is not sure," writes Hersh, "but he thinks the feel of death came quickly to the company once it got to Vietnam. 'We were cautious at first, but as soon as the first man was killed, a new feeling came through the company… almost as if we all knew there was going to be a lot more killing'" (27). Thus, the dangerous and uncertain conditions of the battlefield combined with the dehumanization of the Vietnamese[56] and the pressure from superiors to amass kill counts as a measure of success and progress in the war[57] all contributed to the violation of the American rules of engagement in war by the soldiers in Charlie Company. Yet, while those who were guilty of committing the war crimes, as well as those who participated in the cover-up, went largely unpunished, the American public was nevertheless forced to take reckoning of, on the one hand, their government's actions, and on the other, their national identity. Though the United States judicial system may have done its best to sweep the horrific details of the American presence in Vietnam under the rug, many civilians, such as Cormac McCarthy, could not so easily disavow the actions of their countrymen. I therefore argue that the

[56] From Hersh's November 13, 1969 article: "A third officer, also familiar with the case said: 'There's this question—I think anyone who goes to (Viet) Nam asks it. What's a civilian? Someone who works for us at day and puts on Viet Cong pajamas at night?'" (15-16).
[57] From *American Reckoning*: "The body count was the paramount measure of success. Every month, General Westmoreland required a massive collection of statistical data from all units, and no number was more important than the body count. Commanders reporting low body counts were routinely punished with poor fitness reports and passed over for promotion. Careers were on the line. High body counts, on the other hand, led to medals, rapid promotion, and plum assignments" (169).

violence of *Blood Meridian* mirrors the violence of the American war in Vietnam, the kid and the Glanton gang avatars of the American soldiers whose brutality and loss of morality were substantiated and magnified by the exposure of the My Lai massacre.

In "*Blood Meridian* and the Poetics of Violence," Steven Frye points to two films that establish, in part, the aesthetic that he believes inform the shocking portrayal of brutality in *Blood Meridian*: Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*[58] (1969) and Ralph Nelson's *Soldier Blue*[59] (1970), both of which represent a crisis in American national self-perception in the wake of the Vietnam War and, in the case of *Soldier Blue*, of the My Lai Massacre. Peckinpah openly disclosed that *The Wild Bunch* was in part an allegory of the violence in Vietnam, which was witnessed by the general public in more graphic detail than any previous conflict, because of the advent and accessibility of television. He was particularly interested in how the camera might be used to express a sense of actuality rather than produce mimetic representations. The aesthetic technique and allegorical suggestion of the final battle scene in *The Wild Bunch* is of particular interest here: the outlaws have resolved to rescue a friend from a corrupt Mexican general and his army, and as the battle unfolds, quick close-up shots intercut with wide-angle images of the soldiers and the townspeople fighting the bunch. Normal motion combines with slow motion and there is scarcely any sound besides gunfire. Peckinpah's objective was to create images that both mirrored the subjective experience of the combatants as well as portrayed violence in such a way

---

[58] *The Wild Bunch* tells the story of an aging group of outlaws who struggle to adapt to the rapidly changing world of the 20th century. Leader of the bunch, Pyke Bishop, unites the men for a final heist: a train robbery. After a series of double-crosses, however, all are ultimately killed, except for Bishop's former partner and chief antagonist, Deke Thorton, who rides off to join the Mexican Revolution.

[59] *Soldier Blue* is a retelling of the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864. The plot follows Cresta Lee and Private Honus Grant, the sole survivors of a Cheyenne attack on their travel party, as they attempt to travel to safety at Fort Reunion. The film culminates with brutal retaliatory attack by the Calvary upon the Cheyenne.

that they intensified the viewer's sense of horror. Frye thus links this scene to *Blood Meridian*'s Yuma massacre, which concludes the action of the narrative before the kid becomes the man:

> They swarmed up the hill toward the fortifications where the Americans lay sleeping and some were mounted and some afoot and all of them armed with bows and clubs and their faces blackened or pale with fard and their hair bound up in clay. The first quarters they entered were Lincoln's. When they emerged a few minutes later one of them carried the doctor's dripping head by the hair and others were dragging behind them the doctor's dog, bound at the muzzle, jerking and bucking across the dry clay of the concourse. They entered a wickiup of willowpoles and canvas and slew Gun and Wilson and Henderson Smith each in turn as they reared up drunkenly and they moved on among the rude half walls in total silence glistening with paint and grease and blood among the bands of light where the risen sun now touched the higher ground. (*BM* 274)

McCarthy's portrayals of brutality are typically marked not only by the excess of the violence itself but by the excess of the language and form that he uses to construct said portrayals.[60] But, as Frye notes, with the Yuma massacre scene, McCarthy departs from his typical complex style of ornate language, metaphor, and the use of multiple senses. Instead, the Yuma massacre is predominantly described in simple visual terms, such as, for example, the portrayal of "the doctor's dripping head" or the Yumas "glistening with paint and grease and blood." What is more, the rhythm of the sentences is paced with parataxis and predominantly single syllable words, culminating in a terse yet poetic description of the events. McCarthy, like Peckinpah, is

[60] As Brian Evenson puts it in "Embodying Violence: The Case of Cormac McCarthy," *Blood Meridian's* narrative poetics, that is, the "shifting the speed of what the reader is reading, of moving back and forth between different registers of language, of employing the drumbeat of rhythm to enforce or undercut what is being said, of employing metaphor to make readers read something horrific to the end before they can flinch—is all a kind of violence to the reader, one that demands a palpable engagement with the text" (147).

attempting to portray the actuality of violence without drawing attention to himself as the author of said violence; that is, this focus is on the reality of the violence, rather than on the mimetic literary rendition of the violence.

Similarly, *Solider Blue* attempts to portray the actuality of violence by referring directly to the My Lai massacre. Frye writes that the Sand Creek Massacre scene at the end of the film involves a series of images that are edited to imitate the arrangement of the My Lai images in *Life*, and that most viewers at the time would have recognized the comparison. Soldiers murder children and rape and mutilate women directly in front of the camera's eye, and at the end, decapitated heads are displayed to the commanding officer. This scene mirrors the slaughter of the Gilenos in chapter twelve of *Blood Meridian*:

> When Glanton and his chiefs swung back through the village people were running out under the horses' hooves and the horses were plunging and some of the men were moving on foot among the huts with torches and dragging the victims out, slathered and dripping with blood, hacking at the dying and decapitating those who knelt for mercy. (*BM* 156)

The realism of the scene is qualified by a cinematic method that links image to action, with simple present participle verbs like "moving," "shrieking," and "running," used to heighten the reader's focus. Such aesthetic choices help to implant the horrific events in the subjective consciousness of the reader. Like the My Lai photos and the massacre in *Soldier Blue*, the selective presentation of images in the scene of the slaughter of the Gilenos is rendered more haunting by the lack of commentary, and thus heightens the excesses of violence through the "omission of a qualifying human consciousness" (Frye 115). In other words, by declining to condemn the actions and behaviour of his characters through the narration of the events, McCarthy's places the burden of making ethical considerations on the reader. This narrative

exclusion is meant to mirror the sober reporting on Vietnam in order to illicit from readers the sense of shame and responsibility that was felt by the American public as they discovered through news media the horror of their government's actions. So conceived, *Blood Meridian* is not simply a novel about American history, but rather, bears witness to American history. As Barcley Owens notes in his book *Cormac McCarthy's Western Novels*: "there is no progressive myth of good overcoming evil, no courageous men taming the west for civilization" (7). The notions of nobility and honour, crucial to the Western genre, as we find in Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, *Riders of the Purple Sage*, or Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove*, are absent in McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. Instead, readers are presented with what Tim O'Brien would call a true war story:

> A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever. There is no virtue. As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil. (*The Things They Carried* 65-66)

Reading through *Blood Meridian*'s "absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil" is not for the faint of heart, but then again, the act of bearing witness rarely is.

Part II

The kid: A Cursed Spectre Bears Witness

A close reading of the opening page of *Blood Meridian* supplies us with several hints of McCarthy's reluctance to accept the Enlightenment's conception of human perfectibility, beginning with the very first line: “See the child. He is pale and thin, he wears a thin and ragged linen shirt” (3). McCarthy introduces the novel’s protagonist by immediately invoking Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*, Epistle II: “Behold the child, by Nature's kindly law / Pleased with a rattle, tickled with a straw” (Pope 274-75). Notice that the commanding sound of “behold” is stripped down to a passive “see” and that the kid’s physical description is very ghostly, his thin white frame draped in thin linen. The child Pope describes, on the other hand, amuses itself with rattle and straw, and, as the stanza goes on to reveal, with age is eventually draped with scarfs, garter, and gold, symbols of distinction all. By comparison, the only symbols of distinction the kid will ever wear are his battle scars and Toadvine’s necklace of ears. *Blood Meridian’*s opening sentences are therefore an austere refutation of the philosophical optimism found in Pope’s poem. That being said, the poem’s chief argument does intersect with McCarthy’s stated ambitions for his novel — that is, where the poem argues that the “business of man [is] not to pry into God, but to study himself,”[61] the aim of *Blood Meridian* is likewise to study the nature, powers, and frailties of the ontological and epistemological questions that plague man. Yet, I contend that McCarthy’s response to Pope’s philosophical optimism is not merely, as Boguta-Marchel notes, ironic, but more accurately, critical insofar as the goal of critical analysis is to subject theories to rigorous and sometimes violent review in order to test their validity against said criticism (144).

---

[61] From Pope’s summary: “The business of Man not to pry into God, but to study himself. His Middle Nature; his powers and frailties, v. 1 to 18” (280).

As David Robert King notes in *Cormac McCarthy's Literary Evolution*, McCarthy explains in a letter to his editor, Albert Erskine, that the setting of the American frontier is really only incidental: "The truth is that the historical material is really — to me — little more than a framework upon which to hang a dramatic inquiry into the nature of destiny and history and the uses of reason and knowledge and the nature of evil and all these sorts of things which has [sic] plagued folks since there were folks" (82). The novel's treatment is not of its protagonist, for he is mostly a ghostly figure who chaperones readers through the novel's twenty-three chapters, but of the society to which that individual belongs and of which he is a spectre. In other words, the kid's narrative function is to bear witness to the violence portrayed in novel as it reckons with the problems that have "plagued folks since there were folks." He is, as Pope might say, the isthmus between the reader above and the beasts described in the novel. Much as Pope implores his readers to observe life and study the behaviours of nature to have the correct view of the universe, so are readers of *Blood Meridian* meant to observe through the kid's eyes every violent transgression in their quest to accept their own position in the Great Chain of Being:

> on this isthmus of a middle state,
> a being darkly wise, and rudely great:
> with too much knowledge for the sceptic side,
> with too much weakness for the stoic's pride,
> he hangs between; (Pope 281)

The kid, pale, filthy, and undernourished, with neither rattle to please him, nor straw with which to be tickled, is the antithesis to the Enlightenment's idea of the innocent child as the hope for civilized man. He is without psychological reflection, interiority, or subjectivity, driven only by "a taste for mindless violence" (*BM* 3), a fact that is verified on the next page when we discover that when he comes down from his room above a courtyard behind a tavern in New Orleans, it is to fight with the sailors like "some fairybook beast" (*BM* 4). But as Justin Evans notes, the kid's

absence of subjectivity is an important feature of the epic tradition whereby “characters are physical actors rather than subjective consciousnesses” (411). Given the absence of any kind of commentary or insight from either the narrator or the protagonist, the task of reckoning with the metaphysical problems that have plagued folks since there have been folks therefore falls on the reader.

McCarthy provides further evidence of the kid’s tenuous role in the narrative with an allusion to the Book of Joshua in the very same paragraph. The narrator reveals that the kid’s “folks are known for hewers of woods and drawers of water” (3), a reference to Joshua 9:23, which reads “Now therefore ye are cursed, and there shall none of you be freed from being bondmen, and hewers of wood and drawers of water for the house of God” (King James Bible). The passage relates Joshua’s discovery that the Gibeonites, disguised in ragged clothing, have snuck back into the Promised Land after having been banished by the command of God, and, what is more, have persuaded the Israelites to make a covenant with them, allowing the two peoples to share the land. The Gibeonites’ deception breaks God’s command to the Israelites, yet, bound by their oath to the disguised interlopers, Joshua, rather than condemn them to death and risk the wrath of God, curses them with interminable servitude.

There are two significant scriptural cross-references to bear in mind. The first is to Deuteronomy 29:11, Moses’s third of three sermons to the Israelites in the book:

> You are stationed here today all of you before the Lord your God, your heads, your tribes, your elders, and your overseers, every man of Israel. Your little ones, your wives, and your sojourner who is in the midst of your camps, *from the hewer of your wood to the drawer of your water*, for you to pass into the Covenant of the Lord your God […] (*Five Books of Moses*, Deut. 29:9-11)

Moses here calls to the different members of the tribe, listing them in order of importance, beginning with the leaders, and ending with the hewers of wood and drawers of waters, the servants of servants. Though the kid's father is in truth a schoolmaster who "lies in drink [and] quotes from poets whose names are now lost" (*BM* 3), he is nevertheless known as one such servant. Yet, the kid and his kin appear not to be literal slaves, or descendants thereof, for if they were, the narrative details would certainly reflect as much given the context of slavery in the United States. We must therefore extrapolate that the allusion to scripture infers some deeper vilification. And it is through this extrapolation that we examine the second scriptural cross-reference, that of Genesis 9:25.

This second allusion to the Old Testament, I argue, is critical to the novel's narrative arc because the genealogical connection that it suggests establishes that the misery that the kid will endure throughout his life, culminating in the narrative omission of his potential encounter with grace, has been foreordained. The correlation between the passage from the book of Joshua and that of Genesis is less overt than the correlation between Joshua and Deuteronomy. The connection is found not in a repeated verbiage**,** but rather in the genealogy of the Gibeonites, which Joshua references in 10:12[62] and again in 11:19,[63] and which we can verify against the Table of Nations in Genesis 10.[64] Scripture reveals that the pre-conquest Gibeonites were predominantly comprised of Hivites and, as Samuel writes in 21:2 of his second book,[65]

---

[62] "Then spake Joshua to the LORD in the day when the LORD delivered up the Amorites before the children of Israel, and he said in the sight of Israel, Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon; and thou, Moon, in the valley of Ajalon."
[63] "There was not a city that made peace with the children of Israel, save the Hivites the inhabitants of Gibeon: all *other* they took in battle."
[64] Genesis 10:15-19: "And Canaan begot Sidon, his firstborn, and Heth and the Jebusite and the Amorite and the Girgashite and the Hivite and the Archite and the Sinite and the Arvadite and the Zemarite and the Hamatite."
[65] As written in the second book of Samuel 21:2: "And the king called the Gibeonites, and said unto them; (now the Gibeonites *were* not of the children of Israel, but of the remnant of the Amorites; and the

Amorites, both clans kin of Canaan, son of Ham. The ancestral relation of the Gibeonites to Canaan is significant because of Canaan's curse. As punishment for his father's transgression, which is described only as "[seeing] his father's nakedness and [telling] his two brothers outside" (*The Five Books of Moses*, Gen. 9:14), Canaan is cursed by his grandfather Noah:

> And Noah woke from his wine and he knew what his youngest son had done to him. And he said,
>
> "Cursed be Canaan,
> the lowliest slave shall he be
> to his brothers."
>
> And he said,
>
> "Blessed be the Lord
> the God of Shem,
> unto them shall Canaan be slave.
> May God enlarge Japeth,
> may he dwell in the tents of Shem,
> unto them shall Canaan be slave." (*The Five Books of Moses*, Gen. 9:24-29)

There are two elements in this narrative that are unclear and that continue to be debated by scholars: first, the nature of Ham's transgression, and second, the reason Canaan is punished in place of his father. The only incriminating evidence of offense provided to readers is that Ham saw his father naked and then told his brothers about it, but, given the severity of the punishment levied upon Canaan, the suspiciously unnarrated transgression invites skeptical review.

Robert Altar posits, in *The Five Books of Moses*, that ancient audiences might have been familiar with the source material for the chapter, but that it must have "seemed to the monotheistic writer dangerous to spell out" (52). If such a context is accurate, readers must then rely on intertextual clues to fill in the blanks. And as John Sietze Bergsma and Scott Walker

---

children of Israel had sworn unto them: and Saul sought to slay them in his zeal to the children of Israel and Judah."

Hahn demonstrate in "Noah's Nakedness and the Curse on Canaan (Genesis 9:20-27)," the "literary artistry" and "the biblical intertextuality" of the Pentateuch suggests that there must be more to the story (27). Furthermore, the story of the curse of Ham is especially significant because it is the first entry in Genesis that deals with the national history of Israel. Given the nationalistic implications, it is not unreasonable to posit that the tale, as a national mythology, could have been reverse-engineered by the authors to retroactively justify the Israelite conquest and subjugation of the Canaanites. Whatever the case may be, we are left with three popular theories which have been argued for centuries: the first is that the offense is nothing more than voyeurism and that Ham's failure to not only look away but also to refrain from gossiping about it with his brothers, is what incites his father's ire. But, as Bergsma and Hahn note, voyeurism fails to account for "either the gravity of Ham's offense or the reason for the curse of Canaan [as it] requires the interpreter to assume the existence of a taboo against the accidental sight of a naked parent that is otherwise unattested in biblical or ancient Near Eastern literature" (27).

The second theory, traditionally rabbinic,[66] from as early as the classical Midrash, is that Ham castrates his father in an attempt to usurp him. The rationale for this interpretation is that since Ham has prevented Noah from the possibility of ever having a fourth son, the punishment must fall on Ham's fourth son, Canaan. This framework is interesting insofar as it is reminiscent of the Chronos-Uranus story, but, as Bergsma and Hahn again point out, it has no intertextual support in the Bible.

---

[66] Via Bersgma and Hahn: "For an extensive review of the rabbinic exegesis of this passage, see Baumgarten, who concludes that the rabbis developed the theory of castration as an explanation for features of the text ("Myth and Midrash,"55-71); thus, they are not transmitting an ancient tradition (contra Robert Graves and Raphael Ptai, Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966], 121-22). The relevant rabbinic texts areb. Sanh.70a;Gen.Rab.36, 7;Tanh.49-50; PirqeR. El.ch.23;Tg.Ps.-J.onGen9:24-25. The earliest reference to this theory is found in Theophilus of Antioch, Ad Autolycum 3, 19" (27-28).

The third, widely accepted[67] theory is that Ham sexually assaults his drunken father, again as a means to usurp him. As Altar notes, this reading is supported by the common interpretation of "to see the nakedness of" as "to copulate with."[68] Read against Leviticus,[69] "to see the nakedness" becomes "to uncover nakedness," or, as Alter translates it,

> And a man who takes his sister, his father's daughter or his mother's daughter, and sees her nakedness and she sees his nakedness, it is vileness, and they shall be cut off before the eyes of their kinfolk. *His sister's nakedness he has laid bare*. (Lev. 20:17-18)

The passive act of seeing shifts to the transgressive act of the gaze[70] as both verbs, to uncover and to lay bare, evoke an active engagement with the other.[71] Alter also explains that the verb "takes" from "and a man who takes his sister" is "an ellipsis for "takes as wife," but [the verse's] choice of the term may be dictated by the way it stresses the male's taking the initiative" (633). Note, moreover, that this chapter of Leviticus in general concerns the transgressions of incest, bestiality, and general moral depravity, listing the sins and implications for each. The biblical intertextuality thus suggests that Ham's transgression against Noah had to have been assertive,

---

[67] Via Bergsma and Hahn: "One of the more thorough defenses of this position is by Robert Gagnon in his recently published *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, but other proponents include Anthony Phillips, Devorah Steinmetz, Martti Nissinen, Donald J. Wold, Seth Daniel Kunin, and O. Palmer Robertson.

[68] From Alter's *The Five Books of Moses*: "It is noteworthy that the Hebrews associated the Canaanites with lasciviousness (see, for example, the rape Dinah, Genesis 34). Lot's daughters, of course, take advantage of his drunkenness to have sex with him" (52-53).

[69] The King James version of Leviticus 20:17: "And if a man shall take his sister, his father's daughter, or his mother's daughter, and see her nakedness, and she see his nakedness; it *is* a wicked thing; and they shall be cut off in the sight of their people: he hath uncovered his sister's nakedness; he shall bear his iniquity."

[70] From Dylan Evans's *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*: "Lacan seperates the gaze with the act of looking; the gaze becomes the object of the act of looking, or, to be more precise, the object of the scopic drive. The gaze is therefore no longer on the side of the subject; it is the gaze of the other" (73).

[71] From Evans's *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*: "The little other is the other who is not really other, but a reflection and projection of the Ego. He is simultaneously the counterpart and the specular image" (135).

deliberate, and gravely offensive. Noah knows as soon as he wakes from his drunken stupor "what his youngest son had done to him" (52), without first conferring with his other sons, to whom Ham has already admitted his crimes. Noah's certainty suggests that he has been violated, that he knows what his son has done because he can feel it. This theory is enticing, but as Borgsma and Hahn prove, there is no intertextual precedent for a usurping son committing paternal rape. What is more, this theory does not account for Canaan's punishment in place of his father.

The critics thus provide a fourth, related theory: Ham has indeed committed incest, but with his father's wife, and not with Noah himself. Their theory rests on an alternate reading of the phrase "the nakedness of your father," as they demonstrate that all other relevant texts use "to uncover nakedness" in the context of heterosexual intercourse.[72] Moreover, the critics demonstrate that there is much more textual support for heterosexual incest than there is for homosexual incest.[73] Referring again to Leviticus, they show that "the nakedness of the father" therefore refers to "the nakedness of the mother":

> No man of you shall come near any of his own flesh to lay bare nakedness. I am the Lord. Your father's nakedness, which is your mother's nakedness, you shall not lay bare. She is your mother; you shall not lay bare her nakedness. The nakedness of your father's wife you shall not lay bare. It is your father's nakedness. (*The Five Books of Moses*, Lev. 18:6-9)

[72] "Likewise, Lev. 18:14, 16; 20:11, 30, 21 all describe a woman's nakedness as the nakedness of her husband. The same logic is at work in Deut. 23:1 and 27:20, which describe intercourse with one's father's wife as "uncovering the father's skirt"" (34).

[73] From Borgsma and Hahn: "Thus, Nissinen and Gagnon maybe correct in viewing Ham's transgressive sexual act as an attempt to usurp Noah's patriarchal authority. However, they identify Ham's act as the violation of Noah himself, and there is no precedent in biblical or ancient Near Eastern documents for paternal rape as a means of usurping a father's position" (37).

Ham's crimes are thus intrusion, theft of private property, and dishonouring his father. The rape of his father's wife, if indeed he raped her, is a tertiary concern. As Alter writes, "in the patriarchal order her sexuality "belongs" to him—she is taboo" (621). As such, mother-son incest is considered a much more heinous crime than, for example, father-daughter incest because it is viewed as an attempt to supplant the father's authority,[74] particularly if the son succeeds in impregnating his mother. This fourth theory also accounts for why Noah curses Canaan instead of Ham, the child presumably the product of a forbidden union. Bergsma and Hahn's premise is quite compelling, particularly when compared against the three more popular theories, but the true nature of Ham's transgression remains ultimately unknowable, and it is unknowable because it is unsayable. The act of moral depravity is so egregious, so morally corrupt, that the details of the transgression are omitted from the text by the narrator.

Which returns us to the kid, whose folk are known for hewers of woods and drawers of water. The narrator's allusion to Joshua 9:13 reveals that the protagonist's parents, at best, or his entire family, at worst, have been in some capacity scorned by their community. Though his father has in truth been a schoolmaster, he is looked down upon for some unnamed offence, whether it be a transgression of his own or one he has inherited. As for the kid's mother, the narrator informs us that she died in childbirth, leaving the nurturing of her son entirely to his drunkard father: "The mother dead these fourteen years did incubate in her own bosom the creature who would carry her off. The father never speaks her name, the child does not know it. He has a sister in this world he will not see again" (3). The father is silent on the subject of the kid's mother and instead quotes from poets as he lies in drink by the scullery fire. Whether he is

[74] From Borgsma and Hahn: "Intercourse between father and daughter, while certainly transgressive, was less serious in ancient Near Eastern and Israelite society than intercourse between son and (step-)mother. Although both were forbidden (Lev. 18:7-8, 17), intercourse between son and (step-) mother openly threatened the patriarchal authority structure of the family or clan" (37).

drunk on Noah's wine or some other spirit, we do not know, but the narrator's reference to a sister immediately following that to the kid's parents raises some suspicion, particularly in light of the examined allusion to the curse of Canaan. I thus put forward that the kid is the fruit of some incestuous union and that his estranged sister is in fact his mother, the story of her death fabricated to mitigate the dissemination of the unspeakable truth. We know that there is very little interaction between father and son based on, first, the father's silence on the topic of the kid's mother, and second, on the fact that though he has been a schoolmaster and can recite poetry from memory, he has not taken the time to teach his son how to read or to write: "He can neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence" (3). The feral mongrel, nameless like his mother, has been completely neglected by his father, the latter's silence, I believe, suggesting some measure of shame, and, moreover, his disregard for his child exhibiting contempt. The kid thus carries with him not only a taste for mindless violence, but the curse of Canaan as well, the combination of which contribute to his unceremonious demise.

The kid's violent death by the hands of the judge is further foreshadowed in the lone line of dialogue attributed to his father, which describes the meteor shower that occurred on the night he was born: "Night of your birth. Thirty-three. The Leonids they were called. God how the stars did fall. I looked for blackness, holes in the heavens. The Dipper stove" (*BM* 3). Andrew Keller Estes writes, in *Cormac McCarthy and the Writing of American Spaces*, that this meteor shower was the most important astronomical event of the nineteenth century, and that those who watched it, particularly those who lived in the western United States where an understanding of astronomy was uncommon, believed it to be a sign of the end of times. Estes notes that we must pay mind to McCarthy's grammar, where stove, as the past participle of *to stave*, and when used intransitively meaning to break something by forcing it inward or piercing it roughly, suggests

that the constellation imploded, implying that "the objects which give meaning and directions to people's lives are breaking down" (123). Though the kid will later, after running away from home, use the Pleiades and Great Bear to navigate his way through the "terra damnata of smoking slag" (*BM* 61), his life will not amount to much more than a series of semi-random wanderings and violent happenstance. He will join Captain White's militia and then the Glanton gang, not to fulfil some ideological purpose, or to accumulate capital, but to satisfy "the taste for mindless violence" (*BM* 3) that broods within him. Yet, as mindless as the kid's meanderings may at times seem, they are never, as Brian Evenson notes in "Embodying Violence: The Case of Cormac McCarthy," completely immaterial. "Instead," adds Evenson, "we have a sort of perforated or haunted reality, with the fantastic and the hellish periodically breaking through" (140). Evenson's point is that, as grotesque as the world of *Blood Meridian* becomes over the course of the narrative, it never devolves to being unrealistic. In fact, quite the opposite is true: those elements of the novel that seem most fantastic and hellish are indeed, as I argued above, wrought from reality, whether through the finely researched history of the frontier, or of the freshly witnessed American war in Vietnam. The mimesis of the violence described is thus too pointed for the casual reader, which is why, I believe, so many are haunted by the brutality portrayed in novel — they are haunted not strictly by the portrayals of violence, but by the violence of history.

Consequently, I contend that the sublime horror of the meteor shower that heralds the kid's coming into the world continues to navigate him up until his final confrontation with the judge. The disintegration of meaning that is implied by the reference to the Leonids on the first page of the novel is echoed in the final chapter by the setting of Fort Griffin. Originally a Cavalry outpost, the fort converted into a lawless refuge and hunting complex, serving as a point

of departure for western expeditions and a rest stop for buffalo hunters.[75] Moreover, King notes in *Cormac McCarthy's Literary Evolution* that the fort was also notoriously violent, the murder scene of thirty men in April of 1877 alone, a year or so before the kid, now the man, arrives to meet his own death (86). McCarthy's decision to conclude the narrative at Fort Griffin is thus highly calculated, and it reveals the depth of his historical research for the novel. As King indicates, the fort would close in May of 1881, outlasting the kid by only three years, and so the protagonist's denouement is inextricably linked "with the end of the buffalo trade and the end of the initial phase of western expansion" (87). Aggressive, industrial bison hunting[76] has swallowed up the north Texas plains leaving little but dust and bones. Likewise is the kid, at last, swallowed up himself, his violent delights meeting violent ends.[77] After a brief, embarrassing encounter with a prostitute, he confers a final time with the sky:

> Stars were falling across the sky myriad and random, speeding along brief vectors from their origins in night to their destinies in dust and nothingness. […] He stood outside listening to the voices fading away and he looked again at the silent tracks of the stars where they died over the darkened hills. (333)

These repeated conferences with the sky recall Wordsworth's "My heart leaps up," which is quoted on the first page of the novel before the kid runs away from home: "All history present in

---

[75] See Geoff Cunfer and Bill Waiser's *Bison and People on the North American Great Plains* (2016).
[76] From Cunfer & Waiser: "From Fort Griffin 1,500 hunters and skinners moved onto the Texas plains in search of bison over the winter of 1876/77. They usually worked in teams of one sharpshooter and four to eight skinners. Hunting on foot and firing from a considerable distance, the sharpshooter could often kill dozens of bison in a morning before stampeding the herd. Skinners drove wagons to the kill site and stripped off the hides, leaving carcasses to scavengers and decay. Teams stayed out for months at a time, and there were scores of teams on the Texas plains that winter. A typical party might take two thousand, three thousand, or even four thousand hides over a few months. Middlemen drove wagons from camp to camp, buying fresh hides from the hunters as soon as they were available; prices ranged that year between $1.00 and $1.25 per hide collected in the field" (21-22).
[77] From *Romeo & Juliette*, Act 2, Scene 6.

that visage, *the child the father of the man*" (3). In "My Heart Leaps up", the speaker feels an affinity with rainbows rather than with the stars, feeling the same sublime exhilaration every time he looks up to the sky and sees one:

> My heart leaps up when I behold
> A rainbow in the sky:
> So was it when my life began;
> So is it now I am a man;
> So be it when I shall grow old,
> Or let me die!
> The Child is father of the Man;
> And I could wish my days to be
> Bound each to each by natural piety. (1807)[78]

This arresting, penultimate image of the kid looking up to the stars before his death, all history present in his visage, harks back to the meteor shower on the night of his birth. Yet, while the sky over Fort Griffin is much calmer than it was on that tumultuous night in 1833, the kid's death will be as violent as his conception, the staved stars replaced with the immense and terrible flesh of the judge. As it was when the kid's life began, so will it end: violent and terrifying and obscene. Or so, at least, must we assume since the narrator does not recount the kid's encounter with the naked smiling judge.

I argue that the narrative absence — or rather, the explicit unnarration — of the kid's demise in the jakes echoes Ham's unspoken transgression in Genesis. We know, based on the strong reactions of other characters, that something terrible has transpired, but we do not know what exactly:

> Is someone in there? The first man said.
>
> The man who was relieving himself did not look up. I wouldn't go in there if I were you, he said.

[78] Accessed on the web at: https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/my-heart-leaps

> Is there somebody in there?
>
> I wouldn't go in.
>
> He hitched himself up and buttoned his trousers and stepped past them and went up the walk toward the lights. The first man watched him go and then opened the door of the jakes.
>
> Good God almighty, he said.
>
> What is it?
>
> He didn't answer. He stepped past the other and went back up the walk. The other man stood looking after him. Then he opened the door and looked in. (*BM* 334)

The horrific violence the judge commits upon the kid, now the man, remains unspecified, undocumented, unnarrated, unrepresented, and so the reader is beckoned to fill the void with the scant textual evidence provided. The only traces of the judge's action are the warning from the first man relieving himself not to enter the jakes and the reaction from the second man after he ignores the advice of the first. The common assumption is that the kid has been murdered, but, as Patrick W. Shaw convincingly argues in his essay "The kid's Fate, the Judge's Guilt: Ramifications of Closure in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," there is sufficient evidence throughout the novel to suggest that the judge has sexually assaulted the kid: "Significant economic, social, and psychoerotic motifs in the narrative are clarified as a result of an act which for the kid is a fate fare worse than death" (103). To begin, the frontiersmen who fall upon the scene in the jakes would certainly not have been offended by any scene of murder, given the quotidian nature of the violence committed on the plains they travel as well as in the saloons and brothels they frequent. Secondly, the judge has exhibited his predilection for pedophilia throughout the novel, beginning with his introduction in the revival tent in Nacogdoches where

he projects his crimes onto the Reverend Green by falsely accusing him of violating an eleven-year-old girl. The judge goes on to sexually assault and then murder several children throughout the novel, including, the narrative suggests in chapter 19, the idiot James Robert whom he saves from drowning only to perform some grotesque baptism whereby the idiot is reborn as his carnal companion:

> When they entered the judge's quarters they found the idiot and a girl of perhaps twelve years cowering naked on the floor. Behind them also naked stood the judge. […] The idiot, who reached just to his waist, stuck close to his side, and together they entered the wood at the base of the hill and disappeared from sight. (275)

Though the protagonist is a middle-aged adult by the time he reacquaints himself with the judge, his designation as "the kid" throughout the novel, combined with the apparent agelessness of his attacker who should be an elderly man at this point of the novel's temporal structure, suggests a pedophilic inflection to their violent encounter in the jakes. Moreover, the filial quality of the kid's strange rapport with the judge is evoked a final time when they meet in the Griffin saloon shortly before his death: "Do you believe it's all over, son?" (327). Just as the novel begins with the kid rejecting and escaping his father, so does it end with his humiliation and annihilation at the hands of a father figure who is far more terrible than a negligent schoolmaster who "lies in drink" (3). The inferred sexual assault in the jakes is thus not only a physical transgression, but a moral transgression insofar as it is an incestuous act of pseudo-pedophilia. What is more, as Shaw deftly outlines, a number of scenes in the novel establish homosexuality not only as an affront, but as the ultimate transgression against the hyper-masculinity of life on the frontier. Recall that the kid opts for his chances in the San Diego prison rather than let the judge touch him, the latter having just told him, "Dont you know that I'd have loved you like a son?" (306,

307). The kid's "devotion to the male code" (Shaw 111) is further emphasized a few pages later when he beats a man senseless for having mistaken him "for a male whore" (*BM* 311). Thus, the humiliation that is witnessed by the men in the jakes is not the judge's taking of the kid's life, but his taking of the kid's masculinity. As Shaw writes, in the hyper-masculine culture of the frontier, "public homoeroticism is untenable and it is this sudden revelation that horrifies the observes at Griffin. No other act could offend their masculine sensibilities so throroughly as to cause the shock they display" (117-118).

Shaw notes that as with Greek tragedy, McCarthy charges the reader with imagining the omitted details of the judge's sexual assaults throughout the novel. "Even in a text otherwise replete with the rhetoric of carnage," the critic writes, "such acts are horrible beyond words" (109). These narrative omissions thus provide precedent for McCarthy's choice to make opaque the demise of the novel's protagonist, the kid. What is more, I argue, following the work of narratologist Gerald Prince in "The Disnarrated," that the ineffable nature of the kid's death calls upon the use of two related narrative techniques: on the one hand, the scene is unnarratable, that is, "that which, *according to a given narrative*, cannot be narrated or is not worth narrating either because it transgresses a law (social, authorial, generic, formal) or because it defies the powers of a particular narrator (or those of any narrator) or because it falls below the so-called threshold of narratability" (1), while on the other, it is unnarrated, by which is meant the scene is omitted "because of some narrative call for rhythm, characterization, suspense, surprise, and so on" (Prince 2). Thus, whatever takes place in the jakes is simultaneously unnarratable and unnarrated — that is, the judge's act is unnarratable insofar as it is an intertextual echo of Ham's transgression which was so obscene it could not be fully repeated, as well as unnarrated insofar as its omission is a choice made by the narrator for the purpose of rhythm, characterization, and

suspense. The kid's death is an ellipse in the narrative that is "explicitly underlined by the narrator or inferable from a significant lacuna in the chronology or through a retrospective filling-in" (Prince 2). I argue that McCarthy's allusions to the Old Testament curses in his description of the protagonist's kin as having been "known for hewers of wood and drawers of water" (3) provides this very retrospective filling-in at the beginning of the novel to suggest that the kid descends from a disgraced lineage, and as such, is disavowed from the possibility of grace. Try as he might to change the nature of his ways, whether by showing mercy to David Brown by helping him to remove the arrow from his leg, or by disobeying Glanton's orders and sparing Dick Shelby's life, or, finally, by declining to kill the judge when he has the chance, the kid's fate has been sealed since his conception and thus any gestures towards redemption are futile.

This redemptive impasse is further foreshadowed in the penultimate chapter when the kid attempts to rescue an old woman whom he finds crouched among a group of slaughtered travelers:

> He made his way among the corpses and stood before her. She was very old and her face was gray and leathery and sand had collected in the folds of her clothing. She did not look up. The shawl that covered her head was much faded of its color yet it bore like a patent woven into the fabric the figures of stars and quartermoons and other insignia of a provenance unknown to him. He spoke to her in a low voice. He told her that he was an American and that he was a long way from the country of his birth and that he had no family and that he had traveled much and seen many things and had been at war and endured hardships. He told her that he would convey her to a safe place, some party of

her countrypeople who would welcome her and that she should join them for the could not leave her in this place or she would surely die. (*BM* 315)

I have quoted this passage at length because it is replete with details that forewarn the futility of the kid's attempt to repudiate the taste for mindless violence that he has spent much of his life trying to satisfy. To begin, the pattern of stars on the woman's shawl bespeaks the sky's import to the kid's existence, as discussed above. Yet, while he has used the firmament all his life to navigate his mindless meanderings, the stars he sees in the shawl are "of a provenance unknown to him," and so he loses himself in his soliloquy, oblivious to his audience's ghastly plight. Secondly, the sacramental nature of the kid's interaction with the old woman signals a juncture in both his life and the text. In terms of the novel's temporal structure, the chapter immediately following the kid's conference with the old woman is set roughly thirty years later, and so their encounter serves as a conclusion to the narrative's main action. The narrative juncture serves also as a turning point in the kid's life, or, more accurately, as the possibility of a new path that, as the reader discovers a few pages later when he shoots dead the fifteen-year-old Elrod, is not available to him, try as he might to cleanse himself of his sins when he reveals them to the old woman. Given that his interaction with her is filtered through the narrator, the reader is not privy to the details of his confession, but the details, I argue, are secondary to the act of confession itself, since it is the very act that is revelatory. At no other point in the novel is he as forthcoming with another character, yet to this strange woman he manifests his inner personality without provocation, telling her not only about his home and his family, but about the horrors of war that he has both endured and committed. The kid's efforts are for naught, however, since his confidant turns out to be but the shell of a woman who has been "dead in that place for years" (*BM* 315), and so his confessions are but the soliloquy of a forsaken wanderer.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to explore how McCarthy employs the combination of descriptions and omissions of violence in *Blood Meridian* to produce a text that bears witness to the history of American imperialism. To this end, I have applied Slavoj Žižek's typology of violence as outlined in his book *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* to argue that though the novel is replete with vivid depictions of subjective violence, that is, a violent act committed by one identifiable subject upon another, the true horror with which McCarthy reckons is the objective-systemic violence that fosters the individual outbreaks of brutality, i.e. warfare, aggressive territorial expansion, and state-sanctioned genocide. In Lacanian terms, individual incidents of violence are but the 'points de capitons' of a systemic violence which is the latent 'everywhere' of the *Real*.

I have also argued that the novel's excessive descriptions of violence are juxtaposed with an absence of description insofar as the relentless representations of war and gratuitous murder throughout the narrative culminate in the unnarrated death of the protagonist. McCarthy's omission of the kid's murder thus serves two functions: in the first place, the absence of details within the context of a novel that is otherwise unsparing in its description of brutality suggests that the nature of the kid's death is too horrific to repeat. As I have shown, this narrative absence is foreshadowed by McCarthy's allusion to the curse of Canaan, by proxy of a reference to Joshua 9:13, as Ham's transgression against Noah is likewise too terrible to describe, indeed remaining a mystery to scriptural scholars. Moreover, the allusion to the curse indicates that the kid is himself damned, which thereby disrupts the possibility of his being offered a moment of grace.

The second function of the narrative omission of the kid's death is to prevent readers from witnessing the culmination of the protagonist's dramatic arc, thereby obstructing the

potential for catharsis and forcing a more active engagement with the atrocities portrayed in the text. As Joyce Carol Oates suggests in her collection of essay *In Rough Country*, the writer's imposition upon the reader to bear witness to the violence described in the novel recalls the purpose of Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre which is to prohibit the members of the audience from suspending their disbelief so that they are forced to contend with the gravity of the subject matter being dramatized. Thus, to omit the kid's death from the narrative is to withhold the punishment he has earned through his complicity in all the violence committed by the Glanton gang, and to withhold his punishment is to disrupt the reader's potential cathartic release. The interruption of the reader's moment of catharsis, I conclude, is meant to mirror the interruption of the protagonist's epiphanic moment of grace. Thus, just as the kid's narrative role is to bear witness to the violence perpetrated on the frontier, so must the reader bear witness to the violence enacted in the name of American imperialism.

Harold Bloom might say that the kid, following a traditional theme of American literature,[79] is an Oresteian anti-hero[80] who is in flight from the consequences of his transgressions, and "in search of his identity in the universe" (*Sin and Redemption* 299). Farrell O'Gorman, as I outlined in the introduction, suggests that this identity is that of prophet, but that the kid ultimately fails to achieve his prophetic function. As I have shown, however, the kid is in

---

[79] "The image of the anti-heroic Orestes," Bloom writes, "seems always to have been present in the transgression-conscious American literature. It is a clear motif in works such as *The Scarlet Letter*, *Billy Budd*, and *Moby Dick* as well as in William Faulkner's Euripidean studies of the mythical South. The Oresteian myth is a more subtly defined element of interpretation in the work of other Americans: in that of Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, Emily Dickinson, and Edna St. Vincent Millay. In the works of all of these writers there appears the contour of the guilty protagonist, *man in exile*, in flight from his own transgression. D. H. Lawrence has commented that the study of guilt—the residue of the Puritan heritage—is one of the most persistent themes in American literature" (*Sin and Redemption* 303-304).

[80] As opposed to the Aristotelian anti-hero who is traditionally morally grounded and experiences an unlucky change of fortune, thus eliciting pity from the reader.

flight from much more than the consequences of his transgressions, and, moreover, his flight is a fool’s errand insofar as he is not a failed prophet so much as a cursed prophet.

Conclusion

"What will happy to all that beauty"

"I believe that it's perfectly possible to run a course of academic degrees in English and to emerge a seemingly respectable Ph.D. and still not know how to read fiction."

–Flannery O'Connor (*Mystery and Manners*)

Like much American writing of the first half of the twentieth century, the texts of Flannery O'Connor and Cormac McCarthy convey the schizophrenic break in American literature between the self-affirming positivity of the transcendentalists and the failing vision of perfectibility that germinates in late work of Nathanial Hawthorne and then blooms with modernism. Both writers portray this break, as I have shown, through the use of a poetics of violence, typically labelled as the Southern grotesque, to represent the least flattering aspects of the human experience. The characters they describe are selfish, judgmental, and violent, and the narratives they construct are almost always shocking, if not tragic. Moreover, their texts are not immediately accessible to most readers and so demand patience and discipline: to engage in a productive reading of their narrative poetics requires a high tolerance for the appalling and a taste for the tragi-comic. As O'Connor writes, "[there] is no room for abstract expressions of compassion or piety or morality" in writing and so "the writer's moral sense must coincide with his dramatic sense, and this makes the presentation of fiction to the student, and particularly to the immature student, very difficult indeed" (*MM* 124-125).

Part of this difficulty lies in O'Connor's depiction of the delayed epiphanies of her characters, which usually result in violent death. Her texts demonstrate that the epiphanic moments that derive from the presence of grace typically come at a considerable cost insofar as grace is the bestowal of God's blessing of which we are undeserving: "And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work" (*King James Bible*, Rom. 11:6). Grace is therefore not a reward—the grace that we would receive is far more than what could ever have earned. Conversely, McCarthy's texts, offer no such consolation as the violence he depicts is devoid of mystery and grace—in other words, it is Christless.

The Violence of Bearing Witness begins with an examination of the O'Connor texts that engage with the topic of racial divide in the United States, specifically the titular text of her posthumous collection *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, and "Judgment Day." As I have shown, these late works establish a turn in her portrayal of Black characters as they move from being the mostly passive bystanders of her earlier work, to performing the prophetic function of characters like Mary Grace in "Revelation," or even the Misfit from "A Good Man is Hard to Find." Moreover, I demonstrate that while these two stories represent a shift in O'Connor's writing toward a more mature, more nuanced portrayal of the plight of Black Americans in the mid 20th century, Blacks and whites are only equal insofar as they are equally prone to the same emotional and sometimes violent transgressions as the white protagonists. Carver's mother, Coleman, and the angry actor neighbour are thus all permitted their transgressions the same as Mrs. Chestny, Julian, or Tanner. More significantly, however, Carver's mother and the angry actor neighbour are O'Connor's first (and only) Black prophets insofar as they bear witness to the actions of their respective text's protagonists and return them, through violent means, to reality.

"Judgment Day" is central to my analysis of O'Connor's narrative poetics as it belongs to a group of texts that I have termed *The Geranium Variations*, and which I argue are sign-posts for her artistic development. I thus demonstrate that the variations provide evidence of the writer's artistic evolution as the same basic set of characters and circumstances are written and re-written over the course of twenty years, from the germ of "The Geranium" in her master's thesis, to the final drafts that she continued to edit while on her death-bed. Though Karl-Heinz Westarp's *Flannery O'Connor: Growing Craft* was an indispensable resource for my analysis of the variations, I believe my findings have contributed to the field of O'Connor studies by

exploring the development of the Black prophet in her late texts. It is indisputable that Black characters operate as part of the cultural landscape in her early fiction, but the variations, I demonstrate, reveal O'Connor's efforts to remedy these superficial portrayals by complicating the interactions between her white and Black characters.

My study of *Blood Meridian* begins with an acknowledgment of the novel's use of the epic form and demonstrates that the poetic gestures towards this traditional mode imbues the narrative with the authority of a foundational myth. The national and cultural truths revealed therein, however, prove to be too horrific to bear as they expose not only the violence of aggressive territorial expansion on the frontier in the 19th century, but the brutality of 20th century warfare as well. I then use Žižek's typology of violence to situate the terrible crimes of the bounty hunters within the larger context of systemic, state-sanctioned violence. I have sought to argue that rather than seek to illicit outrage at the individual moments of violence, or even at the agents of chaos themselves, *Blood Meridian* invites its readers to take a step back and assess the world in which the violent acts take place—in other words, to bear witness to a world defined by bloodshed and meanness. McCarthy alludes to favouring reflection in a *New York Times Magazine* interview with Richard B. Woodward when he explains his understanding and use of violence in his work, in turn expressing a reluctance to trust any idealistic expectations of perfectibility:

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

I conclude with a hermeneutic analysis of the intertextual references to the Old Testament and investigate the emphasis on punishment in lieu of redemptive grace. Though I am of course not the first person to identify McCarthy's scriptural allusions, I believe that the parallels that I draw between, on the one hand, the narrative details of the kid's life and death, and on the other, the tale of the curse of Canaan from the Old Testament, provide a new point of departure for the interpretation of *Blood Meridian*, one that allows for a more sympathetic reading of the kid, which in turn makes the narrative absence of his death all the more tragic.

*

After having filled so many pages with a close study of brutality and depravity, meanness and self-indulgence, failed prophets and prophets gone wrong, I wish to conclude on a more positive, hopeful (or, at the very least, less violent) note by calling upon one of the great American prophets of the twentieth century: James Baldwin. In his introduction to *James Baldwin*, Harold Bloom writes that Baldwin, whom he deems a reluctant prophet, "is of the authentic lineage of Jeremiah, most inward of prophets" insofar as he "opposes [what] might be called, in Jeremiah's language, the injustice of outwardness, which means that Baldwin always must protest, even in the rather unlikely event that his country ever were to turn from selfishness and cruelty to justice and compassion" (1-2). Thus, while Baldwin disclaims in his texts many of the same societal ills dramatized, to varying degrees, by Flannery O'Connor and Cormac McCarthy in their works, his attempts to redeem our humanity (or to return us to reality, as O'Connor would say) are communed with love rather than portrayed through O'Connor's violent Christ or McCarthy's Christ-less violence.

Yet, Bloom insists that Baldwin's moral appeal is post-Christian and that his "prophetic stance is not so much religious as aesthetic" (3). Though he performs the role of prophet, he

speaks not for God, but in the name of humanity. Christopher Z. Hobson echoes this sentiment in *James Baldwin and the Heavenly City*, noting that Baldwin's religious references are "a matter of literary expression, not creed" (5), and that he practices a "nontheist 'theological interpretation' toward both general Christian beliefs and African American prophetic traditions, appropriating but also reshaping them" (7). Post-Christian though his prophecy may be, Baldwin nevertheless follows in the tradition of the American jeremiad insofar as his prophetic message contains both threat and possibility—that is, the threat of self-destruction and the possibility of redemption. But, as Mel Watkins writes in his essay entitled "The Fire Next Time This Time," "[instead] of redemption in the eyes of God, [Baldwin] is concerned with redemption in the eyes of man. God is replaced by morality and love. His message is finally as basic as it is undeniable: if we do not love one another, we will destroy one another" (182).

Love is essential to Baldwin's prophetic task as it is only through love that one can strive to become a truly moral human being. "If the concept of God has any validity or use," he writes in *The Fire Next Time*, "it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving" (61). Otherwise, he concludes, we must dispense of Him. Moreover, he contends that we must not simply hope that is it possible to become truly moral human beings, but that we must "*believe* that it is possible" (61), his faith in love thus supplanting his faith in the grace of an all-powerful deity. It is important to note that Baldwin's use of the word "love" refers not to the personal exchange of attachment or affection, but rather, signals "a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth" (109).

Yet, despite Baldwin's faith in the grace of love, and in the possibility of morality, his jeremiad nevertheless employs a rhetoric of anxiety and impeding crisis so to emphasize the

*un*fulfillment of the errand at hand. "*What will happen to all that beauty?*" he asks in the closing pages of *The Fire Next Time* as he considers God's—or Allah's—vengeance. "[When] that vengeance [is] achieved, *What will happen to all that beauty then?*" (119). It is a question well worth considering, for, as O'Connor and McCarthy have shown us, a world deprived of such beauty, and indeed a world deprived of love, is one that is occupied by prophets failed and prophets gone wrong; a world where misfits and marauders deal in terrible violence, redemptive though it may sometimes be.

Works Cited

Ali, Muhammad. "Parkinson." Interview by Michael Parkinson. *BBC*. 12 Apr. 1971. Web. 21 Feb. 2016.

Altar, Robert. *The Five Books of Moses*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co. 2004.

Appy, Christian B. *American Reckoning - The Vietnam War and Our National Identity*. New York: Penguin Putnam Inc, 2016.

Aristotle. *Aristotle Poetics*. Trans. Gerald F. Else. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 1967.

Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time.* New York: The Dial Press, 1963.

--. *Baldwin: Collected Essays*. New York: Library of America, 1998.

Baldwin, James, and Randall Kenan. *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*. New York: Vintage, 2011

Baraka, Amiri. *Home: Social Essays*. New York: Akashic Books, 2009.

Bercovitch, Sacvan. *The American Jeremiad.* Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978.

Bergsma, John Sietze and Scott Walker Hahn "Noah's Nakedness and the Curse on Canaan (Genesis 9:20-27)." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124. 2005: 25-40.

Bloom, Harold and Blake Hobby. *Sin and Redemption*. New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2010.

Boguta-Marchel, Hanna. *The Evil, the Fated, the Biblical: The Latent Metaphysics of Cormac McCarthy*. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2012.

Brown, David, and Clive Webb. *Race in the American South from Slavery to Civil Rights*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

Brown, Lauren. “Existing Without Consent” *The Cormac McCarthy Journals* vol. 16, no. 1. University Park, PA.: Penn State University Press. 2018: 73-94.

Cant, John. *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism*. Routledge, 2009.

Caron, Timothy P. “'The Bottom Rail Is on the Top': Race and 'Theological Whiteness' in Flannery O'Connor's Short Fiction.” *Inside the Church of Flannery O'Connor: Sacrament, Sacramental, and the Sacred in Her Fiction*. Ed. Joanne Halleran McMullen and Jon Parrish. Macon Ga.: Peede Mercer University Press, 2008: 138-164.

Caruth, Cathy. “Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History.” *Yale French Studies*, No. 79 Literature and the Ethical Question. 1991: 181-192.

Cash, Jean W. *Flannery O'Connor: A Life*. University of Tennessee Press, 2003.

Cheatham, George. “Jesus, O'Connor's Artificial Nigger” *Studies in Short Fiction* 22 no. 4 (Fall 1985): 475-479.

Cooper, Lydia R. *No More Heroes*. Louisiana State University Press, 2011.

Cunfer, Geoff, and W. A. Waiser. *Bison and People on the North American Great Plains: a Deep Environmental History*. Texas A & M University Press, 2016.

Deshay, Akiim. “New York City.” *Black Demographics*. Web. 15 Feb. 2017.

Dowd, Ciaran. “Cormac McCarthy's Cultural and Historical Contexts” *Critical insights: Cormac McCarthy.* ed. David N, Cremean. Amenia, N.Y.: Salem Press. 2013: 77-78.

Eaton, Mark. “Dis(re)membered Bodies: Cormac McCarthy's Border Fiction.” *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2003: 155-180.

Estes, Andrew Keller. *Cormac McCarthy and the Writing of American Spaces*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013.

Evans, Dylan. *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. London: Brunner-Routledge, 2003.

Evans, Justin. "To Disenchant and Disintoxicate: *Blood Meridian* as Critical Epic." *Modern Philology*, vol. 112, no. 2, 2014: 405-426.

Evenson, Brian. "Embodying Violence: The Case of Cormac McCarthy." *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2016. 135-148.

Frank, Thomas. *Listen, Liberal, or, What Ever Happened to the Party of the People?* New York: Metropolitan Books, 2017.

Freidman, Zack. "Student Loan Debt in 2017: A $1.3 Trillion Crisis" *Forbes.* 21 Feb. 2017. Web. 11 Oct. 2017.

Frye, Steven. "Blood Meridian and the Poetics of Violence." *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013: 107–120

Foucault, Michel. *History of Sexuality*. New York: Random House, 1990.

Getz, Lorine M. *Flannery O'Connor, Literary Theologian: The Habits and Discipline of Being*. Lewiston, N.Y.: E. Mellen Press, 2000.

Giannone, Richard. *Flannery O'Connor, Hermit Novelist: With a New Preface by the Author*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010.

Goddu, Teresa A. *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation*. Columbia University Press, 1997.

Greif, Mark. "Flannery O'Connor and Faith." *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016: 204-226.

Griffith, David. "'The Displaced Person': Reading Flannery O'Connor in the Age of Islamophobia." *The Paris Review.* 10 Dec. 2015. Web. 22 Jan. 2016.

Haider, Asad. "White Purity" *Viewpoint Magazine.* 6 Jan. 2017. Web. 7 Jan. 2017.

Hegel, G.W.F. *Lectures on Aesthetics*. Part 3, Section 3. Web. 20 June 2018.

Hersh, Seymour M. "The My Lai Massacre." *Reporting Vietnam*. New York: Library of America. 1998: 13-27.

Howe, Iriving. "This Age of Conformity" *The Partisan Review Anthology*. Eds. William Phillips & Philip Rahv. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962.

Houck, Davis W. *Rhetoric, Religion, and the Civil Rights Movement: 1954-1965*. Waco: Baylor Univ. Press, 2014.

Josyph, Peter. *Cormac McCarthy's house: Reading McCarthy Without Walls*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013.

King, Daniel Robert. *Cormac McCarthy's Literary Evolution: Editors, Agents, and the Crafting of a Prolific American Author*. Tennessee: The University of Tennessee Press, 2016.

Lawrence, D.H. *Studies in Classic American Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2003.

Lindsay, Brendan C. *Murder State: California's Native American Genocide, 1846-1873*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2012.

Lomax, Louis E. *When the Word Is Given ...: A Report on Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and the Black Muslim World*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979.

--. *Negro Revolt*. New York: Harper, 1962.

Maisano, Chris. "The New 'Culture of Poverty.'" *Catalyst*. vol. 1 no. 2. Summer 2017. Web. 3 Aug. 2017.

Martin, Karl. "Flannery O'Connor's Prophetic Imagination." *Religion and Literature* Vol 26, No. 23 (Autumn 1994): 33-58.

Mather, Victor. “In the Ring He Was Ali, But in the Newspapers He Was Still Clay.” *New York Times*. 9 Jun. 2016. Web 10 Jan. 2018.

McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian*. New York: Random House, 2001.

Mellard, James M. “Flannery O’Connor’s Others: Freud, Lacan, and the Unconscious,” *American Literature.* Vol. 61. No. 4. (Dec. 1989): 625-643.

Mintz, S., & McNeil, S. “The Old South: Images and Realities.” *Digital History*. (2018). Web. 11 Nov. 2017.

Monbiot, George. “Neoliberalism: the ideology at the root of all our problems.” *The Guardian*. 15 April 2016. Web. 20 Feb. 2018.

Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage Books, a Division of Random House, Inc, 2015.

Oates, Joyce Carol. *In Rough Country: Essays and Reviews*. HarperCollins, 2010.

O’Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. 1990.

O'Connor, Flannery. *Flannery O'Connor, Collected Works*. New York: Library of America, 1989.

--. *The Habit of Being*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980.

--. *Mystery and Manners*. London: Faber and Faber, 2014.

O'Connor, Flannery, and Karl-Heinz Westarp. *Flannery O'Connor, the Growing Craft: a Synoptic Variorium Edition of The Geranium, An Exile in the East, Getting Home, Judgement Day*. Birmingham, AL.: Summa Publications, 1993.

O'Connor, Flannery, and Rosemary M. Magee. *Conversations with Flannery O'Connor*. University Press of Mississippi, 1987.

O'Gorman, Farrell. "Violence, Nature, and Prophecy in Flannery O'Connor and Cormac McCarthy" *Flannery O'Connor in the Age of Terrorism*. Edited byAvis Hewitt and Robert Donahoo. University of Tennessee Press, 2010: 143-168

Owens, Barcley. *Cormac McCarthy's Western Novels*. Arizona: Univ. of Arizona Press, 2000.

PBS. "Charlie Company and the Massacre" *American Experience*. Web. 15 June 2018.

Pope, Alexander. "An Essay on Man." *Alexander Pope: The Major Works*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2006.

Prince, Gerald. "The Disnarrated." *Style.* Vol. 22, No. 1, *Narrative Theory and Criticism* (Spring 1988): 1-8.

Ritterhouse, Jennifer. *Growing Jim Crow*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006.

Roberts, Randy and Johnny Smith. *Blood Brothers: The Fatal Friendship Between Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X*. New York: Basic Books, 2016.

Scott, R. Neil and Irwin H. Streight eds. *Flannery O'Connor: the Contemporary Reviews.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Shaw, Patrick W. *The Modern American Novel of Violence*. Troy, NY: Whitston Pub., 2000.

--. "The kid's Fate, the Judge's Guilt: Ramifications of Closure in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*." The Southern Literary Journal, Vol. 30, No. 1. Fall, 1997: 102-119.

Shearer-Cremean, Christine. "Through a Trauma Theory Lens: McCarthy's Violence Reconsidered" *Critical insights: Cormac McCarthy.* ed. David N, Cremean. Amenia, N.Y.: Salem Press. 2013: 51-72.

Shulman, George. "Thinking Authority Democratically: Prophetic Practices, White Supremacy, and Democratic Politics." *Political Theory*, Vol. 36, No. 5 (Oct., 2008): 708-734.

Stone, I.F. “The Pilgrimage of Malcolm X.” *The New York Review of Books*. November 11, 1964. Vol. 5. 1965. Web. 5 Feb. 2016.

Sullivan, Walter. “About Any Kind of Meanness You Can Name.” *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 93, no. 4, Fall 1985: 549-656.

Sykes Jr., John D. “How The Symbol Means: Deferral vs. Confrontation in *The Sound and The Fury* and “The Artificial Nigger.” *Flannery O'Connor in The Age of Terrorism: Essays on Violence and Grace*, Edited by Avis Hewitt and Robert Donahoo. Tennessee: The University of Tennessee Press, 2010: 125-142.

The Bible. Authorized King James Version*,* Oxford: Oxford Univeristy Press, 1998.

Tuck, Stephen G.N. “The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia.” Ed. Christopher C. Meyers. *The Empire State of the South: Georgia History in Documents and Essays*. Macon, GA.: Mercer University Press, 2008: 311-314.

Tyner, James A. *War, Violence, and Population: Making the Body Count*. New York: Guilfor. 2009.

Walker, Alice. “A South Without Myths” *Soujourners* 23.10 1994-95: 20. Accessed on the Web: 4 May 2015, http://math.buffalo.edu/~sww/walker/south-without-myths.html

Wallach, Rick. “Judge Holden, *Blood Meridian*’s Evil Archon.” *Sacred Violence: Cormac McCarthy's Western Novel*. Ed. Wade H. Hall and Rich Wallach. El Paso: Texas Western Press, 2002: 125-136.

Weller, Sheila. “How Author Timothy Tyson Found The Woman at the Center of the Emmett Till Case.” *Vanity Fair*. 26 Jan. 2017. Web. 5 Feb. 2017.

West, Cornel. *Black Prophetic Fire*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2014.

Wood, Ralph C. *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South*. Grand Rapids, MI.: W.B. Eerdmans Publ., 2005.

--. "Where is the Voice Coming From?: Flannery O'Connor on Race" *The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin 23* (1993-94): 90-118.

Woodward, Richard B. *New York Times Magazine*. 19 April 1992. Web. 23 June 2018: https://www.nytimes.com/1992/04/19/magazine/cormac-mccarthy-s-venomous-fiction.html

Wordsworth, William. "My Heart Leaps Up" (1807). Web. 27 June 2018.

X, Malcolm, and Alex Haley. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2015.

X, Malcolm, "God's Judgment of White America." 4 Dec. 1963. Web. 7 Nov. 2016.

--. "Harlem Freedom Rally." 31 July 1960. Web. 7 Nov. 2016.

--. "Harlem in Revolt." Interview by Austin Clark. *CBC*. 13 Oct. 1963. Web. 21 Feb. 2016.

--. "The Old Negro and The New Negro." 11 Oct. 1963. Web. 7 Nov. 2016.

Zinn, Howard. "Lincoln and Emancipation" *A People's History of the United States*. New York: Harper & Row, 1980. Web. 10 April 2016.

Žižek, Slavoj. *Violence*. New York: Picadore, 2008.

--. *Looking Awry: an Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*. Cambridge, MASS.: MIT Press, 1991.