

Colonial Violence Across Media: Narrative Form and Indigenous Experience in *Blood Meridian*  
and *Red Dead Redemption 2*

WLL 499: Capstone Project

Kamila Mukanova

Adviser: Ivan Delazari

March 2026

## **Table of Contents**

|                                                             |    |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Abstract                                                    | 3  |
| Introduction                                                | 5  |
| Theoretical framework                                       | 9  |
| Systematic Violence and Dehumanization                      | 16 |
| Racialized Dehumanization as Justification                  | 16 |
| Apocalyptic and Ritualistic Violence                        | 20 |
| The Ideology of Progress                                    | 22 |
| Economic Incentivization                                    | 22 |
| Whiteness as Constructed Ideology and Historical Continuity | 25 |
| Medium and Audience                                         | 27 |
| Narrative Authority and Complicity                          | 27 |
| The Implied Author and Cultural Reach                       | 34 |
| Conclusion                                                  | 39 |
| Reference List                                              | 40 |

## Abstract

This project examines how colonial violence against native Americans is represented in two different narrative media, literature and videogames, through Cormac McCarthy's 1985 novel *Blood Meridian* and Rockstar Games' 2018 videogame *Red Dead Redemption 2* (RDR2). Both works depict systematic dehumanization and elimination of Indigenous people but they differ in their ethical commitments. *Blood Meridian* employs an anti-mythological narrative strategy that exposes genocide as constitutive of Westward expansion, while RDR2 centers the moral journey of its white protagonist, placing Native displacement to the background as a tragic but historically inevitable event. My analysis draws on three interconnected theoretical frameworks: Chadwick Allen's settler colonial theory, which understands Indigenous displacement as an ongoing structure rather than a historical event; Farhad Dalal's framework of racialization and dehumanization as primary forces of genocide; and narratological concepts of focalization from Mieke Bal and Gérard Genette that illuminate how perspective shapes the ethical weight violence carries for its audience. The discussion applies Wayne Booth's concept of the implied author to determine not just what each text depicts but what the formal choices in each text demand of the reader. The differences between colonial representations in two media can be noticed in their technical peculiarities. McCarthy's typographic performance of racial hierarchy in his use of lowercase "indians" against capitalized "Americans" or "Mexicans" enacts dehumanization at the level of grammar. In RDR2, there is an honor and reward system that shows how through helping the Wapiti tribe, the protagonist earns in-game currency and reputation points, which commercializes Indigenous struggles and turns their genocide into a resource for white character development. Different narrative media produce different audience relationships to the same colonial history. *Blood Meridian* practices a kind of narrative restraint

through the narrator who presents violence with straightforwardness, offers no moral instructions and demands that readers perform their own ethical judgment with what is described. RDR2's interactive design, by contrast, carries already pre-packed sympathy through its mechanics and narrative design, guiding the player toward condolence for Native suffering. Yet both works construct Indigenous experience around non-Native viewing positions which points to the challenge of representing colonial violence ethically when the storytelling perspective remains colonizer's.

## Introduction

In 2018, Rockstar Games released *Red Dead Redemption 2* (RDR2), a videogame set in the American West that depicts the final years of the frontier era and includes representations of Native American characters. Yet beneath this image of historical sensitivity lies a troubling reproduction of colonial violence. When examined alongside Cormac McCarthy's 1985 novel *Blood Meridian*, a text often celebrated for its unflinching critique of American expansionism, RDR2 reveals how contemporary media can perpetuate the ideologies they seek to condemn. Both works depict the systematic dehumanization and elimination of Indigenous people during America's westward expansion. However, they do so with fundamentally different narrative strategies and ethical commitments. By analyzing these works through postcolonial theory of racialization and dehumanization with narrative theory concepts of focalization, this paper examines how different media represent colonial violence and position audiences in relation to ongoing colonial conditions. The comparison reveals both the persistence of colonial ideologies across different historical moments and the ways narrative form shapes violence.

*Blood Meridian* follows a protagonist known as "the kid" who joins the Glanton Gang, a historical group of scalp hunters operating along the Texas-Mexico border in the 1840-1850s. The gang, contracted by Mexican and American authorities to kill Apache warriors, quickly devolves into a massacre, killing Mexican civilians and peaceful Native communities to collect bounties on scalps regardless of their origin. The novel's central antagonist, Judge Holden, represents a philosophical justification for violence itself, believing that war is the ultimate expression of human will and that domination requires the complete erasure of the dominated. McCarthy presents this violence with no romanticism or moral redemption, the kid witnesses the massacre of peaceful Tigua villagers, the murder of an Apache child, and other countless scenes

of grotesque brutality. The novel refuses to frame westward expansion as heroic or necessary, instead exposing it as systematic genocide motivated by profit and racist ideology.

*Red Dead Redemption 2*, set in 1899 during the closing of the American frontier, follows Arthur Morgan, a member of the Van der Linde gang of outlaws. The game is structured into titled chapters and individual missions, each with its own name. As the gang flees from law enforcement and attempts to secure enough money to escape and obtain freedom, Arthur encounters the Wapiti, a Native American tribe, whose reservation is under threat from the Cornwall Company seeking oil extraction and from the U.S. military confiscating their horses to force starvation and obedience. The game presents two Native perspectives on the methods of fighting with colonization. Chief Rans Fall prefers peaceful resistance and negotiation with authorities, while his son, Eagle Flies, favors violent resistance against colonization. Arthur helps the tribe in several missions, and the game narrative positions him as sympathetic to the Wapiti's issue while suggesting their displacement is historically inevitable. The tribe disappears from the game world after their storyline concludes, perpetuating the same narrative of Indigenous disappearance that the game appears to critique.

This paper addresses a critical gap in our understanding of how colonial violence is represented across different media and historical moments, with significant implications for contemporary debates about historical memory and Indigenous sovereignty. Despite increasing scholarly attention to representations of Native Americans in popular culture, limited research examines how narrative form itself shapes audiences' moral attitude towards depicted genocide. This matters because videogames have become increasingly influential in shaping historical consciousness, particularly among younger audiences who may encounter the American frontier primarily through interactive media rather than historical texts or literary fiction. *Red Dead*

*Redemption 2*, which sold over 50 million copies worldwide by 2023, reaches a larger and more diverse audience than McCarthy's novel that had only 1833 copies sold when printed for the first time,<sup>1</sup> making it crucial to understand how the game's narrative choices might reproduce or challenge colonial ideologies. Moreover, this research responds to ongoing political struggles over how American history should be taught and remembered. If contemporary culture continues to frame Native displacement as tragic but inevitable, then even well-intentioned representations may reinforce the settler colonial logic that Indigenous peoples are destined to vanish. This analysis asks not merely how these texts represent the past, but how their narration positions contemporary audiences in relation to ongoing colonialism's present realities.

Building on postcolonial theory and narrative analysis, this paper investigates: How do *Blood Meridian* and *Red Dead Redemption 2* represent the mechanisms of colonial violence against Native Americans, and do their perspectives differ in relation to the history they depict? It contends that both works demonstrate how colonial violence operated through systematic dehumanization becomes justified by narratives of civilizational progress and economic development, yet they differ fundamentally in their ethical stance on this violence. *Blood Meridian* employs an anti-mythological narrative strategy that ignores any romanticization to expose the economic and ideological foundations of genocide, while RDR2 centers the moral journey of its white protagonist, positioning Native American displacement as a tragic background story. This difference demonstrates how narrative focus shapes whether colonial violence appears as a central subject or additional storyline. This analysis draws upon Allen's settler colonial theory, Dalal's framework of racialization and dehumanization, and Bal's and Genette's concepts of narrator and focalizer. These theoretical perspectives provide an essential

---

<sup>1</sup> Scott Brown, "Rethinking the Print Run and Publication Date of Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*," *Downtown Brown* (Substack), October 27, 2025

framework for examining how different narrative media construct historical violence and position audiences in relation to the ongoing colonization process.

Comparing a literary text with a videogame illuminates how different narrative forms shape understanding of fictionalized historical violence. As Humphreys observes, videogames engage players through multiple simultaneous positions: as performer (executing actions through the avatar), reader (interpreting narrative and environmental cues), and viewer (observing consequences of enacted violence).<sup>2</sup> However, this framework omits a crucial fourth dimension, the player's identificatory relationship with the character as a diegetic participant within the story world.

When a player engages in colonial violence through gameplay, they occupy a liminal space between these roles. They are simultaneously the performer executing or preventing violence, the reader interpreting the meaning, the viewer watching its effects and the immersed self identified with the character who exists within these colonial structures. This layered engagement creates what Humphreys calls a "performative frame" that makes players receptive to embedded ideological perspectives. This distinction matters because, as Mukherjee argues, there remains insufficient scholarly attention to the connection between colonialism and videogames, despite games' increasing cultural influence in shaping historical consciousness.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, when reading a novel about colonialism, the reader maintains distance from the violence. They witness it through narrative mediation but never engage in it. The videogame player, by contrast, becomes implicated in violence through the avatar, even when the game's

---

<sup>2</sup> Sara Humphreys, "Rejuvenating 'Eternal Inequality' on the Digital Frontiers of *Red Dead Redemption*," *Western American Literature* 47, no. 2 (2012): 206

<sup>3</sup> Souvik Mukherjee, "Videogames and Post Colonialism: An Introduction," in *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 13

explicit narrative critiques such approach. This creates a fundamentally different attitude to fictionalized historical violence than literary representation allows.

This comparative analysis employs close reading methodologies drawn from literary studies and ludology (game studies) to examine how *Blood Meridian* and *Red Dead Redemption 2* represent colonial violence against Native Americans. The paper analyzes primary textual evidence from McCarthy's novel alongside gameplay footage, mission transcripts and visual elements from RDR2. The analysis is structured thematically rather than chronologically, examining parallel mechanisms of violence and ideology across both texts. Each major argument section compares how the novel and game handle similar colonial processes (dehumanization, economic exploitation, and ideological justification) while attending to medium-specific differences in narrative authority and audience positioning. By comparing a canonical literary text from 1985 with a mainstream commercial videogame from 2018, this research traces how American culture continues to grapple with its colonial history across different media and historical moments.

### **Theoretical framework**

This analysis draws upon three interconnected theoretical frameworks: postcolonial theory, theories of racialization and dehumanization, and concepts of narratology. Together, these approaches provide the analytical tools to examine how *Blood Meridian* and *Red Dead Redemption 2* construct and ideologically position colonial violence.

Postcolonial theory provides the foundational framework for understanding how colonial power operates through representation. However, as Allen demonstrates, orthodox postcolonial theories developed primarily through analysis of British colonialism in India, Africa, and the Caribbean require adaptation when applied to settler colonial contexts like in the United States.

Allen argues that “there are many different degrees, forms and histories of colonization and there are going to be many different degrees, forms and histories of postcoloniality as a consequence.”<sup>4</sup>

Unlike colonial situations where a small governing class ruled over Indigenous majorities who eventually achieved independence, settler colonialism involves the permanent displacement of Indigenous populations by settlers who establish themselves as the new majority.

This distinction is crucial because Indigenous people in settler nations employ different rhetorical strategies than postcolonial subjects elsewhere. Rather than seeking to subvert or transform colonial discourse, American Indian activists often engage with what Allen calls “re-recognition,” insisting on the original binding authority of treaties and agreements rather than attempting to displace them. This strategy reflects the major difference of settler colonialism. Unlike in Kenya or India, where colonial powers eventually withdrew, in the United States, European colonizers remained permanently, establishing new nations on appropriated indigenous land. Indigenous peoples thus continue to exist within nation-states built through their dispossession, negotiating sovereignty with governments that occupy their territories.

This strategy reflects that for Indigenous people in settler colonial contexts, the colonizers did not leave but stayed and built nations in appropriated land. Allen’s framework helps explain why both *Blood Meridian* and RDR2 depict violence as systematic rather than exceptional. The Glanton Gang’s scalp-hunting operation and the Cornwall Company’s resource extraction are extensions of a settler colonial logic that, as Wang argues, positions whiteness as an ideology requiring continuous colonial violence for its reproduction. In his analysis of *Blood Meridian*, Wang demonstrates that the novel “casts whiteness as an ideology whose existence can only be entrenched through settler colonial violence.”<sup>5</sup> This violence was not accidental or

---

<sup>4</sup> Chadwick Allen, “Postcolonial Theory and the Discourse of Treaties,” *American Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (2000): 63

<sup>5</sup> Kyle Wang, “Cormac McCarthy’s Racial Fictions: Race in *Blood Meridian*’s Colonial Imagination,” *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 10, no. 1 (January 2023): 26

the result of cruelty only, it was built into the system of westward expansion from the start with the goal of clearing the way for white settlement and profit. Wang also argues that this destruction went beyond physical killing. He uses the term "epistemicide," referring to erasure of Indigenous knowledge systems that Judge Holden aims to, to describe how colonial violence did not just kill people but wiped out their ways of understanding and recording the world, replacing them with a settler narrative that framed the whole process as natural and historically inevitable. This framework is crucial for understanding how *Blood Meridian* and RDR2 position themselves within the broader cultural story of westward expansion: while McCarthy does not romanticize white protagonist's participation in the frontier, RDR2 is turning Indigenous genocide into the backdrop for a white protagonist's redemption story.

Central to our understanding of how colonial violence functions is the concept of racialization and dehumanization. Dalal's psychoanalytic framework provides crucial insights in how "racism is essentially a dehumanizing process through which an other is transformed into The Other, from one of us into one of them. The racialized and dehumanized other is positioned outside the moral universe, with all its attendant requirements and obligations to fellow human beings".<sup>6</sup> He emphasizes that this process is not natural or automatic but requires continuous work because of "the danger that some of them will become us."

Writer extends this analysis by demonstrating how acts meeting the definition of terrorism, unlawful violence to intimidate a population for political goals, were committed by government agents against Native people but were never labeled as such. Instead, she shows through the example of the Sand Creek Massacre, a brutal 1864 attack where U.S. soldiers killed approximately 230 peaceful Cheyenne and Arapaho people (primarily women, children, and

---

<sup>6</sup> Farhad Dalal, "Racism: Processes of Detachment, Dehumanization, and Hatred," *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (2006): 158

elderly) who were camped under a white flag and American flag indicating their protected status, that criminals were celebrated as heroes.<sup>7</sup> Writer's central argument is that this discursive reversal reveals how racialization operates to exclude Native people from the protections normally afforded to civilian populations. This inversion, where victims are depicted as threats and criminals as defenders, exemplifies what Brown calls the creation of "ungrievable lives," populations considered as "already dead", "less than human" or "threats to civilization", making violence against them seem justified. Brown's central argument is that Judge Holden embodies U.S. legal and political authority during westward expansion, and she demonstrates how McCarthy's novel reveals the limitations of this power, specifically, that "pockets of autonomous life" exist beyond the judge's totalizing control, representing lives that "exist without consent."<sup>8</sup>

Additionally, to analyze how *Blood Meridian* and *Red Dead Redemption 2* illustrate their representations of colonial violence, this analysis employs concepts from narrative theory, particularly focalization, narrative voice and the relationship between story and discourse. Mieke Bal's narratological framework is crucial for understanding how these works construct meaning through form rather than content alone. Bal argues that narrative is fundamentally "a structured act of communication" where "the choice of perspective, the selection and arrangement of events" and linguistic presentation work together to position audiences in specific relationships to represent events.<sup>9</sup> This framework is particularly relevant for comparing McCarthy's detached, ironic narration with RDR2's player-identified focalization through Arthur, producing fundamentally different ethical orientations to colonial violence. Where *Blood Meridian's* narrative distance forces readers to construct their own moral judgments about genocide, RDR2's

---

<sup>7</sup> Jeanette Haynes Writer, "Terrorism in Native America: Interrogating the Past, Examining the Present, and Constructing a Liberatory Future," *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (2002): 323

<sup>8</sup> Lauren Brown, "Existing Without Consent: American History and the Judge in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* 16, no. 1 (2018): 79

<sup>9</sup> Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 376

intimate third-person perspective encourages players to experience Indigenous displacement primarily as context for Arthur's personal redemption arc.

Focalization, defined by Genette as the perspective through which events are perceived and known, proves essential for understanding how the primary sources represent Indigenous people and colonial violence.<sup>10</sup> Building on Genette, Bal distinguishes between "who sees" (the focalizer) and "who speaks" (the narrator), noting that focalization determines not just what information audiences receive but how they are encouraged to interpret it.

In *Blood Meridian*, the distinction is complex. McCarthy employs a third-person narrator who speaks with rhetorical grandeur and biblical cadence, yet frequently filters events through the kid's limited internal focalization. The kid witnesses extreme violence but lacks comprehension or willingness to morally interpret what he sees. Crucially, the narrator does not provide moral condemnation or ethical framework. Instead, the narrator maintains a stance of impersonal observation. This creates what Suzanne Keen calls an "ironic distance," though the distance operates through the focalizer's incomprehension rather than narratorial commentary.<sup>11</sup> The novel's descriptions of Native people emerge through this dual narrative structure: the kid's gaze filtered through McCarthy's narration. When the text describes Indigenous warriors in a negative context or presents them through animal imagery, it performs and exposes the dehumanizing colonial gaze. Readers are never told how to judge the depicted events and must construct their own ethical beliefs from the void. The novel positions them as active interpreters rather than passive recipients of moral instruction.

*Red Dead Redemption 2* employs a fundamentally different narrative structure through its third-person focalization centered on Arthur Morgan. The players, however, are in the split

---

<sup>10</sup> Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 31

<sup>11</sup> Suzanne Keen, *Narrative Form* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 113

position: they are neither Arthur himself nor a traditional narrator. It might be called a “guiding consciousness” that directs Arthur’s actions while experiencing the events through his perceptual and emotional filter. Unlike the kid’s passive witnessing, Arthur functions as an “active focalizer”, a character whose perceptions, judgments, and moral development drive the narrative, as suggested by Ryan.<sup>12</sup> The game encourages player identification with Arthur’s perspective, positioning Native Americans displacement as a tragic but still historically inevitable event. The contrast between McCarthy’s external and ironic narration and the RDR2’s emotionally engaged, character-centered narration reveals how narrative voice shapes the representation of violence. The player experiences violence not through an interpretive void but through Arthur’s developing conscience. This narratological difference fundamentally shapes how each medium represents colonial violence and Indigenous peoples.

As Bal argues, decisions about who focalizes, who narrates, and how perspective is constructed are never neutral but always serve particular ideological functions.<sup>13</sup> Applying this principle to *Blood Meridian* and RDR2 reveals how narrative structure shapes the political meaning of represented violence. McCarthy’s dual structure of the amoral focalizer and the non-interpretive narrator presents colonial violence as a system requiring readers to build their own critical response. RDR2’s emotionally engaged, character-centered focalization encourages players to experience Indigenous displacement as historical tragedy inspiring sympathy towards Arthur’s moral struggle rather than political analysis of settler colonialism’s ongoing structures.

Another framework guiding this analysis is Wayne Booth’s concept of the implied author. Booth distinguishes between the narrator, who may be unreliable or limited, and the implied

---

<sup>12</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 128

<sup>13</sup> Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 161

author that he describes as a system of values and ethical commitments that a reader reconstructs from the work as a whole.<sup>14</sup> The implied author is not a person but a position embedded in every stylistic and structural decision a text makes, even when it never speaks directly. Applying this concept to both texts allows the analysis to move beyond what each narrative depicts.

Both texts engage within the “progress narrative”, the ideological framework that justified colonial violence as necessary for civilization’s advancement. This ideology manifested in multiple forms during the 19th century. As Mukherjee documents, Representative Strother, a Virginia congressman speaking in an 1830 House debate over Indian removal policy, articulated the logic explicitly: “the progress of mankind is asserted and you condemn one of the most beautiful and fertile tracts of the earth to perpetual sterility as the hunting ground of savages.”<sup>15</sup> Mukherjee’s analysis demonstrates how this progress narrative operated as a self-legitimizing system where Indigenous peoples were constructed as obstacles to development, rendering their “elimination or assimilation framed as historically inevitable and morally justified.” This framework is essential for understanding both *Blood Meridian* and RDR2’s engagement with westward expansion because it reveals the ideological machinery that transformed violence into virtue. Where Mukherjee identifies how the progress narrative directly connects to capitalism, with the Glanton Gang transforming genocide into “profitable enterprise” where scalps serve as “proof of kills and currency for payment”, both primary texts depict this same system. However, they differ dramatically in their treatment of its consequences: McCarthy’s novel exposes the horror of this commodification, while RDR2 uses the Wapiti’s dispossession primarily as moral

---

<sup>14</sup> Wayne C. Booth, "Resurrection of the Implied Author: Why Bother?" in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 76

<sup>15</sup> Souvik Mukherjee, "Videogames and Post Colonialism: An Introduction," in *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 10

backdrop for Arthur's personal transformation, potentially reinforcing the progress narrative's underlying assumptions about whose stories matter.

## **Systematic Violence and Dehumanization**

What makes genocide possible is rarely only hatred, it requires a prior ideological system that makes categories or obstacles out of human beings. This chapter examines how each text constructs and utilizes dehumanization as a precondition for physical destruction. It is divided into two parts: the first looks at how racialized dehumanization is used to justify colonial violence, and the second examines the apocalyptic and ritualistic forms that brutality takes once that logic is established.

### *Racialized Dehumanization as Justification*

Colonial violence in both *Blood Meridian* and *Red Dead Redemption 2* rests upon the systematic reduction of Native Americans to subhuman status, which is a precondition for a more successful arrangement of genocide. McCarthy's novel establishes this framework explicitly through dialogue that articulates the westward expansion. When Captain White states, "What we are dealing with ... is a race of degenerates. A mongrel race, little better than niggers. And maybe no better. There is no government in Mexico. Hell, there's no God in Mexico. Never will be. We are dealing with a people manifestly incapable of governing themselves," the text exposes the logic of colonial racism.<sup>16</sup> The white characters consider Indigenous people to be inferior, therefore their elimination is not only justified but necessary for the civilization's advancement. The comparison to enslaved African Americans through the use of racial slur reveals how white supremacy functions as an interconnected system of oppression, where one

---

<sup>16</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 32.

marginalized group's dehumanization reinforces another's. This dehumanization operates through the construction of Native people as fundamentally alien and threatening. McCarthy's description of the Karankawas on that same page, "tall and austere, their faces dyed blue and their hands locked about the shafts of their sixfoot spears, all but naked savages who with their painted skins and their whispered taste for human flesh seemed outrageous presences even in that fabled company," employs the image that transforms Indigenous cultural practices into signs of savagery. The emphasis on nakedness, body modification and rumored cannibalism constructs the Native body itself as grotesque and dangerous. The phrase "outrageous presences" suggests that their existence constitutes an offence to the civilization, while the qualifier "even in that fabled company" admits the Glanton Gang itself is already composed of violent and morally corrupt men, yet the narrator still positions the Natives as more unacceptable than scalp-hunters.<sup>17</sup>

The statements "The Apaches won't even shoot [their enemies]. They kill them with rocks" further demonstrates how dehumanization operates through the portrayal of Indigenous warfare as primitive and cruel.<sup>18</sup> By emphasizing the method of killing rather than the act itself, the narrator constructs the tribal tactics as evidence of their savage nature, ignoring the context of armed conflict and resistance to invasion that was started by the "progressive" settlers. This rhetorical strategy allows white violence to appear as a civilized response to barbaric threat, even as the Glanton Gang engages in scalp-hunting that treats human bodies as products for profit, which is far more brutal than the Natives' actions.

*Red Dead Redemption 2* illustrates a different form of dehumanization through narrative marginalization. By relegating the Native American storyline to a main quest as an additional

---

<sup>17</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 37

<sup>18</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 32

historical context only, the game still focuses not on the oppressed ones but on the identity of Arthur Morgan and Dutch van der Linde, white male members of the gang, making the protagonist more compassionate and the antagonist more egoistic. The issue of colonization remains a subplot which structurally reproduces the historical erasure of Indigenous experiences from American consciousness. This game design-related choice mirrors how American society has historically treated Indigenous genocide as peripheral to national mythology rather than foundational to it. The game thus replicates colonial violence through its structure, making Indigenous suffering separate from the “real” story of American frontier life.

Wang’s observation that “*Blood Meridian* casts whiteness as an ideology whose existence can only be entrenched through settler colonial violence, most prominently via the judge’s meditations on epistemology and the production of historical knowledge” reveals how dehumanization functions not as prejudice but as constitutive of white identity itself.<sup>19</sup> Whiteness cannot exist without the production of racial others who must be dominated or even eliminated. Judge Holden, the novel’s antagonist, described as “some great pale deity” embodies this principle. His whiteness is simultaneously a physical attribute and a metaphorical force. The description positions him as a god-like figure whose pale skin represents not just race but a principle that places white supremacy at the center of the universe. This theological framing suggests that racial hierarchy is treated as natural law rather than human construction.

The narrative strategies employed in both texts reveal how focalization and narrative voice shape the dehumanization process itself. In *Blood Meridian*, the kid has limited focalization and McCarthy’s narrator refuses to provide moral interpretation. This narrative structure forces readers to confront the dehumanizing language directly. When Captain White

---

<sup>19</sup> Kyle Wang, "Cormac McCarthy's Racial Fictions: Race in *Blood Meridian*'s Colonial Imagination," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 10, no. 1 (2023): 25

describes Indigenous peoples or when the narrator depicts the Karankawas through a narrator who maintains ironic distance, these descriptions emerge without narrative condemnation, creating an unsettling effect where readers must actively resist the dehumanizing gaze rather than passively receiving authorial judgment.

RDR2 employs internal focalization through Arthur Morgan, with a heterodiegetic narrator who remains largely effaced behind Arthur's perceptual and emotional perspective. This focalization frames Indigenous displacement through sympathetic yet resigned perception: Arthur witnesses injustice but ultimately accepts its historical inevitability and moves on in accordance with the main storyline. The game's narrative voice positions Wapiti as tragic victims deserving sympathy rather than as central subjects to their own story. This focalization choice naturalizes the view that Indigenous elimination, while regrettable, was unavoidable. The narrative structure itself thus participates in erasure by making white moral development the primary concern while Indigenous survival remains secondary.

McCarthy's narrative strategies extend beyond focalization to the level of typography and linguistic presentation itself. As Bal argues, narrative discourse encompasses not merely what is told but how the telling is materially constructed on the page.<sup>20</sup> McCarthy's manipulation of capitalization performs racial hierarchy at the typographic level. The use of capital letters for white nations and lowercase for Native Americans means that "Americans" receives typographic dignity while "indians" does not. It suggests that white national identities deserve proper noun status and grammatical respect, while Indigenous identities remain common and unworthy of capitalization. The narrator sustains the lowercase throughout the entire novel and not just once,

---

<sup>20</sup> Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 146.

so that the degradation becomes something regular and common. As a result, readers stop viewing it as a choice, it turns into a fact they simply accept.

### *Apocalyptic and Ritualistic Violence*

McCarthy's narrative transforms frontier violence into something mythic and timeless, what Willbern describes as "the endless iteration of unrestrained violence, what Judge Holden extols as the "dance" of war".<sup>21</sup> In the novel, the passage describing the Natives,

A legion of horrors, hundreds in number, half naked or clad in costumes attic or biblical or wardrobed out of a fevered dream with the skins of animals and silk finery and pieces of uniform still tracked with the blood of prior owners... and the horsemen's faces gaudy and grotesque with daubings like a company of mounted clowns, death hilarious, all howling in a barbarous tongue.<sup>22</sup>

presents violence as theater or some dark carnival. The imagery confuses temporal and cultural boundaries, as the costumes refer to Ancient Greece while the old uniform acknowledges stolen military clothes that serves as evidence for their victories. The phrase "death hilarious" personifies death as a comedian and violence as entertainment. The comparison to "mounted clowns" with face paint transforms Indigenous warriors into figures of mockery even as they inspire terror. This dual movement of representing Indigenous peoples simultaneously dangerous and degraded characterizes the inability to recognize Native humanity. They must be threatening enough to justify violence against them yet inferior enough to confirm white supremacy.

The episode with Judge Holden and the Apache child represents violence's most disturbing incarnation. The sequence is paced to maximize horror: "The judge sat with the Apache boy before the fire and it watched everything with dark berry eyes and some of the men played with it and made it laugh and they gave it jerky and it sat chewing and watching gravely

---

<sup>21</sup> David Willbern, "Dialogic Frontiers: History and Psychology in *Lonesome Dove* and *Blood Meridian*," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 70, no. 1 (2014): 82

<sup>22</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 49

the figures that passed above it. They covered it with a blanket and in the morning the judge was dandling it on one knee while the men saddled their horses”.<sup>23</sup> While “it” has a minor historical usage for infants of unspecified sex in English, the child in the novel is clearly a boy, making the narrator’s use of “it” an act of linguistic dehumanization rather than grammatical convention. The image of the Judge “dandling it on one knee” illustrates paternal affection which creates false expectation of protection since then “Toadvine saw him with the child as he passed with his saddle but when he came back ten minutes later leading his horse the child was dead and the judge had scalped it”.<sup>24</sup> The temporal marker here emphasizes how such murders turned into a routine for them. The child's death is reported with horrifying flatness, no description of the killing itself, just its outcome. Again, the child dies not because the Judge hates him but because its scalp has value. This might be more disturbing than rage-fueled murder since it suggests violence with absence of any human emotion, turning killing into an economic transaction.

*Red Dead Redemption 2*’s interactive medium creates a different relationship to violence. Players must actively participate in encounters with Native characters, shoot enemies to help them and attend their reservation. This interactivity generates procedural rhetoric that the game’s systems make arguments about how the world works. As helping the Wapiti tribe provides in-game rewards (honor points or money), the game commercializes Indigenous problems, turning resistance to genocide into “market”. The scene where Eagle Flies saves Arthur by causing an explosion after the protagonist steals Cornwall documents demonstrates how the game positions Native characters as supporting cast in white characters’ stories. Even when Indigenous characters perform heroic actions, they do so in service of white character development and player satisfaction.

---

<sup>23</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 140

<sup>24</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 141

## The Ideology of Progress

Both primary sources situate colonial violence within a broader ideological framework that turns genocide into a historically inevitable necessity. The progress narrative, a belief that westward expansion represents civilization's advance, provided the moral cover under which Indigenous elimination was not only permitted but celebrated. This section examines how that belief operates economically and racially across both mediums, and how its assumptions continue to structure American identity long after the frontier officially closed.

### *Economic Incentivization*

The transformation of genocide into profitable enterprise reveals how capitalism drives the ideology of progress and westward expansion. *Blood Meridian's* Glanton Gang operates within an explicit economic framework. They are contracted to kill Native Americans for bounty money, with scalps serving as proof of kills and currency for payment. This commercialization of Indigenous bodies positions violence as necessary labor in the march of civilization, transforming murder into economic development and genocide into business strategy. When McCarthy describes "the dried scalps of slaughtered indians strung on cords, the long dull hair swinging like the filaments of certain seaforms and the dry hides clapping against the stones," the scalps are simultaneously trophies and decorative objects.<sup>25</sup> The narrator's comparison aestheticizes the remains, transforming evidence of violence into something beautiful. It particularly shows how the logic of progress can absorb and normalize even horrific acts of murder as inevitable costs of expansion. Because payment depends on scalp production, gang members have material interest in maximizing kills regardless of actual threat or necessity. Their violence becomes justified as a productive contribution to Manifest Destiny. Quotes like "The

---

<sup>25</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 67

dead lay awash in the shallows like the victims of some disaster at sea and they were strewn along the salt foreshore in a havoc of blood and entrails”<sup>26</sup> present Indigenous death as natural disaster, an inevitable catastrophe rather than murder motivated by profit. The passive construction here obscures agency, making it unclear who is performing the killing, as if the bodies arranged themselves. This linguistic choice mirrors how ideologies of progress conceal moral responsibility, the gang members are simply fulfilling their role in America’s inevitable westward expansion.

*Red Dead Redemption 2* reshapes this economic violence for the industrial age, showing how corporate capitalism becomes the new engine of Manifest Destiny. The Cornwall Company’s demand that the Wapiti tribe leave their reservation is motivated by oil extraction, progress measured in barrels rather than scalps. In this quest Arthur must steal a file from the Leland Oil Development Company, which presents the settlers’ craving for progress and indifference towards the fates of the locals. The logic is that if something is in the way of American expansion and industrial dominance, it must be removed. The documents here represent the legal and bureaucratic systems that transform theft into property rights, displacement into development and genocide into progress. The Cornwall Company is a metaphor for American capitalism in its financial and industrial forms, and the destruction these forces created both domestically and internationally, correlating to banker J.P.Morgan and oil industrialist John D.Rockefeller.<sup>27</sup> The parallel between historical capitalists and the game’s villain illuminates how individual greed perpetuates the larger ideology of inevitable progress

---

<sup>26</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 134

<sup>27</sup> Hilary Jane Locke and Thomas Ashley Mackay, "'You Are a True Progressive': Red Dead Redemption 2 and the Depiction and Reception of Progressive Era Politics," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 20, no. 1 (2021): 185

and modernization. The Cornwall Company does not personally hate the Wapiti, they simply want the land's resources and Indigenous people are simply obstacles on the way to that goal.

The U.S. military's confiscation of the tribe's horses demonstrates how state power enforces the economic vision of progress. Without horses, the Wapiti cannot hunt and it would consequently lead to starvation. The military action is not a direct massacre but a manufactured famine, a slower violence that produces the same eliminationist result while maintaining the appearance of lawful progress. Their logic is that they are not murdering the Natives directly as in the novel, but that the Natives are simply failing to adapt to the inevitable match of civilization and modernization. Arthur's mercenary relationship to the Wapiti issue reveals how capitalism incorporates even resistance into the logic of progress. He helps the tribe but for money as he gets hired. His assistance is commercialized labor, not solidarity. This positions Indigenous survival as something that must be purchased within the economic system that displaces them, even aid becomes a transaction in the machinery of Manifest Destiny.

The game's most explicit statement of this economic logic comes not only from the Cornwall Company but from within Arthur's own gang. In the "Favored Sons" mission, Dutch van der Linde reveals his true motivation for involving the gang with the Wapiti: "Everyone will blame everything on the Indian problem, and we'll disappear." When Arthur challenges him "So... you're using them?" Dutch calls it to be "mutually beneficial" but the structure of the exchange is unambiguous; the tribe's political visibility is being monetized as cover for a robbery. This mirrors the Glanton Gang's relationship to Indigenous bodies in *Blood Meridian*. In both cases, Native American suffering is transformed into an instrument of white economic gain: in McCarthy's novel through the commodification of corpses, and in RDR2 through the use of Indigenous political crisis as a distraction. The difference is that the game frames Dutch's

exploitation as villainy and Arthur's recognition as moral growth, although the player cannot refuse from participating in it, whereas *Blood Meridian* rejects redemptive framing; the economic logic is shown to be constitutive of the entire enterprise.

### *Whiteness as Constructed Ideology and Historical Continuity*

Both *Blood Meridian* and *Red Dead Redemption 2* expose whiteness not as a biological fact but as an ideological construction that requires continuous violence to maintain its coherence. McCarthy reveals this through the multilayered composition of the Glanton Gang itself, where white American identity must be constantly performed and policed. When “man named Tate from Kentucky who had fought with McCulloch's Rangers” intervenes to silence a conversation,<sup>28</sup> the text shows how white solidarity operates through exclusion and hierarchy even within the group of mercenaries. The mention of military service through McCulloch's Rangers and the judge's approval of his people's “military bearing”<sup>29</sup> establish military history as credential; a proof of belonging to the racial project of westward expansion. This demonstrates that whiteness is not inherited but earned through participation in genocide, transforming violence from moral crisis into initiation ritual. The need to constantly reassert these boundaries reveals the fundamental instability of racial categories. If whiteness was natural or self-evident, such policing would be unnecessary.

This ideological construction depends on what scholars identified as “wounded whiteness”, the performance of white victimhood that justifies preemptive violence. As Laminack argues, “wounded whiteness is thus a powerful fantasy, a fiction of its own making, and a performance of complicity with historical violence”.<sup>30</sup> *Blood Meridian* enacts this through

---

<sup>28</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 86

<sup>29</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 77

<sup>30</sup> Zachary S. Laminack, “Inhabiting Indianness: Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer* and the Phenomenology of White Sincerity,” *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 29, no. 4 (2017): 51

Captain White's rhetoric, which positions white Americans as defenders against existential threats rather than aggressors. His claim that the Natives are "manifestly incapable of governing themselves" transforms invasion into rescue mission and restoration of natural order. *Red Dead Redemption 2* similarly employs this logic through its protagonist Arthur Morgan, a white outlaw who is positioned in the plot as a victim of government persecution and industrial progress. The game allows players to experience this wounded whiteness firsthand, Arthur's gang is indeed being hunted and displaced, creating emotional identification with his plight. Yet this sympathetic framing exists in contrast to the Wapiti tribe's actual displacement, illustrating how white grievance overshadows Indigenous genocide. The game's narrative structure prioritizes Arthur's personal issues and further character development while relegating Native suffering to optional content, performing the exact erasure it occasionally critiques.

The generational transmission of violence reveals how colonization functions as inherited ideology rather than isolated historical events. McCarthy's description that "They'd learnt war by warring, the generations driven from the eastern shore across a continent, from the ashes at Gnadenhutzen onto the prairies and across the outlet to the bloodlands of the west" traces violence as learned behavior passed from father to son.<sup>31</sup> The phrase "learnt by warring" suggests violence as education, a curriculum of dispossession that each generation masters. The reference to Gnadenhutzen, the 1782 massacre of Christian Delaware Indians, connects the novel's 1850s setting to earlier genocidal precedents, demonstrating that frontier violence is not spontaneous savagery but systematic practice with deep roots. *Red Dead Redemption 2* reinforces this continuity by setting its narrative in 1899, when the violence McCarthy depicts has been replaced by civilization and law. Yet the Wapiti tribe's forced removal shows that genocide has merely changed form, from scalp bounties to legal dispossession and from gang violence to

---

<sup>31</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 120

corporate expansion. The game's historical setting invites players to recognize that the romanticized "wild west" was built on Indigenous elimination, and that this displacement continued long after the frontier supposedly closed in 1890. Both narratives thus depict colonization as a tragic ongoing ideological project that continues to structure American identity.

## **Medium and Audience**

Depicting colonial violence and taking responsibility for how it is depicted are not the same thing. This section turns from content of two texts to their forms, examining how the narrative structures of a novel and a videogame position their audiences in different relationships to the history they represent.

### *Narrative Authority and Complicity*

The difference between *Blood Meridian* and *Red Dead Redemption 2* lies not as much in their content as in how their respective media position audiences in relation to colonial violence. McCarthy's novel employs a strategy where the absence of moral commentary creates an interpretive void in which readers must navigate themselves. The kid witnesses the massacre of Tigua villagers, the murder of the Apache child and other acts of brutality, yet neither he nor the narrator provides ethical judgment. When McCarthy writes, "... nor would this clamor diminish from the first moment the riders entered the village,"<sup>32</sup> the sentence's simplicity provides no dramatization. The violence simply occurs, presented with the same flat affect as descriptions of landscape or weather.

McCarthy's refusal of moral commentary has antecedents in the history of prose fiction. As Jan Nordby Gretlund argues, *Blood Meridian* represents "an impressive treatment of what is a

---

<sup>32</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 133

main theme in American literature from James Fenimore Cooper until today, i.e., man's inhumanity to man," but it distinguishes itself from that tradition specifically by refusing the romanticization that characterized earlier frontier writing.<sup>33</sup> While Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*, such as *The Last of the Mohicans* framed frontier violence within a mythology of heroic conquest and civilizational progress, McCarthy removes that completely. The result is not indifference but an intended strategy which Gretlund identifies as McCarthy's method of showing rather than saying and communicating horror through "a steady accumulation of grotesque images."<sup>34</sup> The violence is defamiliarized because the absence of traditionalized narrative conventions denies readers the interpretive comfort that would let them look away from what is actually being described. This withdrawal of narratorial authority forces readers into an uncomfortable position. They must construct their own moral framework without guidance, experiencing what Keen identifies as the "productive discomfort of ironic distance".<sup>35</sup> The novel demands that readers recognize genocide as obnoxious without being told it is so.

Ricky Shear argues that this narrative withdrawal does not show lack of compassion but rather demands a more complicated understanding of a text. *Blood Meridian's* externalist narration forces readers to actively construct characters' minds from behavioral evidence, producing what Shear calls "difficult empathy": self-conscious, effortful moral engagement that passive identification cannot achieve.<sup>36</sup> This clarifies the ethical logic of McCarthy's strategy: the interpretive void is not nihilistic, it burdens readers with the responsibility of witnessing. *RDR2*, by contrast, delivers empathy pre-packaged, producing what Shear identifies as "passive

---

<sup>33</sup> Jan Nordby Gretlund, "Cormac McCarthy and the American Literary Tradition: Wording the End," in *Intertextual and Interdisciplinary Approaches to Cormac McCarthy: Borders and Crossings*, ed. Nicholas Monk (New York: Routledge, 2011), 63

<sup>34</sup> Jan Nordby Gretlund, "Cormac McCarthy and the American Literary Tradition: Wording the End," in *Intertextual and Interdisciplinary Approaches to Cormac McCarthy: Borders and Crossings*, ed. Nicholas Monk (New York: Routledge, 2011), 66

<sup>35</sup> Suzanne Keen, *Narrative Form* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 116

<sup>36</sup> Ricky Shear, "Struggling toward Empathic Witness in *Blood Meridian*." *Studies in the Novel* 57, no. 1 (2025), 63

empathy”, a feeling requiring minimal effort that is emotionally satisfying but leaves the player’s assumptions about what to experience unchallenged. However, it might be disadvantageous from the psychological perspective as it often has the potential to fetishise the pain of the other.<sup>37</sup> It results in a reader lacking cultural and social context because of which he does not even question what content is consumed.

This narrative stance has a further literary dimension in the treatment of Indigenous peoples themselves. The textual evidence of *Blood Meridian* reveals a contradiction in its narration. The same narrator who describes the Diegueno as offering water “out of a gourd” and providing a “stew of lizards and pocketmice” to desperate travelers, noting that “they would have died if the indians had not found them,” labels these same people “savages” and describes their homes as “crude huts” with “a population of filthy and beggarly creatures.”<sup>38</sup> Diegueno’s act of saving the kid’s life has no positive comments while the narrator’s attitude toward them remains arrogant. This illustrates how morality of literary text is not always going in the same direction as the narrator’s linguistic choice since those described in degrading terms are the ones performing acts of humanity despite the genocide against them. This is not a failure of the novel’s ethics, conversely, it is a demonstration of how racist ideology operates by severing the observable human behavior from the categories used to describe it, as suggested by John Ferer.<sup>39</sup> The reader who notices this gap between what the narrator says and what the text shows is performing the critical analysis the novel demands.

It can be drawn directly on what Flaubert theorized as “impersonal” writing which implies the disappearance of the author behind the text so that style itself becomes the only moral

---

<sup>37</sup> Lauren Weber, "The Foggy Window: Passive Empathy and the Fight for Testimonial Reading in Neoliberal Higher Education," in *Using Social Theory in Higher Education* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 130

<sup>38</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 252

<sup>39</sup> John Ferer, "From Blue to Blood: Jean Toomer's 'Blue Meridian' and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* as Intertexts," in *Intertextual and Interdisciplinary Approaches to Cormac McCarthy: Borders and Crossings*, ed. Nicholas Monk (New York: Routledge, 2011), 207

instrument available to the reader.<sup>40</sup> This principle was later developed by Hemingway into his “theory of omission.” Kim Moreland in *The Hemingway Review* writes that he first applied this stylistic choice in *Death in the Afternoon* (1932), employing the iceberg as its governing metaphor and returned to it multiple times over thirty years; Hemingway himself claimed he used it in his unpublished essay *The Art of the Short Story* and in *A Moveable Feast* (1964).<sup>41</sup> Hemingway noted that what is omitted from a text carries more weight than what is stated because absence of something forces the reader into an active position of completing it. Moreland further mentions that “the structures of literature ... imply more than they state and make us feel more than we know” referring to a quality his literary circle in Paris understood as a sign of a serious modernist approach. McCarthy’s flat declarative sentences about violence rely on the same logic; the horror is submerged beneath the prose’s surface. Readers see only “the tip of an iceberg” but what is implied remains felt rather than stated. When the narrator describes the massacre of the Tigua in the same manner as when the gang just has dinner near the campfire, the omission of moral comment is itself a moral act as it refuses to aestheticize the cruelty by using the language of tragedy or heroism.

RDR2, by contrast, positions players within a framework of clear moral guidance. The game does not depict sympathy for the Wapiti only through dialogues or cinematography, it encodes it into game mechanics in ways that structurally prevent ideological resistance. When the player enters the Wapiti reservation, the game displays the prompt: “You cannot use weapons in this area”. This restriction is typically not applied in towns and settlements of White Americans where weapons are allowed but trigger law enforcement intervention. The

---

<sup>40</sup> Brian Nelson, *The Cambridge Introduction to French Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 123

<sup>41</sup> Kim Moreland, "Just the Tip of the Iceberg Theory: Hemingway and Sherwood Anderson's 'Loneliness,'" *The Hemingway Review* 19, no. 2 (2000): 47

developers' logic presents Indigenous land as a zone of peace requiring white protection rather than sovereign territory whose inhabitants are capable of defending themselves. This moral pre-scripting extends into the mechanics of individual missions. In "Archeology for Beginners," Arthur suggests help with retrieving chanupa, a sacred pipe stolen by drunk American soldiers who destroyed the tents on the Natives, for Rains Fall's healing ritual. The game suggests the player completing the mission by stealth and if Arthur kills any soldiers, Rains Fall responds with visible disappointment. Even violence directed at those who have already committed an act of desecration against the tribe is framed as a moral failing. The chief's disapproval makes the player choose an option of restraint as if the most appropriate response to colonial theft is patience but never resistance.

The game's moral coding of its two Native leaders follows a similar logic. Eagle Flies, the chief's son who is in favor of armed resistance to reclaim Wapiti land, gets killed in a mission "My Last Boy". He dies in sacrifice for Arthur, a white man, with his last words being "You saved my life for more than once... to give mine for your... it's as it should be." Having been used first by Dutch and then by the narrative itself, Eagle Flies is punished for his refusal of a peaceful solution with a death that is heroic and conclusive. Rains Fall, who has always been against a war, stays alive although being way older and even then claims that "The army aren't all bad men, just as my people aren't all good," leading his people to Canada. The political message about the proper response for colonial dispossession that the game carries frames violent reassertion of Indigenous sovereignty as tragic and misguided and rewards pacifist treaties that serve the white protagonist's moral arc more than it serves the Wapiti.

When Arthur helps the tribe, the game's honor system provides feedback through increasing his reputation and affecting how NPCs respond to him. This creates a moral economy

where ethical choices generate tangible rewards within the game world. This moral pre-scripting extends to the game's cinematography: high honor produces heroic, cinematic kill-camera angles while low honor triggers grimmer, red-tinted framings of the same acts. The camera makes choices intended by developers to be visually pleasurable and misdeeds to be visually ugly. The player experiences Arthur's internal focalization directly: his journal entries express sympathy for the tribe's condition, and the game's musical score intensifies the melancholy during scenes of Native suffering. Unlike *Blood Meridian's* reader, who maintains analytical distance even while reading descriptions of violence, RDR2's player is encouraged to emotionally identify with Arthur's moral journey. The game does not leave ethical interpretation open; it guides players toward recognizing injustice while framing events as historically inevitable in any outcome.

What is significant here is not simply that the two texts signal morality differently, but that they engage different cognitive mechanisms in their audiences. Monika Fludernik's concept of experientiality is useful as it suggests that narrative generates engagement by activating cognitive parameters drawn from lived experience, including embodiment, intentionality and emotionally charged temporality. Caracciolo extends this by arguing that experientiality constitutes "a complex, dynamic relation in which real-world and story-driven experiences become intertwined," such that narrative can produce "shifts and changes" in the recipient's understanding of the world.<sup>42</sup> RDR2's honor system exploits this mechanism: rather than simply showing indigenous displacement, the game draws the player's own sense of agency and moral reward into the experience, making the players an active participant in the emotional response the game has already scripted for them. The empathy players feel for the Wapiti is not simply delivered by the text, as in literature, but is actively produced through the player's own

---

<sup>42</sup> Marco Caracciolo, *The Experientiality of Narrative: An Enactivist Approach* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 46

participation. This is the deeper meaning of what Arsenopoulou identifies as Ideological Perspective (IPoV) in videogames. The mechanics of the game, in this case dialogue options that allow no ideological resistance, and a reward system that monetizes sympathy, “force players to suspend his own ideological values and align with the character’s”.<sup>43</sup> The player’s moral positioning is not chosen but manufactured.

This variation in narrative authority creates different forms of complicity. *Blood Meridian*’s readers’ complicity is passive but conscious, a deliberate engagement that refuses to provide moral comfort as they choose to keep reading. RDR2’s players, however, are implicated through action. To progress the narrative, players must physically enact assistance to the Wapiti. Even players who wish to resist the game’s narrative cannot do so, the story of the whole gang will not advance without their participation. This creates a paradox of interactive narrative: the player’s agency is both promised and denied. Players feel they are making meaningful choices through Arthur, yet those choices are predetermined by *Rockstar*’s developers. The game creates an illusion of meaningful action in the present moment of play, but the Wapiti’s disappearance is fixed regardless of what the player does. The player’s sense of rescuing the tribe is false as their elimination, shown through the disappearance from the map, was written into the game before the player ever engaged with their story.

The question of which medium is more effective at generating meaningful engagement with colonial violence may be unanswerable. *Blood Meridian*’s narrative withdrawal risks allowing readers to aestheticize violence, appreciating McCarthy’s prose while still keeping distance from the horror it describes. As Jonathan Boulter observes in his review of *Blood Meridian* comparing it with canonical prose stylists including Proust and Huysmans, McCarthy’s

---

<sup>43</sup> Natalia Arsenopoulou, Anna Poupou, and Charalampos Rizopoulos, "Focalization in Video Games," in *Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference of the ACM Greek SIGCHI Chapter*, Syros, Greece, September 24–26, 2025 (New York: ACM, 2025), 100

work is defined by a relation between aesthetics and violence in which the text's formal qualities become inseparable from its ethical demands; the reader cannot simply "appreciate the style" without confronting what that style is doing to the represented violence.<sup>44</sup> The same Flaubertian impersonality that demands active moral analysis can also permit passive aesthetic appreciation. RDR2's interactive design risks transforming Indigenous suffering into gameplay content, where helping the tribe becomes another mission to complete for rewards. When the honor system makes Indigenous survival a resource for white character development, it replicates the economic logic the game critiques. What both texts reveal is that representation itself, whether through withdrawal or identification, cannot fully resolve the issue of non-Indigenous artists constructing narratives about Native American elimination primarily for non-Native consumers. The ethical failure may be structural rather than medium-specific.

### *The Implied Author and Cultural Reach*

Examining the implied author of both sources clarifies why this ethical failure is structural rather than incidental. Wayne Booth's concept of the implied author specifies not the narrator but the system of authorial values (ethical, aesthetic and ideological) that the reader reconstructs from the work as a whole. The implied author is not the flesh-and-blood author but a superior self constructed through the act of composition. As Booth argues, authors build this version of themselves by eliminating what they dislike about their own character: "in wiping out the selves they do not like, the poets have created versions that elevate both their worlds and ours."<sup>45</sup> This constructed self is therefore distinct from the narrator, who may be unreliable or limited, and instead represents the ethical intelligence embedded in every stylistic decision the

---

<sup>44</sup> Jonathan Boulter, review of *Four Moments of Aesthetic Experience: Reading Huysmans, Proust, McCarthy, and Cusk*, by Bryan Counter, *The Comparatist* 49 (November 2025): 292

<sup>45</sup> Wayne C. Booth, "Resurrection of the Implied Author: Why Bother?" in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 85

work makes, even when it never speaks directly. For Booth, this implied author cannot “withdraw” from a moral perspective. The choice to present violence without comment is itself a moral stance that the reader is suggested to reconstruct from the work as a whole.

In *Blood Meridian*, the implied author’s moral position must be understood in relation to the narrator’s apparent amorality. The narrator is flat, observational, indifferent and not the same as the implied author. What McCarthy’s implied author does is to construct a text in which the gap between the narrator’s language and the ethical weight of the described events becomes the site of the novel’s meaning. The Diegueno example is applicable here; the narrator calls people “savages” while noting that they saved the protagonist’s life, so his reliability is undermined by the text’s own evidence. The implied author criticizes the narrator’s racism instead of supporting it. This is the ethical intelligence Booth describes: “most critics are admitting, some only tacitly, that great fiction educates us ethically — unless we misread it.”<sup>46</sup> The risk of misreading *Blood Meridian* as glorification of violence can be possible but this risk is itself a part of the novel’s ethical design. The reader who does not notice the gap between narrator and implied author has failed the interpretive possibility that the work provides.

*Blood Meridian*’s implied author commits to anti-mythological withdrawal by refusing romanticization, redemption, and moral guidance. It positions itself in contrast to the Romantic literary tradition exemplified by Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales*, in which frontier violence was aestheticized as heroic adventure, and in which the elimination of Indigenous peoples was framed as the necessary cost of civilization.<sup>47</sup> John Ferer, comparing *Blood Meridian* to Jean Toomer’s *Blue Meridian*, identifies in McCarthy’s novel a “pessimistic view of man’s ability to

---

<sup>46</sup> Wayne C. Booth, “Resurrection of the Implied Author: Why Bother?” in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 76

<sup>47</sup> Jan Nordby Gretlund, “Cormac McCarthy and the American Literary Tradition: Wording the End,” in *Intertextual and Interdisciplinary Approaches to Cormac McCarthy: Borders and Crossings*, ed. Nicholas Monk (New York: Routledge, 2011), 63

reunite and transcend” that distinguishes his work from any tradition that finds redemptive possibility in violence.<sup>48</sup> The implied author here forces a confrontation with what the frontier was.

RDR2’s implied author occupies a different position. One of commercial progressivism that signals sympathy for Indigenous peoples through surface-level representation while committing structurally to the white protagonist as the frame for all moral meanings. The difference between these two implied author positions mirrors the difference in the media: McCarthy’s implied author constructs an ethical demand on the reader. *Rockstar’s* interactive design, by contrast, absorbs that demand into the game’s mechanics, producing the appearance of ethical engagement without the critical reflection it requires. Both positions aspire to ethical representation but Booth’s framework also requires us to ask whether those aspirations are realized in the text as received by actual audiences. Booth is clear that to understand the implied author, the reconstruction requires active participation that the game’s pre-scripted moral system discourages. As he argues, the reader’s task is to join the implied author in “full engagement” and “full achievement”; a text that scripts its own reception forecloses that joining before it begins.<sup>49</sup>

The risk of misreading is increased by the asymmetry of cultural reach between the two texts. *Blood Meridian* reaches a primarily literary readership already familiar with critical engagement. RDR2, which sold over seventy million copies worldwide by 2025,<sup>50</sup> reaches a far larger and more diverse global audience, one that may encounter the American frontier primarily through interactive media rather than historical texts. Lisa Gilbert's study of students playing

---

<sup>48</sup> John Ferer, "From Blue to Blood: Jean Toomer's 'Blue Meridian' and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* as Intertexts," in *Intertextual and Interdisciplinary Approaches to Cormac McCarthy: Borders and Crossings*, ed. Nicholas Monk (New York: Routledge, 2011), 208

<sup>49</sup> Wayne C. Booth, "Resurrection of the Implied Author: Why Bother?" in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 86

<sup>50</sup> Blake, Red Dead Redemption 2 Now the Fourth Best-Selling Video Game of All Time

*Assassin's Creed*, a narrative videogame with comparable historical events, offers empirical grounding for this concern. Gilbert found that students consistently believed their gameplay experiences translated to “real insight about the lived experiences of people in the past,” experiencing a feeling of seamless historical access that they did not subject to critical analysis.<sup>51</sup> They trusted the game designers’ version of history to an extent they did not apply to their textbooks, because the design produced a sense of having directly witnessed historical events. The implication of RDR2 is direct: for millions of players with no prior engagement with the history of American settler colonialism, the game’s narrative choices constitute the primary framework through which they interpret this history. Drawing on Caracciolo’s account of experientiality as a dynamic relation between narrative and the recipient’s experiential background,<sup>52</sup> we can assume that RDR2 does not represent settler colonialism but reshapes how its audience will encounter and interpret that history in future contexts. At this scale, the narrative choices embedded in RDR2’s design allow players to participate in the broader cultural negotiation over how settler colonialism is remembered, justified or challenged in the present.

This brings into relief the structural limit that neither medium can fully overcome. Both *Blood Meridian* and RDR2 are produced within the ongoing settler colonial context they represent, by non-Indigenous creators whose narrative choices inevitably organize Indigenous experience around non-Native viewing positions. Getting back to Allen, settler colonialism is not a historical event that concluded but an ongoing structure in which colonizers remain permanently settled on appropriated land.<sup>53</sup> The stories told about Indigenous elimination are therefore not produced from outside that structure but from within it, shaped by the same

---

<sup>51</sup> Lisa Gilbert, "'Assassin's Creed Reminds Us That History Is Human Experience': Students' Senses of Empathy While Playing a Narrative Video Game," *Theory & Research in Social Education* 47, no. 1 (2019): 130

<sup>52</sup> Marco Caracciolo, "Experientiality," in *the living handbook of narratology*, ed. Peter Hühn et al. (Hamburg: Hamburg University, 2014), PDF p. 3

<sup>53</sup> Chadwick Allen, "Postcolonial Theory and the Discourse of Treaties," *American Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (2000): 63

ideological conditions they claim to represent. This is not to dismiss either work's critical potential. *Blood Meridian*'s refusal of redemption narrative and RDR2's insistence on the humanity of the Wapiti both represent interventions in how American culture represents its own history. But both texts ultimately remain organized around the question of how non-Indigenous audiences should feel about colonial violence, rather than around Indigenous perspectives on their own survival and sovereignty. If racialization requires continuous ideological work to sustain itself, as Dalal argues,<sup>54</sup> then its undoing demands the same effort in the opposite direction. Humanization and recognition are not achieved once but must be actively and persistently constructed, and that construction. In the interpretive labor demanded by the novel that refuses to tell readers what to think, and in design choices of a game that, for all its progressive signaling, still framed Indigenous peoples' fate as a subplot in a white outlaw's story.

## Conclusion

The comparison between *Blood Meridian* and *Red Dead Redemption 2* shows that how colonial violence is narrated matters as much as whether it is depicted at all. Both texts confront the same history of settler colonial genocide, yet the novel places the responsibility of moral interpretation on its audience while the videogame manages that interpretation in advance. Neither text escapes the structural condition they share of both being produced by non-Indigenous creators for predominantly non-Indigenous audiences. While both narratives are told from a white point of view, whether that perspective is being criticized or simply taken for granted cannot always be separated because they often operate through the same narrative choices. Critique and reproduction can coexist within the same work and most ideologically

---

<sup>54</sup> Farhad Dalal, "Racism: Processes of Detachment, Dehumanization, and Hatred," *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (2006): 158

consequential choices are often the least visible as embedded in narrative or game mechanics, freedom of choice and typographical conventions instead of explicit statements. What follows from this is not that good intentions are worthless but that they are insufficient. The ethical weight of representation falls not only on what a text says about colonialism but on what its form asks of the people consuming it, whether it produces passive recognition or demands active and often disturbing realization. On that measure, a difficult nineteenth-century novel and a commercial contemporary videogame point in different directions. Future research might examine how Indigenous-authored games and fiction navigate the same tensions. The question of what constitutes an authentically Indigenous voice within mainstream cultural production is itself far from straightforward, since institutional and commercial frameworks shape whose perspectives reach audiences and in what form they do that. The field of comparative media studies has much to gain from centering the voices of those who were colonized, while remaining attentive to the conditions under which those voices are heard.

## Reference List

- Allen, Chadwick. "Postcolonial theory and the discourse of treaties." *American Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (2000): 59-89. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30041825>
- Arsenopoulou, Natalia, Anna Poupou, and Charalampos Rizopoulos. "Focalization in video games: Narrative agents cinematic techniques and gaming experience." In *Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference of the ACM Greek SIGCHI Chapter*, pp. 98-103. 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3749012.3749083>
- Bal, Mieke. *Narratology: Introduction to the theory of narrative*. University of Toronto Press, 2009. <https://muse-jhu-edu.ezproxy.nu.edu.kz/article/513124/pdf>
- Booth, Wayne C. "Resurrection of the Implied Author: Why Bother?." *A companion to narrative theory* (2005): 75-88. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470996935.ch5>
- Blake, Vikki. "Red Dead Redemption 2 Now the Fourth Best-Selling Video Game of All Time." IGN. November 7, 2025. <https://www.ign.com/articles/red-dead-redemption-2-now-the-fourth-best-selling-video-game-of-all-time>.
- Boulter, Jonathan. Review of *Four Moments of Aesthetic Experience: Reading Huysmans, Proust, McCarthy, and Cusk*, by Bryan Counter. *The Comparatist* 49 (November 2025): 291–293. <https://doi.org/10.1353/com.2025.a972442>.
- Brown, Lauren. "Existing Without Consent: American History and the Judge in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*." *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* 16, no. 1 (2018): 73-94. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/690239>

Caracciolo, Marco. "Experientiality." In *the living handbook of narratology*, edited by Peter Hühn et al. Hamburg: Hamburg University, 2014.

<http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/experientiality>

Dalal, Farhad. "Racism: Processes of detachment, dehumanization, and hatred." *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (2006): 131-161.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2167-4086.2006.tb00035.x>

Ferer, John. "From Blue to Blood: Jean Toomer's 'Blue Meridian' and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* as Intertexts." In *Intertextual and Interdisciplinary Approaches to Cormac McCarthy: Borders and Crossings*, edited by Nicholas Monk, 205–219. New York: Routledge, 2011.

<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/astana/detail.action?docID=958413>

Gretlund, Jan Nordby. "Cormac McCarthy and the American Literary Tradition: Wording the End." In *Intertextual and Interdisciplinary Approaches to Cormac McCarthy: Borders and Crossings*, edited by Nicholas Monk, 63–76. New York: Routledge, 2011.

<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/astana/detail.action?docID=958413>

Genette, Gérard. *Narrative discourse: An essay in method*. Vol. 3. Cornell University Press, 1980.

[http://files.commonsc.gc.cuny.edu.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/blogs.dir/36753/files/2025/01/Gerard-Genette-Narrative-Discourse\\_-An-Essay-in-Method-Focalizations.pdf](http://files.commonsc.gc.cuny.edu.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/blogs.dir/36753/files/2025/01/Gerard-Genette-Narrative-Discourse_-An-Essay-in-Method-Focalizations.pdf)

Gilbert, Lisa. "'Assassin's Creed reminds us that history is human experience': Students' senses of empathy while playing a narrative video game." *Theory & Research in Social Education* 47, no. 1 (2019): 108-137. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2018.1560713>

Humphreys, Sara. "Rejuvenating" eternal inequality" on the digital frontiers of Red Dead Redemption." *Western American Literature* 47, no. 2 (2012): 200-215.

<https://doi.org/10.1353/wal.2012.0048>

Keen, Suzanne. Narrative form. *Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan*, 2003.

<https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230503489>

Laminack, Zachary S. "Inhabiting Indianness: Sherman Alexie's Indian Killer and the Phenomenology of White Sincerity." *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 29, no. 4 (2017): 29-57. <https://doi.org/10.5250/studamerindilite.29.4.0029>

Lauren Weber, "The Foggy Window: Passive Empathy and the Fight for Testimonial Reading in Neoliberal Higher Education," in *Using Social Theory in Higher Education*, ed. Remy Y.S. Low, Suzanne Egan, and Amani Bell (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 129–138.

[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-39817-9\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-39817-9_10).

Locke, Hilary Jane, and Thomas Ashley Mackay. "'You Are a True Progressive': Red Dead Redemption 2 and the Depiction and Reception of Progressive Era Politics." *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 20, no. 1 (2021): 174-193.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S153778142000064X>

McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian*. *Random House*, 1985.

Moreland, Kim. "Just the Tip of the Iceberg Theory: Hemingway and Sherwood Anderson's 'Loneliness.'" *The Hemingway Review* 19, no. 2 (2000): 47–56.

Mukherjee, Souvik. "Videogames and post colonialism: an introduction." In *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back*, pp. 1-28. *Cham: Springer International Publishing*, 2017.

<https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.nu.edu.kz/lib/astana/detail.action?pq-origsite=%20primo&docID=4924956>

Nelson, Brian. "Flaubert: The Narrator Vanishes." *The Cambridge Introduction to French Literature* (2015): 122-131. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139047210>

Rockstar Games. 2018. *Red Dead Redemption 2*. Playstation 4.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. Narrative as virtual reality 2: Revisiting immersion and interactivity in literature and electronic media. *JHU press*, 2015.

<https://www.press.jhu.edu/books/title/11170/narrative-virtual-reality-2>

Brown, Scott. "Rethinking the Print Run and Publication Date of Cormac McCarthy's All the Pretty Horses." *Downtown Brown* (Substack). October 27, 2025.

<https://downtownbrown.substack.com/p/cormac-mccarthy-print-runs-and-sales>

Shear, Ricky. "Struggling toward Empathic Witness in Blood Meridian." *Studies in the Novel* 57, no. 1 (2025): 61-84. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sdn.2025.a952391>

Wang, Kyle. "Cormac McCarthy's Racial Fictions: Race in Blood Meridian's Colonial Imagination." *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 10, no. 1 (2023): 21-36. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2022.26>

Weber, Lauren. "The Foggy Window: Passive Empathy and the Fight for Testimonial Reading in Neoliberal Higher Education." In *Using Social Theory in Higher Education*, edited by Remy Y.S. Low, Suzanne Egan, and Amani Bell, 129–138. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-39817-9>

Willbern, David. "Dialogic Frontiers: History and Psychology in Lonesome Dove and Blood Meridian." *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 70, no. 1 (2014): 81-108. <https://doi.org/10.1353/arq.2014.0000>

Writer, Jeanette Haynes. "Terrorism in Native America: Interrogating the past, examining the present, and constructing a liberatory future." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (2002): 317-330. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3211093>