

Jeff Zoldy — Academic Writing Samples

**Sample #1: Excerpt from 2017 Senior Research Thesis “Murder, Myth, and Masculinity: *Blood Meridian* and the True Nature of Violence in the West”**

**“Violence in the Historical American West**

Violence and bloodshed is a hallmark of the Western genre; gunfights and death are intrinsic to the nature of these works. As briefly stated above, however, this violence is rarely presented as graphic or devastating, as it is in *Blood Meridian*. Looking to Sergio Leone’s classic Western film *Once Upon a Time in the West*, violence is a mechanism to achieve the goals of its characters. It is almost theatrical in nature, avoiding the notion of realism in favor of a poetic and dramatic fatal exchange between the outlaws and wandering cowboy figures of the film. In many ways, it fails to reflect the nature of violence that many see in real life. That is, by no means, an assertion that Western films and literature in the early-to-mid-20th century were attempting to be historically accurate. However, they provided the basis for many in society’s basic notion of what the West was like when it was first being settled and populated.

In Thomas J. DiLorenzo’s article from *The Independent Review*, “The Culture of Violence in the American West: Myth vs. Reality,” he takes a look at the misconceptions many hold about the “Wild, Wild West” and attempts to debunk them. Early on, he states, “many historians simply assume that violence was pervasive—even more so than in modern-day America—and then theorize about its likely causes” (DiLorenzo 227). In this instance, historians and the general public are in the same position with this belief. In reality, the West was a moderately untroubled region when settling first began, with English settlers who “‘recognized the advantage of being on friendly terms with the Indians... War was costly.’ Trade and cooperation with the Indians were much more common than conflict and violence during the first half of the nineteenth century” (229). The violence between settlers and Native Americans (Indians) is a perpetual topic/depiction in Western films and texts, so this clarification calls the popular idea of immediate conflict between the two societies into question. The West may not have been entirely peaceful, but it was certainly not always a chaotic region. However, this relative tranquility and civility would not last much longer, and not because of Indian aggression, as many are prone to assume. DiLorenzo says, “history also reveals that the expanded presence of the U.S. government was the real cause of a culture of violence in the American West” (229). This shift occurred about midway through the nineteenth century, with a major turning point being when “a standing army replaced militias in 1865” (230). This presents another interesting caveat to the checkered history of the West, creating an interesting dilemma when the supposed law of the land, the United States government, becomes the source of the problem. It is no secret that throughout the mid-to-late-19th century, American settlers of the West slaughtered countless Native Americans during their conquest of the frontier. The dominant source of violence in the American West was not between settlers (outlaws and lawmen) as many forms of media and stories would have us believe; the overarching conflict was rather between settlers and Native Americans. While the conflict between “cowboys and Indians” may be a major Western theme, the intents and origins of that conflict as presented in Westerns are false.

Due to westward expansion and the construction of the railroad in the mid-1800s, the United States government sent the U.S. Army west to deal with the Indians. This had profound consequences on the Native Americans and their relation with settlers: “white settlers and railroad corporations were able to socialize the costs of stealing Indian lands by using violence supplied by the U.S. Army... Thus, ‘raid’ replaced ‘trade’ in white-Indian relations” (230). This systematic violence against Native Americans would only get worse; after the Civil War, general Grenville Dodge proposed using Indians as slaves to construct the railroad, only to have the government decide to simply kill as many Natives as possible (231). According to biographer Michael Fellman, who is featured in DiLorenzo’s article, the men in charge of dealing with the “final solution of the Indian problem” saw the Native Americans as less than human, a mentality most likely carried over from their service in the Civil War (231). Besides this mindset and the result of the recent war, it is not abundantly clear why the government decided to murder the Indians as opposed to using them for labor. It can be inferred, however, that this line of thought would eventually lead to the perpetuation of the phrase “the only good Indian is a dead Indian,” surely a signifier for the settlers’ stance on violence and their views of the Native Americans.

DiLorenzo’s article also references a significant episode that occurred in 1864: the Sand Creek Massacre. What was supposed to be a safe town for Native Americans, with assured protection from the government, was instead attacked by Colonel John Chivington along with 750 armed soldiers. According to historical transcripts, “Chivington’s orders were: ‘I want you to kill and scalp them all, big and little’ ... the most reliable estimate of the number of Indians killed is ‘163, 110 of which were women and children’ ... Upon returning to his fort, Chivington ‘and his raiders demonstrated around Denver, waving their trophies, more than 100 drying scalps’” (235). The act of scalping is, in most media (*Blood Meridian* included) presented as a mainly Native American practice. However, the more romanticized view of the historical American West keeps this practice by the settlers away from public attention.

For a time, the West was not an overtly violent place. There was understanding and correspondence between settlers and Indians, trade that brought prosperity to both. However, with the building of the railroad and subsequent government involvement, the frontier becomes an incredibly hostile environment for settlers and Indians alike, with Natives being hunted down for simply having land. The West was not always a violent place; with the support of the government and the army it became one at the midpoint of the nineteenth century.”

## **Sample #2: Excerpt from 2018 Essay “A New Rhythm for the Blues: Rock ‘n’ Roll, Counterculture, and Cold War America”**

“When thinking of popular culture in America during the 1950s, it is impossible not to consider the monumental impact of music, especially rock ‘n’ roll. A culmination of the sounds of blues, jazz, and country music, it began a cultural revolution that would change the music industry, and the United States as a whole, forever. While the rise of rock ‘n’ roll at this time may seem coincidental, a mere byproduct of a number of sounds coming together, but this is almost certainly not so. As the 1950s progressed, it was becoming more and more evident that American society was growing discontented with the Cold War and how it was affecting their nation, especially in the nation’s youth, which would go on to make up the majority of the hippie movement in the following decade. When rock ‘n’ roll began to rise in popularity, in large part due to the success of then-newcomers like Little Richard and Chuck Berry, the American people saw it as a way to rebel against the status quo. However, as is the case throughout history, the status quo began to push back. In an attempt to make this new form of music more “palatable” to the general public, they began to have white artists cover music created by predominantly African-American artists, eventually adopting the genre as their own in its entirety, and, in doing so, changing culture irreversibly in their own way. While this act of absorption has many subtle and destructive effects, it also led to a new type of music to become popular and dominate the culture for decades to come; it is a complicated issue. However, by absorbing musical counterculture into the dominant culture, the institutions of 1950s America admitted that their way of living was failing in light of the Cold War.

It is important to understand where the U.S. music industry stood in the wake of World War II and moving into the Cold War era in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In Peter Tschmuck’s thorough 2006 account of the music industry *Creativity and Innovation in the Music Industry*, he approaches the explosion of rock ‘n’ roll onto the cultural scene by first discussing how the rapid change of people’s taste in music shook up the market. Tschmuck says, “in 1948, the top four companies (CBS-Columbia, RCA-Victor, Capitol, and Decca) released 81% of all titles that reached the weekly top 10, by 1958 this share had decreased to 36% ... by 1958 hundreds of small, independent companies had successfully taken away market shares from the majors. One reason for this dramatic loss of the majors’ market control was the emergence of rock ‘n’ roll” (Tschmuck 94). While the idea of market control may not seem vital to understanding the connections between the emergence of rock music and the racial tensions it brought with it, the notion that the music industry was changing radically as a result of this new type of music is crucial. If this predominantly African-American form of music was able to shift the music market this radically, it would logically follow that it would and could shift the public as well. Tschmuck goes on to describe how rock ‘n’ roll originated from the “tradition of ‘black’ music that was practiced in the American south” and saying that “the majors did not want to be associated with a form of music that they considered common and obscene” (Tschmuck 94). This alone is indicative of a massive change to the status quo; the fact that the older generation of music producers was unwilling to change ran directly in opposition to the social movements at the time, directly in opposition to a culture that was ready to change and move away from pre-World War II society. The old guard, it would seem, was failing and slowly falling behind the

times. Cold War society had begun to shift, against all odds. However, there were signs that the new generation of producers were willing and able to take charge of the situation and bend it to their own ends in attempts to regain control. Tschmuck discusses the founding of Sun Records, one of the most historic and massively successful record labels in rock 'n' roll history. Tschmuck says this of the label's founder, Sam Phillips, "after a dispute with Modern Records, however, Phillips founded his own label, Sun Records, and began looking for 'white' musicians who were capable of interpreting 'black' music" (Tschmuck 95). Despite the prospect of massive change to the mainstream music industry, it seems that not all the societal and cultural shifts would translate quite so clearly to success and recognition for those who deserved them."

**Sample #3: Excerpt from 2016 Essay “A New Forecast: American Radicalism, The Weather Underground & *American Pastoral*”**

“*Days of Rage*, as well as *The Weather Underground* documentary cover events that almost certainly were the inspiration for Merry’s bombing in Old Rimrock in *American Pastoral*: the dozens of bombings carried out across the United States by the Weathermen. In both Burrough’s book and Green and Siegel’s film, written or video evidence of Weathermen saying, “As to killing people, we’re prepared to do that” (Burrough 87). In Roth’s novel, Merry embraces this side of her movement, her claim that she is responsible for the deaths of four people a major point of contention and drama by the novel’s conclusion. While it is important to note that by the time their movement came to a close the Weathermen had changed their stance on killing, and had resorted to non-lethal bombings, the fact remains, and is stressed especially in *Days of Rage*, that they still bombed public structures and were responsible for millions of dollars worth of destruction across the United States. Also worth recognizing is the fact that *American Pastoral* does not mention the pacifistic change the group made by the novel’s conclusion, instead focusing on the movement’s violent methods of spreading their message. Much of the novel’s focus is on the violent and shocking repercussions of Merry’s actions and how it affects those around here, and the parallel can be drawn to an event that rocked the Weathermen on March 6th, 1970, when at one of their townhouse headquarters in New York City, a bomb they were crafting malfunctioned and killed two Weathermen (Burrough 106). Like Merry’s bombing in Old Rimrock, this bombing changed the lives of the Weathermen, as well as the trajectory of their movement forever.

Even with all the history and background on the leftist radical movements in the 60’s and 70’s, and with how *American Pastoral* handles them, are these actions and ideas justified? Does the novel cast an honest light on the events that shook the United States for years? The answer is decidedly mixed. The novel, and Roth himself, clearly show great knowledge of the subject matter and respect for at least moderate historical accuracy. It also has a great deal to say about the morality and extent to which these radicals had the right to do what they did, and what it says differs depending on the character that is speaking. In this regard, its open-ended nature regarding its stance differs from Burrough’s account, which seemingly veers very much into the anti-radicals camp. While generally unbiased, some choice words do seem to speak of the radicals, especially the Weathermen, as people of lower moral ground. *The Weather Underground* is neutral in the same way *American Pastoral* is, except in its case the documentary has real Weather Underground members speaking, and each are given the chance to voice their thoughts on their past actions. In this regard, simply due to the people speaking, it holds a slightly higher opinion of the radicals. But if there are conclusions to be drawn from the evidence gathered compared against Roth’s novel, it is such: Members of movements such as the Weather Underground had every right to believe what they did, and to voice those beliefs. However, when it came to their methodology, many entered a moral gray area, with some going straight in depravity. *American Pastoral* depicts this morality faithfully in its characterizations of Rita Cohen as the face of depravity, Merry as the wanderer into moral grayness, and the Swede as a society simply trying to make sense of it all. Roth’s novel is a faithful work that mostly revels in the history of the time period it occupies, but one that truly intrigues and shines when

the morality of Merry's actions, and the Weathermen's as a whole, are left ambiguous, because in reality, that is how the real life actions remain to this day."