“Some third and other destiny”:
The Unresolved Dialectic of Agency in Cormac McCarthy’s
*Blood Meridian*
I am grateful especially to Dr. Bo G. Ekelund, for the care with which he reviewed the preliminary drafts. My thanks also to Dr. Sheila Ghose, for “guidance in things past.”
Blood Meridian, Cormac McCarthy’s most eulogized work, is a novel abounding in contradictory philosophical aphorisms and dialectical tensions. Despite this multiplicity, many critics have tried to read into the novel symbolic resolutions and a coherent unity the text itself does not encourage. Before we set ourselves the task to refute or reconcile such attempts, however, it is important that we pay attention to McCarthy’s contradictions, as they manifest themselves in his novel as well as in contrasting critical readings. Because, as we shall see, these contradictions are not dead ends; on the contrary, they are important keys to understanding Blood Meridian’s significance, and its relationship to contemporary ideology. It will be argued in this essay that the novel’s indeterminacies primarily regard a problematic of agency, implicitly forming the question as to whether or not mankind is to be held responsible for the course of the world. In McCarthy’s rendering, this inquiry results in a text preoccupied with violence, suffering, and—what is more—the difficulties of representing these phenomena aesthetically. I will suggest eventually that this literary struggle is symptomatic of the historical moment of late capitalism—its anthropocentric exhaustion of the Earth’s resources and animal life, its Western-centric subsumption of other cultures, and its centered subjects’ resultant sense of guilt and desire for redemption.

In the opening chapter of McCarthy’s novel, the reader is presented with the decline of Christianity as a vital force in the world. The year is 1849, the location Reverend Green’s “ratty canvas tent” in the Texan town of Nacogdoches (McCarthy
In the middle of a spirited sermon, one of the key figures of *Blood Meridian* accuses the preacher—falsely, it turns out—of imposture, bestiality and pedophilia. Presently, abundant gunfire is released, whereupon the tent, “this nomadic house of God” (6), soon buckles under like a “huge and wounded medusa,” as if the pillars supporting Christendom finally have given way (8).

Via tattered religious symbols continuously bordering the narrative, the Christian debacle that inaugurates McCarthy’s novel can be traced all throughout its subsequent content. For instance, we are told that “a dead Christ in a glass bier lay broken” on a chancel floor (64); that war victims “lay like maimed and naked monks in the bloodslaked dust” (57); that—prior to the tent-scene—the kid sees a “parricide hanged in a crossroads hamlet…” (5) (the Father is dead), and at one point, we learn that an old Mennonite unsuccessfully tries to warn the novel’s filibusters that “[h]ell aint half full” (43). As this warning is not heeded, however, both icons and portents are left behind in the dust.

Instead, like “disciples of a new faith” (137), McCarthy’s itinerants trek on through a barren landscape stretching out like “a great stained altarstone”—a country thirsty for the “blood of a thousand Christs”; a country where violence speaks but God appears to be silent (109). Here, the ostensibly waning force of Christianity is displaced to the periphery, whereas the energy of bloodshed emerges at the very center—in this land “under darkness,” the vacuum of God’s absence is filled with havoc (109).

György Lukács has argued that modernist literature in general tends to voice an atheism that perceives “the empty heavens” as “the projection of a world beyond hope or redemption”; an atheism that hears in divine silence not a liberation, but “a token of the ‘God-forsakeness’ of the world” (208). From this perspective, Lukács suggests, the only point to the nothingness of transcendence is that it reveals “the *facies hippocratica* of the world” (208). This is a strikingly accurate description of the religious beliefs conveyed in *Blood Meridian*, which repeatedly renders Christianity a defeated antithesis to an imperialist killing spree. In McCarthy’s universe, God’s removal from the scene is a tragedy vouching for destruction and death.

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1 Henceforth, unless otherwise indicated, all parenthetical page references will be to *Blood Meridian*, the edition indicated in the list of works cited.

2 The *facies hippocratica* is the facial appearance of someone marked by impending death.
In “The Flawed design: American Imperialism in N. Scott Momaday’s House Made of Dawn and Cormac McCarthy’s Blood Meridian,” Christopher Douglas reads McCarthy’s treatment of religion somewhat differently, arguing that “McCarthy is not comforted by the evidence of design he discerns in the universe”; for McCarthy, Douglas suggests, “that design is evidence of a no-longer benign creator whose dark purposes can be discerned in the awful silence of an empty landscape” (14). In other words, God exists, but God is malevolent, and his original ill intentions have spawned a “world marked by systemic violence,” a world resembling the planet Anareta, a world that annihilates form (Douglas 14). This, God created, whereupon he “absented himself from creation” (Douglas 14). Furthermore, Douglas claims that “McCarthy proposes the truth—though not for the first time—that two millennia of traditional Christian theology has been organized to evade…” (14). Here, Douglas’s reading implicitly recognizes in McCarthy’s novel a rendering of history as preordained, and mankind as an impotent force in relation to its own destiny. This is important, for whether we construe McCarthy’s God as deceased, as a god who perhaps never existed in the first place, or if we—like Douglas—propose that he once did, but then withdrew at an early stage in accordance with deistic beliefs, the want of sustain from some higher power is what renders McCarthy’s universe the violent hell of some widening Yeatsian gyre.

The matter discussed above invites the reader to one of the central thematics of Blood Meridian—the question as to whether “the stuff of creation can be shaped to man’s will,” or, conversely, “whether his heart is not some other kind of clay,” molded by a hand other than his own (5). In From the Civil War to the Apocalypse, Timothy Parrish reads this indeterminacy as a proposition rather than as a question; in other words, he does not conceive of the inquiry as consisting of two different alternatives

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3 Anareta, briefly referenced in Blood Meridian (48), from the Greek, meaning “destroyer”; “murderer.”
4 “He”—rather than “she” or “s/he”—is here used in accordance with the gender-specific pronoun used by McCarthy.
5 In McCarthy’s latest novel, The Road, written when these two Christian millennia have come to an end, the cataclysm has run its full course. Accordingly, there are no longer any “godspoke men,” (The Road 32) and at one point, one of the protagonists watches a grey snowflake fall and expire like “the last host of Christendom” (15). “There is no God and we are his prophets,” a minor character with the biblically connotative name Ely points out later in the novel (170). This latter quote is comparable to the passage in Blood Meridian in which Judge Holden appears as a minister of a modern deliverance and successfully teaches some of his fellow travelers about the origins of the earth by way of geology, making them “right proselytes of a new [presumably secular and scientific] order” (124). When the lecture is over, he laughs at his students “for fools” (124).
However, when pondering the issue, Parrish draws on two different passages from McCarthy’s novel. The first passage describes an old slaveholder cradling a “dried and blackened” heart in his hand (McCarthy 19); the second passage tells of Judge Holden addressing his “recruits,” informing them that “[y]our heart’s desire is to be told some mystery. The mystery is that there is no mystery” (266). Parrish’s reading implies that these two responses are conflicting and incompatible (87). This is surprising, as a different reading seems more plausible: when the retired slave-owner weighs the heart of his former “possession” in his hand, he comes forth as a determinant agent of history, and when the judge dismisses any dreamed-up mystery, he deems humanity responsible for its own deeds. Furthermore, when the aforementioned Mennonite argues that “only men have the power to wake” the “wrath of God,” and his thesis is neglected, the narrator comments: “[h]ow these things end. In confusion and curses and blood” (43). As the slaver puts it, human beings “can do anything,” and make anything—even an “evil that can run itself a thousand years, no need to tend it” (20).

The above rendering of humans as a potent force, however, is as already implied no final and indisputable answer to Blood Meridian’s question of human agency. When Toadvine, another of the novel’s chief characters, has set fire to a hotel, he runs down the street, laughing and crazily waving his hands above his head, looking “like a great clay voodoo doll made animate” (14). Moreover, later in the novel, when the main protagonist, the kid, is “lying on his belly holding the big Walker revolver in both hands,” he lets “off the shots slowly and with care as if he’d done it all before in a dream,” (116) reminding the reader that he possesses “a taste for mindless violence” (3). These last scenes render humans all but marionettes, maneuvered by the hands of some given violence, the idea of which is certainly compatible with the novel’s concept of a divine void predestining the Earth and its inhabitants to an inevitable and bitter end.

As the examples above lay bare, Blood Meridian establishes a dialectic by juxtaposing two divergent ideas on historical agency—on the one hand, mankind is rendered agentially powerless and subject to an “antecedent” (160) purpose by way of figurative speech and due to the philosophy of a “modern atheism”; on the other hand, however, the very same mankind is acknowledged as a force to be reckoned with in a world where “anything is possible,” as the judge puts it (258). As we have seen, the
latter delineation emerges, for instance, both as an element in character dialogue and in the narrator’s comments.

It will ultimately be argued here that the contradictions of McCarthy’s novel can be read as provoked by contemporary ideology. It will therefore also be argued that to regard the “given violence” in the novel’s *dialectic of agency* merely as primordial and timeless would result in a simplistic reading of *Blood Meridian*. To be sure, one of the much quoted epigraphs to McCarthy’s text renders the practice of scalping—which plays a prominent part in the novel—an ancient phenomenon, and this idea of violence as a primordiality is certainly one of the views presented.\(^6\) This being said, however, we must go further by paying attention *both* to how *Blood Meridian* moves beyond this timelessness by demonstrating how American antebellum phenomena administer the ageless violence of the epigraph\(^7\), and how McCarthy’s novel is a product of its own time.

So, to begin with, as McCarthy shows, in the historical moment of *Blood Meridian*’s setting, violence materializes most explicitly in the Westward expansion of the United States, as the scalphunters the narrative revolves around ransack the American-Mexican borderland for bounty evidence. With reference to this drawn-out event, Jay Ellis reads the “meridian” in McCarthy’s title simply as a high point, as atrocities peaking both in proportion and intensity.\(^8\) Ellis writes that “*Blood Meridian* ends at a line in history beyond which the ageless violence of the gang will no longer be possible on the scale at which we find it, *where* we find it in this book” (172). In a footnote, however, he concedes that such levels of violence might now be found elsewhere, for instance, in equatorial Africa or in the Middle East (328)—locations not

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\(^6\) “Clark, who led last year’s expedition to the Afar region of northern Ethiopia, and UC Berkeley colleague Tim D. White, also said that a re-examination of a 300,000-year old fossil skull found in the same region earlier shows evidence of having been scalped” (McCarthy). Here it should be noted that scholars still disagree on the question as to whether scalping—as exercised in an American context—was originally an Indian or a European tradition. See for instance Churchill (179) and Axtell & Sturtevant (49). It seems clear, however, that the practice of the *mercenary scalp hunt* was initiated by the Europeans (Churchill 180, Axtell & Sturtevant 58).

\(^7\) Parrish also discusses this problematic when he suggests that McCarthy’s perspective renders “ideological and cultural...conflict[s] forms that violence takes on or inhabits” (Parrish 84). For Parrish, however, “McCarthy is not saying that with a different ideology there would be no killing...” (84). I, for one, would argue that McCarthy’s designation of certain ideologies as temporary vehicles of violence marks these ideologies as flawed.

\(^8\) We could also choose to focus on this word as “a great circle of the celestial sphere passing through its poles and the zenith of a given place...” (Merriam-Webster). This definition renders the “meridian” a continuity rather than a peak.
yet fully constrained by the “fences, highways, and…fiber-optic cables” (179) that
may potentially shorten any career of violence. Arguably, an even better reference can
be found in the instabilities that haunted various parts of Central America at the time
McCarthy wrote his magnum opus. While addressing this matter and simultaneously
proposing that Blood Meridian dramatizes “a number of cultural anxieties alive in the
1980’s,” Jonathan Imber Shaw quotes a witness account from the massacre of El
Mozote, and points out that this narrative “rivals any scene McCarthy has imagined
and articulated in Blood Meridian, but…is, terribly, not a work of the imagination”
(209, 215). As Shaw notes, the atrocities at Mozote were committed by warriors of the
Atlacatl battalion—an army unit trained by US advisers (215). Like McCarthy’s
scalphunters, these warriors were seemingly out of governmental control, but caught
up in a larger imperialist pattern (and in the latter case, the Cold War). Apart from this
analogy, thoroughly investigated by Shaw, a parallel can be drawn also to the
Nicaraguan contras, who “used American advice and dollars to terrorize the civilian
population of Nicaragua,” (Brody 1) and who were later described by the Human
Rights Watch as “major and systematic violators of the most basic standard of the laws
of armed conflict…” (HRW). Just as Atlacatl, the contras played a part in the imperial
schism between East and West, and just as the Glantons of Blood Meridian, both of
these troops executed a violence beyond public legitimacy, but nonetheless in more or
less direct service of certain political agendas.\(^9\) Bearing these parallels in mind enables
us to think of McCarthy’s text as a child of its time, as a cultural artifact strongly
affected by present-day phenomena, rather than merely a novelistic reenactment of a
violence that has ceased to be.

John Cant touches upon something similar when he argues that “Blood
Meridian reflects the angst of America’s experience of violence, both at home and in
Vietnam, during the books [sic] gestation” (174). Arguably, Cant here tacitly follows
the logic of some influential Marxist ideas, such as Theodor Adorno’s belief that
contradictions inherent in modern art arise from conflicts in socio-historical processes
(Zuidervaart), and Fredric Jameson’s notion that art draws “the Real into its own

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\(^9\) Let it suffice here to state that, in these cases, we are dealing with President Reagan’s line towards
the Communist bloc, labeled by himself as “‘the focus of evil in the modern world’” (qtd in Cannon
273). Furthermore, also in today’s privatized “war on terror,” mercenaries in kind not too different
from McCarthy’s scalphunters are prevalent. As Jeremy Scahill puts it, in Iraq, Blackwater units operate
“in a legal gray zone, seemingly outside the scope of both U.S. civilian and military law and immune
from Iraqi law” (35).
texture…” (Jameson Political 1831). In these lines of thought, the work of art is a social monad—its intrinsic qualities reflecting, or, as in Jameson, even accommodating the “Real,” thus making it accessible to us by way of textualization (1831). In other words, here, extrinsic and intrinsic characteristics of the work of art are of equal significance, because the first manifests itself in the latter. Cant’s notion of Blood Meridian as a reflection of destructive contradictions in our age is interesting, but not specific enough. In order to find a sufficient level of specificity, we need to keep scrutinizing the incongruities in McCarthy’s novel without necessarily attempting to resolve them—only by slowly moving in this direction can we hope to reveal the text’s relation to both its age and its ideology.

At a concrete level, Blood Meridian portrays the aftermath following the American-Mexican war, and in particular a scalp hunt on Indians, fuelled by generous rewards. A group of mercenaries, including the kid, harries the villages and encampments of the desert in hunt for the high-ticket scalps of the indigenous population. Homicidal success vouches for “a hero’s welcome” and a “fantasy of music and flowers” in the town of Chihuahua (174), where the protagonists—themselves with scars making them resemble commercial “articles requiring inventory”—are “promised full payment in gold” for their deeds (176). The streets in the Southwestern cities are generally crowded with “rude apothecaries…vendors and mendicants,” all partaking in bazaars exhibiting human heads pickled in “carboy[s] of clear mescal” (73). Out in the badlands, the scalphunters parade with valuable collections of heads “like…strange vendor[s] bound for market” (165). Here, body parts appear as commodities, as items of exchange separated from the morbid conditions that produced them—the human head at the marketplace has first been deprived of life, and then endowed with a new kind of life allowing it to communicate with the other articles in the emporium;10 here, “a definite social relation between men…assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things,” as Marx wrote in Capital (473). Furthermore, even though a price is put on Indian scalps exclusively, the commerce in Blood Meridian is blind—buyers can be fooled and anyone with a dark complexion is a potential item. We learn also that not only the

10 Dan Moos suggests something similar when he notes that, other than being just proofs or symbols, the Indian “scalps operate as specie, as articles exchanged for other articles or for different monies…” (32). For Moos, McCarthy’s novel is ultimately “about exchange value and commodification under both nineteenth-century imperialism and twentieth century late capitalism…” (36).
imperialist Westerners are corrupted by the incentives of material profit—for instance, at one point, when the “savages” of the Yuma tribe sit by the fire, victorious after battle, “each with his new goods [gold and silver] before him,” “these people” are described as being “no less bound or indentured” (290-91).

As Douglas suggests, the judge is the foremost theorizer and practitioner of Blood Meridian’s study of violence (15). This goes for the novel’s depiction of fatal economics—as outlined above—as well. When the judge appears in a fevered dream of the kid, this is quite explicitly illustrated. Accompanied by a man who seems “an artisan and a worker in metal,” Holden enshadows the latter where he crouches at his trade, but he [is] a coldforger who work[s] with hammer and die, perhaps under some indictment and exile from men’s fires, hammering out like his own conjectural destiny all through the night of his becoming some coinage for a dawn that would not be. It is this false moneyer with his gravers and burins who seeks favor with the judge and he is at contriving from cold slag brute in the crucible a face that will pass, an image that will render this residual specie current in the markets where men barter (326, 327)

“Of this is the judge judge and the night does not end,” McCarthy writes, and as Dan Moos states, the text here makes it clear that Holden is “the sole judge of any representative value” (McCarthy 327, Moos 35). 11 Moos, however, goes further than this when he argues that “not unlike the market of global capitalism” (35), the judge’s “market where men barter,” (McCarthy 327) “has become slick with blood of the world’s referents,” due to the judge’s attempt to construct “a system that needs no referent” (Moos 35, 31). Moos bases his analysis primarily on a scene in McCarthy’s text describing how, when the scalphunters have decided to camp among the ruins of an “older culture,” Holden commences to take notes and make sketches of the material residues of the fallen society he has just encountered (146). Once he is finished, he throws the objects into the fire. This short passage illustrates how the judge—here also referred to as a “draftsman”—substitutes his own version of reality for another;

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11 As Edward T. Arnold notes in A Cormac McCarthy Companion, this passage has been read in various ways. Apart from biblical echoes evoking “sayings of Christ recounted in Matthew, Mark and Luke concerning the question of proper authority and the difference between spiritual and worldly goods,” Arnold himself offers further readings drawing parallels to Spencer’s Mammon “who lives in hell making money,” (47) Blake’s smith Los “who works at the command of Urizen just as the coldforger works to please the judge,” and, finally, he crosses paths with Moos by presenting a Derridean interpretation, focusing on money as having “representational rather than intrinsic value” (48).
eventually, the only known representations of the historical artifacts are to be found in the judge’s ledger. For Moos, this scene also demonstrates how Holden “creates his own epistemology by forcing representation to stand as truth”; drawing on Baudrillard, Moos has it that the judge “builds an economy of signs” (29). As compelling as this reading may be, it is only provisionally valid. Moos lays it down that the judge “knows that his world is merely an order of signs and that the ‘true’ world lies evident in the referent, which…[he] wishes ‘to expunge from the memory of man’…” (31). If we take a closer look at the passage referred to, however, we soon realize that Moos interprets the above quotation most tendentiously: “he asked the judge what he aimed to do with those notes and sketches and the judge smiled and said that it was his intention to expunge them from the memory of man” (McCarthy 148). In other words, judge Holden will destroy even his own artifacts, and can therefore not be considered planning to establish a permanent world of simulacra as a substitute for the old referent-world; rather, we must note that the judge wants to master what he can master in this latter world, and destroy what has to be destroyed—he wishes to be the “suzerain of the earth” (209).

As implied above, the judge is already well on the road to be the sovereign of the world of exchange as it appears in Blood Meridian, and via a language underscoring the corruptive tendencies of commerce, indenture and commodification, McCarthy’s text shows clearly how this world in its turning brings affluence and pleasure on the winning end (see, for instance, the scalphunters’ wallowing in the riches of Chihuahua) and suffering and death on the other. The same world turns today. Related commercial structures prevail, albeit in modified forms, and they include by necessity similar kinds of condoned lawlessness. McCarthy’s questioning of sovereignty, agency and violence is not, in this perspective, restricted to the mid-19th century. For instance, as Robert Saviano—author of Gomorrah—argues, his Italy “could never have met the economic requirements for entry into the European Union” had not “the northern Italian businesses that fuel the country’s economy…sold their toxic waste to the Camorra on the cheap…” (qtd in Donadio). Furthermore, as portrayed by Saviano, this Camorra—a kind of conglomerate mafia12 that has made the killing of a human being “the equivalent of manufacturing something” (qtd in Donadio)—provides European merchants with “oxygen,” by way of consumer goods

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12 Which was revitalized in Naples during “the immediate postwar period” (Behan 29).
offered at a percentage “no sales rep” can match—and percentages, Saviano writes, “are what make or break a store, give birth to new shopping centers, bring in guaranteed earnings and, with them, secure bank loans” (Saviano 14). In Gomorrah, we see clearly how today’s Glanton gangs constitute a criminal undersurface that lubricates the wheels of global capitalism, much like McCarthy’s scalphunters paved the way for 19th century imperialism. And, interestingly, similar to what we find in Glanton’s attitude towards his vocation, Saviano’s subjects do not reach for reasons beyond the triad of “[e]uro, dollar, yuan”—there is ”[n]o other ideology, no symbols or hierarchical passion. Profit, business, capital. Nothing else” (12). The suffering caused by this—by destructive economic totalities in the 1850’s as well as in the late 1900’s—and the question as to what agency causes this suffering, are—as I will go on to show—crucial concerns in Blood Meridian. Therefore, we need to continue following the trails of suzerainty and agency as they present themselves in McCarthy’s writing a while longer.

“Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent,” the judge says, and then goes on to argue that even “the smallest crumb can devour us. Any smallest thing beneath yon rock out of men’s knowing” (209). “The man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear,” the judge explains, and guided by this aphorism, he presses “leaves of trees and plants into his book” and “sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry,” believing that “it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate” (208, 209-210). Several critics have construed judge Holden as an Enlightenment agent, and indeed, the quotations above do evoke Adorno and Horkheimer’s proposal that “[m]an imagines himself free when there is no longer anything unknown” (16); “the disenchantment of the world; the dissolution of myths and the substitution of knowledge for fancy” (3) lie evident in Holden’s speculations, which, ironically, render him a mystery and a “hoodwinker” in the minds of the other itinerants (McCarthy 266).

Certainly, many circumstances surrounding the judge suggest that he should not be read just as any other character in the novel. For instance, every man in the Glanton gang “claims to have encountered [the] sootysouled rascal in some other place” (131); his origins are obscure; he is a mutant (326); “[h]e can cut a trail, shoot a rifle, ride a horse, track a deer”; he can speak at least five languages; “[h]e’s been all
over the world” (130); he is a talented draftsman (147), and he is well read in both geology (123) and legal matters (252). The Glanton gang first encounters the judge in the middle of the desert, carrying only a canvas bag of percussion weapons and minted coins, sitting serenely on a rock, “[l]ike he’d been expecting” the passersby—one of whom first thinks him “a mirage” (133, 132).

The peculiarities retold above render the judge an omnipresent supernaturality, an epitome of cultural phenomena, making an inexplicable entrance into the sociality of the scalphunters. The relationships Holden soon establishes with some of the other characters constitute important allegorical devices. As Cant points out, the kid, in his “‘cultureless’ state” is before long absorbed by the judge’s culture of Enlightenment-ridden expansionism (171). This is important, as of all characters in Blood Meridian, the kid is as close as we get to a focalizer, even though we are never welcomed into the latter’s consciousness. McCarthy keeps his narrator at a considerable distance to all his scalphunters; still, the novel is certainly the kid’s story, in the sense that it starts with his birth and concludes with his death. Without these, and the intermissions of adolescence and middle age, there would be no Blood Meridian. Another affinity between a character and the judge is even more significant: Glanton, too, the formal captain of the expedition, has a “terrible covenant” with Holden, the prime warmonger—the two of them share a “secret commerce” (133). Although Glanton seems not to care about any motives beyond proceeds, he is a key figure in the forceful establishment of the United States, and thus the one in the gang who functions most symbiotically with the expansionist ideas of his culture. Accordingly, a heinous contract between him (human) and Holden (spirit of the age/culture) certainly makes sense: firstly, ideas that seem to have no concrete human originator emanate from culture, secondly, these ideas provide the alleged reasons for violence and subsumption, and lastly, these reasons illusorily liberate humans from responsibility.

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13 Cant also notes that the judge qua an “archeologist, psychologist, art historian, conjurer, taxidermist, magician, paleontologist, and military tactician...may be read as a metaphor for culture itself, or rather for a specific kind of culture, a culture developed from a particular set of assumptions” (170).
14 Cant touches upon this when he repeats the question asked by the slaver on the prairie—“where does a man come by his notions?” (McCarthy 20)—and answers it: “from his culture” (Cant 171).
15 Early in Blood Meridian, the filibusters led by Captain White are but “the instruments of liberation in a dark and troubled land,” as White himself puts it (McCarthy 37, my emphasis).
Also Tobin, the expriest, is part of this arrangement: “Ah Priest…What could I ask of you that you’ve not already given?” the judge says at one point, thus underscoring the crucial function of Christianity as a pretext in North America’s suppression of other cultures (264).

In “Foundation of Empire: the Sacred Hunter and the Eucharist of the Wilderness in Cormac McCarthy’s Blood Meridian,” Sarah Spurgeon claims that Holden replaces one myth with another—a myth of science enacted through the ritual of war substitutes the myth of the “sacred hunter” (100). Spurgeon claims that this myth-maker is the only character in Blood Meridian who “truly understands the immense power of will,” and that he “acts almost as collective human will made flesh in order to shape the stuff of creation through the shaping of the myth that constructs it” (90). Spurgeon here comes close to a resolution of one of the dialectical tensions regarding human agency that operate tenaciously but via relatively subtle arguments and counter-arguments all throughout McCarthy’s text. “As if beyond will or fate he and his beasts and his trappings moved both in card and in substance under consignment to some third and other destiny,” (102) McCarthy writes about “man,” and at one point, he lets the judge preach of a “larger protocol exacted by the formal agenda of an absolute destiny” (90). When the novel draws to a close, however, the kid unknowingly comments on the judge’s true nature with a sureness of aim, consequently showing the reader that Spurgeon’s idea is even more accurate and complex than she herself claims: “[y]ou aint nothin,” the kid says; “[y]ou speak truer than you know,” the judge answers (349). Prior to this highly significant scene, the kid has been incarcerated in San Diego, where he suddenly found himself inclined “to speak with a strange urgency of things,” his mind—according to the jailers—“uncottered by the acts of blood in which he had participated” (321). One morning in jail, the judge stands before him, claiming to have told the jailors the truth, that the kid is “the person responsible,” that it was he “who shaped events along such a calamitous course”—“[i]t was never me,” the judge explains (322). In the passages referred to above, judge Holden finally explicitly appears for what he is: the invisible hand made visible, culture and myth embodied, and a reification of Enlightenment ideas; in other words, “nothin” but a human construct.

The complex character of the judge plays a significant part in Blood Meridian, in the sense that it helps to reveal that the novel is characteristic of its own, American
In her article, “Reification and American Literature,” Carolyn Porter offers further guidance when she refutes the commonplace assumption that “American Literature’s classic tradition lacks the social and historical density of its European counterparts” (188). This misconception, Porter argues, arises due to the inclination of many critics to posit that if American literature would have reflected extraneous societal and historical contradiction, it would have looked exactly like the literature spawned in Europe. In order to avoid this sociocentrism, Porter suggests, we should pay attention to how—in the United States—the absence of a feudal society or a monarchial state has made possible a “relatively unimpeded development of capitalism…” which, in its turn, “has fostered…a social reality breeding an extreme form of alienation” (188). If we make use of these insights, Porter claims, we will soon find in American literature works that are “social to the core” (188). As the title of her article implies, Porter employs a number of Lukácsian ideas, some of which will prove helpful in our reading of Blood Meridian. When discussing the concepts of reification, Porter points out that this term signifies a societal feature that infiltrates “the consciousness of everyone living in a society driven by capitalist growth” (189). Originally emerging from the labourer’s experience of the “objective character stamped upon” his product (Marx qtd in Porter 189), reification eventually creates “a new kind of world…in which peoples’ own productive activity is obscured, so that what they have made appears to them as a given, an external and objective reality operating according to its own immutable laws” (189). Ultimately, this reifying process results in people assuming “a detached contemplative stance not only toward an objective external world, but toward the objectified constructs of his or her own mind, which he or she takes to be incorporated in the external world…” (190).

In Blood Meridian, reification as defined above is projected on to the antebellum border country, and McCarthy renders this phenomenon as having run its full course—the laws of economy, science and war are not merely taken for granted; in all their contradictions and speculative truths, they—personified as the judge—finally even walk the earth. Arguably, this says more about late capitalism in the 1980’s than it does about capitalism in the 1850’s—it is my assumption here that reification manifests itself in McCarthy’s text due to contemporary conditions, not due to societal tendencies of Glanton’s time (which obviously shows only a relatively moderate penetration of capitalist relations of production). This portrayal of reification
is tightly related to *Blood Meridian*'s dialectic of agency, in the sense that it recognizes a currently widespread treatment of constructed “laws” of society as “suzerains,” and acknowledges the damage done by the naturalization of socioeconomic mechanisms.\(^{16}\) McCarthy here provides a subtle comment on a contemporary *human evasion of responsibility*—a delegation of liability to mystified, societal forces. This is decidedly an instance of McCarthy’s aesthetics that renders *Blood Meridian* “social to the core” (Porter 188).

In the end of *Blood Meridian*, Holden repeatedly claims to be immortal (353), and as already mentioned parenthetically, McCarthy’s novel teaches us that there is no “system by which to divide [the judge] back to his origins…”—something deceivingly suggesting primordiality and constancy (326). In *Notes on Blood Meridian*, John Sepich argues that Holden indeed “was waiting with his demand for judgment even before there was man,” and that he surely will “outlive us” (141). Even if we maintain our notion of Holden as an epitome, anything but antecedent to us, there is undoubtedly value in Sepich’s final advice: “[p]ay attention. Look at him. Don’t say he has no presence, ‘he aint nothing’. Say something else” (152). By treating the judge as a human construct, that is precisely what we are doing—saying something else, saying that his actions are our own.\(^{17}\)

The greater the number of critical texts on McCarthy’s works that emerge, the more evident it becomes that these critiques are dealing with an authorship that lends itself readily to scores of contrasting interpretations. This manifests itself not least in the various definitions of genre and style. Cant reminds us that “too many critics have misread *Blood Meridian*, regarding it as a realist text when it is nothing of the kind” (161); Kenneth Lincoln reclaims the term “hyperreal” from theorists such as Baudrillard and Eco (19); \(^{18}\) David Holloway labels McCarthy’s writing in general an

\(^{16}\) Christine Chollier argues that the Glanton gang “is first interested in financial rewards but eventually loses sight of that former motivation”—in the end, profitable murder generates more, random murder, “and general massacre replaces trade” (174). Put differently, in Chollier’s reading, the reasons for violence are forgotten, and violence becomes a natural force self-sufficient in itself.

\(^{17}\) This is what Jameson suggests is the will of the Marxist heritage—“the conquest by human beings of the otherwise seemingly blind ‘laws’ of socioeconomic fatality…” (*Postmodernism* 343).

\(^{18}\) For Lincoln, the term “hyperreal” does not signify a Baudrillardian copy world (a landscape of simulacra) or Eco’s counterfeit reconstruction of the United States; rather, it represents an art that “stands truer-to-life than flat dimensional ‘reality,’ that is, art real to the point of abruptive disbelief and breakthrough discovery” (20). Arguably, this notion of an *art truer than reality* sounds self-contradictory. Moos, however, expresses a related but somewhat more credible view, writing that the
aesthetic that aims to rediscover the critical distance of modernist art and negate the postmodern “dialectically from within” (*The Late* 4), and Sarah Spurgeon sees in *Blood Meridian* a “postmodern challenge to notions of essentialized ethnic and nationalized identities and borders” (86). Surely, postmodern tendencies are prevalent in McCarthy’s later works; however, at least in *Blood Meridian*, these tendencies never seize control over the aesthetic form—the novel lacks anachronisms and other formal ruptures.19 Furthermore, McCarthy’s prose may at times be “photorealistic,” but as Cant remarks, this does not make *Blood Meridian* a realist novel; rather, to quote Lukács comments on Kafka’s aesthetics, “the realistic detail is the expression of a ghostly unreality, of a nightmare, whose function is to evoke angst” (194).20 It is here, however, important that we move beyond Lukács’s indictment of modernism and acknowledge in McCarthy’s nightmare “another world, and yet one to which we feel the tie” (Melville *Confidence* 245)—a “ghostly unreality” perhaps after all not as unreal as we would wish.21

When Douglas discusses *Blood Meridian*’s reintroduction of “divine design” in the late twentieth century, he argues that this is the novel’s only postmodern quality (6). This is not entirely true, and some pages later in his article, as it happens, Douglas proves himself wrong when describing McCarthy’s use of similes as symptomatic of a world where precision has become impossible, and [where] the language can now deal only in proximate descriptions…the ‘as if’ marks the failure of traditional realist language to evoke the larger theological design behind the events of the novel… (16).

Here, Douglas is arguably on to something, because whether we focus primarily on McCarthy’s theology or on his recurrent ponderings on language and referentiality in general, we must recognize *Blood Meridian*’s aphorisms on the difficulties of representation as self-reflexive comments on some of the challenges that inevitably

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19 A parallel can here be drawn to Jameson’s statement that a system is not supposed to be “in kind ‘like’ the object it tries to theorize, any more than the concept of dog is supposed to bark or the concept of sugar to taste sweet” (*Postmodernism* 343). McCarthy comments on postmodernism without adopting its formal characteristics.

20 The term “photorealistic” is used, for instance, by Vereen Bell (Lincoln 20). It should be added that during McCarthy’s many lyrical flights carried by figurative language, this “photorealism” is neutralized, in the sense that it no longer serves realist purposes.

21 Or as Althusser put it, an art that is able “to ‘make us see’ (nous donner à voir), ‘make us perceive’, ‘make us feel’ something which alludes to reality” (Althusser).
meet any progressive writer active in the historical moment of late capitalism—and McCarthy must be regarded as progressive precisely because he concerns himself with literary problems of current interest. As I will show, however, the tone of McCarthy’s musings on this matter is mournful, as if the author regrets the passing of modernism, and the loss of the sign’s “moment of autonomy” (Jameson Postmodernism 96).

In this essay, it has been demonstrated that Blood Meridian is a text obsessed with violence; with the world as an annihilatory Gehenna; with detrimental economies; with “degenerate entrepreneur[s]”; with subsumption, imperialism and genocide (McCarthy 314). Apart from the dialectic of agency this evidently instigates in the novel, for McCarthy, it also seems to make necessary a study of the critical potential of contemporary literature—a disquisition regarding the question as to whether violence and suffering are properly representable at all, and whether any aesthetic can expose their causes. As Holloway points out in his article “‘A false book is no book at all’: the ideology of representation in Blood Meridian and The Border Trilogy,” Blood Meridian strains at “the limits of contemporary aesthetic practice,” (191). Consequently, it eventually elicits the question as to whether critical efficacy is possible in a literary (and critical) world saturated by ideas of différance and undecidability (Holloway 195); a world in which “reference and reality disappear altogether, and even meaning—the signified—is problematized,” as Jameson puts it (Postmodernism 96). Under such a state of things, the grand narratives of the Western world must fall, but ironically, when the referent world is declared inaccessible to all draftsmen, there is a risk that dissident voices fall as well—at last completely deprived of impetus.

As opposed to Jameson, Linda Hutcheon puts faith in the postmodern and what she believes it can offer us in terms of politically stringent art. In The Politics of Postmodernism, Hutcheon remarks that we now “get the histories (in the plural) of the losers as well as the winners, of the regional (and colonial) as well as the centrist, of the unsung many as well as the much sung few, and I might add, of women as well as men” (66). This is an exceedingly enthusiastic conclusion, as it suggests that the voicing of historiography and representations of societal tendencies is now marked by relative equality. Furthermore, Hutcheon asserts that “postmodern relativity and provisionality are not causes for despair; [on the contrary,] they are to be acknowledged as perhaps the very conditions of historical knowledge” (67). Whether
we reckon it correct or not, however, this notion of historical knowledge might indeed entail a problem—a problem constituted by the risk that the above logic potentially contributes to a cementation of the prevailing power relations between the groups Hutcheon mentions. The logic Hutcheon defines runs the risk of serving the forces already in power—the forces known in The Politics of Postmodernism as “the much sung few” (66). As the white, Western and “enlightened” narratives are proven false, Hutcheon’s “few” can relievedly note how all opposing narratives follow the same pattern. If these “few” are wrong, by the same logic, everyone is wrong.

In her reading of Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children, Hutcheon points out that the text takes on a parodic character when the protagonist accepts responsibility for the war between India and Pakistan: “‘the war happened because I dreamed Kashmir into the fantasies of our rulers; furthermore, I remained impure, and the war was to separate me from my sins,’” the protagonist, Saleem, explains (75). In a further pondering, he states that an “[a]ircraft, real or fictional, dropped actual or mythical bombs” (75). This, for Hutcheon, is simply an example of a postmodern parody “of the historiographical drive toward causality and motivation…” (75). Explicit as this irony may be, and whether or not we agree with Hutcheon’s positive account of postmodern aesthetics, it is important that we pay attention to the lamentable and frustration-ridden quality of the last quote, as it states that, whether representable or not, bombs were dropped, and the consequences beyond Saleems’s representation were probably not merely “mythical.” Some things might, of course, mean nothing in print but everything in life, and—albeit channeled through vastly different aesthetic attitudes—this unattainable “life,” this inaccessible “Real” becomes a concern for Rushdie as well as McCarthy. In Blood Meridian, this is articulated when the omniscient narrator tells us of one of Toadvine’s victims that his wounds are “decorated their length with tattooed images, perhaps obscure with age, but without referents in the known desert about” (117). On the following page, first describing a hypothetical prey of a dustspout, the same narrator asks us: “if the dried and blackened shell of him is found among the sands by travelers to come yet who can discover the engine of his ruin?” (118). Furthermore, in one of the last scenes of the novel, taking place in the pub where the kid and the story both will come to an end, we learn that there is a “candlelight constructed upon the wall [that] might have gone begging for referents in any daylight world” (343). In Blood Meridian, however, “the night does
not end,” and no candle-flame can make us see the referents hidden deep in the desert; no flickering light can disclose the engine of our ruin (327). Here, McCarthy seems to wear mourning for a sign that no longer can—or perhaps never really could—illuminate the world. Another example of this appears earlier in the novel, when the scalphunters have slaughtered a “band of peaceful Tiguas” (183) and left them in the ruins of their pavilions, surrendered to oblivion:

In the days to come the frail black rebusesa of blood in those sands would crack and break and drift away so that in the circuit of [a] few suns all trace of the destruction of these people would be erased. The desert wind would salt their ruins and there would be nothing, nor ghost nor scribe, to tell any pilgrim in his passing how it was that people had lived in this place and in this place died (184, italics mine).

Once again, attention is called to a suffering beyond the scribe, beyond the text—a reality out of reach for any author’s textualization22.

Moreover, in the précis at the opening of chapter nine, the sentence “[o]n parallax and the false guidance in things past,” (115) refers to a subsequent passage in which the past is rendered “some ignis fatuus belated upon the road behind” us; something that becomes “altered of its location” depending on our position; something all can see but of which no one speaks—a past in which the “will to deceive…is in things luminous” (127). In this passage, ambiguity and the delusiveness of the past are rendered tragedies, and thus, the text here evokes modernism rather than postmodernism—William Faulkner rather than Paul Auster. Indeed, McCarthy’s “ignis fatuus” does bear resemblance to the past as conveyed in, for instance, Faulkner’s A Rose for Emily, where bygone years is “a huge meadow which no winter ever quite touches, divided from them [the old men] now by the narrow bottleneck of the most recent decade of years” (500). This image of the past “may post men to fraudulent destinies” by way of obscuring antecedent atrocities (McCarthy 127). Conclusively, even though obsessed with the contemporary problematics of representation and historicity, this line of thought is not the expression of a playful,

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22 Cant also implicitly comments on this when he notes that a consistent theme in Blood Meridian is the idea of language as an intellectual grid—“incomplete, provisional, mythic, distinct from the world… [it] purport[s] to define” (171).
parodic or indifferent postmodern mannerism; rather, it seems a modernist lament, even more relevant now than in Faulkner’s day.

However, as already implied, even though McCarthy does not embrace a postmodern aesthetic, he seems inclined to comment on it. Consequently, as Holloway points out, there are certainly grounds for readings that recognize—for instance—in judge Holden an “embodiment of Derridean textuality” (Wallach qtd in Holloway “A False” 187). At one point, via a couple of utterly deconstructive utterances, the judge suggests that the world is “a fevered dream, a trance bepopulate with chimeras,” and that the order in this creation “which you see is the order which you have put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way” (258). As Hutcheon might have put it, the judge here calls attention to a commonplace “act of imposing order on [the] past, of encoding strategies of meaning making through representation” (Hutcheon 67). As previously noted, however, many of the other clues the judge leaves about himself lead interpreters in contrasting directions. Holloway mentions Shaviro, who has argued that the judge “kills out of will and conviction and a deep commitment to the cause and the canons of Western rationality” (qtd in Holloway “A False” 187). When dealing with these conflicting leads, rendering the judge “a ‘character’ so rich in conflicting and contradictory meanings,” (197) Holloway draws on Jameson and argues that McCarthy employs the practice of “‘transcoding’: a speaking of theoretical codes experimentally…” in a kind of “testing of ideological limits…” (197). For Holloway, McCarthy is invariably self-reflexive and restlessly self-conscious, and this, he intimates, is what gives rise to the multiplicity of the latter’s texts (197, 191). Even though this exposition has some validity, it is also arguably slightly misguided.

Finally, as we have now acquired some ground to stand on, the time has come for us to deal properly with Blood Meridian’s contradictions, and ultimately, its

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23 Holloway touches upon something similar to this when he argues that Judge Holden embodies “McCarthy’s modernist attempt to retrieve a sense of relatively fixed meaning in the world” (“A false” 197). I argue that, in his jeremiad, McCarthy appears to partake in “the seriousness of the modernist search for…the essence of reality” (Cahoone 6) and adhere to T.S. Eliot’s exhortation that “we must learn to take literature seriously” (qtd in Diepeveen 101). Furthermore, the pronounced density of McCarthy’s prose could be delineated with Jameson’s words, when the latter suggests that “the deeper social reasons for the stubborn insistence of modern poetry [and in this case, of modern literature] on the materiality and density of language” (qtd in Diepeveen 120f) can be found in a will to intransigence in relation to “the cheap facility of what surrounds it…” (121). The last sentence, Jameson borrows from Adorno.
dialectic of agency. As Holloway himself notes, “irreconcilable claims...have become established positions within McCarthy criticism,” many of these at least seemingly justifiable (“A False” 187). For instance, Douglas proposes that “McCarthy accepts evolutionary violence and historical vio-
lences as givens,” (15) while Spurgeon claims that “man’s will is the most potent of forces” in Blood Meridian (90). Dana Phillips sides with Douglas by arguing that “the novel soon makes it clear that creation cannot be shaped to man’s will” (439), and Moos clearly disagrees when he suggests that the violent markets in McCarthy’s novel are “fueled by American expansionist politics” (37). Cant recognizes in McCarthy’s works in general a “dialectic of vitality and insignificance” but claims also that in Blood Meridian, the more pessimistic element in this dialectic prevails (174).24 As I have already shown, Blood Meridian abounds in contradictions supporting all of the conflicting claims referred to above. Taking this into consideration, I would suggest that a broader dialectic of agency is even more evident in McCarthy’s text than the dialectic Cant presents—Blood Meridian arguably “means” that mankind in general and currently late capitalism in particular are to be held responsible for the current ecological depletion of the Earth’s resources and the ongoing violent subsumption and extinction of animals as well as other cultures; however, the novel also “means” that the Earth is a “terra damnata” (64) in itself, and that mankind is “under consignment to some third and other destiny,” thus not in charge of anything (102).

In McCarthy’s most recent novel, these matters continue to be of central prominence—The Road presents the exhaustion of the Earth as fully consummated; enlightenment ideas and scientific development seems to have backfired into nothingness and left the planet an arid wasteland. In Blood Meridian, this process is only nascent, but lies evident in grounds covered with millions of buffalo carcasses, and in the ponderings of hunters who wonder “if there’s other worlds like this...[or] if this is the only one” (334). To this question, no one replies, and similarly, precisely because he offers more than one explanation, McCarthy gives no definite answer to the question as to whether or not mankind is a potent and destructive force in this world the hunter inquires about.

24 Within this dialectic, Cant argues, “the ardenthearted McCarthy hero opposes cosmic insignificance” by way of positive assertion of life itself, but “only in the terms that his American culture permits” (174).
Scott Esposito also discusses this aspect of McCarthy’s text. Commenting on a scene where the kid has just let go of a chance to kill the judge, Esposito argues that “whether his [the kid’s] agency, real or imagined, made any difference in the outcome,” is a question the novel does not answer. “Is there a point in which a person can…choose his course in the world,” Esposito asks, echoing *Blood Meridian*, and then states that McCarthy is ”intentionally vague” on this matter.

This indeterminacy certainly bestows upon *Blood Meridian* a dialectic character; yet, in contrast to what Holloway and Esposito both suggest, *Blood Meridian*’s contradictions and dialectics may very well be out of McCarthy’s control—the angst caused by the atrocities mentioned above might certainly be too great for any author to deal with rationally and soberly. In other words, it is quite probable that not even McCarthy’s “mind can encompass” the felt guilt of current generations and deal with it self-consciously in the production of a novel (256). Without forgetting what we have seen so far, we now need to move beyond *Blood Meridian*’s ponderings on primordiality, beyond its depictions of antebellum iniquities, and towards its relation to contemporary ideology.

In *A Theory of Literary Production*, Pierre Macherey argues that no book “is completely self-conscious, aware of the means of its realization, aware of what it is doing” (31). Furthermore, as Terry Eagleton points out in his reading of Macherey, if we adhere to the latter’s logic, we can expect to find a text’s significance in its margins, in its “unconsciousness,” rather than in the more or less explicit clues it offers (150)—“[w]hat can be said of the work can never be confused with what the work itself is saying…” (Macherey 7). “[U]nevenness is characteristic of every text,” Macherey argues, but unlike the caricature of economistic and reductionist Marxist theory, he does not suggest that literature mechanically reflects historical contradictions (25); instead, Macherey’s theory proposes that by endowing ideology with a form, literature illuminates “ideology’s contradictory relation to real history” (Eagleton 151). Ideology is in itself unitary, and hence, an illusion, upheld only by the omissions that if spoken would contradict the unity—when treated formally by the text, however, ideology is inevitably revealed “as a structure of absences” (Eagleton 150).

To interrogate *Blood Meridian*’s unconsciousness is to find a guilt not spoken by late capitalism, but inherent in its problematic, contradictory-ridden relation to the
“Real.” As Althusser would have put it, the ideology McCarthy bathes in, is an ideology that incessantly and expertly speaks of “economical growth” and “progress,” while never articulating any self-scrutinizing concerns regarding where its success story eventually might lead us. This is an ideology that is anthropocentric by its very nature, but also, an ideology that allows for its centered subjects to evade the responsibilities that come with such a position.25 McCarthy’s text illuminates the latter contradiction via a desperate search for redemption, thereby also manifesting, to adapt a phrase from Eagleton, “a dissonance within itself” (150). This dissonance emerges as a result of the text’s (and the current generations’) tendency to look for redemption not in one place, but in many, thus also implicitly offering contradictory explanations to why history happens as it happens.

One of these historical explanations emerges via a formal characteristic of McCarthy’s writing that has been labeled “optical democracy” (a phrase taken from the novel itself).26 As Phillips points out, this is a kind of writing that tells of persons “not privileged as subjects,” (443) and of landscapes where “all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships” (McCarthy 261). Vereen Bell has called Blood Meridian “a critique of our culture’s anthropocentrism” (qtd in Phillips 442). Phillips rightly suggests that this critique is rather implicit, and that it consists primarily in the way McCarthy de-centers humans by way of the prose style described above. What Phillips does not see, however, is that this de-centering of the human, this “optical democracy,” is one of the means by which Blood Meridian seeks redemption. By placing humans on a par with the rest of the Earth’s subjects and objects, McCarthy’s text endeavours to write the perpetrator back into harmony with Nature. This would be redemption via an escape into relative insignificance—an escape not unrelated to the novel’s intermittent tendency to render humans subject to a “larger will” other than their own (263). Viewed from this soothing perspective, mankind is agentially powerless, and accordingly, not to be held responsible for either humanitarian disasters or ecological degeneration; on the

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25 When Marx states that the bourgeoisie have created more “colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together,” and that this has been achieved via a “[s]ubjection of Nature’s forces to man” he illustrates this point (249). What Marx observed was, however, evidently only the beginning of this process.

26 A number of critics have paid attention to this feature—see, for instance, Phillips (446), Cant (171), and Holloway (“A False” 193).
contrary, humans are harmonious with Creation, or whatever it be termed. This is one element in the ideological paradox *Blood Meridian* illuminates.

However, whereas the evasive tendency described above tacitly downplays mankind’s detrimental effects on its surroundings, other strategies in *Blood Meridian* aim for redemptory release by different means. As previously discussed, and as Spurgeon shows, McCarthy’s text does not exclusively neglect mankind as a force for either good or evil—contrastingly, it also tells us that “[t]hrough his will man can make himself suzerain of the earth, though in doing so he must destroy that which he would rule” (98). In order to thrive and annex new territory, McCarthy’s Western civilization kills off countless hordes of buffalo and whole tribes of aborigines whose existences check the progress of nation building, and whose body parts are therefore reduced to merchandise. Furthermore, as demonstrated earlier, some of McCarthy’s subtle comments on the judge recognize a human responsibility behind the naturalized laws of society. Viewed against the background of humanity as a potent force, *Blood Meridian*’s depictions of the phenomena mentioned above becomes suggestive of a confession, a declaration of guilt, which obviously stands in stark contrast to the evasions described earlier. Interestingly, towards the end of the novel, the kid also attempts “to perform the act of confession,” as Spurgeon puts it (103). Kneeling on one knee, the protagonist addresses an old woman he encounters in a “desolate scene,” where some past horror seems to have left her the sole survivor (332). More articulate than ever before, the kid tells the woman of his life and hardships and offers to “convey her to a safe place” (332). This recently acquired eloquence, however, is met only with silence. The “[a]buelita” (“granny”) turns out to be long dead and nothing but “a dried shell,” standing as a forlorn monument to a destructiveness she has had no part in (332).

Most likely, no reader fails to note the close to complete absence of women in *Blood Meridian*—the blood red sun that lights up the massacres of the novel resembles, as described, the head of male genitalia, and the constantly imminent violence of McCarthy’s anti-plot is exclusively phallic; aggression is a masculine trade (47).27 Thus, it appears significant that the kid speaks his mind before a woman.28

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27 Thus, for instance, Susan Kollin argues that “McCarthy may be said to have erased the presence of women in order to argue a case about the place of Anglo masculinity in nation-building projects,” (569) and Cant pays attention to the fact that the female principle often “is referred to, in absentia, as an aspect of a living fertility without which patriarchal power generates an arid waste land and the
“Woman” in *Blood Meridin* represents an alternative sociality, a contrast to the novel’s rendering of solitariness as a *condition humaine*. Lukács has argued that modernist literature in general is governed by an ontological view which posits that “man” is “by nature solitary, asocial, unable to enter into relationships with other human beings” (189). This is a plausible description also of the general sociality in *Blood Meridian*—the fellowship of McCarthy’s scalphunters is built on violence rather than emotion, and many of the hunters turn against each other and eventually meet death due to internal conflicts. McCarthy’s “[m]an…establish[es] contact with other individuals, but only in a superficial, accidental manner”; no bonds based on sentiment ever occur (189). As hinted above, however, a female sociality making brief appearances counters this “solitariness of man” (198). This emerges most explicitly when a group of women bathes a mentally retarded man whom the protagonists have been transporting in a dirty cage:

She handed him down, him clinging to her neck. When his feet touched the ground he turned to the water. She was smeared with feces but she seemed not to notice. She…waded out with her dress ballooning about her and took him deeper and swirled him about grown man as he was in her great stout arms. She held him up, she crooned to him. Her pale hair floated on the water (271-72)

As the syntax is here more frequently punctuated than usual, the pace abates while the man is leisurely baptized into *Blood Meridin*’s only utopian space—a sociality of concern rather than devastation. In this utopia, both the kid and McCarthy’s novel seek redemption. As the ideology that *holds* McCarthy is as androcentric as it is anthropocentric, this latter redemptory move must be conceived of as largely related to the attempts previously described. Moreover, both of these two centrisms were arguably part of Christianity’s dowry to capitalism; however, as McCarthy’s God has now fallen silent, and as his institutions lay in ruins, they can no longer confirm the principles subsequently taken on by modernity. Consequently, these principles are

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28 Furthermore, the kid’s mother “did incubate in her own bosom the [male] creature who would carry her off,” (3) and right before the closing of the novel, the kid does not want to leave the female space, as if he knows it will be the end of him: “[y]ou need to get down there and get you a drink…[y]ou’ll be alright,” a prostitute tells him after intercourse; “I’m alright now,” the kid answers (350).  
29 As Holden tells the kid, it is “[a] solitary game, without opponent…You of all men are no stranger to that feeling, the emptiness and despair. It is that which we take arms against, is it not?” (347).  
30 Like a fallen Althusserian ISA, the church can no longer interpellate its subjects. Consequently, its ideological truths lose their unproblematized veracity. In a different but highly related discussion,
bereaved of their former vigour, and leave their subjects with the problems of a sobering addict—in the case of *Blood Meridian*, the angst of agency emerges as the most apparent tribulation of this abstinent state. And so, as, in Lukács’ words, “the desire for salvation lives on with undiminished force in a world without God,” McCarthy’s novel seeks redemption by diverse means, and accordingly renders history both alterable and reified, man both agent and marionette (208). In other words, two different tendencies in McCarthy’s novel communicate two different world-views, both of them engendered by the notion of a world out of joint, and of Western “man” as the principal cause, making “this earth of ours an uncomfortable inn to lodge in…” (Melville *Moby 73*). An ideology wagers the world in a game of progress, and its beneficiaries are interpellated as guiltless subjects; however, *a guilt exists*, and occasionally, the subjects it belongs to get a glimmer of it, where it stands behind the veils of ideology. The repentance that follows leads to both suppression and confession.

The analysis offered above shows that, as opposed to much realist literature and even most modernist novels, *Blood Meridian* does not attempt to establish a unified totality—its contradictions are not even resolved at an illusory level. In other words, there is no false unity in McCarthy’s novel, apart from the coherence critics try to impose on it—the contradictions of a prevalent ideology’s relationship to reality manifest themselves in questions which the ideology itself has provoked and then left unanswered, something the novel now reveals. If we concede that unevenness and contradiction characterize all texts, we soon discover that in a text such as *Blood Meridian*, these characteristics are in fact quite explicit—there is in its content no “imagined order, projected on to disorder,” no permanent “resolution of ideological conflicts” (Macherey 174).32

Walter Benjamin suggests that “[c]apitalism has developed as a parasite of Christianity in the West,” (289) and now “serves essentially to allay the same anxieties, torments, and disturbances to which the so-called religions offered answers” (288). However, here it must be added (or clarified) that as capitalism in this case offers subdual, not resolution, proper answers become rare—something we have discerned also in McCarthy’s novel.

31 Cant has argued that “*Blood Meridian* is McCarthy’s *hommage to Moby Dick*”—whereas “Melville wrote about America’s hubristic drive to dominate nature,” Cant suggests, McCarthy shows how the kid “cannot escape the culture of his day, that overweening, hubristic culture that believed that reason could solve all ills and usher in endless progress” (171). I note that, similarly, in his writing, McCarthy cannot completely escape the influence of the still progress-focused culture of his day.

32 Of course, indeterminacy and lack of closure can be argued to function as equally efficacious strategies of containment. When discussing McCarthy’s *Cities of the Plain*, Holloway states that if
As I have shown, *Blood Meridian* is a novel that implicitly underscores a reality and a suffering often lost somewhere *beyond the text*. In this reality, accessible to neither “ghost nor scribe,” every “man is tabernacled in every other,” as the judge puts it (184, 148). We have also seen, however, that whether the suffering emerging within this *interconnectedness* of mankind is brought about by people themselves, or by some will that “binds them,” is a question only provisionally resolved in McCarthy’s fictional world (263). This *unresolved dialectic of agency* regards not only mankind’s (the suzerain’s) own suffering, but by implication also an anthropocentric exploitation of the Earth and a rapid extinction of species other than our own. More exactly, lastly, we have recognized in McCarthy’s novel an indeterminacy caused by late capitalism’s contradictory relation to an awe-inspiring reality—a reality provoking in Westerners a deep sense of guilt, despite the heavy smoke screens of ideology.

understood in a Jamesonian way, “the ultimate function of ideology would be to repress from view those deeply rooted contradictions of material life which might reveal a movement beyond capitalism to be desirable, necessary, or inevitable”; postmodernism with its permanent present, then, can be designated as an ideological “blocking agent which sets limits around what is thinkable in any particular historical moment” (Holloway “A false” 190).
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