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## Slapstick Carnage: The Absurd Universe of Cormac McCarthy's Blood Meridian

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Slapstick Carnage:  
The Absurd Universe of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
English

by

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B.A., Tulane University, 1991

May 2007

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## Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the function and effect of black comedy in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. Several different explanations for the presence of comedy in such a relentlessly violent novel have been made: that this humor is simply a realistic depiction of the folksy, dry vernacular of the time; that it reinforces the idea that the characters are so morally bankrupt that they are able to make jokes in the midst of so much destruction; or, that it serves to keep the reader's sensibilities in a state of flux between attraction and revulsion: relieving tension, then increasing it again and again, thereby defying easy structuring of how one should feel. This essay proposes that the gallows humor in the novel helps to establish an absurd universe (as delineated by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*), and as this existential void is circumscribed, anything and everything in the novel becomes potentially farcical.

The body, that inconvenient reminder of mortality, is plucked, pierced, etched, pummeled, pumped up, shrunk and remoulded. Flesh is converted into sign, staving off the moment when it will subside into the sheer pornographic meaninglessness of a corpse. Dead bodies are indecent: they proclaim with embarrassing candour the secret of all matter, that it has no obvious relation to meaning. The moment of death is the moment when meaning haemorrhages from us . . . (Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*)

If I convince myself that this life has no other aspect than that of the absurd, if I feel that its whole equilibrium depends on that perpetual opposition between my conscious revolt and the darkness in which it struggles, if I admit that my freedom has no meaning except in relation to its limited fate, then I must say that what counts is not the best living but the most living. It is not up to me to wonder if this is vulgar or revolting, elegant or deplorable. (Albert Camus, "An Absurd Reasoning")

Slightly beyond the halfway mark in *Blood Meridian*, the aftermath of yet another slaughter by the Glanton gang is described:

When they left the cantina ten minutes later the streets were deserted. They had scalped the entire body of the dead, sliding about in a floor that had been packed clay and was now a wine-colored mud. There were twenty-eight Mexicans inside the tavern and eight more in the street including the five the expriest had shot . . . They mounted up . . . and disappeared. (180)

Throughout the novel, idle boozing quickly devolves into unbridled carnage. But in this case, the incidental fireworks accompanying a passing funeral interrupt a "muttered insult" from a villager in the bar and the reaction it had provoked from "the kid." Confusion ensues. Another member of Glanton's gang, Grimley, is stabbed in the back on his way to inspect the noise outside and instantly all of the Mexicans in the cantina are set upon with knives and guns. The Glanton gang prevails and scalps the murdered Mexicans in order to sell them to the governor of Chihuahua as Apache scalps. The senselessness of it all is anesthetizing, and as such episodes accumulate, this revelry of waste begins to seem farcical. This exchange, for instance, begins and ends with two

drolly laconic utterances. When Grimley crosses the threshold with the knife stuck in his back, his life concludes with a comical understatement as he mutters, “I’m killed” (without exclamation point). The retaliatory massacre occurs and the Glanton gang exits the town of Nacori:

It was thirty minutes before anyone appeared in the street. They spoke in whispers. As they approached the cantina one of the men from inside appeared in the doorway like a bloody apparition. He had been scalped and the blood was all run down into his eyes and he was holding shut a huge hole in his chest where a pink froth breathed in and out. One of the citizens laid a hand on his shoulder.

A donde vas? he said.

A casa, said the man. (180-181)

This final dry response from the gravely wounded man, as matter of fact as Grimley’s, closes the scene with a sort of admission that the party is over and that this particular partier knows when he has had enough. Perhaps he will go home to sleep it off. Also, one may note that Grimley, who has not been mentioned before in the novel, is comically and appropriately named for his brief cameo.

All of this is not to say, of course, that *Blood Meridian* is an overtly comic novel that aims for belly laughs and sheer hilariousness. Few readers come away from the book without at least a twinge of nausea about how the West was *really* won, what lies under the veneer of civilization as we know it, and what, if anything, separates man from beast. On this last issue, Barclay Owens writes of the novel’s brutality that “Man has surpassed wolves and all other predators on his climb up the food chain, and as a consequence of successful competition, has reached an obsessive, crazed pinnacle of savagery” (48). But the beastly behavior in *Blood*

*Meridian* is so extremely pitiless and this pitilessness so vividly rendered, that the violence startles less and less as it achieves ubiquity. One is trained to expect it, or its potential, in any human encounter and hence its dramatic effect lessens as it is inevitably telegraphed. The drama exists only in its vivid and unflinching depiction.

So, as an increasingly absurd universe is established, with dubious stakes and unsympathetic characters, a certain kind of dry outrageousness develops that qualifies as black comedy. In fact, it meets J.A. Cuddon's parameters for the mode:

Black comedy is a form of drama which displays a marked disillusionment and cynicism. It shows human beings without convictions and with little hope, regulated by fate or fortune or incomprehensible powers. In fact, human beings in an "absurd" predicament. At its darkest such comedy is pervaded by a kind of sour despair: we can't do anything so we may as well laugh. The wit is mordant and the humour sardonic. (*Literary Terms and Literary Theory* 87)

The Judge has "convictions," yes, but not the moral sort. As he himself says in one of his many pontifications:

Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak. Historical law subverts it at every turn. A moral view can never be proven right or wrong by any ultimate test . . . Decisions of life and death, of what shall be and what shall not, beggar all question of right. In elections of these magnitudes are all lesser ones subsumed, moral, spiritual, natural" (250).

More accurately, the actions of the Judge, Glanton, and company are driven by blind imperatives, not ethical principles: group firepower equals greater dominance equals increased odds of survival, for instance. Or scalps equal money equals whiskey, whores, and provisions.

Peter Josyph argues that “There is tension in *Blood Meridian*, but little drama, for drama is the conflict of conduct, and conduct . . . is more than merely behavior, it is behavior with a palpable moral dimension to give it shape” (187). In this regard, the *bad* behavior of the actors in *Blood Meridian* is never qualified as such in the context of the novel—any moral barometer exists only as a projection of the reader.

It must be acknowledged, also, that Cuddon’s “sour despair” that finds release only in laughter is dependent on the mindset of the reader. Certain readers will never be able to read the book with enough detachment to laugh in the midst of such gore (although the book is consistently written from an alien perspective). This detachment allows for a range of reactions, but an ultimate effect of absurdity, whether of the “wet” slapstick variety, the “dry” deadpan sort, or more broadly, a metaphysical condition, cannot be denied. Beyond the capacity for laughter in this void, a philosophical condition—the one articulated by the Judge—is being bolstered by moments of incidental gallows humor. Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* uses black comedy to limn a universe without meaning, and the novel’s circumstantial humor contributes to a general condition of existential absurdity.



In Albert Camus's essay "An Absurd Reasoning," he proposes that, among other qualifications, "the absurd is sin without God" (30). Indeed, in *Blood Meridian* grievous acts are committed with a conviction usually attributed to the religious, but there is no divine reckoning for these "sins"; there is just a playing field with a perpetual cycle of temporary winners and permanent losers, as the Judge explains in response to Jackson's parroting of the ancient adage, "The good book says that he that lives by the sword shall perish by the sword" (248). If there is a God in this narrative, it is a sinister one, free of compassion or responsibility for the actions of its creations—a divine watchmaker who concocted the pieces of the universe in a mood of malevolence. Tobin (the scalp-hunting expriest) considers the scene of a minor massacre, in which some goldseekers are found scalped, eviscerated, and castrated—their genitals stuffed in their mouths:

The trail of the argonauts terminated in ashes as told and in the convergence of such vectors in such a waste wherein the hearts and enterprise of one small nation have been swallowed up and carried off by another the expriest asked if some might not see the hand of a cynical god conducting with what austerity and what mock surprise so lethal a congruence. (153)

Less conjecturally, God is a concept to be undermined or mocked as when the Judge says, "If God meant to interfere in the degeneracy of mankind would he not have done so by now?" (146) When the Judge first appears in the novel, he slanders a Christian representative of God, a tent revivalist, accusing him of fraud, bestiality, and pedophilia "while actually clothed in the livery of his God" (7). This prank of the Judge's results in gunfire and a minor stampede of congregants. Later he confesses at a nearby tavern: "I never laid eyes on the man before today.

Never even heard of him” (8). The bar erupts in laughter and one of the patrons buys the Judge a drink.

The few times God is invoked in earnest, the effort is presented comically, as when one of Captain White’s parched irregulars makes his petition: “. . . a man named Hayward prayed for rain . . . Almighty God, if it aint too far out of the way of things in your eternal plan do you reckon we could have a little rain down here.” (It is worth noting that McCarthy does not grace this request with a question mark.) “Pray it up, some called, and kneeling he cried out among the thunder and the wind: Lord we are dried to jerky down here on the prairie and a long ways from home” (47). It does rain shortly thereafter, but these men will quickly lose any illusion that God is on their side when a large band of Comanches arrives in a massive cloud of stampede dust and inflicts upon them nearly total destruction. In the brief calm before the carnage, the sergeant says flatly, “Oh my god” (without exclamation, like the scalped survivor in the village cantina). In the midst of the slaughter, piety is mocked in a macabre inversion: “The kid’s horse sank beneath him . . . A man near him sat with an arrow hanging out of his neck. He was bent slightly as if in prayer” (53). One wonders if this was Hayward or one of his chorus of “Amens” who successfully brought down rain on the day before this one. After the Comanches variously dismember, scalp, sodomize, and ultimately extinguish Captain White’s regiment of filibusters, one of two survivors, Sproule (who will soon die of his injuries), offers his own deadpan summary of the experience: “Damn if they aint about a caution to the christians” (56). Shortly thereafter, Sproule, coughing, drops another one liner regarding his being afflicted with consumption in this godforsaken land: “I come out here for my health” (58).

If one were pressed to locate a “God” in *Blood Meridian*—or an omnipresent force in possession of “the truth”—the novel’s truth, that is—Judge Holden would be the obvious choice.

As David Holloway argues, it is the Judge who is dictating the terms of existence:

Since the judge is an agency who expropriates and totalizes all meaning—who owns, we might say, the ideological capital—in the text, and since it is the judge who eventually thus bestows meaning upon the narrative, we are left with little choice but to accept at face value the world as revealed to us through the words that he uses. (195)

So, when the Judge proselytizes about the primary importance of war, it resonates as gospel:

It makes no difference what men think of war . . . War endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate trade awaiting the ultimate practitioner. That is the way it was and will be. That way and not some other way . . . war is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one’s will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god. (249)

The Judge not only accepts but embraces violence because, as he later explains, all events are ceremonies aspiring to ritual and “A ritual includes the letting of blood. Rituals which fail in this requirement are but mock rituals” (329). Or, as Neil Campbell puts it, “Death is the only law and what counts is feeling life asserted against the risk of being at the very edge of existence itself” (220). Finally, the Judge verbalizes the existential circumstance that informs *Blood Meridian* shortly before he murders the kid in an outhouse:

Any man who would discover his own fate and elect therefore some opposite course could only come at last to that selfsame reckoning at the same appointed time, for each

man's destiny is as large as the world he inhabits and contains within it all opposites as well. This desert upon which so many have been broken is vast and calls for largeness of heart but it is also ultimately empty. It is hard, it is barren. Its very nature is stone. (330)

This fatalistic view resigns itself to the reality that each man, doomed as he is to die, is condemned from the moment of his conception. But until that date of expiration arrives, like Camus's "condemned man" in "An Absurd Reasoning," he may feel liberated in the acceptance of this inevitability and (unlike the man who commits suicide in the midst of so much meaninglessness) bear out his existence in a sort of liberated state. The condemned men of *Blood Meridian* enjoy a sort of bleak existential liberty to be sure, and they are always keenly aware of their imminent death as when Glanton is described gazing into the fire after so much death and mayhem:

He'd long forsworn all weighing of consequence and allowing as he did that men's destinies are given yet he usurped to contain within him all that he would ever be in the world and all that the world would be to him and be his charter written in the urstone itself he claimed agency and said so and he'd drive the remorseless sun on to its final endarkment as if he'd ordered it all ages since, before there were paths anywhere, before there were men or suns to go upon them. (243)

The "agency" Glanton claims for himself, though, has less to do with freedom and more to do with license: he views himself as an inevitability, a consequence in a series of consequences, a manifestation prescribed to act instinctually and self-interestedly before perishing. Earlier, the members of the Glanton gang are characterized as "men invested with a purpose whose origins were antecedent to them, like blood legatees of an order both imperative and remote" (152). When Glanton is also described as "complete at every hour" (243) it is

because, again like Camus' "condemned man", he is a liberated (but not freed) slave—liberated in his hyperawareness of his own mortality yet still a slave to its implication: "completely turned toward death, the absurd man feels released from everything outside that passionate attention crystallizing in him. He enjoys a freedom with regard to common rules" (43-44). Judge Holden waxes metaphorical about this absurd state of being to emphasize simultaneously how little is at stake and how much can therefore be gambled:

The truth about the world . . . is that anything is possible. Had you not seen it from birth and thereby bled it of its strangeness it would appear to you for what it is, a hat trick in a medicine show, a fevered dream, a trance bepopulate with chimeras having neither analogue nor precedent, an itinerant carnival, a migratory tentshow whose ultimate destination after many a pitch in many a muddied field is unspeakable and calamitous beyond reckoning. (245)

And finally, "Your heart's desire is to be told some mystery. The mystery is that there is no mystery" (252). In a world without meaningful consequence, where men are free to act upon their desires and "moral law" is but a pretense for fools, the reader is likewise drawn into a lower level of responsibility and, subsequently, concern for the amoral machinations of the novel's inhabitants. Josyph argues that *Blood Meridian* "is not a fundamentally serious book . . . I would not want to suggest that we should not *take* it seriously, only that we might be disappointed when we do. Despite its virtuosity and its bold imagination, I cannot shake a sense of emotional stinginess, a kind of aridity, at its core" (186). Like the desert terrain in which much of the action takes place, the figures traversing the pages are stark of mind and bleached of conscience. Even the kid, who is usually identified as a semi-sympathetic character, colludes in so much brutality and protests so very little through it all, that one feels he is chosen as such relatively—as a lesser

of all the other evils. (The hideous Toadvine actually reveals more moments of conscience than the kid does.) On the first page, when the kid's childhood is briefly summarized, one of the few details is that "in him broods already a taste for mindless violence" (3). In *Blood Meridian's* characters, the reader is privy to none of the angst-ridden ruminating of a Hamlet or the guilt-laden anguishing of a Raskolnikov.

To enhance this backdrop of an absurd, inhospitable universe, McCarthy renders the natural world in consistently hostile terms. A new day begins in a milieu of animosity: "at the edge of creation the top of the sun rose out of nothing like the head of a great red phallus until it cleared the unseen rim and sat squat and malevolent behind them" (44-45). During the day, the sun is a vulgar hue, "urinecolored," and at night mountains appear in flashes of lightning "like a land of some other order out there whose true geology was not stone but fear" (47). Such lightning leaves behind "the blackened bones of trees assassinated in the mountain storms" (188). Later, trees are "ransacked" by the wind" (221). The topography is called "evil terrain" (89) and what lies beneath it "the awful darkness inside the world" (111), both comprising "the bloodlands of the west" (138) and later, "an immense and bloodslaked waste" (177). One of the early desert views in the book seems to establish the entire aesthetic of the novel: "Bone palings ruled the small and dusty purlieus here and death seemed the most prevalent feature of the landscape" (48). The flora—"deadly looking bayonet plants" (57)—and fauna—flies "snarl" (44) as do wolves (45)—are equally uninviting. There are "dry weeds lashed in the wind like the earth's long echo of lance and spear in old encounters forever unrecorded" (105). Bats appear "on leather wings like dark satanic hummingbirds" (148). The night sky is similarly diabolical: "the constellation of Cassiopeia burned like a witch's signature on the black face of the firmament" (256). Indeed, the setting of *Blood Meridian* is less *terra firma* than *terra terror*.

Inside this extremely unfriendly void ride our non-heroes (rather than *anti-heroes*, which are often just a different sort of hero). McCarthy's making of all matter—organic and inorganic—equipollent further encourages a detachment from events:

They rode on. The horses trudged sullenly the alien ground and the round earth rolled beneath them silently milling the greater void wherein they were contained. In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence. The very clarity of these articles belied their familiarity, for the eye predicates the whole on some feature or part and here was nothing more luminous than another and nothing more enshadowed and in the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships. (247)

In “‘The Very Life of the Darkness’: A Reading of *Blood Meridian*”, Steven Shaviro offers a general explanation of this leveling of hierarchies: “There is no interiority, no intentionality and no transcendence. The radical epistemology of *Blood Meridian* subverts all dualisms of subject and object, inside and outside, will and representation or being and interpretation” (148). David Holloway's *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy* extends this “strange equality” to the ultra economic goals underlying the riders' actions, the fruits, as it were, of the scalping gang's labors:

In a fictive realm where scalps, children, buffalo bones, ferry crossings, ornate weaponry, whiskey, landscape, and life itself are all merely ‘things’ to be bought and sold according to the laws of the marketplace, the heterogeneous diversity of the object world is reduced to a single identity, a homogenous mass of matter, a collection of things linked together

by their common exchange-value, their shared status as commodities in a commodity world. (104-105)

In this way, the interchangeability of the Glanton gang's objects brings to mind Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil."

The cumulative effect and implication of these aspects is the total permeation of all events with death. In the final third of *Blood Meridian*, Glanton's scalpers happen upon a few of their missing colleagues, and a scene is described that epitomizes the democracy of violent ends in the novel:

They found the lost scouts hanging head downward from the limbs of a fireblackened paloverde tree [recall that such lightning-struck trees are considered "assassinated"]. They were skewered through the cords of their heels with sharpened shuttles of green wood and they hung gray and naked above the dead ashes of the coals where they'd been roasted until their heads had charred and the brains bubbled in the skulls and steam sang from their noseholes. Their tongues were drawn out and held with sharpened sticks thrust through them and they had been docked of their ears and their torsos were sliced open with flints until the entrails hung down on their chests . . . The two darker forms were the last of the Delawares and the other two were the Vandiemerlander and a man from the east named Gilchrist. Among their barbarous hosts they had met with neither favor nor discrimination but had suffered and died impartially. (226-227)

The slow destruction of these captured scouts by torture, methodical but impersonal, does not faze the hardened witnesses to its aftermath; these are the terms of their existence. By this point in the story the scalpers have witnessed an abundance of creative gore and are mostly numb to such atrocities. It must not be forgotten for an instant: *they are scalpers* and the dressing (or



undressing) of humans as hunted game does not move them. They reside in a fang whorl of dismemberment and death: they deal in it and it is dealt upon them. Well before this tableau, in fact, the following detail in a story Tobin tells the kid reveals a subtle sense of humor about such torture: "we encountered the two lads that had deserted us. Hangin upside down in a tree. They'd been skinned and I can tell ye it does very little for a man's appearance" (128). This deadpan observation is typical of the black comedy that occurs sporadically throughout the novel. Such gallows humor appropriately conveys a stoicism toward whatever figurative (or in Toadvine and Brown's case later, literal) "gallows" from which each character knows he will surely hang sooner or later. In *Blood Meridian*, "cracking wise" before the horrific reinforces the grander scheme of an absurd universe whose carnage is endless, pointless, and inescapable.

Replete as it is with dismemberment, *Blood Meridian* abounds with body parts as sight gags. Toadvine, the man who has no ears, wears a necklace of ears around his neck—as if overcompensating or fetishizing what he so visibly lacks. The frequent display of heads removed from their bodies, while ludicrously macabre, serves as a grisly satire of mortal hubris. For instance, when Mexican soldiers capture the kid, he is taken by force to view a sort of glass aquarium filled with alcohol as a preservative:

In this container with hair afloat and eyes turned upward in a pale face sat a human head . . . It was Captain White. Lately at war among the heathen. The kid looked into the drowned and sightless eyes of his old commander . . . He aint no kin to me he said. (69-70)

The Captain's head, earlier spouting supremacist rhetoric to lure the kid into his filibuster mission ("there's no God in Mexico . . . we are dealing with a people manifestly incapable of governing themselves") has become a carnival exhibit for the Mexicans, "a race of degenerates"

(34). (Like “Grimley”, Captain White is appropriately and ironically named.) Similarly, after laying waste an Apache village Glanton returns with “the chief’s head hanging by its hair from his belt . . . Glanton cursed them on, taking up a lance and mounting the head upon it where it bobbed and leered like a carnival head . . . He looked at the head on the pole. You was some kind of goddamned chief” (159-160). In their first triumphant return to Chihuahua “a hero’s welcome” awaits them, and they enter the city not with flags but with the withered faces of the slain hoisted high. The contrast between the pomp of official ceremony and the reality of the mission is preposterous: “the victors in their gory rags smiled through the filth and the dust and the caked blood as they bore on poles the desiccated heads of the enemy through that fantasy of music and flowers” (165).

Before the novel even begins, McCarthy forces the reader to recognize the veneration of scalping in human history by posting a portion of a newspaper article from 1982 in his third epigraph, in which archaeological evidence suggests scalping began at least 300,000 years ago. Today, the peeling of human manes seems a ghastly intimacy reserved for the most sensational of psychopaths—an Ed Gein, Jeffrey Dahmer, or the fictionalized combination of both, Hannibal Lecter. But as *Blood Meridian* illustrates, graphically, again and again, the collection of scalps was a common practice in the unsettled American West. The novel’s sheer volume of scalps gathered in the book (each one a “receipt” (98) as Glanton calls them) eventually exceeds the reader’s capacities, and whether benefiting from the anesthetic effects of shock, or simply oversaturated with images of the scalped, the mundanity of all of this scalping moves from the horrific to the merely absurd. After the cantina massacre in Nacori, Glanton issues a work order for the collection of scalps: “Hair, boys . . . The string aint run on this trade yet” (180). (Note that the metaphor he employs recognizes that their livelihood is due to detonate.) As the accumulated

scalps pile higher and higher from such extra-contractual sources, the banality of so much waste reaches its apex when the kid discovers that all was for naught as the gang, found out by the Mexican government, destroys the evidence:

A mile further and he came upon a strange blackened mass in the trail like a burnt carcass of some ungodly beast . . . It was the remains of the scalps taken on the Nacozari and they had been burned unredeemed in a green and stinking bonfire so that nothing remained of the poblanos save this charred coagulate of their preterite lives.” (216)

In the middle of all this scalping business is the almost heavy-handed irony that the *de facto* philosophical leader of the scalping gang, and the demi-god of the novel, hairless Judge Holden, is manifestly unscalpable.

The characters do not flinch at the divisibility of their bodies; they are conscious of themselves, as they are of others, as a conglomeration of components. The kid’s rejoinder when Toadvine asks him, “You don’t know me, do ye?”, confirms this perspective: “I know ye . . . I’d know your hide in a tanyard” (73). And again, this is nearly perfect gallows humor, for the kid will eventually reunite with Toadvine on the west coast, except Toadvine will be strung up and curing in the sun. In captivity in Chihuahua, Toadvine is so brutally calculating that he has assessed his overseer not for his alertness or strength as a captor but for his basic economic value:

I seen him first, said Toadvine.

Seen who first.

You know who. Old Brassteeth yonder.

The kid looked after the sauntering figure.

My biggest worry is that something will happen to him. I pray daily for the Lord to watch over him. (75)

One hundred pages later, when Toadvine (ironically, the only gang member who occasionally questions their indiscriminate killing) protests the impending massacre of an encampment of “peaceful Tiguas,” fellow gang member Vandiemander regards the incongruity of this sentiment with Toadvine’s appearance: “He looked at the livid letters tattooed on his forehead and at the lank greasy hair that hung from his earless skull. He looked at the necklace of gold teeth at his chest. They rode on [to help with the slaughter]” (173). This cymbal crash of a detail implies that Toadvine was eventually able to overcome “Old Brassteeth” back in Chihuahua.

Bodies become the sum of their parts and as human beings are repeatedly eviscerated, the living, too, are made material—a collection of guts yet to be spilled. Any inviolability or exceptionalism before the laws of the food chain is sacrificed in this realm where men appraise men as butchers appraise beasts for slaughter. This is expressed most darkly early in the novel when the kid takes shelter with a former “slaver” who is now a bitterly racist hermit:

He turned and rummaged among the hides and handed through the flames a small dark thing. The kid turned it in his hand. Some man’s heart, dried and blackened . . . After a while the old man put the heart away.

That thing cost me two hundred dollars, he said.

You give two hundred dollars for it?

I did for that was the price they put on the black son of a bitch it hung inside of. (18)

Another entity that is described, often hilariously, as a sum of its parts is the Glanton gang *en masse*. During an extremely tense altercation with a band of Apaches, in which Glanton’s horse leans forward (channeling the spirit of his master certainly) and bites the ear of an Apache

horse, the chief of the Apaches steps in to correct the injustice frontier-style: “After some discussion it became plain that whatever the assessment of damage levied there was no specie acceptable by way of payment other than whiskey” (230). Glanton tells the chief, repeatedly, that they do not have any whiskey, and the chief is convinced after scrutinizing their general appearance: “He looked over the Americans, their gear. In truth they did not look like men who might have whiskey they hadn’t drunk” (230). So, Glanton and company advance to the small town before them and the impression they make on the lieutenant garrisoned there is recounted:

Couts looked them over. Haggard and haunted and blacked by the sun. The lines and pores of their skin deeply grimed with gunblack where they’d washed the bores of their weapons. Even the horses looked alien to any he’d ever seen, decked as they were in human hair and teeth and skin. Save for their guns and buckles and a few pieces of metal in the harness of the animals there was nothing about these arrivals to suggest even the discovery of the wheel. (232)

The next twenty-four hours display the ludicrous audacity of the Glanton gang. They coolly disregard the military regiment in town which, again and again, attempts to address them formally. A racist restaurant owner is killed by a black member of Glanton’s gang for refusing him service. The lieutenant attempts to requisition them but the Judge bamboozles him with half-baked legalese. This elicits a McCarthy pun: the lieutenant is “stunned at the baldness of these disclaimers” (237). The gang members display their insatiability to the general horror of the townspeople: “By midnight the citizens had cleared out and there were armed and naked men pounding on doors demanding drink and women.” A feat of strength is gambled upon the next morning, hangovers be damned, with the Judge hurling, in Herculean-fashion, an “enormous iron meteorite” (240). The scalpers leave town contemptuous of the ridiculous attempts at protocol

from the soldiers: “They rode out at dusk. The corporal in the gatehouse above the portal came out and called to them to halt but they did not” (241). The sentry also attempts to hail them, and “When the sentry called again he [David Brown, one of the scalpers] swung about with his rifle and the man had the sense to duck under the parapet and they heard no more from him” (242). The gang pulls a cage with an “idiot” inside (whom his once “tarred and feathered” brother profits from as a sideshow exhibit); on the back of this cage is affixed a barrel of whiskey that has been reconfigured to swindle the Apaches in the previous agreement:

Lashed on behind the cage rode the whiskey keg they’d drained the night before. The keg had been dismantled and rebound . . . and it now contained within it a flask made from a common sheep’s stomach and holding perhaps three quarts of whiskey. This flask was fitted to the bung at the inside and the rest of the keg was filled with water. (241)

The bogus barrel is delivered to the Apaches and the deal is finalized. The farce of this episode is complete: these are the Apaches who had previously tortured and killed the Glanton gang’s scouts, a detail noted earlier: “He [the Apache chief] carried no arms but the men at either side of him were armed with shortbarreled rifles and they also carried the saddle pistols and other accoutrements of the murdered scouts” (229). This day and night in the life of the Glanton gang encapsulates the outrageous amorality that informs everything they do, an approach to living in which respect, integrity, and allegiance do not exist, and grim humor supplies the only human resonance.

An earlier image of the gang depicts them as anarchical and primitive—nihilists cast inside a void:

Deployed upon that plain they moved in a constant elision, ordained agents of the actual dividing out the world which they encountered and leaving what had been and what

would never be alike extinguished on the ground behind them. Spectre horsemen, pale with dust, anonymous in the crenellated heat. Above all else they appeared wholly at venture, primal, provisional, devoid of order. Like beings provoked out of the absolute rock and set nameless and no remove from their own loomings to wander ravenous and doomed and mute as gorgons shambling the brutal wastes of Gondwanaland in a time before nomenclature was and each was all. (172)

Elsewhere, the gang as an entity is presented in full effect:

although each man among them was discrete unto himself, conjoined they made a thing that had not been before and in that communal soul were wastes hardly reckonable more than those white regions on old maps where monsters do live and where there is nothing other of the known world save conjectural winds. (152)

The Glanton gang, simultaneously atavistic and apocalyptic, forms an absurd corporation that is inwardly empty and outwardly malignant—an all-devouring beast that is as vicious in conduct as it is lacking in purpose.

After periods of intense labor and deprivation in the scalping business, the gang seeks diversion in the city. But when this monstrosity rejoins civilization, it is not for leisure but for rapine; on these occasions, in which Glanton and company glut on food, fornication, and superhuman quantities of booze, brawls erupt, buildings burn, and barricades are subsequently erected to stem the tide of general badness. These catastrophic celebrations are hilarious when they reach a pitch, whether it be Bathcat and a blind street harpist passing out on a banquet table with their arms around each other or Glanton in such a drunken rage that he has to be strapped down, only later to break free and continue his ferocious bender: “The first news they had of him was in front of the cuartel where he cut down the Mexican flag with his knife and tied it to the

tail of a mule. Then he mounted the mule and goaded it through the square dragging the sacred bandera in the mud behind him” (193). Uncouth and ignorant (or contemptuous) of decorum, Glanton and his henchmen reveal their low breeding almost immediately at the banquet prepared for them by Angel Trias, the learned and eloquent governor of Chihuahua. After each gang member is thoroughly scrubbed clean (the equivalent of “polishing a turd” perhaps), they proceed to a spectacular feast accompanied with praise from the governor’s cabinet members:

Patriotic toasts were drunk, the governor’s aides raising their glasses to Washington and Franklin and the Americans responding with yet more of their own country’s heroes, ignorant alike of diplomacy and any name at all from the pantheon of their sister republic. (169)

This deteriorates even further when the governor attempts to offer his own encomium after the meal:

The governor had tapped his glass and risen to speak in his well-phrased english, but the bloated and belching mercenaries were leering about and were calling for more drink and some had not ceased to scream out toasts, now degenerated into obscene pledges to the whores of various southern cities. (170)

The Judge directs some musicians to play, and the scalpers dance with “a horde of luridlooking whores [who] had infiltrated the dance” (170). At this point the party really takes off:

Pistolfire soon became general and Mr Riddle, who was acting American consul in the city, descended to remonstrate with the revelers and was warned away. Fights broke out. Furniture was disassembled, men waving chairlegs, candlestands. Two whores grappled and pitched into a sideboard and went to the floor in a crash of brandyglasses. Jackson



[the black member of the gang], pistols drawn, lurched into the street vowing to Shoot the ass off Jesus Christ, the longlegged white son of a bitch. (171)

In the following nights, the shenanigans continue unabated:

The baths had become bordellos, the attendants driven off. The white stone fountain in the plaza was filled at night with naked and drunken men . . . Horses were ridden indoors and out . . . Charcoal scrawls appeared on the limewashed walls. *Mejor los indios.* (171)

This last message from one of the townsfolk (“better the indians”) is written, of course, with the clarity of hindsight. The governor has made a Faustian bargain with a very satanic beast, and the beast has come to town to feed. Many of the exploits have a slapstick quality as town after town is ransacked of its available pleasures and melees end in physical collapse with gang members dropping arbitrarily in the immediate vicinity of whatever last hurrah they happen to be pursuing. Adding to this ludicrousness is their general tendency to spend everything they have, illicit but hard-earned coinage that is thrown, by the pile, to barmen and prostitutes. They typically leave these holidays broke in every sense of the word, slinking away ragged, stinking, and hungover. This cycle of work and play, and the wasting of so many lives and resources, hones the absurdity of their existence. Steven Shaviro writes that, “They ravage the very order upon which they parasitically feed. Their actions all fall under the rubric of what Georges Bataille calls *nonproductive expenditure*: prodigality, play, waste, recklessness, empty display and unmotivated violence” (154). Inevitably shopkeepers, bar owners, and local lawmen recede from view to seek refuge from this plague, and the scalp-hunters find themselves in what are nearly ghost towns.

For the Glanton gang civilization is a thing to be mocked and abused, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the hollow formalities with which the Judge, the apparent “gentleman” of

the bunch, conducts diplomacy and redresses grievances. He is the diabolical attorney of the Glanton corporation—tactful, eloquent, and utterly necessary when the indelicacy of Glanton and others threaten to cause the gang unnecessary trouble (as much as they seem to thrive on it). An arms deal with a Prussian Jew draws the local soldiers out as Glanton tests a massive revolver on a cat, a chicken, a goat, a large clay pot, and a bell tower. Glanton greets the inquiring sergeant with neither concern nor respect: “Andale . . . You and your halfassedlookin niggers” (84). Judge Holden quickly intervenes with elaborate explanations in Spanish. He even offers a lengthy seminar on the origin of the black man (Jackson) in their group; this causes Jackson to demand to know what is being said of him. The Judge lies: “That shaking hands is not the custom in your land” and then proceeds, in English, to baffle Jackson with the same style of customized obfuscation that had placated the sergeant:

It is not necessary . . . that the principals here be in possession of the facts concerning their case, for their acts will ultimately accommodate history with or without their understanding. But it is consistent with notions of right principle that these facts—to the extent that they can be readily made to do so—should find a repository in the witness of some third party. Sergeant Aguilar is just such a party and any slight to his office is but a secondary consideration when compared to divergences in that larger protocol exacted by the formal agenda of an absolute destiny. Words are things. The words he is in possession of he cannot be deprived of. Their authority transcends his ignorance of their meaning.

(85)

Indeed for the Judge “Words are things” that can be used to cajole, ingratiate, insinuate, and as in this case, disarm. He relies on his hearers having an “ignorance of their meaning” because his words often mix empty scholarly jargon, philosophical riddling, and 19<sup>th</sup> century legalese. He

forthrightly identifies himself as Glanton's counsel in another episode where he is, once again, using the language of a learned man in order to manipulate events:

Kindly address your remarks to me, Lieutenant . . . I represent Captain Glanton in all legal matters, I think you should know first of all that the captain does not propose to be called a liar and I would think twice before I involved myself with him in an affair of honor. Secondly I have been with him all day and I can assure you that neither he nor any of his men have ever set foot in the premises to which you allude. (237)

All of this is, of course, untrue. The Judge's polemic satirizes lawyers, who thrive on taking the simple and making it complex.

The pretenses of civilization are also satirized, luridly, in the descriptions of different fashion combinations worn by certain bands of marauding Indians. In the first major bloodbath of the novel, McCarthy displays Comanches in a hodgepodge of the stitched together remnants of several centuries of Western encroachment. It is as if the bill for so much imperialism has arrived, with Captain White and his adventurers obligated to pay immediately:

there rose a fabled horde of mounted lancers and archers bearing shields bedight with bits of broken mirrorglass that cast a thousand unpieced suns against the eyes of their enemies. 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, coats of slain dragoons, frogged and braided cavalry jackets, one in a stovepipe hat and one with an umbrella and one in white stockings and a bloodstained weddingveil and some in headgear of crane feathers or rawhide helmets that bore the horns of bull or buffalo and one in a pigeontailed coat worn backwards and otherwise naked and one in the armor of a

Spanish conquistador, the breastplate and pauldrons deeply dented with old blows of mace or sabre done in another country by men whose very bones were dust and many with their braids spliced up with the hair of other beasts until they trailed upon the ground and their horses' ears and tails worked with bits of brightly colored cloth and one whose horse's whole head was painted crimson red and all the horsemen's faces gaudy and grotesque with daubings like a company of mounted clowns, death hilarious, all howling in a barbarous tongue and riding down upon them like a horde from hell more horrible yet than the brimstone land of christian reckoning (52-53)

This gallery of “death hilarious” refits the pageantry of European culture, turning all its vanity into a nightmare for the besieged descendants, mocking its narcissism (“bits of broken mirrorglass”), courtly elegance (“silk finery and pieces of uniform . . . coats of slain dragoons”), holy matrimony (“bloodstained weddingveil”), and chivalrous questing (“the armor of a Spanish conquistador”). So, Captain White’s “oh my god” can be allowed to mean not just “What is about to happen to us?” but also “What have we wrought?” McCarthy’s wonderfully baroque description of the Comanches’ garb—which so visibly subverts (and subsequently mocks) the pomposity of their oppressors—results in an outlandish spectacle that amuses as it overwhelms. The unrelenting onslaught of intricately satirical images in this passage combine toward the effect of a horrified guffaw in the reader as irregular after irregular is swallowed up in a morass of “the savage” and “the civilized”. A certain kind of comedy is herein established and a choice has to be made whether one wants to venture along in a state of healthy detachment or risk further ambush.

Such outlandish satire conflates absurd comedy and serious historical revisionism. Barclay Owens attempts to sort it out in “Blood Meridian’s Violence”:

many of us are disturbed by laughter juxtaposed with gore. The yo-yo effect is emotionally disconcerting and confounds easy pigeonholing. We want to label experience, to laugh or fight or take flight . . . As we continue reading page after page of violence and unsettling jokes, we make our own Faustian bargain with the novel, a secret commerce of laughing and queasy participation. (16)

Owens struggles with the “yo-yo effect” of the book’s emotional modes, but should look harder at its function in serving a broader theme. Wade Hall (who says “Reading McCarthy is sometimes like reading an Ionesco-like script of a grotesque theatre of the absurd” [50]) considers this and concludes that the absurdity of death—and the prevalence of so much that is incomprehensible in the mind of man—establishes it as the presiding comic device: “the bloodbath McCarthy called *Blood Meridian* may properly be called a comedy of life, which means that death, its main subject, is life’s ultimate absurdity and hence the ultimate comic character” (60). Josyph puts an even more interesting spin on how death operates in comic context:

This is a roughneck novel indeed, but like a photographic reversal, as if it were written from Death’s perspective, *Blood Meridian* can be seen as a positive book, for surely Death would relish those who add to his legion so heartily, and surely it’s an enjoyable book to read, often a highly amusing one. References to the light . . . are characteristically negative, which is fitting in a novel that takes as an epigraph the message from Jacob Boehme that “sorrow is a thing that is swallowed up in death, and death and dying are the very life of the darkness.” For the great glutton Death, who is the ultimate *comedos*, devourer, life is all *comedia*, festival. (181)

Josyph's peculiar interpretation, throwing Dionysius and Thalia in the pit with Thanatos, allows that from a certain viewpoint, the poles of normal reckoning are reversed—darkness inverted with lightness. Shaviro contends that no such polarization, inverted or not, should be sought, and that the book merely establishes a predicament:

*Blood Meridian* is not a salvation narrative; we can be rescued neither by faith nor by works nor by grace. It is useless to look for ulterior, redemptive meanings, useless even to posit the irredeemable gratuitousness of our abandonment in the form of some existential category such as Heideggerian "thrownness." (146)

If the Judge is accepted as a sort of surrogate god in the novel, Plutonian in his dominion among the dead and soon-to-be-dead, then this final exchange between the ex-priest and the kid, as they flee from personified Death, represents this predicament symbolically:

Will you hide me?

Hide you?

Yes.

The kid spat. You caint hide. Where you goin to hide at?

Will he come back?

I don't know.

This is a terrible place to die in.

Where's a good one? (208)

Of course, in this dialogue reminiscent of *Waiting for Godot*, the Judge as personified Death will come back again and again, outlasting them both in his eternal dance. Shaviro identifies this as the *only* polestar by which the novel can be navigated:

*Blood Meridian* is a book, then, not of heights and depths, nor of origins and endings, but of restless, incessant horizontal movements: nomadic wanderings, topographical displacements, variations of weather, skirmishes in the desert. There is only war, there is only the dance. (145)

Inside this void, what Camus would call “the unreasonable silence of the world” (21), run the farcical escapades of the scalp-hunters with brief paroxysms of conflict like fluctuations in climate or changes in weather but ultimately there is only emptiness and “the barren desert wind coming out of whatever godless quadrant cold and sterile and bearing news of nothing at all” (293). For *Blood Meridian* is a book about waste inside of wastes.

With this grim backdrop the novel opens to any number of darkly comic moments. It is not only that the gallows humor in the novel establishes the absurdity of life in violent isolation, but also that this absurd universe, once established, makes anything and everything potentially laughable. An image of Glanton midway through the book generates a comic triumvirate:

They eyed the sun in its circus and at dusk they rode out upon the cooling plain where the western sky was the color of blood. At a desert well they dismounted and drank jaw to jaw with their horses and remounted and rode on. The little desert wolves yapped in the dark and Glanton’s dog trotted beneath the horse’s belly, its footfalls stitched precisely among the hooves. (152)

So there is the pitiless Glanton with his cruel horse and his angry little dog, both lower animals cruelly trained by the top one to complete a sort of Chinese box of ill will—a legion of rage riding south on another diabolical mission. Perhaps the reader should have recognized the book’s sense of humor in the heading of Chapter One, with its dry synopsis of the action that will soon

ensue, emulating the style of so many adventure stories for young boys (albeit much more innocuous ones):

Childhood in Tennessee—Runs away—New Orleans—Fights—Is shot—To Galveston—Nacogdoches—The Reverend Green—Judge Holden—An affray—Toadvine—Burning of the hotel—Escape. (3)

By the time Chapter Five is broached, there may be no excuse for not recognizing this extremely arid gallows humor:

Adrift on the Bolson de Mapimi—Sproule—Tree of dead babies—Scenes from a massacre—Sopilotes—The murdered in the church—Night among the dead—Wolves—The washers at the ford—Afoot westward—A mirage—An encounter with bandits—Attacked by a vampire—Digging a well—A crossroads in the waste—The carreta—Death of Sproule—Under arrest—The captain's head—Survivors—on to Chihuahua—The city—The prison—Toadvine. (55)

This last detail, the reentry of Toadvine into the kid's life (bonding as they did after a drunken knife fight with one another and the next day's tandem stomping to death of a man the kid had no conscious grievance with), brings a typically droll moment between them. At this point they are both in a (literally) lousy Mexican jail, being fed the occasional treat:

What is this? He[the kid] said.

That's prime bullmeat, son. From the corrida. You'll get it of a Sunday night.

You best keep chewin. Don't let it feel ye to weaken. (77)

Under these circumstances, they discuss the merits of municipal living:

How do you like city life? said Toadvine.

I don't like it worth a damn so far.



I keep waitin for it to take with me but it aint done it. (74-75)

And this “waiting for it to take” will never really come for either of them, the ever so slightly sympathetic characters of the novel, soon to be disgorged from this grim prison into the larger one that is *Blood Meridian* and in which their execution is certain.

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## **Vita**

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