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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Jeremy Locke entitled “Exploding Anthropocentrism: Understanding Optical Democracy in Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*.” I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

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EXPLODING ANTHROPOCENTRISM:  
UNDERSTANDING OPTICAL DEMOCRACY  
IN CORMAC McCARTHY'S *BLOOD MERIDIAN*

A Thesis  
Presented for the  
Master of Arts  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Chattanooga

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May 2009

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to all who have had a part in the creation of this thesis. First, I would like to thank Dr. Greg O’Dea for his interest in this project from its inception and for his amazing guidance. I would like to thank Dr. Verbie Prevost, Dr. Chris Stuart, and Dr. Joe Wilferth for both serving on my committee and for lending much helpful advice. Also, I would like to extend my gratitude to Dr. Joyce Smith, Hannah Coffee, Steve Spann, and Foy Tootle for listening to me as I worked through my arguments in the early stages of this project. Finally, I want to thank Dr. Eric Carl Link of the University of Memphis for introducing me to *Blood Meridian* and fostering my interest in Cormac McCarthy.

## Abstract

In this study, I will attempt to synthesize the aesthetic and metaphysical conceptions of optical democracy. While several critics contend that the concept of optical democracy influences all of McCarthy's novels, I will limit this treatment to *Blood Meridian*. By focusing on this one text, I will be able to move beyond the definitional treatments of this concept offered by previous critics and demonstrate how optical democracy works to produce meaning in two particular subjects explored in the novel: history and race. I will suggest that McCarthy uses optical democracy as an aesthetic technique, as described by Holloway, to abolish the idea of anthropocentric order as it applies to the subject being examined. By abolishing this false order, he simultaneously dissociates his treatment of the subject from this illusory order and reveals the presence of a phenomenal reality that is "before or beyond" anthropocentric assumptions in which war is the constant and unalterable cosmic reality and optical democracy is the fundamental ontological status (Shaviro 151). Ultimately, by synthesizing the aesthetic and metaphysical conceptions of optical democracy, I will suggest that McCarthy presents this concept as an intratextual critical apparatus that allows the reader to understand how the seemingly random acts of violence depicted in *Blood Meridian* are actually meaningful incidents that demonstrate the process by which war creates the order of existence.

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## Introduction

“Your heart’s desire is to be told some mystery. The mystery is that there is no mystery” (McCarthy 252). These are the final words of Judge Holden’s lecture concerning a prehistoric bone that “he’d found weathered out of a bluff” at a “watering place” south of the “black volcanic hills” the Glanton gang crossed a few days after passing through Tucson (251). The central objective of this lecture is to reveal this particular bone’s “analogies to the prevalent bones of the country” the Glanton gang traveled through on their scalp hunting campaign (252). Holden claims that there is nothing mysterious about this bone, and indeed, there is not. For this fossilized bone, like the “prevalent bones of the country,” is but another piece of evidence that reveals the truth that all living things will eventually be annihilated by war.

Concerning war, Holden tells the gang, “It makes no difference what men think of war . . . . War endures. . . . War has always been here. Before man was, war waited for him” (248). Moreover, he proclaims that “[w]ar is god” (249). Thus, in *Blood Meridian* war is the constant and unalterable cosmic reality. It is the force that creates the order of existence and maintains this order in accordance with its “absolute and irrevocable” will by making all decisions “of life and death” and “of what shall be and what shall not” (249). Holden claims that this order of existence is “the way it was and will be” (248); however, he contends that humans fail to perceive this order because they have been taught to look at the world from an anthropocentric perspective “from birth” (245). The result of this worldview is that the human mind divests the world of its inherent “strangeness” and orders the “stuff of creation” according to an anthropocentric hierarchy (245 & 5). Although, humans present this anthropocentric hierarchy as the true order of

existence and use it to justify their self-appointed position as the preeminent terrestrial life form, this false ordering of things does not alter the reality that war is the arbiter of existential order and humans are completely subject to its “absolute and irrevocable” will (249).

At the heart of the existential order presented in *Blood Meridian* is the concept of optical democracy. The term “optical democracy” appears in a passage describing “the alien ground” the Glanton gang traveled across after leaving Tucson (McCarthy 247). McCarthy writes,

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 any 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 was 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)

The amount of scholarly attention that has been given to this passage suggests that understanding optical democracy is an integral part of reading *Blood Meridian*. The critics who have discussed the significance of optical democracy in general and this passage in specific have tended to align themselves with one of two major interpretations. The first of these interpretations presents optical democracy as an aesthetic technique that McCarthy uses to abolish the false ideology of anthropocentric thought and reveal the emergence of a “deeper story” embedded in the text, one “in which the nexus of external

historical restraints placed around reader, character, and writer are seemingly shrugged off” (Holloway 199). The second suggests that optical democracy goes beyond aesthetics because it is “not a perspective *upon* the world,” but an “immanent perspective that already *is* the world,” one that reveals all terrestrial life as existing in a phenomenal reality that is “before or beyond” anthropocentric assumptions (Shaviro 151). Thus, those who subscribe to this interpretation suggest that McCarthy seeks to reinvest the world with its strangeness by revealing the fact that the unanthropocentric vision forwarded by optical democracy represents the true ontological status of all terrestrial existence.

The quintessential presentation of optical democracy as an aesthetic technique is David Holloway’s “Modernism, Nature, and Utopia: Another Look at ‘Optical Democracy’ in Cormac McCarthy’s *Western Quartet*” (2000). Holloway suggest that optical democracy is an aesthetic technique that consists of “looking at landscape, and then writing about landscape in such a way that any anthropocentric assumption of human primacy over the natural world is rejected, each human life being represented on the same quotidian level as each spider, each stone, each blade of grass” (192). He contends that by rejecting the idea of human primacy, optical democracy becomes a “self-canceling literary form, an ecocritics that expels from language the anthropocentric notion that aesthetics might explore, define, or own the meaning of things in nature . . .” (197). Once language is divested of its anthropocentric qualities, he suggests that “it is . . . revived as an agent of potential critical praxis upon, as well as within, the world at large” (198). Holloway argues that McCarthy uses this revived, unanthropocentric language to “*engage* the world in such a way that an entire extant order of things slides into view at precisely the moment in which that order is abolished, or ‘neutralized,’ by



the aesthetic act” (198). In order for this concept to work, there must be a notion of a hierarchical order to abolish or democratize, but that notion can exist only in an illusory way, and only in order that it be neutralized. Moreover, in this conception of optical democracy the illusory ordering of things is abolished by an aesthetic act—that is, by the image or language that deconstructs it. Through this deconstruction, Holloway suggests that in the act of democratizing these illusory hierarchical orders a “deeper story” emerges “in which the nexus of external historical restraints placed around reader, character, and writer are seemingly shrugged off” (199).

In “‘The Very Life of the Darkness’: A Reading of *Blood Meridian*” (1993), Steven Shaviro suggests that optical democracy initially functions as an aesthetic technique that presents “[m]inute details and impalpable qualities . . . with such precision that the prejudices of anthropocentric perceptions are disqualified” (151), but that this disqualification reveals the existence of a “kind of perception before or beyond the human” (151). He suggests that this new kind of perception “is not a perspective *upon* the world, and not a vision that *intends* its objects; but an immanent perspective that already *is* the world . . . a primordial visibility . . . that is indifferent to our acts of vision because it is always passively at work in whatever objects we may or may not happen to look at” (151-52). Thus, Shaviro contends that optical democracy is more than a method of writing about landscape. It is a naturally occurring phenomenon that exists prior to any artist who may attempt to capture this same effect in his or her work. Moreover, he describes it as a “primordial visibility” that simultaneously abolishes the false anthropocentric order that humans impose upon reality and reveals the true order of existence in which “all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become

endowed with unguessed kinships” (McCarthy 247). Ultimately, this interpretation presents optical democracy as constituting the fundamental ontological status of all terrestrial existence.

While both Holloway and Shaviro offer excellent definitional examinations of optical democracy as vital to understanding McCarthy’s fiction, neither present a complete explanation of how optical democracy produces meaning within any particular text. Although Holloway contends that McCarthy uses optical democracy to deconstruct the illusory, hierarchical human order to reveal a “deeper story” (199), he neither discusses what this deeper story is nor suggests the effect it has on the texts from which it emerges. On the other hand, while Shaviro’s discussion of the metaphysical aspects of optical democracy allows the reader to see the emergence of such a deeper level of meaning in *Blood Meridian*, he fails to explicate the process by which this meaning is produced. Rather, he simply contends that such a meaning is present and that its presence “cannot be attributed to any fixed center of enunciation, neither to an authorial presence nor to a narrating voice nor to the consciousness of any of the characters” (152). Ultimately, these two articles appear each to present only half of the concept of optical democracy.

In this study, I will attempt to synthesize the aesthetic and metaphysical conceptions of optical democracy. While several critics contend that the concept of optical democracy influences all of McCarthy’s novels, I will limit this treatment to *Blood Meridian*. By focusing on this one text, I will be able to move beyond the definitional treatments of this concept offered by previous critics and demonstrate how optical democracy works to produce meaning in two particular subjects explored in the

novel: history and race. I will suggest that McCarthy uses optical democracy as an aesthetic technique, as described by Holloway, to abolish the idea of anthropocentric order as it applies to the subject being examined. By abolishing this false order, he simultaneously dissociates his treatment of the subject from this illusory order and reveals the presence of a phenomenal reality that is “before or beyond” anthropocentric assumptions in which war is the constant and unalterable cosmic reality and optical democracy is the fundamental ontological status (Shaviro 151). Ultimately, by synthesizing the aesthetic and metaphysical conceptions of optical democracy, I will suggest that McCarthy presents this concept as an intratextual critical apparatus that allows the reader to understand how the seemingly random acts of violence depicted in *Blood Meridian* are actually meaningful incidents that demonstrate the process by which war creates the order of existence.

If I have been successful, this thesis will enhance the current understanding of *Blood Meridian* by encouraging readers to reevaluate the popular trend of reading this novel as a revisionary western aimed at redressing the violent and racist history of the United States’ westward expansion by presenting the concepts of history and race as both demonstrating the ultimate reality that “[w]ar is god” and that humans, like all other terrestrial life forms, are completely subject to its will (McCarthy 249).

## Optical Democracy & the Explosion of Manifest Destiny

Several critics have presented *Blood Meridian* as Cormac McCarthy's attempt to revise the myth of the West<sup>1</sup> by exposing the atrocious violence that accompanied the westward expansion of the United States. Although reading this novel as a revisionary western<sup>2</sup> has gained much popularity, some critics remain unconvinced.

According to Inger-Anne Sjøfting, *Blood Meridian* cannot be considered a revisionary western because it "avoids direct confrontation with specific and commonly shared legends" (22). She writes, "Had [it] shown, say, Wyatt Earp viciously collecting Indian scalps and killing women and children, [it] would have been read as a critical revision of an old legend" (22). This, however, does not happen. Rather, McCarthy chose to base *Blood Meridian* upon the exploits of the Glanton gang, an obscure, historically documented band of scalphunters led by United States Army Captain John Joel Glanton. Sjøfting contends that McCarthy's focus on the Glanton gang renders a revisionary reading impossible because it prevents him from "establish[ing] a specific and common frame of reference with his readers outside of the general frame of the west and the western" (22). She concludes that one "can only conjecture why [McCarthy] . . . made this choice" (22). According to Dana Phillips, explaining McCarthy's focus on the

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<sup>1</sup> According to Jarrett, the myth of the West arose from a combination of the ideology of Manifest Destiny and the human tendency to romanticize the past. He argues that the basic idea that "one race, the Anglo-Saxon, combined with the political form of republican government, comprised an elect nation that held the true title to the American landscape" was modernized into a mythic history "which tended to divide territorial antagonists into allegorical groups of 'good' white and 'bad' black hats (or white and red skin) (70). Moreover, this myth is inextricably linked to notions of American progress. Thus, the myth suggests that those Anglo-Americans who "tamed" the West were in a sense predestined to subjugate nature. This notion was based on the assumption that nature "existed to be appropriated and improved for the glorification of God" (Stephanson 59).

<sup>2</sup> Jarrett defines a revisionary western as a text which "revises the earlier tradition of the western in a postmodern fashion, reusing and parodying elements of the genre and of the historical record in order to critique the historical myth of our traditional narratives of the West" (69).

Glanton gang per se is unlikely to further one's understanding of *Blood Meridian's* treatment of history. He writes, "Knowing that Glanton and other members of his band are not pure fictions may excite some readers. I doubt, however, that this knowledge offers any real hermeneutic advantage" (436). This doubt leads him to conclude that "an awareness of John Joel Glanton's history is . . . [of] little help in sorting out McCarthy's 'philosophy of composition'" (437). Thus, both Søfting and Phillips contend that McCarthy's choice to frame *Blood Meridian* around the exploits of the Glanton gang is insignificant.

This shift of critical focus away from the gang rejects the possibility that McCarthy may have chosen to base *Blood Meridian* upon this group in order to achieve a particular effect. In this chapter I will suggest that McCarthy's choice to focus on the Glanton gang allows him to present Western history in light of optical democracy by depicting a group of historical figures completely removed from the popular, mythical conception of the history of the American West. I will argue that McCarthy uses optical democracy as an aesthetic technique to explode the eschatological vision of history that informed the concept of Manifest Destiny and the myth of the West that has grown from this ideology. By exploding this false ideology, McCarthy simultaneously dissociates his treatment of history in *Blood Meridian* from Manifest Destiny and presents the Glanton gang as functioning in a phenomenal historical reality that is "before or beyond" anthropocentric conceptions of history in which the earth as an oracle through which God speaks the truth that war is the planet's constant and unalterable reality (Shaviro 151). I will begin by presenting the massacre of Captain White's filibusters as the aesthetic act by which McCarthy explodes Manifest Destiny and asserts the dominion of the war

(McCarthy 249). Subsequently, I will suggest that once Manifest Destiny has been eliminated from the text, McCarthy introduces the Glanton gang, a group of historical figures completely removed from the influence of the myth of the West. By depicting the exploits of the gang on their scalp hunting campaign, McCarthy is able to present them as functioning in the phenomenal historical reality revealed by optical democracy. I will suggest that McCarthy depicts this newly revealed historical order by presenting Judge Holden as a prophet who discerns the words of God spoken through the earth in “deep-time metaphors” such as ore samples, ruins of human civilizations, and fossils and explicates their meaning to the Glanton gang (Wallach 105).

*Blood Meridian* opens with a scene depicting the fourteen year old kid, the novel’s protagonist, leaving his home in Tennessee as he begins his journey into the West. Approximately one year after his departure, he gains passage on a boat in New Orleans that is heading for Texas. When the kid climbs aboard this boat that will take him to the newly annexed western territories, McCarthy writes, “Only now is the child finally divested of all that he has been. His origins are now become remote as is his destiny and not again in all the world’s turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man’s will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay” (5). Thus begins *Blood Meridian*’s exploration of the validity of Manifest Destiny.

According to Anders Stephanson, Manifest Destiny was based on the assumption that humankind has the power to subdue nature and shape it according to its will. He contends that those who subscribed to this concept believed nature to be the “providential configuration of space and earth” that “existed to be appropriated and improved upon for

the glorification of God” (59). He argues that this belief led many to conclude that the struggle to subdue the unsettled American West, which many considered the final destination of civilization’s westward march, constituted the “historical climax” toward which God was leading both the United States and human civilization (80). Consequently, many considered westward expansion as the first step in bringing about a “transcending ‘end’ of history through a fundamental change of the world in accordance with [the United States’] self-image” (xii). Stephanson cites as the basis of this belief the idea of *translatio imperii*, or the “double notion that civilization was always carried forward by a single dominant power or people and that historical succession was a matter of westward movement” (18). In the case of Manifest Destiny, this dominant group was the Anglo-Saxon race. Not surprisingly, this idea was appealing to Anglo-Americans because it “gave historical sanction to [their] becoming the next great embodiment of civilization” (18). More significantly, this historical sanction led them to believe that they represented not merely the next, but the final embodiment of civilization, the ultimate product of human progress. According to this conception of history, once the Western frontier was subdued and conformed to the American image, civilization’s westward march would be complete; “there could be nothing higher” than the completely settled American empire, an empire that would be “a condensation of all that was good in the hitherto advanced and westward of civilizations” (18). This eschatological vision of history led many to believe that the United States had been chosen by God to fulfill his ultimate plan for humankind, a mission that ensured their identity as the foremost among nations.

Stephanson argues that although Manifest Destiny neither “exhausts [n]or defines the ‘meaning of America’” (xiv), it gave the United States “a sense of national place and

direction” (xiv). Therefore, he contends that Manifest Destiny is of “signal importance to the way the United States came to understand itself in the world . . .” (xiv). He argues that this concept led to the development of a messianic nation identity that was based upon the assumption that the “nation had been allowed to see the light and was bound to show the way for the historically retrograde” (xii). Consequently, many proponents of Manifest Destiny believed that the nation had a divine “duty to develop and spread to full potential under the blessings of the most perfect principles imaginable” (xii), those of republican government and Anglo-Saxon racial superiority. Stephanson argues that this belief led many to conclude that the only way the nation could fulfill its divine duty “was to push the world along by means of regenerative *intervention*” (xii). It is the idea of regenerative intervention that informs the vision of Manifest Destiny that McCarthy presents in *Blood Meridian* through Captain White, the leader of the filibusters.

In the third chapter of *Blood Meridian*, a group of horsemen find the kid “lying naked under [some] trees” and recognize him as “the feller [who] knocked in that Mexer’s head” at the cantina in Bexar (McCarthy 29). The spokesman of this group tells the kid that their commanding officer Captain White wants him to join his band of filibusters that is heading to Mexico. Although this man describes the squadron’s upcoming mission in terms of economic gain (McCarthy 29, 30), Captain White, in his interview with the kid, presents it in terms of regenerative intervention. Concerning Mexico, White tells the kid,

We fought for it. Lost friends and brothers down there. And then by God if we didnt give it back. Back to a bunch of barbarians that even the most biased in their favor will admit have no least notion in God’s earth of



honor or justice or the meaning of republican government. A people so cowardly they've paid tribute a hundred years to tribes of naked savages. Given up their crops and livestock. Mines shut down. Whole villages abandoned. While a heathen horde rides over the land looting and killing with total impunity. Not a hand raised against them. What kind of people are these? (33)

White goes on to answer this question, saying, "What we are dealing with . . . is a race of degenerates. A mongrel race, little better than niggers. And maybe no better. There is no government in Mexico. . . . We are dealing with a people manifestly incapable of governing themselves. And do you know what happens with people who cannot govern themselves? That's right. Others come in to govern for them" (34). Thus, White and his men are "spearhead[ing] the drive" into Mexico where they "are to be the instruments of liberation in a dark and troubled land" (34).

In "Rewriting the Southwest: *Blood Meridian* as a Revisionary Western" Robert L. Jarrett describes the time period *Blood Meridian* depicts as "teem[ing] with political rhetoric and plots to extend the American empire by war, intrigue, or filibuster" (69). He contends that Captain White "superbly represents these attempts to acquire territory for the American empire in the Western territories" (70). Through his speech to the kid concerning regenerative intervention, White emerges as an embodiment of both the concept of Anglo Saxon racial superiority and the belief that Americans have a divine duty to bring republican government to the "historically retrograde" through regenerative violence (Stephanson xii). In addition to these two assumptions, Jarrett suggests that a third, but unspoken, assumption informs White's expansionist rhetoric, that of divinely

ensured American military victory. He contends that many proponents of Manifest Destiny “used the military successes of the new American nation—the Revolution, the Mexican War—as indicative first of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority and second of the nation’s divine mandate to spread over and possess the North American continent” (70). Consequently, many began to equate these “military victor[ies] with a divine principle behind history” (71). This principle was believed to be God’s desire that all of the world should be made to conform to the American image through regenerative violence. Therefore, many came to believe that if God were indeed guiding human history toward its culmination in the American empire, then he “would ensure victory in future [military] engagements” (71). Thus, the proponents of Manifest Destiny believed that the ultimate goal of regenerative intervention, the forcible spread of republican government, was inevitable. For, if God were with the American forces, who could stand against them?

Only seven days into their mission to liberate Mexico, the God of Manifest Destiny is put to the ultimate test. Early in the day, White and his company see on the horizon “clouds of dust that lay across the earth for miles” (50). Eventually, the source of these clouds becomes visible. It is a herd of several thousand “cattle, mules, and horses” accompanied by “a handful of ragged indians” (51) who Captain White believes to be a “parcel of heathen stockthieves” (51). After watching the approaching herd through his telescope, White says that he is sure that the Indians accompanying these animals must have seen his company by this point, and is surprised that they “dont seem concerned” about their proximity to his men (51). Concerning these Indians, White remarks, “We may see a little sport here before the day is out” (51). This is the quintessential statement of White’s belief in the idea of Manifest Destiny: he has such faith that God is working

both to protect his men and to ensure their victory that he believes that the approaching Indians will offer nothing more than “a little sport,” or target practice, for his men. White’s faith is misplaced, but McCarthy’s choice to describe the filibusters as being “elect,” or chosen by God, seems to imply that the concept of Manifest Destiny is indeed a valid ordering of things (48). This validity is further evidenced by the fact that White and his men hold their ground even after “[t]he first of the herd began to swing past them” (51). Rather than attempt to reposition themselves to gain an advantage, the company simply waits for the racially inferior heathens to arrive at the designated battlefield and meet their deaths. McCarthy’s description of the filibusters may seem to reinforce Captain White’s belief that Manifest Destiny is indeed the true order of existence, but actually McCarthy validates the concept only in order to abolish it with the aesthetic technique of optical democracy.

David Holloway suggests that optical democracy functions as an aesthetic technique by identifying an “extant order of things” and simultaneously abolishing that same order through an “aesthetic act” that deconstructs it (198). In the case of Captain White and the filibusters, the order that McCarthy identifies is the eschatological, racially ordered conception of history that informs Manifest Destiny. McCarthy identifies this order through his description of the “elect” filibusters awaiting the arrival of the “handful of ragged indians” approaching them on the plain. Eventually, the first of these riders arrives but they keep “the stock between themselves and the mounted company” to prevent a confrontation (52). Afterward, “[T]he lattermost of the drivers were . . . coming through the dust . . . . The ponies had now begun to veer off from the herd and the drovers were beating their way toward . . .” the filibusters (52). Finally, White’s “sport”

arrives, but his once unshakable men begin to “saw back on their mounts and . . . mill in confusion when up from the offside of these ponies there rose a fabled horde of mounted lancers and archers” (52). The company’s confidence in their racial superiority and faith in the divine hand guiding their mission fades when what at first appears to be a “handful of ragged Indians” turns out to be “a legion of horrors, hundreds in number . . . riding down upon them like a horde from a hell more horrible yet than the brimstone land of christian reckoning . . .” (52-53).

When this horde arrived, the sergeant said, “Oh my god,” knowing that neither racial superiority nor the divine protection promised by Manifest Destiny could save the company from its hellish fate (54). Then, “A rattling drove of arrows passed through the company and men tottered and dropped from their mounts. Horses were rearing and plunging and the mongol hordes swung up along their flanks and turned and rode full upon them with lances” (53). He describes these hellish attackers as:

riding down the unhorsed Saxons and spearing and clubbing them and leaping from their mounts with knives . . . and stripping the clothes from the dead and seizing them up by the hair and passing their blades about the skulls of the living and the dead alike and snatching aloft the bloody wigs and hacking and chopping at the naked bodies, ripping off limbs, heads, gutting the strange white torsos and holding up great handfuls of viscera, genitals, some of the savages so slathered up with gore they might have rolled in it like dogs and some who fell upon the dying and sodomized them with loud cries to their fellows. (54)

Although eight men, including the kid, survive this attack (56), Captain White's mission of liberation ended here on this plain, almost as soon as it began.

Concerning the defeat of Captain White and the filibusters, Jarrett writes,

White justifies his invasion [of Mexico] by arguing that the Mexican government's inability to protect its citizens against the Apache signifies its inferiority and cowardice. Yet in his very first engagement he loses his entire company to the Comanche . . . . Judged even on the terms of his own rhetoric, White's defeat in battle contradicts his assurance in his racial and national superiority" (70).

This military defeat certainly contradicts the rhetoric of White's speech concerning the need for American intervention in Mexico, but it has a much greater impact on the novel's treatment of history than Jarrett's conclusion suggests. If Captain White and his company embody Manifest Destiny in *Blood Meridian*, then their complete annihilation goes beyond merely contradicting White's rhetoric to explode Manifest Destiny as a valid ideology. More specifically, in this scene McCarthy uses optical democracy as an aesthetic technique to abolish two of the foundational assumptions of Manifest Destiny, those of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority and divinely ensured American military supremacy. If the notion of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority held true, then White's company would have easily prevailed over the Comanches. Likewise, if the notion of divinely ensured American military supremacy held true, then God would have never allowed "these elect" filibusters to be slaughtered by savages whom McCarthy calls a "horde from a hell more horrible yet than the brimstone land of christian reckoning" (48 & 53). Thus, McCarthy uses optical democracy in order to demonstrate that race means

nothing in matters of war and that the omnipotent God who guided the project of Manifest Destiny is unable to protect his elected warriors from the power of the heathens. Ultimately, through this aesthetic manifestation of optical democracy, McCarthy explodes the entire concept of Manifest Destiny in such a way that its influence is removed from the remainder of the novel. All that is left of this false ordering of reality are fragments that lie “among the new slain dead” on the ground “soaked with blood and with urine from the voided bladders of the animals” on which Captain White and his men rode on their mission to liberate Mexico in accordance with the concept of Manifest Destiny (McCarthy 55).

If one considers this massacre in light of Judge Holden's discussion of war, then the aesthetic abolition of Manifest Destiny is revealed as McCarthy's attempt to use optical democracy to point to a phenomenal historical reality that exists “before or beyond” anthropocentric conceptions of history such as Manifest Destiny (Shaviro 151). According to Holden, “[War] 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” one of the combatants (248). Moreover, he suggests that “the selection of one man over another is a preference absolute and irrevocable and it is a dull man indeed who could reckon so profound a decision without agency and significance either one” (249). If this is the case in all instances of violent conflict, then one must consider the larger will's selection of the Comanches over the filibusters as imbuing this scene with additional significance.

Ultimately, the battle between the filibusters and the Comanches is a testing of two wills which arise from different conceptions of history. If Captain White and the filibusters embody the anthropocentric, eschatological vision of history forwarded by

Manifest Destiny, one in which God guides human history, via regenerative violence, toward its culmination in the American empire, then the Comanches embody a different historical claim: that war is earth's constant and unalterable reality. This idea is most clearly demonstrated through McCarthy's description of the Comanches as they approached the filibusters prior to the attack:

A legion of horribles, hundreds in number half naked or clothed 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 with cavalry jackets . . . 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 . . . (52).

Thomas Pughe notes that in this description McCarthy removes this battle from "the historical context of Indian wars" by "break[ing] with the conventions of linear historical narrative, anachronistically mixing different historical periods" (374). Two specific periods suggested through the description of the Comanches' apparel are important to note: the Spanish conquest of Mexico (the "armor of a spanish conquistador") and the Mexican War (the "coats of slain dragoons" and "cavalry jackets"). These two allusions allow McCarthy to transcend the temporal setting of *Blood Meridian* by presenting the Comanches as being clothed in items taken from recent victims as well as those that had been taken from the dead body of a slain conquistador some three centuries earlier. The Comanches thus testify that all history is the history of war. Moreover, the Comanche victory over the filibusters indicates that the larger will has rejected the eschatological

and hierarchically ordered vision of history forwarded by Manifest Destiny and asserted that no human ideology can overcome the reality that war is the force that orders existence, not the human will.

Following the attack, the kid “rose wondrously from among the new slain dead and stole away in the moonlight” (55). Some weeks later, while in a Mexican prison, the kid and his fellow inmates, Toadvine and the veteran, see “a pack of vicious-looking humans mounted on unshod ponies riding half drunk through the streets, bearded and barbarous, clad in the skins of animals stitched up with thews and armed with weapons of every description . . . wearing scapulars or necklaces of dried and blackened human ears” (78). The following night, Toadvine reveals information that he had learned concerning this group and its leader. He says, “His name is Glanton . . . He's got a contract with Trias. They're to pay him a hundred dollars a head for scalps and a thousand for Gomez's head. I told him there was three of us. Gentlemen, we're gettin out of this shithole” (79). Three days later, the trio ride out of Chihuahua City with the Glanton gang.

Concerning *Blood Meridian's* use of the historically documented Glanton gang, Inger-Anne Softing writes, “It is nothing new that westerns base themselves on authentic historical persons and incidents” (22); however, she presents McCarthy's choice to focus on John Joel Glanton and his band of scalp hunters as straying from the western's typical use of historical figures because they are so obscure. Softing contends that by focusing the Glanton gang, McCarthy “does not establish a specific and common frame of reference with his readers outside of the general frame of the west and the western” (22). Although she suggests that one “can only conjecture” why McCarthy chose to base this novel upon the Glanton gang rather than more recognizable figures from Western history,



Softing confesses that this choice “does give him the advantage of *not* having his text confront whatever specific preconceptions and pre-knowledge the readers might already have” (22). This advantage is of the utmost significance in McCarthy's treatment of history in *Blood Meridian*.

In a 1993 interview with Tom Pilkington, McCarthy says, “I've always been interested in the Southwest. There isn't a place in the world where you can go where they don't know about cowboys and Indians and the myth of the West” (312). In *Blood Meridian*, however, he seems to make every effort to separate the text from this very myth. As John Emil Sepich points out, “[*Blood Meridian*] unfolds in a relatively forgotten mid-nineteenth century some thirty years in advance of cowboys, trail drives and rail heads in the Southwest” (121). Thus, by setting it in this “relatively forgotten” period of American history, McCarthy separates *Blood Meridian* from the later period that gave rise to the majority of the legendary figures in the myth of the West such as Wyatt Earp, Wild Bill Hickok, Annie Oakley, and Jesse James. Moreover, he creates further distance from this myth by dedicating the majority of the novel to depicting the exploits of the Glanton gang. Thus, *Blood Meridian*'s historical setting and its focus on the Glanton gang allow McCarthy to separate the readers from the myth of the West in order that we might confront the demythologized Western history revealed by optical democracy.

Once McCarthy explodes Manifest Destiny with the aesthetic technique of optical democracy, he presents the Glanton gang as functioning in a phenomenal historical reality that exists ‘before or beyond’ anthropocentric conceptions of history, a reality in which the earth is an oracle through which God speaks the truth that war is the constant

and unalterable cosmic reality (Shaviro 151). This historical reality is explicated through Judge Holden's lectures on what Rich Wallach has called the various "deep-time metaphors" that the Glanton gang encounters on its scalp hunting campaign (105). He defines deep-time metaphors as "images of antiquity or prehistory" such as "exposed geological strata, ancient marine deposits, jutting fossils, ruined old habitations and churches, corroded conquistador armor, or ancient life irrupted into the present by a sudden backward lurch of the narrative consciousness" (105). According to Wallach, with these metaphors McCarthy attempts to deflate "the human sense of being at the center of the universe" (105-06), revealing the fact that humans "are short lived, make less of an impact, and therefore matter less than we would like to think we do" (106). One might go further still and argue that these metaphors are actually aimed at eradicating anthropocentric historical thought in order to fully explicate the phenomenal historical reality revealed by optical democracy. Moreover, it is significant to note that these metaphors would appear as nothing more than features of the landscape if it were not for Judge Holden's prophetic ability to interpret the words of God spoken through them.

The Glanton gang's first encounter with a deep-time metaphor occurs at an abandoned copper mine they discover after leaving the town of Janos. After the gang sets up camp, Judge Holden explores the mine and later returns with some ore. McCarthy writes, "In the afternoon he sat in the compound breaking ore samples with a hammer, the feldspar rich in red oxide of copper and native nuggets in whose organic lobations he purported to read news of the earth's origins, holding an extemporary lecture in geology to a small gathering who nodded and spat" (116). During this lecture, some of the gang

members “would quote him scripture to confound his ordering up of eons out of the ancient chaos and other apostate supposings” (116). In response to these scriptural objections, the Judge says, “Books lie” (116). Immediately, one of the listeners retorts, “God dont lie” (116). Holden agrees, saying, “No . . . . He does not. And these are his words” (116). He then “h[olds] up a chunk of rock” and says, “He speaks in stones and trees, the bones of things” (116).

Wallach contends that in this lecture Judge Holden exhibits his preference for “the disinterested, nonverbal language of nature” rather than “the moral rhetoric of Biblical text” (113). Thus, Holden exhibits a radical departure from the scriptural conception of history proposed by the objecting gang members in that he denies the idea that “all temporal progress is eschatological and moves inexorably towards a conclusive, grand moral judgement” (113). Moreover, McCarthy’s description of Holden’s “ordering up of eons out of the ancient chaos and other apostate supposings” suggests that he, like geologist Charles Lyell, whose *Principles of Geology* was first published in 1830, seventeen years prior to the opening of *Blood Meridian*, disagreed with the catastrophist belief that the earth was approximately 6, 000 years old, a view that was believed to be consistent with the Hebrew creation myth found in *Genesis*. By declaring that Judeo-Christian scriptures “lie” and presenting the earth as speaking the true words of God (McCarthy 116), Holden suggests that the earth is “an ancient world not of myth but of rock and stone and those life forms that can endure the daily cataclysms of heat and cold and hunger, that can weather the every day round of random, chaotic violence” (Phillips 452). Thus, Holden presents this initial deep-time metaphor as revealing a “history of forces, and the processes by which these forces evolve into the forms” which

constitute the earth and everything in it and on it (453), a history which is far removed from the concept of a moral history which presents God as speaking the world into existence and guiding it toward “a conclusive, grand moral judgement” (Wallach 113). Consequently, this lecture reveals the earth as speaking the truth that “[m]oral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak” and “[h]istorical law subverts it at every turn” (McCarthy 250).

Although Wallach presents all deep-time metaphors as attempting to deflate anthropocentrism, Judge Holden treats the second deep-time metaphor that appears in *Blood Meridian*, the ruins of the Anasazi settlement, in such a way that one cannot help but notice that there is a distinct difference between natural deep-time metaphors and those created by humans. Shortly after Holden’s lecture on the ore samples, the gang travels further into the Sierra Madre mountains where one night “they camped in the ruins of an older culture” (139). McCarthy writes, “Dwellings of mud and stone were walled up beneath an overhanging cliff and the valley was traced with the work of old acequias. The loose sand in the valley floor was strewn with pieces of pottery and blackened bits of wood” (139). Again, Holden leaves the rest of the gang to explore this site, “roam[ing] the ruinous kivas picking up small artifacts” that he later “sketched in his book until the light failed” (139). McCarthy writes,

The judge all day had made small forays among the rocks of the gorge . . . and now at the fire he spread part of a wagon sheet on the ground and was sorting out his finds and arranging them before him. In his lap he held the leather ledgerbook and he took up each piece, flint or potsherd or tool of bone, and deftly sketched it into the book. Lastly he set before him the

footpiece from a suit of armor hammered out in a shop in Toledo three centuries before. . . . This the judge sketched in profile and in perspective, citing the dimensions in his neat script, making marginal notes.

. . . When he had done he took up the little footguard . . . he crushed it into little ball of foil and pitched it into the fire. He gathered up the other artifacts and cast them also into the fire. (140)

Once Holden had finishes his sketching and destroys his findings, Webster, a fellow gang member, “asked [him] 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” (140).

Although the narrator remarks that after this statement was made “Webster smiled and the judge laughed” (140), one should not conclude that Holden is not serious about his purpose in destroying these artifacts. Rather, this expunging is consistent with the vision of history explicated in Holden’s lecture on the copper ore samples.

In his previous lecture, Judge Holden dispels the moral history forwarded by the Bible and presents the earth as speaking the true words of God. Although the Judeo-Christian tradition presents the Bible as being written by God through divinely-inspired human authors, Holden suggests that it is nothing more than a book created by humans, and that “[b]ooks lie” (116). Therefore, the conception of history forwarded by the Bible cannot be accepted as a true witness to the historical reality of earth. It is the concept of bearing false historical witness that leads him to “expunge” the Anasazi ruins. Eventually one of the gangmembers asks, “What kind of indians has these here been, Judge” (142)? He then adds a second question, saying “Dead ones I’d say, what about you, Judge” (142)? Holden tells the man that these Indians are “[n]ot so dead” (142). He then explains his

position through a story concerning a harness maker who murdered a young traveler that he encountered. In the "rider" attached to this story (145), Holden tells the gang,

There was a young bride waiting for that traveler with whose bones we are now acquainted and she bore a child in her womb that was the traveler's son. Now this son whose father's existence in this world is historical and speculative even before the son has entered it is in a bad way. All his life he carries before him the idol of a perfection to which he can never attain. The father dead has euchered the son out of his patrimony. For it is the death of the father to which the son is entitled and to which he is heir, more so than his goods. He will not hear of the small mean ways that tempered the man in life. He will not see him struggling in follies of his own devising. No. The world which he inherits bears him false witness. He is broken before a frozen god and he will never find his way. (145)

The traveler's unborn son "will never find his way" because he will forever live in the shadow of his dead father whom he will never know through any means other than the mythical history of his life created by his surviving loved ones. Such a myth, according to historian Michael C. C. Adams, "when it reaches the proportions of an undisputed reality" (as is the case in Holden's story) "can be destructive" (xiv). By establishing such a mythical rendering of the past, Adams contends that "we inevitably undercut our own efforts. . . . By definition, we become lesser people than our ancestors. Thus a false sense of the past compromises the hope that we might entertain for the present and the future" (xiv). This is the effect that Holden claims the Anasazi ruins have on "the latter races" that are marveled by them (146).

After telling the rider to his story, Holden says,

The people who once lived here are called the Anasazi. The old ones. They quit these parts . . . ages since and of them there is no memory. They are rumors and ghosts in this land and they are much revered. The tools, the art, the building--these things stand in judgement on the latter races. Yet there is nothing for them to grapple with. The old ones are gone like phantoms and the savages wonder these canyons to the sound of an ancient laughter. . . . All progressions from a higher to a lower order are marked by ruins and mystery and a residue of nameless rage. So. Here are the dead fathers. Their spirit is entombed in the stone. It lies upon the land with the same weight and the same ubiquity. For whoever makes a shelter of reeds and hides has joined his spirit to the common destiny of creatures and he will subside back into the primal mud with scarcely a cry. But who builds in stone seeks to alter the structure of the universe and so it was with these masons . . . . (146)

Like the mythical history of the dead traveler that bears false witness to his unborn son, these ruins bear false witness to those who succeed the Anasazi by suggesting that these “latter races” are destined “to become lesser people” than those who came before them and left these artifacts which “stand in judgment” on their deeds (McCarthy 146 & Adams iv ). Whereas Wallach suggests that McCarthy uses ruins as a deep-time metaphor aimed at both “deflat[ing] the human sense of being at the center of the universe” and revealing the fact that humans “are short lived, make less of an impact, and therefore matter less that we would like to think we do” (105-06), these particular ruins seem to

have the opposite effect in that they present the Anasazi as attempting to “alter the structure of the universe” by “build[ing] in stone” and thereby creating a hierarchical vision of history which places them above their successors who Holden describes as being of a “lower order” (146). Therefore, Judge Holden, the explicator of the phenomenal historical reality, must expunge the artifacts he recovers from the Anasazi ruins in order to eradicate the false hierarchical vision of history that they present. By expunging these false deep-time metaphors, Holden eliminates the alterations that the Anasazis imposed on the “structure of the universe” (116), restoring the earth’s ability to speak the words of God (116). Thus, in his destruction of these false deep-time metaphors, one can see the emergence of a response to the kid's unanswered question: “What's he a judge of” (135)? Holden is a judge of the validity of the historical witness given by the deep-time metaphors that constitute the words of God spoken by the earth. In order to preserve the truthfulness of this oracle, this natural book of scripture, he must expunge all objects that bear false witness against the phenomenal historical reality because his failure to do so would render the earth a false book and, as he tells Webster, “a false book is no book at all” (141).

The final deep-time metaphor that the Glanton gang encounters is a prehistoric bone found at a “watering place” south of the “black volcanic hills” they cross a few days after passing through Tucson (251). McCarthy writes, “At all desert watering places there are bones but the judge that evening carried to the fire one such as none there had ever seen before, a great femur from some beast long extinct that he’d found weathered out of a bluff and that he now sat measuring with the tailor’s tape he carried and sketching into his log” (251). As Holden examines this prehistoric bone, McCarthy writes, “All in that



company had heard the judge on paleontology save for the new recruits and they sat watching and putting to him such queries as they could conceive of” (251). In response, “He answered them with care, amplifying their own questions for them, as if they might be apprentice scholars” (251). After hearing Holden's answers, McCarthy describes the recruits as “nodd[ing] dully and reach[ing] to touch that pillar of stained and petrified bone, perhaps to sense with their fingers the temporal immensities of which the judge spoke” (251). Eventually, Cloyce, the brother and “keeper” of the idiot, James Robert (252), “led the imbecile down from his cage” and brought him closer to the judge and even “Glanton's dog rose and sat watching [the bone]” as Holden “illustrate[d] its analogies to the prevalent bones of the country about [them] . . .” (252). Then Holden “let [the] bone fall in the sand and closed his book, telling his audience, “There is no mystery to it . . . . Your heart's desire is to be told some mystery. The mystery is that there is no mystery” (252).

Wallach contends that although this scene displays the “same fidelity to temporal process” as other examples of deep-time metaphors, it is “full of ironic, comical cross references and situational puns” that reveal the fact that Holden uses this lecture as a means of “toy[ing] with the recruits” who he describes as “brutal ignoramuses” who are completely unaware of the “complexities of his discussion” (112). Moreover, in a note concerning this scene he remarks that it “parodies itself in the very funny spectacle of Glanton’s dog becoming suddenly attentive to the giant bone” (114). While Wallach views this scene as being a comedic example of Holden’s use of “double talk” (112), it appears much less comical when one considers the analogies that Holden must inevitably

draw between this prehistoric bone and “the prevalent bones of the country” through which the gang travels (McCarthy 252).

According to Wallach, the analogies that Holden draws between these bones is “an invocation of the evolutionary process both geographical and biological operating across ‘temporal immensities’” (112). While this bone does invoke the evolutionary process, one must note that in *Blood Meridian* this process is nothing more than the natural manifestation of war. Thus, Holden's statement that “[t]he mystery is that there is no mystery” cannot be dismissed as doubletalk aimed at confusing the recruits (246). The reason there is nothing mysterious about this prehistoric bone is because there is no question as to how the beast to which it belonged became extinct. This beast, like those humans and animals to which the countless skeletal remains that litter the death-haunted landscape depicted in *Blood Meridian* belonged, was annihilated through war. Moreover, the species that this beast belonged to became extinct simply because war, the larger will that makes all “decisions of life and death [and] of what shall and shall not be” (250), decided that it should no longer exist. Thus, the direct analogy between this bone and Judge Holden and his audience is that they, like this extinct beast, are ultimately subject to the larger will, which is war. Therefore, rather than fully accepting Wallach's conclusion that this scene is comical in nature because it depicts Holden lecturing to Cloyce, the idiot, and Glanton's dog, one should consider this unlikely audience, which consists of the only beings associated with the Glanton gang who never partake in violent actions, as demonstrating the fact that war is truly a “forcing of the unity of existence” (249). For in this scene one learns that the non-violent Cloyce, the incompetent fool, and the non-human dog are all subject to the larger will and will ultimately be annihilated by

war regardless of whether or not they have chosen, or even have the ability to choose, to partake in violent conflict.

The disturbing idea that war is god and all terrestrial life forms are completely subject to its will have led many to dismiss Judge Holden as a “failed priest” who actively promotes the “false religion” of war (Bell 122); however, the method by which he validates his claims, interpreting the of the words of God spoken through nature, suggests that this seemingly false religion is more orthodox than it may appear. After all, the fact that the much revered Paul of Tarsus subscribed to such a natural theology is clearly demonstrated in his letter to the Romans when he writes, “[T]he invisible things of [God] from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made” (Romans 1: 20). Thus, the attempt to invalidate Holden’s theological methodology through scriptural claims may well result in exposing the naivety of the claims that many such as the gang members use to dismiss the troubling vision of God revealed through the deep time metaphors the gang encounters. Moreover, the revelation of this phenomenal historical reality that presents both human and geological history as revealing the fact that war is the constant and unalterable cosmic reality suggests that any attempt to read *Blood Meridian* as a revisionary western aimed at revising the history of the West by “redressing the imbalance between Eurocentric and Native Americans” will fail (Pughe 381). The reason that such readings are bound to fail is that the ideology that informs any attempt to revise a one-sided rendering of history is based on the idea that the perspectives of all parties involved must be examined as having equal claims to the truth concerning what happened in the past. In *Blood Meridian*, however, no respect is given to the opinions of the various claimants because their cries for historical justice are

made in a court in which all “considerations of equity and rectitude and moral right [are] rendered void and without warrant and . . . the views of the litigants are despised” (250).

In this court, the court of historical law, the only truth that matters is the ultimate truth that war is god.

## Optical Democracy & the Eradication of Race

While McCarthy's choice to focus *Blood Meridian* on the Glanton gang has led some critics to reconsider the extent to which it constitutes a revisionary western, this choice does not represent the only problem that the novel poses to this reading. Several critics point out that the issue of racism represents another aspect of the myth of the West that McCarthy attempts to expose; however, some are convinced that *Blood Meridian* makes no effort to redress the atrocities that Anglo-Americans committed against Native Americans during westward expansion.

In "Rewriting the Southwest: *Blood Meridian* as Revisionary Western," Robert L. Jarrett argues that *Blood Meridian* "forces its readers . . . to confront the history of violence and the uncultural rhetoric of the antebellum period of Manifest Destiny" (93). He contends that it "insists that the national history was multicultural but its multiculturalism took the form of a violent confrontation between the cultures of the West—a violent confrontation fueled by racism . . ." (93). Jarrett concludes that those who read *Blood Meridian* must confront the violent and racist history it depicts. Concerning the possible reactions one might have, he writes, "One means of dealing with [it] is to defend it like the judge; romanticize it like the western; or repress it completely by forgetting the legacy of the conquest" (93). He suggests, however, that "a better task for the revisionary imagination is the laborious imaginary task of constructing a new multiethnic West and nation using a language that opposes itself to the violence of the judge and Glanton" (93); however, some critics disagree with this point, arguing that *Blood Meridian* does not lend itself to this reactionary reading.

Inger-Anne Sjøfting contends that if McCarthy had intended *Blood Meridian* to be a revisionary western aimed at exposing the mistreatment of Native Americans during the era of Manifest Destiny, he would have likely done so by focusing on a White-Native American racial binary that the text would invert in such a way that it would “give preference to the previously Native American other as self” (18), but no such racial binary is present in the text. Moreover, she suggests that a race-focused revisionary reading of the novel is further problematized by the fact that McCarthy does not introduce the reader to “individualized and likable Indians” (18). Rather, the Indians he depicts in *Blood Meridian* “are distant, just figures falling off horses, or they are as unsympathetic and violent as any other character in this book” (18). Through her discussion of the difficulties *Blood Meridian* presents to those who read it as an attempt to revise the racist history of the West, Sjøfting hints at, but never identifies, what I believe to be the fundamental problem that faces such readings: *Blood Meridian* presents race as an invalid concept that is nothing more than a human attempt to impose order upon reality.

In this chapter I will suggest that McCarthy eliminates race as a means of both demonstrating the falsity of the racial hierarchy as a means of ordering human existence and further revealing the fact that humans are subject to the order of existence created by war. I will argue that McCarthy uses optical democracy as an aesthetic technique to abolish the hierarchical order established by the concept of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority. By abolishing this false order, McCarthy dissociates his treatment of race in *Blood Meridian* from the idea that human life is naturally ordered according to a racial hierarchy and reveals the presence a natural phenomenon that eradicates the Glanton

gang's skin color, the physical attribute that both lends itself to the creation of a racial hierarchy and separates them from the "niggers" they have been hired to kill. I will begin by presenting black Jackson's murder of white Jackson as the aesthetic act McCarthy uses to abolish the racial hierarchy that is established when white Jackson attempts to segregate the Glanton gang's campsite. Once the racial hierarchy is eliminated, I will suggest that McCarthy reveals the presence of a natural phenomenon that eradicates the individual gang members' skin color, transforming them into a group of deracialized, and therefore, optically democratic, human beings that have been assimilated into the true order of existence created by war. Moreover, I will present both the aesthetic abolition of the racial hierarchy and the natural eradication of the gang members' skin color as demonstrating the fact that all human actions "ultimately accommodate history with or without their understanding" (85).

The seventh chapter of *Blood Meridian* opens with a paragraph discussing the animosity between two members of the Glanton gang, black Jackson and white Jackson. McCarthy writes,

In this company, there rode two men named Jackson, one black, one white, both forenamed John. Bad blood lay between them and as they rode up under the barren mountains the white man would fall back alongside the other and take his shadow for the shade that was in it and whisper to him. The black would check or start his horse to shake him off. As if the white man were in violation of his person, had stumbled onto some ritual dormant in his dark blood or his dark soul whereby the shape he stood in the sun from that rocky ground bore something of the man

himself and in so doing lay imperiled. The white man laughed and crooned things to him that sounded like words of love. All watched to see how this would go with them but none would caution either back from his course . . . . (81)

According to the narrator, many of the gang members believed this course would eventually end with the murder of white Jackson. This “murder that had been reckoned upon” occurred one night as the gang camped in the mountains they encountered after passing through the town of Janos (107). White Jackson “had been drunk in Janos” and “now sat by the fire with his boots off drinking aguardiente from a flask circumscribed about by his companions” (106), but he became enraged when black Jackson “approached the fire and threw down his apishamore and sat upon it and fell to stoking his pipe” (106). Although two fires had been kindled at the campsite, the narrator points out that there were “no rules real or tacit as to who should use them” (106). Nevertheless, when white Jackson saw that the Delaware scouts and John McGill, three of the gang’s four non-white members were sitting around the other fire, “with a gesture and an oath he warned the black away” (106). Black Jackson “looked up from his pipebowl” and said, “Any man in this company can sit where it suits him” (106). In response to this affront to his perceived racial superiority, white Jackson drew a revolver from his gun belt and took aim at black Jackson. When black Jackson asked if he intended to shoot him, white Jackson said, “You don’t get your black ass away from this fire I’ll kill you graveyard dead” (106). After hearing this statement, black Jackson “put the pipe in his mouth and rose and took up the apishamore and folded it over his arm” and “moved away in the dark” (106), and “the white man uncocked the revolver and placed it on the ground



before him” (106). The narrator remarks that the few men who returned to the fire once the hostilities appeared to be over “stood uneasily” (107); however, white Jackson sat cross-legged smoking a cigarillo, as if he could rest easily now that he had restored order to the campsite. Clearly, this order is that of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority.

Although Judge Holden claims that “the order in creation which [humans] see is that which [they] have put there” (245), McCarthy seems to disregard this idea by presenting the racially ordered campsite in language which empowers white Jackson and belittles black Jackson. After he leaves the “white” fire, McCarthy refers to black Jackson as “the black” for the remainder of the chapter (106 & 107). As for white Jackson, the imposer of racial order, McCarthy first calls him “the white man” and then “Jackson” (106 & 107). This change allows one to see that the concept of Anglo-Saxon racial supremacy has brought a hierarchical order to the Glanton gang’s campsite by revealing that “the white man” is the true John Jackson and that the other is merely a black, not a black *man*, but a black. Thus, one may conclude that by segregating the campfires white Jackson has effectively demonstrated the fact that “the black” and the other non-whites are inferior to the white gang members. Moreover, by leaving the “white” fire, “the black” seems to have accepted this order. While the language in this scene may appear to reaffirm the racial order that white Jackson has imposed, I believe that McCarthy acknowledges this order of things so he can abolish it through the aesthetic technique of optical democracy (Holloway 198).

According to David Holloway, optical democracy functions as an aesthetic technique by identifying an “extant order of things” and simultaneously abolishing that same order by an “aesthetic act” that deconstructs it (198). In the scene depicting the

stand off between black Jackson and white Jackson, the illusory hierarchical order McCarthy depicts is that of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority. This order is identified both through McCarthy's language and through the actions of the Jacksons; however, as is the case with optical democracy, this order is destroyed almost as soon as it is established. Shortly after leaving the fireside, "the black stepped out of the darkness bearing the bowieknife in both hands like some instrument of ceremony . . . . The white man looked up drunkenly and the black stepped forward and with a single stroke swapt off his head" (McCarthy 107). By attempting to impose order on the gang's campsite through racial segregation, white Jackson embodies Anglo-Saxon racial superiority. Thus, through this murder black Jackson both kills his arch-nemesis and eliminates Anglo-Saxon racial superiority as a concept capable of ordering human life.

Once McCarthy abolishes the notion of a racial hierarchy with the aesthetic technique of optical democracy, he reveals the presence of a natural phenomenon that eradicates the gang members' skin color, transforming them into a group of deracialized human beings. This process is revealed through the narrator's description of the gang following their massacre of the Gileños. Although McCarthy depicts the Glanton gang in a minor skirmish with a band of Apaches immediately following the murder of white Jackson, the first full scale depiction of the gang in action is their raid on the Gileños. In his pre-battle address, Glanton says, "When we ride in it's ever man to his own. Dont leave a dog alive if you can help it. . . . If we dont kill ever nigger here we need to be whipped and sent home" (155). Shortly thereafter, the gang attacks the Gileños' "encampment where there lay sleeping upward of a thousand souls" (155). McCarthy writes,

Within that first minute the slaughter had become general. Women were screaming and naked children and one old man tottered forth waving a pair of white pantaloons. The horsemen moved among them and slew them with clubs or knives. . . . Already a number of the huts were afire and a whole enfilade of refugees had begun streaming north along the shore wailing crazily with the riders among them like herdsmen clubbing down the laggards first. . . . [S]ome of the men were moving on foot among the huts with torches and dragging the victims out, slathered and dripping with blood, hacking at the dying and decapitating those who knelt for mercy. There were in the camp a number of Mexican slaves and these ran forth calling out in Spanish and were brained or shot and one of the Delawares emerged from the smoke with a naked infant dangling in each hand and squatted at a ring of midden stones and swung them by their heels each in turn and bashed their heads against the stones so that the brains burst forth through the fontanel in a bloody spew and humans on fire came shrieking forth like berserkers and the riders hacked them down with their enormous knives . . . . (155-56)

Following this attack, the gang begins the process of scalping their victims. McCarthy writes,

They moved among the dead harvesting the long black locks with their knives and leaving their victims rawskulled and strange in their bloody cauls. . . . Men were wading about in the red waters hacking aimlessly at the dead and some lay coupled to the bludgeoned bodies of young women

dead or dying on the beach. One of the Delawares passed with a collection of heads like some strange vendor bound for market, the hair twisted about his wrist and the heads dangling and turning together. (157)

Shortly after harvesting the scalps of the slain Gileños and looting the remnants of what had been their encampment, the gang departs from the site and begins their journey to Chihuahua City to redeem the scalps. As the blood-slathered men travel across the dusty landscape, McCarthy offers a depiction of the phenomenon that eradicates the skin color of the gang. McCarthy writes, “The men as they rode turned black in the sun from the blood on their clothes and their faces and then paled slowly in the rising dust until they assumed once more the color of the land through which they passed” (160). Thus, through this process of eradication, the gang begins to lose the one thing that many of them believed separated them from the “niggers” that they were hire to kill, white skin.

While this scene depicting the eradication of the gang members’s skin color may seem to be nothing more than a vivid description aimed at capturing the extent to which the men were slathered in blood following the massacre of the Gileños, this idea is refuted by the fact that once their skin turns black and then takes on the color of the landscape, none of the men are ever described as having their original color restored, not even black Jackson and the two Delaware scouts. Even in the description of the gang’s visit to the public baths in Chihuahua City, McCarthy never mentions that any of the gang members’s skin changes from the pale, color of the landscape back to its original color while in the water. Rather, the only thing transformed in this scene is the water which becomes “a thin gruel of blood and filth” after contacting the filthy men (167). Moreover, once the gang takes on the color of the landscape, McCarthy describes them as

“[s]pectre horsemen, pale with dust, anonymous in the crenellated heat” who appeared to be “beings provoked out of the absolute rock” in a “time before nomenclature was and each was all” (172). Thus, rather than being mere description, this passage depicts the natural process by which they are transformed into a group of deracialized human beings. As a result of this transformation, the gang is described as being “[I]ike beings created in a “time before nomenclature was” (172), implying that there is no extant system of classification capable of determining what these deracialized men have become. Consequently, the narrator describes them as appearing to be “wholly . . . devoid of order” (172); however, it must be noted that the order that is derived from nomenclatural systems, the order that the gang lacks, is created by humans. Therefore, the gang, according to Judge Holden, cannot be considered as lacking order because the nomenclatural order the narrator speaks of is but a false order that humans have imposed upon reality. Thus, in order to understand what the gang has become, one must examine them in light of the order of existence created by war.

In his lecture concerning the order of existence, Judge Holden says, “Even in this world more things exist without our knowledge than with it and the order in creation that you see is that which you have put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way. For existence has its own order and that no man’s mind can compass, that mind itself being but a fact among others” (245). According to the Holden, the human mind fails to comprehend the totality of existence because it is incapable of perceiving those things that lie outside of the epistemological matrices it imposes upon the world. However, rather than acknowledge the limited nature of their perspective, many humans conclude that this order “which they have put there” constitutes ultimate

reality. Thus, in order to enhance their understanding of this reality, humans began to organize those things which exist in this metaphysical realm by creating a system of nomenclature that they use to identify the objects and life forms they perceive. Once everything is labeled, they classify these newly identified objects and life forms in order to create a hierarchy of terrestrial existence. The aspect of this hierarchy that is most prevalent in *Blood Meridian* is the arrangement of humans according to skin color. Thus, once both the racial hierarchy is eliminated and the gang's skin color is eradicated, it appears that any sense of order has been stripped from this band of deracialized "specter horsemen" (172); however, this is not the case. The reason that the gang seems to be "wholly . . . devoid of order" (172) is because they have become unclassifiable beings that exist outside of the nomenclatural epistemology that humans use to impose order, albeit false order, upon reality. At this point, the task that faces the reader is not the "construct[ion] of a new multiethnic West and nation using a language that opposes itself to the violence of the judge and Glanton" (Holloway 93), but that of determining how this violence assimilates the deracialized gang into the metaphysical order that is created by the god of the universe, war.

Concerning war, Judge Holden tells the gang, "It makes no difference what men think of war . . . War endures. . . War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him. . . That is the way it was and will be. That way and not some other way" (248). This speech reveals the fact that war is the constant and unalterable cosmic reality. More accurately, "[w]ar is god" (249). As such, war is the creator and ruler of all existence. It is the force that maintains the order of existence according to its "absolute and irrevocable" preferences that are made manifest through its decisions "of life and death"

and “of what shall be and what shall not” (249). Moreover, it is this order which is “before or beyond the human” that gives rise to optical democracy (Shaviro 151), the phenomenon by which “all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships” (McCarthy 247). While this is indeed “the way it was and will be” (248), war cannot maintain the order of its creation unimpeded because it is constantly at odds with humans, the one extant being that is not “a creature that is bound in the way God has set for it . . .” (19). Humans continually try to usurp the power of war by attempting to subdue the “stuff of creation” in order to shape the world according to their will (5). Therefore, war must continually work to eradicate the anthropocentric belief in human primacy in order to maintain the true order of existence (McCarthy 247). When viewed in this light, the phenomenon by which the Glanton gang’s skin color is eradicated appears as being quite significant because McCarthy’s depiction of this phenomenon shows the process by which war assimilates the gang into the true order of existence by rendering them indistinct human beings complete with “unguessed kinships” to the phenomenal world (247). Though the process by which it happens is brutal, this eradication is a necessary part of maintaining the order of existence because, as is demonstrated by the establishment of the racial hierarchy, if any aspect of human identity is given preference, then humans will inevitably use this aspect to establish an anthropocentric hierarchy that they present as being the true order of existence. Should such an order be allowed to emerge, war would become “dishonored” and its sovereignty would “be called into question” because it would appear as though humans have been given preference and have, as a result become the arbiters of existential order (331).

While war's incessant struggle to abolish the idea of human primacy may seem to imply that humans must be undermined before they usurp its divine authority, the ironic relationship between war and humans that is revealed by optical democracy suggests that this is not the case. The fact that results in this ironic relationship is the human's insatiable desire to shape the world according to his or her will. War realizes that humans have this innate desire and uses their actions, through which they attempt to impose their wills, to perpetuate the order of existence. Thus, humans are revealed as having no control over the ultimate outcome of their actions. This idea is clearly seen when Judge Holden tells black Jackson, "It is not necessary . . . that the principals . . . be in possession of the facts concerning their case for their acts will ultimately accommodate history with or without their understanding" (85). In order to fully understand the extent to which human actions "accommodate history" (85), one must consider how both black Jackson's murder of white Jackson and the Glanton gang's scalp hunting campaign results in their unknowingly accommodating history.

By killing white Jackson, black Jackson seems only to have eliminated his arch-nemesis. Therefore, one must conclude that this "murder that had been reckoned upon" was committed for personal reasons (107); however, it transcended the personal realm through its unintended consequence of eliminating the concept of a racial hierarchy as a means of ordering human beings in *Blood Meridian*. Consequently, one can see that the effects of black Jackson's murder of white Jackson went beyond mere homicide to work toward the manifestation of the true order of existence by enabling McCarthy to reveal the presence of the natural phenomenon that war uses to assimilate the gang into the true order by eradicating their skin color. This extent to which this unintended consequence



accommodated history is amplified when one considers this violent act as depicting the two Jacksons as “forgo[ing] further argument” and “petition[ing] directly the chambers of the historical absolute” through violent conflict (250). Although Judge Holden states that the ideas forwarded by two combatants “can never be proven right or wrong by any ultimate test” and that “a man falling dead in a duel is not thought to be proven in error as to his view” (250), he argues that by submitting their judgments before the higher court of historical law the individual combatants surrender their wills to “that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select” (249). Consequently, one cannot consider black Jackson’s claim that “[a]ny man in this company can sit where it suits him” to have been validated through his actions (106). Rather, war, the larger will, selected black Jackson’s claim over that of white Jackson and in so doing demonstrated a “preference absolute and irrevocable . . .” (249). This “absolute and irrevocable” preference was based upon war’s desire to eliminate the false order imposed by the racial hierarchy.

As for the Glanton gang, the manner in which their heinous actions accommodate history offers *Blood Meridian*’s best example of the ironic relationship between war and humans. The statement that most clearly displays the intention of the gang’s mission is found in Glanton’s pre-battle address he delivers before the raid on the Gileños: “Dont leave a dog alive if you can help it. . . . If we dont kill ever nigger here we need to be whipped and sent home” (155). Simply put, they were intent on killing “ever nigger” they encountered. Throughout *Blood Meridian*, the gang kills many “niggers”; however, their intentions are undermined when the gore that had accumulated on their skins following their massacre of the Gileños enabled the process by which they lose their skin color and

become deracialized human beings who exist outside of the concept of a racial hierarchy. Moreover, through this eradication of skin color, the gang members, with the exception of black Jackson, lose their whiteness. Consequently, when they re-enter civilization, in which the racial hierarchy has not been abolished, they become the racial equivalent of the very “niggers” that they are paid to exterminate.

After passing through the Santa Cruz valley, the gang stops in Tucson in search of whiskey and food. McCarthy describes the newly arrived gang as being “[h]aggard and haunted and blacked by the sun” (232). Moreover, he writes, “The lines and pores of their skin [were] deeply grimed with gunblack where they’d washed the bores of their weapons. . . . Save for their guns and buckles and a few pieces of metal in the harness of the animals there was nothing to suggest even the discovery of the wheel” (232). Shortly after their arrival, these blackened men “moved on to an eatinghouse” (234). When they enter this restaurant, McCarthy mentions that the people who were dining “got up and left” (234). While one may assume that these diners left the restaurant in order to avoid the filthy and drunken gang members, McCarthy suggests that they may have left for another reason altogether. Shortly after the men sit down at a table, Owens, the owner of the establishment, approached them and said, “Gentlemen . . . we dont mind servin people of color. Glad to do it. But we ast for em to set over here at this other table here” (234). Afterward, he pointed to the “colored” section of the restaurant with a “strange gesture of hospice” (234). The gang members begin to exchange confused looks. Then, one asked, “What the hell is he talkin about” (234)? Again, Owens points them to the “colored” tables. McCarthy writes, “Toadvine looked down the table to where Jackson sat. Several looked toward Glanton. His hands were at rest on the board in front of him

and his head was bent like a man at grace. The judge sat smiling, his arms crossed” (234). Then, one of the gang members announces, “He thinks we’re niggers” (235). Once the men figure out why Owens asked them to move to the “other table” (234), “[t]hey sat in silence” (235), as if completely dumbfounded by the fact that Owens believes every man present, not just Jackson, to be “niggers” (235). Following this period of silence, Glanton tells Owens, “If you were anything at all other than a goddamn fool you could take one look at these here men and know for a stone fact that they aint a one of em goin to get up from where they’re at and go set somewheres else” (235). Although this statement appears to be an attempt to intimidate the owner, he did not relinquish his position. He tells Glanton, “Well I caint serve you” (235). Ultimately, this racially superior white businessman cannot allow a group of “niggers” to disrupt his orderly business.

More than just demonstrate the extent to which the Glanton gang’s actions have “accommodate[d] history” by eradicating race and thereby assisting in the process by which they were transformed into indistinct human beings who are completely subject to the will of war (85), this scene reveals the fact that although the racial hierarchy has been abolished and skin color has been eradicated in the phenomenal world, this concept is alive and well in the ideological, civilized world that is governed by “men’s judgments” (106). Consequently, the reader may conclude that these two worlds do not operate according to the same laws; however, this is not the case. Rather, by depicting the deracialized gang in a “civilized” setting that is clearly ordered by the racial hierarchy, McCarthy creates a scene which allows him to abolish this false order through the aesthetic technique of optical democracy and reveal the truth that deracialization is not

simply a phenomenon that affects the Glanton gang, it is the fundamental reality of all human existence.

Although Owens tells Glanton that the gang members will not be served unless they all move to the table reserved for “people of color” (233), he ignores this demand and tells Tommy Harlan to ask the cook what she had prepared for lunch. Harlan complies, and the woman tells him that she has huesos ready to serve. Glanton says, “Tell her to bring em, Tommy” (235), and Owens again asserts his authority, saying “She wont bring you nothing without I tell her to. I own this place” (235). Again, he is ignored, and Harlan calls out for the woman to bring the huesos. At this point, Owens is through negotiating. He says, “I know for a fact that man yonder’s a nigger” (235). Then, “Jackson looked up at him” (235). Once Owens specifically identifies black Jackson, one can no longer consider this scene to be nothing more than an attempt to poke fun at the deracialized gang. Rather, like the earlier scene depicting the murder of white Jackson, it is transformed into a depiction of a stand off between two individuals who have decided to “forgo further argument” and “submit [their judgments] before [the] higher court” of war (250).

Once Owens identified Jackson as a “nigger,” gang member Davy Brown asked him, “Have you got a gun” (235)? When he replied that he did not, McCarthy writes, “Brown pulled a small fiveshot Colt from his belt and pitched it to him. [Owens] caught it and stood holding it uncertainly” (235). Then Brown tells him, “You got one now. Now shoot the nigger” (235). After receiving this pistol, the owner becomes quite uneasy, but Brown again insists that he shoot Jackson. During this exchange, “Jackson had risen and he pulled one of the big pistols from his belt” (235-36). Upon seeing Jackson with his

pistol drawn, Owens “pointed [his] pistol at him” and said, “You put that down” (236). Brown told him, “You better forget about givin orders and shoot the son of a bitch” (236), but he refused to fire and continued to tell Jackson to put his pistol away. When he saw that Jackson was not going to comply with his request, “Owens cocked his pistol” (236). Then, McCarthy writes,

Jackson fired. He simply passed his left hand over the top of the revolver he was holding in a gesture brief as flintspark and tripped the hammer.

The big pistol jumped and a double handful of Owens’ brains went out the back of his skull and plopped in the floor behind him. He sank without a sound and lay crumpled up with his face in the floor and one eye open and the blood welling up out of the destruction at the back of his head. (236)

After shooting Owens, “Jackson sat down” (236). Once again, war selected his claim that “[a]ny man in this company can sit where it suits him” regardless of his race (106) over the attempt to order human beings according to a racial hierarchy. What he did not realize, however, was that through this killing he had once more accommodated history. Whereas the murder of white Jackson eliminated the concept of a racial hierarchy within the gang, the murder of Owens functions as a universal abolition of this order, revealing the fact that all humans exist within the phenomenal reality “beyond men’s judgments” in which war is god (106). Therefore, one may conclude that McCarthy presents this murder as the act by which all humankind is assimilated into the true order of existence created by war.

Several critics have posited the idea that *Blood Meridian* seeks to expose the brutal racism that was used to justify the mistreatment of Native Americans during westward expansion in order to foster the creation of a “new multiethnic” history (Jarret

93). Certainly, countless atrocities were carried out in the name of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority during the period of history depicted in this novel; however, if one examines McCarthy's treatment of race in light of optical democracy, he or she will find that *Blood Meridian* is not at all concerned with redressing this racist history. As Søvting points out, McCarthy avoids such a treatment of race by refusing to incorporate the revisionary western's tendency to invert the white-Native American binary in order to "give preference to the previously Native American other as self" (18). Rather than give such preferential treatment to the Native Americans, or any other race depicted in *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy immerses all humans into the optically democratic phenomenal realm in which "all preference is . . . whimsical" (247). The revisionary reading is further weakened when one considers the fact that in *Blood Meridian* all human actions "will ultimately accommodate history" (85). Thus, if the individual human has no control over the ultimate effect of his or her actions, then how can the historian judge them as being either just or unjust? Ultimately, by reading *Blood Meridian*'s treatment of race in light of optical democracy, one will discover that McCarthy uses the Glanton gang and their violent acts not to expose the racist history of westward expansion, but to reveal the fact that all humans are indistinct beings who exist in the phenomenal reality governed by war and whose actions are predetermined to "accommodate history with or without their understanding" (85).

## Conclusion

*Blood Meridian* closes with an epilogue that depicts “a man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground” (337). Concerning this man, McCarthy writes, “He uses an implement with two handles and he chucks it into the hole and he enkindles the stone in the hole with his steel hole by hole striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there” (337). Given the context, it is apparent that the implement the man uses is a set of post-hole diggers with which he dig holes for the stakes that he will use to fence off his claim on the newly closed Western frontier. According to Dana Phillips, McCarthy’s depiction of this man offers the reader a “vision of the more contemporary world . . . in which the Western plains have been rationalized—settled, fenced, and punctured . . . in accord with the dictates of an ideology of progress” (454). At this point, the reader is allowed to return to a normalized, settled world, the ideological world from which he or she has been separated from by McCarthy’s use of optical democracy. By returning the reader to the “tamed” West, one may conclude that McCarthy has undermined his earlier explosion of this ideological realm through his use of optical democracy; however, this is not the case. Rather, once the reader is returned to the familiar, orderly world of ideology after being immersed in the phenomenal reality in which “all preference is whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships” (247), I believe it is McCarthy’s intention to have him reexamine this orderly world and consider whether the Judge was right when he told the gang that “the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there . . . so you don’t lose your way” (245). Consequently, if one views this scene in light of optical democracy, then he or she will view it as being quite ironic. For although this man

and his fellow settlers on the frontier believe that they have exterminated the racial other and subjugated the untamed frontier in accordance with the laws of Manifest Destiny, they have not overcome, or even realized, the ultimate truth that “[w]ar is god” and they are completely subject to its “absolute and irrevocable” will (249). Thus, it is only a matter of time until this false order will be exploded and the truth will be revealed.

Ultimately, the synthesis of the aesthetic and metaphysical conceptions of optical democracy allows the reader to see that *Blood Meridian* does not aim to forge a “new multiethnic West and nation using a language that opposes itself to the violence of the judge and Glanton” (Jarrett 93). Rather, this synthesized conception of optical democracy suggests that this novel is McCarthy’s attempt to explode the false, anthropocentric ideologies that humans use to order the world as a means of revealing the fact that we exist in a phenomenal realm in which war is the constant and unalterable reality.





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## Vita

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