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American Books of the Dead:
Mourning and Denial in the Fiction of Don DeLillo and Cormac McCarthy

By

Allan E. Crandell

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts in English

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
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2006

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Abstract

The novels of Don DeLillo and Cormac McCarthy are heavily pervaded by themes of mortality and its denial. DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), with its emblematic centerpiece of an "Airborne Toxic Event," was succeeded by the slim depiction of mourning deferred, *The Body Artist* (2001). Likewise, Cormac McCarthy's epic Appalachian novel, *Suttree* (1979), is ridden with images of death and strangled mourning, a work followed by *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West* (1985), a historiographic depiction of unrelenting, culturally repressed bloodshed. This thesis maintains that DeLillo and McCarthy warn us in these novels about the American way of death, and about how death American-style is continually denied, at both the cultural and individual levels. They also examine how little recourse most Americans have to useful and effective rituals of bereavement. In effect, DeLillo and McCarthy are saying that because the repression and denial of death are so pervasive, there is no culturally sanctioned American Book of the Dead.

This struggle—with the knowledge of our own impending mortality and with that of others—has been characterized by Carl Elliott as "mortality-dysphoria." The philosophical and psychological insights offered in Ernest Becker's 1973 inquiry, *The Denial of Death*, help to interrogate the deathly obsessions of DeLillo and McCarthy's texts. DeLillo has acknowledged that Becker's *Denial of Death* was instrumental in the construction of *White Noise*; less explicitly, but just as pervasively, Becker's theory about denied mortality being the "mainspring" for human activity is echoed in the other three novels as well. A discernible line of continental thought on the topic preceded Becker's treatise, beginning with Søren Kierkegaard and extending to Jean Paul Sartre and Martin

Heidegger, and emphasizing an existential approach to the problem of our vexed wish for immortality. DeLillo and McCarthy's works reflect, depict, and refine this suggested existential trajectory. The thinking of Basque philosopher Miguel de Unamuno has particular relevance here as well, as he argues for the cultivation of "a tragic sense of life." The sense of tragedy was usefully reprised in the mid-twentieth century by the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut, who identified the position of "tragic man." In sum, these thinkers all posit a notion of authenticity that includes a heightened awareness of death as the hallmark of a fully lived life. This thesis argues that DeLillo and McCarthy's meditations on death in these novels place them in this line of enquiry.

Since these are ostensibly realist novels, DeLillo and McCarthy offer varying levels of character interiority, a device they use to examine the more intricate workings of mortality cognizance. Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection sheds light here, as do Freud's theories of the uncanny and of Thanatos, or a death-drive (in lieu of Eros, which is pervasively absent in these four novels, unless it is an Eros of violence). While we tend to be mortally "dysphoric" as subjects of American culture, we also experience at times "mortality-salience," when our repressed fear of death becomes more conscious. This thesis shows how recent social science studies in this area effectively update Becker's work, specifically research which highlights present-day "terror management" as another way that Americans (mis)handle their species-specific dread of death. In this regard, these novels reflect many themes of the post-Vietnam era in which they were written, including the refracted gleam of American imperialism. This thesis shows how they tie empire and death-denial together, the latter energizing and explaining the former, so that the four novels ultimately function together as "American books of the dead."

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Introduction

"Dying is awfully hard to choreograph."
--Robin Marantz Henig

The documentary film *Flight from Death: the Quest for Immortality,* released in 2003, begins by juxtaposing images of children playing, of human celebration, and of graveyards. In this cinematic reprise of cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker's work on 20th-century approaches to death, Gabriel Byrne's voiceover points out that we can now manipulate our own biology and that we are "rulers of the natural world," and yet we have come to treat the topic of death as something to be avoided. Thus we have contrived a multitude of activities to distance ourselves from death, and from importunate thoughts of those slyly beckoning cemeteries. The recent appearance of this relatively high profile documentary film suggests a revival of interest in what Jessica Mitford had termed forty years earlier in the title of a popular book, *The American Way of Death.* The topic of death seems to recur periodically in American culture, perhaps because Americans have become so insistent on performing, as Ernest Becker puts it in the title of his own popular take on the topic, *The Denial of Death.* American novelists quite often take up the topic as well, and in this thesis I will explore the deep-diving portrayals of death-anxiety and our uniquely American difficulty with mourning itself as presented in a quartet of contemporary novels, two by Don DeLillo, and two by Cormac McCarthy. *Blood Meridian* (1985) by McCarthy succeeds *Suttree* (1979) by six years and *White Noise* (1985) precedes *The Body Artist* (2001) by DeLillo by sixteen years; in both cases the writers returned to themes which concern us in this thesis: mourning and denial of mortality. While death is certainly a running theme in other works by these two artists,

e.g., DeLillo's *Running Dog* and *Libra*, and McCarthy's *Child of God* and his *Border Trilogy*, mortality and its avoidance are most thoroughly explored in *White Noise*, *The Body Artist*, *Blood Meridian* and *Suttree.*

Philosophy, psychiatry, literary criticism and social psychology have all been interested in death and mourning American-style, and I will use these systems of thought to interpret what McCarthy and DeLillo are saying novelistically about our reactions to mortality. Robert Lifton, a psychiatrist who has written often about mortality, says in the film, "we are meaning-hungry creatures," and Sheldon Solomon points out that among all creatures on earth, "we are uniquely aware of the inevitability of our demise." Given our resultant high anxiety and dread surrounding our temporality, we have an essential and very human problem to solve, and it is this species-specific dilemma that I believe energizes the four novels we will consider, which, taken together, constitute a conversation about death-related mourning (or the lack thereof), melancholia, and denial in contemporary America.

Within the territory of these four books, the most explicit treatment of denial of death is developed in DeLillo's *White Noise*, the more so since he has acknowledged that Ernest Becker's 1979 book provided inspiration for the book (LeClair 213). In his foreword to the 1997 paperback edition of Ernest Becker's *Denial of Death*, Sam Keen summarizes the four strands of Becker's philosophy:

1). The world is terrifying.

2). The basic motivation for human behavior is our biological need to control our basic anxiety, to deny the terror of death.

3). We invoke the "vital lie of character" as the prime defense against death to keep it unconscious.

4). We manage to devise heroic projects that paradoxically introduce more evil into the world rather than destroying it, in conjunction with our flight from mortality.

Becker's interdisciplinary view of attitudes toward death in this groundbreaking work provides an instructive grate through which to sift the four novels considered in this thesis. I will use Becker's theory about death being a "mainspring" of human preoccupation and Miguel de Unamuno's meditations on a "tragic sense of life," echoed by Heinz Kohut's characterization of "tragic man," to explicate DeLillo's discussion of how death is handled on the American scene, e.g., how shopping has become a sop for existential despair, a poor, if technologically sophisticated, stand-in for a truly authentic life, and how even pursuit of an ultimate, death-anxiety-binding drug, in this case the fictional Dylar, begs the existential question. [1]

In a similar vein, DeLillo presents us in *The Body Artist* with the character of Lauren Hartke, who struggles with the suicide of her husband Rey, invoking first an apparition, whom I interpret as a projection of her inability to grieve, followed by her elaborately performed wish to erase her own identity, or at least purge herself of other

[1] The work of Miguel de Unamuno, who lived from 1864 to 1936, and who wrote essays, novels, and plays, as well as philosophy, is crucial to developing my understanding of DeLillo and McCarthy because his conceptualization of the "tragic sense of life" is revisited in the later psychology of Heinz Kohut ("tragic man"), and this emphasis on tragedy, as we will see, is so much a part of McCarthy's character Suttree and so little a part of DeLillo's Jack Gladney. Unamunian thought emphasizes that being involves an "instruggle" fact of existence, and that one becomes an authentic human being only when one absorbs the consciousness of death and agonizes with this fact, i.e., adopts a tragic sense of life, desiring "that vital longing for human immortality" (106), but pointedly and existentially aware of the limitations of mortality at the same time. Identity, authenticity, mortality, and an existential posture are thereby commingled in Unamuno's philosophy.

troublesome identities, so that she is (perhaps) ready to enter into true mourning at the end of this small novel. DeLillo leaves Lauren Hartke in an arguably ambiguous position at the end of the book, as does Cormac McCarthy with his character Suttree at the end of his eponymously named novel. These ambiguous endings provide us with an opportunity to speculate on the question of whether either or both characters have, or could have, access to a tragic sense of life by way of an emerging authentic sense of self.

Throughout all four novels identity is suspect, a coherent sense of self rarely guaranteed. This blurred existential ambiguity is particularly evident in *Suttree*, as McCarthy presents the reader with a man pervaded by intimations of death, and, in response, clearly in search of more genuine mourning rituals. Of all the characters in the four novels I am considering in this thesis, *Suttree*'s protagonist has the most developed and revealed interiority, and we are thus privy to much of his underlying psychology. He veers between denying his death and actually courting his own demise, a process we will also see delineated in *Blood Meridian*; he seems uncomfortable both with life and death, struggles with these twinned Heideggerian anxieties.[2] *Blood Meridian* is a book attended

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[2] Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) promoted a body of philosophical work which sought to explore "Being" and, more specifically, the interface of Being with *Dasein*, or human-being-thereness. According to Heidegger there are many possible attributes of our "*mitwelt*," or "being-with-others," including thrownness, our inescapable entry into the world; our response to this "thrownness" can either be authentic or inauthentic, deriving from our everyday *Dasein* or fallenness. We can, according to Becker's distillation of Heidegger, be anxious both about life and also death, anxiety *about* being in the world or anxiety *of* being in the world, about life as well as death (53). In Heidegger's own words:

> But temptation, tranquilization, and alienation are distinguishing marks of the kind of Being called "*falling*". As falling, everyday Being-*towards*-death is a constant *fleeing in the face of death*. Being-towards-the-end has the mode of *evasion in the face of it*--giving new explanations for it, understanding it inauthentically, and concealing it. (Macquarrie/Robinson trans. 298).

For a summary of Heidegger's thought as it applies to the boundary between philosophy and psychology, see Chessick, *What Constitutes the Patient in Psychotherapy*, 1-17.

by a highly developed body of criticism, but, as Jonathan Pitts concludes, this criticism fragments into four groups of readers: historical, cultural, literary, and the last cohort who don't finally know what to think about the novel, "since it seems to be about almost everything" (7). The novel serves up death on a mass and horrific scale, sumptuously displayed in McCarthy's lyrical prose, but the participants, save one, are both killers and "diers" and the book sweeps along its eerie, if oddly delicious, path of annihilation by way of a peculiar dialogue between the yoked characters of a "monstrous child" named Judge Holden (Guilleman 249), and an actual child known only as "the kid," who together weave a tangled discourse of death. Violent slaughter is prevalent throughout *Blood Meridian*, but grief and mourning are pervasively, and suggestively, absent. At once a quasi-historical description of imperial conquest in the southwest and possible commentary on Vietnam, denial of death is made explicit in the expansive character of the judge, but strangely covert in the psychologically opaque character of the kid. Similar to DeLillo's consideration of the same theme in *White Noise,* McCarthy's pairing of these characters provides an opportunity to consider death in the American psyche and how our problems with mortality are addressed (or not) on a culture-wide scale. I will also contend that this pairing also exists among the novels themselves: *Blood Meridian* is essentially what occurs if there is no *Suttree*—killing without reflection, death without grief. Similarly, I am arguing that DeLillo suggests that we all become Jack Gladney in *White Noise* if we fail to find a successfully grieving Lauren Hartke in *The Body Artist*. In this thesis, one of the running themes I will consider is to what degree McCarthy's and DeLillo's portrayed characters are conscious of death and what they do with that consciousness. In other words, if we could effectively mourn, if we had successful rituals

for containing our fear of mortality, literally if there was truly an efficacious, or at least instructive, *American Book of the Dead*, then perhaps we would not require such heavy and recurrent access to both denial and empire.

In a sense both McCarthy and DeLillo are saying that we are, or could be, good killers, but we are not, as Americans, good "diers," in Murray Siskind's felicitous phrase in *White Noise*. In a kind of literary prequel to *Suttree*, McCarthy argues in *Blood Meridian* that Americans just don't do mourning very well. *Blood Meridian* at the same time functions as a coda to the observations made in the other three novels: we have (and will) kill effectively and indiscriminately. My argument is that McCarthy tells us that killing through the vehicle of empire is, in the end, so to speak, employed to neutralize our fear of death itself, to use magical (and largely unconscious) thinking on a cultural scale to neutralize our fear of our own mortality. Death is small and singular in *The Body Artist,* but writ large in *Blood Meridian.* I will use recent social science, specifically terror management theories (Cohen, Solomon and others) to contemporize Becker's theories and my contention is that both McCarthy and DeLillo are, in essence, saying to us that the problem of our consciousness of mortality remains a vexing and an unresolved, perhaps irresolvable, question, and it continues to occupy a space in the dead center of their fiction.

I.

Don't Think Twice, it's Alright:

Mortality Salience in DeLillo's *White Noise*

> There is no getting around the fact that we will all die, but alienation from our condition as mortal beings is never simply that; it is always a response to what our particular culture and age have made of our condition as moral beings.
> --Carl Elliott

> In my hungry fatigue I went into the neon fruit supermarket . . .
> What peaches and penumbras! Whole families shopping at night!
> Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes!
> --Allen Ginsberg[3]

Protagonist and narrator Jack Gladney seems to have a project, evident even in the first few pages of Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, which is to address his burgeoning fear and trembling, his "dread" in Sϕren Kierkegaard's famous phrasing. Unhappily, Jack discovers that his wife Babette turns out to have a parallel quest as she pursues the drug Dylar to quell her own fear of impending death. Toby Silverman Zinman notes that DeLillo's overriding obsession might be language, but that his overriding theme is death, not the physical act, but the "fear of dying as the crucial definition of our humanness, the most sensible response to our technological culture" (75). At the same time *White Noise* foregrounds technology, especially in its spin-offs of frenetic shopping and incessant marketing, as a readily available anesthetic to be applied to our fear of death. Frank Lentricchia describes DeLillo's books as "montages of tones, styles, and voices that have the effect of yoking together terror and wild humor as the essential tone of contemporary America" (1), and this union of humor and terror (of death itself) is especially present in

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[3] I am indebted to Thomas Ferraro's book chapter title for this epigraph, originally from Ginsberg's "Supermarket" poem, 1959.

White Noise (WN). It is my argument that DeLillo offers particularly acute insight into what it is about American culture that struggles so ineffectually with death, and how contemporary Americans have dealt with this question of mortality. At a broader level, DeLillo helps us understand just how problematic death can be for Americans, and how poorly it plays within the ongoing American sense of manifest destiny and the self-accorded specialness of its culture.

In 1973 Ernest Becker wrote *The Denial of Death* to argue that death lies at the very epicenter of human existence, that it is "the idea of death, the fear of it, [that] haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is the mainspring of human activity" (ix).[4] In this regard, Becker's singular work helps to explicate the incisive power of *White Noise*, the seeming urgency of Jack and Babette's yearning to avoid death, and how "white noise" itself has become such an extravagant but necessary narcotic in contemporary American life. There is a striking symmetry between Becker's seminal book and DeLillo's latter-day tale, a parallel between fear of death as psychology in the earlier book, and dread as cultural symptom in the contemporary novel. With no intended disrespect for DeLillo, *Denial of Death* (*DD*) can almost be seen as a primer for the exploration of dread in *WN*, both books owing a prior debt to that Danish dreadmeister himself, Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard provides a linkage as well to a line of thought which includes the insistence on the authentic nature of "tragic man" via Miguel de Unamuno, and latter-day writers such as Carl Elliott and Walker Percy, and recent psychoanalytic thinkers such as Heinz Kohut. They would all, it seems, counsel Jack and Babette Gladney to embrace their fear of death, or at least accept it in some kind of existential fashion, rather than try to ameliorate it or avoid it altogether in the all-too-familiar diversions of Americana. As I

[4] Unless otherwise noted, all Becker page numbers refer to *Denial of Death*.

will argue here, an interpretation of the novel in light of the meditations on mortality offered by these thinkers helps with understanding DeLillo's own meditation on the contemporary American way of death.

White Noise begins innocently enough with Jack Gladney, self-invented Hitlerian scholar, musing about the autumn idyll presented by the parade of student-bearing station wagons, "a brilliant event, invariably" (*WN* 3). It isn't long, however, before DeLillo introduces the concept of death, and Jack and Babette's respective and merciless anxieties about it. The parents and students whom Jack observes have "a kind of rude health . . . they glow a little" (6), but DeLillo confounds this all-too-shiny surface view by depicting as well a certain dark "foreboding" on Jack's part. Throughout the novel, this feeling is continually prompted by something he senses lurking underneath the surfaces of the furniture, the toys, the everyday things of the Gladney household. For Jack the smooth (white, racially and otherwise) veneer of American life has become unbound. The interplay of mere physical things and death is heightened when Babette wonders if death is not just an exchange of documents, especially death among the wealthy. As Jack muses,

> . . . furniture, toys, all the unused objects of earlier marriages and different sets of children, the gifts of lost in-laws, the hand-me-downs and rummages. Things, boxes. Why do these possessions carry such sorrowful weight? There is a darkness attached to them, a foreboding. They make me wary not just of personal failure and defeat but of something more general, something large in scope and content. (6)

My contention is that DeLillo is pursuing a larger essence, this pervasive unease within American culture, and that he repeatedly traces it back to our unsuccessfully repressed awareness of our own temporality. In this sardonic opening set piece, a subsumed meditation on mortality, DeLillo alludes not only to the shopping solution as a pacifier for existential discontent, but also to the struggle of Babette and Jack with their third partner, death. He has also set up the other major themes of *WN* within the first few pages, notably the glossy (wealthy, white, well-attired) appearance presented by private college students and their parents, the fluid interchangeability of mere things and underlying conflicts, and, of course, the always-lurking presence of the Hitler motif.

As the novel's resident interpreter of all such American things, Murray Jay Siskind, Gladney's Faustian academic colleague, wants to immerse himself in "American magic and dread" (19). *WN* in its totality can be seen as an explication of intended magic *against* dread, American-style, an enterprise which in the end is impotent and provides no sheltering illusion. DeLillo says, in effect, that not only is there no refuge from death, but that technology, the "daily seeping falsehearted death" (22), has inevitably made any meaningful confrontation with our own mortality more elusive. DeLillo will push this ironic marriage of technology and mortality to the end of the book with its faux, but glorious sunsets on steroids, beauty produced through errant technology. DeLillo recurrently portrays his characters as looking for a kind of secular salvation, e.g., when Babette's ex-husband, Bob Pardee, is looking for "the magic counterspells to his current run of woe" (58).

Like DeLillo, Ernest Becker knows about such talismanic counterspells and his primary thesis in *Denial of Death* is that, in confronting the prospect of death, human

activity is "designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man" (ix). In parallel fashion DeLillo's characters spend much of *WN* trying to counter this burgeoning fear of death, whether it be Babette questing for Dylar, Jack's own craving for the death-denying drug, or his eventual plan to resort to killing to neutralize his own dread. Becker posits the notion of a hero as being one who is courageous in facing death, but DeLillo makes it recurrently if tragicomically clear that Jack Gladney has access to no such heroics. In fact, DeLillo's premise seems to be that we have no successful rituals for containing death, and our shopping mall culture, an artificially sculpted surface, the epitome of white noise, is only a hapless gloss over dread. Becker would say that one solution to our fear of death is to create an effective illusion, what he calls a "lived, compelling illusion that does not lie about life, death, and reality" (204). DeLillo may well agree, but as we shall see, Jack Gladney does not seem to have the comfort of either a creative illusion or a romantic illusion to counter his mortal dread. His academic life is an insubstantial shell and his marriage to Babette is equally insufficient as well to contain this gnawing anxiety, his fear unto death. Ultimately, his milieu and his own uncritical reception of it seem to provide him with no way of successfully quelling or accepting this fear.

The longing for human immortality is, of course, the inverse face of our fear of death, a concept perhaps best explicated by the Spanish philosopher, Miguel de Unamuno. In *Tragic Sense of Life*, (first English translation published in 1921), he argued for just such a tragic sensibility, something which seems very foreign to Jack Gladney. As Unamuno says,

> For the present let us remain keenly suspecting that the longing not to die, the hunger for personal immortality, the effort whereby we tend to persist indefinitely in our own being . . . our very essence, that this is the starting-point of all human philosophy . . . in the tragic sense of life. (14)

Similarly, Alan Harrington, in his recent book about conceptions of immortality, writes about everyone trying to "enshrine themselves alive in great or miniature halls of fame," whether they be "megalomaniacal company presidents, a messianic poet, garrulous senators, salon hostesses, stand-up comedians . . . shoe clerks" (92, 93), or, in the case of *WN*, a college professor and his wife. Harrington claims that "The unceasing quest for immortality is what makes us anxious" (93). Gladney's image of eternal life is markedly less glorious than most, perplexed more than tragic, as he longs for Babette and himself to "live forever, in sickness and health, feeble-minded, doddering, toothless, liver-spotted, dim-sighted, hallucinating" (103). Of course in this quintessentially DeLilloesque mode, this particular vision of immortality is not all that appealing.

Philosopher and psychiatrist Richard Chessick notes that the notion of anxiety has largely been borrowed by modern psychiatry from Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger. As he says, "This is the being of everyday *Dasein* which Heidegger labels fallenness: self-distraction, frantic meaningless activities [or] . . . 'My life consists of lunching and shopping on the North Shore . . . '" (Chessick 5). Similarly, Becker invokes both Otto Rank and Heidegger to speak about our basic anxiety as not only *about* being-in-the-world, but anxiety *of* being-in-the-world [italics his]. Thus, we fear death *and* life. As Becker says, "The irony of man's condition is that the deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of death and annihilation; but it is life itself which awakens it, and so we must

shrink from being fully alive" (66). This fallenness, this existential thrownness, seems frustratingly perplexing to Jack Gladney, and this walking deadness, this death-in-life, epitomizes Jack, who seems mystified by his family life (none of the "radiance of dailiness" that Jack occasionally glimpses here), unfulfilled by his bizarre and thin academic career, and fearful of the loss of both.[5] In *WN*, when Mr. Treadwell' s sister dies, ironically after having been lost in the mall for several days with her husband, the doctor says that she died of "lingering dread" (99). This is truly dread in the Kierkegaardian sense. More to the point, DeLillo, in Jack Gladney's voice (in a nearly precise echo of Becker's), pinpoints the central dilemma of the human animal, which is that we know we will die: "we are the highest form of life on earth and yet ineffably sad because we know what no other animal knows, that we must die" (99). Becker promotes Otto Rank and Sören Kierkegaard because they recognize the pervasive power of this anxiety about death, and in the same way he criticizes Freud for making death merely an instinct, Freud having been seemingly unable to reach for a truly existentialist level of explanation (Becker 98). In terms of possible solutions, Becker will propose the utility of "creative projection" and "life-enhancing illusion" to free us from the immobilization of pervasive dread. If we are to avoid being "haunted, ashen, lost" (*WN* 163), then we need

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[5] It is worth noting that this concept of existential "thrownness" has been considered with regard to *Blood Meridian* as well, but suggesting that even this philosophical construction can't contain McCarthy's novel. As Steven Shaviro concludes about *Blood Meridian*,

> It is useless to look for ulterior, redemptive meanings, useless even to posit the irredeemable gratuitousness of our abandonment in the form of some existential category such as Heideggerian "thrownness" (*Geworfenheit*). We have not fallen here or been "thrown" here, for we have always been here, and always will be. (113)

Jack Gladney, at least in the early part of *WN*, seems to feel ordained, as part of his American birthright, as professor in his earthly place in his comfortable college town, whereas we will see later on in this paper that the protagonist in *Suttree* struggles much more with his thrownness.

some other solution to the problem of death, especially once the skin of reflexive denial is pierced--perhaps by an ominous black cloud.

DeLillo is careful to suggest, via a multigenerational cast of characters, that we are not necessarily born into this death-ridden dread. Three year-old Wilder, Jack and Babette's youngest child, would be too young, in Becker's estimation, to have a developed, conscious fear of death. However, in the early part of the book, he begins an inexplicably extended bout of crying that comes to suggest, at least for Jack, just such an awareness. He is taken to a doctor, but continues to sob, for nearly seven straight hours. Jack describes it as "a sustained, inarticulate and mournful sound . . . keening now . . . expressions of Mideastern lament, of an anguish so accessible that it rushes to overwhelm whatever immediately caused it . . . [there was] something permanent and soul-struck in this crying. It was a sound of inbred desolation" (77). While the toddler Wilder cannot comprehend death on the anxious, conscious level of Jack and Babette, DeLillo clearly means to portray him as capable of some kind of subverbal grief without words, perhaps expressing what none in the Gladney household are capable of verbalizing. Wilder is quasi-magical, a kind of charmed innocent, and during this extended moment Jack would very much like to join with him and "together perform some reckless wonder of intelligibility" (78). Wilder cries again at the very end of the book after he has blithely ridden his tricycle across the perilous lanes of the interstate, once again embodying both an innocence about death and what can cause it, and a sense, nevertheless, of the tragic, of the imminence of sudden death. Whether the child is riding across the interstate or crying interminably, Wilder (whose innocence perhaps renders him "wilder" in this sense than Jack or Babette) is nevertheless himself, an unassumingly authentic child, who

seems to achieve the spontaneity and full possession of feelings that escape his life-weary parents. Perhaps no intimation of death has yet hindered his full appreciation of life.

Again, DeLillo seems to have charted a progression in death-awareness in the variously aged members of the Gladney family. While Wilder is too young to consciously appreciate death, is it conceivable that his prolonged sobbing might just be the expressed voice of a family collectively unaware of their own feelings? Jack does ponder Wilder's affect at length, with an intensity that seems connected to his broodings on mortality. Does this search for some sort of lesson in his son's prolonged wail portend some rudimentary consciousness-raising on Jack's part, even if it is ephemeral and soon eclipsed by his all-too-accessible denial? Death begins to dawn on the older children, especially Heinrich, as they deal with the advancing toxic cloud and initially have to prevail against their parents' bland denials of the danger.[6] Jack and Babette are either completely clothed in denial, shrouded as they are in a kind of false suburban comfort ("It can't happen here"), or they become all too fully aware of the fact of their own death and scramble to find remedies, from the merely inelegant to the truly murderous. In Becker's thinking, humans fetishize parts of their existence, as a way of trying to understand a complex world, to "take in the piece of ground in front of their noses" (178). Just so, Jack appears superficially calm as long as he stays within his carefully defined and

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[6] Orest Mercator, Heinrich's friend who wants to break the world's endurance record for sitting in a cage of poisonous snakes, is another child who seems juxtaposed in opposition to Jack Gladney and who also reflects the dynamic between embracing death and denying it. Before he goes to a motel room and gets bitten by three non-poisonous snakes, he provokes Jack's attention with his erratic vacillations between a blatant invitation to death ("They want to bite, they bite . . . at least I go right away" [208]) and flat denial ("What killed? Who said anything about getting killed?" [207]). In this instance Jack is passionate about his belief the child will die, so he seems acutely aware of Orest's mortality. In Mercator, DeLillo has achieved a neatly satiric compression of the dialectic between courting and denying one's death.

constructed roles as complacent professor and more-or-less competent husband/father. Likewise, early on in the novel Babette—who suffers, we later learn, from a death-fear so intense that it drives her to trade sex for death-defying Dylar tablets—seems surprisingly comfortable reading to the elderly and discharging her domestic responsibilities.

However, such an ostensibly comfortable, routinized existence also allows space for a kind of brooding introspection. Becker lyrically poses the end of denial when he says, "But as soon as a man lifts his nose from the ground and starts sniffing at eternal problems like life and death, the meaning of a rose or a star cluster--then he is in trouble" (178). As Carl Elliott puts it,

> This is not just realizing that your own particular castle is built on thin air. It is realizing you are built out of air yourself. It is radically disorienting; the ultimate, dizzying high-wire act, like Wiley Coyote after he runs off a cliff, glances down, and realizes where he is standing. ("Pursued" 10)

When the black cloud intrudes into their suburban bubble, members of the Gladney household react in their respective ways: Jack initially is so much into denial that he doesn't see the black cloud for what it is ("It's there. We're here."), and Babette surreptitiously takes her tablet of Dylar, but Heinrich becomes alert and focused, fascinated as he tracks the progress of the toxic event with his binoculars and garbed in his camouflage clothing. DeLillo is conceptualizing denial as a progressive process, completely unavailable to innocent children, but intermittently useful for adolescents, and then fully operational for adults.

Jack, however, had persuaded himself earlier that he had this death problem under control. After his disquisition on death for his students, he muses that "Death was a

strictly professional matter here. I was comfortable with it, I was on top of it" (74). He had foreseen his own death as "nonviolent, small-town, thoughtful" (76), almost something that doctors might dismiss for lack of interest, yet he also fears that they might take his dying for granted. Later on he is initially quite immune to the appearance of the death-wraith itself, the airborne cloud, assuring his children that such a thing as widespread death couldn't happen here, that, after all, he is a college professor, and disasters only really occur among the poor and uneducated. As he says, "We live in a neat and pleasant town near a college with a quaint name. These things don't happen in places like Blacksmith" (114). Jack seeks other forms of denial and seems, at times, at least marginally aware that he is performing them. This awareness, partial or absent or distorted, is a central dynamic which ties together the theme of denial of death in the four novels considered in this thesis. At one particularly emblematic point, Jack is trying to comprehend a medical technician's grim, if disinterested appraisal of his exposure to the cloud. He says, "I stood with my arms folded, trying to create a picture of an impassive man, someone in line at a hardware store waiting for the girl at the register to ring up his heavy-duty rope. It seemed the only way to neutralize events, to counteract the passage of computerized dots that registered my life and death" (140). He tries to find solace in his fantasy of being at the hardware store in order to avoid the computer's display of the "bracketed numbers with pulsing stars," but succeeds only in further imbuing this routine retail transaction with the specter of death by summoning, via the image of rope, an evocation of lynching. This is the failure of denial. Yet, there are, of course, many distractions to help us bring it back.

How Much is that Death Denial in the Window?[7]

Enter our culture's proffered solution to postmodern dread: shopping. Several vignettes in *WN* take place in shopping venues with their plastic assault on the senses: supermarkets, specialty stores, and shopping malls. Interestingly enough, Becker, in an arresting prelude to DeLillo's work, had said, "Man is drinking and drugging himself out of awareness, [Or] he spends his time shopping, which is the same thing" (*DD* 284). Both deathly thinkers portray shopping as a manic, but poor antidote to fear of death. DeLillo underscores the point with his triplicate refrain, "Mastercard, Visa, American Express." Shopping is something that the Gladney family, denied other kinds of intimacy, seems to do very well together. Gladney is, in fact, shopping with Murray when they have an extended discussion about death. In the full flush of denial, Jack is balky, quasi-willing pupil as Murray instructs him in the various guises of denial, while at the same time pointing out how necessary these defenses are. In Murray's words,

> Fear is unnatural. Lightning and thunder are unnatural. Pain, death, reality, these are unnatural. We can't bear these things as they are. We know too much. So we resort to repression, compromise, and disguise. This is how we survive in the universe. This is the natural language of the species. (289)

The whole time that these two academics are pondering the verities, they are shopping, periodically diverted by luridly advertised products. Delillo observes, "The data was strong today" (289). The novel's ultimate set piece of denial-by-shopping is the mall extravaganza wherein Jack, encouraged by his family, begins to shop in earnest. It

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[7] Subtitle taken from Len Costa's December 7, 2003 *NYT* article linking shopping and denial of death.

follows an incident wherein a colleague remarks that Jack is without his usual protective coloration--dark glasses and black robe. As DeLillo obliquely comments on the shimmering surface veneer, "Dacron, Orlon, Lycra, Spandex." Jack shops flamboyantly, saying,

> I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I'd forgotten existed . . . Brightness settled around me . . . The more money I spent, the less important it seemed. I was bigger than these sums. These sums poured off my skin like so much rain. These sums came back to me in the form of existential credit." (84)

At some level Jack apparently knows and registers that acquisition is just another form of denial. Interestingly, his family colludes in Jack's shopping solution, and they, especially the children, serve as his "guides to endless well-being" (83). Early on in the book, as we have seen, he had talked about the sorrowed weight of things, mere things. Therefore, possessions and bought things have a dual resonance: they are tokens of well-being, but harbingers of something darker, which is a distillation of DeLillo's theme that there is a problematic underside beneath the shimmering allure of the American dream.[8]

In his book *Living It Up* James Twitchell talks about the tulipmania which afflicted the Dutch Republic in the 1600's, and how this arch-consumerism forged the link between anxiety and desired objects. As he says, "Little wonder . . . [T]hat the

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[8] Tim Engles has a somewhat different interpretation of the shopping spree, i.e., that "Jack conceives of himself while shopping in a particularly white, male way" (722). Engles acknowledges that what are missing are death and history, but that Jack's shopping mania is a specific demarcation of himself "as white" (776), specifically as an "aggressive, plundering white adventurer" (773), which means that the attempt to rescue an authentic sense of self by the shopping experience is also racially encoded—differently raced people have different levels and forms of access to the death-defying fantasies offered by consumer culture.

plague anxiety reached its peak exactly as the market in tulip futures topped . . . " (212). He goes on to say,

> But the key to value of luxury is often in the unarticulated promise attached to undifferentiated objects. We never consciously contend that somehow this object will fill in the blank, that it will provide a temporary palliative, that even as a temporary stay it will tide us over some trauma. (213)

It is this unarticulated, or barely articulated promise, that the Gladney family seeks so fervently in shopping and soporific television. How else could the magic talisman of "Toyota Celica" penetrate Steffie's dreams (155)? However, the shopping frenzy has limited magic, and when the Gladney family returns home, they separate, going to their respective rooms, each "wishing to be left alone" (84). So, the "unarticulated promise" of American consumerism run amok is transient for the Gladneys, brief materialistic balm for their discontent.

Death and the Other

Another way that Jack seeks to remedy his fear of death is to find refuge in the other; Babette, and her continuing and ample wellbeing, are essential to his psychological comfort. Ironically, Babette contravenes Jack's impression (or wish) that she is solidly grounded, that she remain his life-affirming presence--she herself is oppressed by fear of death and attempts to find her own salvation via a supermarket tabloid's advertisement for a drug that ameliorates death anxiety. Obliviously, Jack says about Babette that her death would leave him "scattered, talking to chairs and pillows" (103). Often Jack and Babette discuss who will die first, a troubling and lurking obsession that has become "the central

question in Jack and Babette's child-filled, food-filled, sex-filled, life-filled lives" (Zinman 76). Jack needs Babette to be ever there, unchangeable, alive, a counterweight to his increasing consciousness of death. When Babette asks in a clear Kierkegaardian allusion, "You mean am I sick unto death?" Jack replies, "I depend on you to be the healthy outgoing former Babette" (263). Becker talks about this "romantic solution" when religious solutions fail, as he says *à la* Rank, "he fixed his urge to cosmic heroism onto *another person* in the form of a love object" (160). Regrettably for Jack, any release to be found in romantic distraction evaporates when Babette begins to evince her own species of dread. Separately, neither in the dyad can handle their burgeoning fear of death, and when they are together this spiraling uneasiness soon compounds as they talk about their anxiety. Even their commiseration becomes a solution doomed to fail, which would, of course, come as no surprise to Becker, who also noted that "The romantic love 'cosmology of two' may be an ingenious and creative attempt, but because it is still a continuation of the *causa-sui* project in the world, it is a lie that must fail" (165).

There is a parallel passage in DeLillo's *Libra* describing a similar "cosmology of two" between rogue assassin plotter Win Everett and his wife, Mary Frances:

> "Don't you feel well?" he said.
>
> "I'm all right."
>
> "I want you to be well."
>
> "I'm all right."
>
> "Because it would be devastating if you weren't well. That mustn't happen, understand? I actually couldn't bear it."
>
> (360)

Win goes on to reiterate, "I want you to be well . . . You have to be absolutely well . . . We can't have a situation where you're not completely yourself . . . I count on you for everything that matters" (362). As the stable object, the counterweight to dread, Mary Frances plays Babette to Win Everett's Jack Gladney. Generally then, DeLillo suggests that neither the mania of shopping nor the desired and required presence of the significant other is enough to overcome the specter of death for many of DeLillo's characters, particularly Jack or Babette, or, for that matter, for all of us.

The Mourning After Pill

DeLillo posits two other solutions in *WN* for the thinking person's death fear. One is pharmaceutical release, figured in Babette's pursuit of Dylar, which Jack also begins to covet, and killing another person, in this case, Mr. Gray (a.k.a. Willie Mink) by Jack. DeLillo has been celebrated for his seeming ability to foresee events, pointedly in the case of this novel's Toxic Airborne Event prefiguring the Bhopal disaster, and, in *Mao II*, via ruminations on terrorism and the World Trade Center itself (54), and the 9/11 demise of the twin towers (39). I would add that his fictitious drug Dylar eerily presages contemporary antidepressants such as Prozac, particularly their presumed utility in treating anxiety, including, in some cases, the anxiety unto death. Carl Elliott, a physician-turned-philosopher, notes as much when he says, in explaining how Prozac and other antidepressants are being prescribed for terminally ill patients, "For a meaningful death, try Prozac" ("Medicate" 1). As he says, "Anxiety about death is deeply unpleasant, [so] why *not* medicate it?" (1).

Elliott writes that Americans are almost pathological in their search for happiness, noting wryly, "In America we take happiness seriously, and nowhere do we take the grim

business of happiness more seriously than in American medicine" (1). This earnest, if errant, searching seems to apply to DeLillo's characters, whether to Jack Gladney who is initially comfortable, if not happy, in his incarnation as Hitler professor (then increasingly uneasy and vaguely worried), and to the whole Gladney clan, who seem only too ready to lapse into the faux-happiness readily supplied by supermarkets, their tabloids, or the narcotic lure of the shopping malls.

The discussion of medicated happiness, of course, calls to mind Peter Kramer's thoughtful and provoking meditation in *Listening to Prozac* on this now-infamous drug which, he notes, not only treats depression and anxiety, but seems capable of changing the basic fabric of personality itself. Echoing the frantic pursuit of happiness that DeLillo portrays in several of this novel's characters, Kramer argues that Prozac can make one's psyche "brighter than bright," a kind of cognitive enhancer, rather than something normally diagnosed as necessary, and thereby shepherding in his concept of "cosmetic psychopharmacology" (xvi). There seems to be a continuum of possible drug effects in modern medicine whereby pathology intergrades into wellness, and medicines not only cure disease, but make things for Americans "better than well" which is also the title (taken from Kramer) of Elliott's book, which discusses cosmetics, cosmetic surgery, and the enormous proliferation of ways that we (especially Americans), seek to deny death and perfect the body. Similarly, the novelist Walker Percy was a non-practicing physician who also wrote about this interface of psychology, anxiety and medicine. Elliott invokes Percy as an insightful and literary commentator on this current surge of interest in perfection as a commodity that can be so easily purchased in the marketplace, and a pause to consider Percy's insights helps to show that DeLillo clearly deserves

credit, as well, for further charting some of the psychic undercurrents that account for this escalating trend.

Percy's thinking about human beings and their wish for immortality, or at least for a smooth ride through this life, is explicitly conveyed in his 1971 novel *Love in the Ruins*. In parallel to DeLillo's Dylar, Dr. Tom More, the alcoholic psychiatrist protagonist in the book, has an "Ontological Lapsometer," which allows More's patients to become not only well, but also happy and healthy (Elliott, "Pursued" 8). As Elliott observes, the instrument provides for self-fulfillment and is subsequently merchandized by a character in the book, one Art Immelman. This, of course, is the other link with DeLillo, as Percy believes that our vaunted roles as consumers leave us, in Elliott's phrase, mere "consumers of managed happiness." One could imagine that the Gladneys, especially when faced by the reality of the Toxic Airborne Event, would be only too happy to make any kind of Faustian arrangement to trade their distress for happiness, however ersatz. Kate Arthur has also written about Americans and mortality, and says, in effect, that we view death as simply un-American. As she writes: "In our frenzy of material acquisition, anything that thwarts our individual expression of success is threatening. Death truncates the dream of progress and so is disdained" (72). Indeed, it is this very abhorrence of death and its sheer disavowal that seem to trouble DeLillo about Americans.

In his musings Percy comes very close, I think, to the philosophy of Miguel de Unamuno. Both seem to say there is no easy way around feeling disturbed, no easy exit from the anxiety of everyday life, no slick avoidance of our ultimate fear of death. Both seem to posit the value of embracing the human struggle, yea one's personal human struggle, which demands the prerequisite of acknowledging mortality. Unamuno's work

and, in particular, *Tragic Sense of Life*, suggests that while we mourn for immortality, we should also consider merging with the struggle and see ourselves as tragic, and certainly not as a mere collection of drug receptors that can be fooled (temporarily) by such palliatives as those figured by the DeLillo's fictitious Dylar, or Percy's Lapsometer, or Kramer's Prozac; one should instead be a feeling human being, paradoxically enlivened by the need to struggle with our "mortality dysphoria" (Elliott's phrase).

DeLillo is clearly not alone, then, in being disquieted by how very undisquieted most Americans are, on the surface that is, by the fact of their own mortality. Indeed, there is a significant body of recent research in the social sciences that explores the link between denial of death and certain choices that Americans make, a literature made even more strikingly incisive by the events of 9/11. Such authors, including Cohen, Solomon, Greenberg, Pyxzczynksi, Landau, et al., begin from Becker's thesis that our "uniquely human awareness of mortality" is at fundamental variance with our wish for survival (Landau et al. 1137), and that this perception leads to a variety of strategies deployed in an effort to neutralize our anxiety about death. These latter-day death watchers define "mortality-salience" as a not-quite-conscious sense of mortality (read Jack Gladney's uneasy, if inchoate feelings), and suggest that an intimation of, for example, the events of 9/11, can serve even to influence our choices of leadership in an attempt to escape overwhelming dread and anxiety. In their articles "Deliver Us From Evil" and "Fatal Attraction" these social scientists (Landau et al., and Cohen, et al.) use President Bush's popularity around the election of 2004 as a context in which to explore the role of existential fear and the link with resultant support for government leaders. This recent line of thought ultimately represents an example of the working-out in the social sciences

of Becker's 1973 hypothesis and DeLillo's fictional proposition, supported by early twenty-first century research studies. In similar, but fictional fashion, Jack Gladney adopts the dark promise afforded by Hitler to help assuage his own existential dread, but in the process trades away chances at discovering an authentic self, while Wilder, it seems to me, represents a truly authentic, if nascent, self that contrasts with Jack's insecure and false sense of self. In *WN* DeLillo seems to be trying to describe our culture-wide false self, and he especially attributes its falsity to our subsumed awareness of a more abject, decay-bound self.

In the same way that the Airborne Toxic Event, and his own presumed exposure to the dark cloud, function to heighten Jack's dysphoria about mortality, the above-mentioned authors, in a study prior to the 2004 election, found that reminding people of their own mortality, that is, increasing their mortality-salience, increased their support for President Bush. They also observed that exposure to reminders of 9/11 brought death-related thoughts closer to consciousness (Landau 1136). Both thoughts of death and of 9/11 itself increased support for Bush. The authors opine that this is, in fact, an "existential case study" for the role that existential fear can play in fostering support for seemingly protective political leaders. This phenomenon would seem, then, to be foreshadowed by not only Gladney's career choice of Hitler studies, but also his very reasons for establishing such a field. DeLillo suggests that he chose this area of study involving a strong, if malevolent, leader because of Gladney's barely hidden denial of death which, of course, surfaces recurrently throughout the course of the novel, leading him as well to rely on Murray's advice, and, eventually, to try to kill Mink. In Becker's words,

> It is [fear] that makes people so willing to follow brash, strong-looking demagogues with tight jaws and loud voices: those who focus their measured words and their sharpened eyes in the intensity of hate, and so seem most capable of cleansing the world of the vague, the weak, the uncertain, the evil. Ah, to give oneself over to their direction--what calm, what relief. (Becker, *Meaning* 161)

Well before 9/11 or the political events of 2004, DeLillo novelistically portrayed the effect of anxiety and denial about death, and accurately sketched in Jack Gladney's character the attempts that many Americans and their leaders currently make to try to corral this fear.

Jack Gladney's dilemma between embracing life and at the same time denying death, which seductively peeks at him from every corner of his life, is a vexing dialectic. Sometimes he is actually struck by the "radiance of dailiness" of life, whether it is his curiosity and interest in his son Wilder's spontaneity, or the intrigue of such things as the marvel of a coffee maker. At other times he seems to actually court death, to merge with death, the aggressor, at least sartorially. At one point, in his trademark dark glasses and professorial black robe, he talks to Murray's class about the word "death" and its Norse-German-English derivation. Jack believes that his identification with Hitler, architect of death on a mass scale, gives him--in the classroom, on campus, and in academia more generally--an "aura of power, madness and death" (72). Ultimately, as Douglas Keesey notes, "Fifty-one-year old Jack Gladney is a professor of Hitler Studies at the College-on-the-Hill, hoping that identification with one of the world's greatest aggressors will make him less afraid of his own death" (133). In Becker's words, Jack "learns to embed

himself in other-power" (23), and, as Jack muses in *WN*, "So Hitler gave me something to grow into and develop toward . . ." (17). Hitler has become a proprietary and powerful object for Jack, at least in academic circles, and Murray even approvingly refers to him as "Gladney's Hitler."

In similar fashion, academic department chairmen at the College-on-the-Hill all wear black robes, leading, Jack thinks, to a medieval touch, causing him to say, "The robe is black, of course, and goes with almost anything" (9). Prior to the manic spending spree in the mall, Jack seems deprived of this ersatz power when one Eric Massingale, a computer teacher on Jack's campus, sees Jack without his dark academic garb and confronts him with being "A big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy" (83). Jack is stripped of his identity without his Darth Vaderesque garb, and this is representative of an entire DeLilloesque conversation woven throughout this novel on blackness, wherein black represents power, but dark power--the black robes and the black toxic cloud--and presumably its inverse image, white, would equal life. However, white, as in "white noise" can also represent a kind of death, the living death of shopping malls and television, that would-be "wholesome domestic sport" (16), which Babette wants to detoxify for her children. In this brooding novel, death and its defenses are never far behind, but they are also rarely conscious, except in Murray's glib commentary. All of this comico-melancholic novel takes place under the ominous auspices of the Toxic Airborne Event, which in DeLillo's evocative phrasing is "The enormous dark mass [that] moved like some death ship in a Norse legend, escorted across the night by armored creatures with spiral wings" (127). I think DeLillo is confronting us with the question not only of how inured Americans seem to the very idea of death, which loathsome specter

doesn't fit very well within the glossy K-Mart culture, but how at times we try to skitter away from vitality and an embrace of a full and authentic life by, curiously enough, identifying with the trappings of death itself, as Gladney seems to do with his Hitler motif.

If this novel, at least in part, is about the inevitable failure of Americana[9], and specifically that of its two trademark contemporary institutions, shopping and drugs, to mollify American dread, it is also about Jack's "final solution," insidiously murmured to him by Murray, which is to kill someone else, thereby inoculating himself against death. Later in this paper we will see this gambit considered in *Suttree* and even more fully formed in *Blood Meridian*. In *WN*, predictably, Murray and Jack are shopping when Murray says,

> We have talked about ways to get around death . . . we have discussed how you've already tried two such ways. We have mentioned technology, train wrecks, belief in an afterlife. There are other methods as well and I would like to talk about one such approach. (290)

He then goes on to parse the world into "killers and diers," and thereby defines violence as a form of rebirth. This line of thinking, of course, has uneasy, but clear associations, as we shall see, with the recurrent and seemingly senseless killing in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, and one could predicate the same goal--to neutralize one's own death, or fear of it. Becker notes that some people actually do attempt to relieve their own fear of death by killing others: "I am threatened with death--let us kill plentifully" (149). Once again, it seems not by chance that DeLillo has Gladney concocting his Hitler studies. In a

[9] *Americana* is also the title of DeLillo's first book, in which he was "hurling things at the page" (LeClair, "Interview" 20), and was striving to use "the whole picture, the whole culture" (Begley 88), characterizations which could also apply to *WN*.

parallel argument, Becker references a 1971 paper by R. G. L. Waite in which it is argued that Jews were sacrificed to "Hitler's personal sense of unworthiness and hypervulnerability of the body to filth and decay" (Becker 249), a phrase replete with Kristevan overtones of the abject and the subsequent urge to avoid it; likewise Jack seeks to avoid death, or at least bind, if not ameliorate, his anxiety about it with his plan to kill Mink.[10] Kate Arthur not only notes that "As for [d]eath it is still un-American," but, further, that killing is a very American solution to the problem of our own death. She points out that after September 11th, death, especially violent death, could not be tolerated in America by Americans, so in order to banish death from its soul, America rallied behind George Bush's push for war, since "Americans just don't die, and certainly Americans don't let any one else do the killing" (77). As we shall see, this seems to be the solution devised by McCarthy's vulgarized and decimating posse in *Blood Meridian*, and it is the same spirit in which Jack receives Murray's absurd, yet deadly, proposal.

Good Mourning, America

In *WN* DeLillo seems to be questioning our American way of death, or perhaps our inability to approach it culturally. One of the academics in the department of American environments at the College-on-the-Hill says to Murray that America should have an official American Day of the Dead, like Mexico's. Murray's reply is "We do. It's called Super Bowl Week" (216). This conjunction of the American approach to death with violent spectacle is embedded in a more general discussion of death, which

[10] Julia Kristeva's 1980 book, *Powers of Horror*, details this very interface of abjection and mortality. As she says, "No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* [italics hers] what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death (3)."

inevitably links sex and death, and then eventuates in Murray's description of car crashes as having "a wonderful brimming spirit of innocence and fun" (219). He somehow has conjoined American holidays like Thanksgiving with the cinematic violence of car wrecks, saying, "We don't mourn the dead or rejoice in miracles. These are days of secular optimism, of self-celebration" (219). What is implied here is the inadequacy of American rituals for the dead or for their own dying. Earlier in the book Jack had remarked on the gulf between grief and its appearances, that perhaps professional mourners would be a good idea because his feelings were "inadequate to the spoken grief, the great single-minded anguish" (76). We will see this same search for effective solace as we consider *Suttree* in a later chapter.

Part of Gladney's problem is that he really has no apparent intrinsic gift with which to address his life or to deal effectively with his calculated and anticipated death from Nyodene-D. Becker might be describing Jack Gladney, standing in for America itself, when he writes:

> The whole thing boils down to this paradox: if you are going to be a hero then you must give a gift. If you are the average man you give your heroic gift to the society in which you live, and you give the gift that society specifies in advance. (173)

Jack Gladney is no hero or artist, just a shambling professor with an entirely specious load of academic capital. Much as Christopher Mott describes Lee Harvey Oswald in DeLillo's *Libra*, Jack might also stand "as an example of postmodern subjectivity, a subjectivity without a transcendent self beneath the 'false' layers of social conditioning" (237). Becker says that "Man needs a 'second' world, a world of humanly created

meaning, a new reality that he can live, dramatize, nourish himself in . . . [To] lose the security of heroic cultural illusion is to die" (189). Jack has lost this security, and has no such "second world"; this lack becomes clear after his ostensibly masterful lecture to Murray's class in the first part of *WN,* and then later as his other source of support, Babette, begins to crumble under her own fear of death. One of Becker's central questions posed in *DD* is on what level of illusion one should live, or, what is the "best" illusion if one must have one in order to avoid crippling dread. Jack is denied the "creative illusion" because his academic career is inauthentic, and artificial at best. He is also denied the "romantic illusion," the more so because of Babette's infidelity with Mr. Gray. No longer can he find solace in Babette, the beloved wife-mother-shopper turned scheming adulteress. To bring this full circle, we can turn to the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut, who says the following:

> I see the major issue of life not in the terms of the outcome of the struggle for dominance, but in the terms of the outcome of the struggle to maintain active creativeness . . . the ability to be in touch with the playful child deep in the personality . . . to maintain the freshness of the child's encounter with the world. (*The Curve of Life*, qtd. in Chessick, *Emotional* 239)

Jack is missing authentic creativity and cannot, except by proxy (I'm thinking here of Wilder) find his fresh "encounter with the world."

In *DD* Becker has a rather startling chapter entitled "Human Character as a Vital Lie." Like a lie, Jack Gladney's character has progressively become unraveled throughout the course of the novel. Early in his account, when Jack seems somewhat more secure and content in his professorial identity, replete with a multiply initialed name

(J.A.K. Gladney), he describes himself as "the false character that follows the name around" (17). When even this Beckeresque vital lie disintegrates, not even the attempt to co-opt someone else's life force proves sufficient to neutralize his fear of death.

Becker modified Freud's basic thesis about humans, which claims that our basic anxiety is about sex, to say that it is instead the fear of death that both drives us and produces defensive psychological mechanisms:

> Today we realize that all the talk about blood and excrement, sex and guilt, is true not because of urges to patricide and incest and fears of actual physical castration, but because all these things reflect man's horror of his own basic animal condition . . . (35)

This expansion of Freud's theory, of course, calls to mind again a kind of Kristevan abjection, from which we try to flee. As Kristeva says,

> The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part . . . Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us . . . Abjection is a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles. (4)

Becker goes further in a very Kristevan mode: "The Oedipal project [which Becker defines very broadly] is the flight from passivity, from obliteration, from contingency: the child wants to conquer death . . . " (36). In this regard, Jack's project is failing from the first few pages of *WN*. The university life manifested in the parade of station wagons is a mere patina over much more primitive fears and anxieties, the phantasmagoria of shopping malls a thin skin poorly contrived to mask death itself. Jean Paul Sartre defined

what he termed a "basic project" in human life (see Chessick, *What* 99-107), and if we fail in this basic project we are guilty of "bad faith." This is highly reminiscent of Jack's dawning realization that the project of self has failed and he feels guilty, and existentially lost. Chessick goes on in a later work to emphasize the parallel between a Sartrean basic project and Heinz Kohut's psychoanalytic thinking about self and, in particular, the construct of "Tragic Man." As he says,

> I find Kohut's concept of the nuclear self parallel to Sartre's notion of the basic project . . . developed by every individual and which can only be completely understood retrospectively. . . that what appears to be a strong narcissistically invested self actually can represent a false self . . . while the person's true or nuclear self has remained deeply repressed and enfeebled. (*Emotional* 240-1)

In the end Jack, while afforded a rare opportunity, via the black cloud, to elude the white noise and establish a true as opposed to a false self, to reground his basic project, seems to slip ever-so-easily back into the anesthesia of shopping and the false, if comforting, life of others afforded by the tabloids in the supermarket racks, "the cults of the famous and the dead" (326).

At the end of *WN,* after Wilder's miraculous escape, Babette, Wilder and Jack join others on the overpass to see the spectral, heightened sunsets, undoubtedly rendered more vivid because of the residue from the Airborne Toxic Event. The sunset, for them, takes on "content, feeling, an exalted narrative life" (324). This "postmodern sunset" represents in part the elevated (heroic) life that Jack has been unable to create for himself. Retreating into the turtle shell of denial, Jack "takes no calls," particularly from his doctor

because he is afraid of the imaging block or what it knows about him and his suddenly scheduled death, thanks to his exposure to Nyodene-D. The novel ends, aptly enough, with the "waves and radiation, or how the dead speak to the living" of the supermarket shelves. "Everything we need that is not food or love is here in the tabloid racks" (326). Having failed at several different attempts to otherwise address his anxiety about death and to embrace the struggle afforded by a sense of his own mortality, Jack has been seamlessly absorbed back into the denial afforded by the shimmering surface of the grocery store.

Ernest Becker's own solution, found at the end of *Denial of Death,* is that we submit our gift to the cosmos and hope for the best: "The most that any one of us can seem to do is to fashion something--an object or ourselves--and drop it into the confusion, make an offering of it, so to speak, to the life force" (285). Babette finds that her own gifts such as reading the tabloids to the elderly, or teaching her class on posture are insufficient to cure her increasing fear of death. Even the pharmaceutical solution is inadequate, because, as Zinman says: "Eventually, we come to realize that Dylar is merely an extension of everyday disinformation, TV commercials, PR devices--the white noise of our technomediac society made flesh--or at least polymer" (73). Likewise, Jack Gladney has little to offer beyond his rather paltry academic life, something his own chancellor seems to feel is rather feeble-minded at best. Becker could be talking about Jack's attempts at an academic career when he says,

> The debt to life has to be paid somehow; one has to be a hero in the best and only way that he can; in our impoverished culture even--as Harrington so truly put it--'if only for his skill at the pinball machine.' (217)

Poor Jack Gladney doesn't even have the equivalent of skill at pinball, and this realization is present to varying degrees throughout the course of *WN*. "Repression, compromise and disguise" have all been ineffective at countering his very American dread, and he finds little refuge except in the hypnosis afforded by artificially enhanced sunsets and supermarket shelves. "Tegrin, Denorex, Selsun Blue." What we can see, then, in this novel is a remarkable distillation, whether consciously synthesized by DeLillo or not, of the thinking of DeLillo, Becker, Unamuno and, distantly, Kierkegaard, with regard to the central quandary of how to handle our fear of death. Zinman makes the point that DeLillo has left all of the novel's plots and subplots unfinished, because "by withholding language and refusing to tidy up his plots, [DeLillo] would forestall death . . ." (77). Although Kierkegaard struggled with dread in the mid-1800's, and Becker in the 1970's, DeLillo makes this conflict of the thinking animal incisively contemporary and shows us the unflattering, thin shell, laminated with polluted sunsets and fluorescent shopping malls, under which most of us cower to contain our fear of death.

II.

In the City of "Dead Alchemy": Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree*

"Suttree's obsession with evading death constitutes a form of its embrace."
--Robert Jarrett

Prior to the 2005 publication of the most recent novel by Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men*, it could be successfully argued that Cornelius Suttree, in *Suttree* of the same name, was the Cormac McCarthy character with the most revealed interiority. Permitting us at least a periodic, if fragmented, view inside Suttree's psyche, the novel portrays the prodigal son's return to Knoxville and the Tennessee River valley, but slightly askew, as this white son of privilege dives deliberately into the largely black culture of McAnally Flats. He pursues his consciously downscale career as a sometime fisherman on a river now tamed, ironically enough, in real life partially through the efforts of McCarthy's own father, who was actually employed by the Tennessee Valley Authority (Prather, "Color of Water"). While many critics chart a kind of existential progression in this character, few have noted how central death is to this emergence of a new and more mature self. Unlike Jack Gladney in *White Noise*, who has every chance, it seems, to confront his fear of death, but subsides without awareness into shopping and polluted sunsets, Cornelius Suttree does seem to come to terms with death in a kind of brute way, establishing for himself fragmented, but functional rituals of mourning.

In *Suttree*, McCarthy's pervasive, multiform depiction of death receives its most humanistic treatment, far from the darker, corpse-riddled obsessions of such works as *Blood Meridian* and *Outer Dark*. In *The Denial of Death*, as we have seen, Ernest Becker argued forcefully that we all strive endlessly to eject the fact of our own death from consciousness, a struggle embedded in parallel in the central characters of *White*

Noise. Writing in the wake of Becker's groundbreaking inquiry into our culture's evasive handlings of mortality, McCarthy presents a main character who attempts the same death-denying feat. In fact, McCarthy uses this novel as a vehicle to present a semi-autobiographical character with serial opportunities to face up to death, and the narrative becomes a compendium of shunned, delayed or denied death experiences.

Yet, the treatment of death in this novel is carefully nuanced, with Suttree often balanced on a dialectical tightrope, veering between trying to escape death and embracing it. While it has been argued that this precarious perch makes Suttree more alive, and even more alive than most, his dance with death is fraught with ambiguity, his awareness of death elusive at best. In particular, Cornelius Suttree confounds the accepted rituals of death, and is especially frustrated by his own repeated inability to participate fully in socially sanctioned ceremonies of mourning. I will argue here that with his epic portrayal of Suttree's existentially tinged travails, McCarthy complicates the idea of death and confronts his riverine character with forms and transforms of death in order to challenge his readers to see if he goes beyond his incomplete rituals of mourning, so that he can eventually free himself from the past and solve Becker's central question about dreaded death.

In his 1992 reading of *Blood Meridian*, "The Very Life of the Darkness," Steven Shaviro writes, "But even darkness and death have their own proper vitality" (120), and that "Bloody death['s] baroque opulence is attended with a frighteningly complicitous joy" (111). Indeed, it has been posited that only the prospect of death can provoke the kind of anxiety that can wake the "dead-in-life sleeper" to the possibility of a more authentic existence (Prather, "Color of Water"), a kind of authenticity that Unamuno or

Percy surely would appreciate. Of all of McCarthy's novels prior to *No Country for Old Men*, *Suttree* as a novel and Cornelius Suttree as a character (excluding, possibly, the Judge in *Blood Meridian*) offer the reader a partial introspective translucence, albeit intermittent, cloudy, and ultimately ambiguous. As we will see, this limited interior view reaches its extreme in *Blood Meridian*, of which Shaviro says, "There is no interiority, no intentionality and no transcendence" (115). The question then becomes whether or not Suttree's many experiences of death in the novel *do* serve to awaken him to a more existentially genuine life, i.e., do they "wonderfully concentrate the mind," or are they simply pellucid events through which he passes with no perceptible change? Prather maintains that Suttree is, in fact, a man who has "completed his existential transformation" as he stands at the roadside at the end of the book (10). However, Prather observes in the same passage that Suttree has served an arduous five-year internship in the rituals of mourning, his "extended experience of manifestations of death, a molting phase he himself describes as his 'chrysalis of gloom'" (464). Throughout most of the novel, Suttree inhabits McAnally Flats, which Prather describes as a "temporary island in the sea of death" (8). Suttree has come home to this now-deadened city, the great watercourse now halted in a series of stultified lakes (the river throttled, strangely enough, through the agency of McCarthy's own father), to immerse himself in the "magic and dread" (*WN* 19) of the city's black rituals and, perhaps, thereby to fashion a more authentic sense of self. He therefore confronts the same task as Jack Gladney, namely how to surmount the denial of death so pervasively conferred by American culture and construct an existentially viable life and sense of self.

Ron Evans considers the peculiarly American form of denial of death in his 1992

work, *The Creative Myth and the Cosmic Hero: Text and Context in Ernest Becker's* The Denial of Death. In a passage highly reminiscent of Suttree he says,

> Along with Becker who laments the loss of belief in a hero system and who cautions us about the larger implications of such a loss, we might say that contemporary life *floats* like a drifting boat, with no lines securing it to the tow of tradition. (11)

Addressing a more intellectual context, Evans goes on to say that modernist art generally traces the failure of heroic attributes, and post-modernist work, similarly, "depicts the grim plight of the heroic individual during a Road of Trials"--in this case a River of Trials for Suttree--"confronting . . . the stultifying restriction and spiritual death imposed by hollow symbolic conventions that have paled into hideous mannerisms" (88). The present inquiry considers the interval of Suttree's life depicted in the novel as it reveals his awkward relationship with death, asking to what extent he is freed from his fear of death, and thereby able to participate more fully in ceremonies of mourning, and thus somehow freed in a rather spiritual sense to exit Knoxville at book's end.

The Very Life of the Darkness

This novel is not only suffused with death—its narrative is deliberately bracketed with it. The book begins with a prologue of sorts, a poetically lyrical salutation to a "Dear friend," noting that we are in the "Encampment of the damned," are clothed in "deathwear," riding on "deathcarts" and escorted by those in the "casketmaker's trade." This lethal imagery permeating the first three pages is followed by Suttree witnessing the extraction of a suicide corpse from the river; the novel itself ends just after Suttree finds a

final dead body, "the deathshead" in his houseboat, death having seemingly come for Suttree, but finding someone else instead (Longley 85).

Similarly, for Suttree, in another scene the hookbacked crone's grandmother, glimpsed in a photo, who is very dead, but propped up for the photo, is a particularly concrete representation of the denial of death. Repeatedly, then, McCarthy plies Suttree with encounters with death, and, as has been noted by others, Suttree's encounters with death are almost continuous (Longley 88). There are allusive bookends of death for this novel as well, such as the "weaver [of the] bloody shuttle . . . the hunter with hounds . . . [and] his deadcart" (5) in the preface; these images are reprised at the end of the book as the huntsman of the river and the "castellated cities" reappears, and the admonition is to "Fly them" (471). This yearning for flight, away from the deathly horrors Suttree has witnessed in McAnally Flats, may be the book's final acquiescence to denial of death, or at least a questionable and ambiguous directive. McCarthy often seems to employ a kind of Hawthornian ambiguity, something which in the span of this novel he does not resolve with the ending of *Suttree*, but I want to argue that McCarthy's message is less ambiguous than it might appear. That is, his protagonist retains ambiguity in his relation to death, both his own and those he has known and loved, because his surroundings have not provided him with any adequate forms of ritual that would quell his personal, haunting fear of death. His final leave-taking of McAnally flats, then, is less triumphantly, existentially heroic than most critics allow.

Into the Wasteland

As in the *Border Trilogy* and *Blood Meridian*, Cornelius Suttree's space is liminal, the river a psychologically amorphous and poorly defined space in the sense described by Gloria Anzaldúa in her 1987 work about identity construction in the Southwest. As she says,

> The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy. (Preface [i])

Kristeva describes this transitional space where one is "As jettisoned. Parachuted by the Other" (9), in this case by Suttree's father. She says this region is "simply a frontier" and, apropos of Suttree, "We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it--on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger" (9). Suttree and friends are dragged along, carried across, or submerged in the primordial and sometimes overstated mythos of the Tennessee River, with intimations of mortality ever present, like a smell that usually goes unnoticed, or indeed, like white noise. Not unlike Lowry's consul in *Under the Volcano,* Suttree, as the most elaborated persona in the book, moves between dream sequences, memories, waking hallucinations, delirium and near-death experiences. In describing this fictive space, McCarthy seems to question whether life in McAnally Flats is itself a kind of living death, or whether it becomes more alive when

compared with the ordered but dead world recommended by Suttree's father, or with the encroaching stasis presented by the superhighway swallowing the flats at the end of the book. The novel in its totality rejects our standard handlings of death, as it juggles the countering prospect of some kind of life, any kind of life, with the recurrent death scenes, and presents the question of how death is handled, not only in the 1950s culture of Knoxville, Tennessee, but by American society as well.

It is my contention that the roiled and phantasmagoric characters in *Suttree* collectively swing between two polarities, either inviting death in a welcoming embrace or seeking to deny it altogether. There are clear parallels involving the deniability of death in all of McCarthy's novels. There is Leonard's attempt in *Suttree* to deny, or at least hide the fact of his father's corpse, in the service of trying to preserve his mother's benefits; there are the successive dyads of young men journeying forth into very certain death in the *Border Trilogy*, and there is, of course, Lester Ballard's comicohorrific intercourse with the newly (and not so newly) dead girls in *Child of God.* Robert Jarrett suggests that Suttree and Ballard both share an obsession with death, but Ballard's embrace is quite literal, while Suttree's ambiguous relation to it is self-conscious, metaphysical, and imaginative (57).

McCarthy's western novels are heavily freighted with denial of death as well. As Barcley Owens says of his images,

> the green hopes of youthful dreams--all the pretty horses, Alejandra, the she-wolf, Blevins, Boyd, the scintillating lights of the cities, Magdalena in the mirror--are fanciful chimeras, mere reflections in the night, the artifice of lamps and neon, which bleed and die in a gray dawn. (116)

In his 1997 study of *Blood Meridian*, Neil Campbell notes the elements of denial in the western tetralogy: "Death compels these men to the West with the promise of some dreamlike reward" (2); this mirage is not unlike the hazy desires of Lester Ballard (in *Child of God*) or the ludicrous plans of Gene Harrogate (in *Suttree*). In McCarthy's stark Appalachian tale, *Child of God,* Ballard's hoped-for "reward" is to maintain the dead women in a clammy faux-tableaux of life as he kills them, collects them and keeps them in his cave. Likewise, Harrogate's far-flung schemes to dynamite underground portions of Knoxville are certain, he thinks, to lead to vast earthly reward. In talking about Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian*, Campbell goes on to say, "He hovers 'beyond the worst,' mocking and denying the presence of death like a desert Ahab chasing life-in-death" (2). We will see more of McCarthy's running theme of denial of death as we consider *Blood Meridian* in a later section, but suffice it to say at this point that the judge, in fact, is dancing at the end of the novel, and no less than three times his own death-denial is repeated: "He says that he will never die" (315). Many of McCarthy's characters are incarnations of Everyman--erstwhile deniers of death.

DeLillo and McCarthy seem concerned with, if not obsessed by death in their work, and I would argue that they would agree with Becker, as he plunges to the heart of the matter in *DD,* when he metaphorically described fear of death as *the* mainspring of human motivation. Becker goes on to describe "a network of arguments based on the universality of the fear of death, or 'terror' [as he prefers to call it] in order to convey how all-consuming it is when we look it full in the face" (15). Suttree is forced to confront death early on as he sees a body pulled from the river in the beginning of the novel. Significantly, Suttree is trying to leave the scene when he is pulled back to the body by a

friend and then is transfixed by the fact that the dead man's watch is still running. Here, early in the novel, is Suttree's first intimation of death as a cessation of life, which, personified by the watch, nonetheless continues in other forms, at times by feeding on that which has died. Death is made much more personal for him when his child lover Wanda is killed by a fall of errant slate, and then more personal and painful still for Suttree when he is forced to observe his son's burial from a distance. While McCarthy does provide us with more of Suttree's interior machinations than with other protagonists, he withholds Suttree's thoughts in this scene. Does Suttree *prefer* to observe his son's internment from some remove? If so, this is evidence that Suttree finds this standard ritual inadequate, that the ritual is empty, the kind of ceremony that McCarthy seems to be critiquing. In both cases, Suttree does not take part in any form of ritualized ceremony, underscoring how his particular way of denying death consists, perhaps paradoxically, of refusing his society's proffered ways of getting past particular deaths, and thus in some way denying the full horror and loss. Further, perhaps Suttree is rejecting a larger, culture-wide denial of death and the emptiness of formulaic, rote rituals, the standardized handling of death in the Knoxville of the 1950's, all pervaded by the brooding leitmotif of the confined and immobilized river.

Turning to Becker once more can help to sort through these alternative interpretations. Becker's theory of how we deny death is based in part on Kierkegaardian dread, and it is this anxiety about death which is in Suttree's thoughts, or perhaps the narrator's thoughts, on Suttree's way to his son's gravesite. As he contemplates an empty vault, Suttree thinks,

> how surely are the dead beyond death. Death is what the living carry with them. A state of dread, like some uncanny foretaste of a bitter memory. But the dead do not remember and nothingness is not a curse. Far from it. (153)

It is this dread, this fear and trembling and a sickness unto death, which is the driving force behind the denial of mortality; it may be the lack of mollifying ritual that encourages this dread to continue. Reminding us of the connections between the novels considered in this paper, there is also a graveyard scene in *White Noise* where Jack Gladney walks among the tombstones of "The Old Burying Ground" in Blacksmith Village. He is looking for "the peace that is supposed to descend upon the dead" (97), and even takes off his glove to feel the rough marble of the tombstones. The interlude is quiet, poignant, and yet abrupt--he simply takes the exit to the cemetery from the interstate after dropping his daughter Bee at the airport. Here the tombstone is just that--a marker for the dead, though Jack wonders if the dead still have energy and dream of the living, contrasted with the gravestones in *Suttree,* which at one point are used as tables in a tavern from a flooded cemetery. Suttree, too, touches the markers themselves, "trac[ing] with one hand dim names beneath the table stone" (113). Both protagonists, struggling with intimations of mortality, seem to be looking for consoling rituals, seeking the solace of mourning in the unyielding substance of tombstones. In *WN* DeLillo writes,

> Perhaps we are what they [the dead] dream. May the days be aimless. Let the seasons drift. Do not advance the action according to a plan. (98)

Here the message to Jack in *WN* is a more quasi-existential directive, yet suggestive as well of Suttree's meandering existential quest.

Becker, of course, is aware of his debt to Heidegger in terms of characterizing dread and anxiety. He recalls the Heideggerian distinction between anxiety *about* being-in-the-world as well as anxiety *of* being-in-the-world [italics his] (53). As he says,

> That is, both fear of death and fear of life, of experience and individuation. Man is reluctant to move out into the overwhelmingness of his world, the real dangers of it; he shrinks back from losing himself in the all-consuming appetites of others, from spinning out of control in the clutchings and clawings of men, beasts and machines. (53)

Why, this is our very man, Suttree. He is overwhelmed by the patrician world of his upbringing, but serially overcome by events on the river and (we think) a certain amount of chaos within himself. In the downscale life he chooses on his shantyboat, he loses himself time and time again "in the all-consuming appetites of others," i.e., the likes of Harrogate, Callahan and Leonard. The city of Knoxville appears in the guise of the ragpicker or the old man haranguing him from the window or the many others who often clutch at Suttree, but all could easily represent our collective anxiety about death and also life. In a peculiar variation of the notion of the shock value of exposure to death, it is life itself in its sprawling "overwhelmingness" which also repeatedly provokes dread for Suttree.

Suttree seems to be trying desperately to mourn deaths throughout the novel, but he allows himself no comforting self-fiction, nor family, nor lovers nor boon companions to neutralize, at least for very long, the recurrent appearances of death in his life and, presumably, within his psyche. Because there is limited interiority available to us in Suttree, the reader has to infer much from his actions. However, the centrality of this

driving focus in the novel is underlined as Robert Jarrett points out: "Every critic of Suttree, following the lead of Vereen Bell . . . has recognized that Suttree's problems stem from his fear of death" (56).

In this novel, the ragpicker clearly invites death, just as Suttree himself at times seeks it; it is the ragpicker who is designated by McCarthy as the greeter of death, who asks for death's hand throughout the book. As he says, "I've seen all I want to see and I know all I want to know. I just look forward to death . . . Here's one who is sick of livin" (254). He is, according to Bell, the "oracular voice of nihilism's despair, cursing life and God, and himself as well" ("Nihilism" 40). Jarrett adds that Suttree also seems to court death, if not precisely to embrace it, with his "dysfunctional love affairs, his paranoid fear of hospitals, his alcoholic binges and brawling" (57). He sallies forth repeatedly, if unenthusiastically, to bar fights too numerous to catalogue here, and has as well a heady encounter with a floor polisher that could easily have been fatal.

The prospect of imminent death leads Suttree to "no madonna of desire or mother of eternal attendance," [but] "a foul hag with naked gums smiling" (187). It invites, in Jarrett's words, "the very visionary death state he is attempting to evade" (57). He nearly is killed by a drifter on the dark road whom he meets after his son's burial, and he seeks his "membership among the dead" as he "so wanted for some end to things . . . [among] all souls that ever were, eyes bound with night" (405). He does seem to put himself in harm's way, to occupy that Kristevan space where life and death meet, i.e., where death is both embraced and denied. Kristeva might well be describing Suttree's uneasy occupation of the death/life interface when she says about the abject that it

> draws me toward the point where meaning collapses . . . A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, it annihilates me. (2)

Suttree negotiates a series of hallucinatory experiences throughout the book and is not psychologically protected from death by personal proclivities, such as, for example, Gene Harrogate's industrious naivete, but he shuttles between despairing *embrace* of death, e.g., when he calls the lightning down upon himself, and *denial* of death as he negotiates a series of rebirths, the last of which is from the ravages of typhoid.

One parallel theme that surfaces periodically and uneasily throughout Suttree may help to understand his problematic relationship to death and mourning and the failure of mourning rituals: the fact of his stillborn brother. As McCarthy's narrator puts it, "His subtle obsession with uniqueness troubled all his dreams. He saw his brother in swaddling, hands outheld, a scent of myrrh and lilies" (113). At another point in the book McCarthy confronts Suttree and the reader with a dead baby floating down the river, and Suttree also has a dream of a dead child embalmed under glass, and he can hear as well the "clocklike blade of the cradle," (which brings to mind Whitman's poem, "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking"). Forever, it seems, Suttree's cradle will be "endlessly rocking" without his dead twin, an absence that makes it difficult for him to mature into full-fledged adulthood. One possibility is that it is the death of this twin that also keeps surfacing within his psyche, only to be denied, because it cannot be consciously mourned. This repression could in large part account for Suttree's initial and repeated inability to successfully enter into mourning rituals. Denis Donoghue in his article "Reading Blood

Meridian" likens McCarthy's characters prior to *Suttree's* emergence in his oeuvre to primates with only a very primitive nervous system. To the extent that Suttree is one character with at least the capacity for self-consciousness and wit (Donoghue 404), one would think that Suttree should be capable at least of the very human ceremonies of bereavement, even within the limited introspective view afforded by the novel. Yet, somewhat ambiguously, Suttree either seems blocked and incapable of participating in any meaningful mourning rituals, or else the novel contains a repudiation of his native (essentially white, upper-class) culture, and specifically its notions about bereavement. This almost plaintive search would help explain his plunge into lower-class black culture, and his recurrent identification with its rituals, and the concomitant move away from the ordered, but sterile, world-view offered by his father. Prather goes further to suggest that in parallel this downward plunge represents a response by Cormac McCarthy to his own father ("Color" 12).

While we assume Suttree is capable of at least rudimentary reflection, permitted us by McCarthy's incomplete view inside Suttree's skull, there is no grand, overarching epiphany in *Suttree*, but more of a resigned and ragged forbearance, a slow reordering of his life. He does begin to acknowledge the unavoidable exactitude of death. He does learn that there is "one Suttree and one Suttree only," which Bell invokes as the closest approximation to an epiphany, and he stumbles over the Heraclitean insight that life is process in his realization that "Nothing ever stops moving" (461). Still, whether these newfound awarenesses help Suttree to cut the Gordian knot of dread in any manifest sense remains unclear. By way of typhoid-induced and other deliria, he progresses haltingly to the end-game realization of there being "one Suttree and one Suttree only."

This insight perhaps leads to the book's resolution of a sort, the final grieving and release of his stillborn brother. It may be, as Prather argues in "Color of Water", a description of Suttree's existential transformation, the transit from "the world of his father to the world of the marginal and dispossessed" (12). Leaving a dead man in his bed in the houseboat, he heads out of Knoxville at the end of the book, accepts water from the water-bearer ("water is the color of life"), and seems to have achieved at least some approximation of existential wholeness. In doing so with a more singular sense of himself, perhaps he has found a way to mourn his dead brother and mourn his former self, to come to terms with his abjection and move forward to what seems to be an optimistic, if uncertain, future.

There is one further elaboration of possible solutions to denial of one's death and that is killing--killing in the rather desperate or absurd attempt to inoculate oneself against death, which, as we have seen, Jack Gladney rather desperately tries to enact with Willie Mink. This option is vividly portrayed in *Child of God*, *Outer Dark* and *Blood Meridian*. *Blood Meridian* is, of course, the quintessential killing ground and the only one left at the end of the novel is the Judge who ends the novel by denying he will ever die. It was D. H. Lawrence who said that "the essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic and a killer" (47). Billy Ray Callahan possesses the killer soul in *Suttree*: he pursues mindless violence, his own eventual death cheap and absurd. In this sense, however, Suttree again seems to stand out among McCarthy's protagonists. Though he is an inveterate, if reluctant brawler, Suttree has foresworn killing as a ritual with which to assuage his mortality-bound anxieties, so he is forced to look for other avenues to address mortality in its many appearances to him throughout the novel.

Suttree considers death as a certainty late in the novel in his familiar bed at Mrs. Long's on Grand Street:

> A dark hand had scooped the spirit from his breast and a cold wind circled in the hollow there. He sat up. Even the community of the dead had disbanded into ashes, those shapes wheeling in the earth's crust through a nameless ether no more men than we the ruins of any other thing once living. Suttree felt the terror coming through the walls. He was seized with a thing he'd never known, a sudden understanding of the mathematical certainty of death . . . Could a man not author his own death with a thought? Shut down the ventricle like the closing of an eye? (295)

He experiences Kierkegaard's dread and at the same time is aware of the extent of his previous denial of death, now imperiled by inexorable mathematics, and implicit in this passage is the consideration of suicide. It is here perhaps that Suttree begins to make that inward turn to accept and understand the finality of death, here that he finally begins to shed his denial of death.

Death seems to be a consistent dark strand in McCarthy's writing, surpassed only, perhaps, by his chosen medium of blood. My contention is that it is Suttree, and perhaps McCarthy himself, who is "Some curious person in the past with a penchant for deathbed studies" (129). If the human project is, as Ernest Becker says, "the vital energies of men sweating within the nightmare of creation," then this is Suttree's task. Becker concludes that all we can do is to "fashion something—an object or ourselves—and drop it into the confusion . . . make an offering of it . . . to the life force" (285). This seems an apt summary comment on Suttree's solution—that he has made a kind of gift of his sad

riverself, albeit a temporary one, one that he left behind, a version of himself that dies, as represented by the dead man in his bed, to allow a more vital, robust self to emerge. McCarthy has written a novel that suggests how we can master death, escaping the "sad purlieus of the dead immured with the bones of friends and forbears."

III.

Delusion and Denial: Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist*

If I could tell you what it meant . . . I wouldn't have to dance it!
--Isadora Duncan

You were so good with words . . . And at keeping things vague
--Joan Baez, *Diamonds and Rust*

DeLillo's slim novel, *The Body Artist*, is as sparse, thin, and unyielding as the novels *White Noise*, *Suttree*, and *Blood Meridian* are overstuffed, dense and crowded with images. This tale of estranged and mangled mourning is also small in terms of scholarly references, there being only a handful of critical articles about the novel itself. However, it is a compressed reflection of DeLillo's preoccupation with how we view death, or how we flee from its antithesis, life; it is intriguing that DeLillo felt compelled to return to the explicit theme of mortality so many years after the publication of *WN*. Cornel Bonca interprets *The Body Artist (TBA)* as a thoroughly Heideggerian meditation on death. He implies, as a result of what he sees as a descent into immanence, that DeLillo is not a very reliable postmodernist ("Being" 59). Alternatively, in his brief 2005 review of *TBA,* Robert Ziegler maintains that Lauren Hartke performs a profoundly creative act of mourning (7). My contention is that Lauren Hartke at least initially cannot effectively mourn the suicide death of her husband, the writer/director Rey Robles, and resorts either to a peculiarly vivid, hallucinatory, and dissociated identification with her dead husband in the guise of the seemingly inexplicable Mr. Tuttle, or seeks to erase herself in her body artistry because she cannot endure the agony of bereavement.

The Eidetic Breakfast

The novel begins with a description of breakfast during "the final day" with Rey and Lauren, written in a way which simulates the rhythms and almost the actual time consumed by individual actions of the breakfast partners and couched in Lauren's attendant thoughts. To this first chapter DeLillo appends a newspaper obituary revealing Rey's death by gunshot wound. The central section of *TBA* surrounds the appearance in her house of a being Lauren names Mr. Tuttle, whose sole savant ability seems to be the precise repetition of Rey's voice in an uncanny recitation of life in the coastal house when it was shared by Lauren and her husband. DeLillo interposes another newspaper piece, which reviews Lauren Hartke's performance of her body artistry. As the journalist Mariella Chapman says, "I wait for Hartke, but she doesn't come back" (110). Indeed, this is a central question posed by this slender novel: does Lauren Hartke return to her self, or have the possibility of creating a self she has never experienced? The "slow, spare and painful" event, "body art in extremis," had been preceded by her obsessive ascetic preparation of her body for the piece. DeLillo ends the novel with a short, final section after which she opens the window to allow the sea air "to tell her who she was" (124).

Throughout *TBA*, identity is elusive, and a cohesive sense of self remains problematic. The ultra-distilled compression of this problem of consciousness is found in the review of Lauren's performance: "It is about who we are when we are not rehearsing who we are" (110). Lauren is trying to solidify some kind of identity, but succeeds only in adopting other personae in her piece such as "the bodies of adolescents, pentecostal preachers, a one-hundred-and-twenty-year-old woman sustained by yogurt, and, most

memorably, a pregnant man" (109). Alternatively, perhaps she has to adopt these personages in order to exorcize them from her fragile identity, to peel the layers of self so that she may at some point be prepared to confront Rey's death. Identity itself is problematized early in the novel when Lauren, exploring the depths of the refrigerator, "lets out a groan, but not really every time, that resembled a life lament" (9), but this only echoes Rey "identifyingly," in "a manner so seamless and deep it was her discomfort too" (9). DeLillo offers us the chance to be seduced by the oh-so-ordinary procession of cereal, and toast and juice within the nominally shared intersubjectivity of this married couple, but he has already warned us that this is, in fact, the final morning. The scene, cast in real time by a third-person narrator, or remembered as a prolonged eidetic memory recited in Lauren's mind, unerringly conjoins identity with mortality, and the misleading innocence of breakfast in a house on the coast nonetheless heralds what Rey notes as "[t]he terror of another ordinary day" (15). He, of course, may know that his suicide is planned or pending, as he says to Lauren, "'I'm the one to be touchy in the morning. I'm the one to moan . . .' he said slyly, 'You don't know this yet'" (15).

In his 2005 article, "Echo Chamber: Undertaking *The Body Artist,"* Mark Osteen reminds us of another famous literary breakfast, that with Leopold and Molly Bloom in *Ulysses,* invoking a similar kind of metempsychosis in the two novels. Both literary breakfasts are preoccupied with the mundane, whether it is Lauren's immersion in the contemplation of her soy granules and the vagaries of the toaster, or Bloom's famous pork kidney. In common to both breakfasts, as Osteen points out, is the theme of death--Rey's demise foreshadowed and whispered somewhere between the coffee and the orange juice, and Bloom's breakfast preceding his later participation in Paddy Dignam's funeral. What

DeLillo is underscoring is that life takes place on the ordinary plane, while mortality is routinely, stubbornly, and sometimes pointedly ignored. Both Jack Gladney, who seems delighted and distracted, if mystified, by the ordinary immanence of things such as coffeemakers, and Lauren Hartke, whose internal monologue has trouble naming a part of the toaster ("What's it called, the lever" [9]), often seem uncomfortable in their everyday surround, distressed by the march of the ordinary. Lauren needs a sea breeze at the end of the book to re-establish her reality, and we have seen that Jack is continually amazed by Wilder's vitality. Neither feels real, and both need the other (Rey and Babette, respectively), to anchor them to the planet, and even to define relationally who they themselves are.

Beyond Joyce's other morning meal, in the beginning of *Ulysses* in Martello Tower, there is a third famous breakfast scene which comes to mind, one also saturated with mortality-salience. This breakfast is that musaceous feast prepared by Pirate Prentice in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, prepared with a certain insouciance as the bombs fall in London. All three scenes reflect Becker's thesis that the gloss over our unconscious fear of death provides a convenient cloak of denial; death and breakfast are counterpoised as opposites, not naturally occurring partners. Lauren Hartke's innermost sensations, as conveyed by DeLillo's moment-by-moment phrasing, are about the bluejays feeding ("the birds so sunstruck they were consumed by light . . . sheer and fleet and scatter-bright" [13]), the common daily intercourse of breakfast with Rey, indeed, the very ordinariness of a particular morning. However, reminiscent of Becker, there is an underlying and unacknowledged stratum of reality; Lauren is calling the weather station repeatedly and testing the breezes "for latent implications," this at the same time that Rey

is contemplating suicide. Exemplifying the ordinariness or "dailiness" of breakfast are the optimistic scent of brewing coffee and the sunny cheerfulness of the breakfast scene—the encouraging ambience of breakfast itself, of a day, of a world not yet gone wrong. How ironic it is, then, that these authors pair the aromatic warmth of breakfast with the underlying, barely repressed fear of death. Bombs fall, suicides are planned, funerals beckon, and breakfast is on the table.

DeLillo confronts Lauren and Rey with their ordinary day, without radiance, save for the occasional, bright-winged birds, "sheer and fleet and scatter-bright" (13). Of these Lauren is only partly aware, "an action she only partly saw" (13), or, later, again with the blue jays, "alert to the clarity of the moment . . . or maybe not" (22). DeLillo pulls the reader inescapably into the commonplace rhythms of their meal. He is seducing us with the familiar in order to hint at the underlying emotional discourse of the couple. Who hasn't heard and thought briefly of the slosh of orange juice in a carton ("satisfying in some dumb and blameless way, for its own childlike sake for the . . . cardboard orange aroma" [10]), noted the smell of something distinctive like soy cereal, been struck by light reflected by flying neighborhood birds? He succeeds partly because of the deliberate cadence of Lauren's thoughts paired with her actions in quasi-real time. On the other hand he hints broadly and repeatedly that all is not as it very well appears to be, that there is a somber, if unknowable underside to this carefully stylized and reproduced breakfast of wife and husband.

DeLillo chooses a very Kristevan conceit to convey the extent to which there is an alternate, parallel level of existence for Lauren and Rey on their last day. Lauren finds a strand of hair that wasn't hers and wasn't Rey's, but, as we later realize, conceivably could

have belonged to the autistic Mr. Tuttle--if he existed. DeLillo is playing with the reader here, but becomes all Kristevan seriousness when Lauren tries to eject "the complicated sense memory of someone else's hair" (11). She regards it with "mock aversion or real aversion stretched to artistic limits" (11)--DeLillo seems content to leave the options ambiguous and hanging for Lauren and the reader. DeLillo could be summoning Kristeva herself when he describes Lauren's lingering sensation:

> Her mouth was still twisted from the experience of sharing some food handler's unknown life or from a reality far stranger and more meandering, the intimate passage of the hair from person to person and somehow mouth to mouth across years and cities and diseases and unclean foods and many baneful body fluids. (12)

As Kristeva describes abjection, it is eerily similar to Lauren's experience:

> There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. (1)

Rey's abject is the terror of an ordinary day ("A terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles" Kristeva [4]), which is, of course, no ordinary day at all, as it is the day he will commit suicide. Lauren's abject is this baneful bodily substance, which personifies the dread just beneath the surface of the breakfast table. It is not dissimilar from the uneasiness that Jack Gladney senses beneath the quiet veneer of his college town, and is quite like the intimations of mortality that pervade Suttree's McAnally Flats. Ultimately, this repressed awareness is of "death infecting life" (Kristeva 4). As we have seen, the

Gladneys strove to deal with abjection, here a stand-in for fear of death, either by pharmaceutical release or by murdering an other; Lauren Hartke evinces equally desperate strategies.

As we will see, Lauren tries to deal with the abject condition brought about by Rey's loss, and her inability to mourn it, by essentially murdering herself. She both tries to make her own body disappear by exercising and sanding it into paleness, into a slim wraith of her former body, but also by squeezing out the self--she becomes anyone else in her performance, but not Lauren Hartke. She attempts to extrude the abject, which is her sense of self, because to do otherwise would court the pain of bereavement. This highly improbable project is evidence that she cannot confront Rey's death because she is unable to establish any effective mourning rituals. Her performance piece thus becomes a monument to failed grieving. It may represent, however, some necessary preamble to grief itself, perhaps casting out selves that hinder true mourning, or banishing those selves seen or created by others and, in this way, the failure to grieve is transient, possibly leaving Lauren at novel's end at the beach house, ready to embrace her loss, as one Lauren Hartke, widow. Even so, DeLillo seems to be forcing us again and again to acknowledge the difficulty Lauren has with death itself, and how supremely arduous is the path to a meaningful mourning process, something we have certainly seen before in McCarthy's depiction of *Suttree's* pursuit of effective death rituals.

Channeling Rey

If the first third of *TBA* is a not-quite-intersubjective replay of Rey and Lauren's final morning together, albeit without affect, then the appearance of one Mr. Tuttle, is as

far from the ordinariness of the breakfast as it can be. DeLillo had foreshadowed this strange creature as Lauren and Rey talked in their disconnected way about noises in the house:

> She said, "The noise."
>
> . . . "The noises in the walls. Yes. You've read my mind." [Rey]
>
> "It was one noise. It was one noise," she said. "And it wasn't in the walls."
>
> "One noise. Okay. I haven't heard it lately. This is what I wanted to say. It's gone. Finished. End of conversation."
>
> "True. Except I heard it yesterday, I think."
>
> "Then it's not gone. Good. I'm happy for you." (18)

Lauren goes on to remark on the strangeness of the noise and how it is different from the animals or the settling noises of the house, and then DeLillo intimates Rey's coming suicide by his comment to Lauren, "Good, I'm glad. You need the company" (19). Whether this conversation constitutes evidence that Mr. Tuttle actually exists is not clear from the text; again we see DeLillo's planful ambiguity. At one point, Lauren interprets her halting interaction with Mr. Tuttle as almost a direct reflection of Rey's absence: "It was not some communication with the dead. It was Rey alive in the course of a talk he'd had with her" (61). It seems somehow less likely that this bizarre and limited savant has somehow appeared in this isolated house on the coast, and more likely that Lauren has created this figure as a projection of her own need to hold onto Rey, to avoid the pain of bereavement, and that Mr. Tuttle, therefore, represents pure projection. He represents an attempted communication with the dead Rey Robles, and Lauren's perception of him is

therefore delusional; while it is common for the bereaved to see and hear the deceased briefly, and perhaps even recurrently, in the mourning period, it is unhealthy for this to go on for a long time. If it does, it is usually characterized as prolonged or distorted or absent grief. DeLillo nods in the direction of Mr. Tuttle as pure projection when he says it is "hard for her to think him [Mr. Tuttle] into being, even momentarily, in the shallowest sort of conjecture, a figure by the window in the dusty light" (60). By contrast it seems far easier for Lauren to think Rey into being as a function of the apparition; at the same time it seems just as easy for her to think herself out of being, or to inhabit other personae in her body work

The invocation of Mr. Tuttle inescapably leads us back to Freud and his succinct 1917 paper, "Mourning and Melancholia," in which he describes the struggle of bereavement as sometimes being so intense that one may create a "hallucinatory wish-psychosis" (154), something which Ziegler has also mentioned as a useful construct in the context of *TBA* (8). Mr. Tuttle seems to be just such a wishful, and delusional, creation for Lauren. Although Freud noted that the normal (and preferred) outcome is that "deference for reality gains the day," he observed also in the same passage, "The task is now carried through bit by bit, under great expense of time and cathectic energy, while all the time the existence of the lost object is continued in the mind" (154). At a defined point in the narrative Mr. Tuttle disappears, and shortly after his disappearance, DeLillo inserts the review of the performance piece. Perhaps Lauren's strenuous bodywork has made the apparition unnecessary.

Keeping in mind that Becker promotes Otto Rank in *Denial of Death* at the same time that he is derogates Freud's being unable to progress to a truly existential view of

life (97), it is of more than passing interest that Freud has a long discussion of Rank's theory of the double in his paper about the uncanny. He points out that the 'double' was originally "an insurance against destruction to the ego, an 'energetic denial of the power of death', as Rank says," and denotes "This invention of doubling as a preservation against extinction" (387). Although Freud and Rank are speaking of the demise of one's individual ego, it is an easy transition to see that the uncanny, in this case the enigmatic Mr. Tuttle, is the interposed, if pallid, double standing in for Rey Robles to allow Lauren the fiction of continuing to deny his suicide.

Freud's 1919 discussion of the "uncanny" bears, so to speak, an uncanny resemblance to DeLillo's having created Mr. Tuttle in the service of Lauren's grief. Freud describes the uncanny as "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (370). This sounds strikingly like the conceit of Mr. Tuttle, as Lauren attempts to navigate the terror of losing Rey, but desperately trying at the same time to salvage Rey's familiar presence, a presence so well known that in the breakfast scene the two become "transpersonal," a unitary merged entity (Ziegler 8). Freud goes on to say that a writer, (for our purposes, DeLillo), "creates a kind of uncertainty in us in the beginning by not letting us know, no doubt purposely, whether he is taking us into the real world or into a purely fantastic one of his own creation" (382). As suggested by the epigraphs introducing this chapter, DeLillo's treatment of the nominal existence of Mr. Tuttle in the novel remains stubbornly vague and ambiguous--is he an uncanny projection of Lauren's grieving wish to have Rey alive and speaking, or an idiot savant, an escapee from some nearby mental institution who has somehow hidden in the house, and whose sole gift is the play-by-play recall of conversations between Lauren

and Rey? What is clear from the text is that the interpolation of Mr. Tuttle alone has been insufficient to move Lauren along the path of authentic mourning, so the concurrent project of her body scraping and minimization has to occur.

So here we have Lauren Hartke, not giving herself over to grief in any of the usual ways, but obsessively sanding and erasing her body. The process of sanding, of wearing away of the body (and perhaps any too-painful sensibility of dark thoughts of imperfection like mourning) is visually inviting and disturbing at the same time as we see Lauren using her armamentarium of abrasives to vanish, as much as possible, into thin air. There are many interwoven associations with the word "sand," too rich to ignore. It is of some interest that Freud's conceptualization of the uncanny was illustrated by the story of, yes, the "Sand-Man" from the opera, *Tales of Hoffman*, the movie we are going to be considering in this chapter is *Under the Sand*, and Lauren utilizes sand to wear away her troublesome body. All represent associations with the childhood notion of the Sandman as one who conjures the veil of sleep, during which one can repress, for a time, conscious thoughts. Perhaps not by accident does DeLillo describe Mr. Tuttle as "sandy-haired." In François Ozon's 2000 movie *Under the Sand* (*Sous le sable*), Marie (Charlotte Rampling) is a wife who, like Lauren, has an exceeding amount of trouble with the disappearance and probable, if mysterious, death of her husband, Jean (Bruno Cremer). There are many parallels between this film and *TBA*, centering around the central dialectic of a wife's inability to comprehend and grieve her husband's death: both the film and DeLillo's novel (if one accepts the premise that Mr. Tuttle is pure projection) represent delusional accommodation (or lack thereof) to bereavement. *Under the Sand* opens with an ordinary prologue of a vacation trip to the beach by Marie and her French

husband, including an unremarkable convenience store stop, the seasonal tasks of opening the beach house, and the kitchen clatter of dinner preparation, the latter not unlike DeLillo's real-time breakfast scene with Lauren and Rey. The film progresses to the next day, and by 10 1/2 minutes into the movie, Jean has disappeared, surfacing, so to speak, only in Marie's hallucinations and memories. Indeed, she worries her friends and her new lover by speaking of him in the present tense at dinner engagements.

There are two breakfast scenes in the movie, the first an ambiguous scene with her new lover, Vincent, and the second when she is admonished, "You'll have to get over him sometime." The commonality between *TBA* and *Under the Sand* is that ostensibly normal events such as meals, street and ocean scenes occur superficially, but convincingly, as the very essence of normality. Yet, inlayed within these scenes of quotidian harmony are intimations of extraordinary passions and unresolved issues populating the unconscious lives of the two widows. In the movie, as well as in *TBA,* what you see is not necessarily what you get. In parallel with Rey's starkly rendered suicide, Marie begins to wonder if Jean has committed suicide, as she finds out that he was apparently taking antidepressants, this despite her mean-spirited mother-in-law's comment that "There are no suicides in the Drillon family."

Rampling's understated portrayal of a widow struggling either to hold onto her husband in quasi-psychotic fashion, or to emerge fully into grief, is pierced completely only twice in the film. She is looking at a new apartment and looks through the window, only to see a cemetery laid out, so to speak, below, and then she collapses into the realtor's arms. At the end of the movie, she views a putrefying (Kristeva's "baneful") body found near Lis et Mix. She decides, laughingly, against all evidence (his blue

swimming trunks and a watch she had described to the police before) that it is not her husband. "I'm his wife. I'm telling you it isn't him." Subsequently she falls on the beach weeping, and temporarily dissolves in full grief. This is a supreme cathartic moment, one that, as we have seen, was denied to Lauren by DeLillo, and which McCarthy's Suttree seemed to have been seeking, and perhaps to have found. However, in a final, if slightly ambiguous, twist by Ozon, Marie sees a figure standing on the beach, and runs toward him, certain it is Jean; the movie ends just before she reaches him. From the viewer's perspective, it seems certain that true grief so briefly and painfully attained, has been surrendered to denial, which bleeds, once again, quite easily into the delusional.

Despite DeLillo's allusions to the noises in the house prior to Rey's death, the most economical interpretation of the second section of *TBA* is that Lauren is hallucinating Mr. Tuttle, that uncanny mimic who can channel Rey's voice and recreate the couple's intimate time together in their isolated rural house. To be sure she makes the rounds at least superficially to see if there are escaped mental patients in the area, but this pale shade of a man seems more like a dissociated, partitioned part of Lauren's mind, in the service of avoiding the pain of grieving, and very similar to Marie's delusional evasion of her own husband's disappearance. Prior to her finding him "smallish and fine-bodied . . . sandy-haired and roused from deep sleep, or medicated maybe" (41), Lauren had taken to watching the live internet feed from a street in Kotka, Finland, with cars or "just the empty road in the dead times." As she thinks, "The dead times were best" (38). As she merges with the dead time of a nowhere place in the middle of the night, she is for a time separated from the knowledge of Rey's death. If not, then, "She woke early every

morning and this was the worst time, the first murderous instant of lying in bed and remembering something and knowing in the flow of the same breath what it was" (36).

In the film Marie remembers, dreams, or hallucinates making love with Jean; this is conflated with her real-life lover, Vincent--in one voluptuously rendered scene two pairs of hands caress her body. As a projection of her wish to meld the present with the past, it parallels the useful, if delusional, creation of Mr. Tuttle for Lauren. Lauren recalls "an erotic of see and touch" with Rey, mediated by the metronomic and uncannily accurate recitation of words by the automaton, Mr. Tuttle. Mr. Tuttle has a "thinness of physical address" which, of course, mirrors Lauren's thinness of emotional address. Similarly, in *Under the Sand*, Marie starts laughing when she is with Vincent because he is so "light" as they are making love. Marie buys a tie for the husband who will never return; Lauren looks at Mr. Tuttle, "a cartoon head and body, chinless, stick-figured," but for her "he knew how to make her husband live in the air that rushed from his lungs into his vocal folds" (62). In this bizarre and uncanny twinship, Lauren finds she cannot begin to grieve Rey's death without invoking Mr. Tuttle, Rey's pale double:

> She began to understand that she could not miss Rey, could not consider his absence, the loss of Rey, without thinking along the lines of Mr. Tuttle. (82)

I think this is evidence that not only is Mr. Tuttle's appearance instrumental in Lauren's strangulated attempt to deal with Rey's suicide, but that this is a crucial, if delusional, attempt on her part to reconcile Rey's loss. Mr. Tuttle's intercession may represent a stage, albeit one doomed to failure, through which Lauren needs to pass in order to even begin to truly grieve Rey. Essentially Lauren finds it necessary in a Kristevan sense to

extrude the abject part of herself which is still so bound up with Rey. While this is no neat Kubler-Rossian progression through the stages of bereavement, it may be necessary for Lauren to expel the ghostlike Mr. Tuttle, the internalization of the deceased, in order to safeguard her own identity.

In Memoriam to Identity[11]

Somewhat concurrently with her obsession with Mr. Tuttle, Lauren embarks on her other strategy to vanquish any feelings about Rey's death; she begins to erase herself with her bodywork:

> Over the days she worked her body hard. There were always states to reach that surpassed previous extremes . . . her bodywork made everything transparent . . . life lived irreducibly as sheer respiration. (57)

Lauren exercises relentlessly: "First breathe, then pant, then gasp. It made her go taut and saucer-eyed . . . these hours of breathing so urgent and absurd" (57). She also begins abrading her body to nothingness:

> It was time to sand her body . . . She had emery boards and files, many kinds of scissors, clippers and creams that activated the verbs of abridgment and excision. She studied her fingers and toes. There was a way in which she isolated a digit for sharp regard, using a magnifier and a square of dark cardboard, and there were hangnails flying and shreds and grains of dead skin and fragments of nail, scintillas, springing in the air. (76)

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[11] From the title of Kathy Acker's 1990 work.

Lauren is physically disappearing, and apparently sensing that if she does not exist, has no "physical address," then perhaps she would not have to feel and grieve. When she says, "It was good to be doing this again," the implication is not only that this erasure had been part of her bodywork, but also that it had been used in the service of emotional work before. Arguably DeLillo does make a nod in the direction of catharsis for Lauren when she thinks "these hours of breathing so urgent and absurd that she came out the other end in a kind of pristine light, feeling what it means to be alive" (58). However, the broader implication of Lauren's body torture, and literally sanding herself away, is that non-existence equals absence of emotional pain, but also the concomitant inability to achieve any meaningful mourning. This literal paring away of her body could be interpreted as an effort to penetrate to her real self, who she really is "under the sand[ing]."

Recalling how both Jack Gladney and Suttree struggled with authenticity, DeLillo in *TBA* is also considering authenticity, identity, and mourning in the swirl of partial selves represented by Lauren, Rey and Mr. Tuttle. Mr. Tuttle, whatever he is, represents an autonomous self only insofar as he is the mimicked articulation of overheard conversation. Lauren, as we have seen in the foregoing, is very busy chipping away at her existence. "I am Lauren, but less and less" (117). Along with this progressive loss of self she is able to nimbly adopt other selves, most notably in her performance piece ("There are the naked man and woman who change into each other repeatedly at increasing speeds" [105]), but her sense of self nevertheless keeps on sliding away into the ghost of Rey. However, lest we invest Rey with a solid sense of self, with any markers of his own authenticity, DeLillo, through Lauren recalls "two people passing through each other, easy and airy as sea spray, and how he'd told her she was helping him

recover his soul" (61). DeLillo, in a stark and poignant passage, after Lauren has returned to the house after her performance, writes:

> She walked away from the house, out of the spill of electric light, and the sky grew deeper. She watched for a long time and it began to spread and melt and go deeper still, developing strata and magnitudes and light-years in numbers so unapproachable that someone had to invent idiot names to represent the arrays of ones and zeros and powers and dominations, because only the bedtime language of childhood can save us from awe and shame. (101)

This passage is very reminiscent of Jack's fascination with Wilder and his childlike, perforce wordless, presence. While DeLillo is saying that "the natural language of the species" is constructed to evade death itself (via Murray, *WN 289* and Bonca, "Natural" 27), he is also suggesting the potentially redemptive power of this "language," which is, of course, the language of the unconscious, or, in Murray's words in *WN*, "repression, compromise, and disguise. This is how we survive in the universe" (289). James Berger goes further with this argument in his article 2005 article, "Falling Towers and Postmodern Wild Children: Oliver Sacks, Don DeLillo, and Turns against Language," conflating the drug Dylar and Wilder for Gladney when he says,

> Wilder is one possible, though insufficient, way out of the symbolic and its accompanying knowledge of death. The other is the drug dylar, a sophisticated neural inhibitor . . . He [Gladney] wants his son to be transcendent; he wants this drug to unite word and thing and eliminate the fear of death. (352)

Therefore, at some crossing point Murray and Gladney and Lauren with her Mr. Tuttle converge in the idea that the symbolic and conscious fear of death (or mourning in Lauren's case), can be neutralized by what amounts to the magic of dylar, or appropriating the almost prelapsarian innocence of the child Wilder, or foregoing conscious acknowledgement of death and re-imposing the repression barrier.

Much as McCarthy's conclusion of *Suttree* is ambiguous, and open to a number of interpretations, DeLillo leaves ample room for discussion about Lauren's psychological position at the end of the text. Ziegler believes that her body art has been a kind of "creative recovery" (9), and that the final sentence reveals some kind of completed mourning. Similarly, Philip Nel feels that Lauren has created her piece to purge herself of grief and that she is successful in using "the ameliorative power of art" (755). At the end of the novel she mounts the stairs to the room she shared with Rey, needing the comforting touch of the newel post, and finds the room empty. "She'd known it was empty all along, but was only catching up" (124). It may be only at this point, and not necessarily as an outcome of the intercession of Mr. Tuttle, nor of the subjugation of her body, that Lauren could begin true mourning which would, of course, suggest restitution of, or creation of her identity, but having to rely on the sea to "tell her who she was" (124). As she thinks, "Maybe there are times when we slide into another reality but can't remember it, can't concede the truth of it because it would be too devastating to absorb" (114). This seems to be the central, driving question posed by Becker, avoided by Jack Gladney, and confronted, finally, by Suttree. Perhaps the diminution of her own body and the extravagant projection of the *Doppelgänger*, Mr. Tuttle, were necessary stages on life's way for Lauren, but neither seemed sufficient by themselves to move her into

"relinquishment and equanimity," nor resulted, in Ziegler's paraphrasing of Freud, in "an abatement of pain and detachment from the loved one" (7).

IV.

This Carnival of Excessive Violence:

Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*

Certainly McCarthy's other novels have their share of violence, and a few moments that are especially eye-catching for their graphic nature, but *Blood Meridian* has them very easily beat. Upon closing the book, the reader's first quandary is what to do with all this blood.
---Stacy Peebles

Death is often described as the ultimate destination of all our journeys. Death is the nature of the landscape in *Blood Meridian*, and Death is that against which we create a stay, as described by Nietzsche, in our 'minute of history.'
---Lindsay Townley Woodson

Sie müssen schlafen aber Ich muss tanzen[12]
---*Blood Meridian*

What, indeed, to do with this extraordinary quantity of blood—and its clammy surrogate, death—are questions aggressively posed by this novel, and the further question is, what might be concealed or implied beneath its overt spectacle of wholesale slaughter? Both of the terms of the title of Cormac McCarthy's quintessential novel of the western experience are inherently revealing. The book is a thoroughgoing sanguinary excursion, surmounting and exceeding, in literary fashion, what surely was an actual, historical southwestern landscape seething with violence and bloodshed. Stacey Peebles has counted and found no less than six large-scale massacres described in the book. It is at once an interrogative tale about imperial power and racism, which derives from a cultural apprehension about death, as well as a book about the innate capacity for killing which is implicit in humankind, and perhaps accentuated, though disavowed, in its American variant. It has been called the most violent of books, Richard Woodward describing it as

[12] "You must sleep, but I must dance." Trans. Emma Crandell

the bloodiest book since the *Iliad* (36). McCarthy has also been lauded as "our greatest living author" according to Steven Shaviro (111), and has been favorably compared to Melville, Shaviro going on to say, "In the entire range of American literature, only *Moby-Dick* bears comparison to *Blood Meridian*" (111). He says both epic novels "savagely explode the American dream of manifest destiny, of racial domination and endless imperial expansion" (112). In the context of this thesis's meditation on mortality in the novels of McCarthy and DeLillo, Brady Harrison's prescient assessment of the novel seems especially apt: "if we believe in the inevitability of fearing blood and death and acting against that fear though violence, then we will certainly continue to repeat such histories as McCarthy describes" (41). We have noted previously how DeLillo in *White Noise* profiles the anxious treatment of mortality, and how Lauren Hartke struggles for a sense of self and to account for her husband Rey's death in *The Body Artist.* Unlike the novel *Suttree* which, as we have seen, is an extended meditation on the failures of mourning, and, therefore, testament to denial of death, Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (*BM*) renders an opportunity to consider death on a more mass scale, as well as imperceptibly, scarcely grieved, but certainly both pursued and denied, on a personal level.

Blood Meridian is also a movement in longitude for McCarthy, as he casts his gaze westward from his previous Appalachian novels. Published in 1985, this book represented a new "meridian" for McCarthy, later continued in the "Border Trilogy" (*All the Pretty Horses, The Crossing, and City of the Plains*). *BM* is sometimes thought of as the first book of these four books if, taken together, they are considered as a tetralogy; the southwestern setting was again revisited recently by McCarthy in *No Country for Old*

Men (2005). "Meridian," according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, can mean "The south" (obs.), or "midday," or can also be a proper name for the Devil. In addition to its more strictly astronomical meanings relating to horizontal global positioning, it can also refer to the middle period of one's life, specifically one's prime when one's powers (McCarthy's?) are at the full, and also can mean, figuratively, "the point or period of highest development or perfection, after which decline sets in; culmination, full splendour." In his 2003 essay, Christopher Douglas has paralleled *BM* and *House Made of Dawn* by F. Scott Momaday in terms of their attention to American imperialism in the southwest. If, in fact, McCarthy's novel is, among other things, highly allegorical, it has also been suggested that it is a novel "*of*--if not *about* –Vietnam" (Harrison 35). McCarthy's allusive subtitle is "the Evening Redness in the West;" it implies that we have already crossed beyond the meridian, here the apogee of American empire; it is not only McCarthy's characters who disappear in the immolation of the sun, but he is suggesting that American imperialist and Eurocentric culture may very well pass into the sunset in an uncanny and ironic retelling of the American western.

Blood Meridian follows two major characters, Judge Holden and one known only as "the kid"; the judge is floridly developed as an extraordinarily grandiose self in the novel, and the kid amounts to a psychological cypher, but somehow even in his insubstantiality, or because of it, he is functions in the novel as a necessary counterweight to the judge, his dyadic dance partner throughout the book. We recall that Steven Shaviro has written about *BM's* characters, "There is no interiority, no intentionality and no transcendence" (115). There is, as well, a supporting host of other minor figures populating this novel, all, except the judge, routinely consigned by McCarthy to death,

their demise usually graphically and horrifically portrayed. The judge and one John Glanton in the novel are almost certainly modeled after historical figures (see Sepich, who has traced the historical sources for *Blood Meridian*), and the general story line follows vigilante killings in the 1840s in the northern Mexican state of Chihuahua. However, Vietnam is refracted through the novel's endless and frustrating travail through the hallucinogenic landscape, and we can now see grim parallels, in a contemporary reading, with the current war in Iraq. My contention is that what gives McCarthy's thesis its power (and Melville's too, if we consider Ahab's obsessional love affair with the white whale) is that the expansionist thrust is predicated on our repressed fear of death. The sojourners who murder their way toward the red meridian in McCarthy's novel do so, in part, to act out a Freudian death-urge, whether or not one buys Becker's dismissive trivialization of Freud's thanototic construct that we discussed earlier. In this regard McCarthy seems to be saying that paradoxically we are, indeed, marching toward our death in psychological terms as a reaction formation to our own denial, slouching, no racing, toward Bethlehem to our very death as a viable culture.

The Kid from Cypherspace

In the novel's first chapter, McCarthy launches "the kid" into this thoroughly hemorrhagic spectacle with the narrator's admonition to the reader, "See the child" (3). We discover that he was born in 1933, essentially orphaned because his mother died giving birth to the kid, and as Shaviro notes he is fatherless within the first two pages of the book as well, even separated from a sister he will never know. Within him "broods already a taste for mindless violence" (3). There are two complete breaks in the kid's

narrative: on the first page of the novel there is a span from birth to fourteen, after which he runs away from his dissolute father, and subsequently there is an eleven-year lapse after he leaves the band of mercenaries, reappearing (313) to set up the final scene with Judge Holden. The kid is around forty-five years old at this point, but the judge is curiously ageless. McCarthy might well have been anticipating writing about the kid as he wrote *Suttree,* in which he had referred to the "sad children of the fates whose home is the world, all gathered here a little while to forestall the going" (386). The kid traverses "the shadowed agony in the garden," a description which seems both to refer to black workers in the cotton fields, but also to a rather less than paradisiacal Garden of Eden.

If the kid is a counterweight juxtaposed to the larger-than-life figure of Judge Holden, then he is a dim and unreflective half of the binary that McCarthy sets up and inexorably twists together throughout the novel: "The child's face is curiously untouched behind the scars, the eyes oddly innocent" (4). McCarthy partially merges the two major players when he also incongruously describes some of the judge's features: "His face was serene and strangely childlike. His hands were small" (6) and, later, "Foremost among them, outsized and childlike with his naked face, rode the judge" (79). Neither will have the charmed innocence of, say, the dimensions of the child Wilder in *WN* or the autistic naiveté of Mr. Tuttle in *TBA*, because both are, in fact, killers, the kid reflexively, the judge decisively so; perhaps he is implying that we are all potentially dangerous children. The territory inhabited by the kid, less than comfortably, and the judge, all too serenely, is "that hallucinatory void" (113), which sounds very like a Kristevan space to which we alluded earlier. One clue to the kid's overall "mindlessness" is suggested by Brady Harrison when he argues that this void without--the vast geographical and metaphysical

landscape of the southwest--mirrors the empty space within, which connects the kid's apparent vacuousness, his abjection, with the "imperialist project" (35). In his discussion of "that immense and bloodslaked waste" Harrison writes that

> The void without speaks to the void said to lurk within the Western consciousness . . . the Western self denies the absence within by seeing the other and the space of the other as nothingness, as a space to be filled with the self's own desires and fantasies and empires. (35)

He goes on to say

> McCarthy, in his presentation of the violence of expansionism, turns the desert Southwest into a zone of radical negation, a purgatorial wasteland of ruined churches, piles of bones, surreal brutality. He draws upon the old colonial trope and casts the space of the other [that of the kid] as a space for the imperial self to go wild, to act out fantasies of power and annihilation. (36)

Thus, many of my previous arguments from the first three novels considered here are reprised in my consideration of *BM*: there is a basic project of self (Sartre by way of Chessick), and it is designed largely to avoid and/or deny death, either individually or on a broader cultural scale, hence the vehicle of Western imperialism writ large in the history of the southwest. My observation is that both DeLillo and McCarthy are criticizing not only the "white noise" of denial in suburban America or the expansionistic zeal for war in the southwest or Vietnam (or now Iraq), but that both authors comment on a distinctly American repression of awareness, or what Harrison has called "the

metaphysics underlying the American—and, indeed, the Western—imperial project" (35).

Peebles points out that the kid is the first character "seen" in the novel, but that he is "small, ignorant, and nameless except for that generic moniker" (235). He goes on to note that the kid may nominally be the protagonist thrown into a difficult, violent world (though the judge takes up far more verbal space in the novel than the kid with his infrequent, laconic, and frustratingly limited responses), but that he is easily as ruthless and violent as the other mercenaries. Peter Josyph describes the kid as a figure "whom you could call the book's hero if you can rightly use that word for a boy who begins by helping kick the brains out of a man he has never met, runs with scalpers, rapists, killers, and meets his conclusion possibly--depending on how you imagine it--being eaten alive in a shithouse" (24). There are other interpretations of an ending every bit as inconclusive as that of *Suttree*: that the judge simply killed the kid, or raped him, or both.

The kid is almost entirely devoid of agency; he constitutes a blank, if not innocuous slate, but absolutely acts in the novel as the necessary, if unprepossessing, mate in the binary created with Holden. If we are considering killing as an effort to prolong one's life and avoid death, then the kid and Holden spiral through this dynamic throughout the novel. The kid (perhaps with overtones of Billy the Kid) is an untutored, but crack marksman, so he could easily kill the judge anywhere in the desert and, in fact, is repeatedly urged to do so by his boon companions. The judge clearly could also have murdered the kid in any of a number of places along their long desert sojourn. The question becomes why McCarthy reserves their final curious embrace for the jakes episode near the end of the novel. Read in the light of what seems to be a necessary

partnership between the two protagonists, I think that McCarthy, by way of this curious dyad, is exposing the deeply terrified, and mostly unconscious relationship that Americans have toward death. Either we have our heads literally in the sand, repress our fear of death and blindly go about killing (with Jack or with the kid) or shopping, which in an extreme metaphysics amounts to the same thing as in *WN*, or else bury our national self in a grand, stylized proclamation of denial of death caricatured by the Judge's chortling that he will never die.

I suspect the created binary of these strange companions is necessary because McCarthy wants to highlight the kid's seeming lack of apprehension about life or death, his corresponding virtual courtship of death throughout the novel, and to accentuate the extent even the judge has to go to in order to preserve his denial of death. If my premise is correct that the judge and the kid are in a necessary, if peculiar, dyadic relationship, then there has to be some resolution of the tension generated between the kid's seeming low level of awareness (though arguably it does progress very modestly throughout the course of the novel), and the judge's overt denial of death. The judge is fond throughout the novel of "the dance" and there is, indeed, a strained choreography between the judge and the kid, and between the ragged combatants and the imperturbable landscape. Both the judge and the kid share infantile characteristics, despite their respective ages ("neoteny" in Wallach's characterization of the judge [3]). My interpretation is that McCarthy is saying that even taken together the kid and the judge form an infantile response to mortality and that they embody America itself with its brash, but ultimately ineffectual and naive response to mortality, all too soon to be swallowed, if not by the

Sphinx-like ineluctability of the desert, then by the evening redness at the far western horizon.

The Bloody Dark Pastryman

Even among the flamboyantly arrayed pantheon of miscreant adventurers of "Argonauts" variously named Toadvine, the expriest, Sloat, Bathcat, Elrod the bonepicker, and the Vandiemenlander, the judge strides above all, designed by McCarthy as a figure larger than life and, perhaps if we believe the judge's self-advertising, larger even than death. The ex-priest Tobin details the judge in a conversation with the kid:

> That great hairless thing. You wouldn't think to look at him that he could outdance the devil himself now would ye? God the man is a dancer, you'll not take that away from him. And fiddle. He's the greatest fiddler I ever heard and that's an end on it. The greatest. He can cut a trail, shoot a rifle, ride a horse, track a deer. He's been all over the world . . . it was Paris this and London that in five languages. (123)

Both Sepich (1999) and Peebles (2003) have traced the probable identity of Judge Holden to an actual "Judge" Holden profiled in Samuel Chamberlain's *My Confession: Recollections of a Rogue*, a book discussing his part in the war with Mexico.[13] He describes the real-life Holden thus:

> Who or what he was, no one knew, but a more cool-blooded villain never went unhung. He stood six foot six in his moccasins, had a large fleshy frame, a dull-tallow colored face destitute of hair and all expression . . . He

[13] Although Chamberlain wrote his memoir from 1850 to 1908, it was not published as a book until 1956 (Peebles 232).

> was by far the best educated man in northern Mexico. He conversed with all in their own language, spoke in several Indian lingos, at a fandango would take the Harp or Guitar from the hands of the musicians, and charm all with his wonderful performance. (qtd. in Sepich 128, Peebles 234)

The parallels make it clear that McCarthy has appropriated the original Judge Holden for his "judge," though further endowing him with a certain malevolent maniacality and perceived near-godhood; he is an adept, but "a nightmarish embodiment of the myths of colonial expansion, myths that he extends, rewrites, and reconstructs to apocalyptic ends" (Masters 25). Masters goes on to say that "attempts to schematize the judge will inevitably contain him within boundaries that his complex character resists" (25). Holden has been variously construed as "trickster, ethnographer, Adam (Masters), part Faust, Ahab, Lear, and Macbeth (Campbell 58), Iago and Machiavel (Bloom), and evil gnostic Archon (Wallach), as well having been favorably compared in stature with Brockden Brown's Carwin, Flannery O'Connor's Tarwater, Melville's Ahab, and Nabokov's Kinbote" (Hall and Wallach, *Western* 1). One could add Caesar as well when McCarthy describes the judge as he "rode with a woven wreath of desert scrub about his head like some egregious saltland bard and he looked down upon the refugee with the same smile, as if the world were pleasing even to him alone" (219). Peter Josyph wonders what is in "his great shining skull" and characterizes him as "lawlearned scalphunter, polyglot childrapist, fearless killer-genius who speaks well to all occasions, audited by his largely uncomprehending gangmates" ("Reading" 20). Vereen Bell has described him as a "murderer of innocents—of a Mexican boy, of an Indian girl, of a mere puppy, and of the kid . . . " ("Achievement" 134). He is, of course,

megalomaniacal. He wishes to be a "suzerain," literally a ruler over all rulers and rules, "a special kind of keeper" (198). As Denis Donoghue phrases it, "The judge's philosophy is one of will, war, power, blood, game, eloquence, and in the end the order of what he ambiguously calls 'the dance'" (413). McCarthy, in what can only be construed as an ironic slap at the traditional western dichotomy, writes at one point, "When the judge and Glanton appeared at the front door in their suits, the judge in white and Glanton in black" (202). Vereen Bell concludes that "what it [the text of *BM*] may be said to mean in conventional discourse is beyond claiming" (128). Despite the enigmatic and contradictory position occupied by the judge in the novel's discourse, I think McCarthy is posing him as emblematic of a certain American narcissism which is convinced of immortality.

At the end of the novel the judge, who either kills or sexually assaults the kid in the jakes, is the only remaining member of the vigilantes. No less than three times McCarthy says of the judge, in the penultimate page of the book, "He says that he will never die" (335). This is followed only by an ambiguous epilogue with Promethean overtones as a man strikes fire from the ground, perhaps to construct fencing post-holes, which constitutes an allegory of the confining of the West, of the loss of the illusion of the endless western horizon--no more "evening redness and the pandemonium of the sun"--the meridian has become fixed. My argument is that one way to interpret this outrageous character is that individually the judge tries to cheat death; he kills indiscriminately, and then murders the kid, as a subtly desperate strategy in order to live. This interpretation recalls Jack Gladney's failed plan to dispatch Mink with the same ultimately absurd motive. Of course Gladney is predictably ineffective at killing, but

discovers enough compassion that he rescues Mink after the abortive shooting; there is no such compassion in McCarthy's stark and unforgiving narrative.

More broadly, *Blood Meridian* suggests that western, European, anthropocentric expansionism represents a broad cultural denial of death. This is vividly personified in the bloated personage of the judge, and executed, so to speak, in the serial murder and mayhem practiced by Glanton's gang. Campbell (60) invokes D. H. Lawrence's dismal summary of the core American psyche (see p. 36), and supports my contention that *Blood Meridian* purveys yet another manifestation of denial of death, in quasi-Hitlerian mode: killing as one form of denial of mortality. To some extent the denial of death itself is superseded by an underlying McCarthy theme, implied *sotto voce* rather than stated overtly, that worse than death is the recognition that the universe is essentially indifferent to human beings, perhaps even malignant, and that the inevitable "reckoning" is something even more terrifying than death, if that can be imagined. Such intimations lead to what Campbell calls the judge's "complex assault on time and destiny" (60). Whether the judge is, in theory, immortal, or is simply a landlocked Ahab or an Adamic character whose death is subsequent to his bacchanalian dance at the end of *BM*, it seems clear that his level of death-denial, voiced as his thrice-told enunciation of his never dying, is consonant with Becker's identification of denial of death as a quintessential strain of motivation for human beings. To the extent that the ragged band of mercenaries rides again and again into probable, or even certain death, all (and, by extension, American imperialist forays into the southwest, and beyond) are traveling on Becker's well-demarcated trail of denial.

John Joel Glanton, a historical figure by the same name in the annals of the southwest, and a noted killer, is the putative leader of "the Glanton gang." Given that the real-life Glanton lost a fiancé to Indian predation, there was at least a possible quasi-historical motive for his storied legacy of carnage and violence, this violence, which so thoroughly pervades the novel, otherwise unredeemed either by the kid's apparent stupefaction or the judge's outrageous intellectualization. What this does bring clearly to mind is the almost total lack of mourning in *BM.* The kid kills quite effectively, but clearly has never mourned his mother's death or his father's failed life or the effective loss of his sister. Judge Holden doesn't seem to have a grieving bone in his pale and corpulent body. I think McCarthy is reaching for a larger gesture, perhaps remembering Suttree and saying that if we can't grieve, then we are scarcely human; if we can't mourn then we can't ever approach a solution for our own mortality.

In the novel Glanton kills indiscriminately, and ultimately dies himself: "the old man raised the axe and split the head of John Joel Glanton to the thrapple" (275). It has been posited that Glanton also was a victim of denial of death. Harrison says

> The modern Western self—historically an imperial self—fears death, fears the emptiness, and seeks to quell the gnawing absence within: in the post-Nietzschean world, Westerners can no longer brace themselves with the transcendental signified and, finding that they have no core, that they stand on no ground at all, experience dread. (37)

Harrison goes on to say that Glanton fears that emptiness within, fears his own non-existence--perhaps his abject self, in Kristevan terms.[14] While McCarthy has said in

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[14] As described by David Houston Jones in his discussion of *The Body Abject* in the works of Beckett and Genet, he talks about Beckett being "preoccupied, like Kristeva,

Woodward's interview that he doesn't believe there is life without bloodshed, I think he is also saying there is no true life without an appreciation of death, and that the *BM* characters just don't get it—they are surrounded by violent death every page of the novel, yet aren't somehow conscious of it. Or, they are at some unconscious level aware of mortality but, like Glanton, each "kills to ease that fear" (Harrison 37), and, later, "As Heidegger[15] would have it, they fear their own death, their own annihilation; as Spurr[16] would have it, they transform the space of the other into a zone of death in retaliation for these fears" (38). On the other hand, Shaviro maintains that there is a central dialectic, not between the kid and the judge, but, rather, between the kid and Glanton, but that it is a "stalled dialectic," ever succeeding in returning the reader to the "immanence of the landscape" refracted by the "immanence of death" (152). Glanton is, in essence, a failed Suttree—he never advances in consciousness, never possesses that essential human attribute of being able to grieve. I would contend, however, that the central conversation is, rather, between the judge and the kid, i.e., symbolically between two immature features of Western thought—brute incomprehension on the part of the kid and extravagant, overt proclamation of immortality by the judge. We have seen that sense of self is also a concomitant theme in both McCarthy's and DeLillo's works, and the binary coalescence of these two incomplete characters in this novel suggests that ultimate existential emptiness, or fear of it, reflected in the desert's placid indifference of human activity, is one shared and binding characteristic common to the judge and the kid.

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with the point at which identity approaches annihilation, the protagonist of *Comment c 'est* just barely managing to distinguish his identity from the surrounding matter" (144). It is in just such a way that Glanton (and others) cannot separate themselves from the immanent, hostile, and empty desert, mirroring their own sense of the abject.

[15] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

[16] David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire*.

Death and Empire, or The Metaphysics of Indian-hating[17]

Christopher Douglas makes it clear in his comparison between *BM* and N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* that both books represent critiques of European-American imperialism in the southwest, arguing that there are many parallels between the two novels. He specifically details the presence of a Judge Holden-like character in Momaday's work, a Jemez albino of "alien dominance and monstrous and hairless whiteness" (4). He goes on to say that there are enough similarities in the two novels to suggest some literary borrowing by McCarthy. He points out that McCarthy's Holden not only participates in the extensive violence portrayed in the novel, but also expunges traces of ancient cultures as a further and pointed expression of the ruthlessness of American imperialism. In the novel the judge carefully examines, sketches, and catalogues fossils and other ancient artifacts from the lyrically-described landscape, and then destroys them with his deliberate, but imperial hand, echoing the indifference of the land to human activity, but also imperialism's agency in destroying the culture of the other.

Literary critics offer numerous interpretations of what McCarthy might be saying about Eurocentric imperialism in the southwest, among them Harrison's paper, "That immense and bloodslaked waste: Negation in *Blood Meridian*." He points out that *BM* in some ways reflects the post-Vietnam era, but has a broader application as it "encapsulates the history and sweep of the American empire" (35). The necessary connection, to which I have alluded before in this chapter, is that imperialism originates from a Western self, which Harrison posits as a historically imperial self, a self that fears death, and seeks to

[17] Taken from Melville's *Confidence-Man* by Brady Harrison.

quell that fear by expanding empire, with its resultant colonization and slaughter of indigenous cultures. This is highly reminiscent of Jack Gladney in *WN,* who is put up to the murder of Mink by Murray, theoretically transforming him from a "dier" to a killer, and thereby finding his hoped-for amelioration of his fear of death, an attempt that fails ludicrously. It is worth noting that there are racial issues, as Jack is figured by Engles in his article on whiteness in *WN* as a specifically racialized white male killing Mink, killing the Other; *BM* is likewise the tale of white men eradicating the Other, in this case Indians and Mexicans, albeit far more effectively. We find in *BM* that the desperadoes not only kill Indians per their contract with the Chihuahua government, but also eventually kill indiscriminately, dispatching Mexicans as well.

The fiction developed in the book is that the degenerating posse decided that the scalps would all look the same (they are, after all, racialized Others) and they could claim their bounty on all the killed. It seems clear that the recurrent slaughter of soldiers, Indians, and innocents alike has a deeper purpose than just collecting the bounty. It is both an expression of empire run wild to the very "evening redness of the west," and, I am arguing, an expression of the Becker-Heidegger thesis that humans do all they can, and then some, to avoid dreaded death. Much of this argument, as Harrison points out, goes back to the Heideggerian notion that "Everyday being-toward-death is essentially a constant flight from death" (qtd. in Harrison 36, originally from *Being and Time,* Stambaugh trans. 235). Cornel Bonca applied this same Heideggerian dialectic to *TBA* and Becker relies on Heidegger to explicate his theory of denial of death. *Blood Meridian* delineates not so much the metaphysics of Eurocentric racism in the Southwest, but the sheer sanguinary mechanics of how that was accomplished. As Harrison argues,

Glanton exemplifies the western self struggling with internal emptiness, with "negation" which kills to ease that fear. So, in our four novels we have seen both the attempt to bind one's fear of death, but also to fill the existentially empty space, to address what even Judge Holden seems to fear, the "hallucinatory void" which is what lies either beyond the farthest meridian of blood on the western horizon, undiscerned and unrecognized within oneself.

Throughout the novel the judge and the kid, even as inarticulate as he is, have a running dialogue about emptiness and the hollow self. The judge poses this question to the kid:

> Don't look away. We are not speaking in mysteries. You of all men are no stranger to that feeling, the emptiness and despair. It is that which we take arms against, is it not? . . . What do you think death is, man? Of whom do we speak when we speak of a man who was and is not? Are these blind riddles or are they not some part of every man's jurisdiction? What is death if not an agency? And whom does he intend toward? Look at me. (329)

The kid has been empty and hollow since he fled his alcoholic father, and the ghost of his dead mother, and embarked on his western sojourn. McCarthy does not allow the judge, who is easily McCarthy's most protean and elusive, if most expansive, character in this book, to remain safely above this emptiness. Despite his inoculation with mania we can read his final proclamation about never dying as a particularly naked expression of denial of death. The kid seems, for once, to have the last word with the judge who has asked him, after a disquisition, in his erudite, over-the-top style, about warriors and death, about "the sanctity of blood," "And yet, there will be one who will always be a true dancer and

can you guess who that might be?" (331). In perhaps his most, if not only, perceptive moment in the novel, he kid answers, tellingly, "You ain't nothin." The judge replies, "You speak truer than you know" (331). The judge has apparently acknowledged that the existential emptiness within resides in all of us. While the ending of the novel is somewhat ambiguous, with the kid's horrific end implied rather than described, one interpretation is that here, in the end of the novel, the judge finally decides to kill the kid, having had numerous chances before, because the kid has so clearly, and with unusual perspicacity, identified the judge's own existential hollowness and thus his ongoing project to defeat death. Given the novel's historical setting and its historically resonant characters, the broader implication is that imperial America kills in order to preserve its equally frail illusion of immortality.

A Hat Trick in a Medicine Show

In his February 6, 2000 interview with Harold Bloom, Peter Josyph's title refers to *BM* as "Tragic Ecstasy." There is indeed much high tragedy in *BM*, though it usually goes unrecognized by the motley participants; the described sense of the southwest is nothing short of ecstatic. We are transported as readers when McCarthy paints a sunset as facing into the "distant pandemonium of the sun" (185), or in one passage refers to "the shapes of the men and their mounts advanced elongate before them like strands of the night from which they'd ridden, like tentacles to bind them to the darkness yet to come" (45). Likewise, we can easily find ourselves in McCarthy's desert when he describes the kid as he "woke and lay staring up at a sky of china blue where very high there circled two black hawks about the sun slowly and perfectly opposed like paper birds upon a pole" (213). Whatever *BM* is "about," it is a startlingly lyrical book, especially in

the stunningly gorgeous descriptions of the topography and landscape of the desert southwest. However, the world it describes is ultimately a forbidding and unyielding terrain, ending always with the red meridian in the west, "a deeper run of color like blood seeping up in sudden reaches flaring planewise and where the earth drained up into the sky at the edge of creation" (44). The vigilantes are forced, over and over again, into the landscape itself, with no possibility of transcendence. As we have seen, McCarthy forecloses any possibility of transcending this ominous world, and perhaps predicates either an indifferent cosmos, or perhaps a malignant one. In other words, I think McCarthy is saying there is immanence over transcendence and denial over redemption, certainly in this violent tale of recurrent massacre, but, given the larger McCarthy oeuvre, in general for humankind.

There is little in *BM* that is redemptive, and even the Heideggerian concept of thrownness seems to have little to offer when regarding the endless bloody and unforgiving spectacle provided by McCarthy in *BM.* The desert, as presented by McCarthy, is resplendent, but never transcendent. In its natural beauty it provides no nurturance, no solace for those who inhabit it, no "sheltering sky" in Paul Bowles' phrase, but, rather, it is a place of the dead and nearly dead. Taken as a whole the novel suggests that the adventurers are less "Argonauts" than castaways, and they are immured, spiritually, then corporeally, in the static stone and shifting sands of the desert.

Vereen Bell has written about what he calls "the "ambiguous nihilism of McCarthy." Although he was writing just after *Suttree* was published, thus well before *BM*, his notes about "grotesque cruelty" (35) accompanying McCarthy's "anti-metaphysical vision" (34) could serve as apt descriptors of *BM* as well. He describes

Lester Ballard, a character from McCarthy's *Child of God*, as seeming to possess "a dreadful unconscious, externalized into unreflective and unironic action" (34). The kid in *BM* has little or no interiority, though from his concrete responses in dialogue and his attempt to save an Indian woman from death (who ironically had been dead for some time, to the extent that she was mummified), we could predicate only a very small progression in his moral evolution. Except for the judge and Glanton, who are driven to kill by somewhat different motives, the motley companions are clueless, unreflective, and unlikely to reach any kind of transcendence. Taken as a group they are both participants and audience in Holden's cosmology, all amounting to McCarthy's dismissive and relentlessly nihilistic "hat trick in a medicine show" (245). Still, the kid seems to retain some very basic innocence, a suggestive counterpart to the judge's apparent worldliness. It seems to represent a very dangerous innocence, as he is a willing participant in the desert killing fields, though seems to kill almost by reptilian reflex rather than by design. I see the kid and the judge together as reflecting a fractured American psyche--they are facets of a partitioned American dream run amuck in McCarthy's view. So, it is not really a matter of the kid *versus* the judge, as the kid *and* the judge; merged they resemble a distinctly unpretty American self.

In thinking of the prior novels we have considered, Lauren Hartke, in contrast to the kid, seems puzzlingly immersed in the immanence of the kitchen scene, then later the immanence of her own abject body which she seeks to obliterate. Jack Gladney finds solace only in the immanence of the supermarket and its tabloids, DeLillo suggesting that perhaps tabloids and commercials do fill a religious need (Osteen, *Magic* 190). *Suttree*, of course, is immersed in that very tangibly present, earthy Knoxville environment, but

seeks transcendence by way of dreams, deliria, and, perhaps, some existential escape vehicle provided by McCarthy at the novel's end. There are, therefore, shades of redemption in *Suttree* and *The Body Artist*, but little chance that any characters in *Blood Meridian* or *White Noise* will come close to being redeemed in any meaningful way, except, perhaps, the bizarre and continually problematic figure of the judge--only because he seems convinced of his immortality and McCarthy leaves him ageless at the end of the book. All seem victims of Ernest Becker's denial of death, without any existentialist movement (redemption) of the kind that was offered by Unamuno as a way around, or through, the problem of mortality. McCarthy nods, at times, toward a tragic sense of life. When the grim and ragged reapers bring decapitated heads to town to display, "the heads in the soft glare of the uplight assumed the look of tragic masks and within a few days, they would become mottled white and altogether leprous with the droppings of the birds that roosted upon them" (168). However, McCarthy reveals more of what he thinks of this wretched, disheveled band when he writes:

> Spectre horsemen, pale with dust, anonymous in the crenellated heat. Above all else they appeared wholly at venture, primal, provisional, devoid of order. Like beings provoked out of the absolute rock and set nameless and at no remove from their own loomings to wander and ravenous and doomed and mute as gorgons shambling the brutal wastes of Gondwanaland in a time before nomenclature was and each was all. (172)

Whether it is Jack Gladney and family worshipping, American-style, at the Technicolor sunsets, or the ragged, improbable posse lurching toward the blood meridian, the way

west seems paved with denial, and coherence precluded by the eventual drop into the sun's pandemonium.

It seems to me that *BM* represents a coda of sorts to the other three novels we have examined in this thesis. In its narrative portrayal of the results of the western migration, of bodies, horses, and spirit, it is "devisionary" in Jonathan Pitts's term (7), the final meridian. It is as if McCarthy follows his point about Suttree's inability to mourn, by a discussion of mourning and mortality in *BM* which extends his view of this very American difficulty to the level of the national psyche and that it has not been, cannot be redeemed by the illusory promise of the heretofore limitless western horizon. Rather, we might, according to McCarthy, be consumed by that horizontal redness and come to our own kind of pandemonium because we possess no sense of the tragic--we cannot integrate the split-off incomprehension of the kid or the alluring self-aggrandizement of the judge. McCarthy has taken his extended meditation on death and pushed it beyond the singular fascination of one Jack Gladney, the self-immolation of a Lauren Hartke, or the individual odyssey of Suttree, to a cultural level. Meanwhile, everything and everyone pools into red, and McCarthy seems to be saying that if there is a cosmic dance, it is ultimately careless with its human partners.

Conclusion

"Studies Show that 10 out of 10 People Don't Want to Die"
-- Advertisement, *Prevention Magazine*

Given our consideration of the work of Don DeLillo and Cormac McCarthy, we know this advertisement can only be taken half-ironically, as it reveals a deeper truth. In an April 2005 article in the *New York Times*, Thomas Lynch, a mortician and author who has written pointedly about our peculiarly American burial rites, says that

> Amid all the high fashions and fashion blunders, the ritual wheel that worked the space between the living and the dead still got us where we needed to go . . . For many Americans, however, that wheel is not just broken but off track or in need of reinvention. The loosened ties of faith and family, or religious and ethnic identity, have left them ritually adrift, bereft of custom, symbol, metaphor and meaningful liturgy or language. (19)

Writing within the penumbra of the Vietnam era, Don DeLillo and Cormac McCarthy have alluded to this broken wheel by depicting characters who seem no longer able to control the space between living and dying. We have seen Suttree groping for adequate death rituals and we have watched as Lauren Hartke tried projection, then performance to try to assuage her grief. In a similar vein, Solomon, Greenberg and Pyszczynski in 1998 consolidated and updated Ernest Becker's existential and psychodynamic theory on denial of death, saying that the awareness that death is inevitable is a direct and unavoidable consequence of human evolutionary development toward consciousness itself (12), and, further, that "self-esteem and cultural worldviews function to ameliorate

the anxiety associated with the uniquely human awareness of vulnerability and mortality" (9). This dread, this terror experienced by the thinking creature, was given a particularly contemporary framework by DeLillo in *WN* as we readers watched his characters squirm and try to negotiate their dread of death away, only to have their individual selves subsumed by the marketing effluvia of the tabloid-laden supermarket.

However, I have essentially argued that McCarthy's and DeLillo's fiction, as represented by these four novels, can be seen as constituting a form of philosophical inquiry which derives from a long existential tradition stretching from Kierkegaard through Heidegger; they comprise, therefore, a kind of existential literary project. The novels embody also a deeply psychological line of thought connecting Freud and Kristeva with recent social science theory about mortality-salience and how it affects our behavior. These psychological ruminations of DeLillo and McCarthy, cloaked, as they are, in postmodern American fiction, repeatedly confront us with our mortality-dysphoria; they cast a quizzical light on the universal human question of mortality, cursed, as it seems we are, with our species-specific consciousness of death, and the very American trouble we have in dealing—and not dealing—with our perceived mortality. This problem of mortality salience occurs both when it is occasionally made explicitly conscious, but also when it remains unconscious, as it moves surreptitiously, if uneasily, just beneath the shopping mall's diverting surface. It seems to me that the novels, cloaked in post-Vietnam American garb, explicate Freud's questions about mourning and melancholia, as to what really constitutes adequate grieving. If there is a heuristically useful Freudian dialectic of Eros and Thanatos, some kind of truly human balance between the two, then what happens if, as in the four novels, Eros is muted, if not absent,

in the texts, and if it is present, as in *Blood Meridian*, it becomes only an Eros of sumptuous and seductive violence?

One shared characteristic of the four texts we have considered is their ambiguity. The judge, for example, in *BM* is or is not immortal. The kid is or is not murdered or otherwise violated; the details of his final fate are up to the reader to invent. DeLillo even gives us interpretive choices within *The Body Artist*: Lauren "read some more or didn't" (23), and "Then she either calls after him or doesn't and he responds or doesn't" (24). McCarthy sends Suttree out of Knoxville at the novel's end, perhaps to a more hopeful future, perhaps to a more authentic life, but perhaps not; the few salient details prior to his hitching a ride have been interpreted by critics in a number of disparate ways. While the decided ambiguity of the texts can, of course, be part and parcel of these two authors' post-modern views, I think it alludes to something deeper, and more revealing. They seem to be saying that there is something very unsettling going on here: we humans, and especially we Americans, can't really deal effectively either with the "daily, seeping false-hearted death" implicit within the contemporary American scene, or the mass death periodically offered up by the American imperialist project. As a culture, are we embedded in the immanence of a largely indifferent cosmic desert or absorbed in the immanence offered by the plastic glory of supermarket shelves? Despite his novel's satiric warnings about the numbing effects technology can have, DeLillo may well be suggesting that there really is a whole new level of transcendence available to us through technology, that is, triumph over our fear of death through the intercession of "waves and radiation." He does seem to contend at times that there might be a tangible life in the

tabloid milieu and that there might exist an actual inhabitable space within the medium of digital technology itself.

McCarthy provides the reader with an opportunity to consider the makeup of the American psyche in all of its denying grandiosity as a function of the geography of the expansive, if unforgiving western landscape and the promise of a (hopefully) ever-receding horizon. It becomes clear after reading both authors that they believe that America recurrently opts for an "out-struggle," paraphrasing Unamuno, externalizing conflict either by way of an "it can't happen here" mentality, or the sheltering violence of conquest under imperial signifiers. As we have seen, Unamunian philosophy proposes, rather, the notion of an admittedly tragic "in-struggle," but the value of this potential identification with a tragic and existentially personal sense of life falters in the texts reviewed, as exemplified by Lauren Hartke's contorted bereavement and Suttree's desperate search for meaning, and for a replacement identity for the insubstantial white American position of privilege offered by his family. While what Thomas Lynch calls the "Near-Death Experience," i.e., mourning, is reflected in a number of permutations throughout DeLillo's and McCarthy's novels, it seems the novelists are, in essence, also talking about "Near-Life Experiences" so available in contemporary culture, a faux-existence all too easily dispersed in the white noise generated by the glossy, but ersatz modes of being and becoming in this mall-driven society.

As a fictive rendition of the Heideggerian construct about the equal valence of anxiety accruing to both living and dying, we are confronted by either of two flat characters with diminished consciousness: the immature, opaque kid or the monstrous, death-denying judge, or in other words, suspended between the kid's archaic and

undeveloped self and the judge's grandiose self. We can now see McCarthy's initial invitation in *BM* to "see the child" as he sweeps us into the book's coming immolation as a Pogo-esque nod to the child is us, that we are, in effect, children developmentally, and, as such, more inchoately and inexplicitly moaning Wilder (Jack and Babette Gladney's precociously mourning toddler) than knowledgeable and aware Suttree. Jay Losey has borrowed Norman Frye's term of "demonic epiphany" in his 1999 discussion of denial of death in the work of Philip Larkin and Seamus Heaney, and notes that these dark postmodern realizations do not necessarily result in affirmation of self and consolidation of identity (375). Likewise, Cornel Bonca (1996) had described three separate epiphanies for Jack Gladney in *WN,* which, he similarly notes, are not gathered into any character-changing revelation. The judge's soliloquies strewn throughout *BM* seems to be one long, dark and self-referencing epiphany, unaccompanied by character development, but certainly flavored with overarching denial. McCarthy and DeLillo have us traveling either to some final rendezvous with the dark cloud of our imaginings or a terminal, blood-ridden American meridian of the mind. The immolation is that of the self, and the devolution is that of culture. As Losey puts it

> The postmodernist emphasis on self (or series of selves) [Lauren Hartke] provides one indication as to why organized religion has lost its vitality [Suttree]. The individual is trying [or not even that--the kid] to discover an identity apart from any institutional source. The modernist self is fractured, but the postmodern self is shattered. This shattered, indeterminate self [Gladney] cannot find agency in a random world. (385)

As we have seen, Lauren Hartke has found it necessary to banish some forms of the self via her performance, and the saga of Suttree is testament to the insubstantial nature of his culture, if not exactly religion, to provide answers to the ultimate questions. Gladney clearly struggled with the integrity of self and looked to others, e.g., Babette and Siskind, to provide a structure for his unraveling self and some sense of surrogate agency. As we have considered responses to recognition of mortality in the work of DeLillo and McCarthy, it has become evident that this awareness of death is indissoluble from the project of identity, or, in Kristevan terms, from the awkward and dark dance of the abject.

In *BM* McCarthy offers us a book essentially devoid of mourning, or as Shaviro interprets it, "*Blood Meridian* performs the violent, sacrificial, self-consuming ritual upon which our civilization is founded" (120). Replete with dire descriptions of ethnic cleansing, it shows us how thoroughgoing the divisions in the American psyche can be, once we forego the capability of true mourning. McCarthy questions what Brownian movement of the American soul is responsible for our periodic, indeed, almost constant, excursions into violence and bloodshed, something which is answered by the explication of denial of death in *WN*. Murray Siskind's dichotomy between the diers and killers, utilized in the service of denying death, provides some explanation of why McCarthy confronts us with the gory sojourn of *BM*. However, as Shaviro conclusively reminds us, "All these heroic or evasive stances only bring us back by circuitous routes to the immanence of the landscape and the imminence of death" (116).

The essential problem, as elucidated by DeLillo and McCarthy, is that we can't seem to come to terms with our own mortality, and when confronted with death, we can't effectively mourn our losses: we seem incapable, then, of inhabiting a tragic sense of life.

Given that both DeLillo and McCarthy returned deliberately to the topic of death, in *The Body Artist* written after *White Noise*, and in *Blood Meridian* after *Suttree*, a further direction for research would be to explore denial of death as a function of the total oeuvre of each author. Along these lines, some of the same themes we have explored in this thesis are clearly evident, for example, in McCarthy's *Child of God,* and subsequently developed in the other three novels comprising the *Border Trilogy*. DeLillo has played with the same ramifying strands of individuation versus mortality in *Running Dog* and *Libra*. There would be ample reason, I think, to continue to tie this "literature of death," as used in an Unamunian sense (Valdés 1), to the still-emerging research on mortality-salience of Solomon and Greenberg and others. I could imagine a central running theme of Kristeva's abjection as a dissecting tool for either McCarthy's or DeLillo's entire corpus of works, something which has already been applied to the *Border Trilogy* by Linda Townley Woodson and to *Outer Dark* by Ann Fisher-Wirth (Lilley 267-84, 125-41).

Don DeLillo and Cormac McCarthy have produced sizeable bodies of literary work, and in the four works examined in this thesis, these two similarly reclusive authors centered their fiction on "the very life of the darkness" (Boehme, epigraph *BM*). In doing so they have provided an elegant compendium of the ways in which we resist knowing the looming temporality of our species. Thomas Lynch believes that bereavement is a quintessentially human event, this "going the distance with our dead." He goes on to say, "Cocker spaniels do not bother with this, nor do rock bass, nor rhododendrons, nor any other thing that lives and dies" (19). Whether immersed in McCarthy's "immense and bloodslaked waste" or DeLillo's "American magic and dread," readers of their

remarkably deep-diving work are left with far fewer illusions about the denied centrality of American death and mourning.

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