OLIVER SPIVEY. A Defense of the Moral Dimension of Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*
(Under the direction of Professor Michael Grimwood.)

Critics of Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* typically fall into one of two camps. For critics in the “nihilist” camp—particularly Vereen Bell, Steven Shaviro, and Barcley Owens—the novel negates the possibility of moral thought or action. “Nihilist” readers of the novel tend to be reductive, and refuse to grant any implication of higher meaning. Critics in the “moralist” camp—including Harold Bloom, Steven Frye, and Edwin T. Arnold—acknowledge the novel’s terrifying darkness but also point out its curious moments of magnanimity and redemption, as well as its sacred symbolism. Although the “moralists” are more responsive to *Blood Meridian’s* true spirit, they have so far failed to put forth a sustained and unified analysis defining the specific elements that comprise the book’s moral dimension. My study fills this critical lacuna by focusing on the novel’s most telling representations of conscience: the random acts of kindness performed by total strangers, more than once saving the kid’s life; the scalphunters’ occasional questioning of and resistance to Judge Holden’s doctrine of perpetual war; and, above all, the episodes detailing the kid’s moral maturation over the course of the narrative. I examine these three elements, which together constitute a palpable moral dimension, through an extensive close reading of the text. Before undertaking this analysis, however, I provide a broad overview of the ongoing critical dialogue in which I also defend *Blood Meridian* from accusations of nihilism.