

## REVIEWS

Dorson, James. *Counternarrative Possibilities: Virgin Land, Homeland, and Cormac McCarthy's Westerns*. Campus, 2016. Paperback. 308 pages. \$48. ISBN: 3593505541.

*Reviewed by Casey Jergenson*

The persistent indeterminacy of Cormac McCarthy's politics has been the source of a vibrant critical conversation. Strident critiques of American imperialism exist throughout McCarthy's Western novels alongside passages seeming to dehistoricize imperialist violence by casting it as driven by an essentially violent human nature. Concerns with ecological sustainability and the effects of late capitalism on the environment are intermingled with sometimes troubling representations of race and gender. McCarthy's novels resist situation on the political spectrum, and politicized readings of his work can risk falling out of critical engagement with its ambiguity and into simplification and appropriation.

In *Counternarrative Possibilities: Virgin Land, Homeland, and Cormac McCarthy's Westerns*, James Dorson does not seek ideological coherence in McCarthy's novels; instead, he elucidates their function with respect to the dominant narratives of American nationalism. Central to Dorson's argument is the counterintuitive claim that McCarthy's work expresses many of the prevailing sentiments of contemporary fiction, even though his writing style and thematic concerns arguably appear outmoded alongside the work of postmodernists such as Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon. This is based, Dorson argues, in a widespread disillusionment with the postmodern project of destabilizing constructions of truth and upsetting hegemonic narratives. As he writes at the beginning of his second chapter, "Social change requires both the ability to unsettle dominant narratives and to institute new ones" (38). This is the function of counternarratives—they disrupt dominant narratives while also capitalizing on the moment of rupture by offering alternative narratives that might replace the dominant. If postmodernism's liquidation of determinacy seems to limit it to the first part of this process—the negative destabilization of dominant narratives—the contemporary counternarrative

"appropriates the power of narrative in order to redirect it or to turn it against itself" (59).

Part I of Dorson's book discusses the functions of narratives and counternarratives while organizing this theoretical discussion around two of the major tropes of American nationalism: virgin land and homeland. Part II of the book provides a series of readings of McCarthy's Western novels, seeking to demonstrate that they are effective counternarratives that subvert nationalist mythologies while using the tropes and structures of genre fiction to construct new narratives with emancipatory, and perhaps utopian, potentials. Of McCarthy's use of genre, Dorson writes that "By eschewing a modernist shock aesthetic and taking serious the aesthetic possibilities of genre in a way that postmodern irony prevented, the trilogy represents a departure from both a modern and postmodern aesthetic rationale" (270). McCarthy's earnest use of genre conventions is, paradoxically, an indicator of his status as a forward-looking, contemporary author.

The chapter "From Pastiche to Tragedy," which reads the Border Trilogy's numerous genre markers as a departure from postmodern pastiche, is one of the stronger examples of Dorson's argument. The trilogy, he writes, "rekindle[s] a sense of intense human suffering we thought had vanished for good in a culture dominated by detached irony" (249–50). By borrowing frequently and unironically from generic conventions, the trilogy utilizes subversive potentials of these genres that are often dismissed as outmoded—for instance, by "Making readers feel the totality of global capitalism and replotting it as tragedy" (265). Similarly, in a chapter that takes up elements of romance in the trilogy, Dorson demonstrates that the longing for another world that animates the romance genre—and Billy Parham and John Grady Cole's endeavors—also entails a revision of nationalist narratives. Through Billy and John Grady's flights from modernity, the trilogy "unshackles longing from the American promise" and resituates it in the natural world that is lost with the advance of late capitalism (228). In McCarthy's Westerns, narratives of progress and American exceptionalism are not merely subjected to postmodern critiques that reveal their narrative construction and ideological function. They are replotted within alternative generic constellations that foreground repressed or elided narrative possibilities.

One of the strengths of Dorson's argument is, again, that it traces out the political functions of McCarthy's novels without attempting to locate them on the political spectrum. Dorson's discussions of the relations between narrative and counternarrative make complex postmodern and contemporary theories accessible, and his applications of these theories to McCarthy's Westerns are nuanced and convincing. If there is a section of the argument that could be somewhat more substantiated, it is the discussion of the virgin land and

homeland myths in Chapters 3 and 4, respectively. Here, Dorson provides a valuable disciplinary genealogy for American Studies and discusses some of the major tropes of the myths mentioned above, as they have been theorized by historians and cultural critics. Occasionally, this discussion of myth becomes rather abstract as Dorson details the qualities of the concepts in question and the history of their treatment in American Studies. He devotes less space to linking these descriptions to the cultural productions in which the myths are instantiated. In a footnote on American Romance, Dorson comments "in referring to the American Romance, I am not referring to the literary works usually gathered under this generic rubric . . . but to the *construction* of the genre itself, which subsequently laid claim to these works. The construction of the American Romance is as ideologically fraught and embattled as the concept of 'virgin land'" (218). While this is undoubtedly reasonable, the various concepts—genres, myths, and so on—that are so central to Dorson's argument are, of course, also constructed by that argument such that they perform a certain function within it, and there are moments when his descriptions might have been strengthened by more consideration of the texts with which these concepts are associated.

This is a minor critique, and there are plenty of instances when Dorson does precisely the work that I occasionally found to be missing or underemphasized. If this is a weakness, it is substantially outweighed by the book's contribution to the critical conversation surrounding the political complexities of Cormac McCarthy's novels. This book will be well worth reading for anyone interested in McCarthy's work or, more broadly, in the relations between aesthetics and politics.

CASEY JERGENSON is a doctoral candidate at Loyola University Chicago. His article "In what direction did lost men veer?: Late Capitalism and Utopia in *The Road*" was published in 2016 in *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*. In addition to Cormac McCarthy's novels, he studies contemporary utopian and dystopian fiction.