

Owens, Barclay. Cormac McCarthy's Western Novels. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 2000. Pp. xvii, 136. Paper: \$17.95, ISBN: 081651928-5. Cloth: \$35.00, ISBN: 081651927-7.

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The publication of a book-length study of Cormac McCarthy's texts is always good news because it strengthens his reputation and provides another resource for McCarthy scholars. Unfortunately, Barclay Owens' uneven *Cormac McCarthy's Western Novels* fails to set a new benchmark in McCarthy criticism. While Owens makes a compelling case for the Vietnam War as a cultural context for *Blood Meridian*, his adherence to surfaces and his penchant for gracelorn metaphors do not do justice to McCarthy's rich texts.

Blood Meridian, Owens argues, is a novel of "atavistic violence" (xi) rooted in the pessimistic post-Vietnam era and American literary naturalism. The Border Trilogy, on the other hand, "is grounded in the nostalgic, mythic remembrance of the Old West and American cowboys" (xi), with John Grady Cole and Billy Parham as twentieth-century versions of R.W.B. Lewis' *American Adam*. Contending that "historical revisionism and the escalation of violence in American film and literature" are the lasting legacies of the Vietnam era (21), Owens convincingly demonstrates the resonance between the imagery of Vietnam and *Blood Meridian's* violence, although one could argue that McCarthy continues a motif present in his earliest Appalachian works, which predate America's disillusionment with Vietnam.

Though the title suggests a comprehensive study of the four western novels, Owens lopsidedly devotes three chapters to *Blood Meridian*. This novel, he says, "sticks in my gullet, an indigestible enigma" (xvii); it is "one literary bone we should all choke on" (17). To make the enigma more palatable, he reduces the novel to its most obvious element. Calling Edwin Arnold's moral interpretation "far-fetched" and accusing Peter Josyph of "miss[ing] McCarthy's theme," Owens claims mastery of *Blood Meridian's* "evident purpose" and "McCarthy's original intent" (12-13): to demonstrate the atavistic nature of violence. While dismissing Arnold's reading, Owens cannot resist borrowing his terminology, referring to "McCarthy's parables of violence" (18); however, a parable is, by definition, an allegorical story about things moral or spiritual. Mistaking Judge Holden for McCarthy's "author-figure" (50) allows Owens to solve the novel's enigma with the judge's claim "the mystery is that there is no mystery" (*BM* 252). But to argue the kid "does not achieve maturity or awareness, or experience life-

changing moments of existential glory” (63), Owens must stack the deck, ignoring *Blood Meridian*’s spiritual intimations in passages like the one where the kid, beholding the Pacific for the first time, sees the horse “watching, out there past men’s knowing, where the stars are drowning and whales ferry their vast souls through the black and seamless sea” (*BM* 304). Inaccuracies also suggest undue haste, as when he identifies 1986 as *Blood Meridian*’s publication date (xi) or Knopf as its original publisher (37, 132).

Owens gives short-shrift to *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing*, limiting his analysis to a single, slightly chaotic chapter that posits John Grady Cole and Billy Parham as Adamic figures in Western progress and primitive-pastoral myths, respectively. His best insights, including his claim that Billy “seeks redemption for his people’s transgressions” (88), tend to get lost in the chapter’s ping-pong organization. While he situates discussion of *Blood Meridian* within a critical context in Chapter One, he does not do so for the Border Trilogy. Owens could have greatly enriched his observations on McCarthy’s use of Spanish “to authenticate his locale” (64)—and perhaps avoided oversimplification—had he engaged José Limón’s reading of John Grady Cole in *American Encounters* (published in 1998, two years before Owens’ book). Also suspect is Owens’ view of character motivation, since he finds Billy’s search for his lost brother Boyd a “flims[y] pretext” for going to Mexico (67).

The fifth chapter includes welcome close textual analysis of *Cities of the Plain*, where Mexico becomes the “gray land of death” (116) for American Adams. One wonders, however, why *Cities* rates more careful, extended analysis than the trilogy’s other two volumes. More curious still is the non-sequitur “Afterword,” which contains a sermon about violence and an extended academic vignette that seems to have found its way into Owens’ manuscript by mistake.

In his introduction, Owens states, “*Blood Meridian* deserves closer scrutiny” (xii). Indeed, all McCarthy’s novels deserve such scrutiny, but Owens, despite some welcome insights into McCarthy’s novels, does not look deeply enough to provide a truly nuanced reading.