



James Dorson

COUNTERNARRATIVE POSSIBILITIES

*Virgin Land, Homeland,
and Cormac McCarthy's Westerns*

campus

Counternarrative Possibilities

North American Studies

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For my parents

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Preface

“All is telling. Do not doubt it.”
—Cormac McCarthy, *The Crossing* (1995, 155)

This book is concerned mainly with two things. The first is how to unsettle the power of narrative. When a narrative determines our field of vision, the range of our knowledge, our beliefs and expectations, and even shapes our affective ties, how is it possible to detach oneself from it? How do we call attention to the narrative lenses through which we perceive the world? For several modern critical traditions, from Russian formalism and New Criticism to critical theory and poststructuralism, literature has played a key role in exposing the constructedness of our worlds. The novel in particular gives readers access to an infinite number of worlds that have been created in ways that resemble our own narrative constructions of reality, and thus possesses the unique power of calling those constructions into question. Yet novels are not frontal assaults on our precarious sense of reality. When directly faced with the fact that our perception of the world is just that, a perception, we tend to become defensive. Casting doubt on our narratives threatens the integrity of our worlds. But set apart as fiction, the power of novels is by definition more subtle, more circuitous than other forms of communication. This is both their weakness and their strength. As we usually read novels for pleasure and not to have our beliefs shattered, novels, when we least expect it, may insinuate that something is wrong, that the world is not quite as we thought, that there are rifts in its otherwise seamless surface that cannot be accounted for. Once touched by this doubt, the ground beneath us becomes shaky, the givenness of the world less given.

The second concern of this book is what happens next? How does one move from disorientation to reorientation? How are we ever to inhabit another world after our faith in the first has been shaken? Literature may be capable of inspiring a “negative capability,” John Keats’s memorable phrase for “when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (2000, 889). Yet the irritable reaching after certainty persists. For good reason, too,

because the attempt to know the world is not only a bulwark against existential despair, but a condition for acting in it. Can art, then, also inspire a positive capability? Can it inspire a negative and positive capability at one and the same time? If art stirs up a storm in the waters of knowledge, is it also able to calm those waters again without returning to the murky metaphysics of narrative closure? Is it possible to settle the waters of knowledge, so that its texture and depths remain visible, so that all the fearsome underwater creatures of politics and power, history and habit, fear and desire may still be discerned beneath its scintillating surface, together with all the dreadful crags and inscrutable fissures that we tend to avert our gaze from? Or, once settled, will those waters again become the dazzling surface they were before, a surface that blinds us and conceals its secret motivations and machinations?

Infusing our narratives with doubt will always be an important function of literature, but as the disaffection with postmodern fiction that has made narrative disruption its primary business grows, the question of narrative resumption is gaining in pitch and resonance. In recent years, a number of scholars have identified a cultural push to move beyond the disruptive capabilities of postmodern fiction, and toward what critics awkwardly refer to as 'post-postmodernism.' In *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature* (2013), Mary K. Holland argues that we are not witnessing the end of postmodernism, but that millennial fiction has successfully combined a poststructuralist skepticism of language and narrative with a renewed interest in humanist concerns with truth and ethics.¹ While Holland is mostly interested in postmodern aesthetics, thus following Linda Hutcheon's reading of postmodernism in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988) as culturally instead of historically specific, Jeffrey T. Nealon's *Post-Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (2012) follows Fredric Jameson's view of postmodernism as a historical period determined by the structures of late capitalism. As these structures have only been intensified in the three decades since Jameson's diagnosis, Nealon suggests that the additional prefix of 'post' to postmodernism is the appropriate marker of its intensification rather than its demise. If postmodernism for neither Holland nor Nealon may be said to have 'ended,' whether as an aesthetic practice or historical period, they

1 Holland's book also provides a useful survey of recent studies that examine the 'end of postmodernism' (2013, 11–17).

both identify a development within postmodernism that has made it “something recognizably different in its contours and workings” (Nealon 2012, ix).

Both the idea of post-postmodernism as a paradoxical return to narrative through a style that questions it, and as marking the intensification of capitalism, are relevant to this book. Rather than being unrelated definitions, however, I argue that it is precisely the latter development that underlies the urgency of the former; that the intensification of capitalism makes a revival of narrative as crucial as ever. One of the key contributions of Jameson’s analysis is to show how cultural and aesthetic transgressions in postmodernism have lost their radical potential, that they “are not only received with the greatest complacency but have themselves become institutionalized and are at one with the official or public culture of Western society” (1997, 4). If the misbehavior of art still poses a threat to conservative values and norms, its misbehavior is dwarfed next to what we have come to expect from capitalism. While we have known since Marx that capitalism melts everything solid into air, it is only in its more intensified form that it has become clear that capitalism is not merely disruptive, but that its legitimacy today depends upon its own self-understanding as a cultural rebel.² In light of this development, any oppositional desire we may harbor for art could not content itself with the transgressive power of art, but would have to examine how art functions to remobilize the power of narrative at a time when questioning narrative meaning has become second nature to us. As much popular discontent is channeled into the quick narrative fixes of nativism and nationalism, the narrative skepticism that literature can instill continues to serve an important role. Yet the question of how the power of narrative might recover from our postmodern incredulity is just as crucial to any theory or movement that aims to challenge our present cultural and economic structures.

Thus, while this book probes art’s negative capability, my aim is also to examine how literary narratives today might help organize a growing discontent with the present state of our world. My position here is that any viable cultural or political narrative must strike a balance between narrative skepticism and faith. This is what I would like to express with the term

2 On the ‘rebellious’ spirit of capitalism, see Thomas Frank’s *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (1997), Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello’s *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999), and Jim McGuigan’s *Cool Capitalism* (2009).

‘counternarrative.’ As I define my use of the term in chapter two of this book, a counternarrative simultaneously narrates and disrupts narration. A counternarrative is a story that succeeds as a narrative at the same time as it reveals how it succeeds. In this sense, regardless of the specific content of a counternarrative, the first thing that it counters is depoliticization. Depoliticization, as Wendy Brown writes,

involves removing a political phenomenon from comprehension of its historical emergence and from a recognition of the powers that produce and contour it. No matter its particular form and mechanics, depoliticization always eschews power and history in the representation of its subject. When these two constitutive sources of social relations and political conflict are elided, an ontological naturalness or essentialism almost inevitably takes up residence in our understandings and explanations. (2006, 15)

It is the nature of narratives to obfuscate their own power and history. At the same time, there is no better way to disclose the operations of power and history than to make stories about them. The idea of the counternarrative as I use it here is meant to address this paradox. If we desire the emergence of new narratives that contest the ‘end of history,’ it is imperative that those narratives do not mystify the conditions of their own making. How the idea of the counternarrative may contribute to such a reflexive repoliticization of the social is the underlying question of the pages that follow.

This is also where Cormac McCarthy comes in. As I provide a general introduction to his work in the second part of this book, let me here only explain my choice of reading McCarthy’s Westerns as counternarratives. My pick of McCarthy may appear counterintuitive. Unlike other writers of his generation, such as Thomas Pynchon or Don DeLillo, who for decades have provided us with stories that probe the cultural depths of capitalist society, McCarthy’s fiction appears to be only obliquely, if at all, interested in the market forces that shape our lives. His focus is on those left behind in the modern world rather than those who shape it. Yet by focusing on the people and communities trampled by the processes of modernity, his fiction is able to call those processes into question. Without exception, his novels deal with either the foundation or dissolution of social order. In his early Appalachian work, *The Orchard Keeper* (1965) and *Suttree* (1979) both address an encroaching modern order uprooting older communities, while *Outer Dark* (1968) and *Child of God* (1973) revolve around themes of incest, cannibalism, and necrophilia, some of the foundational taboos of society.

His two most recent novels, *No Country for Old Men* (2005) and *The Road* (2006), both deal with the fragility of order and collapse of civilization. But it was with McCarthy's turn to the Western in *Blood Meridian* (1985) and the Border Trilogy—comprised of *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994), and *Cities of the Plain* (1998)—that his interest in the foundations of law and order culminated. The Western has long been the preeminent genre in American culture for exploring the laying down of law, which made it a natural choice for a writer otherwise distinguished by his literariness. While *Blood Meridian* uses the Western to explore the violent origins of modern society, the Border Trilogy uses it to recuperate the affective power contained within its familiar plots. If the master narratives of the past and present have lead us into violent and desolate places, as McCarthy's novels suggest, the reinscription of powerful cultural narratives in his Westerns, rather than simply their subversion, raises the specter of changing the doom-bound course his novels envision.

It is the dual performance in McCarthy's Westerns of both the dangers of narrative and its social and existential necessity that make his work a model for renewed narrative agency in the twenty-first century. While McCarthy in many ways appears to be out of tune with his times—with his archaic vocabulary and syntax, and his serious exploration of outmoded passions and values—his work nevertheless struck a cultural nerve in the 1990s. Since then his popularity has only surged, making him one of the most influential writers today. Although critics have meticulously traced his literary debts to writers such as William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor, and have practically exhausted every reference or possible connection they might find, only recently have critics begun to explore McCarthy's impact on a younger generation of writers.³ Particularly the turn to genre fiction by a writer of McCarthy's stature helped precipitate the blurring of literary and genre fiction that has characterized some of the most ambitious literature in the past couple of decades. McCarthy might not only be read as part of this development, but as its pioneer—*The Road* only cementing his leading position in the literary field that his Westerns paved the way for. Indeed, there is a fine line between not belonging to ones times and being

3 Lucas Thompson's essay "Books Are Made out of Books: David Foster Wallace and Cormac McCarthy" (2015) is the first to trace McCarthy's influence on David Foster Wallace. Linda Woodson's "Mapping *The Road* in Post-Postmodernism" (2008) reads McCarthy in the context of post-postmodernism, but not in relation to other writers.

ahead of them. One of the reasons for McCarthy's rise to fame may well have been the cultural exhaustion of ironic metafiction as it went mainstream in the 1990s. To be sure, McCarthy's Westerns are reflexive of their own narratives, but their reflexivity is a result of allegory instead of irony; typically the effect of parables told by characters, not the authorial undercutting of the story. Only the black humor and outlandish similes alleviate the high seriousness of McCarthy's authorial voice. If nothing else, the fact that his stories have become as popular as they have in an age as ironically reflexive as ours is an indication that the times are changing.

The book is divided into two parts. The first focuses on the cultural power of narrative (chapter one) and the prospects of both disrupting that power and constructing new narratives that are at once reflexive and compelling (chapter two). McCarthy is by no means a political writer, if we understand by that a writer who takes sides in partisan debates. The human pessimism that runs through his stories makes them as unpalatable to liberal tastes as his challenge to American exceptionalism is to conservative ones. That said, his Westerns take up two highly charged narratives in U.S. culture: the notorious virgin land myth, and its post-Cold War conversion into what could be called 'the homeland myth.' To grasp the counternarrative possibilities of McCarthy's Westerns, we must first understand the cultural narratives they counter. This will be the task of chapters three and four. The analysis of these narratives is vital for my broader purposes here, because national narratives function as a repository for longing, which channels discontent away from transformative political narratives into reactionary cultural ones. An analysis of national narratives also compels me to ask difficult questions about methods in American Studies. From its postwar beginning, the field has been closely involved in shaping and reshaping the stories that the nation tells about itself. My aim is not to take part in this ongoing project, but to show why the narratives in American Studies often fall short of their radical goals. The second part of this book then reads Cormac McCarthy's Westerns as counternarratives in both the sense of disrupting hegemonic narratives and performing as a model for renewed narrative meaning. As I will argue here, McCarthy's Westerns are exemplary counternarratives in their subversive appropriation of national myth (chapter five), their reflexive concern with narrativity (chapters six and seven), and their unleashing of desires submerged in romance and genre fiction that beckons new narrative possibilities (chapters eight and nine).

Part I Narratives and Counternarratives

1 The Power of Narrative

“The social structure seems to us as natural as nature, even though it is only held together by magic. Is it not, in reality, an edifice built of spells, this system which is based on writings, on words obeyed, on promises kept, on effectual images, on observed habits and conventions,—all of which are pure fiction?”

—Paul Valéry, *Selected Writings* (1964, 209)

All fields of knowledge production today are haunted by the specter of ‘narrative.’ Beginning with mid-twentieth-century structuralism, the term has spread like a new faith through the academic disciplines to our culture at large. But when we say ‘narrative,’ we mean the opposite of faith: a type of linguistic skepticism and reflection on the production of meaning. To talk about narratives implies that our relationship to knowledge has changed, that it no longer resides in the fortress of Truth but has become a dweller in the house of Contingency. In the humanities as well as in the social and even natural sciences, researchers explicitly call attention to their narratives, thereby implying that other narratives might have been told, that their data could have been assembled in different ways. To be sure, this is a welcome development as it fosters critical self-awareness and is conducive to debate. But that is not always how it works. As often as not, we do little more than pay lip service to the term. The invocation of narrative has not only become a perfunctory ritual, it can even be used preemptively against those who would call the bluff on Truth, as if to say, “we are all aware that this is a narrative, but the *truth* is....” This is a way of circumventing and containing the productive doubt that a reflection on narrativity brings to knowledge. To avoid this slippage back into incontestable truths, an awareness of the narrative production of meaning has to be more than a gesture: it has to manifest itself in the practice of narrating, not merely in name but in its very structure. In other words, it is not enough that a narrator calls attention to the narrative production of meaning; a narrative has to call attention to itself through its form. This chapter and the next aim to address this problem—*how can narrative form qualify the truth-claim inherent to it?*—first by addressing the narrative structure of meaning, then by exploring the possibilities of a narrative form structurally incapable of falling back on the transcendental legitimation that mystifies its cultural origins, as narratives are wont to do.

Connect the Dots

“We live entirely,” Joan Didion writes, “by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the ‘ideas’ with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience” (1979, 11). This reflection addresses one of the greatest questions of all times: how to make sense of the infinite mass of sensations that are pressed upon us by the world. From the formation of the ego in what Jacques Lacan called the ‘mirror stage’ of infancy, where we are first set apart from the world, we are engaged in a prolonged struggle to sort out the chaos facing us. For mere survival, we struggle to understand the relationship between ourselves and the world. We process our chaotic impressions of the world in numerous ways: we select, we filter, we store, we repress, we embrace, we transform, we abstract, we are overwhelmed, we panic. These reactions are not only implicated in the formation of the ego, but in the formation of society. In *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Freud argued that the origin of civilization is to be found in the way “primitive man transposed the structural conditions of his own mind into the external world” (1975, 91). For Freud, our earliest magic rituals indicated this need to exercise control over the shapeless world: “There is an intellectual function in us which demands unity, connection and intelligibility from any material, whether of perception or thought, that comes within its grasp” (ibid., 95). This function establishes meaning and coherency where there is none. It works as a defense against what for many is the most incomprehensible event in our lives: death. Telling stories that allow us to ‘grasp’ the world, in the dual sense of understanding and taking into possession, is the magic that we wield against the unknown. A narrative is a projection of our desire for meaning onto the world, meaning that “promises to bring with it the advantage of mental relief” (ibid., 92). Only by weaving a narrative web around the world are we able to make the ‘shifting phantasmagoria’ of reality comprehensible. A narrative provides us with a ground and vantage point from which to order and comprehend what happens to us—including past and future events. The way we see the world and ourselves is inseparable from the way we understand it, and how we understand it depends upon what stories we tell ourselves.

“Like life itself,” Roland Barthes writes about narrative, “it is there, international, transhistorical, transcultural” (1975a, 237). The ubiquity of the narrative form, however, only makes it all the more difficult to see. The