

Beck, John. *Dirty Wars: Landscape, Power and Waste in Western American Literature*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2009. 378 pages. Hardcover, \$55.00, ISBN 978-0-8032-2631-9.

Review by Rick Wallach

John Beck's study of the literary response to the exploitation of the American southwest by the so-called military industrial complex, and by the cultural, economic and political interests served by that complex, will be of interest to every serious student of Cormac McCarthy's novels. Beck's work is a hybrid form of deconstruction which teases out contradictions not merely in the rhetoric of nation building but also in our situational affinities with the times and places we occupy. From his point of view, these contradictions are properties both of historical events themselves and of the strange lives these events take on in our national imagination. He depicts "the west" as the subject of both an eternal present and as a chronological series, with the process of American expansionism and its ultimately self-justifying completion existing simultaneously within our national narrative.

The planform of Beck's work is fascinating. Although he gives substantive attention to numerous novelists and historians like Leslie Marmon Silko, Don DeLillo, Bradford Morrow and Charles Bowden, he presents the chronological development of McCarthy's own work, from *Blood Meridian* through *The Road*, as an overarching structural metaphor for the history of the southwest. In effect, he reconfigures the history of political and cultural exploitation of the western wilderness according to the thematic development of McCarthy's—and other novelists' and historians'—fiction and historical exegeses. He is first of all concerned with the development of the Anglo-American mystique and representation of the region. In the national narrative, the spaces of the American West are deracinated from living spaces to their native populations to "wastelands." Emptied by the rhetoric of manifest destiny of its human inhabitants or, to be more precise, of the rights of its aboriginal inhabitants to their mere habitation, the American southwest becomes a site of divinely ordained arrogation and occupation. Ultimately, jingoistic political and quasi-historical paradigms overwrite this discursively evacuated zone. Moreover, this rhetorical cleansing of a vast space also makes possible its human analogy, the literal cleansing of the west coast of the United States of its Japanese-American citizenry during World War II—and the matching of that erased population with the erased wilderness regions to which they were exiled.

As a European critic, Beck is equipped by distance and disinterest to stand outside the siren song of our national narrative and regard it with bracing skepticism. Thus, he treats that narrative as something more malleable and more a product of pure rhetoric than an American critic might. He bends history to conform to a thematic evolution he creates by placing fictional narratives in his own synthetic sequence, and this is bound to infuriate conventional historians who will surely find this way of doing things backasswards. Now, if he were writing "straight" history that would be a legitimate critique. However Beck is not primarily engaged in a heuristics of history or politics. The subtitle of his book is *Landscape, Power and Waste in Western American Literature*, not "landscape, power and waste in western American history." He feels as comfortable about appropriating historical events and figures for the purpose of critiquing the novels

that fall within his purview here as the novelists themselves do about appropriating those events and figures for their own purposes. For example, here he employs a distinctly Deleuzian approach to the problem of temporality in *Blood Meridian*:

The fictional space of *Blood Meridian* is indeed an ancient world of forces and processes, but it is also, at the same time, an inescapably particular historical space. Alongside the primal forces work historical forces, and McCarthy presses hard together the deep temporal dimension with the historically verifiable to produce a kind of fold in time whereby the prehistoric and the late 1840s appear to exist in the same place. (53)

In the course of re-emphasizing the literary critical dimension of Beck's book, I don't mean to imply that there isn't a profound political component his argument. There is. The most cogent and urgent of these components is Beck's observation that we relive on a moment-to-moment basis the state of war which we justified as necessary to evacuate the west in fact of the very inhabitants that our representation of the west as a "frontier" and a wasteland had already evacuated in rhetorical terms. The transposition to the west of the Nisei, the Japanese-American victims of national paranoia during the early 1940s, and then the "war on drugs" and the implicit war on the brown tide of Mexican illegal immigration currently underway are examples of how the archetype is perpetuated. In this context, I found fascinating Beck's discussions of the books of the Border Trilogy and especially of *No Country for Old Men*, as a natural extension of the Trilogy's concerns:

Set in the early 1980s, the book places Bell's conservatism as an articulation of the values and fears of the emergent political Right in the years following the election of Ronald Reagan....[Bell's] presence is remarkable in McCarthy's novels as a commentator who directly attempts to contextualize events within a definable historical frame. Bell is a mess of prejudices and ill-informed terrors....(274)

If I have any misgivings about this book, it would be that its poststructuralist technical jargon will place much of its discussion beyond the grasp of many lay readers. This strikes me as unfortunate because some of the issues intimately associated with this jargon are the ones that an educated American laity ought to be most concerned with: the mystification of jingoism, the propaganda sleight-of-hand that disguises legacies of racist and otherwise political violence as components of vital national interests. Nevertheless I think it would be worth any astute readers' efforts to make their way through these complexities. What Beck illuminates about how our literature becomes, in effect, a simultaneous repository of our "political unconscious" and an exposure of those processes is important matter.