Postmarked Constellations: Historicity and Paraliterary Form in Late American Fictions

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of
English in the Graduate School
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

“Postmarked Constellations” examines how three late-twentieth century American writers bring long historical processes into view through their use of paraliterary forms. The term paraliterary is used in this study to refer to a set of popular cultural forms that overlap the field of the “literary,” thereby complicating the latter’s assumed autonomy from the impurities of everyday life. Focusing upon the historical fictions of Gayl Jones’s blues novel Corregidora (1975), Samuel R. Delany’s sword and sorcery series Return to Nevrÿjon (1979-1987), and Cormac McCarthy’s Western novel Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West (1985), this dissertation argues that these writers strategically turn to the paraliterary in order to engage their own moment’s historical crisis within a larger trajectory of Anglo-European Western expansionism within the Americas. In adopting the blues (Gayl Jones), sword and sorcery (Delany), and the Western (McCarthy), these writers do not merely incorporate elements of these cultural forms, but rather transform their codes and conventions in order to bring past historical experiences into contact with the present. In so doing these writers draw out the historical dimensions internal to each of these generic forms. They show the degree to which genres are embedded within a larger world system, one that cannot be reduced to a national cultural imaginary, but must be placed within a longer-unfolding geopolitical
context of colonial modernity, the Atlantic slave trade, the dispossession of indigenous peoples, and the emergence of a world market.

While written between the years 1975-1987, the texts of this study explore the deeper historical traumas specific to nineteenth-century U.S. expansionism. In turning to these specific histories—either in directly formal ways, as in McCarthy’s Western or in the much broader terms of their legacies, as in Jones’s blues novel or Delany’s sword and sorcery series—these texts reveal the often obscured continuities between nineteenth-century and late-twentieth century forms of American empire. The chapters of this dissertation underscore how the blues, sword and sorcery, and the Western are tied to popular cultural forms that emerge, if not directly out of a nineteenth-century U.S. imperial literary and mass entertainment culture, then out of the historical experiences upon which such mass cultural phenomena was based. But these texts also complicate such ties to an imperial cultural imaginary by actively transforming the narrative logic of their generic forms. Tracing out the paraliterary dimensions of these texts thus allows each chapter to constellate the historical past that their narratives examine with the late-twentieth century historical present in which they appear. In a period characterized by liberation movements and large-scale revolts both at home and abroad, these texts respond both to specifically national situations as well as to unfinished world
historical processes. In this respect, these are American fictions concerned less with their quintessential Americanness—a preoccupation of both nineteenth- and early-twentieth century writers and critics—than with their peculiar relation to the world as Americans. “Postmarked Constellations” therefore proposes a method for tracking, not just a new engagement with the historicity of cultural forms within late-American fictions, but also for understanding the response of American writers to a radically new experience of globalization.
Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to three people who would have loved to celebrate its completion:

To my father, Robert William Jones: You gave me a love of language, both the sound of it and the thrill of its complexities. You also taught me that no man is poor who has history in his head. I thus am richer today, dad. Thank you.

To Laura Townsend who taught me how to listen to the blues. I miss the gravy and the tin bill. When we meet again, it will be at a barstool. Miles Davis beside us at the Blackhawk.

To Andie P. Cotton: David Bowie is believed to have said, “I always had a repulsive need to be something more than human,” but I think he took that daring and imaginative flight from you, the original Major Tom. And, besides, propulsive is what he meant to say, but he misheard you, so softly did you speak.
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idiosyncratic, high-flying, geographically grounded, and wise. Emerson, Melville, and Fiedler were present in that room. Thanks, Tom, for inviting me along. Sean Metzger has been an ally in every sense, a fierce critic and total champion whenever the one or the other was needed. His office was always open, always a place of refuge both intellectually and pragmatically. I can scarcely imagine having negotiated the demands of Academia without him. Fred Moten has transformed my thinking and writing in ways that I am still trying to understand and learn from. In him the aesthetic and the conceptual interanimate exquisitely, and just having his voice in my head was often enough to point me in the direction I needed to go. He has been both mentor and friend. I would have written an altogether different and no doubt inferior dissertation without him as an interlocutor.

I can thank no one more than the person with whom I share this life, Dr. Jennifer Brody. She is my beginning and end. She has taught me that petals dance, that suffering enlarges our store of compassion, and that love for others can be one’s professional vocation. I prefer her teachings most. My beginning and end, and all the beauty between.
The Nineteenth Century in the Twentieth: Towards a Concept of the Paraliterary

1.1 Genre in the Sphere of Culture

Literature begins at the moment when literature becomes a question. — M. Blanchot

Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. — W. Benjamin

“Postmarked Constellations” investigates a turn to paraliterary forms in three texts produced by the writers Gayl Jones, Samuel R. Delany, and Cormac McCarthy in the last decades of the American Century. The texts at the core of this study represent a special case of historical fictions. The “para” literary forms these writers take up—a slave narrative, sword-and-sorcery, and a Western—are genres rooted in various nineteenth-century historical events and processes. But their exemplarity, as texts, for the purposes of this study lies not only in their appropriation of genre fiction but also in the historiographic ends to which these genres are put to use. Since a history of these genres is typically a history of their subordination to the “literary,” the kinds of innovations these texts represent in their turn to traditionally demoted cultural forms suggests the need for a different way of describing their singularity that is a good deal
more analytically subtle than most theories of postmodernism are able to provide. For what in part motivates this dissertation is the curious absence of Gayl Jones’s slave narrative *Corregidora* (1975), Samuel R. Delany’s sword and sorcery series *Return to Nevèrÿon* (1979-1987), and Cormac McCarthy’s Western novel *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West* (1985) in critical studies of the period. What is more, if these are texts that are seldom read or studied together, they also represent texts rarely read by those who avidly read these genres. They are thus a constellation of anomalous texts, too genre based in one sense and too experimental in another.

One way to account for their omission from studies of postmodernism is to underscore how thoroughly the critical vocabulary of pastiche, irony, and reflexivity has come to dominate the field of contemporary literature. The texts of this study, while certainly capable of being read through that dominant lens, push against such critical commonplaces, on their own and especially when taken together. For these writers must be understood to adopt and adapt “para” literary forms with what one wants to describe not only as a kind of rigor but also as a kind of seriousness, a description one should reserve for works that seek to mourn and memorialize what Walter Benjamin once called “the traditions of the oppressed.”\(^1\) Put differently, these are not texts that

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\(^1\) “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 257. It is important to note how intensively Benjamin emphasizes that what is crucial is not ending oppression as such (for this, he would seem to imply is not, strictly speaking, a matter for a philosophy of history), but rather in ensuring that the “traditions of the oppressed” do not disappear. This explains why, for Benjamin, “the fight for the oppressed past” is a radical political act of “remembrance” (263).
approach these genres as “sub” literary forms, nostalgically ironizing them or attempting in some manner to redeem them. Rather, each one takes up the histories internal to the genre forms in which each makes their appearance. Those histories, respectively, involve the longer-unfolding geopolitical context of colonial modernity, the Atlantic slave trade, the dispossession of indigenous peoples, and the emergence of an American-dominated world market.

The distinction that separates “para” literary from “sub” literary cannot be reduced to a matter of subjective tone or temperament. Rather, the different valence each carries marks a distinct shift in an objective attitude aesthetically towards “history”—towards what it is and what its materials are.\(^2\) In the chapters that follow, I read Corregidora (1975), the Nevèrÿon series (1979-1987), and Blood Meridian (1985) not as proliferating endless versions of “history,” as a certain objection to postmodernism claims—as if history were merely reducible to a rhetorical play of relativities in which there was not nor could ever be one “History”—but rather competing histories with no final cause or coordinating term. But neither do I read these texts as if history for them

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\(^2\) Peter Nicholls observes that “language,” for Gertrude Stein, “[was] to be grasped not as a means of reference to a world of objects which can be dominated, but as a medium of consciousness” (Modernisms A Literary Guide (Univ. of California Press, 1995), 204). It is worth speculating that if the materiality of language or discourse represents, in Stein’s moment, a “medium of consciousness,” then it becomes possible to say that after-Stein, that is, after modernism, the density of such inquiries into consciousness produces the possibility of “language” taking on an historical dimension it did not have in the moment of modernist experimentations. And if “language” is understood to refer to any expressive symbolic form—which is to say, in other words, that “language” can be seen to be homologous to “genre”—then we can begin to understand how cultural forms take on an aspect of historicity in the texts of this study—texts marked by their historically “post” condition.
amounted to a “sublime desire,” as certain proponents of postmodernism define the tendency of the period. In this view, history is fundamentally unrepresentable and eternally producing a “post-traumatic imaginary” out of which no adequate figure for real historical experience might come.

The chapters that follow trace a rather different itinerary for examining the historical imagination of American writers in a period of post-modernity. They are organized according to the different figures—“Repetition” (Corregidora), “Seriality” (Nevèrýon), and “Sedimentation” (Blood Meridian)—that each text uses to describe (and thus bring into visibility) the narrative and material dimensions of historical events and historical temporalities. The figures of Repetition, Seriality, and Sedimentation suggest, then, not the unrepresentability of “history”—not the desirelessness for history—but the

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4 Ibid., 49-55. Borrowing at once from Georg Lukács, Hayden White, and Jean-François Lyotard, Elias proposes the “metahistorical romance” as a category for capturing the way in which certain postmodern texts exhibit a desire for representing the past as “unrepresentable” in Lyotard’s Kantian terms. It is precisely why, according to Elias, that the unrepresentableness of “History” leads as if out of necessity to a concept of the sublime. For Elias, the latter marks an historical situation of crisis, one in which “the imagination can conceive of an Idea but not of a presentation of that idea.” The crisis of the period thus lies precisely in its historical incapacity “to make the Idea visible,” and not, à la Frederic Jameson, in its absence of desire for history (Sublime Desire, p. 27). See also, Jameson, Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).
5 Following Fredric Jameson, I would here emphasize the importance of distinguishing between “postmodernism” and “postmodernity.” The former assumes a theory or multiple theories attempting to define the “style” characteristic of a specific historical period. “Postmodernity,” rather, is the name for a new historical period, following modernity, that is generally associated with information and computer technologies, global finance, neo-liberalism, and urban-based consumer societies. See Jameson, A Singular Modernity: Essays on the Ontology of the Present (Verso, 2002).
complexities the narrative artwork must now engage with in order to address the problem of multiple historical temporalities (pasts, presents, and futures) in an age of globalization. For the hard to grasp aspect of our global age is what historical continuity could mean in a world so persistently convulsed by the new. And yet for all the concretely felt convulsions of our own historical moment, all official signs of the culture point relentlessly in the direction of “progress.” The texts gathered here are read, however, under different, less official signs, ones that do not point to a single coherent “History” but rather to its moments of irreconcilability, rupture, and dissonance. The careful unfolding of these moments in the chapters that follow—in both “close” and “distant” ways, which is to say both micro-logically, in terms of an attention to the interplay between language and scene, and macro-logically, in terms of a focus on genre, imperial formations, and the historicity of the historical imagination—signals my commitment to bringing forth out of these otherwise papered-over or discarded pasts that “spark of hope” that Walter Benjamin so urgently and eloquently sought, and for which his ways of reading still stand as an exemplary model.6

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6 Illuminations, 255. By “close” and “distant” I refer, of course, to the practice of close reading, on the one hand, as one of the fundamental heuristics of literary criticism, and to “distant reading,” a term Franco Moretti proposes as an effort at opening up the “extremely small canon” on which close reading “necessarily depends” (“Conjectures on World Literature” New Left Review 1 (Jan/Feb 2000), 57). But I am using “distant reading” to emphasize an enlarged global scale more than an expanded range of “global” texts, the latter being Moretti’s more restricted usage of the term. It bears mentioning that the expansion of canonicity to “global” texts has a darker aspect to it, something not unlike comparative literature’s quest, as a discipline, for a mythical El Dorado—an endless reserve of “world literature” to mine.
Attending to this constellation of texts means coming to terms with their historical imaginations; their turn to paraliterary forms is crucial to this end as it provides the means to show how each of these texts transforms their respective genres into sites of historical inquiry. It is the argument of this dissertation that Gayl Jones’s slave narrative *cum* blues novel, Samuel R. Delany’s sword and sorcery series turned journal of a plague year, and Cormac McCarthy’s Western novel of uncommonly planetary scope shift our understanding of how to *read* these various genre forms against, on the one hand, their routine consumption as mindless entertainment—which is to say, as discredited forms of “popular” culture, meaning the pastime of lower- and working-class peoples; and, on the other, as more or less artful documents of some long ago pasts in the case of the slave narrative and, in a certain uptake, the Western as well. In the chapters that follow, I trace how these texts are themselves especially attentive revisions of the genres they take up. Part of what animates this selection of texts, then, is the shared ways in which each stages a re-reading of the various norms specific to the formal and thematic expectations of the paraliterary forms they incorporate. The way each registers and performs an awareness of their paraliterary conventions is crucial to my own readings of how each thereby reconfigures these cultural forms into sites of historical inquiry, making visible what, over the course of this study, I will develop as a concept of historicity. Framing my argument in terms of “sites” (a spatial term) and “historicity” (a temporal term) involves two clarifications. The first is that by “sites of
historical inquiry” I mean to underscore the spatial dimension of “para”—a prefix that describes not hierarchy, not linearity, but ad-mixture and adjacency. It designates, in my usage, the coming-together of various heterogeneous forms as well as the greater surround upon which the “literary” draws and within which it must be materially situated. In this sense, the paraliterary is a concept for thinking the worldliness of these texts, their simultaneous embeddedness in actual historical worlds (and thus in given forms) and their autonomy as artworks. That a slave narrative, sword and sorcery, and a Western—each distinct “para” literary genres—represent cultural forms within which certain histories are encoded means that when these genres are plucked out of their historical moment and re-inserted into another, their historicity (what we might call the historicality of their historical imagination) is, because of this gap, thrown into relief.

The chapters that follow are, therefore, organized according to the figures that each text uses to stage an experience of various historical events. And since historical events take place in time, “Repetition,” “Seriality,” and “Sedimentation” become differently figured ways for tracking how that gap between one historical moment and another is aesthetically (or formally) mediated.

So if this study is more inclined toward the “para” than the “post,” it is because the former suspends or complicates, or perhaps is just agnostic towards a linear temporality as such, while the latter, on the other hand, seems too constitutively bound to chronology. The “para,” because it refers to things placed in a relation of adjacency,
marks an ongoing and open-ended interaction wherein various temporalities can constellate. In suspending chronology the paraliterary also suspends causality and thus revises our understanding of literary production by asserting its generativeness in relation to the literary. More broadly construed, the paraliterary not only names what have come to be perceived as the largely disgraced cultural forms of “SF, comics, pornography, mysteries [and] Westerns.” It can also be used to refer far more expansively to the everyday cultural environment of modernity, everything from philosophical texts to grocery lists, ad-copy to email, music and cinema. In this larger sense it evokes the everyday materials out of which the seeming (or alleged) autonomy of the literary emerges. It is precisely in its privileging of adjacency, then, that the paraliterary reveals its essential function. Put differently, its externality to the literary rather than being perceived as belated to or after-the-fact of “literature”—which is preserved as a pure, uncontaminated site of “high” and elite cultural production—gives to the paraliterary the name for that which the “literary” actual is. As Samuel Delany so perceptively explains, “Today all art is marginal, and a far more appropriate model for any artwork is that which takes place in the margin. Thus the paraliterary arts, such as science fiction, may become a privileged model for analyzing the ways in which all art is

7 Delany, “The Politics of Paraliterary Criticism,” *Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts and the Politics of the Paraliterary* (Hanover: Wesleyan UP, 1999), 236. Delany’s essays/interviews and the movement of his thought—at once erudite, searching, feelingly exact and eloquent, generous and penetrating—are simply without comparison in the last third of the twentieth century.
produced, is disseminated, and functions.”⁸ It is important to underscore that for Delany marginality is not limited to peripheral cultural forms, but extends to, and is implicated in, the political situation of peripheral peoples—that is, peoples banished to the margins of “History.” Thus the real force of Delany’s use of the paraliterary is that it reveals the total collapse, in the realm of culture, between subordinated peoples and subordinated cultural forms. It exposes, in other words, the bias (which has real political effects) that upholds the distinction between the “paraliterary” and the “literary,” a distinction that implicitly confers onto what marginal peoples read or enjoy the status of a marginal cultural form; what peoples outside of “History” do, think, experience, feel, and desire is, by dint of this association with such peoples, thereby debased. In this broader sense, the paraliterary becomes something of a lexical-conceptual shift, canceling out the force that designating something “vulgar” (from Latin vulgaris, meaning “common people”) still has to render ugly, unsophisticated and morally degenerate that which comes from or attaches to everyday folk.⁹

But there is a further move to make that goes beyond Delany’s notion of “marginality” and its implicit critique of canonicity—that is, what is said to belong to the literary canon, what not, or, in Delany’s words, the “limited, value-bound

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⁸ Ibid., 172.
⁹ Raymond Williams defines the politics of “literature” along similar lines: “It is in no way surprising that the specialized concept of ‘literature,’ developed in precise forms of correspondence with a particular social class, a particular organization of learning, and the appropriate particular technology of print” (Marxism and Literature (Oxford University Press, 1977), 54).
meaning[s]” that determine the literary canon.\(^\text{10}\) It involves recognizing that the paraliterary describes less a classification of texts than a theory for rethinking all artistic production in an era of the “cultural turn.” This is the post-sixties era often defined by the historical processes of financialization, digitization, and globalization—each names not for abstractions but for a larger series of concrete strategies by which the Euro-American “first world” imposed its political and economic norms in the “third world,” a period thus marked as much by de-colonization as by its response, neo-colonization. In the first world especially, and in the United States and England uppermost, the 1970s and 1980s were a period of right-wing counter-insurgencies—authoritarian responses, it must be underscored, to the political social movements of the 1960s. Concomitant with a deregulated and unchecked spread of the capitalist world market meant, as Frederic Jameson has observed, that “the very sphere of culture” expanded into every dimension of collective life. This emergent era of post-modernity is, we might say, in place once “the cultural,” as he explains, “is no longer limited to its earlier, traditional or experimental forms, but is consumed throughout daily life itself, televisual forms of leisure, in production for the market and in the consumption of those market products, indeed in the most secret folds and corners of the quotidian.”\(^\text{11}\)

\(^{10}\)Delany, “The Politics of Paraliterary Criticism,” 240.

\(^{11}\) The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998 (Verso, 1998), 111. Later in this same essay, “Transformations of the Image,” Jameson writes that in a situation “where the sphere of culture expands to the point where everything becomes in one way or another acculturated, the traditional distinctiveness or ‘specificity’ of the aesthetic (and even of culture as such) is necessarily blurred or lost altogether” (111). In a more recent lecture (2012), entitled “The
But if genre increasingly becomes, like so much else, another object within an expanded “sphere of culture,” then it also increasingly becomes a resource available for artists beyond mere nostalgia or play. To assert a new status for genre as a cultural object is to highlight its increasing visibility in a period in which “culture” itself is elevated to a field of knowledge production. This new status of culture itself as a cultural object is why the readings in the following chapters put forth a materialist conception of genre. For the histories internal to genre and their development are not just matters of cultural history. They have become, under the conditions of this new historical moment, elements to be used in the production of new paraliterary forms. My use of paraliterary is meant to mark an historical moment, then, in which previously “subliterary” or “low” cultural forms become available as it were for “literary” appropriation. This includes a class of items made up not only of comic books, science fiction, pornography, popular music, detective and mystery fiction, and fantasy literatures, but also advertisements, literary and critical theory, letters and emails. But the narrative experimentations that emerge out of this new situation are not merely of a collagist sort, one typically associated with modernist practices. There, in figures like T. S. Eliot or John Dos Passos, even Richard Wright or William Faulkner, a different

Aesthetics of Singularity,” Jameson has argued that the expansion of acculturation in our own moment has its emblematic figure in the “curator,” as much a professional vocation as a symptom of how overwhelmed we have become by the vast clutter of late capitalism’s object world (http://townsendcenter.berkeley.edu/content/fredric-jameson-literary-theorist-critic). We might add that if the administered world was Adorno’s fear in one moment, acculturation might stand as Jameson’s within our own.
relation to pulps or formula fiction (detective or gothic formulas) and popular media forms (such as radio, newspaper, and cinema) is brought forward and put complicatily to work. Any close study of these writers, and of modernism as such, reveals, however, that popular cultural forms appear within their texts only as traces of an everyday object world or as instances of a kind of ironic subversion.\(^\text{12}\) They appear in the former sense as traces of an object world precisely because they cannot be canceled out under the conditions of modernity—their ubiquity becomes so relentless that they, as objects, call out for incorporation. In this view, mass society and mass culture emerge full-blown together, and the proliferation of commodities of all kinds is like so many shards in the everyday “fragmented landscape” of the metropolis.\(^\text{13}\) The great literary experimentations of this moment collect or, in Eliot’s elegiac sense, “shore up,” experiences otherwise being shattered by transitioning world systems, as nineteenth century imperial formations pass into new twentieth century forms of social and political life. Shifting modes of production, new cultural products and the shock of urban life, and an increasingly industrial and internationalized experience of war come to map, each in its way, something of the great transformations within the first decades of the twentieth century. The point is that the texts of this study appear in the aftermath of modernity’s built-world. Placed within this historical context, “Repetition,”


“Seriality,” and “Sedimentation” become overlapping figures for describing how each of these texts responds to their condition of *afterwardsness*.

### 1.2 A Late Cultural Turn

But if these are texts that would seem to be looking over their shoulders at the nineteenth century, they are not turning their gaze away from their own historical moment. The readings that follow draw out the larger and longer global situation specific to each text. Important to each of the chapters below is establishing how these texts enlarge the global or planetary scale of the genres they take up. In *Corregidora* the Portuguese part in the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade, *via* their foothold in Brazil, not only introduces a far larger continental dimension to the genre of the slave narrative, but also resituates the blues as a black American musical form within longer global imperial histories. In the Neverÿon series, the interruption of a modern day “gay plague” (which was what the 1980s HIV/AIDS epidemic was referred to in its first appearance) opens the series to a historical commentary on the metaphoricity of illness and Otherness within various moments of Euro-American modernity. And in *Blood Meridian* the “West” its characters ride through is so thoroughly littered with the deposits and markings of former peoples, empires, and life forms that the novel’s setting transforms the “American” desert into a graveyard of an ancient planet orbiting the sun. Thus these are texts that expand the genres they take up in ways that are radically different from the
worldview typically associated with them. For if paraliterary forms always implicitly encode certain historical problematics, these texts forcefully make them explicit. My readings therefore attend specifically to the formal and thematic global dimensions of these texts. What is exemplary about them, and why they belong together, stems from their constant allusions to the larger worldly dimensions of their particular narratives. There is a past—a history of forms, a history of violence, a history of struggle—that shapes the story worlds of each of these texts.

The global dimension to these texts returns us to the question of *afterwardsness*. In what precise sense, in other words, are these “late American fictions?” Of course, marking them as “late” is a critical gesture that aligns in certain respects with Jameson’s major theoretical work, *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). Postmodernism, according to Jameson, is defined primarily as an expression of a global expansion of multinational capital in the moment of post-modernity, a “late” phase within the historical trajectory of capitalist-colonialist modernity. Since a globalizing multinational capital penetrates all things, Jameson argues that the world of postmodernism is a world without “nature”: “Postmodernism is what you have when

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14 Capitalist-colonialist modernity is not the language that Jameson, nor Mandel, would use. For Mandel, the historical stages of capitalism are market capitalism, monopoly capitalism, and multinational capitalism (this last being the historical present of his own time of writing). For Jameson, what is crucial, is the existence of this historical narrative on which he then superimposes, in a very Lukácsian way, the “high” literary movements of realism, modernism, and postmodernism.
the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good.” But if what is meant here is precisely the “cultural turn” of the period following the 1960s, then the emergence of an American-led multinational capitalism in the 1970s marks the latest phase of an historical moment in a double sense. It is “late” in terms strictly of capitalist development, but it also “late” in terms of marking an emergent cultural tendency in which American writers begin recomplicating the inheritances of their artistic forms.

This new aesthetic-compositional orientation toward the foundness of cultural objects was, of course, already there in Marcel Duchamp’s “readymade” (1913) or in T. S. Eliot’s citational poetics. As discussed above, such aesthetic practices are so many emblems of what we now designate as modernism’s distinctive appearance within the history of art. But what lateness means for the purposes of this dissertation relates in a certain sense to what the avowedly post-modernist writer John Barth—that is, a writer fully aware of his afterwards vis-à-vis modernist forms of experimentation—suggested, in a famous 1967 essay, “The Literature of Exhaustion.” Here “exhaustion” means, as Barth explains, nothing so tired as the subject of physical, moral, or intellectual decadence, only the used-upness of certain forms or exhaustion of certain possibilities — by no means necessarily a cause for despair. That a great many Western artists for a great many years have quarreled with received definitions of artistic media, genres, and forms goes without saying: pop art, dramatic and musical ‘happenings’, the

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15 *Postmodernism* (1991), ix.
whole range of ‘intermedia’ or ‘mixed-means’ art, bear recentest witness to the tradition of rebelling against Tradition.\textsuperscript{16}

It is to be, on the one hand, under the spell of what has come before and, on the other, to be animated by a belief that what has come before has not gone far enough (“rebelling against Tradition”). Artworks that knowingly extend or exceed formal conventions are in effect expressions of a will to take a form as far as it will go under the pressures of a specific historical moment, which is to say, within the situation of its own time. What marks Corregidora, the Nevèrýon series, and Blood Meridian is the way in which each signals their awareness at appearing at something like the end of a genre’s long historical sequences. As Adorno has suggested, artworks, are historical in a special sense. “Important artworks constantly divulge new layers,” he wrote, “they age, grow cold and die.”\textsuperscript{17} We might add that since inherited traditions constitute themselves, in the realm of the artwork, as genres, then genres too “age, grow cold and die.”

A fundamental claim of this dissertation is that Adorno’s concept of “late style” can be extended to refer as much to the kinds of developments that occur in relation to the histories internal to a genre’s formation as to the works of an individual writer. But because a concept of late-style is tied to Adorno’s theorizations of Beethoven’s late works, most notably his late sonatas, the term is often restricted to investigations that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} John Barth, “The Literature of Exhaustion,” The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984), 64-65.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Aesthetic Theory, trans. R. Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1997), 4.
\end{itemize}
involve a certain biographical aspect, which Adorno attempts rigorously to ward off by way of dispensing with what he calls mere “subjectivism.” 18 But how, one comes to wonder, does late-style become a concept for thinking the “enigmatic” turn an artist takes in relation to a stage within the life of an art form rather than simply the result of an encounter with one’s own mortality? 19 This relation of a revisionary belatedness with respect to an art form is possible because, as he writes, artworks are themselves historical. What he is after, which is crucial for the purposes of this study, is understanding the difference between an artist’s “radically personal stance,” which exists as the sine qua non of “style,” and what an artist inherits in terms of tradition. The latter is where, for Adorno, history forcefully and ineradicably enters, in the “the role of conventions.” 20 Further, following Barth, rejecting “Tradition” is of course not new in the history of the artwork. What helps to illuminate the singularity of the texts of this study, rather, is the kinds of histories that become available, and which these texts take up, once genre’s “used-upness” creates the conditions for re-figuring its “possibilities” (Barth).

Indeed, for Adorno, late-style is intended to capture artists “who pushed integration to the extreme” and who, like Beethoven in his last works, showed what

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19 Ibid., 124.
20 Ibid., 124.
Adorno calls a “compulsion toward disintegration.”\textsuperscript{21} Adorno, in a famous passage, writes:

[Beethoven] no longer draws together the landscape, now deserted and alienated, into an image. He illuminates it with the fire ignited by subjectivity as it strikes the walls of the work in breaking free, true to the idea of its dynamic. His late work still remains a process, but not as a development...The fragmented landscape is objective, while the light in which alone it glows is subjective. He does not bring about their harmonious synthesis ... [but] tears them apart in time, perhaps to preserve them for the eternal. In the history of art, late works are the catastrophes.\textsuperscript{22}

With the utmost subtlety, Adorno is attempting, as he puts it, to “[illuminate] the contradiction whereby the very late Beethoven is called both subjective and objective.”\textsuperscript{23}

Of course, this seeming contradiction between the simultaneity of subjective and objective dimensions of “style” is a contradiction as well when perceived from the perspective of genre and form. If the social and historical dimension of the artwork is to be found in its relation to “conventions,” then those very inherited forms are precisely the materials to which Adorno alludes when he calls “the fragmented landscape” of modernity “objective.” The point is that the refusal of resolution (“harmonious synthesis”) that Adorno finds in Beethoven’s late works is not a tendency that is finally unique to Beethoven alone, but to late-style as a moment in the capacity of a genre (in this case, the sonata form) to make itself available for “disintegration.” Late-style, from

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 45.  \\
\textsuperscript{22} Beethoven, 126.  \\
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 127.
\end{flushright}
the point of view of form, needs to be extended to describe more than an individual artist’s orientation to form. The texts of this study indicate the need for a concept as well of late-genre.

As Edward Said puts it, “Late style is in, but oddly apart from the present.”24 It is grounded in the objective historical situation, and exists in relation to its materials, traditions, and forms, but it is not reducible to them. Negotiating the objective and subjective conditions of the artwork is why Adorno emphasizes “breaking free” as a singular instance implicit within the “idea” of the form (in Beethoven’s case, the sonata); it is not “development” that is achieved in a teleological sense with respect to the form, otherwise the very historical sequence that includes Beethoven would thereby terminate itself and bear no serviceable descriptive function for later artists, like Schoenberg or Webern, that Adorno also thinks of in relation to what he calls the “enigmaticalness” of late style. I draw out a concept of lateness in this way in order to make clear that the texts of this dissertation, while unmistakably a reflection of the “style” of Gayl Jones, Samuel Delany, and Cormac McCarthy, are also each instances in which such “style” fully registers itself in the way each narrative disrupts the expected harmonies of their genres. Corregidora, if a slave-narrative, refuses the assured reconciliations of the form, moving instead toward the worked-over repetitions of the blues; the Nevèrŷon series complicates sword and sorcery’s historical temporality by inserting into the genre’s

mythic past the barbarism of a present-day New York City; and *Blood Meridian* transforms the conventions of the Western so thoroughly that the novel ends with the triumphant eternal dance of “the judge,” a figure whose acculturation, we might say, is precisely emblematic of his capacity to both commit heinous acts and present them as beautiful episodes in the history of the race.

### 1.3 Late American Fictions

But does “lateness,” a late work, a late period, a late-style not inadvertently smuggle chronology back into the account of how the historical present of these texts links to and can be explained by their historical pasts? What is the concept of “history” in the texts of this study if it is not seen as linear or causal? The organization of this dissertation into chapters that explore Repetition, Seriality, and Sedimentation is intended to address how *Corregidora*, *Nevèrýon*, and *Blood Meridian* negotiate various histories and various pasts, constellating not only their own story world’s historical narrative, but also the relation of their own historical present to the longer histories their stories tell. That these texts break with a nineteenth-century notion of history as a single secular narrative of rationality and progress is crucial to understanding the paraliterary forms to which they turn.

In Chapter 2 “Repetition / Ursa Corregidora’s New World Song,” I trace out in the story that *Corregidora* tells the complicated ties between biological generation and
aesthetic production that result from the first-person narrator’s personal and historic injuries. The interruption of continuity with which Corregidora begins, namely with Ursa Corregidora’s fall down a flight of stairs and her resultant hysterectomy, introduces an epistemological, historiographic and aesthetic problem to her physical incapacity to reproduce. If for Corregidoran women the imperative is “to make generations,” then “Repetition” becomes a figure for understanding how Ursa Corregidora reconceptualizes and reconfigures what making means—specifically, what carrying her maternal line’s slave past forwards means—for a blues songstress. Her hysterectomy (“a barbed wire where a womb should be”), while an embodied biological situation of total constraint, permits her to cultivate her inner-capacities as a blues performer in exquisitely innovative ways. Put in these terms, Ursa’s injury would seem redeemed. But as W.E.B. DuBois made clear in his study of black sorrow songs, whatever their beauty, they are no consolation for the historical horrors at their source. They may lift one up and carry the possibility of hope in them—being the durable records they are of a people having done more than merely survive real historical violence—but they are not in themselves capable of changing the source conditions that gave rise to them as artworks. What they carry forward—in this chapter, the blues uppermost—is the historicity of that struggle. If what song and story offer is the possibility of hope, it is a hope as vital for the individual as it

25 James Snead famously puts the importance of “repetition” within black culture in terms of a “cut” that keeps the West’s historical “illusion of progression and control” from overwhelming its ontologies. He writes, “Black culture, in the ‘cut,’ builds ‘accidents’ into its coverage, this magic of the ‘cut’ attempts to confront accident and rupture not by covering them over, but by making room for them inside the system itself” (“On Repetition in Black Culture,” African American Review 15.4 (Winter, 1981), 150).
is for the polis. Ursa’s art breaks free from the assumption that “history” must follow a fixed authoritative mode. In turn, her narrative demonstrates how a different order of repeating inherited forms—familial, generational, cultural or national—produces a different relationship to one’s historical present.

In Chapter 3 “Seriality / Allegory and Historicity in Return to Nevèrýon” I closely attend to Delany as a reader and critic of sword and sorcery. While the seriality that Delany deliberately draws upon—that of the fantasy and science-fiction pulps of the 1920s and 1930s—has something akin to an antecedent in the serial form of novels and of other kinds of fictive, poetic, and essayistic modes of the nineteenth-century, the kind of seriality he deploys in the Nevèrýon series evokes its emergence, more specifically, within a moment of mass society at the outset of the twentieth century. Sword and sorcery and fantasy genres are each in their way responses to this shift between a nineteenth-century popular culture and a twentieth-century mass culture. Seriality, as this chapter shows, becomes at once a figure for and a description of Nevèrýon’s break with a concept of a linear, progressive history. It therefore allows Delany’s narrator to build his characters and their story world over time and from various shifting narrative perspectives. This sense of the layering of time and of the expansion of scale is accomplished formally in the way the series moves from short stories to a full novel back to short and long stories as the series completes itself. The effect of this larger serial structure, which unfolds over the course of eight years (1979-1987), is that it comes to prioritize a “world” over a “character.” Indeed its major correction to a linear and
progressive historical sequence may lie precisely in the way that it rejects a belief in the subject’s sovereign capacity individually to change his or her world, or to exist in a sacred way at the center of it. Rather, in positing a world in which characters are constantly foregrounded and backgrounded, and in which different levels and territories of that world are now examined, now left behind, “Seriality” comes to mean that in building a character and a world other characters and other worlds proliferate such that the possibility of positing a singular, total picture of the world becomes not only no longer conceivable, but also, and more importantly, no longer desirable. This aesthetic commitment to overlapping temporalities and intersecting worlds helps to explain how the Nevèrÿon series comes to interrupt Delany’s historical present, its “outside” world intervening upon the “inside” of the text.

The final chapter of this dissertation, Chapter 4 “Sedimentation / Late-Style in Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West,” focuses upon the way this novel presents itself as if it were at the end of something. What it is actually at the end of is hard to name in part because the novel returns us to an accumulation of so many “Wests” never before imagined by a Western. Which is to say that it is not the end of the “frontier” that is being dramatized—neither is it the end of an American expansionist desire, which simply cannot be the case for a novel written in 1985. Rather, reading Blood Meridian involves understanding how the variation of the genre that one is encountering within the novel cannot not be read as re-enacting scenes novelistically from the vantage
of the Western’s various former lives, its longer past in the nineteenth-century dime novel and its more recent cinematic uptake within the twentieth. The effect of this layering of multiple pasts and various historical temporalities produces something of an afterimage of the genre. “Sedimentation” is my name for the gorgeously baroque layerings that the novel produces, layerings that the novel uses to describe what it calls the “sentience” of its world, which penetrates down to “the very sediment of things.”

But to clarify more specifically what is at stake in this dissertation requires turning to one of the most singularly demonstrative instances in the texts gathered below. It is a scene toward the end of Blood Meridian in which one of its central characters (“the judge”) lectures their scalp-hunting gang on paleontology for the second time. On this occasion, the lecture is precipitated by the judge’s discovery of “a great femur from some beast long extinct that he’d found weathered out of a bluff” in the near-by environs of their desert camp.26 The judge plays the professor’s part to the gang, “amplifying their own questions for them,” and hands over to them “that pillar of stained and petrified bone” so that they may apprehend by touch “the temporal immensities of which the judge [had] spoke.”27 I highlight this passage in order to give a dramatic correlative to what I will be arguing that each of these texts provides distinct occasions to do—that is, to imagine or apprehend specific “temporal immensities.” My readings of these historical fictions thus turn in each case on one such incident that

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27 Ibid., 251.
simultaneously fulfills a certain narrative and thematic function and refers itself far more expansively to thinking the historical past and those formal-aesthetic-discursive formations that enable an apprehension of it. That incident in *Corregidora* is a late moment in Ursa’s narrative when she recomposes the slave narrative that has come before into the structure of a blues novel; in the Nevèrÿon series it is the moment when we, no longer readers of sword and sorcery, are made to cross its story world’s “bridge of lost desire” into a 1980s AIDS-ravaged New York City; and in *Blood Meridian* that incident involves what it means to “See the child” (or the putative protagonist who is named “the kid”) after nearly two centuries of the Western genre’s formation, namely, over the course of its print (or “dime novel”) as well as its cinematic variations. The wager, then, in my readings of these texts is that genre, like some “stained and petrified bone”—some residual structural support abandoned by time and memory—can bring to our own historical imagination’s touch lost things or forgotten things that might amplify the possibility of living differently or other-wise in our own historical moment.

Attending to the histories of paraliterary genres, in other words, makes visible (or apprehendable) the historicity of our own present’s historical imagination. Repetition, Seriality, and Sedimentation therefore become, in the pages that follow, various ways to name the ongoingness of the late-twentieth century’s historical present and to track how three American writers turn to specific paraliterary forms in order to reimagine the *longue durée* of American empire.
Repetition / Ursa Corregidora’s New World Song

2.1 “Building Up” A Blues Aesthetic

There are in every part of the world [individuals] who search. I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny. I should constantly remind myself that the real leap consists in introducing invention into existence.
— Frantz Fanon

In a very real sense, every writing as revision makes the discovery all over again.
— Hortense Spillers

Music is wounded kinship’s last resort.
— Nathaniel Mackey

Rather late in Gayl Jones’s 1975 novel Corregidora, the first-person narrator and protagonist, Ursa Corregidora, interrupts her narrative with the following bold and forceful interjection, “Well, what this is all building up to.”¹ At this moment, and nearly at the end of the novel, Ursa is acting decisively in her narrative function, signaling the kind of novel that she is making as a blues singer. Breaking with what has narratively preceded it, her use of “building up” shifts at this moment from a novel about a blues singer to a narrative that, in appropriating a blues form in its final scene, transforms into

¹ Gayl Jones, Corregidora (Beacon Press 1975), 180. I use first-person and protagonist to describe Ursa Corregidora’s complicated narrative function within the novel. While it is in one sense “her” narrative, we are never quite contemporaneous with her as a narrating subject. She does not end her narrative within the temporal parameters of the novel—that is, the novel ends on a scene taking place in 1969, but her reference to the 1971 blaxploitation film Shaft, places her outside of its temporal frame and stated chronology. She is, in other words, non-contemporaneous with us as readers. As a first-person narrator, Ursa is a special case: on the one hand she is narrating scenes of her own life as though she were within them and on the other revealing herself to be assembling them at a distance we as readers cannot pinpoint.
what Gayl Jones calls a “blues novel.” ² Ursa in this instance is strategically repeating her narrative insofar as the effect of this intrusion is to make her entire preceding narrative now seem directed towards the staging of the novel’s final scene. That scene, as we learn, involves a re-encounter between Ursa and Mutt Thomas, her first husband, after a twenty-two year separation. The cause of their separation, which turns on Mutt’s responsibility in Ursa’s “fall” down a dark flight of stairs (and whether, in the language of the novel, it was an “accident”), is the traumatic event on which the novel opens. What Ursa’s narrative intrusion makes clear is that the novel’s drama is not solely defined or driven by Ursa’s separation from Mutt and what we learn of its attendant violence. Indeed, this is a novel bound up in the aftermath of her and Mutt’s separation, but, while it is a version of a “man-done-her-wrong” theme, it is far more involved in depicting a deeper background against which they both must be seen as historical subjects.³ For what Ursa’s “blues novel” makes clear—and why it is a novel neither about the blues nor about a blues singer, but rather transforms into a “blues novel”—is that the everyday and the world-historical are interpenetrating dramas. As a result of her “fall,” Ursa loses her womb and cannot “make generations” according to a biological-genetic imperative that her maternal line imposes upon her as a Corregidoran

³ Gayl Jones quoted in Veronica Chamber’s “The Invisible Woman Reappears—sort of” (Newsweek 131, 1998), 68.
woman. Thrust, then, into a complicated barrenness, Ursa as a blues singer must invent and revise on her own terms, and in her own voice, the historical situation she has inherited.

Ursa’s inheritance is a nineteenth-century Brazilian slave past and, as her “Gram” will say, the burden of having to carry the “evidence” of it having occurred (22). Her maternal line—that is, her “Great Gram,” her “Gram” and her “Mama”—are three generations of “Corregidora women,” the possessions, offspring, and concubines of the Portuguese/Brazilian slave master, “old man Corregidora.” Ursa descends from an ancestral past of the African diaspora in the Americas, and she is the first generation born outside of that horrifically incestuous and violent mix that defines the Atlantic slave trade and its plantation-based slave economies. But if her maternal line’s story evokes the genre of the slave narrative—recounting the horrors of slavery and an improbable flight to freedom—Ursa’s story takes another form, as she must learn both how to live with this past and how, in her own voice, to tell it. By shifting its focus on the problem of living with the aftermath of slavery’s past, Corregidora brings the conventions of a slave narrative into a different historical moment, re-figuring flight and freedom in the form of a blues novel. At both a formal and thematic level, its novelistic “reckoning with time”—that is, with the various historical temporalities that Ursa

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4 Corregidora, 22.
5 “Great Gram,” “Gram,” and “Mama” are the names used within the text, which has the effect of marking them at once as intimates (and kin) as well as fixing them in their biological functions. This has the effect at once of marking them as intimates (and kin) and of fixing their relations more firmly to what they each insist Ursa must do, “make generations.”
inherits—disrupts the idea of origins and complicates pure lines of descent, emphasizing that how the story is told—its layerings, its pacings; what it emphasizes, what it does not—comes to inform how one lives in the present. Thus Ursa’s “reckoning with time” is aesthetic and historical. It is, as Ursa’s narrative intrusion suggests, a commitment to thoroughly “building up” what is broken and injured inside of her into the much larger minor totalities that a blues aesthetic makes available by means of story and song.

But Ursa’s use of “building up” is not an expression of a developmental or progressive logic intended to redeem her own life or Mutt’s, or even the lives of her maternal ancestors. Instead, “building up” points to a different conception of history and an intensification of historical experience. By intensification I refer to how a singular instance can be elaborated on or suspended in order to trace out all of its concrete relations within the *longue durée* of historical time. Breaking a single historical instance (or sequence) free from its inscription into a progress narrative of “History” is to open up that instance to its historicity—to its non-relation to historical succession. The novel’s thematic attention to instances of brokenness and injury, to incidents of loss and to memories that overwhelm if not haunt the present, has its formal correspondence in its numerous stylistic disruptions, from stream-of-consciousness like flashbacks to the broken syntax of dream states and fevers. The novel in formal and stylistic ways continuously opens Ursa’s narrative to real and symbolic instances of emptiness: Ursa’s hysterectomy and her ensuing convalescence, her divorce, her desolate social world, her
hollowed out childhood, her strained relationship with her mother, and the haunting silence of a Brazilian historical archive that was burned so that no “document,” beyond the fragments of family memory, could record the systematic crimes-against-humanity (as we would now say) committed by Portuguese slave-masters. But if Ursa’s narrative present is interrupted by various historical temporalities, the effect of their intrusion neither occasions the mourning of the past as a lost object nor suggests that a traumatic past will forever remain “unclaimed.”* Corregidora in fact boldly rejects a model of trauma that places traumatic historical events beyond figuration.

*Corregidora* insists upon the blues as one mode for figuring (or perhaps “fingerling” in Ralph Ellison’s sense) the intensely paradoxical and ongoing effects of a traumatic “wound.” By paradoxical I refer to the way in which a wound, whatever tragedy or brutality is at its source, can give rise to the highest beauty. From Ecclesiastes to the Romantic poets, the interrelationship between brutality and beauty is an enduring dimension of Western poetics. The Jamaican-American writer Michelle Cliff has formalized such a poetics in this striking way: “Captive people have a need for song.” More conceptually, *Corregidora* shows that a distinction must be maintained between “trauma” as noun—that is, as a sealed off event whose appearance in the present is

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tantamount to a haunting—and “traumatic” as an adjectival form which, disencumbered from the discourse of trauma theory, serves to name horrors big and small, intensively historic and unrelentingly banal, to which the blues as a musical form emerges as a cultural response. The novel in its turn to the blues (both in terms of theme and form) offers a different way of figuring the multiplicity and ongoingness of traumatic experience, refusing “trauma” its rhetoric of impasse. My point is that the blues does not moralize or render concrete judgment. It speaks rather from inside the grey zones of individual intentions and their long lasting, hard-to-predict effects. Because of its formal suspension of judgment, the blues acts as a counterforce to the rhetoric of “evidence” and “blame” that proliferates throughout the novel. In its affirmation of attributes or tensions unresolved, the blues refuses the smoothed-out surface of historical resolution, depicting instead a temporally complex drama of forgiveness. The blues as a paraliterary form—that is, as a genre that is not itself “literary” but which is nonetheless an expressive cultural form—offers a set of conventions for registering the problem of global and intimate trauma as a problem of forgiveness. The blues signify throughout the text as a mode of breaking with the repetition complex central to the discourse of trauma theory. The blues aesthetically represents a different order of repetition, namely, what Giles Deleuze has called “repetition with difference.” Repetition, then, is a crucial dimension of a blues aesthetic as it formally allows “difference” to emerge out of the appearance of sameness.
The novel dramatizes the Corregidora past, in one sense, as an experience of sameness. An account of Corregidora’s plantation became something of the soundtrack of Ursa’s childhood, a past she was made to listen to and told she would one day have to retell. It is out of her resistance to these conditions and the loss of her womb that the novel shows how a new historical situation requires a new aesthetic response. Thus Ursa will say, “Everything said in the beginning must be said better than in the beginning.”

She is asserting that her narrative (at the level of its formal organization) is much like the blues she sings, for to each the past represents a problem for and of genre and form. This statement represents a poetics that is as relevant to her blues songs as to her novel. Nothing to the blues songstress or to a narrator of a blues novel can come ex nihilo, but neither can it remain in the world unchanged. But “something must be said better” does not mean the nullification of what comes before; neither does “better” confer an absolute value onto what is secondarily produced. In this sense, it is a kind of ars poetica directly related to afterwardsness and thus aesthetically describes the novel’s “reckoning with time.” It also summarizes Ursa’s historical sense, which, in prioritizing innovation, perfectly captures the aesthetic priorities of a blues novel.

Those aesthetic priorities are intimately tied to specific histories that Ursa cannot leave in the representational form in which she received them. Ursa’s narrative takes up the “blues” because the modifications it introduces to her Corregidora past, if sorrowful,

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7 Note that the text graphically sets off moments of Ursa’s internal speech (or statements) by italics.
refuse defeat or despair. *Corregidora* becomes a blues novel when its historical sense (as a novel) adopts an historical form (“the blues”) in which a paraliterary genre’s inherent insights and formal protocols are thematically revised. *Corregidora*’s orientation to the historical past requires a corresponding formal commitment to a special order of repetition, one which builds revision (and restatement) into the repeated line or the repeated event such that in its later occurrences what is said again becomes a different statement. In this sense, a blues novel rejects the past, the present, or the future as successively ordered temporal phenomena. Rather, *Corregidora* attends to the built-up affect of historical time, the ways complicated historical processes persist as unfinished and ongoing experientially. It thus refuses the historical sense constitutive of either an historical novel or an historical romance—each generic templates in which “History” is at once reserved for Western European and Anglo-American peoples and fundamentally progressive and smooth. *Corregidora* treats neither the past as a finished thing, as in the historical novel, nor the present, as in modernism, as a unique impasse. This disruption of presumed historical continuities or of a progressive succession of historical periods is a central concern of the novel. In complicating the relation binding past and present, Ursa’s “building up” signals her narrative’s internal revision of its own specific histories—a “repetition” that ensures the past is not merely said again but “said better.”

If the novel’s first series of disruptions involves Ursa’s break with Mutt and its immediate aftermath—her injury, their divorce, her taking up with another man—her
“fall” throws her into deeper losses, cutting her off from her capacity to “make generations” as a Corregidora woman. This incapacity to bear children because of her “wound” has profound existential and historiographic implications. Existentially, Ursa will be cut off from a specific biological and generational form of futurity. She will be able neither to reproduce her biological line nor to pass on her family story. The psychic effects of this existential situation alone are enormous. Historiographically, Ursa’s wound will come to relate to the “wounded kinship” of the entire American continent and its plantation-based colonial order. This latter formulation of “wounded kinship,” which I borrow from Nathaniel Mackey, speaks directly to Ursa’s historical situation as a Kentucky blues singer and now “barren” black woman alone at the margins of the twentieth-century (6).

Framed by the years 1947-1969, Ursa’s narrative must be placed within a period characterized by an American hegemony that emerges after the Second World War. The novel’s narrative present, then, occurs during two decades in which the world was decisively shaped by the cold war broadly but more specifically by the shape and ambitions of U.S. economic and military power. It is a span of years that diversely indicate McCarthyism and the Korean War, a Civil Rights movement, decolonization struggles in the former European colonies, Black Power, an anti-war movement, and the Vietnam War. And yet, except for a reference to “afros” and to Shaft—each symptomatic

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of an historically emergent political and cultural militancy among black youth in this period—Ursa’s narrative inventories nothing of these world-historic events. But within the broader historical temporalities the novel traces, these developments are not so much minor events to the stories Ursa tells as points that would need to be plotted along a much larger, epochal mapping of historical time and continental colonial geographies. Ursa, in this sense, would seem to be living out her own kind of “American” century on the periphery of the twentieth-century’s global event, the cold war. But such a view can only be maintained were we to misapprehend the significance of her as a descendent of New World “mulatto women,” who is alternately thought “gypsy” or “Spanish” but affirms emphatically that she is “American.” Including her in a lineage of African-descended women in the Americas whom the experience of captivity turned into “concubine daughter[s]” affirms her place not at the margins of the twentieth-century but at the center of historical processes that have been underway for centuries.10

Ursa’s maternal genealogy—that is, the lives of her Mama, Gram, and Great Gram—is unimaginable outside of an historical conjuncture of the Atlantic slave trade, New World colonization, and Imperial economies that resulted in the production of new “world” subjects. The novel’s introduction to the Portuguese/Brazilian plantation owner (“Old man Corregidora”) who “fathered” the Corregidora women is as the master signifier—the author/authority—of this historical conjuncture. In introducing him and

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9 Corregidora, 60, 8, 70, 71.
10 Ibid., 54.
the horrors he oversaw, Ursa’s narrative spares none of the vernacular violence implicit in such historical processes:

Corregidora. Old man Corregidora, the Portuguese slave breeder and whoremonger. (Is that what they call them?) He fucked his own whores and fathered his own breed. They did the fucking and had to bring him the money they made. My grandmama was his daughter, but he was fucking her too. She said when they did away with slavery down there they burned all the slavery papers so it would be like they never had it.11

The stunningly additive way in which Ursa’s narrative builds up “Corregidora” into the full force of his terror and tyranny captures the novel’s commitment to reconstructing the broken (“wounded”) kinship relations of her diasporic American origins. The proper noun “Corregidora” is placed on the page as if it were, in its first appearance, a complete statement, subject and predicate both, and yet a term which, because of what it signals, cannot be permitted to stand on its own. More than a family name, it marks her maternal line once having been his property, and beyond marking them as property, “Corregidora” evokes an entire epoch of “burned” histories.12 Its invocation thus requires a patient, calculated accumulation of actual Grammatical units—a single word, a phrase, a parenthesis—before a full sentence has enough ground beneath it to unfold the at once intimate and vast symbolic Grammar of New World slavery. For as a

“Portuguese seaman turned plantation owner,” “Corregidora” names an entire history of

11 Ibid., 9.
12 Note that Ursa is not a “Corregidora” woman in the strict sense that Corregidora was not her father, but her great grandfather and grandfather both. Ursa’s father is “Martin,” a man whom she knew nothing of growing up.
empire, a vast “New” worlding project by an old world imperial state. Nearly six centuries of Portuguese imperial expansionism are dramatically condensed into the proper name of this “slave breeder and whoremonger,” with the most violently intimate consequences of this expansionism (“fucked” and “fathered”) mapped onto a global scale.\(^{13}\) Everything turns on Ursa’s recognition that her blues singing and her blues novel must “give witness” to those histories otherwise struck from the historical record and without which her own singularity as a new world subject could not be the grounds for story and song.

That her barrenness imbricates her in such broader historical temporalities explains why Ursa and Mutt’s separation and divorce is not as central to the novel’s unfolding drama as her having to live with the aftermath of its effects. She must learn to get on and make her way injured and alone. Much of the novel, until Ursa’s narrative intrusion, entails her efforts to regain a “voice.” To do so involves her working through—overhearing and learning how to restate—the intrusion of voices in her that are not her own. They are the overlapping voices of her Mama, Gram, and Great Gram reciting events that were supposed to be passed down verbatim. But Ursa’s intrusion (“Well, what this is all building up to”) breaks with the accumulated drift of these pasts and suggests a different orientation to the present. The summarizing sweep of this narrative intrusion thus has a disruptive force, “breaking free” as an artwork, as Adorno

\(^{13}\) Portugal was the first imperial state to colonize Africa, establishing a settler colony in Ceuta in 1415, and the last to leave its African colonial possessions, Angola and Mozambique, which declared their independence in 1975.
might put it, in an objective and subjective sense: objectively from the given story of her ancestral past and subjectively from the narrative she herself has told about her incapacity to forgive Mutt Thomas, her former husband. It is as if by means of this narrative intrusion an unexpected generic form were being introduced and with it a ready-made destiny for Ursa. Prior to this moment, Ursá’s narrative appears to be following the generic arc of a “romance” in which lovers, after a series of dramatic ordeals, are miraculously reunited. For a narrative that has hardly followed so conventional a course it seems incongruous to suddenly impose the promise of Ursa and Mutt’s reconciliation. Mediating this reconciliation is why a blues form intervenes. But while Ursa and Mutt resume a former intimacy in the novel’s final moment, the structure in which this intimacy is registered refuses them the comforts or guarantees of a happy ending. Instead, at the very end of the novel the incommensurabilities that had imperiled them from the beginning of their relationship remain problematically in place:

[Mutt:] “I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you,” he said.
[Ursa:] “Then you don’t want me.”
[Mutt:] “I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you,” he said.
[Ursa:] “Then you don’t want me.”
[Mutt:] “I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you,” he said.
[Ursa:] “Then you don’t want me.”

15 *Corregidora*, 185.
The appearance of this passage at the end of the novel is enormously complicated, and I will return to it over the course of the chapter. But I cite it here for two reasons. One is that the distance separating who they are and what they can give is nowhere more lucidly performed. On the surface of this exchange, they would seem to be articulating positions entirely irresolvable—Mutt expressing a desire that Ursa says she cannot be trusted to satisfy. Since nothing between them is finished or promises the surety of redemption, their exchange breaks with the logic of a “final” scene. All that we know when the novel ends is that they are back at the Drake Hotel, where they had lived twenty-two years ago (“It wasn’t the same room, but the same place. The same feel of the place”), and that they will need to begin again if they are going to start over. To put it in such terms—that is, “to begin again in order to start over”—is intended to elucidate a formal paradox implicit in the way repetition is deployed in this scene: for while they may appear to be simply repeating the same lines, the effect of its cumulative repetition is to change the meaning of what they say each time they say it.

But another reason for highlighting this scene is that in Ursa and Mutt’s exchange the differences they represent are articulated in the special dialogic form of call and response—a harmonic structure characteristic of the blues.16 This capacity to register and affirm multiplicity and difference is a determining feature of a blues aesthetic. In

16 Much of the novel’s critical attention understands Mutt and Ursa’s final scene to be structured in a call and response blues mode or a blues duet. My reading differs, however, in its attention to the way in which the blues here are figured as the enabling condition for an (impossible) reconciliation that is, finally, left unresolved. For a general reception of the final scene, see Claudia Tate (1979), Joyce Pettis (1990), Ashraf Rushdy (2001), and Donia Elizabeth Allen (2002).
commenting on her use of the blues in *Corregidora*, Gayl Jones underscores this open-ended and polyvalent aspect of the blues as a formal structure:

The relationships between men and women I’m dealing with are blues relationships. So they’re out of a tradition of “love and trouble”—but I don’t really have a general view of any of those things. I don’t have any general view of women blues singers or of the relationships between men and women. But there is a relationship between “Deep Song,” which is a blues poem, and *Corregidora*, which is a blues novel. Blues talk about the simultaneity of good and bad, as feeling, as something felt. In the poem, “Deep Song,” how do people react to the words “good” and “bad”? I think people have just as much attraction to the line “Sometimes he is a bad dark man” as they do the line “Sometimes he is a good dark man.” It has to do with meanings and things having a lot of different meanings at once. The last line is “I love him.” It isn’t “But I love him.” I think that’s important because it has to do with being, and it doesn’t set up any territories. It doesn’t set some feelings off into a corner. “Sometimes he is a good dark man. Sometimes he is a bad dark man. I love him.” It acknowledges both things. Blues acknowledges all kinds of different feelings at once. How do we know, for instance, that “Sometimes he is a bad dark man” isn’t really a repetition of “Sometimes he is a good dark man”? That’s what interests me. Ambiguity.17

“Simultaneity,” “different meanings,” “ambiguity”—the blues as Gayl Jones appropriates it provides her with both a theme and a formal structure in which, as she says here, “repetition” can produce similarity out of differences and, with equal force, differences out of similarity. It is this latter effect—differences produced out of seeming similarity—that describes the intensely complex force of repetition within Ursa and Mutt’s final scene together. In terms of what it both obscures and reveals, it is therefore urgent to note that Jones, in affirming that the “Blues acknowledge all kinds of different

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feelings at once,” establishes “love” as crucial to a blues aesthetic. As Jones notes, her poem ends not with a negating “but.” Instead, love serves as a formal element, which, by keeping incommensurability in place, allows the “blues” to figure the complex relations between historic subjects. As a result of its specific historical emergence, the blues fulfills an even greater historiographic function: it brings into visibility through song the lives and situations of those peoples who have been long denied a place in “History.” And it is in the way the blues attends to such a broader mapping of historical differences that we can begin to understand why a mode of formal revision is a persistent feature of its aesthetics.

Jones suggests this power of the blues to map the historical complexities of feeling. She identifies the “blues” as a discursive-rhythmic field of shifting form and content. If “blues relationships” for her include specific (as opposed to what she calls “general”) “relationships between men and women,” they also include specific generic articulations that make “the simultaneity of good and bad, as feeling, as something felt,” elements that can be adapted to a poem or a novel. She eschews making a universal claim about blues relationships (“I don’t have any general view of women blues singers or of the relationships between men and women”) while simultaneously insisting upon

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18 We should hear a distinct evocation of such subjects in Jones’s reference to the penultimate lines of her “blues poem,” “Deep Song,” in which the poem’s speaker writes, “Sometimes he is a good dark man / Sometimes he is a bad dark man.” Such a paradoxical couplet not only gets at the basic disjuncture organizing a blues form but also has us contemplate the basic historical disjuncture concerning the formulation “dark man.” Does “dark” mean brooding or pensive? Can “dark man,” in other words, index an actual ontology that is not reducible to stereotypical ascriptions of blackness? The blues, as Jones notes, opens up such necessary and ongoing ambiguities and therefore “voices” the historical problematic of a “dark” presence of non-Anglo Americans and non-European Americans within the United States.
the specificity of the blues as a connection between her “blues poem” (“Deep Song”) and her “blues novel” (Corregidora). But she regards neither the form (ambiguous repetition) nor the content (“love and trouble”) of the blues as timeless or eternal, but contingent. The blues respond to specific historical instances and specific historical contradictions. In Corregidora, the importance of this historical specificity involves both Ursa’s turn to the blues as an escape from her childhood home and Jones’s appropriation of the blues into the thought-world of a 1975 novel. Corregidora appears within a Black Arts, Black Power milieu that privileged a jazz form (mostly urban, mostly male) as the avant-garde mode of black aesthetic production.\(^\text{19}\) Within this context, Corregidora’s attention to a rural female blues singer is significant as much for the minor history it tells as for the risks it takes in telling it.

If a blues aesthetics, as Jones suggest, has the capacity to orient us in time (by means of a specific mode of repetition) as well as in history (by means of keeping paradox and difference in place), then by “novelizing” the blues Corregidora is able to re-situate its seemingly marginal characters at the center of world-historic processes.\(^\text{20}\) By “novelizing” I refer to a key theoretical insight into the genre of the novel by Mikhail Bakhtin. He understands the novel as a literary form constituted by the social discourses

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\(^{19}\) One marker of the way in which jazz had become valorized during what we might call the long 1960s—that is, from the ascendency of Bebop in the 1950s to the rise of the avant garde through the 1970s—is how frequently jazz forms (its a-harmonies; its notion of the ensemble) are taken up by an experimental poetics and prose that aspired to create out of language the ecstatic time passages of jazz. Amiri Baraka, Ishmael Reed, Michael Harper (Gayl Jones’s mentor at Brown University, where she received her creative writing degree), and Henry Dumas, to name only a few prominent figures of the Black Arts period, are demonstrative here.

\(^{20}\) See *The Dialogical Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Press, 1982).
and narrative modes it internalizes. The novel is therefore not a timeless set of conventions but wholly specified by its tendency to assimilate proximate discourses within the socio-cultural field. It is because of this dual capacity of the blues to situate us in time and in history that Ursa’s narrative intrusion above decisively marks the novel’s passage from a novel about a blues singer to a “blues novel.” The “blues” enters the novel in order to disrupt the telos normatively inscribed into the genre of the slave narrative, which is supposed to end in freedom, and the genre of the historical romance, which promises the restoration of its world’s social order. But Corregidora is not a novel of a great escape from one’s slave master, as a slave narrative proposes. If the ending of Corregidora signals anything at all about Ursa and Mutt’s future it is that they still have far more work to do to free themselves from the limitations—social, interpersonal, politically and economically—they have inherited from their respective slave pasts. But neither is Corregidora a novel of extraordinary heroes and heroines, of improbable or fantastic adventures. Romance conventions, as they have come down through Western European and Anglo-American literary traditions, do not prevail in Corregidora. For this is not a novel that ascribes to “love” the reconciliatory powers it has come to have in a Western European and Anglo-American novelistic tradition. Corregidora, instead, concerns lives rarely granted the reconciliation constitutive of the romance genre’s symbolic closure. As a blues novel its comportment towards “love” and “forgiveness” extend along a different trajectory. Corregidora breaks with the conventions of both a
slave narrative and a historical romance in order to trace the accumulated histories of twentieth-century afro-diasporic lives.

2.2 The Global Context of A Blues People

_Corregidora_ gathers black working-class peoples in Kentucky from the 1940s through the 1960s together with Afro-Brazilian enslaved men and women and their Portuguese slave masters in the 1870s and 1880s. Across continents and centuries, the novel constellates lives that are diversely “American” and distinctly “New World.” These lives are held together, on the one hand, by the forward and broadly chronological movement of Ursa’s narrative, which moves amid the years 1947-1969, and on the other, by a backwards movement in time involving what Ursa recalls having learned from her Great Gram, Gram, and Mama about their Brazilian slave past. The stories her maternal ancestors tell her concern “old man” Corregidora’s Brazilian slave plantation from the 1870s until Great Gram, Gram, and Mama flee him (and Brazil) in 1906, settling shortly thereafter in rural Kentucky. Ursa is thus the descendent of three generations of black women either owned or fathered by Corregidora, a “Portuguese seaman turned plantation owner.”

“Brazil” as a locus of Ursa’s maternal origins is important as it opens the door to thinking continentally and epochally. Brazil, however, is mentioned only once in the text; the more common national sign within the narrative is “Portuguese.” The presence of

21 _Corregidora_, 10.
Portuguese over Brazil exposes a contradiction in the way that modernity is typically conceptualized. In one sense, her Great Gram and Gram’s insistence on calling old man Corregidora Portuguese as opposed to Brazilian would seem to be in keeping with a narrative that locates the origins of modernity in Europe. But in another sense the novel’s consistent use of Portugal over Brazil unmasks the false unity of a singular colonializing “Europe.” The insistence on “Portuguese” and “Portugal” keeps alive the specificity of Portuguese colonization in South America in contrast to other European colonial models elsewhere in the Americas and the Caribbean.

It is within such an expanded global context that Ursa’s burden as a Corregidora woman intersects with her troubles as Mutt Thomas’s wife. The various histories intersect in deeply generational and historical ways as a descendent of Corregidora’s plantation and more biographically as a young black woman not knowing how to negotiate her own needs and desires when she has been taught since childhood to want, as she puts it, “[w]hat all Corregidora women want. Have been taught to want. To make generations.”22 But her incapacity to do so now (“a barbed wire where a womb should be”) enables a new desire, which she expresses as a desire to create a “new world song”: “I wanted a song that would touch me, touch my life and theirs. A Portuguese song, but not a Portuguese song. A new world song. A song branded with the new world.”23 Staged within a specifically “new world” context, Ursa’s desire expansively casts the lives most kindred to her as the lives of black diasporic subjects. Theirs is an experience as

22 Ibid., 22.
23 Ibid., 59.
Corregidora women that is composed of the most brutal private memories, but it is also an experience that has a structural dimension that is constitutively of the new world.

Ursa’s desire is to produce an aesthetic structure (a “song”) that can mediate private and public, that can enable various worlds and various global scales to “touch.” She wants, in other words, a new world song for an expanded historical and geographic conception of a “blues people.”

In her movement from an “I” statement (“I wanted a song”) to a collective statement (“my life and theirs”) no single term is made subordinate. Each term is enlarged by its contact with the other term such that “my life and theirs” and “A Portuguese song, but not a Portuguese song” become reconfigured. In her desire to “touch my life and theirs” Ursa is not reaching for synthesis. No totalizing or subordinating relations are intended to exist between terms. The formulation “A Portuguese song, but not a Portuguese song” captures this absence of subordination or subsumption. Ideas, feelings, and histories are added up and made to intermix. Ursa’s extraordinary crystallization of her desire as “A new world song” is not offered as the resolution of a seemingly contradictory logic of “A” and “not-A” but rather draws upon the persistence of paradox as means for producing expansive tonalities, atmospheres, and tempos—allowing the most minimal chords or lyrics to conjure a whole epoch. “A new world song” thus enables us to imagine how the new world’s conditions of Atlantic plantation slavery gave rise to “blues relationships” (Jones). In her desire to produce a

“new world song” Ursa is seeking a way to inscribe afro-diasporic lives into the histories of “blues peoples.”

Ursa and Mutt’s troubles—his violence towards her, her aloofness towards him—are not therefore figured as merely biographical, idiosyncratic features within the novel. They are viewed from the perspective of an Afro-diasporic historical framework and its historiographical absences. These are absences that have resulted from the interrelated processes of the creation of an African diaspora of generations of enslaved laborers within the Americas (from the mid-sixteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century) and the fact of their obliteration as historical subjects within its official archives. The “blues,” as Ursa takes it up, attempts to correct such absences. Her “song” thus performs a symbolic historiographic function in seeking to document those lives and histories otherwise unrecorded. Ursa’s declared desire to produce a new world song is thus an effort to draw out the role the Portuguese played in opening up West African ports to European traffickers in African men and women. While the Spanish were the first to import slaves into the “New World”—that is, into their early Caribbean colonies—in the sixteenth-century, the Portuguese colony of Brazil was the single largest destination of enslaved African peoples from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries. Such an expansive historical scope justifies viewing old man Corregidora as a metonym for historical processes as alive in Ursa’s historical present as our own. Thus attending to an afro-diasporic framework means specifying how Ursa’s and Mutt’s
separation immediately implicates her and her narrative in a series of tragedies that cannot finally be understood as personal or private, or even accidental. Her fall down a flight of stairs no doubt ends in a massively traumatic individual “wound,” but the symbolic implications of her loss extends into orders of time, at once generational and epochal, that throw her seemingly private and minor worlds into global histories of empire, New World slave-labor economies, and societies still structured by these pasts.25

The real and symbolic effect of Ursa’s hysterectomy is that she, a young black woman in late 1940s Kentucky, is blocked both from having children and from passing on the stories of Corregidora to future generations. Since she cannot “make generations,” she cannot reproduce the “evidence” her Great Gram, Gram, and Mama tell her she must in order to bring judgment against Corregidora’s crimes of rape and incest. Her Great Gram instructs her, when Ursa is only five years old, to vouchsafe everything she is told: “And I’m leaving evidence. And you got to leave evidence too.

25 My argument does not neglect the presence of such global histories of empire within traditional novelistic romances—that set of generic conventions against which I want to suggest we read Corregidora. Surely in Samuel Richardson and Jane Austen, for instance, as two early British exemplars of the genre, the drama of courtship and seduction, and of improbable “love,” takes place amid such historic temporalities, but the concrete appearance of such histories takes place off stage and is thus phantasmatic. It must be underscored that the “romance,” in its generic constitution, privileges the “privative” by sealing it off from larger orders of time. The romance indicates an orientation to time that is organized around the lives of individual lovers and not around the collective generational or epochal movements of history. The latter being so difficult to render, we might say that the novel needs the invention of a first-person narrator in order that generational memory might serve as a way to emplot orders of time simply otherwise unimaginable to human consciousness. One version of the work that the traditional romance does is to build up subjects narratively, which is to say over time, in relation to merely private dramas and not expansively collective events. “Love” within the generic parameters of the romance therefore posits not a subject of history but an (historical) subject who is not in need of history. Putting it this way is not merely to affirm that the romance papers over an at bottom violent rending of the “public” and the “private” on which post-Enlightenment bourgeois social and political norms are founded. It is to suggest rather that the romance carries forward a construction of “love” that cannot lend to peoples forcefully banished from history the same satisfactions it guarantees to those at its center.
And your children got to leave evidence. And when it come time to hold up the evidence, we got to have evidence to hold up. That’s why they burned all the papers, so there wouldn’t be no evidence to hold up against them” (14). Her Gram, however, casts Ursa’s burden differently. Gram will tell her: “The important thing is making generations. They can burn the papers but they can’t burn conscious, Ursa. And that what makes the evidence. And that what makes the verdict.” (22). With the repetition of an indeterminate “they” here and throughout the novel, Great Gram and Gram point to a phenomenon larger than what they individually experienced on Corregidora’s Brazilian plantation. The referent to “they” is a broadly historical one, alluding at one and the same time to Corregidora and his wife, to the administers of the Brazilian state who ordered the annihilation of facts pertaining to slavery and the slave trade, and, at a more symbolic level, to every other slave master throughout the Americas.

Gram’s use of “conscious” above must be read within the context of this broadly American situation. For in its adjectival form, it describes an active mental state, an orientation to events that she has lived through and suffered from but for which there exists no official documentation. “Conscious” in this context is not improper grammatical usage from an uneducated non-native speaker of English, but rather the use of language in a far more complicated sense. Her use of it acts as a symbolic injunction for Ursa, demanding that Ursa keep alive an active engagement with what she has undergone so that Ursa can activate whenever necessary “evidence” Ursa has
been given to carry. Figured as a capacity to remember, “conscious” here signals a mode of actively living with the past. It is not meant to indicate a way of relating to the past as if it were a settled and closed thing. It is not a consciousness of what happened on Corregidora’s plantation that Gram asks from Ursa, but rather she is telling Ursa to remain conscious to its afterlives and to the future forms its documentation might need to take—forms that may extend beyond the oral story-telling in which Ursa received it. Gram here breaks with a language of “evidence” that both Great Gram and Mama strictly imposed. To Ursa’s mother especially, the “evidence” they have been made to carry brings with it a Christian logic of Judgment Day:

“You got to make generations, you go on making them anyway. And when the ground and the sky open up to ask them that question that’s going to be ask. They think it ain’t going to be ask, but it’s going to be ask. They have the evidence and give the verdict too. They think they hid everything. But they have the evidence and give the verdict too. You said that, Mama. I know I said it, and I’m going to keep saying it.”

Their storytelling to Ursa and the storytelling she is enjoined to continue is entirely premised on the force of accumulated memory: “You said that, Mama. I know I said it, and I’m going to keep saying it.” The implication is that Ursa, too, must “keep saying it.” It is precisely this instrumental relation both to storytelling and to a specified function of her “voice” that Ursa rejects. What she finds in the blues is an aesthetic mode that suspends “judgment,” but still remains, as Gram urged, “conscious” of experiences that must be testified to and histories that must be kept alive in new forms.

26 *Corregidora*, 41.
So while the blues on one level of the text mediates the outcome between Ursa and Mutt, keeping “alive” what she and he still need to work through, it also names an antagonism at a deeper level between Ursa and her maternal ancestors (Great Gram, Gram, and Mama). This antagonism involves in part her determination to become a blues singer, but it is an antagonism intensified by the fact that she cannot “make generations” in the strict sense that her Great Gram, Gram, and Mama have raised her thinking she must. Making generations thus involves an inheritance that is premised as much upon reproduction as upon a certain logic of repetition. Indeed she was raised in an environment in which, as a child, she was subjected routinely to a narrative regime of “telling”:

*Always their memories, but never my own. They slept in the bedroom and I slept on a trundle bed in the front room. An old slop jar behind their bed. I can remember how high the bed looked when I was sitting on the slop jar. Big enough to hide behind. The two women in that house. The three of them at first and then when I was older, just the two of them, one sitting in a rocker, the other in a straight-back chair, telling me things. I’d always listen ... They kept to the house, telling me things. My mother would work while my grandmother told me, then she’d come home and tell me. I’d go to school and come back and be told.*

The proliferation of forms of the infinitive “to tell”—that is, “telling,” “told,” “tell”—indicates how continuous and total this regime was. “Always their memories, but never my own,” Ursa says, concisely naming how enduring her diminishment must have seemed. Their voices and “their memories” formed the constant and determining feature

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of “that house,” more prison as Ursa describes it than home. But against the relentlessness of “their memories,” Ursa will eventually come to compose her own response to her Corregidora past. Ursa will come to reject the construction of a pure, fixed past that “their memories” take, which Ursa’s entire being is meant merely to confirm and preserve intact as “evidence.” Since she can neither invent upon nor escape “their memories,” narrative constraint and self-constraint for Ursa become one and the same. Ursa notes this collapse between narrative and self-identity when Mama seems to transform into Great Gram when telling one of Great Gram’s stories:

It was as if she had more than learned it off by heart, though. It was as if their memory, the memory of all the Corregidora women, was her memory too, as strong as her own private memory, or almost as strong. But now she was Mama again.28

The richness of this passage lies in its power to condense what Ursa opposes in her inheritance of “their memories.” While in one sense Ursa’s opposition to her foremothers would appear generational, what is finally at stake is a difference involving their respective orientations toward their own historical present. This difference comes into focus most clearly in her conflict with her mother. While her mother—who thinks of the blues as “devil music” and who maintains that “the voice is a devil”—may be inclined toward this view given her preference for singing “Christian songs,” her real objection to Ursa’s blues singing has its source in a more philosophical difference.

between them. The basis of this difference surfaces midway through the novel, when Ursa seeks out her mother’s “private memories” — those experiences of her mother’s not attributable to the events that took place on Corregidora’s Brazilian plantation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Their difference is profoundly captured in the following exchange:

[Mama:] “Corregidora’s never been enough for you, has it?” she asked
[Ursa:] “No.”
[Mama:] “I thought it would be.”
[Ursa:] “What happened with you was always more important. What happened with you and him [Ursa’s father].”
[Mama:] “Corregidora’s responsible for that part of my life. If Corregidora hadn’t happened that part of my life never would have happened.”

Ursa responds to her mother’s final statement by asking, “Wouldn’t it?” With this remark Ursa interrupts her mother’s recourse to “Corregidora” as though it were “enough” not simply to account for past events, but also to determine all future ones as well. Might Ursa’s mother and father have had problems remaining together even if not for Corregidora, and if they had, what would then have explained their troubles? While Ursa’s “Wouldn’t it?” suggests such a troubling line of inquiry, her tone is certainly more empathetic than defiant, more conciliatory than condemning. Whatever disdain Ursa might feel towards her mother she buries with the following remark: “I wanted to ask her if their past could really have had so much to do with her own, but I just kept

\[29\] Ibid., 146, 53, 103.
\[30\] Ibid., 111.
watching her."31 Here Ursa seems simultaneously to underscore how differently oriented she is to “their past” and yet how attentive she still is to its effects. Ursa is objecting to “Corregidora” as first cause and master signifier. She rejects also the moralism that attaches to her mother’s account. It is a view that Mama shares with Great Gram, a view personified in the photograph of old man Corregidora that Great Gram smuggles out of Brazil “so we’d know who to hate.”32 Intolerable to Ursa is the finalized form “Corregidora” takes, functioning as if the name alone were a fully mapped and completed narrative, which, in many respects, for her Mama, Gram, and Great Gram, it had become. Ursa’s narrative, in part, must be understood as her attempt at escaping the conception of history “Corregidora” marked out for her like a cage dropped down from above.

If in one sense Jones opens the novel in a situation in which Ursa has miscarried the future, then in this scene above, half-way through the novel, Ursa is beginning to recognize that in carrying the past forward differently she opens herself not to a present that repeats a past awaiting its fulfillment, but to a present whose awareness of itself enables new forms to emerge. In other words, as a result of Ursa’s incapacity to “make generations,” Ursa must not only reconceive her own historical present but also revise her relation to her own future. As a result of her incapacity to have children, she develops a different relation to generation as such and to its associations with other

31 Ibid., 111.
32 Ibid., 10.
cognate terms, like gender, genre, and genesis. Her own origin and womanhood (“Now, what good am I for a man?”), her own turn to the blues as a way to “give witness,” her own desire for a “new world song” — these each emerge as distinct and decisive responses to the void that has opened within her. It is as if her “fall” and the disruptions it brings commits her to having to understand a personal and historical crisis that has in fact been long underway and awaiting her, but a crisis she seeks not so much to escape but to innovatively revise.

But in order to understand why her incapacity to “make generations” implicates her in so vast a crisis, we need at least a minimal sense of how the blues, for Ursa, enables her to “give witness,” as she will say, as singer and as storyteller. From a narrative and compositional point of view, the drama of Ursa’s narrative lies in the way the blues are shown to help her attend to the crises signaled by the proper names “Corregidora” and “Mutt.” Keeping Ursa’s construction within the text as a blues singer (on one level) discrete from her function as a first person narrator of a blues novel (on another level) is one of the challenges of reading Corregidora. But doing so is crucial to a fuller understanding of why the paraliterary form of the blues is taken up by a novel that tells the ongoing global and intimate histories that “Corregidora” represents and organizes. Ursa’s refusal to mimic the version of the past she has inherited means that she seeks a way to voice that inheritance differently. Her capacity to do so requires a
formal commitment to revision that the blues, aesthetically and historiographically, provides.

The blues is formally aware of its embeddedness in its own past. It incorporates, in other words, its own revisions into its form. Take, for instance, the often standardly repeated first line in a blues stanza, the lyrical core of the blues as a musical idiom. Its function is in fact a special kind of repetition. By repeating a line and saying (or singing) the thing again neither the thing nor the speaker remains the same. It enables a return that can never be a return to the same thing nor to the same person who once spoke it even if the line itself repeats. As Ralph Ellison observes, repetition in this formal sense has an historic resonance: “Perhaps in the swift change of American society in which the meanings of one’s origins are so quickly lost, one of the chief values of living with music lies in its power to give us an orientation in time.”

33 Black music, as Ellison suggests, gives an “orientation in time” that reflects an experience of living amid the flux of various American social realities. If we add Ellison’s “orientation in time” to Fredric Jameson’s description of the novel as “a way of coming to terms with a temporal experience that cannot be defined in advance or indeed dealt with in any other way,” a blues novel comes into view as a form for dealing specifically with an expansive

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33 Ellison, “Living with Music” (1955), Shadow and Act, 198.
“temporal experience” not just within Ellison’s “American society” but with the still unfolding histories of the new world.34

But the blues are not exceptional in what I am calling their embeddedness in their own past, if by this we understand embeddedness to mean the way an aesthetic practice knowingly cites, appropriates, and even steals works adjacent to it. All forms of folkways and popular cultural practices acknowledge their mixed paternity even as they claim orphanage. What I am after is the singular kind of revision in which the blues as a musical form makes possible. But such repetition is often understood narrowly with respect to its internal musical structure or to its development and dissemination as a received tradition—even in terms of practice and fluency. In terms of its musical form, repetition in the blues refers to how lyrical or instrumental structures recur and in so doing build up specific harmonies and rhythms. Repetition refers as well to the way the blues developed into a set of recognizable conventions. According to a dialectic of repetition and revision, blues standards are constantly improvised on at the level of chordal arrangements and lyrical content. Thus a blues composition came to belong, in both an artistic and proprietary sense, to whoever sang it. Possession in such a context meant more a state of being inhabited by a song than a proprietary right over its destiny. While it is important to focus on the interrelationship between repetition and revision within a blues aesthetic in order to understand how the blues function in Corregidora, I

34 Jameson, The Prison-House of Language, 73.
want to isolate something distinct about a blues aesthetic that is not strictly reducible to its musical elements, performance histories, or migratory patterns.

In an interview a few years after publishing *Corregidora*, Gayl Jones alludes directly to the blues as a practice of repetition and revision. In it she explains that listening to Billie Holiday was part of what she calls the total “environment” of her compositional *process* (the latter a word she emphasizes throughout the interview) while writing the novel. She explains,

> But everything has to happen to me in the process of doing it. Sometimes I know how a story will end. And I know certain things I want in a story, certain scenes, certain relationships, etc. But there are all those ‘in process’ things. I remember you [M. Harper] said poetry is about process. Storytelling is about process, too. But I have no particular method. I always like everything to be different. I have always liked everything to work itself out differently. If I’ve done something, I don’t like to do it again. Why do something again when you’ve already done it? Why say something the same way again? Why sing something the same way twice? I’m thinking about Billie Holiday here, of course. That’s the tradition. I like to change a tune.  

In Jones’s description poetry, storytelling and the blues are all related in their commitment not only to “process” but also to repeating tradition in a revisionary way (“That’s the tradition”). The blues in her account becomes akin to “storytelling.” What must be underscored is that “storytelling” in terms of a blues tradition involves a historiographic dimension.

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35 Harper, 697.
As *Corregidora* demonstrates, it is precisely in the absence of official historiography that the “blues” emerges as a critical cultural form of expressive documentation. Against Great Gram’s dictates about “leaving evidence,” Ursa will declare: “Then let me give witness the only way I can. I’ll make a fetus out of grounds of coffee to rub inside my eyes. When it’s time to give witness, I’ll make a fetus out of grounds of coffee. I’ll stain their hands.” Ursa is responding to her mother’s condemnation of the blues as “devil’s music.” Against her mother’s objection to the blues, Ursa affirms its capacity to reinvent if not revivify their coffee-plantation past (“a fetus out of grounds of coffee”). Following Mackey, the blues for her becomes a “form of social and epistemological dissent” at once against the professed teleology of her household (where “voice” was instrumentalized as “evidence”) and against the silence of the historical record (where her family history had been erased). The act of creation Ursa understands herself involved in is not described passively, as in to “bear” witness, but rather appears in the far more agential language of giving, as “to give witness” states. The blues gives her a form to keep alive or invent connections that have been brutally severed or altogether lost. Gram insists that Ursa keep the “wound” that Corregidora inflicted on them “as visible as [her] blood.” Ursa “gives witness” to this wound when she sings that in her “veins centuries are meeting.” In a novel that aspires to have its language register the

36 *Corregidora*, 54.
39 *Corregidora*, 72, 45, 46.
feeling of the blues, Ursa’s lyric also registers the genre’s historicity. For there is a history embedded in Ursa’s desire to sing a “new world song.” In its desire to capture what is “Portuguese and not Portuguese” it seeks to restore the possibility of newness to the “new” world, which “old man” Corregidora and the “Mad Portuguese” perverted with their “genital fantasies” and “sex circuses.” What remains of that desire is lodged within her at once as a sound beyond language and yet more intensely evocative than any word: “That old man still howls in me” (46). Screams, shouts and laughter, moans and wails—all those voicings disparaged as illegitimate, “blue” notes here become a matter of testimony. What the official archive failed or refused to register, black music sang, itself its own archive.

In its formal commitment to making what is subjectively lived collectively shared the blues performs something of a historiographic or archival function. Ellison, for instance, has emphasized the public performance as a primary dimension of the blues: “The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain … As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.” In one of her early interior monologue, Ursa shows how her desire for a “new world song” aligns

40 Ibid., 59, 125.
41 It is crucial to emphasize that “making generations” within the novel stands as a practice Michel Foucault has referred to as “counter-memory.” Ursa’s desire for a new world song must be seen as an expression of a collective need to remember those lives and events stricken from the historical record. Further, given her incapacity to “make generations” and fulfill an archival function in that strict sense, her desire for a “song” that would capture the experiences of her ancestral past takes on greater urgency.
42 Ellison, “Richard Wright’s Blues” (1945), Shadow and Act, 78.
with what Ellison calls “an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed
lyrically.” She says,

I took one of my iron pills. I swallowed it and closed my eyes. I wanted a song
that would touch me, touch my life and theirs. A Portuguese song, but not a
Portuguese song. A new world song. A song branded with the new world. I
thought of the girl who had to sleep with her master and her mistress. Her father,
the master. Her daughter’s father. The father of her daughter’s daughter. How
many generations? Days that were pages of hysteria. She went and got her
daughter, womb swollen with the child of her own father. How many
generations had to bow to his genital fantasies? They were fisherman and
planters. And you with the coffee-bean face, what were you? You were
sacrificed. They knew you only by the signs of your sex. They touched you as if
you were magic. They ate your genitals. And you, Grandmama, the mulatto
daughter, when did you begin to feel yourself in your nostrils? And, Mama,
when did you smell your body with your hands?43

This is a different “orientation in time” than what the historical facts alone might give.

Here Ursa, a wounded blues singer, takes a received family story and lyrically
redescribes it as “[d]ays that were pages of hysteria” (14). Great Gram becomes a “girl
who” and Corregidora, unnamed, is signaled by the generic markers of “father” and
“master,” his “genital fantasies” as much his own as built into the very structure of the
colonial project. In this manner of impersonal movement a kind of distant historical
reflection moves over the whole of it. Indeed, a historiographic reversal occurs over the
course of its sweep as they, the colonial masters, are here figured as fetishizers of
“magic” objects (“They touched you as if you were magic”) and cannibals (“They ate
your genitals”).

43 Corregidora, 59.
The longue durée that Ursa captures here (“How many generations had to bow to his genital fantasies?”) evokes Amiri Baraka’s observation that “it is impossible to say exactly how old blues is—certainly no older than the presence of Negroes in the United States. It is a native American music, the product of black men in this country; or to put it more exactly the way I have come to think of it, blues could not exist if the African captives had not become American captives.”\textsuperscript{44} Certainly it is the experience of American captivity (“of days that were pages of hysteria”) that gives the genre of the blues, as an aesthetic form, its descriptive historical force. Mississippi bluesman Booker White put it into extremely material terms, saying: “The foundation of the blues is working behind a mule way back in slavery time.”\textsuperscript{45} In emphasizing “slavery time” as its “foundation,” White helps bring what Ursa herself will say about the blues into historical focus: “It helps me to explain what I can’t explain.”\textsuperscript{46} The blues does not retain the historic experience of captivity as a static explanatory fact. The blues brings forward, revises, and through this revision makes past experiences of captivity contemporaneous with an historical present in which formal emancipation brought little more than false freedoms to the masses of black folks. Writing of blues performances as multiply situated, Houston Baker reminds us of the kinds of disjunctures that a blues aesthetics

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\textsuperscript{44} See “Swing—From Verb to Noun,” The LeRoi Jones Amiri Baraka Reader, ed. William J. Harris, 21.
\textsuperscript{45} Cited in Baker, Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory (University of Chicago, 1984), 8. Ursa’s presence in the United States south (Kentucky) is what is formative to her development as a blues singer and not necessarily her ancestral slave past. Were she to have landed elsewhere within the African diaspora of the Atlantic and Caribbean Worlds, she could have become a singer of son (Cuba) or reggae (Jamaica) and have produced a much different “new world song.”
\textsuperscript{46} Corregidora, 56.
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simultaneously is founded on and figures, “Standing at the juncture, or railhead, the singer draws into his repertoire hollers, cries, whoops, and moans of black men and women working in the fields without recompense.”47 If the blues for Baker is mostly a spatial metaphor or trope (in his words, a “matrix”) by which marginality is figured and thereby made a privileged place for artistic creation, I want to emphasize the repeated generic “repertoire” upon which Baker’s blues man “draws.” In fact, such appropriation is much more properly (and generatively) temporal, and thus historical. The “hollers, cries, whoops, and moans” make the historical present in which the blues singer emerges—that is, the early decades of the twentieth century—resonant with a longer and thus still ongoing historical situation, especially as tenancy and sharecropping were widespread strategies used from the 1870s through the 1940s to maintain an African American underclass in the U.S. south.

If the blues has its foundations in “slavery time” (or, for the Corregidora women in “genital fantasies”) this is because its “repertoire” of sounds were structured by an experience of plantation slavery. The blues in carrying these sounds and feelings forward therefore carries within itself the internal histories that gave rise to their formation. This is why the blues are more an accumulated mood or feeling than an accumulation of notes. They cannot be empirically reduced to a sequence of chords or of what more generally are referred to as “blue notes.” Rather, the blues involves distinct

47 Baker, Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature, 8.
sounds and voicings, what Amiri Baraka refers to as the “sliding and slurring effects in Afro-American music, the basic ‘aberrant’ quality of a blues scale.”\textsuperscript{48} Such aberrance in the voice, for Baraka, must be understood with respect to a different valuation of the voice and the different historical urgencies to which it gives lyrical expression. What is non-normative to a European classical musical form in its voice (or voicings) is one way to mark the different historical sense the blues embeds. It revises—aesthetically manners—what Euro-American norms have regarded as the deviancy of black English or its corollary, the pathology of black life. This is especially relevant for understanding it as a response to the already given, known, seen forms of blackness trafficked in by a post-emancipation early-twentieth century American society that routinely engaged in racial violence and all manner of official strategies to dispossess African Americans of personhood and citizenship. Its repudiation of “white” bourgeois American norms made the blues a mode of black working-class vernacular dissent and, in this respect, a kind of (cultural) politics and “counter-memory”—that is, “aberrant” historiographically as well. What Baraka isolates as a “middle-class spirit”—and scandalizes as the incoherence of those African Americans “who were beginning to move toward what they could think of as citizenship”—marks the movement away from what he calls the “older blues.”\textsuperscript{49} In this formulation, the “older blues” is less an essentialist claim about

\textsuperscript{48} “Swing—From Verb to Noun,” 27.
\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Ibid.}, 33. My emphasis. Baraka’s observation is remarkable for how forcefully it exposes “citizenship” as a profoundly impoverished category for imagining what freedom might mean within an actually existing democracy.
black peoples than an argument about the distinct oppositional forms to which an
experience of blackness gave rise. Baraka’s insistence on the “older blues” brings into
focus the fact that a black radical tradition has always been an expression of an
aesthetics that strays or deviates from official culture. Within such a context, the blues
were deemed a “low” cultural form by the often assimilationist sensibilities and politics
of African American writers, artists, and intellectuals involved in the 1920s Harlem
Renaissance. Of the most prominent figures of the Harlem Renaissance only Langston
Hughes broke with this sentiment, incorporating the blues into his poetics and going so
far as to fictionalize the life of a blues singer.\footnote{Angela Davis importantly notes, citing the work of scholar Cheryl Wall, that Hughes “was not only ‘the
first writer to represent the figure of the blues woman in literature [in his first novel, Not Without Laughter
(1930)], [but] no comparable representation would appear in the fiction of black woman in literature for
decades to come’” (xiii). Davis follows this with a list of contemporary black women writers who have
fictionalized blues women in their works. That list includes Toni Cade Bambara, Gayl Jones, Sherley Anne
Williams, and Alice Walker. See Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie
Smith, and Billie Holiday.}

It is at once within and against the above historical descriptions of the blues that
we must read the appearance of Ursa Corregidora. Most studies of the blues take the
blues singer as male and its themes of traveling and itinerancy, of lives at the “juncture,”
as normatively masculine.\footnote{Baker writes, “To suggest a trope for the blues as a forceful matrix in cultural understanding is to
summon an image of the black blues singer at the railway junction lustily transforming experiences of a
durative (unceasingly oppressive) landscape into the energies of rhythmic song” (Blues, 7).}

In her incomparable study of the blues, entitled \textit{Blues Legacies and Black Feminism} (1998), Angela Davis affirms this standard view of the blues
singer as “a solitary wandering man accompanied by his banjo or guitar.”52 But Davis contrasts this view and its thematics with women’s blues, whose emphasis she writes were fundamentally the consequences and contradictions of “love and sexuality.”53 The novel’s portrait of Ursa Corregidora in this sense reclaims the women’s blues as an important mode of attending to the complicated, and paradoxical aspects of love and sexuality. Ursa’s story, moreover, returns us to a particular milieu of working-class communities and female blues singers during the early to mid-twentieth century. While the female blues singer is often marginalized within studies of the blues, Ursa and the experiences that structure her “voice” are placed here at the center of the novel.54 The themes Ursa takes up in her songs put her in the company of many of the significant female blues singers of this period who are in fact referenced within the novel: Ma (Gertrude “Ma” Rainey), Lady Day (Billie Holiday), Ella Fitzgerald, and Della Reese. She cites, moreover, a number of traditional blues standards, popular in these years—such as “Trouble in Mind,” “Open the Door, Richard,” “See, See Rider,” and “The Broken Soul Blues”—that she incorporates into her performances. Situated within a genealogy of women’s blues, Ursa’s blues performances can be thought to contribute to what Angela Davis calls the “predominant postslavery African American musical form” (5).

52 See Davis, 11. Her study approaches the blues Rainey, Smith, and Holiday sang and composed as transcripts of the “unacknowledged traditions of feminist consciousness in working-class black communities” as it emerged over the course of the early to mid-twentieth century (xi).
53 Ibid., 11.
54 I draw here upon Davis’s argument regarding the marginality of women blues singers within scholarly accounts of the blues. (See especially, 42-90.)
One reason for its predominance was that few public modes of self-expression were available for poor working-class black women. The blues therefore gave such women access to domains either exclusively male or reserved for “respectable” middle-class women. The classic blues market of the 1920s emerged into an enormous black entertainment industry for this reason. The phenomenal commercial popularity of Bessie Smith during this period earned her the title, “the Empress of the blues,” a title as descriptive of her material success as her virtuosity. When placed within this historical moment we can begin to apprehend how formative it was for a young Ursa Corregidora to hear records of, say, “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith on Gram’s “Victrola” breaking with what was an otherwise continuous sheet of sound in which her maternal ancestors spoke only of “Corregidora”:

> What was their life then? Only a life spoken to the sounds of my breathing or a low-playing Victrola. Mama’s Christian songs, and Grandmama—wasn’t it funny—it was grandmama who liked the blues. But still Mama would say listening to the blues and singing them ain’t the same. That’s what she said when I asked her how come she didn’t mind Grandmama’s old blues records. What’s a life always spoken, and only spoken?  

The Victrola breaks the spell of “a life always spoken, and only spoken.” Ursa realizes in this moment that the blues gives her a voice with a power far greater than speaking and a life that is more than routine. Relatedly, Ursa later affirms, “They squeezed Corregidora into me, and I sung back in return,” and, at another moment within the text, she notes, “It

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55 *Corregidora*, 103.
seems as if you’re not singing the past, you’re humming it.” The point in pairing these statements of hers within a broader context of the blues (and within an instance of its novelization) is that each of these statements richly illustrates her awareness that her response to being a Corregidora woman meant finding her own manner and style to “voice” its inheritance.

Her “aberrant” (Baraka) uptake of Corregidora is structured by a blues aesthetics. The bodily violence, the sexual exploitation, the “wound” Gram says Corregidora put in their minds, the incest—all that confounded and disfigured desire, making pain mix with pleasure, love with hate, in monstrously damaging ways; all this Ursa couldn’t “hum,” mimic, or obediently repeat without revising it. She fashions her very self in terms of revision, embedding within her narrative how she lyrically reshapes her past:

\[ I \text{ am Ursa Corregidora. I have tears for eyes. I was made to touch my past at an early age. I found it on my mother’s tiddies. In her milk. Let no one pollute my music. I will dig out their temples. I will pluck out their eyes. (77) \]

In this passage there is no trace of “their memories.” This is a statement about her willingness to do violence to what would constrain her (aesthetically or otherwise). But who she is (“I am Ursa Corregidora”) cannot be denied or avoided (“I was made to touch my past at an early age. I found it on my mother’s tiddies. In her milk”). She can only become

\[ ^{56} \text{Ibid., 103, 45.} \]
“Ursa Corregidora” by decisively breaking with a past that had disfigured her (“I have tears for eyes”).

2.3 Women’s Blues and Afro-Diasporic Lives

In her study of women’s blues, Angela Davis emphasizes the important historic and ideological function it places as a genre on love and sexuality. Its openness in respect to male and female sexuality must be understood to have developed in a situation in which slavery had been formally abolished but its effects were everywhere still felt within African American communities. Davis writes,

Emerging during the decades following the abolition of slavery, the blues gave musical expression to the new social and sexual realities encountered by African Americans as free women and men. The former slaves’ economic status had not undergone a radical transformation—they were no less impoverished than they had been during slavery. It was the status of their personal relationships that was revolutionized. For the first time in the history of the African presence in North America, masses of black women and men were in a position to make autonomous decisions regarding the sexual partnerships into which they had entered. Sexuality thus was one of the most tangible domains in which emancipation was acted upon and through which its meanings were expressed. Sovereignty in sexual matters marked an important divide between life during slavery and life after emancipation.⁵⁷

Under such historic conditions, sexual agency substituted for a social freedom limited at best. In the manner in which female blues singers like “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith took up the complicated themes of love and sexuality, they “articulated,” according to

⁵⁷ Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 4.
Davis, “a collective experience of freedom, giving voice to the most powerful evidence there was for many black people that slavery no longer existed.”

Davis casts “evidence” differently from the way in which it is so perversely freighted within Corregidora, but her use of it suggests no less historically urgent a form of documentation. For Davis, women’s blues gives “voice,” attests to, archives a profound shift in the daily lives of African Americans in the first part of the twentieth century.

Davis helps us to see the emergence of women’s blues as an aesthetic encounter with a new historical situation in which “sovereignty in sexual matters” and “personal relationships” produced all manner of sublime joy and peril.

Davis’s emphasis on “autonomous decisions” with respect to “sexual partnerships” reminds us of Ursa’s dispute with her mother over the totalizing explanatory power of “Corregidora.” Old man Corregidora was, for Ursa’s mother, wholly “responsible” as person and as historical legacy for her failed relationship with Ursa’s father. But to ascribe blame to Corregidora for her own life requires that she deny precisely that capacity within herself of those “autonomous decisions” she found threatening in the blues. Ursa’s mother forbids Ursa from listening to the blues, condemning it as “devil’s music.” In her rejection of the blues she is symbolically rejecting the sexual and self-making agencies they perform. But Ursa, in renouncing the determining sweep of her Corregidora past, affirms her own autonomy as an historical

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58 Ibid., 9; my emphasis.
agent vis-à-vis “sexual matters” and “personal relationships.” Ursa’s narrative is animated by an historically specific conception of “love” and “forgiveness” that a blues novel formally permits. Davis explains that in women’s blues love is an important site of political agency, a way for black women to contest the forms of life available to them:

The expression of socially unfulfilled dreams in the language and imagery of individual sexual love is, of course, not peculiar to the African-American experience. As part of the capitalist schism between the public and private realms within European-derived American popular culture, however, themes of romantic love had quite different ideological implications from themes of sexuality within postslavery African-American cultural expression. In the context of the consolidation of industrial capitalism, the sphere of personal love and domestic life in mainstream American culture came to be increasingly idealized as the arena in which happiness was to be sought. This held a special significance for women, since love and domesticity were supposed to constitute the outermost limits of their lives. Full membership in the public community was the exclusive domain of men.59

Davis is arguing for an historical understanding of the blues within the black community, particularly as it was taken up by female blues performers in the beginning of the twentieth century. Idealizations of love and domesticity in a “European-derived” sense would not have characterized the blues Ursa would have heard on her grandma’s phonograph—and after whom she would have presumably modeled herself. In working against prevailing idealizations of romantic love in popular cultural forms, women’s blues plotted a course other than marriage or motherhood for a woman’s fulfillment. Women’s blues therefore strained against the “outermost limits” of a form of “romantic

59 Ibid., 10.
love” and domesticity. We should hear in Ursa and Mutt’s struggle over Ursa’s blues singing such a “strain” against the limits of their relationship and against the limits of the novel form itself.

What gave Ursa her distinct “voice” as a blues singer was a “strain” that made it sound, in the words of her friend Cat, “like [she] had been through something.” To Cat, and for the “blues” as a musical tradition, it was “the strain [that] made it better.” Cat says to Ursa, “Before it was beautiful too, but you sound like you been through more now.” To Cat, having been “through something” refers to all that collects around Ursa’s “wound”—her fall, her hysterectomy, her divorce, her incapacity to “make generations” and pass on “evidence.” As Cat makes clear, for the blues, “beautiful” was in and of itself insufficient, one’s sound or “voice” had to involve, register, embed and revise what was undergone and ongoing in what one sang. In this description, the blues registers within itself (and thereby performs) an intimate historical awareness animated not by what was felt, but rather by what is still felt and irresolvably lived with. In her first performance after her injury, Ursa provides a minute transcript of what it now means to voice this “strain,” the hurt she now has in knowing her insides are “barren”:

“They call it the devil blues. It ride your back. It devil you. I bit my lip singing. I troubled my mind, took my rocker down by the river again. It was as if I wanted them to see what he’d done, hear it. All those blues feelings. That time I asked him to understand my feeling ways. That’s what I called it. My feeling ways. My voice felt like it was screaming. What do they say about pleasure mixed in the pain? That’s the way it always was with him. The pleasure somehow greater

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60 Corregidora, 44.
than the pain. My voice screaming for him to take me. And when he would, I’d draw him down to the bottom of my eyes. They watched me. I felt as if they could see my feelings somewhere in the bottom of my eyes.\textsuperscript{61}

Ursa’s desire to have her audience “see what he’d done, hear it” is in every sense intended to make public her “blues feelings.” Significantly, their expression is in an aesthetic register that includes the necessary and urgent eloquence of “screaming”—that is, language at its absolute limit. In such a performance, everything for her was being exhibited, feeling uppermost (“They watched me. I felt as if they could see my feelings somewhere in the bottom of my eyes”).

But the lyric Ursa cites here—“They call it the devil blues. It ride your back. It devil you”—is a condensed image of what the blues are for her, a compulsion or burden, or even a kind of possession. It further condenses what at least manifestly seems Ursa and Mutt’s most profound discord. For what we know when the novel begins is that Ursa Corregidora, a blues singer in a bar called Happy’s Cafe, sings, as she says, “because it was something [she] had to do.”\textsuperscript{62} When the novel opens, it is Saturday night, April 1948, Ursa is twenty-five years old, and she and Mutt Thomas have been recently married (“December 1947”). The novel immediately attends to Ursa’s description of their strife: “He didn’t like for me to sing after we were married because he said that’s

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 51.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 3.
why he married me so he could support me. I said I didn't just sing to be supported."

Because the blues were “something [she] had to do,” she ignores Mutt’s repeated requests to not take the bandstand. But the night on which the novel opens, Mutt, drunk and enraged at her defiance of him—and in a fit to possess her (“I’m your husband. You listen to me, not to them”)—grabs after her atop a flight of dark alleyway stairs behind Happy’s Cafe. Not seeing him at first (“he was standing back in the shadows behind the door”), she loses her footing and falls. As a result of being in an early phase of pregnancy, the injury Ursa sustains ends in the loss of her child and womb:

> The doctors in the hospital said my womb would have to come out. Mutt and me didn’t stay together after that. I wouldn’t even let him come in the hospital to see me when I knew what was happening. They said he’d come in when I didn’t know what was happening. They said when I was delirious I was cursing him and the doctors and nurses out.64

The novel opens with Ursa’s pain, her fit of delirium, and her tragic loss. Mutt’s drunkenness and madness to possess her (“I don’t like those mens messing with you”) is the first flash of the kinds of violence that underlie the novel’s depiction of love. The consequences of loving are a major problem for novel. In a series of statements he alternately shouts to Ursa while he’s trying to yank her from the stage, Mutt shows love to be its own kind of delirium to possess: “You my woman, ain’t you,” “You ain’t they woman, is you,” and finally, “You ain’t they woman, is you? Is you they woman, or

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63 Ibid., 3.
64 Ibid., 4.
mines?” His delirium to possess her (he is repeatedly referred to as “crazy” in this scene) ends in him dispossessing her of her womb, a state which will eventually lead her to ask, “Now, what good am I for a man?” (25). But even in the immediate aftermath of her fall she intuits that she is devoid of some value or function. Tadpole McCormick, the man whom Ursa takes up with after she separates from Mutt, will tell her that while she was in the hospital she “kept saying something about a man treat a woman like a piece of shit” (167). “You got your piece a shit now, ain’t you”—is Ursa’s summary of her situation, her hysterectomy having reduced her, she fears, to waste. As she convalesces after her surgery, Tadpole asks not how she feels, but what she feels, to which she responds, “As if part of my life’s already marked out for me—the barren part” (6). Significantly, it is not merely the bodily wound that preoccupies her but the existential one. The “hole” in her seems now to name incapacity, isolation, and fear.

Without womb and husband, scarred and unable to sing, Ursa begins the novel in a state of dispossess. Her taking up immediately with Tadpole, the owner of Happy’s Cafe, the bar where she performs, is a symptom of her vulnerability. “Taddy, will you take me home when it’s time to go?” she asks (5). One realizes only belatedly how quickly this transition comes, one man seemingly interchangeable with another. But what is more troubling than what seems at times her calculated use of Tadpole’s

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65 Ibid., 166-167.
devotion to her is the manner in which she seems to drift immediately into a situation determined by Tadpole’s desires:

I lay on my back, feeling as if something more than the womb had been taken out. When [Tadpole] was downstairs, I’d looked at the stitches across my belly again. When they were gone, I’d get back to work again, that and . . . I couldn’t help feeling I was forcing something with Tadpole. What our talk was leading to. Something I needed, but couldn’t give back. There’d be plenty I couldn’t give back now. Of course, I’d get the divorce from Mutt . . . I went to sleep.\textsuperscript{66}

The use of ellipses is integral to this early passage. Even in solitude, there are things she refuses to think through to the end. The absence of the stitches (“when they were gone”) has its counterpoint in a silence that conceals a concern about her incapacity not only to have children but also to please a man (“There’d be plenty I couldn’t give back now”). But her concern runs deeper and involves her own capacity for pleasure—a problem for her and for each Corregidora woman. Hence the silence with which she buries the thought. In each of their placements, the ellipses graphically index her need for this silence and stand in for an anxiety she cannot yet name. So beyond pondering her scars (“stitches across my belly”), Ursa is here revealed pondering the underside of her own history. The sparse, spare lines of the passage transcribe her thoughts as they accumulate, but the complex recognition that builds beneath them cannot, at this moment, yet break through “sleep.”

\textsuperscript{66} Corregidora, 6.
Through a slow adding up of time, Ursa’s narrative incrementally builds up an archive of her own experiences, as she return over and over again to her memories. Her first-person narrative shows how she is thinking through what is happening to her or what is happening around her, leaving no conversation or incident unreflected upon in her mind. Her use of ellipses in the above passage is a grammatical transcription of the simultaneity of her thought, all things happening and intervening as if at once. But this is not to say that her interiority is figured as a mess of psychological fluctuations. There is a “feeling” she invokes that is less mood or psychological state than a whole range of sensations and expressive possibilities to which she must give order. Her fall returns in this passage, as it will throughout the novel, as an “event” she needs to rethink and actively restructure in response to the continued state of barrenness it has left her in. Even at the very outset of the novel, Ursa is already returning to and reframing her fall. In a sentence that is set off graphically from either the paragraph that precedes or follows it, she announces, “That was when I fell.”67 It is as if with this repetition the novel were starting over again, or that in this return to the opening image of her fall we are actually seeing the fall for the first time and taking in its significance. Her narrative is giving notice that no event will remain as it is first reported; that internal to the novel is an impulse to repeat and through repetition to revise, which is, as we have seen, one of the fundamental characteristics of the blues as a musical form and aesthetic practice. The

67 Ibid., 4.
novel thus demands that we take seriously at every level of its pacing and plotting

Ursa’s statement that “Everything said in the beginning must be said better than in the beginning.”

With this in mind, we should note that Ursa’s “feeling as if something more than the womb had been taken out” symbolically registers her isolation within the text. She begins the novel having separated from Mutt and, shortly thereafter, she separates, too, from Tadpole. She breaks with her friend Cat early in the novel and thus for many years seems utterly without companionship. The “something more than the womb” absented from Ursa’s life returns us to Mackey’s notion of “wounded kinship.” Part of what Ursa’s “wound” requires of her is in keeping with what Gram enjoins her to do: “We got to burn out what they put in our minds, like you burn out a wound.” As I suggested above, Gram’s usage of “they” strategically leaves its referent unnamed. Left ambiguous, “they” can refer at once to the authors of enormous historical processes (slave masters and slave traders) and to those who inflict the most intimate and severe personal injuries (Corregidora in one historical instance, Mutt in another). But if the blues (as we have seen with Ursa’s “new world song”) permits her distance on “Corregidora” and the histories his name signifies, it also means a troubling proximity to Mutt. The blues she sings allow her to express the “blame” and “hate” that have overwhelmed her own

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68 Ibid., 54.
69 Ibid., 72.
sense of her wound’s meaning. Thus, she will confirm while on stage, “My voice felt like it was screaming.” The wound Mutt inflicts on her comes to structure the course of events that follow from her hysterectomy and push her as an artist to articulate (or “acknowledge” in Jones’s terms) the complexities involved in her feelings of “hate.”

There is an analogy between how Ursula’s wound comes to structure her life and how the horrors inflicted upon Great Gram and Gram by Corregidora came to structure theirs. Such parallelism would seem to suggest that this is a novel organized by the logic of traumatic repetition—that is, that Ursula “reproduces” herself as a Corregidorean woman at the symbolic level of her situation—as a woman, in a blues idiom, whose man has done her wrong. But Ursula’s narrative rejects a concept of history as only violent and traumatic. This is why Ursula rejects her mother’s use of old man Corregidora as “enough” to explain the lives they live.

But slavery, concubinage, rape, and incest are undeniably Ursula’s inheritance, and her burden. It is a burden both because she must carry this memory with her—must “bear witness” as her Gram says—and because the heaviness of it makes her “hard,” in the language of the text, in ways she struggles to rid herself of. It is a hardness no doubt resulting from her being the daughter of an historical form of possession that disfigured the lives of her maternal ancestors. Authorized by the patriarchal and racist norms of plantation slavery, Corregidora “possessed” Great Gram and Gram in every

70 Ibid., 41, 9.
71 Ibid., 79, 40-41.
sense. But if the novel asks us to see “Corregidora” as the absolute, most monstrous limit of this historical norm, then Mutt must also appear before us as a contemporary figure, however lesser, of a desire to possess or control that Ursa now, in all manner of complicated ways, must learn to negotiate.

It is thus within this series of contextualizations that we can now better understand the significance of Ursa’s narrative intrusion (“Well, what this is all building up to”) with which this chapter began. If Ursa’s narrative intrusion would seem to reinitiate the narrative expectations of a romance, it more importantly embeds by means of novelistic convention one of her narrative’s most crucial thematic concerns. At once aesthetic, historical, and philosophical, it is a concern that involves the consequences, in the present, of how one orients oneself to the past and to past events. It is a concern, moreover, that is present at every level of the text. It organizes not only Ursa’s first-person narrative and its attentions but also the other first-person testimonies (the recollections and memories of others) she encounters throughout the novel. The point is that Ursa’s narrative intrusion enables her to consolidate her narrative as a “past,” one she can rework and revise. By consolidating her own story, Ursa is able to place herself as narrator back into historical time. She now has to decide what “Mutt” and “Corregidora” will signify for her and whether the constraints they have previously named will continue to govern her future. But in order to understand why an imperative
to decide opens at this instance we must attend to the larger dramatic context of Ursa's
“Well, what this is all building up to.”

When Ursa says this it is June 1969 and she is in her late 40s, lives alone, and
maintains a small circumference: “I usually kept to my end of town, going to work, then
back to the apartment, except when I had groceries to get or some shopping to do
downtown. But I rarely did shopping downtown. The drugstore on the corner had most
of the things I needed and the grocery store down the road. I made most of the gowns I
sang in and I wasn’t one for changing costumes a lot” (173). Her admission that she was
not “one for changing costumes a lot” gets us at the deep constancy of her character as
well as the routine of her life. Obscured in this summary of her daily life are a handful of
intervening years between Ursa traveling to confront her mother in the early 1960s and
her life as it now is, quiet and solitary. We know she still performs at the Spider, a
modest bar in a small Kentucky city, and has largely sealed herself off from any of her
former social relations.

It is then amidst what at least outwardly appears a “barren” life that Ursa
interjects, “Well, what this is all building up to, anyway, is that Sal Cooper came in the
other day.” But this summarizing gesture involves more than Sal Cooper herself, a
former co-worker at a bar where Ursa performed in the late 1940s. It involves what Sal
Cooper’s reappearance in Ursa’s life means. “Wouldn’t be no other reason she be in

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72 Ibid., 180.
"Here," Ursa remarks, knowing that Sal has come with news about Mutt Thomas. It has been twenty-two years since Ursa’s “fall,” and twenty-two years since she last spoke to Mutt. Nothing in the novel to this point has suggested the possibility of their reconciliation. But given the preponderance of Mutt’s “voice” throughout the text—especially in the many moments Ursa either recalls his speech or ascribes speech to him—one might argue that Mutt was never absent from it. In this sense, he functions as both a persistent phantasmal presence and a name, not unlike Corregidora, which keeps “visible” an ongoing “wound.” At this moment in the text, Ursa has not overcome her resentment of Mutt. What she tells her friend Cat earlier in the novel—“From the day he throwed me down those stairs we not together, and we not coming back together”—still seems to obtain more than twenty-ears later.73 Upon seeing Sal and before hearing of Mutt, Ursa says to herself, “I didn’t know what I was feeling … But I knew I hadn’t forgiven him. Even when I felt excited about seeing him, I knew I hadn’t forgiven him too.”74

I dwell here on this matter of forgiveness because the novel’s final scene, which Ursa now indicates her narrative has been “building up to,” comes to be structured as a call and response blues duet. What her narrative has been “building up to,” then, involves two interrelated developments. One has involved her aesthetic commitment to “make generations” as a Corregidoran woman even in the absence of a physical capacity  

73 Ibid., 25.  
74 Ibid., 182.
to do so. The other has involved tracing her developing awareness of the complications of “love” within an afro-diasporic framework and of what “forgiveness” must mean for a blues people.

In the novel’s final scene, Ursa, amid performing fellatio on Mutt, will realize, “It had to be sexual. I was thinking that it had to be something sexual that Great gram did to Corregidora. I knew it had to be sexual.” A tremendous “concourse of mixed temporalities” is being staged here with numerous pasts converging within the singular historical present Ursa and Mutt now occupy. Mutt tells Ursa that as part of his penance for what he had done to her he tried imposing on himself a diet of “onions and peppermint” that his great-grandfather had resorted to when he had lost his wife. He tells Ursa, “Eat the onions so people wouldn’t come around him, and then eat the peppermint so they would. I tried it but it didn’t do nothing but make me sick.” Mutt realizes that a remedy within one concrete historical instance and for one concrete historical subject cannot be a remedy for another historical instance or for another historical subject. What allowed his grandfather to cope with the world becomes poison for Mutt. While for Ursa recognizing that “it had to be sexual” similarly references a complex of past relations, it does so with the intention of repeating in order to return to them differently. Reflecting on the inseparability of “hate and love” and of “pleasure and excruciating pain,” Ursa realizes,

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75 Ibid., 184.
76 Harry Harootunian, “Remembering the Historical Present,” (Critical Inquiry 33, Spring 2007), 493.
77 Corregidora, 183-184.
It was like I didn’t know how much was me and Mutt and how much was Great Gram and Corregidora—like Mama when she had started talking like Great Gram. But was what Corregidora had done to her, to them, any worse than what Mutt had done to me, than what we had done to each other, than what Mama had done to Daddy, or what he had done to her in return, making her walk down the street looking like a whore?\textsuperscript{78}

In the midst of various historical repetitions, Ursa understands that she must suspend her need to attribute “blame” to Mutt. For even as “like” proliferates in this passage, she understands that there are no real equivalences connecting Great Gram and Corregidora, her mother and her father, and her and Mutt. Ursa will realize that “[it] had to be sexual” because it had to involve what Angela Davis calls “autonomous decision.” Ursa is not naive about the work it will entail to forgive Mutt. She recognizes, rather, that within the broader temporalities in which she and Mutt are located—temporalities that are at once generational and historical, familial and personal—the only way to move beyond the arrested, inadequate discourses of their pasts is to tarry fully and forcefully in “all kinds of [contradictions] at once.”\textsuperscript{79}

Indeed, their exchange in the final scene manifestly withholds any guarantees of a pure forgiveness:

[Mutt:] “I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you,” he said.
[Ursa:] “Then you don’t want me.”
[Mutt:] “I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you,” he said.
[Ursa:] “Then you don’t want me.”
[Mutt:] “I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you,” he said.

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 184.
\textsuperscript{79} Harper, 700.
[Ursa:] “Then you don’t want me.”

We are asked here as readers to work with them as they work through the hard and heavy burden of their shared past. By this I mean, literally, that we repeat “hurt” as we read. But “hurt” now cycles through not as Ursa’s but as Mutt’s. Emotional vulnerability is now his, or rather is now shared. This reversal suggests a different distribution to the injuries undergone than the narrative had previously apportioned out, for now we see the “consequences” of Ursa’s fall and their separation from Mutt’s perspective. The repetition that is here being staged is not a strengthening of their positions—each seeming to be a further negation of the other. Instead, with every strophe and antistrophe, every call and response, the whole structure of the impossibility they have become vibrates, gives way and loosens the fixity of their positions. The strength of this repetition is to transform them so much that the novel tells us that Ursa “shook,” falling one last time in the novel (“He shook me till I fell against him crying”) into Mutt’s embrace (“He held me tight”). The novel would therefore appear to begin and end on two opposed, paradoxical movements: Mutt pushing her down a flight of stairs and Mutt pulling her towards him. Cast as a kind of choreography, the novel becomes an intricate ensemble of so many vast irreconcilable parts, so many jagged historical injuries.

But if the blues structures the possibility of their re-encounter, it cannot be called upon to guarantee a “better” future. What a blues form reveals is that love and
forgiveness require active and historically ongoing “repetition.” Thus history within *Corregidora* is figured neither as a haunting nor as that which “hurts.” 

To the lives that *Corregidora* assembles, the “blues” attests less to the fact that history haunts or “hurts” and more to a collective need to respond bravely and beautifully to its horrors. It is therefore as an aesthetic act of revision and restatement, and not as a sign of fatalism or impasse, that I read Ursa’s narrative intrusion above. We might say, after Walter Benjamin, that it is “the small individual moment” crystallizing “the total event” of the novel. Isolating it enables us to give precise content to Ursa’s historical sense and to begin to understand the historiographic function a blues novel has in *straining* to document afro-diasporic lives.

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80 I refer here to Fredric Jameson’s study of literary modernism in which he declares, “History is what hurts” (*The Political Unconscious*, 102).  
81 See *The Arcades Project* (N2, 6).
It is self evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist.
— Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

The problem now is to constitute series: to define the elements proper to each series.
— Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*

Among the most prolific American writers of the late twentieth-century, Samuel R. Delany has published science fiction novels and short stories, an autobiography and a memoir of social commentary, essays of literary criticism and numerous (written) interviews.¹ But his *Return to Nevèrýon* (1979-1987) sword and sorcery series represents what he describes as his most ambitious narrative “experiment.”² Occupying Delany from the late-1970s through the late-1980s, the series is composed of long and short stories, a novel, and two novellas. Taken together these “tales” comprise four volumes that appeared in regular intervals over the course of a decade. Those volumes, in order of publication, include *Tales of Nevèrýon* (1979), *Neveryóna* (1983), *Flight from Nevèrýon* (1985), and *Return to Nevèrýon* (1987).

¹ The “written interview” for Delany is a strategy for bypassing the assumptions that “truth” lies in the formal relations of a conventional interview, which assumes that “truth” is most readily accessed by, or registered in, the presence of speech. Ever the Derridean, Delany calls instead for the “anti-interview” as a written exchange: “Marginality, lack of intimidation, accuracy—these are finally the reasons a writer might be tempted to favor the interview in written form” (“Reading and the Written Interview,” *Silent Interviews*, 16).

² *Silent Interviews*, 214.
But its singularity as a late American fiction, for the purposes of this study, is not solely to be described in terms of its complex unfolding as a series, each tale accumulating over four volumes into an astonishing ensemble of stories, images, and worlds. Certainly, it is a complex re-reading of the genre’s conventional norms, as Delany himself suggests in numerous interviews and essays. But beyond its baroque unfolding and enfolding of tales and beyond its “play” at the “game” of sword and sorcery—a4—its numerous reworkings of the genre’s most basic narrative elements, such as dragons and sorcery, gender and race and sexuality, heroism and resistance—at the heart of its fictional experiment is its commitment to the “para” literary construction of his text. “Para,” for the Nevèrÿon series, is not just a reference to the largely disgraced genre of sword and sorcery—nor to the near-pornographic S/M (sadomasochism) elements that the series at times takes up. Working against the strictures of “high” and “low” cultural forms, Delany uses the series form to produce a textual world in which various discourses and narrative elements are made to converge and interanimate.

Delany’s “experiment” can be described as his effort to open up sword and sorcery

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3 The language of “game” and “play” is everywhere scattered throughout the Nevèrÿon series. They are terms that appear repeatedly in the tales themselves as well as in the preface and the appendices. The most notable usage of “play” occurs within the fictional character K. Leslie Steiner’s preface, “Return … a preface,” wherein she suggests that the relation between the “Culhar’ fragment”—the purportedly “Ur text” of the Nevèrÿon tales—and “Delany’s stories” should not be mistaken as a direct one of scholarly or historical fidelity. Rather, as she puts it, their relation must be understood as one based on “suggestion, invention, and play” (14). The most significant appearance of “game” outside the tales occurs in an interview Delany gives in which he comments on the relation of “the game of Vlet” in the SF novel preceding the Nevèrÿon series, Trouble on Triton (1976)—a game which functions within Triton as something of a model of the novel itself. He says, “The three books I’ve written since Triton, set in ancient Nevèrÿon, are basically the game of Vlet writ large. Vlet is a game of sword and sorcery. In some ideal future world, with ideal readers, the books might all be considered part of a larger amorphous work, ‘Some Informal Remarks Toward the Modular Calculus,’ to which Triton is the SF prologue” (“On Triton and Other Matters: An Interview with Samuel R. Delany,” Science Fiction Studies 52: 17.3 (1990)).
to such a discursive and rhetorical flux. One superb illustration of this enlargement of its
discursive and textual world can be found in its incorporation of a scholarly apparatus of
literary criticism and commentary. Distributed across its four volumes in the form of a
general preface (to the series as a whole), several appendices, correspondences,
publisher’s notes, and post-scripts, these “scholarly” insertions have the effect of
extending Nevèrýon’s discursive world until the entire fictionality of the series would
seem to swallow itself as a “para” fiction. Its series of overlapping discourses can be seen
in the way the series presents itself as a fictional text “commenting” on an ancient and
purportedly “real” text—namely, the alleged Ur-text of Nevèrýon’s story-world, the so-
called “Culhar’ fragment”—and then builds around its story-world various scholarly
interventions and debates such that it becomes a text that is itself undergoing
commentary. Nevèrýon’s “fiction” thus extends ever outwards until it comes to include
the very historical moment of its own discursive emergence, a mid-1980s New York City
in a time of AIDS.

The series plays with its “factual” status more broadly by incorporating the
discursive fields of linguistics, anthropology, mathematics, literary criticism, critical
theory, historiography, archaeology, and epidemiology. By adding this specific complex
of discourses to the story-world of Nevèrýon, the series becomes something other than a
mere collection of sword-and-sorcery stories. Instead, it becomes sword and sorcery
intensively aware of itself both as a marginal cultural form and as a “document.” Its
awareness of its own marginality is articulated through discursive formations that make
knowledge claims about the world. Fictionalizing these allows the Nevèrýon series to situate itself within its own historical intellectual horizon and yet not be wholly reducible to it. In its formal and thematic attention to what is imaginable in any one historical moment the series dramatizes both imagination’s captivity and its escape from its historical determinations. That it can turn a sword and sorcery series story into a profound interrogation of language, power, and historicity is precisely why the preface to the four volumes can claim, “there is something about it rigorously of its own decades, the twentieth century’s terminal quarter.”

The series extends its fictionality and proves itself “rigorously of its own decades” in its use of two fictional characters, K. Leslie Steiner (a young “black” female linguist and mathematician) and S. L. Kermit (an aging “white” gay conservative archaeologist). They are, as academics, and as commentators on the text, figured as wholly external to it. And yet their externality is a crucial internal feature of the series, especially as their repeated “return” is an important mechanism for maintaining the text’s interrogation of its own contemporaneity. They effectively make available, then, the simultaneity of multiple historical presents, on the one hand, by situating readers in Delany’s own historical present and, on the other, by opening up the possibility of a “real” historical present (that is, the supposed Nevèrýon of the Culhar´ fragment) to be itself different from the one the series fictively imagines in Delany’s story-world. In this way Steiner and Kermit ensure that “Nevèrýon” has no simple, stable referent, historical or imaginative. It is kept “open” to multiple designations, and to the presence of multiple...

4 Tales of Nevèrýon, 20.
outsides, and is thus actively announcing its awareness of its own historical moment, what Delany’s narrator himself refers to as the “historicity” of the series, without taking a position of absolute knowledge or absolute authority.\(^5\) It accomplishes this active relation to itself in a very precise sense. Steiner, whose translating and decoding work of the “Culhar’ fragment” is the purported textual basis for Delany’s Nevèrýon tales, and Kermit, whose archaeological work is presented as similarly taking Steiner’s “cryptographical” discoveries as the basis for his own field work, each constitute limits to Nevèrýon’s story-world.\(^6\) They come to figure the kinds of antinomies that make Delany’s concept of the paraliterary crucial to understanding his use of seriality as a necessary narrative form for producing what we might call, after Foucault, a history of the present, or what the series itself suggests is “a document of our times, thank you very much. And a carefully prepared one, too.”\(^7\)

But while the fictional characters K. Leslie Steiner and S. L. Kermit permit the presence of an outside discursive “world” to appear within Nevèrýon’s very narrative fiction, they are far from the only instances in which outside(r) voices become woven like so many strands into the elaborate internal weave of the series. Indeed, outer-spaces, outer-voices, outer-sexualities are all intimately tied to the attentions of paraliterary forms. This is especially the case as the paraliterary, for Delany, maps cultural forms long construed as “marginal” because “popular,” such as fantasy or speculative fiction, sword-and-sorcery, comic books, pornography, or science fiction. But Delany’s affirmation of

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\(^5\) Flight from Nevèrýon, 249.  
\(^6\) Tales of Nevèrýon, 12.  
\(^7\) Flight from Nevèrýon, 245.
the paraliterary is not undertaken in the interest of seeing them redeemed. Rather, Delany affirms them precisely for their marginality. Indeed, their outsiderness becomes a crucial resource for thinking against the grain of their own historical present. The paraliterary, for Delany, is thus thought from the margins. It is a disposition towards the margins that enables him to argue that SF, which for him condenses “science fiction” and “speculative fiction and fantasy,” represents an oppositional discourse in much the same way that critical theory does. Like critical theory, paraliterary forms “[shatter] the whole notion of a firm and fixed social center, as well as of a coherent and socially centered subject, into a series of political questions.”

The designation of the “political” becomes all the more salient when we recall that Delany’s Nevèrÿon series appears in a post-Stonewall, post-Black Power, and Black Arts moment. Appropriating marginality, or being “out,” for Delany involves a “queering” of social and political norms in ways that are not at all limited to gender and sexuality. While a concept particularly useful in exploring gender and sexuality, “queer” or “queering” cannot be, as Eve Sedgwick explains, wholly “subsumed under” these categories or designations. She writes, instead, of its relevance in particular to “[i]ntellectuals and artists of color whose sexual self-definition includes ‘queer’… [who use] the leverage of ‘queer’ to do a new kind of justice to the fractal intricacies of

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8 “Toto, We’re Back,” Silent Interviews, 71.
9 I use “queering” in the critical sense Eve Sedgwick made available. For Sedgwick, homosexuality or “queer” sexualities mapped “a space of overlapping, contradictory, and conflictual forces,” which produced all manner of what she theorized as “homosexual panic” (Epistemology of the Closet 45). She usefully deployed “queer” as a way of thinking, if not enlarging, “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances, resonances” that occur when the meaning, for instance, of “constituent elements” are made to signify otherwise and differently (Tendencies, 8-9).
language, skin, migration, state. Thereby, the gravity (I mean the *gravitas*, the meaning, but also the *center* of gravity) of the term ‘queer’ itself deepens and shifts.”

We might say further that, following Gertrude Stein, being “out” in this broader sense for Delany means acting “so that there is no *use* in a centre.”

Or as Delany himself puts it, “I don’t think our society *has* a center—nor, I suspect, did it ever. Centrality was, at best, a stabilizing illusion. At worst it was an oppressive and exploitative lie. All I think is or was is a system of intersecting margins, and the progression of margins neither stops nor starts with literature, [nor] with science fiction.”

The presencing of an outside *inside* Nevërýon is thus constitutively related to a larger interest in shifting centers and intersecting marginalities. An important manifestation of this can be seen in Nevërýon’s simultaneous avowal and disavowal of its “origins.” K. Leslie Steiner’s general preface to the series admits from the outset that “something of these stories defers origins (not to say endings) in favor of fictions.” Yet it also insists on the “Culhar’ fragment” as the source of Delany’s stories. Steiner tells us,

“I have worked with that ancient, fragmented, and incomplete narrative with its barbarians, dragons, sunken cities, reeds and memory masks, twin-bladed warrior women, child ruler, one-eyed dreamer and mysterious rubber balls, for many, many months, spread out over what has become many years; and I’m delighted that the pressure of my own attentions drew Delany to pose (with the help of my commentary) his own land of Nevërýon.”

The “pressure of my own attentions,” as she puts it, creates an overlap, permitting the

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10 *Tendencies* 9; italics in original.
11 Gertrude Stein, “Rooms,” *Tender Buttons* (1914); my italics.
12 *Tendencies*, 71.
13 *Tales of Nevërýon*, 12.
margins of her own work to intersect with the margins of Nevèrýon’s paraliterary form. In this way, the preface stages the Nevèrýon series as a massively interanimating tableau “of intersecting margins.” It is why, for instance, its “tales” accumulate in the way they do, building and un-building themselves as they shift their focus from major to minor characters. The first volume of short stories, Tales of Nevèrýon, for instance, opens upon Gorgik’s life then shifts immediately in the next story to “The Tale of Old Venn.” Alternating in this way its “world” is never focalized through any single character or figure. Rather, in what might be called an allegory of unboundedness, Return to Nevèrýon moves among and presses up against its own world’s margins in a two-fold way. It does so, first, by fictionally tracking the outsider “queer” types that inhabit its world’s margins—its slaves, smugglers, brigands, rebels, artists, and sex workers. But it extends this further by metafictionally incorporating what is “outside” its “fiction”—its fictional academics and scholars, its use of theoretical discourse, and, as we will see, in its turn to a 1980s AIDS epidemic. Margins and centers, inside and outside, thus profoundly shift as the story-world of Nevèrýon intersects with the narrator’s own historical present.

Its emphasis on subordinate, marginal lives is one way to understand the relation of “allegory” to Return to Nevèrýon. Allegory and allegorical interpretation involves a sedimentation of reading and reading practices. As we will see below, its importance lies precisely in the way in which what it reads and how it reads discloses its historicity. For rather than standing as a timeless mode of literary critical practice, its every moment of appearance reveals how temporally bound it is. But there is another point to be made here
regarding allegory that is not tied to historicity, but to historiography. As Michael Denning argues, “allegory is a mode characteristic of subordinate groups.” The Nevèrýon series must be understood as an allegory which attempts to document a “world” at its margins and thus to be in a symbolic sense historiographic. But in terms of historicity it must be read as a document that allegorizes, not the persistence of the past in the present, but the ineradicable traces of the present in any “return” to the past. For if allegory, as Paul de Man has observed, relies on time as its main “constitutive category” to fulfill itself, then Nevèrýon’s self-presentation as a “document of our times” is bound up in its very specific deployment of allegory and seriality. This is especially the case as both allegory and seriality are literary forms for negotiating and crossing the distance between temporally and spatially disjointed (reading) moments. Each operates by placing one historical present in relation to another. Each, in other words, builds or un-builds that which preceded it in a time-delayed manner—in what de Man has called “the void of temporal difference.” Allegory and seriality each enacts a passageway across the “void” either through a backwards-looking hermeneutical operation (as in allegory) or in its narrative accumulation of tales-modifying-tales (as in seriality).

Nevèrýon’s imaginative horizon as a text lies in events specific to the 1970s and 1980s. These decades provided Delany with a number of distinct encounters that would

15 *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America*, 73-74. Alfred Habegger further suggests that allegory is “the literature of exiles, prisoners, captives, or others who have no room to act in their society” and that, as such, it constitutes “one of the many human artifacts expressing a sense of individual powerlessness” (*Gender, Fantasy, and Realism in American Literature*, 111; cited in Denning 74).
impact the thematic and formal direction of the series. The most aesthetically and imaginatively significant may be Delany’s intensive experience as a reader of various writers and critical theorists producing landmark texts over the course of the 1970s. These were engagements that would actively shape the first Nevèrýon stories into the extended series of elaborations they would become, as each tale enlarged the world of the one preceding it. But intersecting the direction of the series and radically altering its experiment with narrative form is Delany’s experience of living through the AIDS epidemic of the early 1980s and becoming an intimate witness to its effects on what he describes as “a limited social section of New York City.”¹⁸

The roving, seemingly capricious terror that AIDS first was when it had neither a known epidemiology nor an effective cure finds its way into the third-volume of the series, *Flight from Nevèrýon*, as if something of its catastrophe required a certain momentum, or build-up of Nevèrýon’s world before it could enter. When AIDS does enter, it makes its entrance through the deliberate, willed evocation of a “bridge” connecting Kolhari, Nevèrýon’s urban center, and New York City during a time of “plague.” The interruption of AIDS and of an AIDS-like epidemic into the ninth tale of the series, *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals* (1985), results in a direct, alternating weave between New York City and Kolhari. It is as if contamination occurs not only within each of these “worlds,” but also between them.

Referring to it as his “novel of crisis,” Delany has himself insisted on *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals* as an “experiment.” Seriality is crucial to this, for it is what enables a sword-and-sorcery story to become an open form in which outer-spaces and

disjunctive temporalities can overlap, intersect, and momentarily converge. Seriality, finally, is what gives to *Return to Nevèrÿon* its historicity, or, in an even more precise sense, its capacity to allegorize itself as a “document of our times.”

### 3.2 “New Barbarians” and “Cross-Cultural Concepts”

There is only desire and the social, nothing else.
— Deleuze and Guattari

Recombining elements of the gothic, chivalric romances and nineteenth-century adventure fiction, sword and sorcery is one of modernity’s strange new spaces. It emerges as a distinct landscape in the 1930s in the pages of *Weird Tales*, an influential “pulp” magazine of the period, which published stories of horror, fantasy, and science fiction.\(^1^9\) Subtitled “The Unique Magazine,” it was the first periodical to publish Robert E. Howard’s stories of Conan the Crimean (later, “Conan the Barbarian”). Published in *Weird Tales* between 1932-1936, the Conan series would eventually establish the genre of “sword and sorcery,” a term neither Howard himself nor his early publishers invented. Rather, it had its coinage in the 1960s, decades after the first appearance of the seventeen Conan stories Howard published during his lifetime.\(^2^0\) In these ensuing years, however, Howard’s stories developed a committed following, influencing a whole generation of

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\(^1^9\) In its original run, *Weird Tales* published “unique” and avowedly bizarre stories on a monthly basis from 1923 to 1954. Its current website, which is the second generation of the magazine, dating back to 1988, boasts having first showcased the talents of H.P. Lovecraft, Ray Bradbury, and Robert E. Howard. (See [http://weirdtalesmagazine.com/about/](http://weirdtalesmagazine.com/about/))

\(^2^0\) Born in the small town of Cross Plains, Texas, Robert E. Howard lived there with his aged and ill mother until his suicide in 1936. He is said to have committed suicide upon hearing news that his mother had died. He was only thirty years old.
writers who took up his themes and appropriated his style. It is not surprising, then, given Howard’s influence on the development of this strain of fantasy and speculative fiction, that the term “sword and sorcery” first appears in the correspondence between two writers heavily influenced by Howard, the British author Michael Moorcock and the American writer Fritz Leiber. It is in responding to Moorcock’s general call for a more precise description of the Conan stories that Leiber suggests the term. “I feel more certain than ever that this field should be called the sword-and-sorcery story,” Leiber wrote to Moorcock. “This accurately describes the points of culture-level and supernatural element and also immediately distinguishes it from the cloak-and-sword (historical adventure) story and (quite incidentally) from the cloak-and-dagger (international espionage) story too!”

This special mixture of “culture-level and supernatural element,” as Leiber puts it, helps to explain Robert E. Howard’s aesthetic, as well as the spell, so to speak, it casts over its readers. Leiber’s term for this mixture, “sword and sorcery,” is especially useful for describing its relation to the historical past. This is in part because, separately, “sword” and “sorcery” function as synecdoches, with each respectively conjuring the specificity of its so-called “culture-level” and “supernatural element,” and thereby placing it squarely within a technological and cosmological matrix. But when taken together the term marks the story-world’s very capacity to combine something of cultural realism with the fairy tale, anthropological adventurism with elements of fantasy and the

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What this means is that Leiber’s neologism rightfully perceives, and incisively captures, the way that Howard’s stories posit a world of exalted primitivism.

For Howard, the figure of the “barbarian” becomes the centerpiece of this world, a figure which becomes at one and the same time an ontological and social category as well as a privileged mode for accessing the historical past. In this way, Conan the Barbarian serves both a narrative and an historicist function. He can represent, on the one hand, the hero whose exploits drive (and organize) the thematic content of the series—a “good” that is both morally and aesthetically pleasing—and, on the other, the recurrent proof for why such a world needs to be purged of its civilizational ills. The Conan stories thus enact a costume drama that fundamentally pits barbarians (a virtuous male warrior culture) against innumerable personifications of civilizational threats and entrapments. Corrupt, over-refined, calculating—“civilization” in these stories is an affront to all that is noble, while barbarism becomes sword-and-sorcery’s highest social form and most evolved state. As a result, alienation and dis-alienation are inverted, and the goal of every adventure becomes formalizing Conan’s dis-identification with the villains, monsters, and wizards who are each so many projections of a decadent force and whose origins are invariably to be found in some castle or kingdom or city-state. In a deeply symbolic sense, it is not death or capture that Conan’s powers are called upon to resist; it

22 Within this fantasy fiction context of magic mixed with an anthropological quest, H. Rider Haggard’s She (1887) is an important prior literary instance and would no doubt have been read either by Howard or by those whom he read.

23 In going beyond Howard’s mere reversal of the values generally attributed to civilization and barbarism, Delany has one of his most fascinating characters, the legendary Old Venn, remark that she and her Island people “do not aspire to civilization” (“The Tale of Old Venn,” Tales of Nevèrÿon). In voicing this desire, she powerfully introduces the possibility that one can imagine a world beyond the impasse of this binary and thus gestures towards a way out.
is rather the threat of his conversion to forces which would domesticate him and render his Otherness “civil.” He is not, then, so much a transhistoric figure of individual good as a figure that emerges at a particular historical moment that resists the instrumentalization of the individual. In this respect, Conan is as much a figure for critiquing early twentieth-century forms of bureaucratization (and corporatization) as Weber’s “iron cage.”

Put differently, Conan is a twentieth-century Liberal deposited into a warrior culture of modernity’s imagined past. Howard’s reversal of the values typically assigned to barbarism and civilization is a complicated transposing of early twentieth-century concerns onto a fantasy context—namely, colonialism, immigration, fascism, and industrialization. The result is that Howard’s “interest” in the past, as he puts it, carries forward a peculiar historicism that is central to the genre his stories would found.

Commenting upon his fascination with transitional historical periods, Howard explains,

> When a race—almost any race—is emerging from barbarism, or not yet emerged, they hold my interest. I can seem to understand them, and to write intelligently of them. But as they progress toward civilization, my grip on them begins to weaken, until at last it vanishes entirely, and I find their ways and thoughts and ambitions perfectly alien and baffling. Thus the first Mongol conquerors of China and India inspire in me the most intense interest and appreciation; but a few generations later when they adopted the civilization of their subjects, they stir not a hint of interest in my mind. My study of history has been a continual search for newer barbarians from age to age.

What is remarkable is that a genre more associated with fantasy fiction than historical fiction is here depicted as governed, imaginatively, by historical research. But its research

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24 One thinks, of course, here of Adorno and Horkheimer’s phrase, “the administered world,” as yet another iteration of this growing concern of capitalist modernity’s stultifying spread.
into the past—Howard’s “continual search”—is not undertaken to find settled forces, but emergent ones, not civilizational sureties, but its “newer barbarians.” Howard clearly finds a creative vitality in the innovations of the “conquerors” and nothing even remotely redeeming in those who “adopted the civilization of their subjects.” Barbarism is for Howard the motive force of history, civilization a deadly, suffocating “progress.”

Of course attributing freedom to the absence of social forms is a persistent theme within the history of European and Anglo-American literatures. Howard’s figure of the barbarian is, as he himself puts it elsewhere, representative of the “natural state of mankind.”26 In this sense there is a strong Romanticist impulse in Howard’s conception of the skilled and savvy barbarian. But beyond its clearly Romanticist celebration of the noble savage, Conan evokes an early twentieth-century privileging of “primitivism” as oppositional to a progress narrative of modernity. Surrealism, within the context of early twentieth-century European avant-garde movements, is one instance of a confused reclaiming of pre- or anti-modern forms. But what is interesting is that sword and sorcery, a decidedly “pulp,” mass form of American vernacular culture—which is to say, hardly experimental—comes to share a tendency with a European avant-garde. That tendency is a shared disposition towards thematizing, not bourgeois refinement and its persistent Victorian moralities, but sources and figures of renewal that originate in the margins of the world-historic and the everyday. They both curiously find in “lines of flight” and violently formal juxtapositions, respectively, the possibility of breaking with

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dominant cultural norms. The irony is that while surrealism represents “high” artistic practice and sword and sorcery a “low” cultural form, each in its way draws upon modernity’s “Other” (the working classes, “primitive” cultures, disposable peoples and things, and peripheral spaces or zones) in order to renew itself and its artistic materials.

And in a period coinciding with the greatest territorial expansion of European and American imperialisms (1870s-1930s), neither of their appropriations can be seen as purely innocent or purely radical.

Sword and sorcery’s privileging of the outsider, or of a barbarian force is of further note given the paradox that it is vilifying “civilization” within an historical situation, on the one hand, of a sheer expansionism of “Western civilization” and, on the other, of a rapturous promotion of commodity culture and the “New.” These are not minor points within the context of an expanding world market whose expansion would only intensify by mid-century and accelerate further and unprecedentedly in the decades during which the Nevèrÿon series was being composed. Within an imperializing American context, its depictions of “civilization” (or the State, or government) as decadent and corrupt are symptomatic of both a native, folksy anti-authoritarianism and a business elite’s tendency to denounce popular democratic forms. As the two become ever more wildly, and tragically, conflated within American society, the result is that “civilization” and its

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28 I refer here to commodity culture, first and foremost, but, there is of course a direct relation, within this historical context, to avant-garde movements as well, both right-wing and left, of which Futurism, Vorticism, and Imagism are only a handful of its most conspicuous iterations — all, arguably, captured in Ezra Pound’s injunction, “Make it New.”
perceived restraints and restrictions are opposed for what would seem much simpler, if world-historic, reasons—reasons that Marx identified in the *Grundrisse*, namely that if capitalist economic forces are driven by an ever-modernizing imperative to overcome their social, cultural, and historical limits, than “civilization” itself appears as a boundary to be overcome. In a strange and discomfiting reversal of a reversal, which is precisely the kinds of convolutions typical of ideological effects, barbarism, ironically, gets transfigured by sword and sorcery into a modernizing force—a profoundly curious occurrence in an American period otherwise known for its monopoly capitalism, fascist polities, immigration bashing, and Jim Crow. Thus when read within the American grain, Howard’s Conan stories become an early-twentieth century version of Huck Finn’s flight from “sivilization.” An important difference, however, is that Huck Finn “lit out” for late-nineteenth century frontier territories at the moment of their closing, while Conan’s adventures mixed the most historically disjointed of times and spaces during a period of “world war” and imperial expansion. When placed within this larger context, the presumed “escapism” of sword and sorcery becomes a “fiction” that shows quite thrillingly, and yet against itself, that the past has no place outside the present that imagines it.

Deleuze and Guattari’s claim that “nomads have no history; they only have a geography” helps to explain why Howard’s invention of a “historical” setting for the Conan stories—which he called, quasi-scientifically, “The Hyborian Age”—required the
creation of a fantastical world. His story-world’s actual historical placelessness was covered over, literally, by Howard’s creation of a fantastical map that was intended to act as its “real” referent. Fantasy flaunted its ahistoricism, but did so under the pretense of historical and cartographic realism. Its “newer barbarians” (Deleuze’s “nomads”) illustrated this strange realism, culled as they were from specific historical periods and geographies: “Elizabethan pirates, Irish reavers, and Barbary corsairs; American frontiersman and Cossack raiders; Egyptian sorcerers and followers of mystery cults; medieval knights and Assyrian armies.” Such a “world” was the essence of the exotic with all manner of historical “outsiders” thrown together into a vivid spectacle of masculine adventure and reward. A striking collage of historically disparate materials, its characters, stories, and landscapes were drawn from different traditions, cultures and epochs. More than merely his ideal warriors, this was Howard’s ideal society.

In Howard’s “sword and sorcery,” its central dynamic is not, as we will see in Delany’s use of its conventions, a rigorous commitment to “suggestion, invention, and play” with the genre’s ahistoricism. Its very ahistoricism as a genre is for Delany the source of its documentary potential. Howard, however, betrays an indifference to the historicity of the historical past that he uses; his “continual search” into the historical

30 Cartographically, “the Hyborian Age” was a depiction of a northern land, disconnected from other landmasses and thus, literally, placeless. It was an age, as Howard explains in his essay, “The Hyborian Age” (which was written in the 1930s, but published only posthumously), of “wandering and conquest” (See an on-line version of Howard’s essay [http://hyboria.xoth.net/history/hyborian_age.htm](http://hyboria.xoth.net/history/hyborian_age.htm) as well as Patrice Louinet’s “Hyborian Genesis: Notes on the Creation of the Conan Stories,” *The Coming of Conan the Cimmerian* (1932-1933) (2002), 423-446).
record is merely mining for story ideas. It is as if, in a Nietzschean sense, there is only the present in Howard’s use of the past, but it is a present wholly unaware of its own historicity. Historical inaccuracies and anachronisms proliferate in Howard’s Conan stories, not because he was careless or unsystematic, but rather because of a fidelity to a floating map and a triumphalist theme.

It is therefore the case that his fictional collage of historically disjointed figures and landscapes turns “history” into a mere backdrop, and, as such, a dead letter. And yet something of its very unevenness and discontinuity with respect to its world is actually concretely radical: it gets at the root of what modernity imagines as its Other—a pre-modern, pre-historical epoch of “wandering and conquest,” as Howard puts it; a hulkish, seductively virtuous irrationalism in permanent war with Reason. And yet at the same time sword and sorcery does not intend to devise a strict narrative recovery of modernity’s origins. It is “new barbarians” that Howard is after, and not civilization’s founders or stewards.

As a pure projection of Howard’s own present, these elements of the conventional sword and sorcery genre are entirely contemporary to an emergent vernacular literary culture in a period of an increasingly outward-directed American empire. In the late-nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth, popular literary forms like the Western, detective and mystery fiction, science fiction, horror, and fantasy proliferated in

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terms of both their availability and production. Printed on cheap paper, “pulps,” as they came to be called, were thought trashy, ephemeral things, the flotsam and jetsam of an increasingly commodified culture. They were objected to on the grounds that they pandered to the lurid and superficial thrills adolescent boys were said to crave. As such, they were deemed aesthetically and morally improper, that which marked the outer limit of good “taste.” A culture saturated in pulps, so the thinking went, was a culture in decline. Naturally such controversies surrounding, first, dime novels, then later “pulps,” have had their right- and left-wing versions, denounced on the one hand for corrupting morals and inciting crime and on the other for narcotizing an exploited population and thwarting its revolutionary aims. But however at odds such complaints appear, they share in the assumption that mass cultural forms degraded the inner life (whether in the rhetoric of “morality” or “consciousness”) of a reading public.

Delany’s turn to sword and sorcery counters the various histories of its critical reception. By perceiving it as a textual landscape of historical transitions, Delany recognizes it as a form, not for telling the same story of the past, but for rethinking how that past might relate differently to the present that imagines it. In an interview conducted during the writing of the third and fourth volumes of the Nevèrÿon series, a compositional period during which, as we will see, the series turns its most formally

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34 Michael Denning brilliantly captures the systematic proliferation of “proletarian” or “plebeian” literatures in this period by noting the emergence of what he calls “fiction factories,” that is, the appearance of publishing houses that churned out ready-made narrative entertainments. See Michael Denning’s invaluable study, Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America (1987).

35 This concern over “degraded mass culture” is shared in the early part of the twentieth-century, by philosophers on both the Right and the Left, from Heidegger on one side to Adorno and Horkheimer on another. See Fredric Jameson, “Utopia and its Antinomies,” Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions, 153.
experimental, Delany elaborates on the historical imagination specific to sword and sorcery as a genre. Reflecting on its significance in this respect, he notes:

What’s intriguing about sword-and-sorcery is that it takes place in an aspecific, idealized past—rather than in Rome or Egypt or Babylonia or Troy. This means whatever happens in this vision of the past that may have something to do with us today doesn’t filter through any recognizable historical events—the Diaspora, say, or the Peloponnesian or Gallic Wars. So, once again—and this should sound familiar—it lets you look at the impact of certain cross-cultural concepts that nevertheless are often not given the same kind of spotlight in historical novels, concepts (like money, writing, weaving, or any early technological advances—the techne Pound got so obsessed with by the “Rock Drill” *Cantos*) that go so far in overdetermining the structure of the historical biggies: a war, a change of government, a large migration from country to city. 36

It is an extraordinary passage for the counter-intuitive claim it makes about the genre. Its “aspecific, idealized past” becomes for Delany *the* source of its *historical* imagination. In other words, it is precisely its “ahistoricism” that endows it with its historical substance. Since it does not route its readers through “Rome or Egypt or Babylonia or Troy,” it offers a way of reimagining, not “recognizable historical events,” but those outside the typical contemporary domain of “historical novels”—that is, those events now rendered marginal (“Diaspora, say, or the Peloponnesian or Gallic Wars”) by those currently dominant and central narratives of modernity. It takes up people and events outside history, but thereby broadens, and complicates, the very meaning of what is imaginable within the horizon set by the “historical novel” as a sedimented form and reading

36 “The Semiology of Silence,” *Silent Interviews*, 47; italics in the original. The headnote to the interview reads: “The following text began as a conversation that took place in New York City (in August of 1983) between Samuel R. Delany and Sinda Gregory and Larry McCaffery (both from San Diego State University).” Published in *Science-Fiction Studies*, the interview does not appear until July 1987. It is thus held during Delany’s composition of the third and fourth volumes, *Flight from Nevèrýon* (1985) and *Return to Nevèrýon* (1987), respectively.
Indeed this passage points to Delany’s commitment to complicating the very meaning of the “historical,” which is why he specifically invokes the term “historicity” within the course of the series to explain his interest in models, metaphors and what he calls “recognizable pattern[s].” Delany’s emphasis on “cross-cultural concepts” in this passage helps to clarify the importance he places, ethically and aesthetically, on “intersecting margins”—on peoples, places, and events in their concrete materiality and not as sociological or historical abstractions. It is instances of contact and transmission that are otherwise overlooked that Delany is pointing to with this term, but he is doing so in an overtly conceptual register.

The reason for this conceptual turn involves the previousness of Howard’s stories—and Delany’s revision of them. Howard’s “continual search for newer barbarians” established a precedent for the genre that Delany’s Nevèrýon series elaborately rethinks. Delany’s interest in “the impact of certain cross-cultural concepts” is his attempt to rethink the implications of Howard’s “search.” If Howard’s barbarian (“Conan”) is a figure who organizes a specific series of stories for which the category “newer barbarians” is the general historical tendency, then for Delany the barbarian is no longer a single or autonomous figure. Neither is the “barbarian,” as such or principally, placed at the center of Nevèrýon’s story-world. Gorgik is many things, but he cannot be mistaken for a “barbarian” in the same way that Howard specifically intends. Instead, within

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37 The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals, Flight to Nevèrýon, §8.55, 249.
Delany’s tales even the category of the “barbarian” undergoes revision, especially along racial lines. Delany inverts sword and sorcery’s typical world of white rulers and dark-skinned savages, creating a Nevèrÿon in which dark-skinned peoples are “civilized” and blond blue-eyed peoples are “barbarians.” Contrasting the status of the barbarian in Howard and Delany is not meant to refer to Gorgik’s characterological (or merely phenotypical) departures from the figure of Conan. The concern is with the way Delany’s own historical present becomes involved in Nevèrÿon’s story-world. Thus, just as with the distance that separates Howard’s sense of history from Delany’s sense of historicity, there is likewise a similar kind of distantiation operating in the difference between Howard’s “search for newer barbarians” and Delany’s tracking down of “cross cultural concepts.” The actual figure in Howard is thereby rendered figural in Delany.

The distance between history and historicity, figure and figuration, comes more clearly into focus by invoking a reference Delany makes to Ezra Pound. Referencing Pound should remind us that the long poem in Pound’s hands, like the epic, aimed at telling the “tale of the tribe.” Beyond its invocation of tribalism, the relevance pertains to Pound’s use of this expression to underscore the cultural importance of a poetics that sought representative motifs in the ancient and recent past for the present. Telling the tale of the tribe, for Pound, marked the poet’s effort at documenting one’s present in relation

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38 Much more remains to be said about the textual, graphic, material history of Nevèrÿon’s various publications and printings. Jeffrey Allen Tucker’s detailed study of race and racial markings within the series highlights the discrepancy between what the cover art (of the initial Bantam mass paperback printings) suggests of the narrative’s world and the actual world of Nevèrÿon. That discrepancy is between the “white,” physically sculpted figures who appear on the cover, and who are typical of the genre, but who bear no resemblance, racially or physically, to the actual characters peopling Nevèrÿon, especially, and most notably, Gorgik. See “The Empire of Signs,” 96-101.
to the entire imaginative availability of one’s past and, in so doing, made the past and the present cohere in a “now” that was constituted by the reading present of the poem.

Pound’s *Cantos*, a massively collagist serial poem composed from 1915-1962, is no arbitrary reference, then, either with respect to using the past or in making that past appear available to the present. But more importantly, Pound links us to Delany’s interest in seriality and to his own efforts at producing a long-form narrative that gives its own developments over to, not linear time, but a complicated temporal logic of seriality’s consecutiveness and accumulation. On this relation between the SF or fantasy series story and the long poem, or serial poem, Delany has been quite clear: “In one sense, the SF series is something like a prose narrative version of that quintessentially American form, the open-ended serial composition long poem—Pound’s *Cantos*, Olson’s *Maximus Poems*, Diane Wakowski’s *Greed*, or Robert Duncan’s *Passages*. You also find the same self-critical thrust there.”39 Delany’s emphasis on a shared “self-critical thrust” points to the formal way that seriality allows a certain critical distanitation to enter the artwork. This in-built dimension of a layered, delayed, “critical” return is no doubt seriality’s central appeal to Delany. What is more, seriality’s constitutive formal relation to sword and sorcery would then in a way close the circle, fully accounting for why Delany spent ten years on “this most massive yet marginal project in an already marginal sub-genre.”40

39 “The Semiology of Silence,” *Silent Interviews: On Language, Race, Sex, Science Fiction, and Some Comics*, 49. Delany curiously omits William Carlos Williams’s long poem *Patterson* (published serially from 1946-1958). This is an especially curious omission given that Williams’s poetics prioritized marginal and common speech, that is, marginal and common peoples, places and things.

40 The fictional K. Leslie Steiner notes this in her preface to the series (“Return … a preface” *Tales of Nevèrÿon*, 15).
3.3 Seriality, Historicity, and Experimentation

Emerging out of the publishing history of science fiction and fantasy, the series story comes of age in the pulp magazines of the 1930s and 1940s. This enabled science fiction and fantasy writers to create stories, characters, and settings—indeed worlds and universes—to which they could consecutively return. What was in essence a publishing mandate had the result of encouraging a compositional structure of return. Story-worlds thus built and un-built themselves in all manner of surprising and compelling ways. The narrative form that emerged out of these conditions and pressures became, as Delany explains, a rich conceptual model for narratively posing and addressing problems:

Put simple, the first story poses a problem and finally offers some solution. But in the next story, what was the solution of the first story is now the problem. In general, the solution for story N becomes the problem for story N + 1. This allows the writer to go back and critique his or her own ideas as they develop over time. Often, of course, the progression isn’t all that linear. Sometimes a whole new problem will assert itself in the writer’s concern—another kind of critique of past concerns. Sometimes you’ll rethink things in stories more than one back. But the basic factor is the idea of a continuous, open-ended, self-critical dialogue with yourself.

The language of “problem” and “solution” enables a far more conceptual account of how a story can be extended in ways that go beyond an Aristotelian telos of “beginning and middle and end.” Narrative unity is thus not sought as the highest aesthetic ideal.

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41. While this would appear to parallel other publishing histories, for instance, that of nineteenth century multi-plot Victorian novels, there is a difference that needs to be maintained between the sense of coherence and resolution to be found in novels of the Victorian period and the far more episodic and limited, which is to say far more provisional “solutions” often found within the SF and fantasy stories to which Delany refers.

Solutions neither yield perfect foreclosed ends, nor do problems have a singular origin. Seriality instead gives itself over to development and “progression” but along lines that do not follow a regular or rational “linear” trajectory. Instead, the series story builds according to a logic of sedimentation. Problems build and solutions arise to address them, but this leads in turn to a new situation that will in itself give rise to further problems and the necessity of other provisional solutions. Describing it in this way would seem to evoke Hegel’s logic of dialectics. But what Delany affirms is not the eventuality of a final synthesis, but a “continuous, open-ended, self-critical dialogue” that is not so much one of cunning, but of craft. A sense of the whole is not arrived at by an external force, but is immanent to the concrete working out of the thing itself. If we emphasize “aesthetics” as a perceptive capacity, as opposed to its Kantian connotation of “taste,” then we can begin to understand what Delany refers to when he suggests that a consequence of the serial form is that “a whole new problem will assert itself in the writer’s concern” and that the emergence of this “new problem” becomes, ipso facto, “another kind of critique of past concerns.” It is as if the form itself enables a new kind of perception of how narrative should be temporally ordered. The movement from a proposed “problem” to a new “critique” means that nothing within the series is left unchanged by its encounter as a series. For if seriality’s essence lies in its continual generation of “a whole new problem,” then it comes to describe the complicated process by which a narrative “progression” moves by means of an elaborate return to what precedes it. Recursively, then, story “N” builds and story “N + 1” rounds out N’s world without presuming, or desiring, its
fulfillment. Seriality therefore conceives of narrative as an unfinished “critique of past concerns.” Self-reflexivity is not then posited as external to the series, but is identified as one of its constitutive features.

While in one sense the SF and fantasy serial of the 1930s and 40s fulfills a publishing mandate to sell more magazines by capturing a loyal readership, the series story when Delany takes it up in the 1970s is no longer tied to magazine subscriptions. Appearing as it does in novel or volume-bound form, *Return to Nevèrýon* registers an altogether different moment of the fantasy series as an industrial product. For the Nevèrýon series appears within a period (1979-1987) characterized by the ascendency of the novel as the premiere commodity of the print-publishing industry. One effect of this historical shift from the age of magazines to the age of the novel is illustrated in the way that a series, when published as a “novel,” has a novelistic form imposed on it. The “continuous” and “open-ended” compositional form that Delany celebrates above becomes subordinated to a strict organizational regime of chronology. What initially, and deliberately, built-up over time into an open-series now becomes the kind of stable, “linear” narrative of development that Delany rejects. Once reformatted into a logical

43 There is a resonance to be noted here between Old Venn’s assertion, as discussed in a footnote above, that she and her Island people “do not aspire to civilization” and the sense here in which seriality refuses the kinds of settlements and sedimentation (in another idiom, “reification”) that “civilization” is figured as. There is a way that Old Venn the storyteller, inventor, mathematician and architect represents precisely something at once of Howard’s “newer barbarians” and Delany’s “cross-cultural concepts.” The point for now is that something of the series story (or seriality in the particular sense in which Nevèrýon deploys it) refuses the solid and stable meanings upon which civilizations, figuratively and concretely, are founded. The “N + 1” as an algebraic designation of a new entry into the series is merely a mathematical stand-in for an ever-emergent barbarian-like force—that which cannot be domesticated semantically, socially, or historically.

44 Within this context, it is important to recall that chronology, derived from the Greek, is composed of *khronos* “time” + *-logia* “logic.”
time-sequence, its experimental and critical effects become nullified. Delany has quite carefully tracked the complications that occur when publishers mistake the seriality of a series story for what they perceive as novelistic incoherence:

The series is very flexible. Here’s a short story. Next’s a bulky novel that can be followed by a novella, or another novel, or another short story. When publishers first began to collect SF series together in volume form, they did everything they could to try to make the resultant books look like novels. Because of that back-looking critical process [of the series story], however, often a writer would have set a story further back in time from an earlier tale, instead of moving continually forward in strict chronological order … When the stories appeared over months in magazines, this was no problem. But when the stories were collected, invariably they’d be put in chronological order, no matter how this obscured the self-critical development … I’m sure you can understand how, if a reader picks up the book version of one of these series, thinking it’s an SF novel (and there’s often no way to tell, since separate stories are frequently renamed ‘chapters’), and begins it with the expectation ordinarily brought to a novel, the book’s going to read strangely; and the self-critical development, especially if it’s not blatantly obvious, might just slip by because the reader isn’t looking for it.

In opposing “strict chronological order” to “self-critical development,” Delany understands that narrative time can still develop without reinforcing a conception of history as developmental, or progressive. The referent for what Delany valorizes as seriality’s “self-critical development” involves a refusal to think genre as if it consisted, or named, ontologically fixed forms. But what Delany means by building up a series out of various story forms should not be confused with the literary critical norms associated with the building, or cultivation, of a self-transparent, centered subject (the “bildung” of the bildungsroman). Refusing the bildungsroman as the novel’s archetypical form means

45 Discussing the reception of the Nevërûon series, and with particular reference to why readers find it “difficult,” Delany has observed that “readers who dislike the series find what you call ‘straightforward’ hopelessly ornamental, baroque, ‘literary,’ and—even more so—too unyielding of any narrative progression to be worth the struggle” (“The Kenneth James Interview,” Silent Interviews 239; my italics).
refusing the unified self and the unities between self and society that this particular literary genre proposes. The sword and sorcery series story, for Delany, is more about building a world through successive stories—that is, successive problems and critiques—than in crystalizing the development of a single, solid self. This emphasis on world over self is not merely a function of novelistic theme but is inscribed into seriality’s form. Thus if the Nevèrÿon series is interested in tracing the development of any single figure, it is not so much the figure of the individual bourgeois subject as its own changing relation to sword and sorcery as its narrative unfolds. In this sense, its “self-critical development” is as important to its story-world as it is to the genre’s imaginative possibilities.

But beyond its formal capacity for self-reflection, Delany invests the SF and fantasy series story with a broader historical significance that emphasizes its participation in a more general cultural and conceptual shift. The series story, as Delany explains, is an expression of a changing conception of history. It is a paraliterary form’s response to changes in historical consciousness:

With the end of World War II and the explosion of the Atomic Bomb at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the focus of SF has changed to that of history [whereas before it was mostly, under the editorship of John W. Campbell’s 1937 *Astounding Stories*, focused on “technological and scientific innovation”]. At the same time, the series story, popular for years, took on a new substance and relevance. Many such series were continued in such a way as to force a rereading of them … Now the genre’s range presented a view of plural theories of history that spanned from images of historical guidance by unknowable, mystical forces,
through historical materialism, through notions of individual charisma as well as historical necessity.\textsuperscript{47}

It is as if with the advent of catastrophe, “history” enters the form. New and shattering historical experiences compel seriality’s response in such a way that it becomes a perfect vehicle for “plural theories of history.” According to Delany, a growing interest in history results in the formation of a genre that is constructed “in such a way as to force a rereading” of itself and its own assumptions. What Delany is concerned with here is how a literary form essentially embeds within itself a necessity to be \textit{reread}. This seemingly intrinsic property of seriality is fundamentally related to allegory and allegorical interpretation. What is significant is how the series story is said to compel a rereading of itself in such a way that it forces a re-encounter with its own development. Inserting a historical dimension into the form thus ensures that its concept of history is significantly revised. It can no longer present a totalizing, single picture of the world. The meaning of any “end” to the series literally lags behind itself, since one must reread in order to arrive at an ever-changing picture of the whole. This temporal delay becomes the most conspicuous way in which theme (historical focus) and form (a compulsory “rereading”) collapse within a series, turning its aesthetic “substance” into historical “relevance.” This is achieved in the way the genre comes to thematize “plural theories of history.” As Delany insists, “history is never originally written, but \textit{only} revised.”\textsuperscript{48} Such a knowing delay—namely, seriality’s structural delay of “rereading”—functions to ground seriality’s capacity to carry its own history forward, paradoxically, as something of a

\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Ibid.}, 162; italics in the original.
backformation. This isn’t merely a complicated way of reformulating Hegel’s “Owl of Minerva.” What matters here is the way that seriality shows “history” to be a palimpsest, and in so doing, points to a very specific (con)figuration of time.

The above passage is essentially re-figuring the notorious “break” between modernism and postmodernism along decidedly paraliterary lines. Within the specific context of SF and fantasy, Delany is suggesting that “history” intrudes upon the thematic and formal concerns that separate the period of the World Wars from the period of the post-War. In so doing, he implicitly challenges a number of theoretical points Fredric Jameson, for instance, has made about postmodernism. The first is Jameson’s contention that postmodernism is marked by its “loss of historicity,” and the second is that it is wholly distinguished by its “spatial turn.” For Jameson, both this loss of an historical awareness and a turn to spatiality (or “surface”) are understood as indications of a general decline within postmodernity of genuinely oppositional artistic practices. But note that Delany is, first, underscoring an historical focus as the distinguishing feature of post-war series stories and, second, claiming that the most constitutive dimension of its “new substance and relevance” is the incorporation of a new temporal logic (“plural theories of history”) into its narrative form.

Of course, Jameson’s notion of a “cultural dominant” is intended to run cover for

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49 Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (x, 154). See chapters 1, 6, and 9, especially.
50 Amy Elias, for instance, argues that postmodern texts are at bottom metahistorical romances, a category she uses to capture what she claims is a tendency of postmodern writers who desire “the past itself as a situating, grounding foundation for knowledge and truth” (*Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction* (2001), 22-23).
the far-too generalizing tendencies of his claims, especially as it is a theory that seeks
only to discern the broadest appearances of postmodernism as a dominant cultural
practice. But Delany’s insistence that historicity and temporality are fundamental to the
series stories that influenced him is an important counter-claim to long-standing
assumptions about American literary cultures in the last decades of the twentieth century.
In part, it counters the assumption that modernism (and its moment) was more properly
historically minded, when, in fact, what Delany shows is that it is his return to sword and
sorcery (in an apparently ahistorical “postmodern” moment) which effects its most
radical historicization. While no one would mistake Robert E. Howard for either William
Faulkner or Thomas Mann, it is also the case that few would read Delany’s Nevèrýon
series and not be persuaded that it was among one of the most ambitious narrative
experiments ever undertaken by an American writer. Indeed, in ways that evoke a
writerly tradition of Joyce and Sterne and Swift, as well as Scott, Cooper, and Balzac—to
say nothing of Heinlein and Sturgeon and Asimov—Delany’s Nevèrýon series is at once
compositionally stunning and philosophically rigorous. Jameson’s own endorsement of
the series as “a major and unclassifiable achievement in contemporary American
literature” directly addresses the difficulty of deciding whether the series constitutes a
superb sword and sorcery fantasy or a fantastically realized historical novel of the
writer’s present. Indeed, its sustained attempt to bridge both is in many ways the very
core of its “experiment.”

In two significant ways, Delany’s various experimentations within Nevèrýon owe
much to the science fiction writer Joanna Russ. The first involves her influence upon his turn to sword and sorcery, and the second involves the model she provides for what he calls his “novel of crisis.” First, Russ’s sword and sorcery story collection *The Adventures of Alyx* (1976) had an enormous influence over Delany’s understanding of genre and seriality. In his introduction to her collection of stories, he singles out her approach to genre as a major innovation. Her stories, he writes, move seamlessly “from sword-and-sorcery to SF and beyond.”51 But it is not merely her eclecticism that he admires, but the collection’s performative code-switching. She effectively deploys one set of genre conventions, or discursive modes, to complicate or trouble another, thereby telling a series of stories that are as much about setting, theme, and plot as they are about genre. Thus the very act of reading as a set of pleasures and interpretive protocols specific to genre become a crucial part of her stories. Her very mobilization of genre conventions—now dramatically coded as science fiction, now sword and sorcery—become, to Delany’s surprise, the “prime delights of the tale.”52

Russ’s strategic use of genre provides a model for Delany’s rethinking of sword and sorcery as a performance of various generic signs, various codes and conventions.53


52 Ibid., 75.

53 For Delany, the concept of genre is not unlike the concept of gender in that each is never pure, never essentially this or that. From this perspective, genre and gender are each reliant upon a certain borrowing and improvising, a certain drag performance or cross-dressing, or what Derrida referred to as “iterability,” namely, that gender, or genre, is made visible by the performance(s) of endlessly repeated statements and ensembles of acts and gestures. It is because Delany perceives a basic performative affinity between gender and genre that he can say: “What I am doing in almost all my books is the genre equivalent of ‘gender bending.’ That’s how all genres expand, progress, survive. It’s a paradox that when the results look most
Delany thus learns from Russ what literary critic John Frow explains is critical to understand about genres: they are not, he explains, “fixed and stable, since texts—even the simplest and most formulaic—do not ‘belong’ to genres but are, rather, uses of them; they refer not to ‘a’ genre but to a field or economy of genres, and their complexity derives from the complexity of that relation.”\textsuperscript{54} It is this complex “economy of genres” that Nevèrýon formally prioritizes (in terms of seriality) and thematically stages (in terms of its proliferation of stories and characters). Genre, in this view, becomes a series of relations that enable passageways from one set of relations to another, from one discursive mode to another, and it is only in their formalization as a “field” that they become a visible ensemble of coordinated and constellated signs. Their “economy” is precisely this circuit of points, relations, and flows.

The proliferation of genres and discourses throughout the Nevèrýon series—that is, its turn to sword and sorcery; its incorporation of memoir, scholarly criticism and dispute; and its use of theoretical and literary-critical discourse as headnotes to each of the tales—has the effect of ensuring that no single genre or discourse can be given priority. Its “economy” of signs in this way keeps with Delany’s understanding of sword and sorcery as a genre in which the conceptual and imaginative materials of one’s historical present can be made to enter. For what he finds in the genre is a constellation of signs, desires, and reading protocols that allow him to “truly play the game” of sword and sorcery:

\textit{revolutionary}, that’s when the writer is most attending to tradition” (“Sex, Race, and Science Fiction,” \textit{Shorter Views} 226). We can mark “gender bending,” then, as an additional dimension of Delany’s narrative experimentation in the Nevèrýon series. For more on drag as a figure for gender performance, see Judith Butler, “Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion,” \textit{Bodies that Matter} (1993).\textsuperscript{54} John Frow, \textit{Genre} (New York: Routledge, 2006), 2.
What one wanted, even at fourteen, was a landscape which, in all its anthropological possibility, remained totally malleable: real historical ties, no matter how tenuous, limited this malleability too much. For sword-and-sorcery to be at its best, one needs a landscape that is ‘on the brink of civilization’ in an almost scientifically ideal way. It is only here that one can truly play the game. More precisely I suspect, sword-and-sorcery represents what can, most safely, still be imagined about the transition from a barter economy to a money economy. (One might even say, instead of imagined, ‘remembered.’ But to remember anything from before one’s own personal memory begins is, of course, as much an act of imagination, in its essence, as any vision of the future might be.) By the same light, science fiction represents what can most safely be imagined about the transition from a money economy to a credit economy.55

Implicit in this description of sword and sorcery is its liberation from “real historical ties.” In Delany’s reading the genre rejects facticity “in an almost scientifically ideal way,” and yet its sense of the scientific seems to owe much to an empiricist’s commitment to experimentation. In his reading, playing the game is equivalent to experimenting in the laboratory. The point is that all is in flux and that “transition” is as much about the reader (“fourteen”) as it is about its landscape (“on the brink of civilization”). Its “malleability” becomes the very source of both its pleasure and its imaginative “possibility.”

Ernst Bloch’s remarks on the utopian dimension of the fairy tale and “colportage” (a German colloquialism for “pulps”) help to recast what might appear as the form’s mere adolescent escapism, which Delany at once points to and undercuts with the phrase, “even at fourteen.”56 For Bloch, adolescence is a symbolically important oppositional

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56 By “fairy tale or colportage,” Bloch is referring more generally to those cheaply produced late nineteenth and early twentieth century publications that were denigrated as “popular,” “mass,” or, as Michael Denning suggests, “proletarian” literatures. Within the American context, these were specifically the “dime novel” or the “penny dreadful,” each important precursors to what in the early twentieth century would be called
stage. “The adolescent,” as he writes, “is at odds with his ordinary environment and declares war on it.” But such adventure-fantasies are no guarantees of utopian outcomes; they can just as easily “point to Ku Kluxers and fascists,” as he has warned. Their importance, Bloch maintains, is that their fantasy structure can awaken in a reader a “legitimate wishful image,” one that points toward the “possibility” of imagining a different, and better, order of things. If adolescent, or in Delany’s terms, if “infantile,” its production of a “wishful image” is still the highest function of fantasy literature, as it proposes a world that defies the given one. If civilization and the adult world say, “this is it”—an expression which has its corollary in Delany’s period with Margret Thatcher’s infamous saying, which Ronald Reagan is said to have admired, “there is no alternative”—the barbarian and the adolescent say, “it must be otherwise.” Those in power always denounce such assertions as childish and naïve dreams. But Bloch insists on the importance of fantasy fiction as the source of that dream:

At all points here lost meanings are fresh, awaiting meanings which have not been lost, as in the fairytale. A happy outcome is secured, no trace remains of the dragon, except in chains, the treasure-hunter finds his dream-money, the couple are united. Fairytales and colportage are castle in the air par excellence, but one in good air and, as far as it can be true at all of mere wishing-work: the castle in the air is right.

Bloch maintains a perfect balance between the dream’s goodness (“in the air”) and the goodness of the dream (“the castle in the air is right”). But this is not simply an effort to

“pulps” and, relatedly, they are each important influences on the development of what would become “sword and sorcery,” since Robert E. Howard not only read them, but also sought to model his own writing after them. See Mark Finn, Blood and Thunder: The Life and Art of Robert E. Howard (2006).

57 The Principle of Hope, 36.
58 “Sex, Race, and Science Fiction,” Shorter Views, 226.
59 Ibid., 369.
redeem “mere wishing-work.” Bloch is affirming the placelessness of adolescent longing, and the literary forms that such longing gives rise to, as vital. It is where, in the realm of the cultural imagination, the “game” of political dreaming can be played.

But a question then emerges as to the specificity of the “game” Delany admits to be playing within the fantasy structure of sword and sorcery. What, in other words, is the nature of this game and for what purposes is it being played? Answering this returns us to Joanna Russ and explicitly engages us in the other way she influenced Delany’s Nevèrÿon series. Remarking upon the texts enabling Nevèrÿon’s experimentations, Delany has pointed to another of Russ’s novels, this time her 1976 novel We Who Were About to . . . Delany explains,

Now, back in the sixties, I’d also read Dalton Trumbo’s Johnny Got his Gun (1939), another novel of crisis . . . But Russ’s novel [We Who Were About to . . .] was the first experimental novel of crisis I’d read. And it was, for me, so much more effective than Trumbo’s that, when AIDS precipitated the time for me to write my own novel of crisis, it never occurred to me to put it in, say, fairly traditional narrative form Trumbo used. With Harlan Ellison’s extraordinary mosaic story “Deathbird” (1975) in pursuit, I went straight for the experimental.

While the experimentation he found in Joanna Russ and Harlan Ellison in the mid-70s,

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60 Bloch is a resonant voice here not simply for his championing of mass literature’s utopian possibilities. More to the point is that Bloch enables us to think the unfulfilled — his “not yet”—as a constitutive dimension of the fairy tale’s fantasy structure. Bloch’s concept of the “non-synchronous”—of the temporal unevenness of the historical present — is useful precisely in that it returns us to the importance of seriality as a non-linear, open, and self-critical mode of engaging with time as an historical category.

61 This matter of the relationship between games and dreaming as a kind of political education is given rather eloquent and forceful illustration by C.L.R. James in Beyond a Boundary (1963). In discussing how sporting games ("cricket and soccer") implicitly politicized him, he writes: “Cricket had plunged me into politics long before I was aware of it. When I did turn to politics I did not have too much to learn” (65).

62 Delany has been quite forceful about the effect this particular text had upon him. After having read it, he has said, “I have never quite been the same” (“A Paradoxa Interview: Experimental Writing/Texts & Questions" (1995), 211-212).

63 Ibid., 211.
just as he was beginning the first of the Nevèrýon stories, indicated a new direction for
his fiction, it was not until an actual catastrophe intervened upon his life that a need for
the experimental exerted itself. His going “straight for the experimental” is thus a
consequence of an historical situation that demanded he produce his “own novel of
crisis.” As he explains, AIDS “precipitated” a turn to experimentation, which is to say
that its catastrophe (from the Greek, katastrophē, “overturning”) overturned those
conditions which would have made a “fairly traditional narrative” possible. As Delany
goes on to say, the ninth tale of the series, the novel The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals,
captures a profound decision to “take on AIDS” as a problem of literary form:

Because of the topicality and the urgency of my own undertaking, I felt it was
worth the risk to hoist up on my own shaky shoulders the burden of the
experimental, when I decided to take on AIDS, life, and death in a novel started in
’83 and finished in June ’84. That Judgment of the crisis was not: I must reach as
many people as possible. Rather it was: The people I reach, I must reach as
intensely as possible.⁶⁴

In deciding to “risk” even greater experimentation in the Nevèrýon series, Delany was
motivated to produce not a popular work but an “intensely” realized one. What this
means, in part, refers us to the unfolding of the series itself. For the Nevèrýon series,
prior to the ninth tale (that is, the novel The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals) was, as
Delany has famously called it, more a “Child’s Game of Semiotics” than a “novel of
crisis.”⁶⁵ Delany has acknowledged that the series broadly was undertaken “to articulate
for adults the hidden and subterranean currents that are forever at play in the largely

⁶⁴ Ibid., 211-212; italics in the original.
⁶⁵ “Appendix: Closures and Openings,” Return to Nevèrýon, 270.
infantile genre of sword-and-sorcery.\(^{66}\)

This does not mean, however, that the six tales which make up the first two volumes of the series—*Tales of Nevèrÿon* (1976) and *Neverýona* (1983)—are not sufficiently radical in their modifications of the genre. As the series makes clear, Gorgik’s predilection for S/M as well as his phenotypical difference from the standard sword and sorcery forebears are important, clever, and, at times, astonishingly subversive deviations from the genre’s norms. There is also, to be sure, the very carefully placed theoretical and literary-critical headnotes — far from a commonplace within fantasy fiction. Edward Said, Michel Foucault, Barbara Johnson, Gayatri Spivak, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida are only some of the proper names deployed throughout the four volumes, and they each add immensely to a subtle, intricate expansion of Nevèrÿon’s larger discursive world. In so doing, they mark not only Delany’s encounter with poststructuralist thought and contemporary theory, but also act as signposts delimiting something of the text’s hermeneutical horizon. These, Delany’s text is announcing, are the thinkers whose ideas form an important part of the conceptual landscape of Nevèrÿon’s concept of the paraliterary.

The first two volumes of the series tell the story of Gorgik the Liberator, but they also move far beyond him and Kolhari—the port city of Nevèrÿon—into the peripheral peoples and landscapes of its larger story-world. The narrative of Gorgik the Liberator traces his transformation from a man formerly enslaved into the central leader of a

\(^{66}\) “Sex, Race, and Science Fiction,” *Shorter Views*, 226.
massive slave revolt, but the series constantly moves towards him and away from him as its builds. By the end of the first tale, “The Tale of Gorgik,” we have in large part left him behind and entered the greater surround of civilization he is said to be representative of—its “optimum product.” Following the model of “N” and “N+1,” Gorgik at the end of the first tale of the series represents a “problem.” He is the figure of his world’s would-be salvation, its “Liberator”—a trope as common in fantasy as it is in what Lukács would have called Bourgeois realism. But each subsequent tale becomes a “critique” not only of Gorgik’s centrality to a sword and sorcery epic, but also of Gorgik’s centered-ness as a subject. As Gorgik becomes increasingly peripheral as the series builds, the landscape of what appears to be a bildungsroman shifts to that of a much more ambitious tableau of Nevërýon’s overlapping and intersecting parts and peoples. The focus of its tales thus radiates out from Gorgik and increasingly follows those fascinated by him, indifferent to him, oblivious of him, hostile to him, or, indeed, counterfeiting him. The point is that Nevërýon is not, through its first two volumes, so much experimental as gorgeously layered with all kinds of narrative and discursive arabesques. There are dragons, but they are rare and corralled beasts. There is little swordplay, but there are wonderfully staged storytelling scenes. It is at once complicated and thrilling, but it is not a “novel of crisis.”

67 “The Tale of Gorgik,” Tales of Nevërýon, 77. However contingent his formation, or because of this contingency, Gorgik, by the end of his tale, crystallizes as “a man who was—in his way and for his epoch—the optimum product of his civilization” (“The Tale of Gorgik,” 77). That he will become the liberator of Nevërýon’s slaves as a civilized outsider marks the complicated ambivalence of the terms “barbarian” and “civilized” within the series.
3.4 A “Novel of Crisis” and Allegorical Passageways

And so it was I entered the broken world …
— Hart Crane

As Delany states, “the burden of the experimental” became, under very specific historical circumstances, an urgent undertaking, and one that involved bringing more of an intensity to a sword and sorcery series already underway. By “novel of crisis,” Delany means the effort at registering that intensity in narrative form. As he says, the intention of his experiment was to “reach” readers “as intensely as possible.” What he wrote of an AIDS crisis that was just then emerging would have to partake in something of the same intensity of the event itself. That event’s disruptions, terrors, and bewilderment would have to lodge their force in the very form of the text—in its language, tone, and pacing.

Theodor Adorno speaks of this “burden” in terms of the artist giving his or her artwork over to time. That beyond its subjective dimension—that is, beyond what the individual artist may intend—there is always, and ineradicably, the objective dimension to the artwork, which, for Adorno, is history and its determinations. This sense that artworks must respond to the demands of their historical situations; that they must find a form that makes their particular chaos “eloquent,” as Adorno would say, is relevant to how Delany’s Nevèrÿon series orients itself with respect to the AIDS crisis. It is what Delany himself understands as the determinative, objective dimension of his work, that which turns it toward the experimental, and, in the language of Adorno, produces the
“enigmatic” and difficult artwork.⁶⁸ History in the form of catastrophe intervenes upon the Nevèrýon series, and when it does, it makes its first appearance in the manner of a “Bridge.”

Our passageway from Nevèrýon’s story-world to “New York City during 1982 and 1983, mostly before the 23 April announcement of the discovery of a virus (human t-cell lymphotropic virus [HTLV-3]) as the overwhelmingly probable cause of AIDS” occurs by means of “the Bridge of Lost Desire.”⁶⁹ This is not our first encounter with the Bridge in the series; our first full encounter occurs in the seventh tale, “The Tale of Fog and Granite.”⁷⁰ While the Bridge appears or is alluded to at early moments within the series, it is not given a concrete specificity until the seventh tale places it at the center of Kolhari’s underground social world, giving it a certain conspicuous function as a meeting site for Kolhari’s underclass. For some, like the “smuggler” whose story is taken up by the seventh tale, the Bridge provides both a means of transit and a place of destination. Through the smuggler we gain access to the Bridge not only as an important architectural fact of the city, linking its older sections to its newer developments, but also as a site of concentrated (“intimate”) social exchanges. As the seventh tale follows the smuggler into the city (“He walked; and the city drew in to him”), something of a long exposure picture of the Bridge emerges, time-delayed through its daily and nightly cycles.⁷¹ It emerges as

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⁶⁹ “Appendix A: Postscript,” Flight to Nevèrýon, 361; italics in the original.
⁷⁰ As a point of clarification, “The Tale of Fog and Granite” is the first tale in the three tales that make up Flight from Nevèrýon, the third volume of the series. The novel The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals is the final tale in the same volume.
a place at once of pure traffic and deliberate congregation, of routine flows and varying concentrations:

During the afternoon and evening, the bridge served not only as entranceway into Old Market of the Spur, but also as workplace for most of Kolhari’s prostitutes. Once the market that made it profitable to pursue such sexual enterprise shut down, however, the women and men and boys and girls listlessly or vigorously hawking their bodies lingered on the bridge only an hour or so past sunset, when the market’s mummers and bear-tamers and acrobats and street musicians also left for the night. […] When the last rowdy youngster ceased calling across the walkway after his or her friends, when the last middle-aged man, unsteady with too many mixed mugs of cider and beer, gave up his search for known, if not knowledgeable, flesh, when the last and oldest prostitutes fell in with one another, shoulder to shoulder, to walk tiredly back to the Spur, for a while the bridge might seem empty. But soon you noticed the sparse population remaining — there during the day, certainly, but absorbed, then, by the traffic coming and going. Now, made prominent by isolation and darkness, they became distressingly visible: the mad, the displaced, the sleepless, the disturbed.\footnote{Ibid., 31-32.}

The Bridge is depicted here as a singular kind of “workplace.” Kolhari’s prostitutes— “the women and men and boys and girls”—are not figured as deviants, but laborers “listless or vigorously hawking their bodies.” It is work that they have spent their afternoons and evenings doing. And the narrative reminds us explicitly of the fact of their labor, not only in its description as “sexual enterprise,” but also in showing them leaving the Bridge “shoulder to shoulder, to walk tiredly back to the Spur,” as if this were a scene in which workers, of another century or epoch, were leaving the factory. Their collective social function is far more precisely grasped when the narrator relays what the “the mummer” (a gay, older dramaturge who frequents the Bridge and is profiled in later tales) had once suggested to the smuggler about how to read the sex workers on the
Bridge of Lost Desire. The mummer had said that the sex workers were no different from “the market’s mummers and bear-tamers and acrobats and street musicians.” They were all, the mummer concluded, “merely purveyors of entertainments at different orders of intimacy” (31). For the mummer, appearance has a latent content. His understanding of the trade and traffic on the Bridge discloses its own “intimacy” with the relations among the complex social exchanges taking place there. The force of his insight is, of course, made more striking, and seems to bear along a greater “truth,” spoken as it is by one of his profession—by a mummer (a pantomimist, from Old French, momeur, from momer, “act in a mime”), that is, one who is presumably committed to the close reading of social phenomena. As an artist and storyteller, he points to a seeming paradox encountered repeatedly throughout the series: those closer to artifice appear closest to “truth.”

This scene when mixed with the mummer’s reading of its manifest and latent content suggests how inexhaustible Nevêrŷon is. No one person, theory, historical explanation, or figure is presented a capable of mastering it. Over and again, questing after absolute knowledge proves futile, revealed as kind of beautiful madness or as anguished defeat. No part of Nevêrŷon’s world, whether its imperial court or its barbarian villages, is fully known or knowable—and, anticipating the crisis to come, this ongoing sense of that which mystifies and baffles and exceeds a collective effort at understanding will only be far more poignantly intensified in a time of “plague.” In each tale there is always that which escapes someone or another’s attention, always someone or something which cannot be accounted for. The ineradicable presence on the Bridge of “the mad, the
displaced, the sleepless, the disturbed” is a local, dramatic instance of an “outside” or an Otherness inassimilable to the goings-on of the Bridge, and yet constitutive of its very order.

But the smuggler’s appearance in the series fulfills a larger thematic function. He is not only the keeper of some share of the Bridge’s secrets, but is also, at the lower ends of Nevèrîyon’s social hierarchy, a would-be archivist and biographer of Gorgik the Liberator, one in whom all of the certainties and deformations of rumor confusedly collect. “Walking beside his cart, the smuggler thought clearly and firmly, as if his own inner voice could drown the others out: I probably know details and incidents about the Liberator’s history that even he has forgotten. Yet who around me knows I have such knowledge? Not the madmen swaying in the night, nor the schemers behind their planked-up doors, nor the lazy whores and hustlers working in daylight” (33). His sense of being the bearer of a privileged secret expresses itself in a preposterous contempt for those around him, but it is equally the case that he serves, in his broader narrative function, the purpose of granting visibility to Nevèrîyon’s marginalized peoples. The irony is that while he prides himself in having the “Liberator’s history” in his head, he cannot himself, in the course of his tale, distinguish between the actual Liberator (that is, Gorgik himself) and his counterfeit (Clodon the bandit)—both of whom he encounters. A figure of secret passage and false appearance, the smuggler neither knows what he knows, nor what he does not. In him the Nevèrîyon series would seem to be scattering so many proliferating signs and yet underscoring how so few are capable of negotiating
them. And yet negotiating a world of signs is all that the social is, all that “history” is, as Gorgik will attest to in the final tale in which he appears in the series. Now older and now a Minister of Nevèrýon, he says, reflecting on his years in a slave mine, that what he learned was that “history … despite our masters, is never inevitable, only more or less negotiable.” In this respect, the Bridge of Lost Desire becomes a site of heightened and intensified negotiations. It is at once a space of ceaseless traffic between social signs and social bodies and a metaphor of the dis-connection and dis-identification that all social forms attempt to compensate for and yet actively produce (“Lost Desires”). Desire’s paradox is manifest in the title, the thing bringing one towards what is ever vanishing. It is as if the “Bridge” were a “phantom limb,” and all art (or artifice) were revealed to be an effort at giving itself over to that which refuses to be forgotten, yet cannot be fully retrieved.

The Bridge that we encounter two tales later in The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals is not identical to Nevèrýon’s “Bridge of Lost Desire,” but it serves a similar function of mediating thematically between the abstract and the concrete, and of producing a formal place where various worlds “touch.” In so doing it serves the narrative function of conveying us as readers across one story world into another, from one social world into

73 “The Game of Time and Pain,” Return to Nevèrýon, 34.
74 In writing about the blues form as a kind of revisionary, re-animating prosthetic, or social form, Nathaniel Mackey writes: “The phantom limb haunts or critiques a condition in which feeling, consciousness itself, would seem to have been cut off” (“Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol,” Discrepant Engagement). Through all manner of mediations, the phantom limb returns our awareness to what has been “lost.”
75 See section 1.3 of the introduction to this dissertation, “The Nineteenth Century in the Twentieth: Towards a Concept of the Paraliterary.”
another. “The Mummer’s Tale” (the eighth tale of the series), which precedes *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals*, prepares the ground for our crossing as readers. In the eighth tale we take a more thorough (de)tour of Kolhari’s lower depths, encountering again, though differently than in the smuggler’s tale, the complex knitting together of necessity and desire that the Bridge represents. “The Mummer’s Tale” largely involves the mummer entertaining his sometime friend and patron, “the Master,” as they pass through what the mummer refers to as Kolhari’s “common lane.” The mummer describes it this way for two reasons. First, he is literally directing his walk with the Master along the Bridge and through side streets that the Master, well born and without the kinds of inclinations that the Bridge attracts, has never before ventured down. Second, the mummer means this more figuratively, as the mummer is telling his companion stories about those whose lives collect in the underworld of the Bridge. By the end of the tale, with the afternoon behind them, the Master must find his way back from the “sordid center of our city” into which the mummer, who becomes effusively apologetic, proclaims he has driven him. In the final scene of the eighth tale, the Master asks the mummer to direct him back to the neighborhood of Sallese (a wealthy enclave above Kolhari where the Master lives and teaches). The tale’s final image is of the mummer pointing across the Bridge that he and the Master are now on the other side of, indicating the direction in which the Master must go in order to make it home. The tale thus ends with the mummer pointing beyond the Bridge, and in the direction of Sallese, saying, “it lies there … a bit of madness one must

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76 The Master is born an aristocrat, but in a kind of Tolstoyan gesture, renounces his noble title. He is renowned and notorious for this, but also for having erected a school in the city of Kolhari for the children of both aristocrats and wealthy traders and craftspersons.

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cross to get from here to there” (180).

That “bit of madness” is thus given as the condition of our own entry into *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals*. Derangement is required, in other words, because the Bridge we use to cross over from Nevèrÿon to New York City does not, of course, exist, but must be invented, and, like madness, lies outside and is other to what is construed as known. As Chip (Delany’s narrative double) writes in the ninth tale’s opening vignette:

> On —th Street, just beyond Ninth Avenue, the bridge runs across sunken tracks. Really it’s just an extension of the street. (In a car, you might not notice you’d crossed an overpass.) The stone walls are a little higher than my waist. Slouching comfortably, you can lean back against them, an elbow either side, or you can hoist yourself up to sit. There’s no real walkways. The paving is potholed. The walls are cracked here, broken there. At least three places the concrete has crumbled from iron supports: rust had washed down over the pebbled exterior. Except for this twentieth-century detail, it has the air of a prehistoric structure.\(^77\)

This first section begins, ironically, with the force of realism, faithfully describing (or purporting to) Chip’s New York City as it is. He notes potholes, “rust,” and other signs of deterioration on the Bridge where he stands — signs, incidentally, that require a characteristically subtle decipherment (“Really it’s just … In a car, you might not notice … ”). But more significantly, there is an absent referent to the comparative tone it takes, its “a little higher than,” while clearly referring to his own physical dimensions, is something of a ghostly gesture towards a comparison that has not yet been fully made. What is becoming clear, however, is that by evoking its “air of a prehistoric structure” this “bridge” is transforming with each additional detail into a passageway between

\(^77\) *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals, Flight from Nevèrÿon*, 183.
Nevèrýon and the narrator’s historical present. The bridge, in its actual concreteness is dissolving, as it were, into metaphoricity. Yet Chip oversees this transformation with a striking nonchalance:

At various times over the last half-dozen years, I’ve walked across it, now in the day, now at night. Somehow I never remember passing another person on it. It’s the proper width. You’d have to double its length, though. Give it the pedestrians you get a few blocks over on Eighth Avenue, just above what a musician friend of mine used to call “Forty-Douche” Street: kids selling their black beauties, their Valiums, their loose joints, the prostitutes and hustlers, the working men and women. Then put the market I saw on the Italian trip Ted and I took to L’Aquila at one end, and any East Side business district on the other, and you have a contemporary Bridge of Lost Desire. It’s the bridge Joey told me he was under that sweltering night in July when, beside the towering garbage pile beneath it, he smelled the first of the corpses.  

While not the same “Bridge of Lost Desire” that the mummer pointed the Master across, it seems to require only minor modifications to connect Nevèrýon and New York City. Such modifications are, moreover, undertaken in the present tense, a sequence of imperatives (“give it,” “then put,” “you have”) that make its transformation complete. We have thereby crossed worlds, leaving one tale and entering another by means of metafictional will.

At this moment we are at once outside the “fiction” and yet curiously deeper within it, reentering the bridge of lost desire from what would seem the perspective of the future. But that future is, in fact, Delany’s historical present, and its relation to Nevèrýon is not so much a relation to a “primitive past” as an elaborately staged re-presentation of its

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78 Ibid., 183.
own “contemporary cultural materials.” These are the words of Delany’s (meta)fictional female academic, K. Leslie Steiner and as such is an instance of Nevërémon’s own self-reflexive “play” with respect to its own historical present. Of course, Steiner’s preface to the entire four volumes of the Nevërémon series is constantly staging a dialogue with its story world—with its “textual” origins and with its own contemporaneity. Her emphasis on sword and sorcery’s landscape of “transition,” as we have seen in Delany, is an important feature of Nevërémon’s conceptual resources. If the Nevërémon series is to be viewed as a self-aware “document of its times,” then, Steiner’s preface suggests, it must be understood as involving mixed historical temporalities. We might say, after Gramsci, that it is the landscape for rigorously staging “the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born.” But its historical unevenness—its “malleability,” in Delany’s terms—has further implications. As Steiner writes, the “suggestion” of the series is that “the place we are returning to is deeply and historically implicated in the place we are returning from.” “Even as [the tale’s] speculate on the workings of history,” she adds, “such creations [of a primitive past] are insistently ahistorical—or, are, at any rate, historical only as they are products of our own historical moment.”

In the ninth tale “our own historical moment” intrudes upon the text, its own unevenness interrupting the unevenness of Nevërémon. Standing on a Bridge on the West

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79 “Return … a preface,” Tales of Nevërémon, 19.
80 That the preface can accomplish this is largely because, while appearing now at the beginning of the series, it was originally composed after The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals. It first appears as an appendix to the 1987 edition of the fourth and final volume of the series, Return to Nevërémon. This publication history is noteworthy because it restores to the preface a direct relation to the experimental effects of The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals on the series as a whole.
82 Ibid., 19.
Side of lower Manhattan, Chip is *within* his own historical moment as he figures a passage to Nevêrŷon’s “primitive past.” In his narrative function, the connection between two worlds is secured. But in bridging the one world with the other, the series conflates Steiner’s “returning to” and “returning from.” The appearance of the “—th Street” bridge seems to reverse the direction of “to” and “from” such that it is no longer clear which holds a prior and original relation to the other. Which, in other words, comes first, Nevêrŷon and then New York City, or *vice versa*? The point in drawing out Steiner’s remarks is that while it would seem that two separate historical temporalities are here being made to touch, the fact is that the configurations of a “past” (Nevêrŷon) and a “future” (New York City) are momentarily diegetically suspended. This is because the bridge enables a profoundly deepening sense of the entire project’s contemporaneity: it is neither the future nor the past that is being figured, but an ever expanding historical present aware of its own expansion. In this sense, the bridge opens up the entire interpretive space of the series. It initiates an interview between how the present is historically tied to its imagined pasts and how the appearance of the past must always be placed within the historicity of the present that imagines it. The Bridge’s startling “fiction,” then, is that it brings an imagined ancient world and a postmodern one into simultaneous contact.

Urgently, terrifyingly, that point of contact is the onset in the early 1980s of an AIDS epidemic. The historical present we are entering is one fractured by the onset of “plague.” Thus the problem of determining which bridge appeared first must be recast as
a question concerning infection and transmission—which, in other words, represents the site of contamination between the one and the other. It is by way of New York, it would appear, that the “gay plague” (re)visits Nevèrýon. But Return to Nevèrýon has, from its opening pages, prepared its readers to attend to the ways it refuses to seal itself off as an autonomous object. The “outside” has been a persistent contaminant from the beginning of the series. The series has marked this “outside” in multiple ways: by its incorporation of (meta)fictitious academics (K. Leslie Steiner and S. L. Kermit), in its use of appendices and correspondences, and in its citation of theoretical discourse. It has extended the discursive space and enlarged the diegetic world of “Nevèrýon” from its opening pages. But the introduction of “plague” to the story worlds of both Nevèrýon and New York City dramatically shifts our understanding of what is properly, or improperly, “outside” its text. It now becomes possible to say that the “experiment” Nevèrýon represents is entirely involved in registering the presence of the outside within the diegetic space of the series. Commenting on the emergence of AIDS, Delany writes,

The strongest motivation behind the experiment was simple: ‘I’ve got things to say that are too important and that will not fit within the structures of narrative fiction as it is usually handed to us.’ But for such a motivation to produce other than chaos, it presumes in the writer a history of reading and a sense of what can be done outside those strictures, of what’s to be won by going outside.83

The phrase, “what’s to be won by going outside” is an especially interesting formulation in light of the fact that The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals is so consistently meditating on its representational failures. The language of “incompleteness” regularly arises within the

83 “A Paradoxa Interview: Experimental Writing/Texts & Questions,” About Writing: Seven Essays, Four Letters, and Five Interviews, 212-213; italics in the original.
ninth tale as a real and aesthetic constraint—one that is all the more haunting when the stakes of failure are bound up in illness and death. Failure, doubt, and incompleteness become even more intensified in a text that is attempting both to address an “unagented” virus—as AIDS was in the period during which the ninth tale was being written—and to record the lives of those in Nevèrÿon and New York City dying as a result of the illness.

A time of plague is a period of great speculation and panic, of rumor, opinion, anecdote, and prejudice. And for those living with the disease or in terror of contracting it, the advent of AIDS seemed hardly consistent with an age of Reason. Section 3.1 tells us that AIDS “was first dubbed ‘the gay plague,’” and section 3.2 tells of its emergence in a diaristic mode:

A new illness, AIDS, began to infiltrate the larger cities. Some saw it as a metaphor for the license, corruption, and decay that is the general urban condition. (Well, after all, ‘metaphor, —a transfer, something that carries something else after it—is as much a metaphor as is ‘disease.’) More interesting to the more interested citizens were, however, the strategies people used to avoid thinking about the illness. Certainly the relation between the facts of the infirmity and these strategies … was anything but metaphorical.84

This interest in “the strategies people used to avoid thinking about the illness” and of the historicity of this moment’s use of a metaphor such as “gay plague” to describe the onset of an epidemic impacting, at first, what appeared to be a population of largely gay men—this careful registering of a particular historical moment’s dissemination of language at a time of crisis underscores one of the basic effects that the appearance of the “Bridge” has upon how we are being asked to think this tale’s historical present. For what we

84 The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals, §3.2, 188; italics in the original.
encounter in the New York City strand of the “disease” is more superstitious than rational, belonging therefore more to the “primitivism” of Nevèrŷon than the modernity of New York City in 1982, the year when The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals was begun. While the presence of “plague” would not be the only way, thematically, to sustain both the symbolic and material persistence of contamination between these worlds (and their historically specific temporalities), it is by far the most effective at capturing the urgency of its experimentation. Braiding together the strands of Nevèrŷon and New York City enables us to feel and think our way through the expanding chaos of an actually occurring epidemic.

Delany’s formal treatment of the advent of AIDS as a public health crisis refuses to betray the experience(s) of those living through it. On one level, this means capturing its confusion, panic, and grief, and, on another, finding a way to formally thematize its particular disruptions and distinct dilations and contractions of time: how one moment can seem permanently sealed off from another moment and yet other moments or experiences can blur into a seemingly endless number of days.

From the perspective of the tale as a whole these registerings of temporal variation are inscribed into the aphoristic form of the ninth tale. Its aphoristic structure performs in miniature a function similar to that of the “Bridge of Lost Desire”—that is, each aphorism allows for simultaneous openings to emerge that expand the relations among the entries. And because the aphorism in its philosophical tradition gestures at the partiality, or, in the language of the ninth tale, the “incompleteness” of knowledge, no
one entry is presented as though it can stand alone. In this way, the various entries not
only enlarge crucial moments of insight but also intensify the impact of their
accumulation. In its production of space and in its precise, incremental serial unfolding
the aphoristic form becomes crucial to depicting how precarious and harried individual
moments are in a time of crisis. While previous tales within the series are composed in
sections or parts, *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals* is the only tale to thoroughly
incorporate an aphoristic structure. Thirteen numbered entries, distributed across 176
pages, make up *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals*. In alternating between sweep and
specificity it formally instantiates the “broken world” (Hart Crane) that the ninth tale has
us enter. In so doing it allows for a proliferation of scenes and strands such that each
functions autonomously, as each is commenting upon the one that precedes it. Thus, in
this sense, the aphorisms are entirely interdependent. It is a form that allows, as the
narrator suggests, the possibility of “letting the fragments argue with one another.”\(^8\)
Its effect is to give the narrative over, not to a singular History, but to the proliferating
histories of everyday life.

But it is not only the outwardness of a time of plague that is inscribed into the
form of the novel. The inwardness of the trauma of plague has its local moments as well,
such as in this section (§6) in which Pheron, a young gay weaver and one of Nevërëyon’s
afflicted, is shown to be sealed off from the world by his suffering. What is remarkable is
not that he is said to drift off into a state of incoherence, but that his drifting off into
incoherence is dramatized by way of his total departure from syntactical logic. Language

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\(^8\) *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals*, §11.4, 348.
itself drifts off into fleeting impressions as his consciousness, ravaged we must infer by fever and delirium, collects in composite images and memories. This section begins:

with a thumbnail, nudged and nipped the dark, beneath bark’s brown the yellow wood beneath green, copper under oil the ashy slate stepped into high-troughs with hides floating, nudged them with poles while the grey gunk you waded in took the hairs off the leather […]\textsuperscript{86}

It is language under only the slightest grammatical control. There are commas, but no capitalization. There are phrases, but no sentences. Language has turned totally associational, a transcription of Pheron’s disoriented, clearly delusional state. But note that this section begins in media res. It is not clear whether Pheron’s fever has found its way into his language alone or whether it too infects the narrator’s supposed authorial distance. The passage above seems to be a description of a language event in Pheron’s head, an attempt at capturing in language his particular interiority vis-à-vis the onset of a generalized condition of “plague.” But as this section builds, Nari and Zadyuk (his friends) phantasmically appear, and Pheron himself becomes a third-person entity: “was it necessary to feel a little superior to friends to love them that anxiety he wished the workshop hide hanging behind the planks in wait for summer to be at the shop not opened wasn’t close” (211). These typographical caesuras are like the flagstones Pheron’s mind or Pheron’s language either leaps to or slips off. Language here is simultaneously something less than meaning and more than sense. It is as if plague had taken hold of the text, contaminating its very materiality. It is an exquisite instance in which the poignancy of a ravaged body is given a textual imprint, and in this very

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., §6, 211.
singular respect it recalls Emily Dickinson’s great phrase, “Infection in the sentence breeds.”

An emphasis upon contamination in The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals—or, rather, emphasizing the violent intrusion of something foreign or external to its structure—might seem postmodernism avant la lettre. But rather than periodizing Delany’s work, this concern of his text with the outside world that surrounds it reveals the extent to which he isolates the singularity of his historical present. Delany helps us to see how any narrative, fictional or historiographic, calls forth some manner of “bridge” to connect itself to the past. Making the Bridge of Lost Desire “contemporary” is what permits plague to cross from one world into the other. The significance of having “plague” further figure our passage from Nevërýon to New York City is that the appearance of the term plague immediately opens up a history in the West of superstitions and persecutions that followed the arrival of plague.

As a term used for the onset of a widespread, devastating infection whose cause or source is unknown, “plague” conjures an earlier epoch’s superstitions regarding the causes of an illness. It brings to mind the now surreal costumes worn by medieval “doctors” to protect themselves during the Bubonic Plague from “bad” or poisonous airs then thought to be the source of the epidemic. Their ankle-length black gowns, boots, gloves, and bird-like masks appear from this historical distance as “primitive” hazardous material (or “hazmat”) suits. But there is, of course, a correlation between an epoch’s theory of the transmission of infectious diseases and the formal means taken to protect
against its spread. Their masks laced with herbs and flowers to ward off noxious airs, “bird-doctors,” as they were then called, corresponded to a miasma theory of disease that prevailed throughout the middle ages, extending with only minor modifications to the last decades of the nineteenth-century.⁸⁷ Not until the 1880s, in the separate but mutually reinforcing work of Louis Pasteur and Robert Koch, does microbiology emerge as a scientific field, and not until this moment is the epidemiological cause, and pathophysiology of the Bubonic plague discovered.⁸⁸ The newly emergent fields of microbiology and bacteriology advanced a germ theory of disease, definitively replacing the miasma theory, which had long dominated the way in which disease transmission had been conceptualized.

In its insistent use of “plague,” Nevrëyon points to something deeper about scientific models of disease and infection and in so doing has us reflect upon the knowledge systems that mediate our encounter with the world. And “plague,” in its general vernacular usage—and because it refers to a sudden and total onset of a deadly phenomenon—is not so much a term for what is known but for what is feared. It is thus a term used in the early phase of an affliction to connote both the speed and the severity of an unaccountable illness’s spread. No small part of that severity involves the swift terror of its appearance—it’s not standing still long enough to be diagnosed. It thus names what


⁸⁸ Chiras, 301-303. The bacteria for the Bubonic plague is discovered by the bacteriologist Alexandre Emile Jean Yersin, a student of Robert Koch’s, in 1894.
is at first an enigmatic manifestation of symptoms or signs (fevers, sores, emaciation) that, in their spread across a segment of a population, increasingly become legible as the inscriptions of a particular epidemic. It names, in other words, a process of disease transmission that is less scientific than ineradicably social, a process that begins in bewilderment and panic at the widespread loss occurring within a population until it is replaced, slowly and eventually, by a master term that purports to stabilize the catastrophe.

As a collection of specific signs proliferate across a population—and an epidemic would seem to be inscribing itself onto the surface of individual bodies—panic begins to announce itself in the growing use of “plague.” It is not only panic and peril that is kept active in the use of the term, but also the way that its use seems to summon persecution. This was particularly so with respect to the Black Death, which was alternately attributed to astrological causes, divine wrath, and a Jewish conspiracy to poison the wells. The broader grammatical usage of plague, as in to be plagued by, concisely captures and carries forward this sense of it constituting a form of punishment. Its relation, then, to persecution and punishment is why the narrator describes AIDS as a “new illness” that “[s]ome saw as a metaphor for the license, corruption, and decay that is the general urban condition.” Seeing or reading “plague” in an expanded historical context enables us to understand why the description of AIDS as a “gay plague” in the Nevèrÿon series points to the persistence of the medieval mind in 1980s America.

Delany’s experiment within The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals is, of course,
directed against such prejudiced thought. The narrator writes in §2.4,

> Without a virus, in a sense AIDS is not a disease. It’s a mysterious and so far (23 February 1984) microbically unagented failure to fight disease. It is connected with sex—“perverted” sex. It is connected with blood—“blood products,” as they say. Suddenly the body gives up, refuses to heal, will not become whole. This is the aspect of the ‘illness’ that is ravenous for metaphors to stifle its unsettled shift, its insistent uneasiness, its conceptual turbulence.

What worries the narrator is the aspect of the disease that “refuses to heal, will not become whole.” His worry registers itself in the text’s distinction between “disease” and “dis-ease”: one a fact in the world (its objective dimension) and the other the effect that its “unsettled shift, its insistent uneasiness, its conceptual turbulence” has upon those who must live without a “metaphor” to protect them (the subjective dimension). The narrator’s desire to restore wholeness is thus in equal measure ethical and aesthetic. But it is not a desire, however located within a fantasy epic, that resorts to magical solutions. Its narrative does not endeavor to make the aesthetically “good” compensate for a broken world. In its imperative on dis-identification with the present, on not wanting to make a “fairy-tale” out of the past, and on historicizing the social conditions of aesthetic production, *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals* shares Brecht’s interest in smashing all of the consolations of mimesis.

Yet in the midst of braiding together the “fiction” of the Nevèrýon strand with the “fact” of the New York City strand, the narrator draws no consolation from this refusal of

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89 *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals*, §2.4, 186; italics in the original.
90 I allude to Bertolt Brecht’s militant suggestion that “art [should not be] a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it.”
mimesis either. In §11.4 towards the end of the ninth tale, Chip abandons the fictional
conceit altogether, partly out of grief, and partly out of writerly frustration. While telling
the tale of Pheron, the young gay weaver who has come down with an AIDS-like illness,
he breaks off, mid-paragraph. The narrative about Pheron and his friends (Nari and
Zadyuk) that precedes this moment, and which in no way prepares us for the break to
come, reads:

Finally Zadyuk lay down too, till all of them were in the uneasy slumber of three
exhausted children, cowering in a forest, waiting for morning or a monster. 91

Then comes the graphic break, the italicized letters lodging the narrator’s despair at
continuing the fiction as though what awaited his characters Zadyuk, Nari, and Pheron
could be sufficiently addressed by means of a fairy-tale’s ending (“waiting for morning
or a monster”). But in Chip’s fractured, confused, catastrophic world, no deus ex machina
can be summoned to redeem the situation of his characters; no “structures of narrative
fiction as it is usually handed to us,” as Delany says above, will solve the “problem” of
this narrative situation. Part of his despair is that not even he, the narrator, can martial the
resources to save them. Against time’s fulfillment, and against a salvific unfolding of
events, Chip writes,

No. Can’t write it out. Not now. Partly because it touches too many emotional
things in me. And partly because, seven weeks before my forty second year, I’m
cynical enough to wonder seriously if a young heterosexual, working couple
would give up, for a gay friend (even if he were dying), what amounts, after all, to
a night’s sleep on the last day of Carnival before returning next morning to a full
work schedule: ten, twelve hours for them both. 92

91 The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals, 347.
92 Ibid., 347-348.
His appeal directly to the reader, mid-paragraph, arrives towards the end of a vignette in which Pheron approaches Nari and Zadyuk, a young “barbarian” couple who have become close friends of his. Pheron, alone and scared, is in an appalling state (“Pheron looked like a skeleton”) and pleads with them to keep him company (“Please, I’m so frightened”).

For the narrator, the plausibility or implausibility of the scene hinges on the question of whether Zadyuk and Nari could have, given their social position, suspended their fear of plague and devoted themselves so solicitously to Pheron, a pariah at this moment in Kolhari. Chip’s incapacity to decide whether Zadyuk and Nari could have mobilized such concern in the face of so much circulating superstition about the disease is rooted in his suspicion of their being “primitives” in a double sense. Zadyuk and Nari are common workers—she, a laundress, and he, a cobbler—and characters in a sword-and-sorcery world. Such a doubt concerning the possibility of their kindness and concern toward Pheron is marked, as the narrator puts it, by his own “cynical response” which, he says, is intended to guard himself from his own “emotions.” The narrator then asks, “Are the emotions and the cynicism two valid responses to the world as I’ve known it at painful play within me, in no particularly contingent hierarchy?”

It is a moment at which the thinnest tissue is seen to separate the story-world of Nevèrÿon and the historical present in which the narrator is imagining it. It is a poignant

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93 Ibid., 346, 347.
94 Ibid., 348.
instance in which the possibilities in the past are entirely contaminated by our understanding of what is possible in the present. And it is a crossing of worlds that is again effected by means of a metafictional interruption, here signaled by an emphatic negation of the narrative’s fictional conceit (“No. Can’t write it out. Not now.”). The point is that Delany’s novel is not just about narrating the effects of plague in Nevèrýon and New York City. It is also, at a deeper level, about the distance between event and meaning, sign and referent, same and Other, origin and copy. It is a distance that K. Leslie Steiner’s preface to the series invites us from the outset to cross over, walk across, enter: “Come to a far when, a distant once.”

Allegory, as Deborah L. Madsen suggests, “holds together two separate realms of meaning.” The very essence of allegory, as Paul de Man argues, is to produce a distance between sign and meaning, text and commentary. Distinguishing between “symbol” and “allegory” as literary tropes, de Man writes,

Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference. In so doing, it prevents the self from an illusory identification with the non-self, which is now fully, though, painfully, recognized as a non-self.

In substituting “present” and “past” in de Man’s use of “self” and “non-self,” the “distance” that opens up “in the void of this temporal difference” between the one and the

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95 “Return … a preface,” Tales of Nevèrýon, 11.
other—between, that is, identity and non-identity, sameness and difference—returns our attentions to the allegorical passageway effected by a “contemporary Bridge of Lost Desire.”

As both Madsen and de Man suggest, allegory takes place at a distance, or in the break, but it affects a passage between itself and the text it reads. In this view, the determining language of postmodernism—distance, break, and proliferation of meaning—becomes equally descriptive of allegory and allegorical interpretation. But something more is at stake in what has been referred to as the “revival of allegory” within postmodern literature.\(^98\) It involves the historicity of reading and interpretation, or what the ninth tale itself refers to, in its headnote, as “allegoresis.”

The headnote to *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals* quotes Allen Mandelbaum’s claim—in the introduction to his 1980 translation of Dante Alighieri’s *The Inferno*—that “Ours, too, is an age of allegoresis.” Mandelbaum’s introduction takes pains to argue for Dante as our contemporary. Dante is figured as a modern exile whose “age,” according to Mandelbaum, resembles our own. In a sentence Delany does not quote, Mandelbaum goes on to invoke the figure of Walter Benjamin, saying: “Walter Benjamin is always there, his riches ready to be ransacked or counterfeited.”\(^99\) Mandelbaum’s point in pairing Dante and Benjamin is that “allegoresis,” which is largely assumed to be a literary rhetorical mode characteristic of a previous era (or episteme), is brought into modernity.

\(^99\) “Introduction,” *The Inferno*, x.
in being associated with Benjamin. Conceived of as an ancient, outmoded form of reading and interpretation, allegoresis would seem an anachronism in our age, especially as it is regarded as a dogmatic, theological approach to texts, more an expression of a medieval mind than a postmodern one. An allegorical interpretation is thought to read a text from a cosmological point of view, making its collection of signs cohere with an absolute referent. “As above, so below” would summarize the logic of its method. But an allegorical reading points to its hermeneutical horizon. In this sense, allegorical readings are not so much facts about a text as facts about the historical moment in which a particular reading is produced.

If the headnote is thus suggesting the persistence of something otherwise hidden from view, namely, our own historicity (“Ours, too, is an age of allegoresis …”), then the ninth tale attempts to show how frighteningly real certain sedimented ways of reading the world are. To make a seemingly outmoded literary form contemporary (“allegoresis”) undermines certain assumptions about the enlightenment principles that purportedly unify modernity. Allegoresis typically conjures a medieval mind submerged in religiosity, superstition, and myth. Throughout The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals Delany complicates the assumption that ours is not an age of allegoresis; that it is not the case that ours is an age liberated from dogma and irrational orthodoxies. By citing Mandelbaum, Delany is signaling his critique of modernity’s claim to rational historical development. Nevrèyon as a whole refuses our own age’s still nearly theological belief in its oneness with a progressive course of universal History.
While allegoresis purports to interpret the world, the ninth tale’s insistence on “plague” shows that allegorical interpretations are better understood as documents of a world. This explains why its aphoristic structure is so effective. Like a palimpsest, it shows how prior readings never wholly disappear, but provoke new, subsequent readings. And if prior readings never disappear, but deposit their traces, all readings become derivative as “temporal difference” (de Man) inserts itself between event and meaning, text and interpretation. No reading can therefore be posited as primary or original. Each reading rather becomes belated, always after the fact. As a hermeneutical operation, allegory is time-bound, layered, primarily a response to the reading (or “commentary”) that precedes it. With respect to its temporal unfolding, then, allegory comes to resemble a critical operation not unlike seriality. This is especially the case in the way that Delany uses seriality as a strategic compositional feature of the Nevèrÿon series to unfold, tale-by-tale, an ongoing self-reflexive “critique” of its story world, its signs and symbols.100

We might say further that in terms of its belatedness, and its strange interdependence to what is prior to itself while also maintaining its autonomy, allegory becomes a curiously effective figure for describing seriality itself. If in allegory, every “reading” necessitates its own previousness, then every “tale” in a series requires its “return.” In this view, allegory becomes, like seriality, a formal way of apprehending, and

100 Maureen Quilligan, for instance, argues that “self-reflexive verbal techniques [are] characteristic of allegory” (The Language of Allegory (1979), 280). Deborah L. Madsen in her study of postmodernism and allegory similarly writes, “Allegory disrupts the creation of a ‘reading’ which would close or contract the free play of signifiers by grounding them in terms of an ultimate referent. All narratives are contaminated by the indeterminate nature of a language that prevents the establishment of a pure or unequivocal system of representation” (The Postmodern Allegories of Thomas Pynchon, 8).
methodically approaching, the problem of the relation between inside and outside, purity and contamination, previousness and afterwardsness.

But the problem of the outside, as we’ve shown, was there in the beginning of sword and sorcery as a genre. Howard elevated barbarism into an ideal historical force. Delany’s experimentation with it was to show how its own ahistoricity could be deployed as a powerfully vivid way of allegorizing his own age’s historical imagination. Allegory and seriality thereby become both figures for sedimented modes of “reading” history and forms for understanding the historicity of specific historical narratives.

Avital Ronell, writing beautifully and hauntingly of AIDS as an irreducibly social crisis, insists, “Never felt to be a natural catastrophe, AIDS has from the start carried the traits of an historical event.”101 “Plagues and Carnivals” draws its resources not just from the historical catastrophe surrounding Delany. It also intervenes, literally, within a “world” whose renderings were already long underway. In this sense, it is as if the series were preparing the ground in advance for its own experimentation. It is thus one of the astonishing features of Return to Nevèrjòn that it had already put in place a form whose conception of time was capable of staging multiple historical temporalities at once, and, then, through its own focus on reading and interpretation, providing an allegorical model for reading itself precisely in those moments when history as such intervened. In its own unfolding, it followed one discursive and narrative crises of reference after another until the crisis became, as the narrator writes in §7.3, about the actual “possible keys to life,

the possibility of living humanely, and death.”¹⁰² The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals is this convergence of times (and temporalities) out of joint and of the historical possibilities for “living humanely” now, in the fullness of one’s own time and in the midst of one’s own metaphors. It is as much a “document of our times” as it is an allegory of the imaginative capacities of our shared present.

¹⁰² The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals, §7.3, 226.
Sedimentation / Late-Style in *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West*

“War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him.”
— Judge Holden

“You don’t do anything you want with language; it was here before us and it will be here after we are gone.”
— Jacques Derrida

“In the history of art, late works are catastrophes.”
— Theodor Adorno

There are typically two phases put forth to describe Cormac McCarthy’s early and late novels. The novels of his early period—*The Orchard Keeper* (1965), *Outer Dark* (1968), *Child of God* (1973), and *Suttree* (1979)—are decisively set off from the novels of the late period—*All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994), and *Cities on the Plain* (1998), which are collectively known as the “Border Trilogy,” followed by the more recent *No Country for Old Men* (2005) and *The Road* (2006). Central to this periodization of an early and a late phase is the appearance of McCarthy’s 1985 novel, *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West*, which is said to break from the Southern geographies and gothicism of the earlier texts and thereby anticipates an increasing engagement, on the part of the novels to come, with the coordinates and concerns associated with the borderland regions, histories, and fantasy structures of the “West.” If most of
McCarthy’s earlier novels are located in Tennessee and are thus situated within and seen as responses to a Southern literary tradition, then Blood Meridian can be understood to thematize McCarthy’s own departure as a novelist from his Southern past. In his movement over the course of the nineteenth century from eastern Appalachia to the newly-annexed Southwestern territories of Texas, Arizona and New Mexico, Blood Meridian’s protagonist (who is called “the kid”) prepares the ground for the later novels, internally staging McCarthy’s own increasing turn to both the geographies of “the West” and the genre of the Western.¹

But if the later, post-Blood Meridian novels explore the residual effects of western expansionism on twentieth-century landscapes and peoples, Blood Meridian concentrates instead on the horrors specific to the West’s mid-nineteenth-century founding. Opening in Tennessee in 1833 and ending in a Texas garrison town in 1878, Blood Meridian returns to the most intensive phase of nineteenth-century American expansionism within the western territories, which extends from the Indian Removal campaigns of the 1830s to the last of the so-called Indian Wars in the late 1870s. This is the period during which the United States would come to colonize the remainder of the continent, annexing new

¹ While this essay does not address McCarthy’s oeuvre, it does view Blood Meridian as though it were something of a prehistory to the novels that follow, especially the “Border Trilogy” (1992-1998). This is because these specific works, and even, although in a far more complicated sense, those that follow—that is, No Country for Old Men (2005), and The Road (2006)—assume the generic and conceptual coordinates of the “Western” world that Blood Meridian founds. That world—totally mercenary, incapable of producing a coherent heroic type, and structured by some inexplicably demonic, if not apocalyptic, force—puts in place the cosmos that the later novels will inherit.
frontier lands and new “Wests,” pushing from the Eastern Atlantic and Southern states through to California. But while set broadly from the 1830s to the 1870s, *Blood Meridian* is predominantly a narrative of the kid’s travels throughout Northern Mexico in the year 1849. In this respect, it is a novel that stages a return, in the midst of a 1980s Reagan-era renewal of American interventionism abroad, to an important moment of American expansionism in the 1840s, a period of territorial annexation directly following the Mexican-American War. In its return to the nineteenth century, the novel brings together two historically discrete moments of American expansionism, reconstituting a late-twentieth century Cold War-global moment with a late-1840s moment of continentalism. By bringing these two historical moments into contact, *Blood Meridian* gets at the problem of history—and of the fate of historical consciousness in its own moment of the 1980s, the moment of so-called postmodern historical amnesia. But it

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2 It did so under the supposed divine mandate of “Manifest Destiny,” the single most forceful expression within the nineteenth century of a nationalist ideology of expansion. First articulated by John L. O’Sullivan in the *Democratic Review* in 1845, the term names a militant belief that no “hostile interference” on the part of other nations should be permitted to interrupt the western continental aspirations of a new American nation. As Deborah Madsen suggests, O’Sullivan’s formulation of a divinely sanctioned and safeguarded American expansionism crystallized a nineteenth-century iteration of an already-longstanding doctrine of American exceptionalism. In this sense, Manifest Destiny effectively consolidated America’s self-appointed status as a “redeemer nation” by carrying the Puritan errand and the Jeffersonian notion of America as an “Empire of light” into the 1840s (Deborah Madsen, *American Exceptionalism*, 16-40).

3 As Shelley Streeby argues, 1848 was an especially crucial moment in the history of U.S. empire building, since it both gave rise to the concept of a contiguous continental national territory and, through U.S. victory in the Mexican-American War, resulted in the “remapping of U.S. national boundaries and the addition of vast new lands.” The period of the Mexican-American War (1846-1848) is thus a critical phase in the process of territorial consolidation, since the lands acquired through war concessions meant a contiguous continental United States, a “natural” enlargement of the nation from “sea to shining sea” (*American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture* (2002), 10).
takes up the problem of historical representation as a problem that can be most clearly thought within a genre that has, as a function of its particular instrumentalization within the culture industry, been otherwise voided of its capacity to historically think itself.

By disarticulating its “West” from “the West” that is commonplace to the genre, *Blood Meridian* makes a past available that, while surely a past marked by the historical present of the novel’s appearance, is not naively or nostalgically so, but is rather aimed at those larger pasts that the novel seeks to describe. What the novel puts in place, in the figure of Judge Holden and in the language of “temporal immensities,” is a larger planetary and global frame for thinking both the relations between twentieth century and nineteenth century forms of American imperialism and, further, how such histories produce specific variations within the Western’s appearance at particular moments as a genre. Indeed *Blood Meridian*’s self-awareness as a “Western” lies in the way that it turns at the end of the so-called American Century to a more expansive frame for bringing the “historical past” of the genre into view. In this it rejects a kind of “common sense” of the Western and the “world” it is understood to produce. The effect is to modify the generic coordinates (and conventions) of the Western as an imagined historical space. Attending to the novel in this way requires tracing out the histories (and historical sequences) that *Blood Meridian*’s appearance in the 1980s retrospectively brings into focus, both in terms of genre and of a genre’s historicity. Those historical sequences involve, first, the genre’s twentieth-century cinematic life and, second, its nineteenth-century literary or print-
based emergence in the form of the “dime novel.” But situating Blood Meridian at something like the end of these two historical sequences of the genre’s formation means recasting the novel as a manifestation of a “late-style” with respect to the genre’s career over nearly two centuries of American expansionism. In other words, the novel’s distinctive and innovative discursive energies take on their significance only when understood, not as late-McCarthy, but within the longer historical situation that makes possible the emergence of a late-Western.

Reading the novel in this way means also attending to the deeper understanding it permits with respect to the over-accumulation of “innocence” that so peculiarly inheres within the Western’s status as one of the preeminent forms for both writing the United States triumphantly across a continent and projecting its version of civilizational adventure onto the globe. This chapter thus reads Blood Meridian as a thoroughgoing reconceptualization of the genre as a mythic (and thus ideological) spectacle of compulsory heroism, but one that can no longer be naïve about its figurations of violence in the wake of the Vietnam War and a resurgent 1980s Cold War militarism. By disarticulating its “West” from “the West” that the genre has traditionally narrowly imagined, and by reconstellating the 1840s and the 1980s within an enlarged global and planetary framework of ongoing American expansionism from the Indian Wars to Reagan’s “war against terrorism,” Blood Meridian interrupts the genre’s self-
understanding as a primarily “American” cultural form, inserting it instead into the
*longue durée* of Western imperialisms and their discursive-archival aesthetic practices.

4.1 “Always a Bloody Ground Over the Horizon”

*Blood Meridian*'s narrative proceeds along lines that would seem to be in keeping
with a mythic course of American nineteenth-century expansionism. Its narrative
follows the travels of its protagonist, “the kid,” as he moves through the contested
territories of an as-yet unsetttled American southwest. For the actual designation of “the
West” in the late 1840s was, as the novel reminds us, still indeterminate, more idea (or
ideal) than place. Indeed when the kid arrives in a newly annexed Texas in 1849 by a
boat carrying those who intend, in the words of John O’Sullivan, “to overspread the
continent allotted by Providence,” he is described as merely “a pilgrim among others.”
Having abandoned his home in Tennessee, he heads west at the age of fourteen
equipped only with a capacity to survive, to best others in bar fights, to drift and make
do: “he can neither read nor write but in him broods already a taste for mindless

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violence.” Young and untested, “the kid” is hardly the heroic type of the classical Western—hardly, that is, a figure who, in keeping with one basic trope of the 1950s cinematic Western, appears all at once from out of nowhere and with no past. Neither is he figured as “the man who knows Indians,” as in another classic Western convention, which is to say he betrays no knowledge of the native peoples, or of the lands, he passes through. And yet, in spite of seeming ill-fitted as the hero of a Western, the kid’s “taste for mindless violence” would seem adequate enough to lead him inexorably into the genre’s prevailing scenario, the bloodlands of the West—or what the novel calls its “bloodslaked waste.” His special, even mystical capacity for violence thereby fatally directs his destiny; it is what drives him on and gives his eyes their “oddly innocent” cast, and it will be what makes him a desirable recruit for both Captain White and Captain John Joel Glanton—the two rogue military men whose campaigns the kid will join. Focalizing the novel through the kid’s innocence upends established Western conventions, since the kid’s “mindless violence” is, because of its automaticity, without principle, subordinated to nothing outside of itself, a potential inside him merely there to be used. He, like some instrument, is thus inserted strangely, and in an alienated way, into the hero-function of the novel. Viewed from the perspective of his narrative

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6 Ibid., 3.
7 Henry Nash Smith is the first to use this formulation to describe the frontier fictions of James Fenimore Cooper. Richard Slotkinrevives this terminology as a central formulation for tracking the continuities and discontinuities of the Western hero throughout two centuries of American cultural life.
8 Ibid., 177.
9 Ibid., 4.
function, the kid draws attention to the genre’s essential logic—that of “oddly innocent” Americans taking flight west and imposing a “mindless violence” upon a continent. It is, in sum, a savage rendering of the triumphalism that typically attends the idea of the Western genre.

Arriving “in the spring of the year eighteen and forty-nine” on the back of an “aged mule” in “the latterday republic of Fredonia into the town of Nacogdoches,” the kid rides into town an unlikely savior. Having known only hardships, the kid appears in new “American” terrains seeking out some vague sense of the alleged opportunities there. There is thus something desperate and contingent to his arrival. The novel is structured entirely by the kid’s accidental wandering into “the West,” contingencies which thrust him, first, and briefly, into the paramilitary campaign of Captain White and then, and far more extensively, into the dark errand that brings Captain John Joel Glanton and his men (“seasoned indiannkillers”) into the “conflict zone” of Northwestern Mexico and Apacheria. The novel closely tracks the kid’s recruitment into Captain White’s unauthorized war against Mexico and his subsequent enlistment in Glanton’s scalphunting Gang, and it is careful to show how his passage from White to Glanton inscribes him into darker and more savage Western campaigns and landscapes.

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10 Ibid., 79. In my use of “conflict zone” I am invoking the concept of “contact zone” from Mary Louis Pratt. For Pratt, the contact zone describes certain diasporic spatial relations that mark “the place in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations” (Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation, 6). Since a concept of war is so central to the novel, it is useful to think of these spaces of contact as complicated zones of imperial conflict and, further, of coloniality as a distinct form of “ongoing relations.” More in what follows.
Since still unsettled territories in the historical present of the novel's story-world, the landscapes appear “American” only in an Anglo-European colonial sense. “The West," we are reminded, was first an event in the life of the Anglo-European colonial imagination before it had an actual referent in the world.\textsuperscript{11} It has long been, as Leslie Fiedler once argued, geographically “elusive” and yet conceptually (or discursively) consistent. “First of all,” Fiedler writes, “it was Virginia itself, the Old Dominion, then New England, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Louisiana, Ohio, Missouri, Texas, the Oregon Territory, etc., etc.—always a bloody ground just over the horizon, or just this side of it, where we confronted \textit{in their own territory} the original possessors of the continent.”\textsuperscript{12}

Through the figures of Captain White and Captain John Joel Glanton—and, moreover, through the break that occurs in the text with respect to the kid’s passage from White to Glanton—the novel is imagining one moment within which the West’s diverse nineteenth century histories can be made to appear.\textsuperscript{13} It dramatizes both the longue durée of imperial aggression on these American shores and the forms of resistance among native peoples such aggression provoked. To read the novel in this way is to insist upon

\textsuperscript{11} In a certain sense, I am paraphrasing Fiedler’s seminal insight: “The American novel is only \textit{finally} American; its appearance is an event in the history of the European spirit—as, indeed, is the very invention of America itself” \textit{(Love and Death in the American Novel}, 37).

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Return of the Vanishing American} (1968), 26; italics in original.

\textsuperscript{13} There is something of Lukács’s impatience with the positivism of historical and sociological knowledge in \textit{Blood Meridian}'s orientation to the nineteenth century as an historical past. It takes as its antecedent text, Samuel Chamberlain’s \textit{My Confession: Recollections of a Rogue} (Ed. William H. Goetzmann. Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1996), which is a memoir/historical romance that Chamberlain wrote from 1867-1905 loosely based on his experiences with the actual historical personage, Captain John Joel Glanton and his scalphunting campaigns (1846-1848). \textit{Blood Meridian} is based, then, on an “historical” work that is already at a distance from fact.
a much larger historical view than the typically reduced one taken by the genre of the Western, in either its literary or cinematic iterations—that is, in either its nineteenth- or twentieth-century mass cultural disseminations. For the Western must be understood to have had many appearances over the course of the last two centuries, from its nineteenth-century “dime novel” emergence to its uptake as one of the preeminent cinematic forms of the twentieth-century. In this respect, the Western’s many variations become a key way to track responses to and figurations of distinct moments in the history of American empire, from its early continental dominance to its emergence as a hemispheric and now global power. No other popular genre so singularly tracks American empire’s heterogeneous moments, since no other popular genre, as Christine Bold has argued, “is so enmeshed in nationalist mythology.”

One key aspect to the genre’s “nationalist mythology” is the way it formally sediments historical time. As Jane Gaines and Charlotte Herzog have suggested, the Western offers a “fantasy of authenticity” insofar as it purports to re-enact a “real”

14 More than this, the Western genre has always turned the national gaze not to the legacy of the African slave trade and planation slavery, but rather to the mythic narrative of the willful and proud, resourceful and decent men and women who fought “savages” and bravely settled the country. Its preeminence in the nineteenth century (in dime novels and traveling shows) and the twentieth (in pulps, radio, television, and, uppermost, in film) effectively shifts historical attention away from a North-South axis and onto an East-West axis. Such a shift is one way of isolating the Western’s ideological or mythic function as a cultural narrative, and at least, in passing, indicating how the catastrophe of American action in the world is either simplistically staged as a fairy-tale or omitted altogether.
historical past.\textsuperscript{16} Gaines and Herzog argue that “popular culture is never about genuine historical knowledge of our historical past. The way it was always underwrites the way things are. In the lapse of our historical memory, familiarity gets overcoded as verisimilitude.”\textsuperscript{17} The verisimilitude they refer to involves an historical past that is constructed out of “a mere forty years of regional history.”\textsuperscript{18} The historical period the genre fetishizes aligns with a nationalist mythopoetics that valorizes western expansion and settlement as a universalization of Progress, from the first Gold Rush of 1849 to the cattle wars of the 1890s. Fetishizing this specific period means, as cultural historian Richard Slotkin has argued, that a “narrow slice of time has come to symbolize the whole history of expansion preceding it.” The genre’s concept of history is an ahistoricism, an eternal product. It produces, not historical authenticity, as the genre purports to present, but a hyper-stylized image of the past. That image results in a fabulous compression of events, such that, as Slotkin memorably puts it, a mere “forty years of six-guns and Stetsons are better known and more significant than two centuries of long rifles and buckskins.”\textsuperscript{19}

But for \textit{Blood Meridian} the question of time exceeds the genre’s historical semiotics. Rather, the novel, in the figure of Judge Holden, aims to consider and probe

\begin{flushleft}\textsuperscript{16} “The Fantasy of Authenticity in Western Costume,” 173, 175 (\textit{Back in the Saddle Again: New Essays on the Western}, Eds. Edward Buscombe and Roberta E. Pearson).\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Ibid.}, 174; italics in original.\textsuperscript{18} Slotkin, “The Movie Western,” \textit{Updating the Literary West} (1997), 873.\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Ibid.}, 873. In \textit{Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western} (1975), Will Wright puts this period at thirty years, “from 1860 to 1890” (5).\end{flushleft}
what “the judge” (as Judge Holden is called) will refer to as the “temporal immensities” of the earth Glanton’s scalphunters will ride through, the ruins they will see of ancient peoples and empires, and the disfigured bodies and piles of bones they will pass as one scene of slaughter follows another—scenes to which they are witnesses and participants both—as they cross the vast desert lands of Santa Fe de Nuevo México, Comancheria, and Apacheria. In this sense, it is a Western novel that introduces a larger historical consciousness into the genre. It is aware of the actual histories of conflict and conquest that precede what the genre typically takes as its historical present. It figures its story-world as composed of long-standing warfare between imperial states (Anglo-American, Mexican, Spanish, French, and German) and an even longer history of conflict against its first peoples. Thus the novel’s title (“blood meridian”) alludes as much to the singularity of the region in which the novel is set as it does to the metaphoric borderline, which, once crossed, brings into sharp visibility the circumstances that permit, and render virtuous, the shedding of blood.

A figure “oddly innocent,” the kid falls naïvely into this larger historical situation of imperial expansionism and internecine warfare. Orphaned, uneducated, it is his partial view of events that largely organizes the novel. All he knows he learns from other men—hermits and prophets, killers and criminals, warmongers and Indian haters. And what he learns aligns with the pedagogical function of the genre that he has drifted

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20 Blood Meridian, 251.
into: that a concept of “the West” is structured around the problem of “savages.” From the standpoint of the genre, the problem of savagery is the problem of insurgent native populations (Fiedler’s “original possessors of the continent”) who refuse to subordinate themselves to Anglo-European invaders. In this respect, the novel conjures both Captain White and Captain Glanton as representative American “types” specifically outfitted—the one with idealism and the other with advanced weaponry—to address the problem of the insurgent native populations of the region. Such insurgency is the de facto legitimation for both White’s and Glanton’s opportunism, their would-be fortunes tied to their capacities to subdue native resistance. Comanche, Apache, Gileños, Tiguas, and Yuma each appear in the course of the novel and each in their way represent the threat of “autonomous life” to the imperial order of things that Judge Holden, one of Glanton’s men, consistently expounds on and seeks to rid the novel’s world of. But while Captain White and his men will intersect with and be annihilated by a fierce instance of this larger history of insurgency, Glanton’s Gang simply becomes the principle of slaughter personified, he issuing orders to his men to scalp any head whose hair approximates the bounty placed on the heads of the Apache. In other words, what is high-ideals and “sport” for White is all mercenary “trade” for Glanton. But whatever their substantive differences, they each come to represent a solution to the genre’s basic problematic.

\[\text{Ibid.}, 199.\]
\[\text{Ibid.}, 51, 180.\]
That problematic consists fundamentally of a conflict between the forces of “savagery” and “civilization.” The symbolic construction of borders and borderlands within which such conflict is staged is central to what Slotkin refers to as the “mythic space” of the Western’s cosmos. Its fantasy structure requires the topoi of outposts and hideouts, forts and enemy strongholds, lone houses and small towns surrounded by the vast harshness of the landscape, but it must also call forth a corresponding milieu in which mountains and rivers, canyons and open plains equally play their part in intensifying the drama of confrontation, escape, or ambush. It is through what Slotkin calls their “persistent association” that these features of the genre’s imagined world “have come to symbolize a range of fundamental ideological differences.”23 According to Slotkin, such geographical markers and spatial arrangements become the imagistic and iconographic fund upon which the genre draws to ground the ideological differences between white civilization and redskin savagery; between a corrupt metropolitan “East” and a rough but virtuous “West”; between tyrannical old proprietors (big ranches) and new, progressive entrepreneurs (homesteaders); between the engorged wealth of industrial monopolies (railroads) and the hard-earned property of citizens (farmers); between old technologies (stagecoaches) and new (railroads); between the undisciplined rapacity of frontier criminals and the lawman’s determination to establish order. The borderline may also be construed as the moral opposition between the violent culture of men and the Christian culture associated with women.24

23 “The Movie Western,” 873.
24 Ibid., 874.
It is not accidental that the primary distinction Slotkin makes is “between” what he calls “white civilization and redskin savagery.” The purity of these categories is generative. As he and others have argued, the difference they mark, which is posited as constitutive and ontological, is the originating difference from which all of the genre’s other structuring oppositions derive. Of course in the positing of these multiple, and multiply valenced, borderlines and borderlands the Western fashions the crossing of borders—and of the transgression of the norms they designate—as the quintessence of its dramatic action. As Slotkin explains, “Through this transgression of the borders, through combat with the dark elements on the other side, the heroes reveal the meaning of the frontier line even as they break it down. In the process they evoke the elements in themselves, or their society, which correspond to the ‘dark’; and by destroying the dark elements and colonizing the border, they violently purge darkness from themselves and the world.”

In his monumental three-volume study of the myth of the frontier, from the Pequot War (1638) to the American invasion of Vietnam (1962), Slotkin traces a tendency within American imperial culture to view such “darkness” as an Otherness (racialized, gendered, classed) that must be destroyed, and, more importantly, whose destruction is deemed salvific, both for those who deploy the violence and for those in whose name

\[25\] I refer primarily to Bill Brown, Christine Bold, Will Wright, John Cawelti, Richard Drinnon, Michael Rogin, and William Spanos. One can, of course, also point to Melville’s The Confidence Man (1857) as a savage critique of the “metaphysics” of this American world-view.

\[26\] “The Movie Western,” 874.
such violence is deployed. This is what Slotkin famously refers to as “regeneration through violence.” As an analytic, it is intended to capture both the ritualistic and the spectatorial dimension of the “frontier”—that place wherein a certain visibility and violence cohere such that the violence that it summons brings into focus an ontological clarity “between” civilization and savagery, progress and primitivism, light and dark, good and evil. The mythic (and ideological) function of violence in this respect is devoted as much to cleansing the world of “savagery” as it is to clarifying its sites/sights and sources.

It is precisely as a world-founding ritual, wherein the problematic of civilization and savagery yields to matters of law and order, that John Cawelti also understands the classical content of the genre. Cawelti writes,

The Western, with it historical setting, its thematic emphasis on the establishment of law and order, and its resolution of the conflict between civilization and savagery on the frontier, is a kind of foundation ritual. It presents for our renewed contemplation that epic moment when the frontier passed from the old way of life into social and cultural forms directly connected with the present. By dramatizing this moment, and associating it with the hero’s agency, the Western reaffirms the act of foundation.

If the classical Western, as Cawelti suggests, specifically dramatizes the “epic moment” of the hero’s agency, then its hero is constructed as an impossible figure, since the new

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world that the hero is designed to found (or affirm) cannot in fact accommodate him.\textsuperscript{30}

But the “epic moment” of the new order’s founding is also the moment of the old order’s dispersal. The tension inherent in founding an order that is already passing away evokes the elegiac tendency of a genre that has long been preoccupied with preserving an image of the conditions upon which the genre is based—both its open and unsettled “frontier” lands (new towns and new farming communities) and the kinds of hostilities and confrontations associated with them. It is a genre preoccupied with figuring these very enabling conditions as always on the verge of disappearance as a result of contrasting modernizing forces, which are largely encoded emblems, like the railroad, of large-scale capital formations indissociably linked to processes of industrialization.

Noting the longstanding relation of the Western to what the novelist Owen Wister in 1902 already called the “vanished world” of the genre, Bill Brown has written that the West’s value as a literary and cinematic fantasy structure “resides in the movement between proclaimed absence and textual presence, in the nostalgic portrayal of an image and era marked as passing if not passed.”\textsuperscript{31} There is thus a strange desire within the genre to return to a time that is at a standstill—to a time, that is, which is

\textsuperscript{30} Instances of this strange order-restoring function are too numerous to cite, but two of the most iconic occur within Owen Wister’s novel The Virginian (1902) and John Ford’s film The Searchers (1956). In each, the reconciling agent (that is, the “hero”) must be either wholly transformed in order to enter the new order of things (as in Wister’s novel) or entirely banished (as in Ford’s film). Also, a note on gender: following the work of scholars like Lee Mitchell and Jane Tompkins, I take the gendered norm of the genre to be masculine. I am merely drawing attention to that fact above.

\textsuperscript{31} Bill Brown, Reading the West: An Anthology of Dime Westerns (1997), 3.
frozen into its embattlement with a larger History (or epoch) that will erase it. This is another way of emphasizing that the genre involves a temporal border-crossing as well; that it posits a “frontier line” (Slotkin) that marks “past” and “present” and thereby grounds American imperial expansionism as a “legitimate” (and ongoing) war with “savagery” but a conflict that is placed outside actual historical time. This displacement of real historical space results in the production of a “mythic space” (Slotkin), a kind of temporal outpost or fort that protects the genre’s innocence against the complexities of modernity and the ongoing consequences of empire.

But in its desire to establish a transparent, and thus “real,” symbolic past, the Western points to a deeper truth. Its preoccupation with a “passing if not passed” motif is an expression of the genre’s anxiety to figure its end-conditions near in order to establish that the violence it calls forth is necessary only in these said instances. The violence it conjures is thus made to appear more as a specific depiction of singular acts than as an American way of life. The savagery of killing—and, in the language of the novel, of “slaughter”—can in fact be convincing as heroism if it is dramatized as happening only this “once,” as if called forth by highly contingent circumstances and

32 John Ford’s superb, The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence (1962), is an exquisitely layered instantiation of the complexity of this elegiac impulse.

33 It is thus mythic in precisely the way that Roland Barthes meant when he wrote that myth reproduces “a world which is without contradictions ... a world wide open and wallowing in the evident” (Mythologies ([1957] 1972), 22).
wholly governed by a moral principle (a Kantian “ought”).

“Real” savagery, conversely, is figured as an endless tendency towards violence—its regularity being a mark of sadism and, characterologically, of villainy, or monstrosity. Contingency and number thus come to distinguish the legitimacy or illegitimacy of violence, its heroism or its repugnance. Putting it this way also evokes how thoroughly related innocence and experience are to its depictions of violence and further raises, on the one hand, the curious ambivalence thematically to the formulation “mindless violence,” which would seem to suggest its unthought, nearly innocent deployment, and, on the other, the more conceptual problem with respect to the mindlessness that comes from routine and regularity, as if the kid were issuing from the imagination of the genre full-grown in body and yet “mindless,” automaton-like. The point is that the classical Western formalizes innocence in a paradoxical manner. It posits the conflict between savagery and civilization (and, by extension, the conflicts among all of the oppositions onto which its various ideological differences are projected) as “intractable,” as a situation of permanent conflict and terror, and yet its resolution, paradoxically, is presented as though it required what Slotkin calls a mere “singular act of violence.”

What Blood Meridian does, through the figure of the kid, is distribute the genre’s typical

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34 That an eternal “once upon a time” organizes the classical Hollywood Western is precisely what Sergio Leone’s great vision apprehends. Grasping this is why the Western, under Leone’s direction, was so perfectly able to abstract in mood and style its fairy tale-like grandeur. What the hero sets out to do, in other words, he does, and all “progress” thereby proceeds. See Christopher Frayling, Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone (1981) and Barry Langford, “Revising the ‘Revisionist’ Western” (Film & History 33: 2 (2003).

formalization of this “singular act” into any number of horrific episodes, thus producing a world in which “the slaughter had become general” (155).

If the classical Western is held together by such a paradox, namely, by these “singular” founding acts, then this explains why it stages such singularity as a drama unfolding within an eternal present. Such an eternal drama may preserve its historical “real” but it also shows how palimpsestic its various historical simulations have become.36 Positing its crises as occurring over and again in the same time-space is done in order, first, to endow the violence it figures as an urgently heroic act and, second, to prevent its own world’s subsumption by the forces of modernity. It seeks to prevent its own (en)closure by endlessly restaging its vitality in opposing those forces arrayed against it. Its historical “real” is kept alive in this sense and so resists becoming a mere anachronism. But in order to make its story-world appear as one of eternal conflict its tendency, ironically, is to preserve the fantasy of America as a pastoral garden—that is, as a continent of “Virgin Land” in Henry Nash Smith’s words.37 For such a fantasy of a

36 One cannot overstate the palimpsest that the Western genre had become in the late-1940s through the mid-1960s. The appearance and popularity in the 1960s of Western parodies is one indication of how deeply sedimented the form was within the culture. Films like McLintock (1963), which starred John Wayne and Maureen O’Hara, Cat Ballou (1965), and, later, Mel Brooks’ Blazing Saddles (1974) were each commercially successful films that could only have been effective if the genre’s normative dimensions were thoroughly established.

37 See Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (1950). Like so many scholars of his generation, Smith adopted Fredrick Jackson Turner’s “Frontier Thesis” as the basis for investigating what Smith calls “the impact of the West,” which for him is constituted as a “vacant continent beyond the frontier,” on “literature and social thought” in the nineteenth-century (4). Smith’s study was one of the principle founding texts within the field of American Studies, a disciplinary formation deeply bound up with the Cold War ideological work of the 1950s. Much
“vacant continent” (Smith) has to be placed within its otherwise fatalistic depictions as a crisis of permanent war. This fantasy of the pastoral (or of an “Arcadia,” which the novel itself invokes) endows the West’s wilds and wastes with a dark utopic dimension, since its logic is predicated on a belief in some paradise just across the border, or of some unblemished way of life here-and-now, but it is a belief premised on the condition that some “heathen horde” (in the language of Blood Meridian) can be displaced and disposed of. Thus this fantasy cannot purge from itself its desire to purge others and otherness. The Western’s founding act—its “epic moment” (Cawelti)—presupposes some savage presence that must be eliminated (only this once) in order for paradise to appear. Of course, the kernel of truth is that each “singular act of violence” gives way to its formulaic repetition. Legitimating this repetition would seem, finally, the actual ideological work of the genre’s fantasy. For what would appear singular thereby becomes the unending enactment of a rule, or of a historical contingency becoming elevated into a Historical universal. Mindlessness and violence thus fuse into national fantasy. By ritualizing a false singularity, the genre’s serial depictions over-code American acts of violence as heroic. Any variation of content only serves to re-intensify the ideological concreteness of its form: that Americans are divinely obligated and

later (1986) Smith disavowed having adopted wholesale what he called “Turner’s tunnel vision,” by which he seems to have meant, the “refusal to acknowledge the guilt intrinsic to the national errand into the wilderness” (quoted in James H. Maguire, “Encountering the West,” Updating the Literary West (1997), 81).
exceptionally equipped to eradicate all forms of “savagery” (“or darkness”) from the world.

But the result of the genre’s universalization of “mindless violence” is that the hero over the long cycles of the genre’s lives (print, stage, cinema, television) becomes no longer heroic at all but appears more and more as a killer, and one made mad by the single-mindedness of his function. The killer-function of the hero brings to mind D.H. Lawrence’s insight in the 1920s of James Fenimore Cooper’s “Deerslayer” (or “Hawkeye,” the hero of Cooper’s Leatherstocking Tales (1823-1841). Seeing Deerslayer as the “integral soul” of the American new man, Lawrence wrote, “You have there the myth of the essential white America. All the other stuff, the love, the democracy, the floundering into lust, is a sort of by-play. The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer. It has never yet melted … An isolate, almost selfless, stoic, enduring man, who lives by death, by killing, but who is pure white.” Lawrence is of course reading Cooper at the end of the Western genre’s first full cycle as a print (or literary) commodity. Not, that is, that Cooper wrote Westerns, but rather that what Lawrence saw from a particular historical distance, and from the vantage of the First World War, was an American “essence” that had its first full rendering in Cooper’s early nineteenth-century Studies in Classic American Literature (1923), 68-69; qtd in Slotkin, Regeneration through Violence, 466. Of course, it is the purity of genre and race that is additionally relevant to Lawrence’s description of Deerslayer as the archetypal frontier hero.
century historical epic. Lawrence’s description of Cooper’s hero as an “enduring man, who lives by death” perceptively isolates what will become a key convention in the development of the Western as a genre. Because the Western is understood to have its thematic origins in the frontier adventures of the Leatherstocking Tales, referencing Cooper enlarges our understanding of the historical imaginary Blood Meridian inherits. That inheritance can be traced along “one general pattern” that runs from Cooper’s Leatherstocking Tales to the fable-like biographies of early nineteenth-century figures like Daniel Boone, Davey Crockett, and Kit Carson.

The frontier hero that the Western genre inherits is a figure of an originary form, freed from overdevelopment, an American Adam. But as an idea, the “frontier” marks the condition of possibility for the hero’s emergence, signaling the kind of conceptual-dramatic-narratological space in which he can make his appearance. Indeed “the West’s appeal,” according to Will Wright, is that it proliferates various “ways of life,” assigning to each “its own element of adventure”: “there were farmers, cowboys, cavalrymen, miners, Indian fighters, gamblers, gunfighters, and railroad builders, all contemporary

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39 So much more needs to be said, than I have time for here, with respect to the debt Cooper’s fiction owes to the historical novels of Walter Scott. In passing, however, it is important to note that Scott, in the preface to Rob Roy (1817), suggests the need to introduce the historical romance into the American frontier, a suggestion which Cooper would famously heed.

40 Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation, 374 and The Fatal Environment, 374. See also, Cawelti, The Six-Gun Mystique, 61.

with one another.” Such diversity and contemporaneity gave to this frontier space a utopic dimension of opportunity that historian Fredric Jackson Turner famously called its promise of “perennial rebirth.” The whole representative machinery of the genre ensures that the subject positions that would otherwise only offer fixed social-historical types come to appear as life forms whose openness and flux escape the corruption and dead-end of the “East.”

_Blood Meridian_ opens with the kid fleeing the East. In his first feckless wanderings across Missouri and down the Mississippi into New Orleans, the kid is moving through former Wests, the “frontier” that they once represented now evidently closed to him. More symbolically, “the East” is presented as closed to “innocent” experience and to the “ways of life” that would permit the kid something other than the desolation of his childhood. Thus it is only once the kid arrives in Texas that the narrative will extend to him the possibility of self-creation, or “rebirth.” His movement “West” is cast as a kind of experiment: “Only now is the child divested of all that he has been. His origins are become remote as is his destiny and not again in all the world’s turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man’s will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay” (4-5). Before even

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42 _Sixguns and Society_, 5-6.
43 “The Significance of the Frontier in American History (1893),” 32 (Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner, ed. John Mack Faragher, 1998). Turner’s reconceptualization of what he calls “the Great West” as the single most determinative force in producing both American history and American character was itself the most dominant historiographic frame for generations of American historians, especially within the first half of the so-called American Century (32).
having entered the West his “will” is cast in doubt. He is entering a world that is composed under the sign of the genre’s longue durée and is therefore represented not strictly along the lines of an anti-hero—not, that is, simply as a negative (or reverse) image of the classical Western gunfighter—but rather is being inserted into a narrative structure in which the hero-function is shown to be historically empty. This emptiness is signaled by a “will” that would seem not to be his own, as it does not in itself seem endowed with the capacity to re-order the world. Rather, his origins and ends are deemed distant things and his will is described as entirely conjectural (“may be shaped”).

In this way the kid introduces something experimental into the genre of the Western, as if the formulation “to try whether” were thereby placing Blood Meridian into an experimental relation with the genre itself. This experimentation involves, in part, the fact that the kid’s travels west are marked both as a new beginning (“the child divested of all that he has been”) and as a singular event in the history of the genre’s imagined world (“not again in all the world’s turning”). Framed as if a singular event in the life of the genre (“not again in all the world’s turning”), the kid’s narrative raises questions concerning historicity that are specific to the genre. What conditions, in other words,

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44 The kid’s tentativeness is established in an important early encounter with “the hermit” while first drifting across Texas. The hermit asks the kid if he has seen a world he prefers to the one they inhabit, to which the kid replies, “I can think of better places and better ways” (19). But, the hermit asks, “Can ye make it be?” The kid’s response to this—an emphatic, “No”—reveals a crucial insight into the kid’s narrative function. He is there, it seems, to survive his story-world and takes us as readers through it, but not to remake it in any fundamental sense.
have to be in place for the kid to emerge and what version of the Western world is he entering?

To raise the question of historicity with respect to the kid is thus to raise the question in a much more precise way as to the relations that obtain between Blood Meridian and the genre of the Western. It is to ask what it means, first, to describe Blood Meridian as a Western and, second, to establish how its awareness of itself as a Western produces certain deviations, or certain experimentations, with respect to the genre’s heavily sedimented norms. If “[r]ethinking the genre,” as Christine Bold suggests, “requires continual reconceptualization of it within a larger cultural space,” then Blood Meridian, in the first instance, requires the enlargement of its cultural space to a global and planetary scale.45 For what Blood Meridian so singularly shows is how constitutive the global and the planetary are (and have been) to the genre’s problematic. The novel concisely invokes this sense of scale in its incorporation of the character “Bathcat,” a former white settler in Tasmania (“Wales by birth”) who is experienced in hunting down “aborigines.”46 That he has now been unleashed upon the Apache inserts Glanton’s scalphunting raids into a much broader series of global racial-imperial histories. Through such a layering of allusions, the novel literalizes the killing of indigenous people not as previous to mercantilism or industrial formation but as a global industry in itself.

46 Blood Meridian, 86-87.
The much larger demonstration of this expansive scale involves the novel’s ensemble formations, those linked to the military campaigns that the kid will join. Captain White’s encounter with the Comanche is especially significant in this respect. It is an encounter that will be dramatized not within a nationalistic paradigm but as an event deeply layered with geopolitical references. But this does not then mean that the novel’s concept of planetarity can be entirely collapsed into a “political”—and thus a “global”—picture of their conflict. The novel, in fact, makes thinking this distinction between the global and the planetary possible by registering not only the region’s actual imperial histories (the geopolitical), but also something of the earth’s greater phenomenological presence—its desert landscapes and ecosystems, its atmospheres and geologic specificities (planetarity). The novel consistently figures the land and the sky as something far greater and far more animate than what is conventionally understood, or felt, by the genre’s traditional use of a Western setting. This is because the earth its characters ride through appears agential, a force (perhaps a consciousness) with which they must contend, as if the point of all of the unburied corpses that litter its terrains is to indicate that the land is aware of its own historic stratifications (meta-reflexively) as a

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47 *Blood Meridian* makes possible a way of thinking a concept of the geopolitical as fused with the global and of planetarity as a separate, though related, concept indicating the world-historical dimension to the idea of the earth as a planet. The need for such a distinction is related to the profound transformations of what Marx called the world market after the 1970s—the emergence, that is, of the so-called information age and of an increasingly intensified interconnection of global life that has become known as “globalization,” a conception, incidentally, which owes as much to a then-emergent ecological consciousness as to the developments related to computer science and various information technologies.
mass grave. But the novel also incessantly evokes the stars and the astral-marked vault under which its numerous warrior ensembles ride, constellations from which they are said to take their bearings. Their dependence on the sky creates an even greater feeling for the planetary nature of their errand. Constellating their presence in this way makes the assumed cosmic right of their errand appear for what it actually is—a strange earthling-like perversion. Indeed, the strangeness of the novel is often a function of feeling that Glanton’s scalphunters have, as the novel so wondrously puts it, “broken through some misweave in the weft of things into the world below.” Figured as beings of total alterity, they are like outriders possessed by a fit of madness far darker than what William Carlos Williams once meant when he wrote, “Pure products of America go crazy.” This sense of the strangeness of place is keyed early on when the hermit says to the kid, “This is a hungry country.” It is as if the hunger he means were more an attribute of America’s planetary condition (perhaps its earthly mission as a place) than a characteristic of its people. From the standpoint of the western expansionism that the genre valorizes, it can also be understood as a hunger for the genuineness (beyond mere verisimilitude) of those freedoms that the Anglo-European imagination dreamt the continent would yield.

49 Ibid., 17.
50 Having become sickened by the world, “the hermit” (true to his name) retreats from it into the backcountry of Texas where the kid inadvertently comes upon his place of shelter. A former slaver, he is yet another of the story-world’s figures who casts a dark shadow upon the American garden.
Intensifying the actual specificities of place is a key dimension to Blood Meridian’s planetary imagination. Its attention to the specificity of place has to be seen within the context of a genre that largely uses place symbolically (as in John Ford’s cinematic use of Monument Valley) or as backdrop and local color (which is the prop it is often reduced to in much formulaic dime or literary Westerns). We might say that while reading or viewing a Western, we often know we are in another country, but we are seldom aware of being in another world. Blood Meridian, however, in disarticulating its “Western” world from the “the West” of the genre, is able to produce something of a singularly global and planetary picture out of a distinctively “American” territorial form.

The novel emphasizes this planetarity as a key dimension of its story-world in the following passage. Seeking the path of the Apache, Glanton’s scalphunters are riding into a region described as a “shoreless void”:

They crossed a vast dry lake with rows of dead volcanoes ranged beyond it like the works of enormous insects. To the south lay broken shapes of scoria in a lava bed as far as the eye could see. Under the hooves of the horses the alabaster sand shaped itself in whorls strangely symmetric like iron fillings in a field and these shapes flared and drew back again, resonating upon that ground and then turning to swirl away over the playa. As if the very sediment of things contained yet some residue of sentience. As if the transit of those riders were a thing so profoundly terrible as to register even to the uttermost granulation of reality.\textsuperscript{51}

Its largest structures (“dead volcanoes”) miniaturized and its most minute elements (“alabaster sand”) enlarged—the novel estranges its “West” from “the West” we think

\textsuperscript{51} Blood Meridian, 247.
we know. The novel is directly having us attend, at the level of language, not only to
different scales but also to “the very sediment” of the Western as an imagined space. It
thus produces a different sort of optics for apprehending how the genre itself has
sedimented over time. Its sense of the “try whether”—that is, of the experiment that the
kid’s narrative is framed to be—aligns with the strange “residue of sentience” Glanton’s
scalphunters kick up and bring into visibility. All the elements of its world would seem
to intermesh. Indeed the world its characters ride through appears so wholly threaded
together by innumerable strings that the entirety of its actions seem to yield not just
interconnection but “sentience” as well. It is as if the novel were so intricately composed
semantically and syntactically that any disturbance in any one of its parts vibrated the
whole of it such that its entire composite of worlds past and present were brought into
animation—“even to the uttermost granulation of reality.”

It follows that the same errand that brings Glanton’s men into view above
concludes by introducing a new kind of vision into the Western. Figured as a kind of
many-eyed thing, horse and human, the Glanton Gang appear “on a rise at the western
edge of the playa” and begin to merge with the general sensorium of the ecosystem
through which they ride:

In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena was bequeathed a strange
equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth
claim to precedence … for the eye predicated the whole on some feature or part
and here was nothing more luminous than another and nothing more
enshadowed and in the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is
made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships.\textsuperscript{52}

Here we have a coming together of the specific milieu that is Blood Meridian’s world. It shows how its registering of planetarity is bound up with a kind of omniscience that includes the point-of-view—what the novel calls an “optical democracy”—that endows its world’s “very sediment of things” with “a strange equality.” Its “unguessed kinships” are registered as a planetary phenomenon and as such have us confront whether planetarity is independent from the geopolitical or whether the geopolitical annexes to itself the very capacity to think and feel the planetary as such. This feeling for the planetary thus removes us from the genre’s narrowly regional, and historically over-specific, paradigm and in so doing returns us to questions of historicity and genre.

If staging such “unguessed kinships” is integral to the novel’s story-world, then the most important conjuncture for the purposes of this chapter is the many different histories Blood Meridian’s narrative evokes without “claim to precedence.” The histories it invokes are internal to the text and relate as well to Blood Meridian’s appearance within the history of the genre. In other words, what makes possible a vision of Glanton’s scalphunters as “a thing so profoundly terrible” within a Western that begins, somewhat improbably, with the sentence: “see the child”?

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 247.
4.2 Western Variations: “See the Child”

_Blood Meridian_ is an attempt to come to terms with its own genre’s coming of age. By nominalizing its protagonist as “the child,” “the kid,” and “the man,” the novel is not just knowingly inserting him into a developmental schema. It is also calling attention to how it disrupts the genre’s otherwise more conventional treatment of the lives of its characters as entirely contemporary to its story-world’s narrative present. The Western is not typically concerned with the full arc of a life but rather extracts out and dilates one of its moments. It may utilize the convention of a flashback in order to organize its revenge-plot scenario and thereby legitimate the spectacle of violence that it crescendos in, but that is an altogether different relation to matters of narrative temporality than opening upon “the child” and ending on “the man.” In this sense, _Blood Meridian_ is breaking as much with the conventions of the Western as with the conventions of the _bildungsroman_. This is because it is never quite clear whether “the man,” as the kid will come to be called, is ever more aware of who he is or what his motivations are by the end of the novel. He would seem to drift as _naïvely_ into Fort Griffin in 1878, one of the last Texas garrison towns, as he had originally drifted into Nacogdoches in 1848. In breaking with the assurances of the _bildungsroman_, the novel sabotages at a more symbolic level the would-be progress narrative of the genre itself.

Here we return to the expansiveness of scale that the novel introduces in its attention to the planetary and the global. Such an expansiveness of scale is what marks
Blood Meridian as a “late” appearance in the history of the genre. For if the novel is a transitional work with respect to McCarthy’s oeuvre, then it is also a work that demands our coming to terms with the limits and possibilities of the Western in the mid-1980s. This means attending to the world-historic situation of the 1980s that it appears within. Part of this moment’s texture is of course the counter-revolutions which that decade put into place after the upheavals of the 1960s. But its related dimension involves an expanding planetary consciousness—an opening of the world by processes of globalization. Blood Meridian broadly appears within this historical horizon. But it also appears at something like the end of at least two long and varied historical sequences involving the formation of the Western as a genre, one cinematic and the other “print” based.

The first historical sequence is the Western’s cinematic uptake over the course of the twentieth century, which establishes the contemporary conditions for understanding the genre in the 1980s. Bracketed by the years 1903-1973, this sequence runs from the first Western film (The Great Train Robbery, 1903) to the last year in which the Hollywood Studio system had continuously produced a large number of Western films. The cinematic Western “had reached the peak of its popularity and cultural pre-eminence from 1969-1972, with an average release by American producers of 24 feature Westerns per year, with a high of 29 in 1971. But in 1973 only 13 Western features were released, and in 1974 only 7. After a brief resurgence in 1975-1976 (13 releases in each year), the
number dropped to an average of 4 per year from 1977 to 1982.” These numbers give a broader indication of the fallen cultural prestige of the genre in the 1970s. *Blood Meridian’s* mid-1980s appearance takes on its full significance when placed within this general situation of the growing perception of the Western as no longer capable of responding to the needs of its own historical present. We might say, then, that the proliferation of dystopian, apocalyptic science fiction novels and films in the late-1970s and throughout the 1980s is, as an emergent cultural formation, a more fitting response to the concrete historical situation of the period, one that can be described as a convergence of numerous widespread cultural anxieties surrounding nuclear proliferation, environmental catastrophes, economic downturns, State violence, international conflicts, and urban blight. Indeed, the apocalyptic tenor of the 1970s and 1980s is nowhere more persuasively indexed than in the cinema of this period. Films like *Soylent Green* (Fleischer, 1973), *A Towering Inferno* (Allen, 1974), *A Boy and His Dog* (Jones, 1975), *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese, 1976), *Alien* (Scott, 1979), *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1979), and *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982) illustrate a general theme, across genres, of a world unmoored and pitching towards catastrophe.  

As numerous scholars have shown, this seventy-year sequence of cinematic Westerns does not follow a continuous developmental logic, but rather has innumerable

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54 As Slotkin put is, “The crisis of political culture had its counterpart in the genres of mass culture,” (*Gunfighter Nation*, 627).
discontinuous histories internal to it.\textsuperscript{55} From silent to sound; from “B” billing to box-office draw; from classical to revisionist; from outlaw to gunfighter; from cavalry soldiers to professional mercenaries—these shifts mark only a handful of the most significant transformations within the classical Hollywood Western over a seventy-year period of American history, which includes at least four major wars, successive economic booms and busts, and popular uprisings at home and abroad (which is to say Civil Rights domestically and decolonization internationally). The Western changes repeatedly throughout this period as it responds to and engages with the complexities of its various historical moments.

The second historical sequence that bears upon Blood Meridian is the nineteenth-century print history of the genre. Running roughly from the 1860s through the early 1910s, this a period of the Western’s print formation that overlaps with Blood Meridian’s story world. This is the sequence of the Western’s emergence as a fictional literary form out of its dime novel variations from the 1860s through the 1890s—a period generally

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{55} I refer uppermost to Richard Slotkin’s magisterial Gunfighter Nation (1992), but I also refer to the film scholarship of John G. Cawelti, Barry Langford, Lee Mitchell, J. E. Smyth, Peter Stanfield, and Will Wright. While there is no consensus over specific terminology, there is a general coherence with respect to this period’s different moments. The agreement, in the broadest strokes, is over the differences between certain moments in the Westerns twentieth century career: the 1910s and 20s, for instance, are distinguished from the films of the late 30s and 40s, and 1950s Westerns are distinguished from the later 1960s and early 1970s. Beyond these internal periodizations within the classical Hollywood period 1903-1973, there is also the category of the “post-Western,” which designates films and novels from the 1980s into the present that attempt to introduce major deviations into the genre’s norms. William Burroughs’s novel The Place of Dead Roads (1983) and the films The Ballad of Little Jo (dir. Maggie Greenwald, 1993) and Meek’s Cutoff (dir. Kelly Reichardt, 2010) are important examples.}
regarded as the first full cycle of nineteenth-century “sensationalist” fiction, largely written by men for men and organized primarily around Wild West adventures that was increasingly rationalized into formulaic plots and themes.\textsuperscript{56} The House of Beadle, the largest and most commercially successful publishing house of dime Westerns, “published over seven thousand novels between 1860 and 1897.”\textsuperscript{57} The Western formula, as such figures suggest, had been thoroughly commodified by the “fiction factories” of the day, turning the Wild West into a mass cultural and quintessentially “American” adventure commodity. While solidifying its various narrative elements, the Western’s generic reification over the course of the nineteenth century also meant that its story conventions were increasingly appropriated by other genres, like science fiction and detective stories. It is a late-nineteenth century situation of cross-generic appropriation similar to that of the 1970s.\textsuperscript{58} What Henry Nash Smith disparaged as the dime Western’s

\textsuperscript{56} In a famous study of what she called “the inner life of Westerns,” Jane Tomkins argued that such overt masculinity within the Western had its roots in its ideological and commercial response to the sentimentalist literary culture that dominated the nineteenth century—what Nathaniel Hawthorne famously disparaged as “the damned mob of scribbling women.” See West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns (1992).

\textsuperscript{57} Bill Brown, Reading the West: An Anthology of Dime Westerns (1997), 14-15.

\textsuperscript{58} Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation, p. 25. In passing it is worth noting that while science fiction novels and films have a distinctively important status within a 1950s Cold War America, the science fiction written in the 1970s is generally much darker and yet more utopically (or queerly, as in the case of Delany) focused upon alternative worlds and imagining other forms of collective life. It is curious, then, to mark how the first historical sequence of the Western at the end of the nineteenth-century overlaps with, perhaps gives rise to, a much more progressively oriented science fiction (very much organized around the discourse of “wonder”) and that the end of the second (cinematic) historical sequence of the Western in the 1970s gives rise to a far more dystopic world, not so much one of wonder but of a terribly rational technological-sublime. In sum, wonder gives way to horror in a way that is not unrelated to the kind of Western that Blood Meridian becomes with respect to the Westerns that precede it.
“automatic writing” and its “apparently unbreakable pattern” of stock plots and characters had, in fact, already undergone substantial modifications by the end of the nineteenth century as the “cheap series,” as Smith referred to it, entered the twentieth.59 But as it entered the twentieth century “writers such as Owen Wister and Zane Grey appropriated the dime Western’s formula, turning it into “literature.” 60 Indeed, Wister’s The Virginian—with its outsider hero figure whose special capacity for decency and violence restores order to the world (what is called the “town-tamer” motif)—becomes the template for the Western novel and classical Hollywood film in the twentieth century.61 While the specific formula for the Western is generally agreed not to have

59 Virgin Land (1950), 91, 199-120.
60 Both writers aspired to write “literary” or “serious” Westerns. They each helped to add nuance and sophistication to the genre, moving it self-consciously away from its dime novel past and into a more classical, dramatic form. See “The Popular West,” Updating the Literary West (1997). Note that there is another history associated with the Western’s literary formation that runs parallel to and indeed intersects with the genre’s cinematic career. This would involve a series of writers who took up the Western’s conventions in order to subvert them either somewhat savagely, as in Nathaniel West’s The Day of the Locust (1939), or more parodically, as in Thomas Berger’s Little Big Man (1964). Extending this series would be those novels often described as “anti-Westerns”—that is, Westerns that sought, like Berger’s novel, to repurpose the entire representative and mythic machinery of the Western in order to show the often-suppressed underside of America’s past. These novels would include E.L. Doctorow’s Welcome to Hard Times (1960), Larry McMurtry’s Horseman, Pass By (1961)—later filmed as Hud (dir. Martin Ritt, 1963)—and Ishmael Reed’s surreal satire Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down (1969). See Christine Bold, Selling the Wild West: Popular Western Fiction, 1860 to 1960 (1987), 155-169.
61 See Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation, p. 171; and Cawelti Six-Gun Mystique, p. 30. George Steven’s Shane (1953) is the cinematic version of Wister’s The Virginian in terms of its solidification of the hero-type, in this case that of the virtuous gunfighter.
emerged until the 1860s, in the popular cultural form of the dime novel, its antecedents lie primarily in the frontier fictions of Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales* (1823-1841).62

The effort to describe the genre of the Western as an object means in some nearly inevitable way trying to uncover and bring to light its hidden structures and underlying principles. The interest in identifying its arrangements and relationships is to provide proof of its existence, and establishing once and for all what the Western is. But it is more useful to think of a work as manifesting a genre rather than *being* a genre.63 Likewise, the prevalence of terms like “decline,” “end,” and “exhaustion” to describe the Western’s twentieth century variations confuses the analysis, as they participate in a general assumption that genres evolve or develop organically. Modifications, variations, and innovations—these no doubt occur in the course of a genre’s formation, particularly in its encounter with the larger historical contexts within which it appears. But such transformations do not occur according to a strict developmental logic. Being responsible to the heterogeneity and internal differentiation of a genre’s consolidation over time (which is to say in the actual course of concrete historical situations) is why it becomes important to adopt the language of sequences in order to view *Blood Meridian’s* relation to the *longue durée* of the genre.

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62 The frontier fictions of the early nineteenth-century had regional variations as well. Southern writers William Gilmore Simms (*The Yemassee*, 1835) and Robert Montgomery Bird (*Nick of the Woods*, 1837) were especially influential in emphasizing a racialist-aristocratic dimension to what would become the Western’s archetypal hero. See Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment*, and Drinnon, *Facing West*.

63 “We would have to say that a given work manifests a certain genre, not that this genre exists in the work” (Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1973), 21).
But to address the Western’s many variations is, in a sense, an effort to rethink the origins and ends of a genre—namely, why it begins when it does and why it may be said to end at a particular moment and whether a developmental logic is helpful when thinking a genre’s *longue durée*. For Stanley Cavell, there is no irrefutably empirical way to determine when a genre begins. Rather, he suggests that “genre” be understood as a form that emerges full-blow[n], in a particular instance first, (or set of them if they are simultaneous), and then works out its internal consequences in further instances. So that, as I would like to put it, it has no history, only a birth and a logic (or a biology). It has a, let us say, prehistory, a setting up of the conditions it requires for viability ... and it has a posthistory, the story of its fortunes in the test of the world, but all this means is that later history must be told with this new creation as a generating element. But if the genre emerges full-blow[n], how can later members of the genre *add* anything to it?64

For Cavell, a genre is far too typically “characterized by features, as an object by its properties.” What matters, he insists, is breaking away from a description of genre that slavishly repeats the falsehood that “later members can ‘add’ something to the genre because there is no such thing as ‘all its features.’” Rather, Cavell proposes, “that a narrative or dramatic genre might be thought of as a medium in the visual arts might be thought of, or a ‘form’ of music. The idea is that the members of a genre share the inheritance of certain conditions, procedures and subjects and goals of composition, and that in primary art each member of such a genre represents a study of these conditions,

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something I think of as bearing the responsibility of the inheritance." Such a concept of genre allows us to ask more precisely what it means to describe *Blood Meridian* as a Western aware of itself as such after two long historical sequences, over nearly two centuries of American expansionism, one truly territorial, the other more global, but each for all their specificity no less engaged in the construction of imagined “historical” spaces for presenting (or examining) heroic American actions. Following from Cavell’s suggestion that genre be thought of as a musical form, the Western can be seen not as constant and continuous, but as various and variable, a set (or scale) of themes (and tonalities) dramatized within an expanding global American “West.” This sense of its heterogeneity explains the importance of the novel’s late-twentieth-century conjuncture, as forces of globalization amidst a renewed “Red Scare” puts in place the kinds of nationalistic ambitions that are a basic condition to the genre.66

Most readings of *Blood Meridian* rarely delineate the actual significance of its relation to the longer histories of the genre and their historical variations. Critics largely cite its baroque episodes of violence and its fallen, anti-heroic world in order to inscribe it into a “revisionist” paradigm. They thus read the novel as a counter-history to Turner’s “Frontier Thesis” and treat it as a kind of high literary analogue to the revisionist historiography then emergent (in the 1970s and 1980s) that went by the name New Western History. Scholars like William Cronon, Richard Drinnon, Annette

65 Ibid., 28.
Kolodny, Patricia Nelson Limerick, Richard Slotkin, Richard White and Donald Worster wrote landmark texts that defied the prevailing, and largely hegemonically preferred, national myths. At their moment and in their respective fields, these scholars were as important as any number of other history-from-below and cultural studies knowledge projects that emerged out of what Noam Chomsky has called the “time of troubles” — the 1960s—a period in which “normally passive and apathetic parts of the population entered the political arena to advance their concerns: minorities, women, the young, the old, working people.”

This “excess of democracy,” as Chomsky puts it, however, was by no means merely about suffrage and representational democracy, although it had these narrower and more locally political dimensions as well. Rather than merely entering “the political arena,” these social movements sought to enlarge it. I stress this period as an expansion of politics—and of the “political,” which is to say of what “politics” might mean, could mean, and needed to more broadly refer to and include—as a way of concretely attesting to the changed historical situation in which the Western as a genre could no longer function as it once did. A constitutive dimension of its situation was an enlarged geopolitical conception of history.

Cinematic Westerns therefore undergo significant modifications in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the general aftermath of the Vietnam War. Sam Peckinpah’s

68 Michael Denning gets at this transformation from the perspective of the era’s decolonization movements, when he writes that, in the 1970s, “If Globalism [comes to mark] the end of European history, it also marks an entry into history for the peoples without history.” (Culture in the Age of Three Worlds (2004), 25.)
masterpiece, *The Wild Bunch* (1969), for instance, becomes an increasingly hyper-violent and anti-heroic examination of the Western’s worldview. Other films also begin explicitly staging contemporary revelations about American-perpetrated atrocities against Vietnamese peasants *as if* identical with American-perpetrated atrocities against Native American peoples.⁶⁹ “In watching a western,” Slotkin has argued, “we are asked to think of ourselves as looking across the border that divides past and present, in order to recover a ‘genetic’ myth, which displays the (putative) origins of our present [historical] condition. By doing so (the film suggests) we may find precedents for responding to present crises.”⁷⁰ But when the “mythic space” that Slotkin suggests separates past and present dissolves because past atrocities are being re-constellated with present ones, the supposed distance that holds the fantasy structure of the Western together as a “real” past disappears. In films like Arthur Penn’s *Little Big Man* (1970) and Ralph Nelson’s *Soldier Blue* (1970), the carnage of the present becomes staged overtly as a Western, not in order to suggest their pure identification but rather to insist, and urgently stage, the diverse but continuous histories as interlinked and interanimating.

*Blood Meridian* thus appears at a moment when the genre’s “institutional matrix” of plot, character, setting, and theme has become fully sedimented over the course of

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⁷⁰ “The Movie Western,” 874, *Updating the Literary West*. 196
two centuries of national popular life. When *Blood Meridian* appears in 1985, it appears after a profound transformation in the genre’s cinematic, and thus popular, status. *Blood Meridian*’s opening vignette needs to be read as a gesture that acknowledges its own break from those complicated generic histories that precede it. The knowingness of its intervention is signaled in its first sentence. Renowned for its baroque, endlessly additive sentences, the novel paradoxically begins with a brief injunction: “See the child.” Placed at the end of the genre’s two historical sequences (the dime/literary and the cinematic), it becomes possible to ascribe to the genre itself the grammatical position of the implied speaker. For what is being predicated is not simply the injunction to “see,” but rather to rethink the genre from the standpoint that it ordinarily—which is to say traditionally and classically—has refused. We can now say more precisely how the problem of innocence is imbricated in the larger problematic of the historical situation of the genre in 1985. For what *Blood Meridian* calls attention to is the way that the Western could no longer purport in the 1980s to naïvely present a picture of American action in the world as a transparent, transcendent, universal good. The genre’s very conditions of possibility as a heroic narrative are thrown into crisis by an historical present in which U.S. power, both at home and abroad, had been exposed as illegitimate. Both “Watergate” and “Vietnam” can function as shorthand for the much broader, complex and confusing

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period in which radical and reactionary energies were exceedingly dominant. The
Western’s discontinuities over the course of the Cold War, with each decade in effect
offering up a different variation on the Western’s ideological preoccupations, suggests
its power culturally as a perceived universal history of the American Republic. If the
cinematic Western falls into massive decline by the mid- to late-1970s, it can be entirely
traced to its having lost the cultural (and ideological) force it once had to restore a
damaged and demoralized national self-image.

If the Western could no longer function in the aftermath of Vietnam and the
scandal-ridden 1970s as it had during the height of the Cold War, then it could no longer
legitimate the kinds of violence it had long historically mythologized. It was, in this
sense, always recruited to tell a triumphalist narrative. Whether depicting an outlaw or a
lawman, a gunslinger or a cavalry officer, it participates over and again in what Tom
Engelhardt has usefully called “Victory culture.”\(^2\) The deeper continuity between its
nineteenth- and twentieth-century iterations is that the Western genre has consistently
marked a hegemonic cultural form for disseminating narratives that at once constructed
both America and Americans as heroic agents of History. And this tendency toward
legitimating American action in the world is especially intensified in the 1980s under the

While Engelhardt is referring to a twentieth century postwar phenomenon—mostly grounded in
a Cold War culture—the analytics of “Victory culture” are powerful in a retrospective sense,
illuminating the ideological work that nineteenth century popular cultural forms participated in
as well.
Reagan Administration. It is a period of nearly un-apologetic pro-American revivalism. That the popular cowboy-hero would make a resurgence in this period is in keeping with America’s preferred self-image of a heroic everyman, and it becomes an even more fitting development given that it had its corollary in the presidential election of Ronald Reagan, a self-figured cowboy-errant and “B” film star. In an age of the “evil empire” and of a renewed “Red Scare,” Communists were rather all too easily converted into new “injuns” against which America needed to wage a renewed good war. Thus American exceptionalism in the 1980s was under a mandate not of “Manifest Destiny,” but of “roll back”—Reagan’s revamped Cold War policy for pushing back the perceived threat of Soviet expansionism, which permitted the renewal of American interventionism under the sign of a new kind of American conflict with savagery.

It is then as if through the eyes of the Western as a genre, and its various internal histories, that we are being asked, as readers, to “see” the protagonist as a child. Since seeing is beyond the sense of sight, to see the child refers additionally to what the mind (which is to say an historically-situated consciousness) takes in and gathers up for its own understanding. If, as Derrida writes, “We think only in signs,” he is also indicating the implicit visual dimension of thought, as thinking constitutively involves some dimension of sight. This understanding of the way in which thought precedes, and virtually anticipates seeing, and of how ideas can bring forth from the world images that purportedly correspond to them, is very much at issue when considering the function
genre plays in organizing what we as readers “see” and for understanding how
determinative a generic frame is in proposing the coordinates into which readers must
learn to situate themselves and their expectations (semantically and affectively). An
alignment between idea and image, theme and story, is what, in its most basic operation,
genre designations fundamentally secure. Genre categories purport to frame a certain
constellation of narrative elements into recognizable arrangements. This is why genre
invokes an historical and not an ontological designation, since what is recognizable as a
generic convention shifts over time.

But behind the seemingly simple command of the novel’s first sentence lies
deeper complexities. For if the novel is to be read under this injunction — “See the
child” — then the narrative that follows must be understood as organized by a special
relation to sight with respect to what the Western genre otherwise organizes its readers
to see and attend to. In this sense, the opening sentence would seem to suggest that all
could be foreseen or anticipated by the signposts of genre. Thus the question becomes
what must be seen, or grasped, to see the child and thus to register fully the sort of
modifications McCarthy is introducing into a 1980s Western. But seeing “the child” first
means taking in the whole of the kid’s circumstances in one glance. The novel’s opening
paragraph reads:

See the child. He is pale and thin, he wears a thin and ragged linen shirt. He
stokes the scullery fire. Outside lie dark turned fields with rags of snow and
darker woods beyond that harbor yet a few last wolves. His folk are known for
hewers of wood and drawers of water but in truth his father has been a
schoolmaster. He lies in drink, he quotes from poets whose names are now lost. The boy crouches by the fire and watches him.\textsuperscript{73}

The novel’s opening vignette depicts the small and sad illumination of a childhood home in which the father function has been annulled of either past or future. To “the child” the everyday world is described as a composite of empty structures: “His folk are known for hewers of wood and drawers of water but in truth his father has been a schoolmaster. He lies in drink, he quotes from poets whose names are now lost. The boy crouches by the fire and watches him” (3). Not even basic everyday folkways (“hewers of wood and drawers of water”) are available to him, for his father, whatever learning he might have had or might have passed on, has dissipated as a pedagogical force. There is no past for the child who will become the novel’s wayfaring “kid.”

This absence of a relation to the past is all the more dramatically rendered in that the novel also opens upon the death that the kid’s entry into the world brings: “The mother dead these fourteen years did incubate in her own bosom the creature who would carry her off” (3). By some force intrinsic to him, the protagonist orphans himself of a maternal relation. In this way, the narrative knowingly gestures towards the fact that in order for the genre’s protagonist to enter its world it must arrive as if having escaped the confinement of a feminine order. To maintain the feminine presence of the mother would be otherwise too deviant a gesture, since it would preserve a moral code

\textsuperscript{73} Blood Meridian, 3.
incapable, symbolically, of producing men who could make a vocation out of the killing of men. But with this detail, death is as omnipresent at the beginning of the kid’s world as is total deprivation.

On the surface of things, opening in this way would suggest some affinity with the biological-cultural narrative of development typical of the bildungsroman. But as if anticipating the assumptions of characterological development that inhere in the bildungsroman, Blood Meridian would seem to mock this preoccupation with moral growth by evoking William Wordsworth’s Romanticist poem, “My Heart Leaps Up” (1802):

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!
The Child is father of the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

But instead of Wordsworth’s “The Child is father of the Man,” the novel removes the copula, collapsing subject and predicate into an asyntactical relation. Some revision is thus being pointed at that is larger than a mere revisionism of the Western genre. If Wordsworth’s poem posits a human essence that is most perfect when least corrupted by the affairs of the world, then the poem’s speaker is figured as perfect in childhood, possessing an innocence Wordsworth captures in the language of “natural piety.”
Appearing for its first time in this last instance, the phrase “natural piety” is meant to suggest an equivalence between “childhood” and a perfect “natural” state and to convert the last sound of the poem into the figurative last breath of the man—that is, of the poem’s speaker. Thus the poem posits “natural piety” as the noblest state or condition to which all human life should aspire. But this gives an odd telos to the poem. The first line proposes a state of being that the poem’s speaker desires will be continuous throughout his “days.” While the middle lines of the poem—those starting, “So was it,” “So is it,” and “So be it”—would verbally seem to indicate a sense of time’s passage (from youth to manhood to old age), their effect is in fact to render, in the repetition of “So,” a desire to have the speaker’s days “Bound each to each” as if in a perfectly unchanging arc. There was, the poem’s telos suggests, “natural piety” in the beginning—that is, in youth—which the poem introduces in its first line as a subjectively felt coincidence between one’s “heart” (one’s inner workings) and celestial phenomena (here, figured in the appearance of “A rainbow in the sky,” which is symbolic of the harmonies of nature). And beyond youth there is “natural piety” at the end, which encloses the individual life within the larger circle of a Christian cosmos. Taken as a symbol, “natural piety” is meant to be synonymous with what the child both has and can teach. It is there at both the beginning and the end, a permanent essence.

74 In his homage to Derrida, entitled Derrida, an Egyptian, Peter Sloterdijk writes that Derrida’s signal feat was having made “it still possible to marvel without reverting to childhood” (73).
In Wordsworth the child represents an “experience” prior to the corruptions of experience. Childhood is meant to evoke a purified state, uncorrupted, morally true, and, most importantly, a way of being in the world governed by nothing other than intuition. In McCarthy, this state of a transparently mystical, numinous relation to the goodness of the world is shattered. Its break from an idealized picture of a fully harmonized sense of belonging to the world (a secular analogue to a religious discourse of grace) is registered in the way the novel work to unite its various strata. There is no guaranteed syntactical relation among things; no relation guaranteed by any singular force. This is why the novel makes repeated recourse to the metaphors of “string,” “rope,” “wires,” and “thread.” Its “is”—the copula in Wordsworth’s poem, which connects one thing logically to another—does not exist. Its preoccupation at the level of the sentence is thus a kind of expansive dilation, seeking after the connections that its very world seems to cancel. With astonishing attention the novel dilates scenes and enlarges what might seem peripheral or small matters down “to the uttermost granulation of reality.” The novel’s insistence on authentic, precise terms, which are often noteworthy for their obscurity (such as terms like “felloes” and “duledge pegs”), and its constant recording of eyes gone blank, staring out of “eyes cooked in their sockets” are profound instances of this tendency toward dis-articulating and re-

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articulating parts and wholes, which serves to break off instances from their larger telos in order to reinscribe them into other kinds of totalities.\footnote{\textit{Blood Meridian}, 45, 59.}

\subsection*{4.3 \textit{“Conjoined They Made a Thing”: From Liberators to Scalphunters}}

The novel first reorients our understanding of the kind of Western the kid enters through the figure of Captain White, an American military man who recruits the kid into a rogue campaign to fulfill, as he puts it, the original territorial ambitions of the Mexican-American War. A filibusterer, Captain White unofficially invades Mexico ostensibly to provide safe passage between the newly annexed Texas territory and California. “I don’t think there’s any question that ultimately Sonora will become a United State territory,” White tells the kid. “Americans will be able to get to California without having to pass through our benighted sister republic and our citizens will be protected at last from the notorious packs of cutthroats presently infesting the routes which they are obliged to travel” (34). But his pretty-sounding at times comic rhetoric of a commonwealth nevertheless carries forward the darker and cynical underside of nineteenth-century American empire. For White knows that his expedition’s kernel of truth lies in its promise of “spoils.” Revealing the true mercenary dimension of their filibustering campaign, he leans toward the kid, forcing a curious intimacy, and says,
And we will be the ones who will divide the spoils. There will be a section of land for every man in my company. Fine grassland. Some of the finest in the world. A land rich in minerals, in gold and silver I would say beyond the wildest speculation. You’re young. But I don’t misread you. I’m seldom mistaken in a man. I think you mean to make your mark in this world.\textsuperscript{77}

The high-sounding expedition here breaks down into a boyish adventure of pillage and plunder. It is also White’s close-up as the patriarch. He is at once using the language of “man” but shifts, in his gesture to the kid’s youth, to the developmental character implicit in the expedition. I will make you a man, Captain White is saying, in the image of myself. This is the meaning and force behind his assertion that he is not misreading the kid (“You’re young. But I don’t misread you.”), for to read the kid correctly is to endow him, proleptically, with a manhood he does not yet have, but will, once conscripted into the mission. “Sign this man up,” the Captain tells his Sergeant, and with this the kid becomes a “new man,” one who, presumably, will come to possess the same appetite for “grassland” and “minerals” that normative American men desire.\textsuperscript{78}

It is finally the “[s]poils of war” that White holds out to his recruits.\textsuperscript{79} “Soldierin” is presented as the only mechanism of social uplift available to the kid: “It’s a chance for ye to raise ye self in the world.”\textsuperscript{80} Captain White explains,
No. I don’t think you’re the sort of chap to abandon a land that Americans fought and died for to a foreign power. And mark my word. Unless Americans act, people like you and me who take their country seriously while those mollycoddles in Washington sit on their hind sides, unless we act, Mexico—and I mean the whole of the country—will one day fly a European flag. Monroe Doctrine or no.\textsuperscript{81}

There has been no mention, prior to this instance in the novel, of the kid identifying or needing to identify as an American. He has drifted from Tennessee to Texas and yet no mention has been made of the fact of his citizenship as he has wandered through these territories. Significantly, it is only once he enters the frontier-zone of the West that he is hailed as “American.” But the intention behind doing so is entirely motivated by the Captain’s need to recruit more men to his cause. Nationalism and a discourse of the frontier thereby align, co-producing a structure of address that immediately inserts the kid into a structure of national belonging from which he had been entirely alienated before. The kid, like most orphaned and adrift young men, is thus especially vulnerable to the Captain’s seductions of “soldierin,” for in it is the romantic allure of worth and glory. He appeals immediately to a shared kinship (“I don’t think you’re the sort of chap”), suggesting that he belongs to a strong and noble people (“like you and me”) who believe themselves manifestly destined to overtake the continent. But this promise of belonging is all predicated on the success of his interpellation as one who will likewise wage war for nationalist purposes.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 35.
On the surface, White’s speech to the kid is a caricature of the blustery American imperialist. In this precise way he fulfills a formula of speech and manner, and of type, that is consonant with American expansionist ideology. His internationalist tendencies and his imperial war making fantasies, however, deviate from the largely nationally bound Western formula. His concern over the inadequacy of international treaties (“Monroe Doctrine or no”) to hold back European rivals from taking a territory already deemed “American” is one of the novel’s more subtle deviations from the Western’s norms. It is not White’s expansionist jingoism that is deviant—this sentiment is typical enough in the Western’s rhetorical conventions. Rather, the deviance lies in the actual staging of White’s intentions to lead a band of irregular soldiers into an unofficial war with the expressed purpose of toppling a sovereign nation. White’s rationale for his operation follows neither the Western code of justice, which is usually seen as above the corruptions of the “law,” nor its dramatic formula of a spirited and righteous revenge plot, which is the supposed legitimation of such extra-judicial action. But while there is a cinematic genre, which Slotkin has termed the “Mexican Western,” that appears during the height of the Cold War in the 1950s and 1960s, these films are not narratively driven by an expressed rhetoric of waging war against Mexican nationals per se. These are films, rather, that use Mexico in order to stage the dilemma of American intervention in “third-world” spaces. These films served to reinforce a general perception that America

82 The “Mexican Western” genre includes films such as Rio Grande (1950), Vera Cruz (1954), The Magnificent Seven (1960) and The Professionals (1964). See Gunfighter Nation, 405-440.
represented a nation, more or less princpled, of hired guns and expert warmongers who would triumphantly prevail, whatever the odds against them. Indeed, once price and principle were brought into near enough proximity, the idea that such films projected was that a representative American gunfighter would arrive, as the fable goes, with the necessary expertise, good will, and grit.

But there is a crucial modification in White’s fantasy—which is in every sense a “white man’s” fantasy. He presents “Americans” as a providential people in a far more globally oriented sense, ones who annex a whole country in order to save it, the historically enlightened masters of the universe. White’s errand into the international wilderness returns us to the planetary and the global scale of the novel, as his desire to annex planetary space is tantamount to conquering historical time in a geopolitical sense. As Captain White will argue, it is the backwardness of the Mexican people, a fact that White racializes, that legitimates his paramilitary expedition into “a dark and troubled land” as the advanced guard of Progress.83 But unlike Captain John Joel Glanton, the Indian-hater, Captain White is not hunting down Comanche and Apache peoples in order primarily to exterminate them. Rather, the continued existence in these lands of “tribes of naked savages” is to him proof of Mexico’s failure as a sovereign state, as if Indian extermination were a prerequisite for self-rule: “We are dealing with a people manifestly incapable of governing themselves,” White tells the kid. “And do you

83 Blood Meridian, 34.
know what happens with people who cannot govern themselves? That’s right. Others come in to govern for them.”  

Captain White serves the important geographical-conceptual function of both enlisting the kid in a campaign that takes him deeper into the bloodlands of the West and thematizing the kid’s presence there as fundamentally an imperial war making adventure. But if Captain White sees himself and his paramilitary unit as “instruments of liberation in a dark and troubled land,” they are also pictured, ominously, beneath “a great red phallus” that rises “malevolent behind them.” In a symbolic sense, they appear in their westward movement like mere automatons ("faceless under their hats, like an army asleep on the march"). What gives them their identity, and drives them on, seems not only wholly external to them but driving them towards their annihilation.

For appearing as an enigma against the horizon one morning, Captain White’s men slow to watch “clouds of dust that lay across the earth for miles” approaching them with astonishing speed. By afternoon this “parcel of heathen stockthieves” converges upon White’s men, their trajectory and his intersecting. “The captain smiled gravely. We may see a little sport here before the day is out,” he tells his men (51). The captain’s use of “sport” bears witness to the nature of his freebooter adventure in these territories. All legitimacy is on his side, both officially (“We have the tacit support of Governor Burnett

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84 Ibid., 34.
85 Ibid., 45.
86 Ibid., 45.
of California”) and ideologically (“We are to be the instruments of liberation in a dark and troubled land”). Thus “a little sport” resonates as arrogance in a two-fold sense: it indicates at once the folly of over-confidence and, etymologically (from the Latin, arrogate, “to claim for oneself”), the folly of over-reach. Certain of his superiority over mere “savages” he believes himself on the right side of History. His over-confidence and would-be over-reach result in his failure to react effectively to the surging mass of horses moving towards him and his men. Thus when, in White’s words, this “parcel of heathen stockthieves” intersects with his recruits, the Comanche in both skill and number prove overwhelming. Their only response to the onslaught accelerating towards them is a feeble, shocked, “Oh my god,” which one in their company utters as a wave of total carnage crashes down upon them:

A rattling drove of arrows passed through the company and men tottered and dropped from their mounts. Horses were rearing and plunging and mongol hordes swung up along their flanks and turned and rode full upon them with lances.87

White and his men are encountering their own avatars out of a deeper past; it is as if a different historical epoch is racing towards them, bringing forth a world not outside or beyond the one that they and Captain White’s filibusterers inhabit, but rather that exists in a disjunctive synthesis (Deleuze) with the contemporaneity of the novel’s story

87 Blood Meridian, 53.
Ironically, Captain White, with his vision turned to annexing all of Mexico cannot function as “the man who knows Indians.” He is thus heroically ill-fitted and blind to the actual work that conquering such territory requires, namely countering the insurgencies of native peoples. The problem, in point of fact, is not Mexico’s weakness, but Apache and Comanche strength, and Captain White’s blindness to the forces arrayed before him make him ignorant to, and thus annihilated by, the detachment of solitary “ponies” riding towards him. Hiding themselves from White’s view by riding along the sides of their horses, the Comanche fling themselves up onto their horses as they near and thoroughly rout Captain White and his men. In their anachronistic armor and period “costumes,” the Comanche bring into view the long and still-unfolding histories of combat between Native American peoples and Anglo-European soldiers of fortune, bringing distant lands and conquerors into a stunning instance of contemporaneity:

A legion of horribles, hundreds in number, half naked or clad in costumes attic or biblical or wardrobed out of a fevered dream with the skins of animals and silk finery and pieces of uniform still tracked with the blood of prior owners, coats of slain dragoons, frogged and braided cavalry jackets, one in a stovepipe hat and one with an umbrella and one in white stockings and a bloodstained weddingveil and some in headgear of cranefeathers or rawhide helmets that bore the horns of bull or buffalo and one in a pigeontailed coat worn backwards and otherwise naked and one in the armor and one in the armor of a spanish conquistador, the breastplate and pauldrons deeply dented with old blows of

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mace or sabre done in another country by men whose very bones were dust and many with their braids sliced up with the hair of other beasts until they trailed upon the ground and their horses’ ears and tails worked with bits of brightly colored cloth and one whose horse’s whole head was painted crimson red and all the horsemen’s faces gaudy and grotesque with daubings like a company of mounted clowns, death hilarious, all howling in a barbarous tongue and riding down upon them like a horde from a hell more horrible yet than the brimstone land of christian reckoning, screeching and yammering and clothed in smoke like those vapid beings in regions beyond right knowing where the eye wanders and the lip jerks and drools.⁸⁹

Their eruption into the text comes as one vividly colored, wendingly paced sentence, at once an expansive eternal now and a densely composed historical moment at a standstill. It is as if all of its ancient references to the West (“attic or biblical”) or to European colonialism (“spanish conquistador”) add up to a simple eternal parable of violence begetting violence. Items from Europe and the West have not so much left their mark as been deposited into another historically embattled “America.” The presence of “cavalry jackets” and of “breastplate and pauldrons” would seem nothing more than an interchangeable prop. And yet the Comanche exceed the imagination of “christian reckoning,” going “beyond right knowing” with an utterly insurrectionary ferocity. They take up the objects of the European invaders—an “umbrella,” a “bloodstained weddingveil,” “a pigeontailed coat worn backwards”—as so many ornaments of a dead culture. Seen from the perspective of the 1980s, it is an astonishing reversal of Europe’s object-world, as if theirs was the cultural inheritance reduced to mere costuming, theirs

⁸⁹ Blood Meridian, 52-53.
a civilization at the “end of history.” But from the perspective of the Western, the Comanche appear as an exorbitant force, some discordant thing that cannot be harmonized with “the West.”

Historically collaged in the costumes of past invaders, the Comanche are shown to be responding to trespassers upon their land. If, as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have argued, “the ideological premise of the Western genre is based on making indigenous people appear to be invaders in their own land, as enemies of western progress,” then Blood Meridian presents us with an image of a people who have survived European invasion. Theirs is a composite of never-before-seen, because historically new, articulations: a “fabled horde of mounted lancers and archers,” “frogged,” “braided,” and “bandylegged.” If there is a ghastly enthusiasm in this scene it is because their assault upon the American invaders betrays a rarely disclosed truth to the so-called New World’s colonization. It is not that the Old World brought over its political ideals; it is rather that it brought over its war making powers. It is these latter “gifts” that the Europeans came over with and not something other—not, that is, the pretty-sounding ideals of Captain White. The image here is not of “the West” conquering a continent through acts of beauty or moral goodness, but through its numerous campaigns of war.

In Captain Glanton, the scalphunter, it is definitively the case that “the West” was settled not by those with a superior civilization, but by those with superior savagery.

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The Comanche are thus brought into view as a force produced out of the histories of invasion that “the West” had become. They are less a manifestation of its destiny than the delirium that can be traced out of those episodic bursts by which “the West was won.” But what is most striking is that they seem to appear as if out of the landscape itself. Their immanence within the landscape produces confusion, as White’s men cannot discern the Comanche until they are nearly upon them. The Comanche come up out of the horizon as its limit case and yet as its consummate figurative logic. Thus for Captain White and his men the crisis of the moment is a function less of seeing than of vision: they cannot apprehend that what rides towards them constitutes a force that they themselves have unleashed. And because the Comanche are immanent to the longer historical forces that they reflect and incorporate, they are an overwhelming force of annihilation. Their appearance so total and swift, they mark an event within the text after which nothing is the same.

With White, the eclipse of U. S. idealism is being staged, which is underscored in the whole paternal seduction at the basis of the kid’s recruitment. The idealism of White’s campaign is geared toward the indoctrination of youth. The kid’s age matters with respect to the idealism of the Western. It is as if Blood Meridian is making clear to us readers of Westerns—after two centuries of sedimented imagery and motifs—that an excess of U. S. idealism can simply no longer be maintained. After Vietnam, White’s idealism cannot be figured without signaling that calamity lies just ahead for him and
his men. The incident with the Comanche, which will result in the death of Captain White and his men, places Western imperialist expansion in the Americas within a wider global context and a deeper history. They present an image of a universal world culture, which colonial modernity, and war, produces. However much the Western would seem to isolate landscape and geography, one of the effects of that isolation is that it reveals how its idea of “the West” ideologically masks its much larger geopolitical context.

Moreover, if the Western has passed primarily into cinema’s aesthetic regime than it behooves us to read this scene cinematically. White dies off too soon, not but fifty pages into the novel; he is, therefore, in terms of plot, a minor character. His function, for the purposes of the narrative, is to lead the kid into the west’s bloodlands. White deposits the kid into those territories where bounties for Apaches scalps were so obscenely high that men like Captain John Joel Glanton, “seasoned indiankillers,” could practice their trade lucratively. But beyond the plot points, White serves a more conspicuous symbolic function. The problem is not in imagining an excess of U. S. idealism in the 1980s of Blood Meridian’s appearance. The Reagan counter-revolution of the 1980s was deeply invested in renewing a heroic “Western” narrative against the “Evil Empire” of the Soviet Union. The more difficult thing for the genre to imagine, which

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91 Barry Langford in his remarkable essay, “Revising the ‘Revisionist’ Western” (Film & History 33: 2 (2003), writes that Reagan’s adoption of this rhetoric in 1981 was a turn to a trope that Langford associates with the then “newly dominant genre of science fiction” (26). “Reagan,”
the cinematic Western’s transformations in the 1960s and 1970s prepared the way for, is
the presentation of a world that is entirely absent such idealism. It is a world not in
which such idealism is revealed to be the thinnest papering over of naked aggression,
but rather a world in which savagery itself is elevated to an ideal, in which “slaughter”
has become generalized.

And yet there is more in the kid’s passage from White to Glanton than
introducing highly graphic barbarism into the Western. Since its inception as a distinct
Americanized adventure-form, the Western has long traded in a kind of industrial-grade
sensationalism. Bill Brown has stressed—as did Henry Nash Smith before him—the
crucial function that violence played in selling the next installment in a dime Western’s
series. Violence and its visual and visualizing dimension is the *sine qua non* of the
genre.92 The type and kind of violence used, on whom it was deployed, and whether
such deployment was legitimate or illegitimate—these contingencies and
contextualizations constitute the norms as well as the deviations from those norms that
have concretized the genre’s conventions. As the kid moves from White’s recruit to a
member in Glanton’s scalphunting gang, the novel stages the genre’s passage into a kind
of violence that has become worldwide. This is the special significance of the novel’s

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Langford writes, “was signaling an interstellar shift in the imaginative location of American
political discourse” (26). The Star Wars trilogy (1977-1983), which Langford does not mention in
this context, marks the moment of science fiction’s emergence within the Hollywood system as a
blockbuster genre.

92 Katherine McNamara underscores the Western as a “genre that is itself a voluptuously violent
visual fantasy about our history” (“The Only God is the God of War: On *Blood Meridian*, an
American Myth,” 6).
setting. It is a Western set less in the “third world”—with all of its associations of Cold War antagonisms and alliances—and more in a zone merely marked out for its especially lucrative market in human hair.

Put into the terms of an open or free market, it becomes more necessary to see the kid’s passage from White to Glanton as constituting not an absolute break between the one and the other but as a way of thinking their continuity. For the kid’s passage from White to Glanton dramatically stages the kinds of types America produces, ones that come into visibility at very specific historical moments. Reinserting those types (in this case, and primarily, a series that is constituted by the figures Captain White, the kid, Glanton and Judge Holden) into a history that may or may not have factually included them allows for certain historical moments to be reconstellated. In this manner a past becomes available that, while surely of the present of the novel’s appearance, is not mythically so, but is rather aimed at those larger pasts that the novel itself (in the figure of Judge Holden and in the language of “temporal immensities”) seeks to describe.

From the larger planetary and global perspective of the novel, the Comanche represent the longue durée of the West’s founding. In the figure of Judge Holden the novel makes clear that it is invoking the establishment of empires of which “los Americanos” were only the most recent iteration. What Captain White fulfills is the necessity of establishing the milieu in which Glanton’s appearance can be grasped not as an aberration of the West, but as one of its founding instances. And yet Glanton serves,
much like the Comanche, as an incursion of the unexpected into the text. If Captain White brings a certain triumphalist version of the Western to an end-point, then what we learn is that something far more extreme awaits in the figure of Glanton. For the Republican niceties of Captain White are done away with in the figure of Captain John Joel Glanton. If Captain White espouses a version of Manifest Destiny, then Glanton is of the more notorious sort, a model of the rapacious 1980s American businessman or corporate raider, a merchant of death or confidence man, one who will plunge himself and his band of mercenaries into whichever depraved trade yields the greatest profit. He and his mercenaries appear at first as a band of improbably, fearsomely collaged figures outfitted for an unspeakable, inhuman campaign:

They saw the governor himself erect and formal within his silkmullioned sulky clatter forth from the double doors of the palace courtyard and they saw one day a pack of viciouslooking humans mounted on unshod ponies riding half drunk through the streets, bearded, barbarous, clad in the skins of animals stitched up with thews and armed with weapons of every description, revolvers of enormous weight and bowieknives the size of claymores and short twobarreled rifles with bores you could stick your thumbs in and the trappings of their horses fashioned out of human skin and their bridles woven up from human hair and decorated with human teeth and the riders wearing scapulars or necklaces of dried and blackened human ears and the horses rawlooking and wild in the eye and their teeth bared like feral dogs and riding also in the company a number of halfnaked savages reeling in the saddle, dangerous, filthy, brutal, the whole like a visitation from some heathen land where they and others like them fed on human flesh.93

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93 Blood Meridian, 78.
This is the novel’s introduction of Glanton and his men. Their composite of horrific things crudely conjoined (“stitched up with thews”) is keyed off by the eerily run-together compound word “viciouslooking.” From the viewpoint of the citizenry, “viciouslooking humans” makes clear how their monstrousness was instantaneous with the fact of their presence. But is could also describes the way the scalphunters themselves looked out onto the world. This is especially the case as death and killing constituted their unmistakable craft, and everything they wore on their persons bore the signs of their savage trade: “clad in the skins of animals,” carrying revolvers, knives, rifles, and having incorporated into their carriage human skin, human hair, and human ears. They are, as a constellation of bizarre forms, “like a visitation from some heathen land.” They are figured at once as external to these lands (“a visitation”) and yet, paradoxically, entirely fashioned (“stitched up”) out of its parts. They carry forward an entire history that is internal to the territories they ride through, presenting something of a reverse image of the Comanche. In Glanton’s first appearance, he and his men cancel the self-evident claims about the American “man” that White’s rhetoric glorified. Glanton thus represents a new authority intervening upon an old order. The novel suggests that the latter, as represented by Captain White, can no longer be sustained within a Western without resorting to parody. In this way, Blood Meridian brings the “cowboys-errant” motif symbolically to an end.94 For with Captain White done away

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94 See Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation, 274, 475.
with, a newer version of “los Americanos” can enter the text. They in fact appear as even more savage than the savages—superior in savagery than those whom they are contracted to scalp. In this they embody an American superiority for expertly waging a savage war, a depiction that has its first full instance in the 1950s. The militarism of the classical Western presents a picture of a utopian society organized not around class or aristocratic privilege but around merit and a hierarchy composed of “natural” leaders. Its utopic dimension is precisely that it imagines a form of collective life in which one is superior not because of what one has (in terms of pedigree and family connection) but because of who one is (in terms of honor and courage).

We are in a new “West” with the occasion of Glanton’s entry. Not Captain White’s speech, but the presence of this awful and awesomely skilled heterogeneity brings us into direct contact with the referent of Turner’s formulation of the frontier as “the meeting point between savagery and civilization.” But more importantly, the frontier, in Turner’s formulation, was a place simultaneously of “hostile Indians and the stubborn wilderness,” a zone that could only be “won by a series of Indian wars.” Glanton’s men reverse this seemingly fixed designation of “savage” and “civilized”

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95The archetype is John Ford’s superb Cavalry Trilogy (1948-1950), which consists of Fort Apache (1948), She Wore a Yellow Ribbon (1949), and Rio Grande (1950). See Slotkin (Gunfighter Nation) on the Trilogy’s relation to emergent Cold War geopolitical concerns, especially with reference to the Korean War.

when presented as the real force behind the historical process of “Winning the West.” I take this phrase from Theodore Roosevelt’s four-volume epic, Winning the West (1889-1896), which was a popular work in his day.

Homicide for these men is profit-driven, the narrator’s incessant use of the declarative, “They rode on,” a reminder of the relentless nomadic spirit of “primitive accumulation.”

By primitive accumulation, Marx meant graphically to conjure the fact that wealth, or in his terms, “capital,” did not mysteriously arise, but came into the world “dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt.”

Note, however, that such means mark only the emergence of industrial capitalist wealth and do not constitute a form of its own self-understanding. While primitive accumulation marks capitalism’s initial instance, and thus marks its first cause, it is fundamentally disavowed, tout court, in its further appearances. Where power wants to deny force as its means of establishing legitimacy, it turns to law. Thus an historical process which began as plunder, enslavement, and genocide becomes transformed into the bringing of law and order—in short, of “introducing,” as Marx once put it, “civilization into their midst.”

In each of the gang’s appearances they are described as a finite configuration of moving and dead human parts, of animal life and machine life, of civilized life and barbarism:

For although each man among them was discrete unto himself, conjoined they made a thing that had not been before and in that communal soul were wastes hardly reckonable more than those whited regions on old maps where monsters

97 I take this phrase from Theodore Roosevelt’s four-volume epic, Winning the West (1889-1896), which was a popular work in his day.

98 Capital, 926.

99 The Communist Manifesto (1848).
do live and where there in nothing other of the known world save conjectural winds.\textsuperscript{100}

Later, and long into their journey through the desert in search of scalps, they grow increasingly depraved in their hungering after the commodity of human hair. Having turned rogue, their warpath has left a weird, bloody havoc in its wake. They have just massacred a camp of Gileños, their women and children and elders. Their transformation of the encampment is horrific:

The dead lay awash in the shallows like the victims of some disaster at sea and they were strewn along the salt foreshore in a havoc of blood and entrails. Riders were towing bodies out of the bloody waters of the lake and the froth that rode lightly on the beach was a pale pink in the rising light. They moved among the dead harvesting the long black locks with their knives and leaving their victims rawskulled and strange in their bloody caul...Men were wading about in the red waters hacking aimlessly at the dead and lay coupled to the bludgeoned bodies of young women dead or dying on the beach. One of the Delawares passed with a collection of heads like some strange vendor bound for market, the hair twisted about his wrist and the heads dangling and turning together.\textsuperscript{101}

The practical component of their trade, however, is here revealed. The business of their work is grotesque in its craftsmanship and results in all manner of strange and monstrous couplings: the beautiful dawn (“a pale pink in the rising light”) turned into “a havoc of blood and entrails”; a land war becoming “some disaster at sea”; human forms converted into harvestable things; “dead or dying” bodies seized and violated for an utterly obscene moment of intercourse; “heads” collected as though a pile of coins.

\textsuperscript{100} Blood Meridian, 52.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 152.
The desecration is immense and chilling and yet commonplace. Theirs is a near mechanical carrying out of an entrepreneurial spirit. Indeed, as the narrator suggest, “the slaughter had become general.”\textsuperscript{102}

And add to this scene of carnage the fact that all their work of “harvesting” and “hacking aimlessly at the dead” adds up to a nice profit.\textsuperscript{103} It is Americans going about their obscene business, their war-making coming to specify their common continental identity as a people (“los Americanos”). And such obscenities are rewarded handsomely, both in cheer and in coin:

On the twenty-first of July in the year eighteen forty-nine they rode into the city of Chihuahua to a hero’s welcome, driving the harlequin horses before them through the dust of the streets in a pandemonium of teeth and whited eyes [of the Mexican citizens gathered to celebrate them]. Small boys ran among the horses and the victors in their gory rags smiled through their filth and the dust and the caked blood as they bore on poles the desiccated heads of the enemy through that fantasy of music and flowers.\textsuperscript{104}

They are nothing more than mercenaries, headhunters, soldiers of fortune. The fantasy structure of their “hero’s welcome” involves the belief on the part of the celebrants that those whom Glanton’s gang have killed deserved their death. It is a “fantasy of music and flowers” precisely to the extent that the presumed genocide of their enemies is a

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 155.
\textsuperscript{103} In this context, David Holloway usefully suggests that we read the novel’s thematized interconnectedness in relation to late capitalism; he writes, that “the homogenous diversity of the object word is reduced to a single identity, a homogeneous mass of matter, a collection of things linked together by their common exchange-value, their shared status as commodities in a commodity world” \textit{(The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy} (2002), 104-105).
\textsuperscript{104} \textit{Blood Meridian}, 165.
cause for euphoria. Indeed, euphemism here is extended to the scalp—a grisly artifact that when dried and hung is disarticulated from its originating scene of butchery and becomes, instead, a thing of decoration. Of course to the inhabitants of Chihuahua, each scalp is a token of a utopian hope that the centuries-old conflict between Spanish colonists, now Mexican citizenry, and the native peoples (Apache and Comanche tribal regions) might finally be brought to an end. But the scalp, while mediating this crisis, is also an abstraction of the murder that underwrote it in a powerfully symbolic way.

When it comes, the payment of gold that Glanton receives for the scalps is poured over the top of an already overladen banquet table of food and drink, mixing in “among the bones and rinds and pools of spilled drink” (170). It becomes equivalent to any of the other things that fed or intoxicated them. Following the banquet are days and nights of mayhem. “The citizenry made redress to the governor but he was much like the sorcerer’s apprentice who could indeed provoke the imp to do his will but could in no way make him cease again.”105 The citizens of Chihuahua scrawl upon the city’s walls

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105 Blood Meridian, 171. There is reason to argue that the financial crisis of 2008, which was so heavily founded upon a massive policy of generalized indebtedness, was in essence the most recent declaration of a “new frontier.” The invention of securitization, which includes Collateralized Mortgage Obligation (CMOs), announced itself as a new market opportunity. But crises of these kinds reveal again and again that generating new wealth involves the positing of new “wastes” and new designations of thresholds on the other side of which can be posited new “enemies.” In a tragically literal sense for many everyday Americans, mortgages became the new scalps for financial cowboys. While securitization is clearly an abstraction of a basic principle of frontier-like speculation, the effects for people on the ground are never anything but tragically concrete.

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their protestation: “Mejor los indios” (“better the Indians”).\textsuperscript{106} The would-be saviors prove another kind of insufferable savagery. The “imp” the bounty in Indian scalps unleashed symbolizes an American war machine that cannot be placed permanently under civilian control; that always escapes its stated objectives, maximizes its killing fields, and invariably produces collateral damage.

4.4 Late-Style: “How Came the Learned Man”

But if Glanton is their leader with respect to the violence that attends their scalphunting raids, Judge Holden elevates its deployment into something “holy.”\textsuperscript{107} The judge is the novel’s avatar, on the one hand, of extraordinary erudition and, on the other, of a singular fiendishness and perversity. If the kid is the novel’s symbolic working through of the genre’s assumption of innocence, then the judge is the novel’s attempt to make the genre’s impulse to kill and annihilate into a “learned,” even sacred, discourse. For if mindlessness is the kid’s dispensation, then mindfulness is the judge’s monstrous gift. His is a portrait of civilization at its most barbarically learned, as he elevates their Indian killing into a conception of “war” as the “truest form of divination” and thus the ultimate sovereign.\textsuperscript{108} Not only does his conception of waging war turn the entire cosmos “clanking” in a “preference absolute” when it selects one man (or one

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 171.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 307.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 249.
people) over another. It also acts as its own “authority” and “justification.” As the judge explains,

This man holding this particular arrangement of cards in his hand is thereby removed from existence. This is the nature of war, whose stake is at once the game and the authority and the justification. Seen so, war is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one’s will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god.109

The personification of “war” as an agent (“that larger will”) is syntactically marked by the presence of “whose” in this passage, a relative pronoun that lends “war” personhood. In the judge’s account of the working of the universe, war is the ultimate agent—it alone decides, it alone determines who is “removed from existence.” In deciding who lives and who dies, it would seem to follow a classical theorization of the political nature of the sovereign, but adds to it a mystical dimension by making its power “to select” a form of divination. The statements “War is god” and “War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence” are each efforts at endowing war’s violence with a sacred end. That end is in the production of a “unity of existence” wherein each thing is allotted its place in the whole. By thus theologizing war, the judge turns a category of the political into a category of the divine. A theological concept of war is used to justify Glanton’s men as cosmic agents, ensuring that the slaughters they commit are in harmony with “that larger will.” The judge is

109 Ibid., 249.
tracing the metaphysical roots that cling to deeply American forms of Indian-hating and empire building.110 The Glanton Gang—“Seen so”—are professional killers playing at war’s “game.” But beyond the way war is thematized as a world-ordering agency, it is also used formally to bring a kind of unity to the plot. For if the judge is the novel’s personification of war in every sense, then the way he both precedes and yet awaits the kid over the course of the novel, would seem, like war itself, to be what wholly organizes the kid’s travels and thus the narrative as a whole. “I seen him before” the kid will say to Tobin, the expriest, another of Glanton’s men. To which Tobin replies, “Every man in the company claims to have encountered that sootysouled rascal in some other place.”111

The kid’s first introduction to the judge is in Nacogdoches, Texas where the judge falsely professes to have witnessed a crime, producing false evidence and bearing false witness. The result is total bedlam and calls for a lynching. The judge thus enters the text as a force of an especially disruptive, because seemingly rational, chaos. The principle of the law, the procedures of adjudication and verdict, the truth of the tribunal—these fundamental dimensions of civilizational rule and their claims to transparency with respect to law and order are crossed out or overturned in the figure of the judge. Dispute in the judge’s world is not litigated in a court of law but is settled in

110 The language of “Indian hating and empire building” appears as the subtitle to Richard Drinnon’s study, Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian Hating and Empire Building (1980). Appearing as it does in a post-1960s intellectual milieu, it participates in an important movement among historians to revise dominant historiographies of the American past.

111 Blood Meridian, 124.
an atavistic way on the battlefield ("It is the testing of one's will and the will of another within that larger will"). It is not within the judge's worldview that chaos should be allowed to stand that he has not authored. When he confesses to never having met the preacher, Reverend Green, before that night in Nacogdoches, and thus being without knowledge of the particulars of the very crimes he had accused the Reverend of committing, he is not being inconsistent. He had not been there, but that did not necessarily make his statements any less true. As the judge will say much later in the novel, "Men's memories are uncertain and the past that was differs little from the past that was not" (330). But here in Nacogdoches, as will be true throughout the novel, no one has the courage, perhaps the power, to confront or contradict him.

But if his omnipresence unnerves the gang, his omniscience and learnedness puts them under his terrible spell. His rhetorical fluency combined with his enormous charms and talents make him something of the natural aristocrat among the men. Where they are crude and quiet, he is the refined, honey-tongued expositor of geology and archaeology, the collector of artifacts and the sketcher of birds and ancient bones—there is in him some great seat of learning the others cannot fathom, and so, distrust. Under the chapter heading, "How came the learned man," the expriest, Tobin will tell the kid:

God the man is a dancer, you'll not take that away from him. And fiddle. He's the greatest fiddler I ever heard and that's an end to it. The greatest. He can cut a trail, shoot a rifle, ride a horse, track a deer. He's been all over the world. Him and the governor they sat up till breakfast and it was Paris this and London that
in five languages, you’d have give something to of heard them. The governor’s a learned man himself he is, but the judge . . .\textsuperscript{112}

The expriest’s incapacity to compare the judge to the governor of Chihuahua, which is marked off by ellipses, captures the futility in trying to analogize the judge’s gifts. It is as if no words, finally, could encompass the great enigma that he is. His is that impossible admixture of backwoodsman—“He can cut a trail, shoot a rifle, ride a horse, track a deer”—and cosmopolitan—“He’s been all over the world. Him and the governor they sat up till breakfast and it was Paris this and London that in five languages.” And yet he has within him a brutality that would seem discordant with his otherwise civilized refinements and rhetorical, polyglot gifts. He is historian and philosopher as well as the adjudicator of all things. But he is also an especially evil force even among the scalphunters—a force whose capacities to kill seem to transgress even the moral codes of murderers and thieves. For instance, “Toadvine” (a sadist and cutthroat, but fair and loyal in his dealings with the other members of Glanton’s company) threatens to assassinate the judge after the judge is said to have murdered, perhaps raped, and just freshly scalped an Indian child. Such acts make the judge a total deviant within genre’s norms of legitimate violence—of who is and who is not eligible to be killed. But if Glanton may command his men to slaughter an entire village of innocents in order to collect on their scalps, the judge is altogether of another sordid sort, as he is one to

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 123.
whom unspeakable horrors are linked. Much like *The Heart of Darkness* (1899) could conclude, “All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz,” *Blood Meridian* would suggest, “The entire history of European expansionism contributed to the making of the judge.”

We might say, in other words, that the genre had led to the judge all along. As Will Wright argues, the last phase of the cinematic Western consisted of films, like Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch* (1969), in which the heroes had become “professional fighters, men willing to defend society only as a job they accept for pay or for love of fighting, not from commitment to ideas of law and justice.”

In fact if revisionism does constitute a genuine moment within the cinematic Western of the late-1960s it does so by naming a tendency of certain films to reveal a “commitment to ideas of law and justice” as fraudulent, a mere cover all along for imperial aggression. But *Blood Meridian* does more than just extend various elements of the “professional plot” by inserting it into an historical moment (the late-1840s) that is much earlier than the historical referent of the films Wright examines. This is a significant modification. It means that the novel is returning to a period of extreme territorial expansionism (the 1840s) that is prior to the founding of the frontier settlements that the cinematic Western of the post-war period

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113 *Sixguns and Society*, p. 85. Wright’s study is an analysis of four variations he identifies as crucial to the cinematic Western over the course of the twentieth century. Those four variants include the classical, the revenge, the transition, and the professional plot. Frederic Jameson provides an extremely perceptive reading of Wright and Cawelti in his review essay, “Ideology, Narrative Analysis, and Popular Culture,” *Theory and Society* 4.4 (Winter 1977), 543-559.
took as its dramatic setting (the 1870s). *Blood Meridian* goes beyond this anarchic, violent expertise of “professional fighters” in not only placing a madman like Glanton at their head, whose eyes are said to be “burning centroids of murder” (218). It also brings forward, in the figure of the judge, an updating of the imperial vocation. The judge is the fit master of a Cold War text, omnipresent and omniscient, something of a superpower mired in perpetual antagonisms, turning the historical present into a time of permanent war.

Cicero wrote, “In time of war, law is silent.” Wartime is thus a state of exception on which the law is suspended, and if law and principle are suspended then what takes place in the absence of law is a series of exceptional situations that is wartime. In a situation in which the law has been silenced, however, judgment loses the purported basis of its legitimacy. The novel maximizes such a state of exception, giving it a metaphysical cast in its incorporation of the judge. For in emphasizing the judge’s omnipresence throughout the bloodlands of the West the novel is symbolically suspending the principle of law. Judgment is being figured as an agency of war. In other words, judgment is not annulled by a situation of war but strangely heightened. Because of the presence of the judge, laws are not so much suspended, as reconceptualized, and authority is parceled out in strongman-like terms. Thus the judge will tell the men,

Whatever exists, he said. Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent.

[The judge] looked about at the dark forest in which they were bivouacked. He nodded toward the specimens he’d collected. These anonymous creatures, he
said, may seem little or nothing in the world. Yet the smallest crumb can devour us. Any small thing beneath yon rock out of men’s knowing. Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entry is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth … The judge placed his hands on the ground … This is my claim, he said. And yet everywhere upon it are pockets of autonomous life. Autonomous. In order for it to be mine nothing must be permitted to occur upon it save by my dispensation.\textsuperscript{114}

Following from this passage is the exchange that the judge is having with Toadvine. “No man,” Toadvine says to the judge, “can acquaint himself with everything on this earth.”

And the judge responds,

The man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear. Superstition will drag him down. The rain will erode the deeds of his life. But that man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate.\textsuperscript{115}

A different logic is being presented here, not a logic that absolves one of crime but suspends entirely the question of criminality. War crimes cannot be deduced from a situation in which law is made silent. Lawless military actions under such conditions become themselves forms of lawmaking. Law then comes to speak otherwise, and in the eloquence and beastly-cold calculations of the judge, judgment is thereby presented as one of the most devastating instruments of war.

\textsuperscript{114} Blood Meridian, 198.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 199.
Allied with what the judge describes as “the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry” is the problem of “anonymous creatures” and “autonomous life.” The judge is rounding out a world-view in which existence, knowledge, consent, and possession become key coordinating concerns. Indeed, the judge is very clear on the relation between “knowledge” and destruction. His notebooks and sketches—the textual embodiment of his “learning”—has a single and total purpose. One of the novel’s key expository scenes unfolds as an exchange between one of Glanton’s men asking the judge about his “ledgerbook”:

A Tennessean named Webster had been watching him and he asked the judge what he aimed to so with those notes and sketches and the judge smiled and said that it was his intention to expunge them from the memory of man …Whether in my book or not, every man is tabernacled in every other and he in exchange and so on in an endless complexity of being and witness to the uttermost edge of the world.116

To be “tabernacled” confuses if not collapses the secular and the sacred, making the ledgerbook an archival enterprise as much about pinpointing and cataloguing as about dispersal and “endless complexity.” Centripetal and centrifugal forces are at work, producing function and malfunction both. But because the judge intends that his memories will dominate “to the uttermost edge of the world,” he seeks to crush the least thing that might threaten his own efforts at order:

He looked about the dark forest in which they were bivouacked. He nodded toward the specimens he’d collected. These anonymous creatures, he said, may

116 Ibid., 140-141.
The existence of “pockets of autonomous life” threatens the judge’s “claim” to being what he calls “a special kind of keeper.” It is the power, he says, to select what is preserved and what is not—“his authority countermands local judgments.” Nothing, he says, “must be permitted to occur [in the world] save by my dispensation.” Autonomy threatens the rule of the “keeper or overlord” whose “task,” the judge explains, is the “singling out of the thread of order from the tapestry” of the world. Doing so, the judge declares, is to take “charge of the world” and to “dictate the terms” of one’s “fate.”

It is this power over the very rigging of the world that gives the presence of the novel’s repeated imagery of all things being wired together an additional relation to the judge’s concept of suzerainty. The novel would seem to adopt the judge’s standpoint, which is the standpoint of “war”—by making the kid the “autonomous life” with whom the judge is wired into an ancient antagonism. “Our animosities,” the judge tells the kid, “were formed and waiting before ever we two met.” In “singling out” his antagonism with the kid as preceding them the judge makes the strange telos of the Western more precise. On the one hand, the genre cannot itself provide an alternative to the crisis of

117 Ibid., 198.
118 Ibid.
119 Ibid., 199.
120 Ibid., 307.
masculinity, of coloniality and empire, and of genocide and ecocide that its own imagination has brought forth and for which it has provided the ideological justifications for over the course of nearly two (now three) centuries.\footnote{121} The startling dimension to framing it in this way involves the implications that this would potentially have for periodizing the long nineteenth century as a period from James Fenimore Cooper through to the prolific popular Western writer Louis L’Amour as one single period of “Western” expansionism. Framed in this way, the significance of the frontier is that it is far from closed, whatever the contemporary “declinists” of American empire might suggest.\footnote{122} As long as the United States remains an expanding global power imposing itself unilaterally across the planet we remain in the nineteenth century.

*Blood Meridian* intends that the judge appear as a figure still among us, we nineteenth centuryists. His is the imperial gesture, inexorably annexing to itself the world. Holden expresses it powerfully in a language that is simultaneously one of capture and category: “The freedom of birds is an insult to me. I’d have them all in

\footnote{121} I symbolically draw here on a formulation of Arundhati Roy’s in her recent study, *Walking with the Comrades* (2011). Roy writes, “Can we expect that an alternative to what looks like certain death for the planet will come from the imagination that has brought about the crisis in the first place? It seems unlikely. The alternative, if there is one, will emerge from the places and the people who have resisted the hegemonic impulse of capitalism and imperialism instead of being coopted by it.”

A zoo would comfort the judge, stabilizing the chaos and confusion of the world. He becomes the would-be keeper of all forms of possible life. Holden’s ledger returns to this theme of captivity over and over again. Indeed every reference to his writings is a commentary on both the violence of writing and the power of the archive to destroy even as it remembers. Preserving in order to destroy is the logic of Holden’s “ledgerbook.”

The kid’s travels return him not only to Texas, but also to the judge. In the intervening period, from the 1850s to the late-1870s, the narrative is mostly gestural with respect to his wanderings throughout the West. We are told that he had drifted as far west and north as San Francisco, having “twice saw it burn.” (313). His wanderings would appear not to add up to much, as though they had never led anywhere of any significance but back to the judge. So twenty-nine years after their last encounter, the kid (now “the man”) encounters him in a sad, garish saloon in Fort Griffin, Texas in 1878. In one sentence (of “temporal immensities”) the judge appears as if waiting for him, timeless and ageless, his patience a most horrible thing:

He wore a round hat with a narrow rim and he was among every kind of man, herder and bullwhacker and drover and freighter and miner and hunter and thief and he was among the dregs of the earth in beggary a thousand years and he was among the scapegrace scions of eastern dynasties and in all that motley assemblage he sat by them and yet alone as of he were some other sort of man entire and he seemed little changed or none in all these years.125

123 Blood Meridian, 199.
124 Ibid., 313.
125 Ibid., 325.
Society is at its most depraved here in this garrison town—a bear is shot gruesomely, and wantonly; the whole whirligig of the town is gambling, drinking, and whoring, and there is no entertainment that does not terminate, finally, in some kind of violence. It is at once a scene we Western readers and filmgoers have seen time without number and yet a depravity that the Western has never shown so brutally before. “You aint nothin,” the kid says to the judge. “You speak truer than you know”—is the judge’s response, which is fitting, given that he would seem to once more, and finally, preside over “horror in the round.”

The kid’s ultimate encounter with the judge—and his terminus as type of American innocent—occurs in the outhouse (the “jakes”). Seeking to void himself, he steps into the jakes only to find that the judge, as ever, has preceded him. Seated there, presumably already having evacuated the contents of his bladder or bowels—and again perhaps there for nothing so practical as this but rather waiting there to ambush the kid—rises up and would seem to devour the kid horrendously. The judge, as the narrative tells us, “was naked and he rose up smiling and gathered him in his arms against his immense and terrible flesh and shot the wooden barlatch home behind him.” But whereas the novel has never shied from a certain impeccable fidelity to savage acts, here it falls into a kind of silence, as if the judge’s violence towards the kid

126 Ibid., 331.
127 Ibid., 333.
was a desecration so great that it had to be left off-screen, as it were, and rendered unspeakable. The three “witnesses” to its aftermath, random frontier men, one after the other look in and are left literally without words to describe the defilement they see.

But can genre fiction ever provide direct perception of an historical event? Only when seen in relation to the genre as a whole can we begin to apprehend Blood Meridian’s importance. This is because its significance has a retrospective effect on the historical sequences preceding it. It becomes all the more powerful when viewed as a Western within the larger context of the genre’s formal sedimentation. And once this sedimentation occurs it becomes possible to understand how genre itself can become style. Harold Bloom champions what he calls Blood Meridian’s “high style.” By this Bloom means what others have referred to as McCarthy’s “late-modernism”—the torrent of language, the density and range of allusion, and the achievement of a poesis that stands as much outside of time as within it.128 But in focusing on this aspect of Blood Meridian he crucially omits the more important category of “late-style.” I refer here to Adorno’s concept of “lateness” or “late-style,” a term he used to explain the particular complexities that arise when an artist’s late works develop into a densely self-reflexive style.129 But this understanding of the accumulation of “style” within an artist’s subjective and objective development—an accumulation that results in the

128 Vereen M. Bell’s The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy (1988) and, especially, David Holloway’s The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy (2002) are prominent examples of this strain of McCarthy criticism.
crystallization of a break between earlier and later works—can be extended to explain the internal development of genre and form. It can be extended to explain not only how genre can become a style in itself—that is, of how internal tendencies can be pushed to their extremes—but also how, in the formal sedimentation of a genre, a late-style emerges that is specific to a new ensemble of relations among its formerly fixed conventions. These new relations of formal elements undergo what Adorno refers to as a “compulsion towards disintegration,” which allows for a radical reorientation of the genre’s norms.\footnote{Adorno, \textit{Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music}, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford UP), 45.}

But to account for the way late-style emerges over the course of a genre’s development can only be arrived at by means of attention to the specific histories internal to the form. For genre is never an eternally fixed arrangement of narrative elements. Its stability over time is premised upon its inner capacity for variation. Its differences are tied to the imperatives of any industrial commodity, which is to say that it must produce variation in order to win over, maintain, and extend market share. But a genre’s capacity to produce difference is also largely external to the form—a matter of appearance. Whatever surface-level variations emerge, the “inner life of the Western” (in Jane Thompkin’s phrase) still orients itself within established generic coordinates. The Western’s variations are also very much tied to the way it allows the pleasure of having
one’s readerly (or spectatorial) expectations affirmed or denied or merely modified ever so much to indulge one’s connoisseurship.

The histories internal to the Western’s formation as a genre point to the usefulness of extending Adorno’s analysis of the catastrophic sensibilities, formally and stylistically, which enter into and radically modify the genre’s particular appearance in the 1960s and 1970s. The tendency in this period is not, for instance, towards “revisionism,” as if the western films appearing in the era of the Vietnam War were the first to rearrange the basic normative-elements of the genre for ideological or stylistic effects. The truth of genre and of the formulas it gives rise to is that it is constantly undergoing certain modifications at the level of surface and depth. Were this capacity to repeat with noticeable differences not constitutive of its formation as a “system,” then conventions of character, plot, setting, and theme would not be recognizably available as material for stylistic invention. In other words, a genre system as it accumulates provides a certain density and self-reflexivity in which abstraction becomes available.

What late-style points to, beyond the individual artwork, is how the appropriation of genre can itself become stylistic. It is what, within theories of postmodernism, has been referred to, in an overused sense, as “pastiche.” But emphasizing appropriation-as-style as a defining mark of postmodernism obscures a greater truth of genre itself. Innovations occur throughout a genre’s formation. Genre, as Blood Meridian’s turn to the Western shows, is a category for understanding how relations between aesthetic form
and historical experience interanimate, vary, and produce, as Stanley Cavell suggests, music-like elaborations. Indeed, this sense of elaboration and accumulation especially matters within a genre, like the Western, heavily overburdened by certain words—words like “Injun,” “red man,” and “savage”—and certain concepts and histories, such as “the West,” “frontier,” “justice,” “law and order,” and “civilization.” Genres in this sense carry in themselves a subordination or obedience to memory. If a particular iteration of a genre seems disobedient, it means that it is obeying something else by remembering other words, other histories—ones that point to new forms and figures, new music.\footnote{Jean-François Lyotard has an extraordinary way of describing his own relation to writing and to words. He suggests that our attempt at finding “a sense of order” is doomed until we give way to what the words themselves want to do. Allowing this order to emerge on its own, and in its own time, requires a special share of attentiveness and patience. He puts it in this remarkable way: “They disobey because they are obeying something else” (\textit{The Lyotard Reader} xiii). According to Lyotard, one’s duty to writing involves puzzling through that “something else” that one’s words are obeying.}
Coda

At the ends of the world
The words do not end but come back
From adventure
— Robin Blaser

“The West,” as this chapter has argued, continues to mark an event in the life of American empire. Its very plasticity—that it can simultaneously refer to a concrete landmass and designate an imperial policy of successive annexations—gives to it a strangely absorptive and yet floating quality. In it lies a paradoxical capacity to pinpoint time and to suspend it altogether. It can mark on the one hand a perfectly exact, temporally precise, historical moment in which a geographical site is opened to “settlement”—for instance, the opening of the trans-Mississippi regions after the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, or, and directly relevant to Cormac McCarthy’s Blood Meridian, the opening of Texas and of the territories that would become the southwestern United States in 1848 following U.S. victory in the Mexican-American War (1846-1848). But on the other hand it can mark something of a trans-historical, timeless imperial vocation, which, within a long U.S. context, is the basis of an American Exceptionalist doctrine that connects the first permanent colony at Jamestown (1607) to U.S. military troops garrisoned in Kandahar Province, Afghanistan (2012). So while Deborah Madsen is certainly correct to tie the concept of “the West” to “European colonial ambitions in North America,” it is also necessary to go further and assert how
“the West” has become a totally de-territorialized concept. This is especially crucial given how a concept of the West has, over the course of the twentieth century, been converted into a purely imaginary and imagistic cinematic space that itself travels and mobilizes discourses that work to legitimate American expansionism and interventionism across the globe.\(^1\)\(^{12}\) Enlarging the imperial use to which a concept of “the West” is put is especially timely in light of the fact that the most recent illegal American covert operation to assassinate Osama bin Laden (2011)—and not extradite him and bring judicial proceedings against him—was codenamed “Operation Geronimo.”

Writing in the early 1970s, Richard Slotkin observes,

> The archetypal enemy of the American hero is the red Indian, and to some degree all groups or nations which threaten us are seen in terms derived from our early myths. Rebellious urban blacks, hippies, and the ‘youth culture’ are recent examples. For most of our history, our most significant conflicts were the campaigns against the Indians, and most American wars against European or Mexican powers until 1898 were accompanied by war with the Indians. The Indian wars were in many ways the characterizing event of American history, bringing into dramatic focus forces contending for mastery of the opening of the continent.\(^1\)\(^{33}\)

Since the 1970s “war with the Indians” has increasingly been cast as a war against “terrorism”—first by Ronald Reagan and later, and most recently, by George W. Bush, who added another layer of simplicity to Reagan’s earlier formulation, in the 1980s, of

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\(^1\)\(^{12}\) Deborah Madsen, “The West and Manifest Destiny.” In making this claim, I am drawing upon the extraordinary scholarship of Leslie Fiedler, Michael Rogin, Richard Drinnon, Richard Slotkin, and William Spanos.

\(^{13}\) Regeneration through Violence, 558.
the Soviet Union, and its allies, as an “evil empire.” In the early twenty-first century a new enemy had appeared, but about this more recent enemy Bush resorted to nothing more sophisticated than a school-yard logic, declaring that our enemy’s actions were motivated by something elemental, if not elementary: “They hate our freedoms.”\textsuperscript{134} The immortalization of Reagan that occurred at the time of his death in 2004 is noteworthy as it is an indication of the degree to which the American political class had succeeded in restoring confidence in its imperial vocation—at least popularly. Of course, glorifying Reagan’s Presidency would be disastrous enough solely in terms of the horrors he oversaw (and yet pretended not to) within Central America alone—to say nothing of South America’s bloody dictatorships, each one of whom the United States state backed. Reagan’s canonized status as “the greatest of American Presidents” becomes unspeakably tragic in view of the fact that his “war on terrorism” provided the basis for its renewal under George W. Bush.\textsuperscript{135} Perhaps Michael Herr put the long tortured line of

\textsuperscript{134} President George W. Bush addressing congress and the nation, September 20, 2011. See: \url{http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress_092001.html}

\textsuperscript{135} Reagan’s popularity was not exceptionally high during his presidency, especially after the Iran-Contra scandal in his second-term, the late 1980s. He did, however, carry every state, except his opponent’s (Walter Mondale was from Minnesota) in his re-election bid in 1984. Distressingly, Reagan’s popularity has actually increased in the intervening decades, an outcome that can only be attributed to growing corporate control over public discourse—itself a legacy of Reagan’s domestic war against “the democracy” (Michael Denning’s useful phrase for a popular conception of democratic life that exceeds its nullification in mere State politics). This is all relevant as Reagan was recently declared “the Greatest U.S. President” by a Gallup poll conducted last year (2011). See: \url{http://www.gallup.com/poll/146183/Americans-Say-Reagan-Greatest-President.aspx}
American-made atrocities from the Pequot Massacre (1638) to the invasion of Vietnam best:

You couldn’t find two people who agreed about when it began, how could you say when it began going off? Mission intellectuals like 1954 as the reference date; if you saw as far back as War II and the Japanese occupation you were practically a historical visionary. “Realists” said that it began for us in 1961, and the common run of Mission flack insisted on 1965, post-Tonkin Resolution, as though all the killing that had gone before wasn’t really war. Anyway, you couldn’t use standard methods to date the doom; might as well say that Vietnam was where the Trail of Tears was headed all along, the turnaround point where it would touch and come back to a containing perimeter; might just as well lay it on the proto-Gringos who found the New England woods too raw and empty for their peace and filled them up with their own imported devils.136

“Operation Geronimo” (2011) extends the Trail of Tears into our own century, the twenty-first. It carries forward one of the most repugnant and pitiful sides of our “Victory culture” (Engelhardt), which appropriates the names of those people we have slaughtered as propitious emblems for nominalizing further campaigns of imperial aggression.

136Dispatches (Vintage, 1977), 49.
Afterward

An absence of meaning opens a rift in time.
— Michel de Certeau

As “late American fictions,” the texts of this study are not merely at the end of a long line of development. They are not “late” in the sense of having fulfilled the internal tendencies of an art form—namely, in this study, the paraliterary conventions specific to a slave-narrative/blues novel, sword and sorcery, and the Western. Nor could we say that their “lateness” indexes something of their art form’s historicist deterioration, as if their difficulty, their strangeness, and their deviancy, which Adorno summarized so perfectly by the phrase “enigmaticalness,” were the telltale cause of civilizational decline.

The “compulsion toward disintegration” that Adorno distills out of the late works of Beethoven, and which this dissertation has, in an allied way, traced in the specific works of the previous chapters, is symptomatic rather of the dense interweave between new, late-twentieth century historical experience and how these works show their knowing relation to what has come before in terms of artistic inheritance.¹ If the “para” literary has a generalizable conceptual interest beyond these specific works, it is because it allows us to investigate the presence of genre forms as distinct artifacts that are tied both to real historical experience and to that history’s symbolic, or imaginative,

¹ Aesthetic Theory, trans. R. Hullot-Kentor, 45.
afterlife. In this way the “para” marks what is neither late nor early, neither what is
timely nor untimely in a strict sense of historicist chronology. It is reminiscent instead of
Joyce’s famous declaration that he was led as an artist by moments of coincidence and
caprice: “Chance furnishes me with what I need. I’m like a man who stumbles: my foot
strikes something, I look down, and there is exactly what I’m in need of.”2 This relay
between “chance” and “need” is a way of conjuring the historical contingency of the
near-at-hand—that enveloping object- and thought-world of one’s own present. The
paraliterary helps us to track the appearance and the use of contingent cultural forms
within contemporary fiction—the happened upon that happens to enlarge the world for us, both narratively and historically

But if the paraliterary is that greater surround out of which all cultural
production comes, then it must also mark an implicit relation to its own internal
differentiations—that is, to the histories that are internal and specific to the forms it
appropriates and puts to use. Isolating this internal differentiated quality is what makes
possible the kinds of revelations that lead to historical claims about historical objects. Of
course “history” (in either its lower- or upper-case determinations) has a history—this,
in the West, has been known at least since Vico. But the way in which cultural objects
can themselves be shown to have a history, and for that history to become foregrounded

and turned in toward itself, is a special characteristic of an historical imagination that is best captured by the concept of historicity.

Lateness comes back, then, in relation to historicity. A “late” art, a late-style, a late-genre helps us to think beyond the long-dominant models of historical time. Those models being either, one, a mythic or cyclical conception of time, or, the other, a developmentalist-progressivist conception of time. The problem is that in each “history” is evacuated of any of its actual content. Indeed, the most historical dimension of each model is its capacity as an historical artifact to tell us something of the variety of ways historical time has been imagined. Thus “late” art, in the terms of this study, must be understood to exist in a paradoxical relation to the historical temporality it purportedly designates. In this sense it is key to understanding the odd spatiality of Walter Benjamin’s concept of the constellation. I say odd because the idea of a constellation for Benjamin involves a critical reading practice that seeks to produce an image, which, because of its radical historical concreteness, crystallizes not just the historicity of its own appearance, but makes possible an understanding of that hard-to-grasp description of a “unique experience with the past” (for Benjamin, his very singular notion of historical materialism) that “blasts open the continuum of history.” In this “cessation of happening”—in this “blast”—lies what is crucial for Benjamin, which is not, it must be stressed, a utopic instance in which armed struggle or a militant overthrow of the

bourgeois state is deemed possible. The question of revolution is rather posed
exclusively in terms of caring historiographically for what he calls the “oppressed past.” Profound though it is, we should not mistake Benjamin’s historical poetics for anything other than what they are: a way of reading. What that way of reading promises is this:
“nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. To be sure, only a redeemed [human]kind receives the fullness of its past—which is to say, only for a redeemed [human]kind has its past become citable in all its moments. Part of what matters most to a concept of the paraliterary is what we might call its historiographic poetics, its capacity to allow us to track how the fullness of the past, in a Benjaminian sense, appears “citable in all its moments.”

My contention throughout this dissertation has been that the “para” literary forms that these texts take up enables a kind of citational index of history in all its moments—that is, specifically with respect to the histories internal to the genre forms that make up Corregidora, Return to Nevèrÿon, and Blood Meridian. What is more, tracking the paraliterary dimensions of these texts allows us to more fully attend to the knowingness with which fictional texts today are produced. It teaches us to do more than promote “close reading” or “distant reading” as Franco Moretti has, for instance, quite controversially suggested. Or, rather, it allows us to avoid the problem, as Moretti
frames it, of understanding the “world literary system” in its “entirety.” This study proposes less a rereading of contemporary American fictions within a world literary system than a renewed attention to the way specific world-historical events have left their formal traces in certain American fictions aware of their belatedness.

One of the ironic consequences of the proliferation globally of the cultural sphere is that the past is no longer turned to and venerated as the intellectual, ethical, and aesthetic model of the highest good. Matthew Arnold’s late-nineteenth century defense of “culture” as the “best which has been thought and said” was both entirely Eurocentric and backwards looking. The present, in Arnold’s time, was fallen; what was of worth was thought to naturally endure, and thus only time had the power to confer “perfection,” as Arnold put it, onto the cultural products of an age. But in our own moment of globalized and instantaneous “culture,” the market trains us to attend to the wonders of the present with alacrity. The “now” is presently dominated by the next trend—the next blockbuster, the next big thing—and is thus endlessly promising to offer all that is worthy and best in the days or months ahead, tied, of course, to the specific rhythms of a market’s cycle. If this situation accords too much with a late-consumerist imperative to live in the moment so as to instantly renew one’s desire for what is next, then Fredric Jameson’s oft-quoted declaration that we postmodernists can imagine the end of the world before the end of capitalism is less dire a pronouncement than it might

7 Ibid., 56, 57.
8 “Preface,” Culture and Anarchy (1875).
first appear. From this perspective it is merely a dramatic reframing of the new global situation of cultural saturation and diffusion that would seem to increasingly hold the attention of humanities scholars today. By attending to the “para” literary dimensions of the texts of this study, this dissertation aims to restore historicity to our own moment’s historical present. It aims, further, to constellate the “fullness” of an “oppressed past” with what we might call the critic’s task to rethink the inherited cultural forms of our oppressed present. If the power broadly of the literary imagination is to suture the “ripts in time” opened up by the “absence[s] of meaning” (Michel de Certeau), then an attention to “para” literary forms allows us to trace the sedimented scars left by such various sutures across even more diverse bodies and across far more distant times.

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Biography

Keith Jones was born in Hacienda Heights, CA, in the spring of 1973, and grew up on the periphery of Los Angeles. He attended Glen A. Wilson High School and graduated from the University of Santa Cruz in 1996 with College Honors. After teaching middle school in Watsonville and East Oakland, CA, for five years, he completed a Master’s Degree in English at the California State University, Long Beach, graduating with Distinguished Graduate Honors in the spring of 2005. That fall he began his PhD in English at Duke University. He is the author of a book of poems, *Surface to Air, Residuals of Basquiat* (Pressed Wafer, 2012). He lives in Boston, MA, with his wife Jennifer Brody, and he is teaching this academic year (2012-2013) as a Visiting Lecturer at the College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, MA.