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"Words Are Things": The Settler Colonial Politics of Post-Humanist Materialism in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*

W. Oliver Baker

In criticism and theory today, we are witnessing a rise to prominence of new materialisms. These approaches loosely encompass object oriented ontologies, speculative realism, affect theory, vitalist materialism, and actor-network theory.¹ What distinguishes new materialisms from prior or competing theoretical traditions is a post-humanist understanding of materialism and materiality. Rather than pursuing questions of epistemology, new materialisms study the ontology of nonhuman matter. This approach promises to traverse the Enlightenment dualism of human/nonhuman that new materialists claim continues to structure and stifle much of criticism and theory today. As a result, a post-humanist perspective avoids, it is believed, the political pitfalls found in older theoretical traditions of historical materialism and poststructuralism that are considered human-centered frameworks. New materialisms foreground what these theories overlook, namely the relationship of the phenomenological experience of daily life to international political economy, the liveliness and agency of matter, objects, affects and bodies, and the role of embodiment in the age of global biopolitics. In emphasizing the infinitesimal, a new materialist framework offers to generate models of praxis that are affirmative and productive, which might helpfully replace the models of difference and alterity of prior and competing human-centered frameworks that are believed to lead to political and ethical fragmentation, destabilization, and, ultimately, defeat. As Diana Coole and Samantha Frost explain in their introduction to *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*: "The prevailing ethos of new materialist ontology is consequently more positive and constructive than critical or negative: it sees its task as creating new concepts and images of nature that affirm matter's immanent vitality ... It avoids dualism or dialectical reconciliation by espousing a monological account of emergent, generative material being."² Put simply, new materialists want to stop deconstructing

and demystifying the world and instead begin constructing, building, and producing creative and sustainable alternatives to it.

While new materialisms have come to represent a new post-human turn in criticism and theory, this break from so-called human-centered theories I want to suggest is not so much a new development as it is an extension of a previous break Michel Foucault had inaugurated through his positive materialist approaches of genealogy and archaeology from the traditions of historical materialism and linguistic-centered poststructuralism. Against what he argued was a totalizing, teleological, and thus exclusionary functionalism found in Enlightenment theories like Marxism, psychoanalysis, and structuralism, Foucault, like new materialisms today, advocated for a method that could be inclusive of all of history's actors and their struggles. As Foucault writes:

It is not therefore via an empiricism that the genealogical project unfolds, nor even via a positivism in the ordinary sense of that term. What it really does is to entertain the claims to attention of local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges against the claims of a unitary body of theory which would filter, hierarchise and order them in the name of some true knowledge and some arbitrary idea of what constitutes a science and its objects (sic).³

Although Foucault didn't explicitly emphasize nonhuman ontologies, his local form of analysis nonetheless prefigures the logic of new materialisms insofar as it rejects the category of transcendental humanism that structured competing methods of analysis in order to write a productive rather than negative knowledge of history.⁴

I begin with an attempt to trace the emergence of new materialisms not to demonstrate its influences, which lie perhaps much more with Spinoza or Deleuze and Guattari than with Foucault, but to reveal how the prominence of new materialisms today represents the most recent development in a much longer trajectory of theories of what we can now call post-humanist materialism. In this essay, I want to explore not only how we understand post-humanist materialism's emergence and its rise to prominence today in the fields of criticism and theory, but what kind of knowledge it produces about the histories and identities it represents. Moreover, as a historical form, how can post-humanist materialism help us periodize the era it tracks from its emergence in Foucault's break with historical materialism and linguistic-centered forms of poststructuralism to today when it promises to finally supplant and replace these older theoretical traditions? To address these problems, I turn to Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, (1985), a novel whose aesthetic, I argue, embodies a similar form of post-humanist materialism that we see in Foucault's local analysis and the new materialisms of today. *Blood Meridian* is a historical novel that tells the story of settler colonial conquest in the borderlands of Northern Mexico in

the years following the US-Mexico war of 1848. It fictionalizes the actions of a group of American scalp hunters who were paid by the Mexican state after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo to help exterminate the Apache peoples and other Indigenous groups whose claims to and defense of their ancestral lands stood in the way of Mexican and US settler colonial expansion. The novel demonstrates that the essence of this history is like that of the very desert where the events of colonial conquest and violence take place: “This desert upon which so many have been broken is vast and calls for largeness of heart but it is also ultimately empty. It is hard, it is barren. Its very nature is stone.”⁵ In emphasizing the nature of colonial conquest and violence as “stone,” which is to say, as a history of the nonhuman, *Blood Meridian* becomes an important text that helps us understand the historical trajectory and political meanings of post-humanist materialism. This essay will demonstrate through a reading of McCarthy’s novel that post-humanist materialism not only embodies a neoliberal colonial politics of recognition, reconciliation and affirmation that functions to erase the structural violence found in the histories of colonialism and capitalism, but is also a theoretical and aesthetic project premised on, even as it disavows, the settler colonial (re)production of indigeneity as the social ontology of the savage, wild, nonhuman outside to modern liberal humanism. In what follows, then, I want to argue for a reading of post-humanist materialism that understands it as a neoliberal settler ideology that traces and tracks, just as much as it seeks to manage and legitimate, the ongoing role of settler colonialism in our era of late capitalism.

Enlightenment Mastery, Negative Critique, and Optical Democracy

Scholarship on *Blood Meridian* is as expansive, disparate, and layered as the novel itself. After winning the National Book Award for *Cities of the Plain* (1992), McCarthy’s previous works, including *Blood Meridian* and his earlier novels of Appalachia, were opened for critical excavation. Initial scholarship on *Blood Meridian* announced it as one of the most important novels of the twentieth century.⁶ Formalist critics praised McCarthy’s intricate and exhilarating prose style, while also admiring the novel’s self-conscious form. But where the novel has attracted the most critical attention is in how it revises and subverts dominant frontier ideologies of westward expansion.⁷ The novel voices and critiques these frontier ideologies most clearly in its representation of Captain White’s army of filibusters who, early in the novel, recruit and enlist the help of the novel’s protagonist, named only as “the kid,” in their campaign to seize control of Mexico. As Captain White tells the kid, “do you know what happens with people who cannot govern themselves? That’s right. Others come in to govern for them.”⁸ The kid who has become “divested of all that he has been. His origins [as] remote as is his destiny” is promised social mobility via land dispossession: “You ready to go to Mexico?” the recruiter asks the kid, “It’s a chance for ye to raise ye self in the world. You best make a move someway or another fore ye go plumb in under.”⁹ When the kid asks about pay, the recruiter retorts “Hell fire son, you won’t need no

wages. You get to keep ever thing you can raise. We goin to Mexico. Spoils of war. Aint a man in the company wont come out a big landowner (sic)."¹⁰ By representing the frontier less as a place of progress than as one of imperial expansion, economic opportunism, and violent dispossession, the novel serves as what Sara Spurgeon argues is a "counter-memory" or "anti-myth" to the narratives of manifest destiny and American exceptionalism.¹¹

Still, *Blood Meridian* does more than revise colonial narratives. We can also see how it embodies a deconstructive method that foregrounds the instability of narrative representation itself. In one of the novel's most cited passages, the scalp hunters' co-leader, Judge Holden, ruminates on the function of the notes and sketches he makes and collects in his ledger. After one of the scalp hunters, a "Tennessean name Webster," contends that "them pictures is like enough the things themselves. But no man can put all the world in a book. No more than everthing drawed in a book is so (sic)," the Judge replies, "What is to be deviates no jot from the book wherein it's writ. How could it? It would be a false book and a false book is no book at all 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."¹² Echoing what Linda Hutcheon famously described as "historiographic metafiction," the novel lays bare that there is no original or genuine account of history hiding behind the official ideologies of the ruling order; rather, history itself is textual, the sliding of signifiers for signifiers, representations of representations, narratives that produce truths rather than reveal the truth.¹³ That is, *Blood Meridian* does not merely revise, but destabilizes official accounts of US history — not by offering a more truthful account that would "correct" official versions but by highlighting the contingency and indeterminacy of narrative representation itself.

Of course, it is the Judge himself and what he typifies that becomes the principal target of the novel's deconstructive method. Perhaps one of the most engrossing and violent characters of American literature, the Judge serves as the group's desert guide and advisor in the work of scalp hunting.¹⁴ While the Judge is many things — a devil-figure, theologian, murderer, scholar, pedophile, preacher — it's clear that his skills as rhetor are equaled only by skills in genocide, and that the two are intertwined as the novel presents his use of the word and his use of the gun as co-constitutive tools of colonial violence. When asked by the horse thief and fellow scalp hunter Toadvine why the Judge collects and records in his ledger specimens of the desert's plants and animals, the Judge explains:

whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent.... These anonymous creatures ... may seem little or nothing in the world. Yet the smallest crumb can devour us. Any smallest thing beneath yon rock out of men's knowing. Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to

stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth ... This is my claim ... 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.¹⁵

Here the Judge’s understanding of nature exemplifies what Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer described as the “dialectic of enlightenment,” or the contradiction found in Enlightenment rationality that seeks to violently eliminate that which threatens its ideological consistency as a universal project of knowledge and emancipation.¹⁶ For the Judge, nature or the other, signal the outside to or limits of Enlightenment master narratives that otherwise function as global explanatory histories. This is why both nature and the other must be forcefully seized, possessed, or killed in order to be explained away. In fact, what the Judge expresses is the Enlightenment promise of mastery and dominion precisely through representation: it is the Enlightenment subject’s capacity to explain, represent, or express the world in language that gives him or her dominion over it.

In this way, the Judge’s position on nature also comes to allegorize the Enlightenment logics found in structuralism. Claiming that “The freedom of birds is an insult to me. I’d have them all in zoos,” the Judge echoes early anthropology’s use of taxidermy to represent and understand Indigenous peoples, a colonialist form of treating them as already always “vanished” peoples whose cultures are in need of categorization, preservation, and museumification.¹⁷ Indeed, like the logic of “salvage” ethnography, the Judge categorizes, collects, observes, records, captures, and in so doing, kills what exceeds him. The Judge’s desire, then, to explain everything becomes the same as structuralism’s imperative to totalize social relations. When Toadvine questions the Judge’s suzerainty, claiming that “no man can acquaint himself with everthing on this earth (sic),” the Judge replies:

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.¹⁸

The “task of singling out the thread of order” shares with structuralism the goal of finding the inner-logic or central law by which the social field under observation operates. When placed in the genocidal hands of the Judge, this method of representing structural causality comes to be seen as a form of social domination. It becomes, in other words, a form of human-centered totalization, and as such — and in line with Enlightenment rationality — excludes and marginalizes identities, ontologies, and

struggles that exist outside of structuralism's global explanatory framework.

While *Blood Meridian* models a deconstructive method that troubles the Enlightenment master narrative and the structuralist social map figured by the Judge, it nonetheless suggests that the power and force of such forms outmatch the novel's attempt to subvert or destabilize them. That is, the Judge who embodies the Enlightenment logic of totalization and genocidal (ir)rationality appears destined to prevail and dominate despite the attempts of other characters and the novel's deconstructive method to challenge his power. Of the members of Glanton's scalp hunters, the Judge alone endures, in the end raping and killing the kid in a latrine behind a Texas saloon only to take the saloon's stage moments later, dancing naked in the novel's final scene: "Towering over them all and quick and now in doubletime and bowing to the ladies, huge and pale and hairless, like an enormous infant. He never sleeps, he says. He says he'll never die," an ending that seems to indicate the novel's self-awareness of the limits of the deconstructive method.¹⁹ As David Holloway puts it, "*Blood Meridian* surrenders ... provisional control of meaning to the totalizing force of the judge precisely because McCarthy's critique is informed by a deconstructive methodology. In surrendering this, the text also gives up the critical and the political agency which it needs to bring witness against him."²⁰ How should we read the novel's representation of the limits of its own deconstructive method? Critics point out that it demonstrates *Blood Meridian's* most politically progressive feature: it is the sign of the novel's acute understanding of the function of a deconstructive method. The deconstructive move of the novel is not in its representational critique of the Judge and Enlightenment logic, but in the novel's self-referential image of its own failure to do so in the form of a positive representation. For Phillip Snyder, this is a kind of narrative form that "makes absolute hegemonic discourse impossible."²¹ Holloway agrees, explaining that "where the oppositional voice is converted suddenly and violently into its own negation, one core feature of McCarthy's aesthetic might then be summarized as a testing of ideological limits ... what does not compute or is inexpressible in this or that theoretical language may then be a more damaging indictment of the theory in question than traditional ontological or metaphysical critiques."²² By emphasizing the undecidability of its representational critique of Enlightenment narrative forms, McCarthy may fall short of representing alternatives to the domination and power of the Judge and what he represents, but the novel nonetheless successfully enacts a form of negative critique. Such a reading thus maintains that the novel's deconstructive method avoids privileging or even producing positive counter-narratives that might critique or compete against Enlightenment master narratives not because McCarthy is disinterested in alternatives, but because deferring positive representations allows the novel to maintain the position of critique, destabilization, and undecidability in which alternative thinking is possible in the first place.

Against this reading, I want to suggest that the novel is just as suspicious of deconstruction and other forms of negative critique as it is of the Enlightenment logics

embodied in the figure of the Judge. We should read the novel’s staging of the limits of its representational critique of the Judge not as evidence of McCarthy’s support of an aesthetics of deconstruction but as the novel’s way of demonstrating the political weakness of deconstruction. The deconstructive method is shown to fall short of challenging Enlightenment hegemony precisely because, like other poststructuralist methods and theories, it ignores nonhuman ontology, the materiality of the body, affects, and daily life. Foucault had offered the same criticism of dialectics and (post) structuralist theories of language:

Neither the dialectic, as logic of contradictions, nor semiotics, as the structure of communication, can account for the intrinsic intelligibility of conflicts. ‘Dialectics’ is a way of evading the always open and hazardous reality of conflict by reducing it to a Hegelian skeleton, and ‘semiology’ is a way of avoiding its violent, bloody, and lethal character by reducing it to the calm Platonic form of language and dialogue.²³

New materialists Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin offer a similar critique of frameworks of negativity: “A relationality in the negative, dualistic sense presupposes the terms of the relation in question, whereas the creation of concepts [found in new materialisms] entails a traversing of dualisms, and the establishment of a relationality that is affirmative — that is, structured by positivity rather than negativity.”²⁴ Here I want to make the claim that *Blood Meridian* serves as an early example in American fiction of what has become today in criticism and theory a turn away from the methods of demystification and deconstruction. The novel intimates that demystifying or deconstructing dominant Enlightenment logic doesn’t do much towards changing the material reality this logic helps produce and sustain. To challenge what the Judge represents it is not necessary or practical to know how the Judge wields power as it is to know how to come together and struggle against him. Like Foucault’s work and new materialisms, *Blood Meridian* suggests that we don’t so much need a perspective that reveals the contradictions of power as we need a perspective that reveals productive points of intersection among those who struggle against power.

Such a perspective that illuminates the local and molecular and that as a result represents productive relationalities among the dominated, marginalized, and excluded is what the novel describes as “optical democracy”:

In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence. The very clarity of these articles belied their familiarity, for the eye predicates 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.²⁵

In an early reading of *Blood Meridian*, critic Dana Phillips reads optical democracy as a form of description rather than narration in the terms defined by Lukács in his essay “Narrate or Describe.”²⁶ As description, optical democracy scans and reproduces the experience of the surfaces of the social field rather than mapping, if there is one, its inner-logic. Against Lukács who argues that description is a form of reification — a representation of the mystified immediacy of capitalism — Phillips understands optical democracy as an important narrative form that overcomes the limits of teleological and homogenizing Enlightenment frameworks of periodization. As Phillips claims, McCarthy is a “writer not of the ‘modern or ‘postmodern’ eras but of the Holocene, with a strong historical interest in the late Pleistocene and even earlier epochs,” and that “Human beings and the natural world do not figure as antagonists. . . They are instead parts of the same continuum.”²⁷ In a similar early post-humanist reading, Steven Shaviro points out how in the novel “Minute details and impalpable qualities are registered with such precision that the prejudices of anthropocentric perceptions are disqualified. The eye no longer constitutes the axis of vision. We are given instead a kind of perception before or beyond the human.”²⁸ Through its optical democracy, the novel attempts to prove not only that “Books Lie,” but that even if, as one of the scalp hunters tells the Judge, “God don’t,” the ontology of language is nonetheless nonhuman, or as the Judge reminds the group “these are [God’s] words. He held up a chunk of rock. He speaks in stones and trees, the bones of things.” As the Judge says elsewhere, “words are things.”²⁹ Optical democracy becomes the equivalent of the imperative found in post-humanist materialisms to center nonhuman ontologies, to traverse the human/nonhuman binary, and to give inanimate matter the attention it deserves.

Colonial Violence and Affective Witnessing

It is through this post-humanist aesthetic that the novel represents colonial violence in the form of a lively thing, that is, as a visceral and thus material affect of trauma and brutality that is meant to engage contemporary readers at a bodily (nonhuman) rather than cognitive (human-centered) level. For example, the following sentence, like so many in the novel, which describes the Apache attacking and decimating Captain White’s filibustering party, attempts to offer readers not a counter-representation but a material affective experience of the violence found in history of colonial conquest:

Now driving in a wild frieze of headlong horses with eyes walled and teeth cropped and naked riders with clusters of arrows clenched in their jaws and their shields winking in the dust and up the far side of the ruined ranks in a piping of bone flutes and dropping down off the sides of their

mounts with one heel hung in the withers strap and their short bows flexing beneath the outstretched necks of the ponies until they had circled the company and cut their ranks in two and then rising up again like funhouse figures, some with nightmare faces painted on their breasts, riding down the unhorsed Saxons and spearing and clubbing them and leaping from their mounts with knives and running about on the ground with a peculiar bandy-legged trot like creatures driven to alien forms of locomotion and stripping the clothes from the dead and seizing them up by the hair and passing their blades about the skulls of the living and the dead alike and snatching aloft the bloody wigs and hacking and chopping at the naked bodies, ripping off limbs, heads, gutting the strange white torsos and holding up great handfuls of viscera, genitals, some of the savages so slathered up with gore they might have rolled in it like dogs and some who fell upon the dying and sodomized them with loud cries to their fellows.³⁰

Here the overabundance of adjectives and indefinite pronouns defers and buries the sentence's subjects, decentering the scene's actors, presenting the events horizontally as an experience unfolding rather than preconceived. McCarthy also uses simile rather than metaphor, which for Phillips, seems “designed to increase the intensity and accuracy of focus on the objects being described rather than to suggest that they have double natures or bear hidden meanings.”³¹ By focusing readers' attention on the objecthood of the violence found in this scene, giving each detail equal weight, the novel attempts to reveal what Jane Bennett calls the “vibrancy of matter” or “Thing-Power” of objects: “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.”³² To treat violence as a thing is to attune readers' perception to what new materialists call the agential power of objects, which in this scene and others like it where the affective experience of violence is re-enacted in order to produce a visceral and material response in readers, has the effect of engaging and entangling contemporary readers in ways that call them to stand as witnesses against forgotten and buried histories of violence underwriting US history. *Blood Meridian* thus fulfills what Timothy Morton argues is the role of an object oriented poetics: “a poem is not simply a representation, but rather a nonhuman agent” that does “something as physical as what happens when my car scrapes the sidewalk.”³³ In experiencing colonial violence at a nonhuman bodily level, the novel's post-humanist aesthetic avoids the traps and limits of representation and counter-representation, critique, demystification, or deconstruction precisely because it allows, in the language of new materialism, readers to affirm the thing-power of the affects of colonial violence in a shared moment of productive witnessing.

Critics of Western American literature have praised McCarthy's aesthetic for its ability to unearth the buried experiences of trauma and horror found in the history

of colonial violence. Billy Stratton argues that “by bringing this horrifying episode in American history to the attention of modern readers, McCarthy gives voice to its anonymous victims . . . this is *Blood Meridian*’s greatest achievement. For in so doing McCarthy subverts the prevailing mythico-historical narrative of the Old West developed to keep traumatic events such as these buried in the dustbins of history.”³⁴ Comparing *Blood Meridian* to the discourses of its source texts, Stratton celebrates how contemporary readers are able to experience and acknowledge the trauma and anguish of colonial violence that these discourses actively suppress. For Stephen Tatum, McCarthy’s aesthetic exemplifies a wider “forensic aesthetic paradigm” of contemporary western American literature that focuses readers’ attention on the material objects found in the scenes of ruin, loss, death, and decay of the American west.³⁵ In such scenes, objects mark the presence of a “spectral beauty,” a utopian desire to recover the lost or forgotten stories of U.S. history whose traces remain in the fragments or material remains of the forensic scene. Focusing on the objecthood of violence beckons readers to “to reconstruct a whole body and a completed narrative so that the dead or missing in the end can have a ‘voice,’” which as Tatum suggests performs a “kind of ventriloquism of and for the dead,” giving readers a feeling that they have the “power to make the world ‘right’ again.”³⁶ For Tatum, like Stratton, readers who bear witness to the trauma of colonial history are readers who not only seek justice for its victims but also search for more ethical ways of relating to them.

Yet to suggest that *Blood Meridian*’s greatest achievement lies in how it represents the liveliness of forgotten and buried material affects of colonial violence, which allows readers to politically and ethically stand as witnesses to the horrors of colonialism, is also to demonstrate how the novel’s object oriented aesthetic displaces and thus defers an experience of the structural violence of colonialism. The materiality of colonial violence in the novel is located in the positivism — which is also believed to be the productiveness — of objects rather than in the negativity of colonialism’s structures of dispossession. The difference is one between understanding settler colonialism as an event or experience of the past considered complete and finished and as a structure of dispossession that continues today to violently enclose and occupy the lands and bodies not only of Indigenous peoples of North America but populations around the world who through settler imperialisms are, as Indigenous feminist scholar Jodi Byrd argues, made to be “Indian,” in their position as “peoples and nations who stand in the way of U.S. military and economic desires.”³⁷

By way of a brief comparison, we could say that McCarthy commits the same mistake in his representation of the genocide of Indigenous peoples that Adorno had accused Arnold Schoenberg of making in *A Survivor from Warsaw* (1947) that represents the genocide of European Jews. Adorno had pointed out that because Schoenberg chose to emphasize the images of the suffering of the Holocaust, he fails to accomplish the task of compelling listeners to condemn the fascist culture that produced it. The following could also describe McCarthy’s post-humanist aesthetic:

There is something embarrassing in Schoenberg’s composition ... the way in which, by turning suffering into images, harsh and uncompromising though they are, it wounds the shame we feel in the presence of the victims. For these victims are used to create something, works of art, that are thrown to the consumption of a world which destroyed them. The so-called artistic representation of the sheer physical pain of people beaten to the ground by rifle-butts contains, however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment of it ... The aesthetic principle of stylization ... makes an unthinkable fate appear to have had some meaning; it is transfigured, something of its horror is removed. This alone does an injustice to the victims; yet no art which tried to evade them could confront the claims of justice. Even the sound of despair pays its tribute to a hideous affirmation ... When genocide becomes part of the cultural heritage in the themes of committed literature, it becomes easier to continue to play along with the culture which gave birth to murder.³⁸

In attempting to enhance readers’ sensitivity to the liveliness of the affects of colonial violence, McCarthy’s optical democracy, like Schoenberg’s committed images of suffering, seeks to produce a meaningful experience of genocide in ways that generate productive and affirmative moments between audiences and the victims of genocide. While McCarthy’s aesthetic form does not privilege human over nonhuman suffering, like Schoenberg’s aesthetic, it nonetheless suggests that readers can come to identify with the victims of colonial conquest. *Blood Meridian* may not elicit liberal humanist notions of empathy for the victims of colonial violence but it does call on readers to share in the experience of such violence when it is aestheticized in the novel as a vibrant matter — as an affect with the agential power to produce effects on contemporary readers. In assuming, then, that through the novel’s object oriented aesthetic readers can stand as ethical and affirmative witnesses to acts of colonial violence, McCarthy asks readers to “play along” with and thus sustain the same culture that produces such violence in the first place, namely an American culture that continues to function as a settler culture, since it remains today premised on the ongoing attempt to eliminate Indigenous peoples. In other words, it is because of the post-humanist materialism of *Blood Meridian* — which eschews an experience of colonial violence as structural — that McCarthy fails to demonstrate how the cultural logic of settler colonialism that informs his novel of the 1980s is the same that in the 1850s produced the violence that the novel’s aesthetic attempts to make meaningful for contemporary readers. The novel’s visceral depictions of violence do not so much offer an experience of colonial violence as they offer an affective experience of its effects. Which is to say, *Blood Meridian* may be bloody but we shouldn’t consider it a novel of violence precisely because the violence of colonialism lies where the novel doesn’t look: in colonialism’s structural form rather than in its material effects.

It is in this way, then, that the post-humanist materialism of *Blood Meridian* participates in a wider set of neoliberal settler ideologies of recognition, reconciliation, affirmation, and forgetting. Such ideologies represent what Indigenous scholars and scholars of Indigenous critical theory such as Glen Coulthard, Jodi Byrd, Joanne Barker, and Elizabeth Povinelli, among others, have argued is a shift, beginning in the mid- to late-twentieth century, in how settler colonial states have come to govern Indigenous peoples.³⁹ In response to mobilized, militant, and collective forms of anti-colonial resistance found in Indigenous movements in North America and abroad, the settler-colonial state, Coulthard explains, was compelled to transform:

[F]rom a structure that was once primarily reinforced by policies, techniques, and ideologies explicitly oriented around the genocidal exclusion/assimilation double, to one that is now reproduced through a seemingly more conciliatory set of discourses and institutional practices that emphasize [Indigenous] recognition and accommodation. Regardless of this modification, however, the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the state has remained colonial to its foundation.⁴⁰

Coulthard describes this new form of governance a “colonial politics of recognition,” which corresponds to a wider set of neoliberal recognition strategies in which the cultural identity and/or experience of oppression and domination of marginalized groups is respected and affirmed while their class position or relation to capital — what is causing the experiences of oppression and suffering — is ignored or not addressed and thus left undisturbed. While it must be acknowledged that bringing to light histories of violence can certainly serve an affirmative role in building decolonial movements and solidarities, this strategy can also play into the hands of neoliberal settler-colonial governing modalities that offer conditional inclusion in modern liberal civil society through cultural recognition, appeals to reconciliation/healing, projects of forgiving and forgetting, and formal civil rights so as to leave unchallenged settler-colonial structures of dispossession.

Like the modern liberal settler-colonial state, the aesthetic of affective witnessing in *Blood Meridian* treats the violence of colonial conquest not as a continuous structure of dispossession but as an experience, or at best, a completed and finished project/event of the nation’s past that through a proper post-humanist ethics of affirmation can be reconciled with a now seemingly repentant liberal settler state and civil society. Such a politics of recognition not only erases the ongoing violence of dispossession and occupation still taking place within the territorial boundaries of settler colonies of North America, but also suggests that where imperial violence is recognized today in places outside of North America it can be resisted by developing a perception of, sensitivity to, or what is an aesthetic taste for, the affects of imperial violence.

Thus, just as the settler state continues to dispossess Indigenous peoples through new governing strategies of recognition and reconciliation, *Blood Meridian* affirms the very violence it seeks to expose by suggesting that colonial conquest can be reconciled, overcome, or resisted through a personal and local ethics of witnessing.

The Political Ecology of Settler Colonial Conquest

At this point, however, a question might be raised concerning the novel’s acute historical awareness of the economics of US and Mexican settler colonialism in the years following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848. Does not the novel, which was the product of several years of McCarthy researching archival holdings throughout the US-Mexico borderlands, perceptively emphasize the role of capitalism in determining the violent events depicted? As an historical novel, in other words, is not the novel’s faithful representation not only a genealogy but also an analogy of the economics of the 1980s? For instance, just as the novel had captured the imperialist filibustering spirit of the time in the representation of Captain White’s army, it also details how the American scalp hunters are contracted by Mexican state governments to remove Apache communities from the land to prepare the way for resource extraction and settlement. The scalp hunters enter into a “contract with [Angel Trias],” the governor of Chihuahua who promises a “hundred dollars a head for scalps and a thousand for [the Apache leader] Gómez’s head.”⁴¹ However, the novel goes on to show how this agreement quickly dissolves as readers learn that the Americans begin to indiscriminately hunt and scalp both the Apache and the Mexican citizenry. As the gang’s leader John Joel Glanton remarks, after his men kill a group of Mexican citizens of Nacori, “Hair, boys . . . The string aint run on this trade yet.”⁴² On returning, then, to Chihuahua to trade flesh for gold, the scalp-hunters

entered the city haggard and filthy and reeking with the blood of the citizenry for whose protection they had contracted. The scalps of the slain villagers were strung from the windows of the governor’s house and the partisans were paid out of the all but exhausted coffers and the Sociedad was disbanded and the bounty rescinded. Within a week of their quitting the city there would be a price of eight thousand pesos post for Glanton’s head.⁴³

If in the beginning the Americans had killed for gold, this arrangement changes as they begin to kill for reasons that go against their economic self-interest and/or the interests of the Mexican and US settler states. Moreover, not only do they kill the very people subsidizing their ventures, they also gratuitously kill or at least terrorize, plunder, and rob a mining expedition, an American-run ferry service on the Colorado river, and the small settlement of Tucson protected by a US military garrison, just to name a few. It seems that violence overtakes the Americans as they give into a

bloodlust with no end in sight.

Dan Sinykin reads the scalp hunters' entropic trajectory that ends in violent disarray and the group's destruction as an allegory of the instability, unchecked violence, and the unavoidable chaos of the US economy at the time of the novel's publication. For Sinykin, "the violence figured by the scalp hunters institutes capitalism's order . . . and haunts the world it has created with the threat of a return to chaos."⁴⁴ The novel is a warning that "the apparent US economic resurgence through financialization and the regained faith through Reagan in US progress rested on chaos, a violence always ready to consume us."⁴⁵ Yet, while the excess violence found in the actions of the scalp hunters might emphasize how the bloody origins of US capitalism portend equally bloody ends, I read the novel's focus on excess, chaos, and entropy as a product of its post-humanist aesthetic that attempts to represent the social field of colonialism as a dense web or horizontal assemblage of nonhuman actants rather than as a structure of accumulation that exploits and dominates differentially.

If the novel accurately documents the roles of Glanton's scalp hunters as agents of primitive accumulation, the novel's optical democracy undercuts this view when it represents the social field of settler colonialism as an assemblage in which violence is equally distributed, administered and suffered interchangeably by Glanton's gang, Indigenous peoples, and the Mexican citizenry. All three groups become equally susceptible to attack or extermination, or as the Judge tells the kid, "what joins men together . . . is not the sharing of bread but sharing of enemies."⁴⁶ The advantage of one group over the other is often seen as arbitrary and random: Glanton's success becomes just as unpredictable as is his demise. When the Yuma kill most of the scalp hunters late in the novel, their vulnerability to violence appears equal to the vulnerability to violence experienced by Indigenous groups. The narrator notes how the Yuma pile up the bodies of Glanton and his men and set them on fire. While looking on, the Yuma "contemplat[ed] towns to come and the poor fanfare of the trumpet and drum and the rude boards upon which their destinies were inscribed for these people were no less bound and indentured and they watched like the prefiguration of their own ends the carbonized skulls of their enemies incandescing before them bright as blood among the coals."⁴⁷ Here, settlers who will bring towns and the "poor fanfare of the trumpet and drum" are considered "no less bound and indentured," or comparably victimized by colonialism as the Indigenous groups the settlers seek to dispossess and displace in the first place. Emphasizing the primary cause or principal agents of the violence becomes much less important than focusing on what is held in common among the different actors of settler colonialism, actors who are believed to be one in the same its agents and victims.

This assemblage of colonial violence also extends to include nonhumans. Animals hunt humans, and humans hunt animals; the desert destroys even as settlers invade and overtake it. In fact, the dualism of the human/animal fully breaks down and all that remains is a plurality of different bodies preying on and being preyed upon

by other bodies. After surviving the Apache attack on Captain White’s filibustering party, the kid and Sproule wander through the desert only to be attacked one night by a “bloodbat” that drinks Sproule’s blood, who after pushing the bat off him let out a “howl of such outrage as to stitch a caesura in the pulse beat of the world.”⁴⁸ Or, in another instance, the scalp hunters are attacked by a bear, that “carried off their kinsman like some fabled storybook beast and the land had swallowed them up beyond ransom or reprieve.”⁴⁹ Like animals, the desert is also indiscriminately violent to all who enter it. As the kid and Sproule move further into the desert, “they saw half buried skeletons of mules with bones so white and polished they seemed incandescent even in that blazing heat and they saw panniers and packsaddles and the bones of men and they saw a mule entire, the dried and blackened carcass hard as iron (sic).”⁵⁰ Later, when Glanton’s group wanders the desert, the narrator describes their experience as: “out of that whirlwind no voice spoke and the pilgrim lying in his broken bones may cry out and in his anguish he may rage, but rage as what? And if the dried and blackened shell of him is found among the sands by travelers to come yet who can discover the engine of his ruin?”⁵¹ Conversely, there are many examples of animals and the landscape falling victim to the violence of humans. When Glanton buys a new set of pistols he tests them in a city courtyard, randomly selecting nearby animals as live targets, gratuitously obliterating in a matter of seconds a cat, two chickens, and a goat.⁵² We also witness the killing of an innocent stage bear that is mercilessly shot while entertaining a large crowd in the novel’s final scenes in the same saloon where the Judge ends the novel dancing. Moreover, the desert, at times, is seen as a space overrun and exhausted by waves of settlers hungry to exploit it: “they saw patched argonauts from the states driving mules through the streets on their way south through the mountains to the coast. Gold seekers. Itinerant degenerates bleeding westward like some heliotropic plague.”⁵³

The point of representing colonial conquest as an assemblage of horizontal violence is to emphasize a perceived equality of vulnerability or precariousness among the bodies placed in a violent entanglement by colonialism. This equality of violence/vulnerability is what critic Georg Guillemin describes as a balance between *Blood Meridian*’s “‘pastoral melancholia’ (everything is equally worthless),” and its other form of “‘ecopastoral elation’ (over the fact that everything has equal value).”⁵⁴ The novel’s non-hierarchical field of vision thus aligns with the optics of post-humanist materialism, which, as Jane Bennett explains, “is to find a more horizontal representation of the relation between human and nonhuman actants in order to be more faithful to the style of action pursued by each.”⁵⁵ The historical role of the scalp hunters as agents of primitive accumulation dissolves into a post-humanist view of colonial conquest as, to use Bennett’s language, a political ecology of violence/vulnerability. Through such a view, the novel attempts to accomplish the difficult task of resisting Enlightenment totalization embodied in the Judge whose master narratives excluded, erased, and subordinated nonhuman and other marginalized

ontologies. It does this by not centering or privileging certain ontologies over others, the result of which is that the novel might offer a view of the productive entanglements and intersections among bodies caught in a shared violence of colonial conquest.

We should not forget that this was the same goal of Foucault's local analysis of power. If Foucault urges us to see that "there is no single locus of great refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case," he also suggests that we not, "ask why certain people want to dominate, what they seek, what is their overall strategy. Let us ask, instead, how things work at the level of on-going subjugation, at the level of those continuous and uninterrupted processes which subject our bodies, govern our gestures, dictate our behaviours."⁵⁶ Like Foucault's local analysis and new materialisms, then, the aim of *Blood Meridian's* assemblage of colonial violence is not to essentialize who or what to blame in the history of colonial conquest, such as the the American scalp hunters who serve as the shock troops of primitive accumulation, but to emphasize what is held in common, a shared recognition that bridges the gap and traverses the dualism between settlers and natives, bodies and rocks, or humans and nonhumans, as a way to build, become, and live more sustainably together. As Jane Bennett explains the ethical and political goal of the assemblage framework:

The ethical aim becomes to distribute value more generously, to bodies as such. Such a newfound attentiveness to matter and its powers will not solve the problem of human exploitation or oppression, but it can inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations. And in a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself.⁵⁷

In fulfilling this ethical vision that "all bodies are kin," post-humanist materialism seeks to politically activate those who might be passively mired in human-centered understandings that see certain causes as more important than others. It is through acts of cross-identification and mutual recognition of shared points of vulnerability that bodies considered human might learn to become active, engaged, and receptive to the forms of becoming that are already in many cases underway, assemblages which may lead to alternative or least more sustainable forms of social belonging. We see this in the goal of Karen Barad's new materialist theory of "agential realism" which is "not about right responses to a radically exteriorized other, but about responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming, of which we are a part. Ethics is about mattering, about taking account of the entangled materializations of which we are part, including new configurations, new subjectivities, new possibilities." And a similar point can be found in the work of Rosi Braidotti who calls for a "nomadic ethics," which is not a "master theory but rather about multiple micropolitical modes

of daily activism. It is essential to put the ‘active’ back into activism.”⁵⁸ Against a politics of difference and alterity that is believed to undercut — because it centers certain struggles over others — attempts at coalition-building and cooperation across the divides of race, class, gender, sexuality, and the dualism of the human/nonhuman, post-humanist materialism promises more practical, effective, and active ways of building solidarity among bodies brought together by forms of shared harm. McCarthy’s aesthetic contains the same political vision: just as the Yuma see themselves in the burning bodies of the Americans the Yuma have killed or like the representation of a desert that is scarred but also scars the scores of settlers spilling west, those of us today who see that “all bodies are kin” will have a better chance of coming together, the novel suggests, in productive ways to co-exist sustainably or at least less violently in late capitalism.

Yet in representing settler colonial conquest in the form of a nonhuman assemblage, *Blood Meridian* obfuscates the irreconcilable power disparities between settlers and Indigenous people in late (settler colonial) capitalism. If the novel suggests that settlers and Indigenous peoples come to relate through a shared nonhuman ontology, this post-humanist perspective ignores how the social ontology of the settler is premised on — relates antagonistically to — the social ontology of structural genocide of the Indian.⁵⁹ Put differently, settler sovereignty rests on the production of the Indian as the category of the savage, a type of nonperson who might occupy but can’t own or labor on the lands capitalism encloses, the result of which is the social ontology of what Jean O’Brien calls the “ancient” and primitive, a form of life destined to disappear or “vanish” in the face of settler progress, that is, capitalist development.⁶⁰ Indigeneity thus serves, Byrd argues, as the position in modernity of “radical alterity,” or that which functions as the outside to modern liberal humanism.⁶¹ As Byrd explains: “European modernity hinges upon Indians as the necessary antinomy through which the New World — along with civilization, freedom, sovereignty, and humanity — comes to have meaning, structure, and presence.”⁶² What this entails, then, is that from the structural perspective of the settler any recognition offered or any attempt at a cultivating a productive becoming between the social ontologies of the settler and Indigenous peoples, will nonetheless be in the interests of perpetuating settler sovereignty.

As Coulthard, building on the work of Fanon, reminds us: the settler doesn’t seek recognition from the colonized, but rather only wants the colonized to give up their land and vanish: “The [settler] colonial state and state society — does not require recognition from the previously self-determining communities upon which its territorial, economic, and social infrastructure is constituted. What it needs is land, labor, and resources.”⁶³ The only condition of possibility for shared recognition, or a productive becoming, between settlers and Indigenous peoples would be the abolition of the social relation in which such recognition and affirmation is structurally impossible in the first place. Yet, instead of decolonization, as Coulthard

explains, “today it appears, much as it did in Fanon’s day, that colonial powers will only recognize the collective rights and identities of Indigenous peoples insofar as this recognition does not throw into question the background legal, political, and economic framework of the colonial relationship itself.”⁶⁴ For McCarthy’s novel to represent the history of settler colonial conquest in the form of an equality of violence/vulnerability among settlers and Indigenous peoples is to ignore this irresolvable structural tension of colonial difference.

In this way, we can see how post-humanist materialism’s project of extending the spheres of modern liberal civil society to include the nonhuman, like the goal of *Blood Meridian*’s optical democracy to represent all ontologies and temporalities equally, is premised on the ongoing project of settler colonialism. For example, when Bennett argues, “surely the scope of democratization can be broadened to acknowledge more nonhumans in more ways, in something like the ways in which we have come to hear the political voices of other humans formerly on the outs,” it is assumed that the inclusion of Indigenous peoples in the very liberal democracy dependent upon their colonization not only is a progressive development but that this ongoing colonization must inevitably serve as the unacknowledged condition of possibility for the included status of nonhuman ontologies in the first place.⁶⁵ We could say, then, that because post-humanist materialism eschews a knowledge of political ontology in favor of emphasizing object ontologies, it ends up reproducing the very project of liberal humanism against which it is defined. As Byrd puts it, “One reason why a ‘post racial’ and just democratic society,” to which we can also add a posthuman society, “is a lost cause in the United States is that is always already conceived through the prior disavowed and misremembered colonization of Indigenous lands that cannot be ended by further inclusion or more participation.”⁶⁶ In order for post-humanist materialisms to traverse the human/nonhuman binary, it requires both the continued production of the settler (human)/Indian (savage or wilderness) binary and the colonial structures of dispossession this binary legitimates. By representing colonial conquest as a horizontal assemblage of violence and shared vulnerability, *Blood Meridian*’s post-humanist form doesn’t so much work to include and activate marginalized ontologies and their struggles in ways that produce cooperation and coalition-building as it further defers confronting what produces marginality, difference, alterity, and, antagonism in the first place.

The Post-Human Turn and Neoliberal Dispossession

I want to conclude by asking why it begins to matter in the 1970s and 80s and continues to matter even more in the current era of the post-human turn that we represent our positions in the world through a framework of nonhuman ontologies? Why does it matter that we think of ourselves as objects that relate horizontally rather than as subjects positioned hierarchically and antagonistically — some socially alive and others socially dead? The post-humanist materialism we see in *Blood Meridian*, the

work of Foucault, and new materialisms of today should be read as an ideological response to the perceived erosion of the liberal social contract in the era of late capitalism and deindustrialization when more and more groups of people experience structural exclusion from waged labor as well as fall victim to neoliberal forms of what David Harvey calls “accumulation by dispossession.”⁶⁷ The group who has historically enjoyed protections from such forms of exclusion and dispossession, but who today has come to experience late capitalism as a process that erodes the liberal social contract, is the working- and middle-class white settler. If the liberal social contract is the product of coloniality — the right to have rights of property and person is the inversion of the incapacity of colonial peoples to own or possess their lands or bodies — then what it has always meant to be protected by this contract and thus to be counted and included as Human is precisely not to be colonial, which is to say, the object, the outside, the wild, the savage and heathen, or the nonhuman. For post humanist materialism to suggest we are all nonhuman and for this perspective to rise to prominence in the last few years, allegorizes the anxiety of white settlers who in the wake of the processes of accumulation by dispossession and structural unemployment have come to feel as though they have lost what has historically been a white-settler immunity from forms of colonial and racialized structural domination, dispossession and exclusion. In other words, we might read post-humanist materialism as the story of a white settler group experience that expresses the worry that we are all colonial now — that we are all like Fanon when he said: “I came into this world anxious to uncover the meaning of things, my soul desirous to be at the origin of the world, and here I am an object among other objects.”⁶⁹ Post-humanist materialism’s call to overcome the dualism of the human/nonhuman is thus the inverted form of a white-settler anxiety that believes that no longer is white supremacy or the ontological differentiation between settlers and colonial peoples respected in late capitalism.

We see this anxiety represented in the brutal way the Judge rapes and kills the kid, who by the end of the novel is a middle-aged man. Nonetheless, if the kid was a scalp hunter by necessity as a dispossessed and displaced poor Tennessee white who travelled West to escape exploitation, in the end he becomes like the Indian he was contracted to murder. That is, just as the Judge had previously raped and killed both an Apache kid, “a strange dark child,” and Mexican kid, a “halfbreed boy maybe twelve years old,” the Judge does the same to the novel’s Anglo American kid.⁷⁰ The kid’s brutal death at the end of the novel caps the novel’s representation of colonialism as an assemblage of shared vulnerability and dispossession: the novel suggests the kid was never immune or protected from colonial violence that he helped to unleash in the first place. He becomes an object of colonial violence among other objects of colonial violence. In this way, the novel projects a white settler fear that the Enlightenment will in the end turn against the human, or, put inversely, that the human might become the Indian, that the white settler might be reduced to the position of structural exclusion and domination in late capitalism.

Still, the novel's point in representing the kid's death as the ultimate example of horizontal dispossession is to develop in readers a sensitivity to this shared nonhuman ontology in order to find ways to come together against the forces like those figured by the Judge that in the end it appears indiscriminately target us all. Yet to suggest that we are all now horizontally dispossessed or that we should no longer consider or critique the colonial division between the human and nonhuman results in erasing and thus legitimating ongoing settler forms of dispossession that dominate and exploit bodies differentially according to land and race. Post-humanist materialism, in other words, rests on the deferral of settler colonial antagonisms, even as the language of the object, the outside, and the nonhuman, which are historical products of coloniality, are invoked to give meaning to the post-humanist assemblage form that promises to lead to more sustainable forms of social belonging in late capitalism. In a recent study of the relationship between object oriented theory, queer theory, and settler colonialism, Jord/ana Rosenberg argues:

The ontological turn reiterates a version of [a] settler rationality, borrowing — or, rather, capsizing — a set of arguments from queer studies in order to grasp [nonhuman] biology as a kind of sheer queerness ... that enshrines a primitive/brink temporal logic while appearing non normative ... and resistant to the demands of capitalism's logics of time, discipline, and subject-formation. In this process, the molecular becomes the vehicle for the cleaving of ontology from politics—investing it with a dual temporalization that is simultaneously a dehistoricization.⁷⁰

As Rosenberg suggests, nonhuman ontologies serve as the space of fantasized refuge beyond the social and historical constraints of capitalism in the same way that the frontier wilderness had functioned as a perceived escape from the alienation of modernity. In late capitalism, where it is felt as though the liberal social contract is under attack, white settlers, who come to believe that they are now dispossessed rather than protected, treat the nonhuman, the outside, the wilderness as a productive space where they join colonial bodies in an imagined shared harm that if recognized as such might help create new sustainable and less violent forms of social belonging. Yet in these assemblages, what can't be included, recognized, or affirmed is the political ontology of indigeneity because to do so is to confront how the continued occupation of Indigenous lands and the ongoing production of the Indian as the outside to liberal modernity serve as the condition of possibility for the meanings of the assemblage form as a productive form of social belonging.

Post-humanist materialisms thus come to serve as a settler class fantasy resolving the contradiction of differential exploitation and domination the results from the ongoing role of settler colonialism and racial capitalism in contemporary late capitalism. It imagines racial capitalism and settler colonialism as completed stages

rather than constitutive and continuous processes of the capitalist mode of production. It's the fantasy of building successful coalitions of resistance after difference and alterity have been dissolved in the nonhuman ontologies, it is believed, we mutually share as subjects no longer zoned by colonial difference. In this way, the productive and affirmative politics of post-humanist materialism are a false resolution to the failure of the Left to form a successful alliance politics in late capitalism. Writing around the same time as the publication of *Blood Meridian* and Foucault's work on biopolitics, Frederic Jameson had argued for a critical materialism of social totality as the framework for helping construct a successful alliance politics. Jameson had suggested that “the privileged form in which the American Left can develop today must therefore necessarily be that of an alliance politics; and such a politics is the strict practical equivalent of the concept of totalization on the theoretical level. In practice, then, the attack on the concept of ‘totality’ in the American framework means the undermining and the repudiation of the only realistic perspective in which a genuine Left could come into being in this country.”⁷¹ Jameson's point is that a successful alliance politics would result from the knowledge or experience of the negativity that a materialist framework or aesthetic of social totality provides. This kind of materialist framework involves representing how groups are positioned negatively, differentially, and antagonistically in the structures of colonialism and capitalism in order to avoid what we have witnessed as the limit of a post-humanist materialism that works to achieve gains at one social pole even though it might result in or often remains premised on losses suffered at the other.

Nevertheless, we should not ignore the resemblance of the assemblage form to Marx's notion of “free association.” Perhaps the only difference between these similar utopian visions is of course the form of the critical method or aesthetic that represents free associations or creative assemblages as alternatives forms of social belonging. While the post-humanist materialisms found in McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, Foucault's local analysis, and the new materialisms of today see utopia in the sustainable, creative, and productive spaces of the nonhuman, a critical materialism of social totality that seeks to produce a knowledge of social antagonism sees utopia in the abolition of the colonial and capitalist structures that prevent living in creative assemblages or free associations in the first place. It would be, then, to this latter form of materialist critique that we should turn today if our goal is to achieve a genuine post-humanist world, since it is only after capitalism and colonialism are abolished that we can say we have never been modern.

Notes

1. Important introductions to and edited collections of new materialisms include: Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010); Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities, 2012); Richard Grusin, *The Nonhuman Turn* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2015). For notable works of new materialism see: Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010); Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014); Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke UP, 2007); Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2013); Steven Shaviro, *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2014); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005); Graham Harmon, *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2010); Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. (London: Continuum, 2008); Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: U of Chicago, 2003).
2. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010) 8.
3. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980) 83.
4. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 117.
5. Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian: or the Evening Redness in the West* (New York: Random House, 1985) 330.
6. See Vereen M. Bell, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1988); Harold Bloom, "Tragic Ecstasy: A Conversation about McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," *Sacred Violence*, ed. Wade Hall and Rich Wallach (El Paso: Texas Western Press) 205-221.
7. See Neil Campbell, "Liberty beyond Its Proper Bounds: Cormac McCarthy's History of the West in *Blood Meridian*," *Myth, Legend, Dust: Critical Responses to Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Rick Wallach (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000) 217-26; John Cant, *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Routledge, 2008).
8. Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 34.
9. *Blood Meridian* 4, 29.
10. *Blood Meridian* 30.
11. Sara Spurgeon, "The Sacred Hunter and the Eucharist of the Wilderness: Mythic Reconstructions in *Blood Meridian*," *Cormac McCarthy: New Directions*. Ed. James D. Lilley (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 2002) 75-102, 76.
12. *Blood Meridian* 141.
13. See Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988).
14. McCarthy based the character Judge Holden on an actual historical figure of the same name whose role as a co-leader of a group of filibustering scalp hunters in late 1840s is documented in the memoirs of Samuel Chamberlain. Chamberlain was a member of the group and describes "Judge Holden from Texas" as tall, strong, learned, skilled in fighting, and without facial hair, among other things. McCarthy consulted Chamberlain's memoir while researching for *Blood Meridian*. See Samuel Chamberlain, *My Confession* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1987 [1956]); See also John Emil Sepich, "'What kind of indians was

- them?': Some Historical Sources in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," *Perspectives On Cormac McCarthy*. eds. Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1999).
15. *Blood Meridian* 199-200.
 16. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002).
 17. *Blood Meridian* 199. For more on the history of taxidermy and its role in colonial history see Pauline Wakeham, *Taxidermic Signs: Reconstructing Aboriginality* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2008)
 18. *Blood Meridian* 199.
 19. *Blood Meridian* 335.
 20. David Holloway, "'a false book in no book at all': Ideology of Representation in *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy," *Myth, Legend, Dust: Critical Responses to Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Rick Wallach (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000) 195.
 21. Phillip A. Snyder, "Disappearance in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," *Western American Literature* 44.2 (2009) 127-39, 128.
 22. David Holloway, "Ideology of Representation" 197.
 23. *Power/Knowledge* 114-115.
 24. Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities, 2012) 127.
 25. *Blood Meridian* 247.
 26. Dana Phillips, "History and the Ugly Facts of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," *American Literature* 68.2 (1996) 433-460.
 27. Phillips 451, 446.
 28. Steven Shaviro, "'The Very Life of the Darkness': A Reading of *Blood Meridian*." *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, eds. Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1993) 153.
 29. *Blood Meridian* 116, 85.
 30. *Blood Meridian* 54.
 31. Dana Phillips, "History and the Ugly Facts" 450.
 32. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010) 6.
 33. Timothy Morton, "An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry." *New Literary History* 43.2 (2012) 206, 215.
 34. Billy Stratton, "'el brujo es un coyote': Taxonomies of Trauma in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," *Arizona Quarterly* 67.3 (2011) 167.
 35. Stephen Tatum, "Spectral Beauty and Forensic Aesthetics in the West." *Western American Literature* 41.2 (2006) 123-145.
 36. Stephen Tatum, "Spectral Beauty" 128.
 37. Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2011) xx.
 38. Theodor Adorno, "On Commitment," *Aesthetics and Politics* (New York: Verso, 2010) 189.
 39. See Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2014); Jodi Byrd, *The Transit of Empire*; Joanne Barker, *Native Acts: Law, Recognition, and Cultural Authenticity* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011); Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002).
 40. Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin White Masks* 6

41. *Blood Meridian* 79.
42. *Blood Meridian* 180.
43. *Blood Meridian* 185.
44. Dan Sinykin, "Evening in America: *Blood Meridian* and the Origins and Ends of Imperial Capitalism," *American Literary History* 28.2 (2016) 375.
45. Dan Sinykin, "Evening in America" 376.
46. *Blood Meridian* 307
47. *Blood Meridian* 276.
48. *Blood Meridian* 66.
49. *Blood Meridian* 137-138.
50. *Blood Meridian* 46.
51. *Blood Meridian* 111
52. *Blood Meridian* 82.
53. *Blood Meridian* 78.
54. Georg Guillemin, *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy* (College Station: Texas A & M UP, 2004) 101.
55. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* 98.
56. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978) 96; *Power/Knowledge* 97.
57. *Vibrant Matter* 13.
58. Karen Barad, "Interview," *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities, 2012) 69; Rosi Braidotti, "The Politics of 'Life Itself' and New Ways of Dying," *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010) 209-210.
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