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Cormac McCarthy and Performance: Page, Stage, Screen by
Stacey Peebles (review)

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BOOK REVIEWS

Cormac McCarthy and Performance: Page, Stage, Screen, by Stacey Peebles. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017. 256 pp. \$29.95 paper.

CORMAC MCCARTHY IS NOT THE RECLUSE HE IS ALLEGED TO BE. THESE days, his name is popping up in mass media all over the US. From national prize announcements and movies to book clubs, McCarthy is everywhere. Stacey Peebles claims that McCarthy was never as isolated as others have thought, noting that he has “routinely welcomed others into his creative projects and, just as routinely, has demonstrated a keen interest in writing directly for film and theater as well as a desire to see how filmmakers would bring his writing to the screen” (2). Throughout *Cormac McCarthy and Performance: Page, Stage, Screen*, Peebles approaches tensions of isolation by viewing McCarthy’s work through a lens of performance. In this way, she debunks myths of reclusion for McCarthy, his characters, and his texts as she illustrates a sense of connection and involvement in such popular novels as *The Road*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *All the Pretty Horses*.

Peebles’s two primary concerns are how performance in McCarthy’s work illustrates connection and involvement, and how performance centers on tragedy; through substantial research and expertise, she successfully triangulates the three. In Chapter 6, she shows the audience Lester Ballard’s simultaneous embodiment of connection and tragedy through a lens of performance. In James Franco’s film adaptation of *Child of God*, Lester looks bluntly into the camera during the opening scene, head tilted forward and slightly upward; straight out of the gate, the notorious serial killer directly engages with the audience (192). Further, Peebles discusses how Ballard, who seemingly has no chance of fruitful intimacy, is in *some* way capable of human connection as established by his marriage. But the inevitable exclusion by his community only exacerbates his unstable mental state, causing him to repeatedly act out against intimacy and connection (197).

McCarthy’s leading-role characters, Peebles argues, are typically battling shame and are ostracized from a specific community. While most of them *do* desire true human connection at their core, shame or exclusion pushes them into isolation. In *No Country for Old Men* and *The Counselor*, the main characters battle impulsivity (likely driven by shame), and are eventually forced to accept the consequences of their

choices (174). In dealing with McCarthy's screenplay *The Gardener's Son*, Peebles examines its violence in terms of its tragic and performative aspects: "That McCarthy is writing for performance makes the tragic implications of the narrative more obvious—*The Gardener's Son* invites considerations of violent cause and effect, though it doesn't offer any clear anagnorisis, or sudden awareness of the forces at play, for either the protagonist or the audience" (25). Peebles's approaches to these narratives help us understand better, and empathize and engage more with, each ostracized character.

In addition to character-and-audience relationships, Peebles addresses involvement and interaction regarding McCarthy himself. She examines McCarthy's sense of community through his close friendships with Richard Pearce, Roger Payne, and Albert Erskine (17), and she notes the interaction and sense of belonging evident in McCarthy's personal letters and interviews with his colleagues. As vice president of the Cormac McCarthy Society and primary editor of *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, Peebles has abundant knowledge to walk the reader chronologically through McCarthy's writing for performance. With a true passion for his prose, she uses many theoretical lenses—gender-related, historicist, and others—to show as well how performance works within his novels.

While Peebles uses many theoretical approaches by which to view performance, her book leaves a door open for ecocriticism. Not only is it imperative to view the landscape in McCarthy's work as influential, but it also has a role of performance in each text. Barren desert-scapes in *No Country for Old Men* are a consistent backdrop that contributes to character performance. Subterranean, chilling landscapes in *Child of God* underscore Lester's terrifying actions. Peebles *does* mention landscape as an influence for John Grady in *All the Pretty Horses* when she references the closing scene of Billy Bob Thornton's film adaptation and John Grady's line, "I don't know what happens to country." She writes, "It's a moving moment and an appropriate culmination of this story about a young man who has suffered great losses, including the region and landscape that used to define him" (93). The mention of land as an identity-influence leaves this reader desiring more ecocritical analysis to understand how landscape contributes to performance, tragedy, and community/isolation tensions.

Cormac McCarthy and Performance fills a large void in McCarthy scholarship. In a welcoming and engaging style, the book guides

the reader through his life and career. Broadening the discussion of McCarthy to include performance allows for deeper understanding of his treatments of isolation, engagement, and tragedy. *Cormac McCarthy and Performance* is suitable both for McCarthy scholars and for those new to his work.

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LeAnne Howe at the Intersections of Southern and Native American Literature, by Kirstin L. Squint. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2018. 192 pp. \$40.00 cloth.

KIRSTIN SQUINT HAS WRITTEN A REMARKABLE AND MUCH NEEDED monograph on the works of Choctaw writer LeAnne Howe. This is the first full-length manuscript devoted entirely to her work, situating it specifically in relationship to southern studies. Too often southern studies has concerned itself with the binary of whiteness against blackness, but more scholars are now addressing the pivotal role of Indigenous people in the South and their literary and cultural imaginings. Squint argues that readers and scholars of Howe's work should understand her oeuvre in relationship to the South for a number of reasons, including the history of Choctaw people in the region, removal to Indian Territory in present day Southern Oklahoma, and Native mobility, a point Squint develops in her theories of the interstate South. What also makes the book so noteworthy is the scope of Squint's engagement with Howe's literary output. Squint painstakingly addresses the full range of Howe's work, including unpublished performance pieces. In examining such a wide range of work, Squint confronts issues relating to gender theory and postcolonial studies, in addition to southern studies. In less capable hands, the book could read as a loose collection of ideas centered on Howe's works. Yet Squint continually foregrounds Howe's embodied connection to Choctaw lands, history, and customs, hence unifying the chapters.

Indigenous/tribal specificity frames Squint's introduction, beginning with an explanation of Howe's neologism "Choctalking." Choctalking stems from Howe's understanding of Choctaw humor, history, and cultural legacies, which she shares and translates for her audience (12-13). It represents the relationship between Choctaw history, present,