ABSTRACT

DAVID GATEWOOD. “the truth will be there yet”: History, Violence and Representation in Cormac McCarthy and Tim O’Brien (Under the direction of Professor Jon Thompson.)

“A violent and sudden revolution gave birth to the new United States” (x). So states, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg in her examination of the origins of the American national identity. The broad idea that Smith-Rosenberg forwards is one that becomes the foundation for the writings of Tim O’Brien and Cormac McCarthy, most notably in their respective works, In the Lake of the Woods and No Country for Old Men. Perhaps no two contemporary American writers embrace the subject of violence as frequently and profoundly as these two. With O’Brien’s interest founded in the trauma-inducing violence of the Vietnam War, and McCarthy’s interest motivated by a sense of America’s dark history as a country forged by violence, these authors posit in these two novels that violence is perhaps the most defining element of contemporary American culture. Moreover, each suggests that violence has a profound effect on individual identity by, in essence, negating it.

Despite Frederick Jameson’s claim that postmodernity is plagued by its “historical deafness” (ix), McCarthy and O’Brien clearly challenge that idea as both suggest that America and Americans struggle to understand the truth of America’s historical relationship with violence. What each author recognizes is that a failure to develop a meaningful, honest relationship with history has disastrous ramifications in the present. Both men recognize the mythology that has been constructed about America’s history, and each sees the degree to which narratives contribute to this self-deception. Through O’Brien’s examination of narrative and
McCarthy’s depiction of culturally pervasive violence, both authors ultimately come to the same conclusions both about America’s relationship with violence and history.