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From Frontier Violence
to Post-Apocalyptic Ash: Ecological Violence and
Environmental Ethics
in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* and *The Road*

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Abstract

This article proposes a comparative analysis of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West* (1985) and *The Road* (2006), two novels that trace the trajectory of American ecological violence from its nineteenth-century origins to its post-apocalyptic culmination. Drawing on ecocritical theory, environmental philosophy, and Anthropocene discourse, the article argues that McCarthy moves from an anthropocentric vision of human dominion over nature in *Blood Meridian*, to a biocentric perspective in *The Road*, where nature is depicted as a neutral, totally indifferent, post-human force after total ecospheric collapse. Through close readings of landscape, character, and imagery, the article shows how nineteenth-century "mindless" frontier violence against nature and humanity in *Blood Meridian* functions as a historical precondition for the ash-covered, post-apocalyptic wasteland of *The Road*. McCarthy's desert and post-apocalyptic settings in the two novels are active agents that expose the limits of human "suzerainty" in the world and the ethical consequences of ecological destruction. Ultimately, the article situates McCarthy's fiction within contemporary debates on the Anthropocene, presenting his work as a prophetic meditation on

coexistence/interconnectedness, extinction, survival, and death in a damaged world.

Keywords: Anthropocene, biocentrism, American literature, desert, (post-)apocalypse.

Cormac McCarthy's Literary Geographies: An Overview

Cormac McCarthy (1933-2023) is known as a novelist who best enjoyed the company of scientists and who developed his own scientific strategy he applied to most of his literary projects. In other words, he started his work on every piece he had ever written with a thorough research focused on the setting, the historical context, and the peculiarities of the real worlds he used as frameworks for his imaginary universes he meticulously laid before the eyes of his readers. The resulted worlds he describes in his twelve novels are fascinating interpretations of places that he visited, researched and/or (re)imagined, all dominated by his love for American landscapes, and not only: Appalachia, the American Southwest, the South, the East or northern Mexico.

His debut novel, as well as his next three pieces, are all part of his Appalachian cycle, being set in Tennessee. *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), *Outer Dark* (1968), *Child of God* (1973), and the autobiographical *Suttree* (1979) can be located in time and space in the mid-twentieth century rural and urban Tennessee. From the clearly-set boundaries of his Southern Gothic explorations of rural and urban decay, McCarthy, the former regional writer of the Appalachian South, moves further west, placing his anti-western, *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West* (1985), and his Border Trilogy, namely *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994), and *Cities of the Plain* (1998), in the troubled, vast area of the United States-Mexico Borderlands, including territories such as Northern Mexico, the American Southwest, West Texas, or New Mexico.

His later novels, the bloody, contemporary western *No Country for Old Men* (2005), and the (post-)apocalyptic *The Road* (2006) are set in West Texas, New Mexico, Mexico (the former), and in a post-apocalyptic, dystopian East and (an imagined) South (the latter). McCarthy's last two novels were both published in 2022, sixteen years after *The Road*, and are located in New Orleans, El Paso, Ibiza, the Spanish island where McCarthy lived in the mid-1960s (*The Passenger*), and Black River Falls, in Jackson County, Wisconsin (*Stella Maris*).

McCarthy's chronotopes are always the result of a thorough study of the geography and the history of the places he used as settings for his novels, and they perfectly match the philosophical and artistic weight of his narratives. If the mapping of his first set of novels, the Appalachian cycle, corresponds to his localized Southern Gothic style, which draws its creative energy from the rotten, decayed, claustrophobic East Tennessee, and from the primordial soup of the malodorous Tennessee River, that of the Western cycle implies an expansion towards the immense, arid desert of the United States-Mexico borderlands, doubled by an abrupt aesthetic change meant to ignite the emergence of what McCarthy imagined as his own great Western American epic. Thus, McCarthy's contained, moderate Southern Gothic style converts into a more abrupt, violent, direct depiction of the chaotic violence, of the cruel reality that shaped the American west in the nineteenth century and ensured the transition towards the capitalist society of the twentieth century.

McCarthy's depiction of the environment, from the rural and urban landscapes in his Appalachian cycle to the desert and the post-apocalyptic wasteland in his later novels, unveils his obsession with nature interpreted as more than a neutral setting for his narrative or an implacable witness of his characters' struggles. In his novels, the natural world is deeply affected by either the violence of human action or by society's ignorance of environmental issues, but it is also able to reset, to renew itself without or even in spite of any human intervention. In *Blood Meridian*, or *The Evening Redness in the West*, the Kid's evil,

unpredictable antagonist, Judge Holden, acts like a crazy scientist who collects specimens only to destroy them, or like an animal lover who buys dogs only to put them to violent death by throwing them into the river. In one of the novel's most shockingly cruel scenes, after he had bought two puppies from a boy, for apparently no reason, "[h]e crossed upon the stone bridge and he looked down into the swollen waters and raised the dogs and pitched them in" (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 192). The crazy "scientist," the American archon apparently possessed by Mnemosyne, collects specimens from the natural world, records valuable information about them in his ledger both to manifest his power, but also to destroy them later from his position as true "suzerain of the earth," a "keeper or overlord," one who can never be enslaved by "nature." He is thus portrayed as an anti-Adam, who takes the original Adam's act of naming the animals of the earth in the Bible, in Genesis 2:20 – "So Adam gave names to all cattle, to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field" (NKJV) – to the extreme, blending creation and destruction from the position he assumes as a "keeper" who either subdues nature entirely, or destroys it (or both):

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

He 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 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.

What's a suzerain?

A keeper. A keeper or overlord.

Why not say keeper then?

Because he is a special kind of keeper. A suzerain rules even where there are other rulers. His authority countermands local judgements. (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 198)

Freedom is an insult to McCarthy's nineteenth-century American archon, Judge Holden, who would collect and contain all nature, all plants, and all animals in his ledger or, as the case may be, in a zoo: "The freedom of birds is an insult to me. I'd have them all in zoos" (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 199).

The "suzerain of the earth," man, manages to somehow collect all the scientific information about the world he inhabits and, later on, in the twentieth century, Anthropocene imagined by McCarthy, "contains," namely destroys all the environment and reshapes it into what obviously looks like a post-apocalyptic wasteland in which he has one objective left to pursue: survival. The gray snow falling over the absolute post-apocalyptic desert in *The Road* signals a material, a chemical, but also a spiritual metamorphosis the world has undergone under the influence of man: there is no longer a difference between ash and snow in the natural world and no distinction between death and life in the people's minds.

The two, half-dead protagonists in *The Road* walk through the barren land in search of a more hospitable, warmer place, one that would make life and a future in the post-apocalyptic world they inhabit if not certain, at least possible: "It took two days to cross that ashen scabland. The road beyond ran along the crest of a ridge where the barren woodland fell away on every side. It's snowing, the boy said. He looked at the sky. A single gray flake sifting down. He caught it in his hand and watched it expire there like the last host of Christendom" (McCarthy, *The Road* 16). The snow is gray, the water is black, and most humans are cannibals in McCarthy's post-apocalyptic desert. His characters only wish to survive and they know that their survival depends on finding enough food in that "desolate country" and shoes: "Mostly he worried about their shoes. That and food. Always food" (McCarthy, *The Road* 17).

McCarthy's style, whether he describes worlds inhabited by pilgrims of the desert, or survivors walking on what is left of the earth after the apocalypse, is similar to that of a biblical text that makes not reference to the name or presence of the one whose name must not be uttered. His

formidable prose is indebted to the Old Testament. His landscapes are wide, blazing and biblical with conflagrations. His characters are not thick, psychologically resonant creations, but are subordinate to the breadth and muscle of the world that surrounds them. In the Old Testament, of course, the surrounding world belongs to God. But in McCarthy's novels, it is nature - nasty, brutish and short. "I always figured they was a God," mutters one of Suttree's Knoxville disreputables. "I just never did like him."

McCarthy's world is an existential one in which men face two choices - either to battle or to die. (Bradfield)

The worlds imagined by McCarthy in his *Blood Meridian*, or *The Evening Redness in the West* and *The Road* look like the past and future of the universe, if we were to use our time as a point of reference. This essay argues that McCarthy places the present, namely our current environmental moment, somewhere between these two novels' timelines, between an evasive "not yet" and "already," located within the boundaries of a tragic existential possibility.

The Desert and the (Post-)Apocalyptic Wasteland in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* and *The Road*

In general, McCarthy's work abounds in philosophical, religious and environmental meditations, which invite diverse interpretations from all these perspectives and as many attempts to show how his imaginary universe replicates the struggles of humanity to deal with its own history and ensure survival as its ultimate goal. If, at times, criticism finds it difficult to separate McCarthy's multifarious, almost scientific interest in the survival of our species from the product of his literary imagination, recent approaches have identified at least two interpretive paths that prove to be extremely productive and enlightening.

Starting from a thorough analysis of his characters' journey through history and the natural world, the reader visits and revisits

historical places, events, located on a timeline that builds a magical bridge connecting past, present and future, and learns from McCarthy how knowledge is dependent on an innate, thus mandatory, cognitive state that must be always kept alert to ensure the survival of “the good guys” (McCarthy, *The Road* 77), of humanity. “McCarthy’s intense curiosity is reflected in characters whose experiences are grounded in specific historical moments as wide-ranging as westward expansion in the nineteenth century, the social transformation of the postbellum south, and the psychological and environmental traumas of the nuclear age” (Frye 4).

According to Steven Frye, McCarthy is thus a “philosophical novelist” who uses as a foundation for his fictional protagonists historical figures who had a significant contribution to the events he revisits in his fiction. For example, the protagonist in *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West* (1985) is based on Samuel Emery Chamberlain, a mid-nineteenth century writer, painter and soldier who described his journeys through Mexico and the American Southwest in one of his memoirs, but he, and many of his other similar characters are used only as vehicles of McCarthy’s own religious beliefs and philosophical ideas. Thus, “[h]istory and historical change are at the center of his preoccupations, but his characters engage these moments only in the context of the deepest philosophical and religious questions. McCarthy explores a range of philosophical conceptions, and, as such, he is a ‘philosophical’ novelist in the most profound sense,” an author deeply interested “in Western and non-Western philosophical and theological traditions” (Frye 4, 5).

Before Frye, it was Robert Coles who, in his 1974 book review of McCarthy’s *Child of God*, prophetically labeled then the forty-year-old winner of literary awards a writer of “religious feeling,” thus inviting further exploration of his philosophical and religious imaginary universe: “He simply writes novels that tell us we cannot comprehend the riddles of human idiosyncrasy, the influence of the merely contingent or incidental upon our lives. He is a novelist of religious feeling who appears to subscribe to no

creed but who cannot stop wondering in the most passionate and honest way what gives life meaning" (Coles). McCarthy's reader is thus bound to be familiar with (at least) "the ancient Gnosticism of the first-century Mediterranean and Middle Eastern regions, Platonism and Neo-Platonism, Nietzschean materialism, and existential Christianity" (Frye 5), in order to be able to understand his characters, his plots, and his language.

In addition to McCarthy's philosophical ideas that pervade his writing and make it stand out as one of the most original and relevant artistic creations in contemporary American prose, in order to fully perceive the complex reverberations of his text, the reader must also be conversant with the author's understanding of the influence of the natural world, of the current environmental issues on contemporary society, and with his manner of transposing this influence into the lives of his characters and into the settings he creates for his novels. In *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West* and *The Road*, McCarthy shows how the violence against humans and the environment produces long-lasting, sometimes irreversible effects, which can be indeed explained and understood from a philosophical and religious perspective, but can be neither mitigated nor prevented. McCarthy's approach to nature is indeed rooted in nineteenth-century American fiction, drawing from Nathaniel Hawthorne's and Herman Melville's interpretations of nature as dangerous, as a powerful opponent, but it develops, in his later work, into a very modern, contemporary understanding of American landscapes, of the environment, in general, as a system that ultimately resists classification as good or evil, a system that exists in and for itself, that may destroy, reset itself, totally ignoring humans and their actions. Thus, McCarthy's shift from an anthropocentric to a biocentric view of the natural world (Estes 15) becomes discernible if we compare his depiction of the desert in *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West* to the post-apocalyptic wilderness he lays on his canvas in *The Road*.

In addition to the philosophical or religious exegesis of McCarthy's prose, the ecocritical perspective is also valuable for the interpreter particularly interested in his depictions of the desert

he uses as a setting for his most lavishly awarded novels and in his character construction strategies he uses to sketch some of the most surprisingly vivid characters in all contemporary American literature. Even though some critics perceive the world in McCarthy's works as a "more-than-human" entity roaming with "nonhuman" characters (Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian*, or the cannibals in *The Road*), in the tradition of Melville's *Moby Dick*, for example, whose nature is a super-human force, capable of inflicting vengeful, deadly punishment upon ignorant, unrepentant humanity, the setting he uses for his most violent pieces, *Blood Meridian*, or *The Evening Redness in the West* and *The Road*, and the strange, complex characters are apparently extra-human, as they seem to ignore humanity and humanity's struggle to survive the desert, the post-apocalyptic wasteland, and the disasters that spread from a small, local to a huge, planetary scale. Thus, according to Susan Kollin, McCarthy's "narratives of loss" investigate

complicated and often fraught interactions between humans and the more-than-human world. Encompassing tales about Southern abandonment and precarity, failures of the Western dream to provide new beginnings, philosophical meditations on the limits of knowledge about the self and the world, and apocalyptic revisions of agency in end times, McCarthy's fictions often chronicle the entanglements between human and nonhuman characters as they engage a complex and changing material world. (216)

These complex "interactions" between his human and "more-than-human" nature and characters tend to "reconfigure spatial categories, often unfolding across diverse geographical scales that are local, regional, national, transnational, and at times even planetary" (Kollin 216). Moreover, Kollin also argues that McCarthy's characters confront "unsettling conditions when their previous belief systems break down, their fantasies about place and identity fall apart, and their cultures or ways of living violently collapse" (216). We might add here that, McCarthy's cunningly orchestrated spiritual and material disasters happen almost

simultaneously, even though they do not seem to be interdependent. The *khôral* desert in *Blood Meridian*, or *The Evening Redness in the West* conspires with the gang of bloody murderers and participates in their struggle to exterminate humanity, as if this would be part of a greater plan to destroy the world in its entirety. That world is America and McCarthy's description of manslaughter "has a bleakness that matches this arid landscape; both aspects of the text express the mythoclastic notion of America as a 'waste land'" (Cant 158). Moreover, the total destruction of America and the world in *The Road* and their turning into the ultimate wasteland, surprisingly, does not imply the total and permanent annihilation of humanity *per se*, since "the good guys" somehow manage to keep "the fire" burning in the hostile world around and in the empty spirit of humans either left behind after the rapture, or surviving the nuclear blast.

After just experimenting with the *khôral* desert in *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy deconstructs it and returns the world to the very a priori state of (non-)existence. This space in *The Road*, this *khôra* is what Jacques Derrida interpreted as "the pre-philosophical, pre-originary non-locatable non-space that existed without existing before the cosmos" (Lucy 68); it is the desert of "*the revelations and the retreats, of the lives and deaths of God, of all the figures of kenosis or of transcendence, of religio or of historical 'religions'*" (Derrida 58–59). This desert is that in which God allows the members of the murderous gang (in *Blood Meridian*) to roam freely, and in which the people who were not taken to heaven after the apocalypse (in *The Road*) are destined to prove themselves worthy of a new beginning. According to John D. Caputo, *khôra*, this ultimate desert, is

the immense and indeterminate spatial receptacle (*dekhomenon, hypodokhe*) in which the sensible likenesses of the eternal paradigms are "engendered," in which they are "inscribed" by the Demiurge, thereby providing a "home" for all things. *Khôra* is neither an intelligible form nor one more sensible thing, but, rather, that *in which (in quo)* sensible things are inscribed, a *tabula rasa* on which the Demiurge writes. This receptacle is like

the forms inasmuch as it has a kind of eternity . . . a certain achronistic a-temporality. (84)

The characters in *Blood Meridian* seem to be able to find their way through the desert by using survival skills which are absolutely mandatory for any traveler who dared to ride westward in the nineteenth century. Even though they use the sun and the moon for guidance and they ride through the landscape populated with elements meant to support life, both men and nature seem to collude to commit the abominable murders that lie ahead:

They rode on and the sun in the east flushed pale streaks of light and then a deeper run of color like blood seeping up in sudden reaches flaring planewise and where the earth drained up into the sky at the edge of creation the top of the sun rose out of nothing like the head of a great red phallus until it cleared the unseen rim and sat squat and pulsing and malevolent behind them. The shadows of the smallest stones lay like pencil lines across the sand and the shapes of the men and their mounts advanced elongate before them like strands of the night from which they'd ridden, like tentacles to bind them to the darkness yet to come. (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 44-45)

The picturesque landscape operates like a permanent threat to the life of humanity, to the existence of the universe, even though the color palette and the light present at almost all times might invite the reader to a more optimistic perspective upon the fate of the characters. The dominant feeling is that the bleakness of the desert matches the darkness in the souls of the protagonists, and the light of the sun or of the moon that lies ahead is nothing but an omen of the slaughters to come. The desert is the perfect environment for such actions, and the redness of the sun symbolizes blood and chaos. The drops of blood on the sand of the desert produce as much change to the environment as the presence of humans changes the configuration of this world. Nothing ever changes in the action of man or in the design of the world.

They rode through the long twilight and the sun set and no moon rose and to the west the mountains shuddered again and again in clattering frames and burned to final darkness and the rain hissed in the blind night land. They went up through the foothills among pine trees and barren rock. . . . They crossed the blackened wood of a burn and they rode through a region of cloven rock where great boulders lay halved with smooth uncentered faces and on the slopes of those ferric grounds old paths of fire and the blackened bones of trees assassinated in the mountain storms. (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 187-88)

The gang, along with their malevolent leader, Judge Holden, suffering from a superiority complex, behave like a community of white, Western men, living in the early stages of the Capitalocene, or the Necrocene, to be more precise, aimed at surviving, at gaining material possessions, at the expense of all other inferior groups (women, children, Mexicans, Apaches etc.), even if that involves the total destruction of human civilization, of humanity and their natural habitat (see Moore 7, 8). Murder, genocide, theft and Holden's "scientific" endeavor symbolize the steps taken by humanity toward its extinction as a species, as a civilization, an extinction of culture, of languages, and, ultimately, of all nature. To McCarthy, man is no longer the master, the "suzerain of the earth," but a pilgrim at first, and then a penitent who faces spiritual and physical mutilation and then total annihilation:

The company of penitents lay hacked and butchered among the stones in every attitude. Many lay about the fallen cross and some were mutilated and some were without heads. Perhaps they'd gathered under the cross for shelter but the hole into which it had been set and the cairn of rocks about its base showed how it had been pushed over and how the hooded alter-christ had been cut down and disemboweled who now lay with the scraps of rope by which he had been bound still tied about his wrists and ankles. (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 315)

If in *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy's view may be defined as rather anthropocentric (man rules, preserves, or alters the world), in *The Road*, he looks at the universe from a biocentric perspective. Life, nature, and the environment simply exist irrespective of humanity's actions or wishes. Apparently, only two white, unnamed western male members of the extinct species are the only ones left to inhabit the earth after a natural cataclysm, a nuclear war, or a nuclear accident:

The Road tells the story of two human beings trying to adjust to an environment from which all the usual markers – geographical, temporal, and social – have been erased. Ironically, McCarthy paints a tragically parodic version of the post-Cold War world that seems at once remindful of some past and a weird hinting that we, like the world, must never stop moving, the difference being that we never know what direction this world is taking. To the “immappable world of our journey” mentioned at the end of *Cities of the Plain* the protagonists of *The Road* oppose their desperate peregrinations for which no “oil company roadmap” is of any help. The lesson, whether it applies to McCarthy's fiction, to the Cold War, or to any other war, is a lesson in blindness and progress. Advance one must, however painful the movement, for, as the father tells the son, “you don't know what might be down the road. (Lagayette 89)

Later in the story, McCarthy introduces other characters, mostly cannibals and their victims kept alive for them to feed on, and, in the last few pages of the novel, also a woman who saves the orphan boy after the death of his father. All characters seem to “advance” in this post-apocalyptic desert based on their intuition and experience since there is no useful map available anymore. The only visible living creatures on earth are humans, and the only humans who have access to fresh food are cannibals. McCarthy describes a world in which names are not important (the protagonists are unnamed), since they would make no difference: the world simply exists without and indifferent to human intervention. Humanity has nothing left to do in the world, for it

cannot improve it, or destroy it anymore. The two protagonists, the man and his son, feed on canned food they scavenge from the ruins of supermarkets, and they spend their days and nights either hiding from other humans or walking towards the South in search for a warmer climate. Nothing survived of the world, there is no sunlight, no color, no unbroken thing, save from the last can of Coca-Cola in the world, the last “all-American” material artifact of an extinct civilization: “He withdrew his hand slowly and sat looking at a Coca Cola” (McCarthy, *The Road* 23). The last spiritual remnant of the lost world is the boy and his father’s love for him; the boy survived the cataclysm, and the father interprets this as the last sign of redemption in the dark wasteland: “He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke” (McCarthy, *The Road* 5).

McCarthy transferred the redness of the sun and of fire in *Blood Meridian* to the bodies and souls of the two characters: they carry the fire inside, i.e. hope, faith and love for each other. The bleakness of nature in *Blood Meridian*, an omen of the times to come, is in *The Road* part of the present for the characters, or a possible future for humanity. The post-apocalyptic wasteland in *The Road* shows the neutrality of nature, which is neither good, nor bad in relation to the two characters, but, paradoxically, influences their lives and the life of all the other humans that have ever lived on earth. To use a phrase used by Timothy Morton four years after the publication of *The Road*, as a title for his book, McCarthy’s ecological thought is the binding agent which intertwines all humanity, all history, all culture, and connects the timelines he placed his narratives on, and he seems to have anticipated Morton’s definition of it. According to Morton,

Ecological thinking might be quite different from our assumptions about it. It isn’t just to do with the sciences of ecology. Ecological thinking is to do with art, philosophy, literature, music, and culture. Ecological thinking has as much to do with the humanities wing of modern universities as with the sciences, and it also has to do with factories, transportation, architecture and economics. Ecology include all the ways we

imagine how we live together. Ecology is profoundly about coexistence. Existence is always coexistence. . . . Human beings *are* each others' environment. Thinking ecologically isn't simply about nonhuman thing. Ecology has to do with you and me. (4)

McCarthy's characters describe this "coexistence" as the only thing worth living and dying for:

What would you do if I died?
If you died I would want to die too.
So you could be with me?
Yes. So I could be with you.
Okay. (*The Road* 11)

This coexistence, this interconnectedness, this primeval, and, for that matter, late or post-(modern and)apocalyptic heterogeneous amalgamation of different concepts, objects, beings etc. exposes the conclusion his ecological thinking reveals for McCarthy. Surprisingly enough, Morton maps this idea, exposing the role of ecological thought in understanding humanity, which looks very much like the oil company map in *The Road*, useful in a normal world, but useless in the post-world where roads are destroyed and borders are no more:

The ecological thought realizes that the boundaries between, and the identities of, beings are affected by this interconnection. This is the strange stranger. The ecological thought finds itself next to other beings, neither me nor not-me. These other beings exist, but they don't really exist. They are strange, all the way down. The more intimately we know them, the stranger they become. The ecological thought is intimacy with the strangeness of the stranger. (94).

McCarthy's post-apocalyptic world, his "mesh," to use Morton's word, blends all in an absolute, chaotic darkness, a permanent night, an "eternal blackness" (McCarthy, *The Road* 96) meant neither to help nature and people rest, nor to offer, but to level everything to

the ground and to penetrate all boundaries in order to bring this entire post-apocalyptic soup to the boiling point of the universe:

The blackness he woke to on those nights was sightless and impenetrable. A blackness to hurt your ears with listening. Often he had to get up. No sound but the wind in the bare and blackened trees. He rose and stood tottering in that cold autistic dark with his arms outheld for balance while the vestibular calculations in his skull cranked out their reckonings. . . .He took great marching steps into the nothingness, counting them against his return. Eyes closed, arms oaring. Upright or what? Something nameless in the night, lode or matrix. To which he and the stars were common satellite. Like the great pendulum in its rotunda scribing through the long day movements of the universe of which you may say it knows nothing and yet know it must. (*The Road* 15)

Position does not mean anything in the strange world, there is no need for maps, for any global positioning system, for satellites, the characters behaving like sleep walking ghosts, like walking dead roaming the world for food, water, and shelter. When awake, they take part in or cause disturbing events and start agonistic debates with a hidden God. For example, in the scene when a “roadrat,” a member of a cannibal gang, attacked the two, the father shot him and the man’s brains and blood spilled all over the child’s head. The father washes the boy’s hair in a ceremony resembling a combination of two old, hard to remember religious rituals, Baptism and the Eucharist: “This is my child, he said. I wash a dead man’s brains out of his hair. That is my job. Then he wrapped him in the blanket and carried him to the fire. . . . Golden chalice, good to house a good” (McCarthy, *The Road* 74, 75).

The two characters’ sole objective is to stay alive, and human life becomes so easy to define against the dark background of the dead natural landscape surrounding them: “He woke in the dark of the woods in the leaves shivering violently. He sat up and felt about for the boy. He held his hand to the thin ribs. Warmth and movement. Heartbeat” (McCarthy, *The Road* 116). If death is unavoidable in *The Road*, as Louise Squire observes in her article

“Death and the Anthropocene: Cormac McCarthy’s World of Unliving,” life happens only as a result of human action: “On reading *The Road*, one is quickly struck by its presencing of death’s *inevitability*, made imminent through some (we are left to assume, human) impact to the planet itself” (220). It is true that McCarthy’s characters see death as “inevitable,” but only in certain circumstances, for example when the world threatens to cease its existence, or when humanity turns against itself. In *The Road*, death is produced through suicide, murder, or starvation. The boy’s mother commits suicide when confronted with the prospect of living in the newly-forged world; the father teaches his son how to kill himself to prevent being raped and cannibalized, while also considering the possibility to kill him himself before the inevitable strikes: “Can you do it? When the time comes? Can you?” (McCarthy, *The Road* 29).

McCarthy’s biocentrism in *The Road* does not cancel the questions relevant to the Anthropocene, such as, for example: What is life?, What is survival?, or What is death? (Squire 224), but it adds more complex, more personal, more precise interrogations that address humanity’s ability to produce or prevent such events at a time when nature (or God) becomes indifferent: How do you stay alive?, How do you kill yourself?, and How do you kill your own child? Thus, in McCarthy’s world(s), death is inevitable, but ultimately unacceptable, irrespective how it might be perceived. It comes in various forms: the mother commits suicide, the father thinks of murder and suicide but dies of illness, and the boy learns how to kill himself, but eventually survives and keeps the promise to preserve his humanity:

We wouldnt eat anybody, would be?

No. Of course not.

Even if we were starving? . . .

No. We wouldnt.

No matter what. . . .

Because we’re the good guys.

Yes.

And we’re carrying the fire.

And we're carrying the fire. Yes.
Okay. (McCarthy, *The Road* 128–29)

Once the boy is found by an unnamed woman, McCarthy's world becomes less objective, returning to a subjectivity which enables those who inhabit it to talk to and about God. They thus turn from an unequivocal "There is no God and we are his prophets," in the words of Ely, "a starved and threadbare buddha, staring into the coals" (McCarthy, *The Road* 170, 168), to a hopeful "She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time" (McCarthy, *The Road* 288). However, McCarthy's God remains still unreachable or indifferent to the cries of the child of the apocalypse: "He tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didnt forget. The woman said that was all right" (McCarthy, *The Road* 288), just like the nature in *The Road*. The boy keeps a living memory of his father, and the dead nature preserves the memory of its previous life in the form of a blueprint that could be used for a fresh start:

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (McCarthy, *The Road* 286–87)

McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, or *The Evening Redness in the West* and *The Road* may be thus read as a devastating diptych of environmental prophecy, tracing American ecological violence from its identifiable historical origins to its possible (post-)apocalyptic culmination. In other words, McCarthy turns from an anthropocentric interpretation of nature in *Blood Meridian* towards a more biocentric perspective in *The Road*. If the anti-western

Blood Meridian depicts the systematic destruction of Native American natives, animals, and landscapes, thus exposing the ecocidal logic of Manifest Destiny through its portrayal of nineteenth-century borderland violence, *The Road* completes this trajectory, by expanding the disaster and by presenting a world where that extractive logic reached its inevitable conclusion in the form of a total ecospheric collapse.

In other words, Kid in *Blood Meridian* embodies all the historically documented violence of nineteenth-century America, and that violence is the seed for the natural or nuclear catastrophe in *The Road*: “He watches, pale and unwashed. He can neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence. All history present in that visage, the child the father of the man” (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 3). This “taste” for violence against nature and humanity stops time in *The Road* and finishes the destruction started in the nineteenth-century: “The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions. . . . A dull rose glow in the windowglass” (McCarthy, *The Road* 52). Thus, McCarthy’s perspective upon the environmental crisis produced and suffered by humanity is uncompromising: human dominion over nature, embodied in Judge Holden’s philosophy of conquest, leads inexorably to the ash-covered wasteland, where a dying father and his innocent, young boy, born after the catastrophe, struggle to survive in a neutral, indifferent, but altogether dangerous world, stripped of all forms of non-human life.

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