

The Functionality of Food
in Cormac McCarthy's Desert Imaginary, or Abundance
and Scarcity in *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness
in the West* (1985) and *The Road* (2006)

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Abstract

This article analyzes the concept of food in Cormac McCarthy's dystopian, (post-)apocalyptic fiction, aiming to prove that in the American writer's universe the act of eating is deprived of its social and spiritual dimension, being restricted to its basic functionality similar to that of a meal-replacement product. The analysis draws a parallel between the concept of *manna* in the Exodus and the types of foodstuffs and their functionality in the novels *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West* and *The Road*, showing that food is one of the constituent ingredients of McCarthy's desert imaginary and is interpreted as a crucial weapon in the fight against death and dehumanization.

Keywords: manna, soylent, food, desert, Cormac McCarty, post-apocalyptic fiction.

The "Functional" Food of the Desert and of the Megalopolis:
From *Manna* to *Soylent*

In an attempt to answer its fundamental question, which, according to Warren Belasco is similar to that of its good twin, namely

utopian fiction, “Can we invent a better, indeed a perfect, world?” (119), apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic dystopian fiction distills two types of ingredients with almost similar effects: the desert the characters are wandering through and the food they are eating to stay alive (sometimes taken with a pinch of cannibalism). The “chemical” composition of these two ingredients is, almost invariably, the same, deriving from what the two concepts signify. Moreover, all life forms which are not yet extinct are polarized into two categories: life threatening or life supporting agents. Foodstuffs are also part of a binomial expression: nourishing and toxic. In other words, the social and spiritual function of space and food is almost completely lost as an effect of this polarization, indeed with few but notable exceptions.

Thus, in dystopian fictional worlds, living or eating together loses the social function, becoming less of a means of social interaction and more of a means of *in-situ* conservation, within a self-sufficient eco-system. In such an eco-system, food would be ideally reduced to a meal replacement product, while real social interaction would be reduced to a minimum. The idea of meal replacement has been exploited by various fiction writers over time, but, according to some commentators, it is rooted in politics:

This tiny, white vision of the future had its roots in late 19th Century feminism. In the lead up to the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago, the American Press Association asked writers from a number of fields to promote the event by writing essays on what they thought the world of 1993 might look like. Their work was published in small town newspapers across the country. American suffragette Mary Elizabeth Lease predicted that by 1993, humans would only eat synthetic food, liberating women from the drudgery of the kitchen. (Novak)

Even though Novak’s conclusion is debatable, the meal-replacement concept being much older than the 19th century, the idea that procuring, cooking, and eating meals is time consuming and has a strong impact upon people’s freedom is completely

reasonable. By contrast, eating meal-replacement products is a liberating and life-changing experience, in both fiction and real life. Whether made by human hands or a gift from heaven, meal pills may be regarded as the all-in-one solution to world's food-shortage challenge or a means for liberating people from the burden of buying or making food.

The soylent in Harry Harrison's 1966 science fiction novel *Make Room! Make Room!* is a meal replacement product based on two ingredients, soy and lentils, and is used to make steaks and burgers. The idea, as well as the portmanteau word itself, was used by American director Richard Fleischer in his 1973 *Soylent Green* film starring Charlton Heston; in the movie, the product Soylent Green, because of the shortage of ocean plankton, is made of human flesh. The "real" Soylent, produced by Soylent Nutrition Inc., was invented by Rob Rhinehart in 2013, and it was named "in homage to the novel," according to the company's website; apparently, its main purpose is to "change the way the world looks at food and the role food plays in our lives" ("The Story of Soylent").

This change, however, seems to be not exactly for the better, since the inventors of the real soylent materialized the product of Harrison's fictional world in a world that is slowly turning into a dystopian universe. This 2021 dystopian universe mirrors the crowded 1999 New York in Harrison's novel or the terrifying 2022 metropolis in Fleisher's movie, recreating the spaces, the people and the food imagined by the two artists, with very interesting and equally disturbing variations:

Soylent stands as an anti-food, without socialized eating or preparation, enjoyment, or history, but rather a nutrient delivery system to optimize nutrition and work. Taste, for the consumers of Soylent, is of little consequence. Most report the texture to be unpleasant and the flavors unremarkable. Marketing campaigns for Soylent focus on its functionality and convenience. As a "functional food," Soylent seems to fall outside of social relations of food procurement, preparation, and consumption and yet it is

tied to socioeconomic class and identity through its relationship with work and life. It supports a work regime in which workers can remain at their desks through lunch break and minimize unpaid labor (e.g., food preparation and procurement). This work regime supports worker identity formation as workers demonstrate their value in terms of efficiency, focus, and dedication by foregoing lunch breaks in favor of quick, tasteless meals at their workstation. (Ofstehage 251)

In *Make Room! Make Room!*, the “functional” foodstuff is hard to digest and its ingestion has the usual reactions rotten food causes in the real world: “The soylent steaks were sitting like lead in his stomach and twice he had to go back to the dark and miserable toilet in the rear of the building” (Harrison 32). The sensation does not last for long, though, and character Billy Chung soon feels hunger eating him inside out again, longing for the next bite of soylent steak or burger. Soylent thus remains a functional (anti-) food, being part of a process that produces a necessary result.

Paradoxically, in the history of humanity, and, as shown above, in secular literature, the dystopian functional foodstuff, soylent, operates on the same level the utopian “functional” foodstuff usually referred to as manna operates in the Judaeo-Christian tradition and its sacred texts. The concept appears in chapter 16 (“Bread from Heaven”) of the second book of the Old Testament, the Book of Exodus, the book which narrates the founding myth of the Israelites: “So it was that quail came up at evening and covered the camp, and in the morning the dew lay all around the camp. And when the layer of dew lifted, there, on the surface of the wilderness, was a small round substance, as fine as frost on the ground” (NKJV Exod. 16.13-14).

Even though Moses answers their question, “What is it?,” explains its origin, and how it should be harvested, the Israelites treat it more as a “functional” food that they must harvest and store, rather than a recurring gift from heaven: “So when the children of Israel saw it, they said to one another, ‘What is it?’ For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, ‘This is the bread

which the Lord has given you to eat.’ This is the thing which the Lord has commanded: ‘Let every man gather it according to each one’s need...’ (Exod. 16.15-16).

The direct contact with this substance is not enough to satisfy the curiosity of the people and “the name of the substance itself took the form of the interrogative”: man-hu, “What is it?” and the etymology of the word remains a complex issue. According to R. A. Donkin, the word might be derived from Arabic (from *mann*, “gift”), it might be “a Sinaitic dialect word and adopted by the Hebrews for manna,” or it might have been taken from Sumero-Akkadian mythology (*ma-nu*, a sacred tree, related to the tamarisk and date palm) (4–5).

However, in spite of the etymological controversy, *manna* remains a gift from heaven; it was sweet (“it was like white coriander seed, and the taste of it was like wafers *made* with honey”), and its main function is to feed the Israelites and keep them alive during their journey through the Biblical desert: “the children of Israel ate manna forty years, until they came to an inhabited land; they ate manna until they came to the border of the land of Canaan” (Exod. 16.31, 35).

The Biblical and the wasteland imagined by writers of (post-)apocalyptic dystopian fiction share elements which contribute to a general perception of the desert as the place where humanity recuperates its vertical connection with the transcendence through the total immersion in the antagonistic mundane: the wind, the sand, the heat of the sun, the cold, the scarcity of food, the hostility of the environment and of the other life forms. David Jasper’s statement that the wind is the dominant presence in all the writings in which the desert is used as a setting could be expanded to include all these elements of the desert imaginary: “[the wind] lies at the heart of necessary fictions, from the accounts of the Exodus, to the gospels, to the fantastic lives of the Desert Fathers of Egypt, to the modern fiction of Rider Haggard, Michael Ondaatje, Jim Crace, and Cormac McCarthy” (172).

Meat as Manna in *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West*

Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West* and *The Road* are two "necessary fictions" set in the apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic desert, the hostile environment in which everything is reduced to the constant struggle with death, with dissolution, with dehumanization. *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West*, as the title suggests, is one of the most violent westerns in American literature. The world of *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West* is dominated by terror, by aggression, and it is populated with characters who worship the god of war. Their main objective is to stay alive by suppressing life, by reducing everything to the desert they inhabit. McCarthy imagines an apocalyptic world in which life is possible only in the vicinity of death. In other words, death makes life possible.

Not at all surprising within such a context is McCarthy's taste for food imagery that melts into his prose and permeates all his main areas of interest: the human mind, the setting, life as an act of war, and religion. Thus, food is added as an ingredient to two types of scenes in McCarthy's *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West*, the scenes in which the characters are at peace, taking a break from their tumultuous wanderings through the apocalyptic desert, or when an act of war has been consumed and the leftovers testify to the atrocities committed by humans in their struggle for survival.

In McCarthy's novels, the setting is crucial. He builds it with great care and never misses anything, as if he were setting the table. The *mise en place* is quite simple, but the effect is always planetary. The Kid, the protagonist of McCarthy's novel, is born a century before the author himself, on November 13, 1833, namely on a day with cosmic significance, the day of the great Leonids Meteor Storm, when the stars fell from the sky and people believed that the Judgment Day had just begun: "Night of your birth. Thirty-

three. The Leonids they were called. God how the stars did fall. I looked for blackness, holes in the heavens. The Dipper stove" (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 3).

The nameless kid was born the night when fire fell from heaven like God's angels, and his destiny was similar to that of fire. He died young, after burning intensely and after consuming all his energy in the darkest and most remote places on earth. He runs away after turning fourteen, leaving behind the "freezing kitchenhouse. ... The firewood, the washpots" (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 3-4). He went westwards to meet his destiny. His destiny was to die in the jakes behind a saloon, killed by Judge Holden, when "[s]tars were falling across the sky myriad and random, speeding along brief vectors from their origins in night to their destinies in dust and nothingness" (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 333). The kid's life started around the kitchen, ended in the jakes and burnt to ashes like the stars falling from the skies.

The novel has been interpreted from various perspectives, but most of them have failed to address the Christian symbolism which permeates the text from the first page to the last. Christianity lives under the sign of the *agape*, and McCarthy's readers wander the apocalyptic desert mouths agape at all the "mindless violence" (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 3) and blood shed by his characters. Blood is one of the most powerful Christian symbols; paradoxically, it symbolizes both death and rebirth as the main substance of the Eucharist: it is "the tempering agent in the mortar which bonds?" (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 329).

McCarthy's characters know that life is "a ceremony of a certain magnitude perhaps more commonly called a ritual. A ritual includes the letting of blood. Rituals which fail in this requirement are but mock rituals" (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 329). In other words, blood maintains life and holds all the pieces of this apocalyptic world together. It also mixes with other liquids, which are, as well, substances people ingest in order to enjoy life or in an attempt to forget about their own death.

The first reference to such a cocktail is made during a fight involving the ritual of “letting of blood” and two bottles of liquor:

The kid crouched lightly with the bottles and fainted and then broke the right one over the man’s head. Blood and liquor sprayed and the man’s knees buckled and his eyes rolled. The kid had already let go the bottleneck and he pitched the second bottle into his right hand in a roadagent’s pass before it even reached the floor and he backhanded the second bottle across the barman’s skull and crammed the jagged remnant into his eye as he went down. (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 25)

In this scene, blood does not mix with crumbs of bread to turn into Christ’s body and blood, but it mixes with crumbs of human brain and alcohol, thus consecrating the ritual of murder, a ritual which involves the “letting of blood” and is crucial to the members of the war-worshipping cult: “If Christ’s blood offers salvation in a wine chalice, Dionysus – the mysterious god of the vine and of drunkenness – brings both solace and frenzy, joy and rage, when he unleashes the power in the cup” (Gilbert 258).

Drinking gives characters the power to survive in the scorched desert (water) or the power to accept the natural domination of death (alcohol); it also establishes one of the concordances, “Fools and Crazies,” discovered by John Sepich on the first page of the novel: the kid’s father “lies in drink” and his son, the kid, has “a taste for mindless violence” (159). The “history” of the novel and of the world is controlled by the crazies: “All history present in that visage, the child the father of the man” (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 3).

This “history” is a Biblical one, and the whole universe conspires to bring it to an end. The kid’s journey starts under the sign of prophecy: “Now come days of begging, days of theft. Days of riding where there rode no soul save he” (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 15). The desert he is about to cross is full of demons as all deserts are, but it is also monotheistic, as Ernest Rénan argues (qtd. in Jasper 173). There is no abundance in the desert, but scarcity is

defined as the absence of the unnecessary. The fathers of the desert survived on little food and water, but McCarthy's hermit has a "ponderable body" and is ready to share his "abundance" of resources with anyone who begs for help: "Thought you might spare a man a sup of water. He pointed down to where a bucket stood in the dirt. The kid bent and took up the gourd floating there and dipped and drank. The water was salty, sulphurous. He drank on" (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 16).

Water tastes and smells like the atmosphere in Hell, but it has a "functional" role, just like the manna in the Old Testament and it keeps people alive. The hermit, a strange, "half-mad" Elijah, shares his meal with the kid, but his food is covered with mold and not enough to feed more than one person: "He came up with an old dark brass kettle, lifted the cover and poked inside with one finger. The remains of one of the lank prairie hares interred in cold grease and furred with a light blue mold. He clamped the lid back on the kettle and set it in the flames. Aint much but we'll go shares, he said" (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 18).

Food is insufficient in the desert, but, when it is available, the characters feast on it just like the Israelites in the desert. McCarthy's (anti-)western tells the story of America as the mirage of a modern Canaan:

In the early dark the wagon came back with the meat. The skimmers had piled the wagonbed with mesquite brush and stumps they'd drug out of the ground with the horses and they unloaded the firewood and commenced cutting up the gutted antelopes in the floor of the wagon with bowieknives and hand-axes, laughing and hacking in a welter of gore, a reeking scene in the light of the handheld lanterns. By full dark the blackened ribs racks leaned steaming at the fires and there was a jousting over the coals with shaven sticks whereon were skewered gobs of meat and a clank of canteens and endless raillery. (*Blood Meridian* 43–44)

Meat is manna, and the food of warriors, but there are other foodstuffs available, such as flapjacks with molasses, beans,

peppers, etc., eaten and shared by herders, or charred tortillas, tamales, cold pinole, “prime bullmeat ... From the corrida” the kid finds in Chihuahua (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 73).

The Native Americans (the Diegueños) save the wanderers and give them their food and they like it, but this abundance of nourishing meals does not change the characters’ attitude towards the “functionality” of food:

They fetched them a stew of lizards and pocketmice hot in clay bowls and a sort of pinole made from dried and pounded grasshoppers and they crouched about and watched them with great solemnity as they ate. [...] He’d been eating with his fingers and he licked them and wiped them on the filthy leg of his trousers. [...] A woman brought more of the pinole but they had been without food too long to have appetites and they waved her away. (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 301, 302)

The abundance does not last, the Canaan is always left behind, and the desert with its scarcity replaces it: “He walked all day through those wild uplands, eating handfuls of snow from the evergreen boughs as he went. [...] He’d been without food for almost two days and he’d had little rest” (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 212, 214). In the desert, the kid feasts on snow, a symbolic manna, for survival.

McCarthy describes a racist, violent, filthy America dominated by savages and “mindless violence.” It is an America fed by the Indians, by the Mexicans, an America which turned the Biblical manna fallen from the sky into a constant, though not abounding, supply of meat. Bloodshed is naturally part of the process, part of the “ritual” of survival. In *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West*, “functional” eating and drinking, are thus naturally integrated in almost every crucial aspect of the characters’ journey through the apocalyptic desert, McCarthy building a terrifying portrait of America seen from the South: “They is four things that can destroy the earth, he said. Women, whiskey, money, and niggers” (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 18).

The Road, or between Abundance and Scarcity in the Post-apocalyptic Desert

If in *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West*, the setting shifts back and forth, from the desert to the Promised Land, *The Road* (2006) is set after the rapture, in a hopeless post-apocalyptic wasteland, in which the shift is made between “functional” manna (scavenged food) and “functional” meat (the only available meat is human flesh). In *The Road*, McCarthy takes his vision of the earth as *terra deserta et inhabitata* to a new level: there are no life forms on earth other than two types of humans: “the good guys” who are carrying the fire and the “bad guys” they must hide from (79, 129). The “good guys” are those who struggle to survive clinging to the old ways of life (they live as families, they travel south, always looking for shelter, clean water and scavenging for food), while the “bad guys” are cannibals who feed on the flesh they cut off from the bodies of their slaves who are kept alive for food.

The two main characters are an unnamed father and his son who follow the road in an attempt to stay alive and find salvation. The birth of the unnamed boy, just like that of the unnamed kid in *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West*, was announced by a great fire coming from the sky, but the cataclysm is not named either. It was caused either by a nuclear bomb or the Biblical Judgment Day followed by the Rapture, and which left the characters wandering in the ultimate representation of the “terrestrial hell” announced by McCarthy in his 1979-novel, *Suttree* (14).

This “terrestrial hell” seems devoid of any hope for spiritual salvation, and the only legitimate purpose of all those who inhabit it is to stay alive. The two “good guys” are always hungry and scavenging for food, just like all the other characters, but the food they find is not merely “functional”: it also has both a “social” and a sacrificial role. The father and his son eat everything they find together, and the father gives up most of his food in his struggle to provide his ten-year-old son with the nourishment he

needs. Their intense love eventually multiplies, and, after his father's death, the son joins a family they meet and keeps "carrying the fire," the hope for a better future.

In *The Road*, the two types of "functional" food, the manna the characters find at the right time on their way through the barren post-apocalyptic desert and the fresh "Green Soylen" the cannibals cut off the living bodies of their slaves, symbolize both the end of consumerism, of capitalism, of the world as we know it, and also serve as a social label which distinguishes between the members of the powerful, the dominating class (the cannibals, the slave masters) and the weak, always-on-the-run "good guys," promoters of humanity and supporters of a society based on mutual respect and love.

McCarthy's approach is similar to that of the biblical author: the presence of food is life, the absence of it is death, and the two characters do not take more than they need because that would affect their mobility. However, the white manna in the Exodus is rotten, *The Road* being replaced by the grey ash which covers everything, and functionally by the food the characters scavenge from piles of debris or find accidentally. Those who refuse this manna are dehumanized and take the violence in the apocalyptic desert depicted in *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West* to a new level, cannibalizing their kin. If in *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West* cannibalism is only hinted at: "In the morning the rain had stopped and they appeared in the streets, tattered, stinking, ornamented with human parts like cannibals. They carried the huge pistols stuck in their belts and the vile skins they wore were deeply stained with blood and smoke and gunblack" (143), in *The Road*, it takes horrific forms: "Huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands. On the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt. The smell was hideous" (110).

The sighting of the human flesh farm in the cellar scene exacerbates the father's fear that his son might become a cannibal

or be cannibalized, and he urges his son to commit suicide before that happens: "If they find you you are going to have to do it. Do you understand? Shh. No crying. Do you hear me? You know how to do it. You put it in your mouth and point it up. Do it quick and hard. Do you understand? Stop crying. Do you understand?" (McCarthy, *The Road* 113).

This is probably one of the most disturbing scenes in *The Road*, a scene in which the "functionality" of food is no longer important because this "food" dehumanizes, destroys the "good guys" by turning them into "bad guys." The basic necessities of life (food, water, fire, shelter) are to be satisfied only under acceptable circumstances. The lesson that this father teaches his son is itself acceptable only in part, and the innocent kid does not seem to be able to commit suicide.

The father, a latter-day Abraham, is determined to fight cannibalism at all costs and makes plans to kill his son, a latter-day Isaac as innocent as his Biblical counterpart is, but filicide followed by suicide to avoid murder and cannibalism are prevented by the revelation that they might stand a chance as long as they can still hear each other's heartbeat:

Can you do it? When the time comes? When the time comes there will be no time. Now is the time. Curse God and die. What if it doesnt fire? It has to fire. What if it doesnt fire? Could you crush that beloved skull with a rock? Is there such a being within you of which you know nothing? Can there be? Hold him in your arms. Just so. The soul is quick. Pull him toward you. Kiss him. Quickly.

[...] He began to believe they had a chance. We just have to wait, he whispered. (McCarthy, *The Road* 114)

The "good guys" in McCarthy's *The Road* reject the natural "Green Soylen" (human flesh), harvest (scavenge for) manna (canned food, Coke, seeds, dried fruit, corned beef, etc.) and admit that food is everything: "I found everything. Everything" (McCarthy, *The Road* 139). The bunker and the supermarket scenes describe in great detail McCarthy's perspective upon the future of food in the

post-apocalyptic world he imagines in his novel. The dominating symbols in these scenes are the canned food stacked in the bunker and the last can of Coca-Cola in the world found in a gutted vending machine.

The canned food in the bunker symbolizes the manna the Israelites stacked up even though Moses had instructed them not to since the Lord would supply them daily with all the food they needed: "And Moses said, 'Let no one leave any of it till morning.' Notwithstanding they did not heed Moses. But some of them left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and stank" (Exod. 16.19-20), or the manna the Lord commanded they should keep as proof of the Lord's mercy for generations: "Then Moses said, 'This is the thing which the Lord has commanded: 'Fill an omer with it, to be kept for your generations, that they may see the bread with which I fed you in the wilderness, when I brought you out of the land of Egypt'" (Exod. 16.32). Either way, the food supply is not to be consumed in its entirety and some of it must be preserved for future generations as proof of man's encounter with God.

After they feast on the food they found in the bunker, the boy says grace and expresses his hope that their benefactors are now in heaven with God: "Dear people, thank you for all this food and stuff. We know that you saved it for yourself and if you were here we wouldnt eat it no matter how hungry we were and we're sorry that you didnt get to eat it and we hope that you're safe in heaven with God" (McCarthy, *The Road* 146). Solidarity among people expands beyond the limits of the relationship between the father and the son, and McCarthy introduces in the narrative another level of hope which is no longer restricted to the immediate mundane, to a permanent present, but to both the past and the future. Thus, time recovers its linearity and makes hope physically possible.

If the discovery of the bunker full of supermarket products might be interpreted as fortunate, the Coke the father finds in a destroyed vending machine is, according to Andrew Warnes, providential:

The drink he offers his son here, after all, could have been a Mountain Dew or Doctor Pepper, and it could have been a Seven Up or Fanta. That it is instead a Coca Cola, and a commodity whose global mythologies all but exceed its contents, guarantees that its appearance in the ruins of the supermarket seems not just fortunate but providential, and altogether too pregnant with meaning to belong to the unplanned happenings on which novelistic reality normally depends. (71–72)

Even if it is one of the “unplanned happenings on which novelistic reality normally depends,” it is still providential, in the way in which any knowledgeable expert in global business would admit that after a crisis of this magnitude only the most valuable and best-known American brand symbols would survive. The brand symbols of MacDonald’s, not Burger King, of Starbuck’s, not Dunkin’ Donuts are the ones people would remember and probably not due to the quality of their products, but to what they represent, namely “the global expansion of US consumer culture” (Warnes 72) and economic dominance.

It is not the quality of the fizzy drink in the “cold metal cylinder” produced by Coca-Cola before the Armageddon which impresses the characters, but its existence, its endurance in spite of its nutritional value and its impact on people’s health. The can in *The Road* is the last one in the world, and, once the drink has been consumed, the empty aluminum can returns to the state of the unusable container, unless someone finds an alternative way to use it. The shopping cart the characters use as transport for the stuff they find under piles of rubble was also repurposed, replacing the family car and thus performing a task that is far more complex than the original one. Moreover, its size and the adverts stuck to its sides can no longer control the characters and turn them into zombies ready to go on a shopping spree whenever they hear the word “sale,” “[b]ut it can be acted upon, and it can become an aid to his and his son’s survival, and a surrogate car for their all too hopeful journey South. Its new identity seems both potent and permanent. Indeed, when he stumbles upon the ruins of an old supermarket,

The Road's father is at pains to keep the redefined cart away from it" (Warnes 71).

The can of Coke is thus thrown on top of just another pile of garbage, once emptied of its contents. Even though the father calls it "a treat" – maybe unnecessary in a normal world, but also a source of much needed extra calories for McCarthy's character –, the son concludes "It's really good" and understands there are no other cans left (McCarthy, *The Road* 23). In the bunker scene, they both sit by the fire and drink "Coca Cola out of plastic mugs" (McCarthy, *The Road* 148), reusable containers with no particular significance, other than their obvious functionality. By contrast, the red can of Coke, beyond its significance reminiscent of the old days, also symbolizes the unexpected divine intervention in the mundane, remaining the last stain of color in the grey post-apocalyptic wasteland, just like the red label on the bottle of Coke in the *Wheel of Fortune* installation (Peabody).

Conclusion

Even though both utopias and dystopias ask the same fundamental question, they fail to reach the same conclusion, dystopias excluding the possibility of reconciling "mechanical and social engineering, for the law of unintended consequences dictates that gee-whiz technologies do not always produce happy social results" (Belasco 119). In dystopian fictional worlds, food is deprived of its social significance and acquires a certain "functionality," similar to both acceptable and unacceptable, natural/synthetic and human-flesh foodstuffs.

Contrary to general belief, the origins of the basic meal-replacement concept can be traced back to the manna in chapter 16 of the Exodus, a text which describes it as "a small round substance, as fine as frost on the ground" (Exod. 16.14), more similar to a round pill than to the promised bread from Heaven. The idea has developed over time, both in fiction and in the real world, and produced similar concepts of "functional" food.

McCarthy's taste for food imagery is comparable to his taste for violence. In *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West*, food is usually associated with the manna of the West, meat, and it is sometimes supplied, symbolically, by the "divine" intervention of American Indians or Mexicans, who save a racist, filthy and violent America from starvation. On the other hand, in *The Road*, there are two types of "functional" food available in the post-apocalyptic American wasteland: manna, namely the food scavenged from the ruins of the old world, and human flesh produced according to the basic rules of a post-apocalyptic consumer economy: farming and hunting. However, in both cases, food neither abounds, nor is it totally absent, thus maintaining its basic function, empowering the characters to exercise their free will and choose between what is acceptable or unacceptable to be used as food: the manna the characters find at the right time or the "Green Soylent" harvested by the dominant, cannibalistic society.

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