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The Imagined Southern Setting
of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

The Road by Cormac McCarthy hardly seems like a work of southern literature at a first glance. The novel is post-apocalyptic. A man and his son, neither of whom are ever named, trek south as they struggle to survive in a world darkened by ash-filled skies. The setting surrounding them is not recognizable as the southern US anymore. The cities are burnt and everything is covered with ash. If we rely on the geography portrayed by a work of literature to identify that literature as southern or not, then *The Road* cannot be classified as southern based solely on the tangible places described within the novel, places that are no different from anywhere else in a world where everything has been destroyed, as “‘sense of place’ often seems to imply being located not merely in a distinctive region, but in a distinctive way; the term connotes something that is not just geographically different (a southern variation of a thing that exists elsewhere), but qualitatively different (a thing distinctive to the South)” (Romine 5). The South as we know it does not exist in the world of *The Road* and there is nothing distinctive about the region anymore. But the South is still represented within *The Road's* pages. We have to look to the memories of the main character, the man, to find it. His memories create an imaginary setting in *The Road* that is juxtaposed with the ruined state of the novel's post-apocalyptic setting. His memories provide a snapshot of the South before the cataclysm and it is through them that we

find a distinctive, southern setting.

We can start to look at *The Road* as a southern novel because the study of southern literature has changed recently. In “Toward 'A New Southern Studies'” Michael Kreyling asks, “What, if anything, is distinctive in the present, protracted shift from southern literature (now an outdated term for what we study) to southern studies?” (4). The term southern literature is now too narrow to encompass everything covered in southern studies. Its focus on literature is too limiting and fails to include the culture that influenced the southern authors it attempts to honor. In contrast, southern studies expands its discourse to include the history and the culture that is relevant to the literature. When we consider southern studies, it is important to remember that it is currently “struggling to absorb several 'new' discourses: memory and trauma studies and a new geography spurred by interest in globalization being the most prominent” (Kreyling 4). Southern studies is expanding to include works of literature that would not have been considered part of the canon in the past. This new wiggle-room arises from the fact that southern studies frees the South from its regional borders through the inclusion of these new discourses and through the South's interest in its place in the world. But “[b]ecoming 'new' has always been a problem for a discipline with so much of its foundation dedicated to strict borders: who was white and who was not, what was literature and what was not, what was southern and what was not” (Kreyling 4), so there is still some resistance to classifying a novel like *The Road* as southern because it does not limit itself to the region's borders by taking place in a traditional southern setting; it destroys the region outright instead, making it so scarcely anything remains of the South in its world.

To know anything of where we are going with southern studies and the possible inclusion of new works of literature such as *The Road*, it is necessary that we recall where we have been by reviewing the manner in which southern literature has been taught in the past. As a result, we

can look first at literary anthologies which Kreyling refers to as “the great scrum of the field, grinding forward on multiple legs to engulf the new while they re-digest the old” (4). The question that arises is how much of the old should be kept as this great beast grinds forward since “the new texts need to consider what has come before to avoid the embarrassing position of making progress 'crabwise' that Kreyling sees as the potential weakness of the field” (Ford 19). The challenge faced by these anthologies is one where they must decide how to include both the old and the new without slipping backward toward a rehashing of the old and without slipping too far forward by forgetting the old entirely. It is slippery and the “best texts are those that place the mixing of old and new at the center of their constructions” (Ford 19). Any anthology that focuses on this juxtaposition of new and old has the promise of highlighting how southern identity continues to be distinctive in literature. We have such an anthology in “*The South in Perspective*—a self-consciously new anthology published by venerable Prentice-Hall (P-H). . .— [in which the editors] maintain the delicate balance between the new and the old more anxiously” (Kreyling 5). Their anxiety proves useful as it takes an awareness, maybe even a hyper-awareness, of both the old and the new literature to put them into conversation with each other in any endeavors to show the southern identity present within the literature as “[o]n the one hand, the Prentice-Hall editors claim, there is an imperative to think new; on the other hand, one must not leave behind the old, enduring South, for doing that amounts to a kind of cultural suicide, a forfeiture of identity. Memory struggles with amnesia: what to remember and what to forget, and most importantly at what cost to whom” (Kreyling 5). Including *The Road* in the canon should not come at the sacrifice of the works of southern literature that have come before it. Both should be recognized as southern instead as the juxtaposition of *The Road* and earlier works would show the evolution of southern identity. This progression of southern studies as it

struggles to incorporate new literature without forgetting the old echos the man's attempts in *The Road* to linger in his memories of the South without succumbing to the current dangers of the post-apocalyptic world.

In our quest to discover southern identity in the literature, we have to ask, “What is the South?” I visited Savannah, Georgia with my grandmother when I was a child, and part of that visit was a tour of a plantation house—an imposing structure with fluted columns, sprawling wings, and massive oaks lining the driveway—and “[s]outhern writing, from the antebellum period onward, has been full of ruined old houses, symbolizing the failure of southern order to preserve itself against time” (Grammer 30). Does the South continue to be represented by such symbols from its past? The plantation house, slavery, and the racial tension signified by both still haunt the South as “the region continues to this day to be depicted and understood metaphorically—not only as the negative standard used to assess the civic immorality of other places, but also as an object lesson, a morality tale, about what America was or was not, or could be, or most certainly should not be” (Griffin 57). The rest of the nation sees only the South's checkered past and knows nearly nothing about the culture of the South. To them, the South is a single entity with a dark past, an entity that still represents civic injustice today. In “Southern Distinctiveness, Yet Again, or, Why America Still Needs the South” Larry Griffin asks, “When we talk about 'the South,' for example, which South, exactly, are we talking about?” (62). He goes on to name various cultures that thrive within the South: “The glittering Sun-Belt, franchise-laden South of Houston, Atlanta, Nashville, Charlotte. . .the rural, small-town and disappearing South of coalminers in eastern Kentucky, sharecroppers in the Mississippi Delta, textile workers in small Carolina towns throughout the Piedmont” (Griffin 62). It would be a fallacy to consider southerners to be a single, homogeneous people, but then, that is a perspective

backed up by the “*modus operandi* of earlier anthologies and critical practice, which had in common the defense of the distinctiveness of the southern homeland, not to mention a strong consensus on what was 'literary' and what was not” (Kreyling 16). The literature contained in earlier anthologies enforces a homogeneous view of the South as those anthologies focused on portraying the South as that one entity, one characterized by mostly white, middle to upper class southerners but “[d]espite some (mainly white) southerners’ attempts to portray and enact a closed society, the American South has always been a dynamic site of hybrid, often competing cultures and identities” (Henninger 178). Other southern voices were simply not allowed in the literature.

To speak of a distinctive South implies regional borders, but in the modern world and in contemporary literature, the South is not truly hedged in by borders and is distinctive through its sense of place instead. In “Dismantling the Monolith: Southern Places – Past, Present, and Future” Barbara Ladd asks, “Is a literature 'grounded in place' necessarily a 'regional' literature?” (28). She quotes Eudora Welty to find the answer: “'Regional' is an outsider's term. . . [that] has no meaning for the insider who is doing the writing, because as far as he knows he is simply writing about life” (qtd in Ladd 28). Our understanding of southern literature should not be limited to works that take place within the region's borders. It would be far too limiting to classify southern literature as simply those works that undoubtedly use the South as their setting. The word *region* should be struck from our vocabulary entirely as “[p]lace', in other words, is a matter of 'location', of 'situation', a 'conductor' of the currents that move and move through a literary text; and unlike 'region' as it has usually been understood, 'place' and 'location' are subjective, experiential, insiders' terms” (Ladd 28). Place conducts the experiences of the characters and gives them a medium through which they can express their culture whereas region

is a superficial limiter that loses meaning in the modern world because “in the late modern age we are possessed of a capacity to move (our bodies, our voices, our texts) or to transgress boundaries between one culture and another while we are bound politically and legally to a sovereign government which controls a particular territory” (Ladd 33). No culture is hemmed in by a region's borders despite the insistence of governments for their drawn lines on a map. We are not hemmed in with our ability to travel the world in a matter of days and to project our ideas across the world in a matter of seconds. In *The Road* regional borders are obsolete. The boy asks his father, “Why are they the state roads?” and the man answers, “Because they used to belong to the states. What used to be called the states” (McCarthy 43). The novel emphasizes that it will not be recognizable as southern for taking place in the region known as the South; that region no longer exists. The government that presided over the region no longer exists. There is no South anymore except the South evoked through the places the man remembers.

As we move away from the earlier southern literature contained in the anthologies, as we move toward classifying new literature as southern, we have to ask what is distinctive about the South in the modern world as the South takes its place in what is becoming a global culture. Griffin speaks to a unique quality of southern culture itself:

No culture, of course, exists only in the present: all draw on, hark back to, a past significant precisely because of its continued moral, identity, and emotional utility. In this the South is no different, but what is unusual is how explicitly, how routinely, and how pervasively the region's history, that very particular southern past, is evoked in the present: the South of *then* is recreated and oddly memorialized, concretized in a sense, in the South of *now* (Griffin 48).

The literature is no different. The distinctive qualities that characterize the earlier works as

southern reappear in the more recent pieces of literature that are being juxtaposed against the old. The South continues to be evoked in the pages of the literature, both new and old. It is through the places depicted in the literature that the literature comes to evoke the South as “[o]f the several stock answers to the perennial question 'What is southern literature?', the importance of 'place' (or the presence of 'sense of place') surely ranks near the top of the list” (Romine 5). The culture of the South is immortalized in the setting of any southern literature as it is that setting that proves to be truly distinctive as it serves as a vehicle for the culture: “[B]oth the past (memory) and the future (invention) are evoked in terms of places - and it is hard to imagine that memory could withstand the destruction of place, or that the future could be imagined except as a place (in both time and space)” (Ladd 30). The crisis of memory struggling to survive the destruction of the setting is at the center of *The Road*, but in the novel, it is that memory of those places that invokes the southern culture that has not survived elsewhere. There is no culture without memory and only the main character has that memory. The lack of a memory of the culture dehumanizes most of *The Road's* denizens.

The Road destroys the setting that would typically mark it as a work of southern literature. It goes “from a distant, settled sense of place to a new mythically terrifying sense of space following the global disaster that has occurred” (Walsh 49). Everything that was once familiar has been lost and buried beneath the ash with “[n]ights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before” (McCarthy 3). Most of the characters do not seem to remember the world as it once was, so the South and its culture are not even a memory for them. Instead they claw at each other to survive in their new post-apocalyptic culture. Even the sun is denied to them “[l]ike a cold glaucoma dimming away the world” (McCarthy 3). The once distinctive South has been reduced to gray, ash-filled landscapes and

“McCarthy’s landscape resists interpretation, for the landscape itself is largely mute, darkened, clouded, its color palette stripped of beauty and diversity and reduced to variations of gray” (Edwards 56). Every part of the world is equally gray and desolate. The man in *The Road* starts to wonder about people that might be elsewhere in the world, across the ocean he is staring at: “And perhaps beyond those shrouded swells another man did walk with another child on the dead gray sands. Slept but a sea apart on another beach among the bitter ashes of the world or stood in their rags lost to the same indifferent sun” (McCarthy 219). At no point does the man question how the landscape would look on that other shore. He does not have to wonder. He knows everywhere in the world is gray and covered with ash, that “the earth, blistered by nuclear blast and withered by nuclear winter, presents us, of course, with a very different kind of landscape, one that seems stripped of meaning” (Edwards 56). Everything that might signify the South has been destroyed. The roads are the feature that are the most permanent, and of them the man says to his son after the boy asks how long they will last, “There's nothing to uproot them so they should be okay for a while” (McCarthy 43). That the boy thought to question whether or not the roads would survive is telling. He is accustomed to a world where nothing lasts, where only ruined remnants remain of the previous world.

The tattered map the man and the boy carry with them signifies the South as it once was, and the map proves to be a lie when juxtaposed with the setting that surrounds them. In the novel, “maps are associated with a visual, abstracted and purportedly objective understanding of space that is shown to be both illusory and wholly inadequate” (Warde) because the map cannot show the world as it is now in *The Road*. But the man relies on it anyway: “The tattered oilcompany roadmap had once been taped together but now it was just sorted into leaves and numbered with crayon in the corners for their assembly. He sorted through the limp pages and

spread out those that answered to their location” (McCarthy 42). The man looks through the pages of the map as if it can actually help them, as if it can guide them through their post-apocalyptic world. Later in the novel, the man goes so far as to try and transpose himself and the boy onto the map's landscape as a way of comforting the boy: “At a crossroads they sat in the dusk and he spread out the pieces of the map in the road and he studied them. He put his finger down. This is us, he said. Right here. The boy wouldnt look. He sat studying the twisted matrix of routes in red and black with his finger at the junction where he thought that they might be. As if he'd see their small selves crouching there” (McCarthy 86). In doing so, the man reveals his wish for the world to be as it was, for the map to be accurate again, and he also “betrays a desire for positionality that cannot be alleviated by reference to anything in his surrounding landscape” (Warde). Nothing of the world around him makes any sense as the landmarks portrayed on the map no longer exist.

Even the geography has changed due to the cataclysm and its aftereffects, making it so that the terrain of the South that is drawn on the map is wholly inaccurate. There is an earthquake toward the novel's beginning: “It neared, growing louder. Everything trembling. Then it passed beneath them like an underground train and drew away into the night and was gone” (McCarthy 28). The geography around them changes on a day-to-day basis as if the earth itself is dying and these quakes are the last tremors of its body. The man's anxiety about the map not matching the world around them intensifies later in the novel when “[h]e found a telephone directory in a filling station and he wrote the name of the town [they were in] on their map with a pencil. They sat on the curb in front of the building and ate crackers and looked for the town but they couldnt find it” (McCarthy 181-2). They are sitting in the very town they want to find on the map, but despite their physical presence in the town, they cannot force the map to reflect the reality of

their current location. The man even “drew stick figures on the map. This is us, he said” (McCarthy 182). Drawing actual figures on the map is an attempt by him to develop a correlation between their location in their post-apocalyptic world and their location on the map, and his “progression from imaginary projection to graphic inscription reflects his escalating disorientation and spatial anxieties, and the increasing importance of the map in alleviating these fears” (Warde). At this point in the novel, the man is not just imagining himself and the boy as figures on the map; he is actually using a pencil to alter the map, to place representations of himself and the boy on it. His need to understand the world around him is growing, but his continued reliance on the map is misguided. It cannot help them because it signifies “a world of social and spatial order, a known and knowable space” (Warde), but that world and its order are lost to them and only relics of that world still exist.

Despite their significance within the father's memories, the places in *The Road* are not named in the narrative, further destroying their connection to the map and to the world before the cataclysm. In the earlier example of the man writing a town's name on the map, the town is never actually named in the text. The man and the boy place emphasis on discovering the name, but that name is not important in the actual narrative as “the narrative offers very few proper place names, and of the handful contained in the book, none is a marker of the story’s action” (Kunsa 62). None of the proper place names used in *The Road* (“Rock City, Tenerife, London, Cadiz, Bristol and Mars” [Kunsa 71]) do anything to place the characters in a specific locale. The first proper place name in the novel comes in the form of an advertisement on the roof of a barn: “A log barn in a field with an advertisement in faded ten-foot letters across the roofslope. See Rock City” (McCarthy 21). The advertisement is an empty signifier. The place it refers to is likely to be as burnt and desolate as the rest of the world. And the sign for Rock City has no impact on the

man and his son. It is simply something they pass on their journey south. In looking at the significance of places in the novel, it is clear that those with proper names have no importance at all, but many of the unnamed places influence the narrative since “change and possibility, those forces that move narrative, might be more accurately imagined as a transfiguration of – rather than as a flight or liberation from – place” (Ladd 29). On a larger scale, everything of the post-apocalyptic setting of *The Road* and its ashen landscapes serve as a locus of change that drives the narrative forward; the aftereffects of the destruction of the world are what the man and the boy strive to endure. Despite his reliance on an outdated map, “[t]he man demonstrates considerable familiarity with the [unnamed] locales through which he and the boy pass” (Kunsa 62), showing how significant those locales are to him and that he more than likely has a history with them, that he was probably a native southerner before the cataclysm.

The main character's familiarity with the South echos McCarthy's own knowledge of the southern places through which the man and his son pass. The places are never named in the novel, but some of their descriptions are accurate portrayals of certain locations in the South, suggesting that “the importance of the route [the man and the boy take] is that McCarthy is fictionally returning once again to his own roots in Knoxville and the southeast, to some of the places where the author spent the earlier years of his life” (Morgan 46). These places have been decimated by the apocalypse, so it takes work on the part of the reader to connect them back to the southern places that have influenced McCarthy and his writing. The Cumberland Gap in Kentucky is a great example: “Just beyond the high gap in the mountains they stood and looked out over the great gulf to the south where the country as far as they could see was burned away, the blackened shapes of rock standing out of the shoals of ash and billows of ash rising up and blowing downcountry through the waste. The track of the dull sun moving unseen beyond the

murk” (McCarthy 14). The details the novel provides about this gap are also accurate for the Cumberland Gap as “[t]he saddle of the gap itself was on US 25-E before the Cumberland Gap Tunnel was opened in 1996. Wonderful views to the south are indeed to be seen from the Gap and Pinnacle Overlook” (Morgan 40). The father-son pair are probably standing on the road that used to be US 25-E before the apocalypse, and it is the gap itself that potentially allows us to place them there. It is also significant that the pair are looking south over terrain that is familiar to both the father and McCarthy. The father knew these lands before they were burnt and desolate, and his gaze southward creates a disconnect between the places he remembers and the places as they are now in the post-apocalyptic world. Further south the pair arrive at a city that is not named, but it is still recognizable thanks to the construction of the road itself: “By dusk of the day following they were at the city. The long concrete sweeps of the interstate exchanges like the ruins of a vast funhouse against the distant murk” (McCarthy 24). The interstate exchanges identify “[t]he 'city' [as] Knoxville, Tennessee, and the interstate exchanges are likely those of I-40 and I-75 (or now I-275). For years that particular interchange was known as 'malfunction junction.' The more recent construction of new interchanges and I-240 were intended to reduce the traffic problems. It does look like a 'funhouse' from the air” (Morgan 40). McCarthy is again relying on the features of the road itself, undoubtedly the most important thing in the lives of the man and his son, to clue his readers in about the location of the pair, even if that location holds significance only for the man who can remember the city as it once was.

The places in *The Road* hold significance for McCarthy as well since it is his past in addition to the man's that is being evoked through these descriptions of southern places. His history with Knoxville started at a young age as “[h]e was four years old when he moved to Knoxville, Tennessee, and lived there and in neighboring Sevier and Blount counties for most of

the first forty-three years of his life” (Brosi 11). Like McCarthy, the man's childhood home is also located in Knoxville, and the pair visit it when they pass through the city: “The day following some few miles south of the city at a bend in the road and half lost in the dead brambles they came upon an old frame house with chimneys and gables and a stone wall. The man stopped. Then he pushed the cart up the drive.” The boy asks, “What is this place, Papa?” and the man answers, “It's the house where I grew up” (McCarthy 24-25). There is significance to the fact that McCarthy decided to give the man the home-city of Knoxville, the very city that McCarthy lived in for the first half of his life. The man's search for a southern identity parallels McCarthy's own, and both rely on memories of those southern places. McCarthy's southern influences, Knoxville in particular, can be clearly seen in his works as his “first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, includes some particularly vivid Knoxville scenes, and *Child of God* references the city, but nothing he ever wrote is so thoroughly soaked in Knoxville as *Suttree* is. It may be the most Knoxville novel ever written” (Neely 16). *The Road* does not focus on Knoxville as much as *Suttree* does, but it is telling that the man and his son linger in a ruined Knoxville as the man reminisces about his past. The man's childhood home is even a dead ringer for “[t]he house where Cormac McCarthy grew up. . . It is a frame house with seven gables that has seen better days situated on a now overgrown lot. And there are the remains of a stone wall made by the McCarthy boys near the drive” (Morgan 41). It is the same house. It even has the stone wall from McCarthy's childhood. It takes an informed reader to make that connection to McCarthy's personal life, but the fact remains that McCarthy uses his own memories to create ripples of the South through the memories of the man in *The Road* as he experiences each place through the lens of those memories. These ripples of the South resonate with a reader because every southern place described in *The Road* feels genuine due to McCarthy's intimate knowledge of those

places.

Since *The Road* does not name any of the important places in the narrative, in the text itself, readers are forced to re-imagine those places instead of relying on any preconceived notions they might have of the places that would typically be grounded in a southern landscape with well-known names. It is a daring move by McCarthy, and “[t]he narrative’s strategy is actually one of withholding place names, a provocative rhetorical move that forces the reader to imagine new possibilities, to think not solely in terms of the world that was, but also of the world that will be. The burned out landscape, strangely, is a new if unlikely Eden awaiting once again those perfect names” (Kunsa 62). The end result is that a 'sense of place' in the novel cannot be obtained through place names as those names have not been given, and the work of establishing a 'sense of place' is partly done by the imagination of a reader. But when we look at 'place,' it “has [traditionally] signified a nexus of is and ought, a describable outside metonymically associated with a network of imperatives, codes, norms, limitations, duties, obligations, and relationships. 'Place', therefore, is both subject to representation and suggestive of things that resist representation - hence the 'texture' often associated with it” (Romine 5-6). The places in *The Road* resist representation because they are not named, so their texture comes not from their names, not from any history they may have, but from their descriptions instead, descriptions that can only be loosely tied to places in the real world. Even descriptions that resemble real world places exactly, such as that of the gap that may very well be the Cumberland Gap, can only be connected to that real world place through speculation, through the imagination and knowledge of the reader. *The Road* forgoes the use of place names because “as the past world itself becomes meaningless, *The Road* suggests, the names of the past become meaningless as well” (Kunsa 63). Only the man attributes meaning to the past and to the places of his past, and these places have

an ethereal quality when described on the page since they exist only in his memories, memories the post-apocalyptic world interrupts.

The juxtaposition of the wasteland landscapes to the father's memories infuses the writing of *The Road* with a sense of loss. In "The World He'd Lost": Geography and "Green" Memory in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," Laura Gruber Godfrey looks to historian Pierre Nora in defining the father as a "memory individual": "[W]hen memory is no longer everywhere. . .it will not be anywhere unless one takes the responsibility to recapture it through individual means. The less memory is experienced collectively, the more it will require individuals to undertake to become themselves memory individuals" (qtd in 165). The father is the only character that could qualify as a memory individual as he is the only one that seems to possess any memories of the past.

There is another somewhat civilized character the man and the boy meet on the road: the old man that gives his name as Ely. But it becomes clear that he is not clinging to the past in any way.

When asked his name, the old man answers, "I couldn't trust you with it. To do something with it.

I don't want anybody talking about me. To say where I was or what I said when I was there. I mean, you could talk about me maybe. But nobody could say that it was me. I could be anybody" (McCarthy 171). Instead of lingering in memories of the past like the father does, Ely chooses to

rely on lies (and the name Ely is also a lie). He chooses cultural amnesia because it is easier for him compared to admitting everything the world has lost. Ely is another reversal of the natural order; as an elder, he should be a memory individual and someone younger generations can look to for stories of the past, but in this post-apocalyptic world he does not want to be remembered.

The onus of remembering is placed solely on the shoulders of the man instead. With the exception of Ely, everyone the father-son pair meets on the road is a cannibal, a thief, a slave, or the cannibals' larder. None of them seem to have any memories of the culture they have lost.

It is through the father's memories that McCarthy creates *The Road's* emotionally devastating landscapes. Not only are they bleak and barren—they become truly terrifying due to the man remembering the natural beauty that should be there instead of the ash. A comparison of McCarthy to Ernest Hemingway is helpful here as “[b]oth Hemingway and McCarthy use geography as a mechanism for conveying emotional despair” (Godfrey 165). Hemingway's “The Big Two-Hearted River” begins with a desolate setting reminiscent of an apocalypse: “There was no town, nothing but the rails and the burned-over country. The thirteen saloons that had lined the one street of Seney had not left a trace. The foundations of the Mansion House hotel stuck up above the ground. The stone was chipped and split by the fire. It was all that was left of the town of Seney. Even the surface had been burned off the ground” (Hemingway). The burnt state of the town speaks to loss only because that setting is informed by the memories of the narrator. Details such as the number of saloons and the identity of the hotel contrast the intact setting of the past with what remains of the town at the time of the story's present-day. A comparison with *The Road* is easy to make considering that *The Road* employs the same technique of remembered setting versus the ruined state of the present-day. It simply does it on a scale that spans most of the South. Toward the beginning of the novel, near the start of their trek south, the man “stood on a stone bridge where the waters slurried into a pool and turned slowly in a gray foam. Where once he'd watched trout swaying in the current, tracking their perfect shadows on the stones beneath” (McCarthy 30). Two images are juxtaposed here: that of the dead water in the present moment and that of the shadows of the trout in the man's memory of the river. The man's sadness over the river's loss of life and beauty comes to us through that juxtaposition.

The man's memories of the South both help and hinder him in his journey south with his son—helping through his ability to navigate the South even without a reliable map, but the

memories prove to be a hindrance as well. Very little of the old world, the old South, remains, but the man cannot help but compare places in the post-apocalyptic world to the imaginary setting his memory creates as he “has difficulty perceiving this world and the new truths of the landscape—which include its endless grayness, and the ash that covers everything—but this difficulty in perception is more emotionally draining because he still retains his inner perceptions and memories of the 'truths' of the old world” (Godfrey 166). Despite the old world's loss of meaning, the man still clings to ways of thinking that have become obsolete: “He thought the month was October but he wasn't sure. He hadn't kept a calendar for years” (McCarthy 4). Like the names of places, the name of the current month signifies nothing. There is nothing to distinguish one month from another without the man-made construct of the calendar, something that also loses meaning in a world where all the seasons call for cold, ash-filled skies. And yet the man is still trying to think of what month it is, a fact that proves useless when it comes to the survival of him and his son. The man struggles against his memories of the South, recognizing the danger they pose to his awareness of his current surroundings:

He said the right dreams for a man in peril were dreams of peril and all else was the call of languor and of death. He slept little and he slept poorly. He dreamt of walking in a flowering wood where birds flew before them he and the child and the sky was aching blue but he was learning how to wake himself from just such siren worlds. Lying there in the dark with the uncanny taste of a peach from some phantom orchard fading in his mouth. He thought if he lived long enough the world at last would all be lost. Like the dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowly fading from memory (McCarthy 18).

But even as he fights to forget the pleasures of the past world, he still finds himself tormented by

his memories of them, by his inability to accept the world as it is now. However, he does accept the futility of serving as a memory individual for the new world as he admits to himself that if he does live long enough, then he will eventually be rid of his memories of the past culture entirely. Forgetting would be a comfort to him because “[t]he landscapes he is forced to navigate each day are, for the most part, torturously indistinct. Yet because he retains his memory, they are consistent reminders of the vanished greener world he once knew” (Godfrey 167). But however much he might wish to discard his memories, the danger of forgetting is all too clear in the novel. The characters that cannot remember the past, that know nothing of the beauty the ash-filled places once held, are doomed to an existence where they accept ash and death as the natural order of things.

Humanity has a grim fate in *The Road*, one where the strong prey on the weak, and all that has come before has been forgotten and lost after a cataclysm of dubious origins. Everyone survives as best they can, and this survival often comes at the cost to others. Worse still, no one except the man shows any regret for the desolation of every place he passes through with his son. The nature of the cataclysm is never revealed in *The Road*; all we know is that “[t]he 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 52). It is possible to speculate about this catastrophe by following the train of thought that humanity ended itself. Such speculation proves to be a stretch, however, as “the novel does not contain any lexical items relating to atomic warfare, nor does McCarthy use forms of *disaster* or *catastrophe* or other related words to describe the novel’s central event” (Grindley). There is also an argument to be made for a connection to the book of Revelations and thus a religious end instead of a man-made one. The clocks stopping at exactly 1:17 could be “an allusion to Revelation 1.17, which introduces Christ’s theophany to John the Divine: ‘And when I

saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last.' Following his appearance, John then receives knowledge of the eschaton (Grindley). A connection to the apocalypse described in Revelations does seem plausible here, a connection that is possibly signaled by the 1:17. If the apocalypse in *The Road* is indeed “supernatural in origin, then much is explained: inconsistencies between descriptions of burned people and burned buildings (in *The Road*, the wilderness and people are burned, but structures are mostly intact), strange earthquakes (very rare in the southeastern United States), dead seas, dead rivers, dead oceans, strange weather, the missing sun and moon, and so on” (Grindley). The landscapes of *The Road* do share similarities with those described in Revelations, but the aftermath of a nuclear apocalypse might also have these very features. Ultimately, *The Road* does not allow itself to be read decisively one way or the other, but “[i]n a world in which nature has been so decimated that it cannot rightly be said to exist anymore, it is of course appropriate to question whether the author has meant his book as a warning to a humanity run rampant” (Graulund 68). Is the cataclysm in *The Road* a result of human actions? Both the nuclear reading and the Revelations reading place humanity as the cause of the destruction of nature. The former does so through nuclear aggression whereas the latter speaks of humanity as corrupt and deserving of the world they have ruined. It would also be possible to lay the blame at the feet of nature itself by reading into the shear of light as the strike of a meteor, but such a reading seems less likely considering how accepting humanity is of the new, dying world. At no point in *The Road* does anyone question why or how the world was destroyed. Humanity accepts its fate of cultural amnesia instead as it devolves and commits acts of brutality for the sake of survival, acts that would previously have been associated with only the animal kingdom.

The dregs of humanity are all that remain in *The Road* (with the exceptions of the man, the boy, and the family the boy meets at the end of the novel), signifying that when places are forgotten, when their histories and cultures are lost, then a person's very humanity is threatened. In this ash-filled, man-eat-man world, "[t]he traces of humanity will linger on for *a while*, but as the nameless man knows all too well, traces are all that is left. In a world in which humanity is no longer humane, where survival is all and not even cannibalism and filicide are deemed unacceptable acts, all the man and his son can do is wait" (Graulund 61). Eating one's own smacks of the animal kingdom, such as the example in nature of a polar bear mother eating her cubs if there is no other food to be found. But nothing is taboo when it comes to survival for most of *The Road's* denizens, not even the consumption of a child: "What the boy had seen was a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit" (McCarthy 198). The barbaric practices undertaken for the sake of survival are mixed with the bare bones of technology here (fire), showing that humanity has forgotten itself to some extent, but it is still ingenious in the ways in which it goes about sating its needs. At one point in their journey south, the man and his son hide in the woods to one side of the road as they watch a group of people march past, a group that exemplifies the brutality and cleverness of this new breed of humanity:

An army in tennis shoes, tramping. Carrying three-foot lengths of pipe with leather wrappings. Lanyards at the wrist. Some of the pipes were threaded through with lengths of chain fitted at their ends with every manner of bludgeon. They clanked past, marching with a swaying gait like wind-up toys. . . The phalanx following carried spears or lances tasseled with ribbons, the long blades hammered out of trucksprings in some crude forge upcountry. . . Behind them came wagons drawn by slaves in harness and piled with goods of war and

after that the women, perhaps a dozen in number, some of them pregnant, and lastly a supplementary consort of catamites illclothed against the cold and fitted in dogcollars and yoked each to each (McCarthy 91-2).

This group appears to be downright militant and cruelly organized to establish a hierarchy where everything and everyone serves the needs (hunger-related and sexual) of the able-bodied males, the strongest members of the group. Anything remotely resembling democracy has been lost. And yet this group proves themselves to be skilled at cannibalizing their surroundings, as is evident by the makeshift weapons they carry and by the wealth of goods they have managed to procure. In contrast, the man and the boy are almost always on the brink of starvation.

But however much they might suffer physically, it becomes clear that the father-son pair are better off spiritually than any other travelers on the road. The man can still dream of “a flowering wood where birds flew before them” (McCarthy 18), but a stranger they meet “had a tattoo of a bird on his neck done by someone with an illformed notion of their appearance” (McCarthy 63). The natural beauty of the world is something the man struggles to forget, knowing it to be a distraction from survival, and yet it is precisely because of those memories that he retains his humanity. An argument could be made that it is the boy and not his place memories that sustains the man's humanity. The boy is pure in a way the man could never be, as the man kills without hesitation whenever he needs to in order to protect the boy. The boy also serves as a moral compass for his father:

Again and again, the boy asks the man for reassurance that they will not transgress this fundamental boundary [cannibalism] no matter how desperate they may become. This promise the man continually reaffirms. Given his constant need for affirmation, however, it seems likely that the boy suspects the same as the reader,

namely that the man would be able to transgress not just this prohibition, but any, as long as it serves that central premise of keeping his boy alive (Graulund 73).

I disagree with Rune Graulund's assessment of the man's moral restraint. He kills because there is no alternative; to choose pacifism is to choose death by someone else's hands in the world of *The Road*. But the man does not ever seem tempted to partake in cannibalism. When the boy sees the charred infant on the spit, the man “bent and picked the boy up and started for the road with him, holding him close. I'm sorry, he whispered. I'm sorry” (McCarthy 198). In every encounter the man and the boy have with cannibalism, the man does his best to keep the boy from seeing it, from witnessing that horror:

He [the man] crouched and stepped down again and held out the light. 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.

Jesus, he whispered.

Then one by one they turned and blinked in the pitiful light. Help us, they whispered. Please help us.

Christ, he said. Oh Christ.

He turned and grabbed the boy. Hurry, he said. Hurry (McCarthy 110).

The man has a grim hardness to him anytime killing is required of him, such as when he kills a stranger that “dove and grabbed the boy and rolled and came up holding him against his chest with the knife at his throat. The man had already dropped to the ground and he swung with him and leveled the pistol and fired from a two-handed position balanced on both knees at a distance

of six feet. The man fell back instantly and lay with blood bubbling from the hole in his forehead” (McCarthy 66), and yet the sight of naked people trapped in a basement and awaiting consumption, one of them half-eaten already even, clearly unnerves him. It is not just for the sake of the boy that the man struggles to maintain his humanity in a world where cannibalism is the norm. His need to cling to his identity is at the root of his struggle with himself to both remember and yet also forget the past world and its culture while trying to pass something of that culture on to his son as well.

The man's visit to his childhood home with his son is a return to his roots, one that has him remembering the house as it once was, but reality intrudes on his memories, causing him to question the purpose of the visit as he begins to doubt the worth of remembering a past that cannot ever be again. But the boy does not want to visit the house: The man asks him, “Dont you want to see where I used to live?” and the boy answers, “No” (McCarthy 25). A physical place that represents the father's past frightens the boy. Every time the father attempts to impart some kernel of his past to the boy, the boy rejects it in favor of the burnt, ashen world he knows. The boy exhibits no curiosity whatsoever when they linger at what was the man's room when he was a boy himself:

He [the man] stood in the doorway to his room. A small space under the eaves. This is where I used to sleep. My cot was against this wall. In the nights in their thousands to dream the dreams of a child's imaginings, worlds rich or fearful such as might offer themselves but never the one to be. He pushed open the closet door half expecting to find his childhood things. Raw cold daylight fell through from the roof. Gray as his heart.

We should go, Papa. Can we go?

Yes. We can go.

I'm scared.

I know. I'm sorry.

I'm really scared.

It's all right. We shouldn't have come (McCarthy 27).

His “gray heart” proves that the man regrets visiting the room even before the boy voices his own opinion. His regret is born of a wish to preserve the room in his memory, a wish that cannot be fulfilled once reality contradicts the memory with “raw cold daylight” falling through the roof of the closet. He fights his role as a memory individual because the ruined setting overwrites his geographical memory with each place they visit, and his attempts to show his son the South of his past ultimately prove to be futile. He comes to realize the hopelessness of sharing the culture of his past with the boy:

Maybe he understood for the first time that to the boy he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed. The tales of which were suspect. He could not construct for the child's pleasure the world he'd lost without constructing the loss as well and he thought perhaps the child had known this better than he. . . he could not enkindle in the heart of the child what was ashes in his own (McCarthy 153-4).

A memory individual in a world where the memory of everyone else is nonexistent is indeed an alien. His stories never have any meaning for the boy because the boy cannot imagine the world depicted in those stories. Even the concept of sleeping safely in one place every night would be alien to him. When the man tries to get the boy to tell him a story of his own, the boy answers, “[B]ut stories are supposed to be happy.” The man then asks, “You don't have any happy ones?”

and the boy answers, “They're more like real life” (McCarthy 268). The boy cannot craft stories of his own because creativity has never been a trait the new, ash-filled world nurtures. He knows only the reality of imminent death, either from starvation or from violence. It is for the sake of the boy that “the father assumes all roles of protector, nurturer, and caregiver” (Woodson 88) as he fights against himself to pare away everything of himself except what the boy needs in a father and protector.

The man cannot afford to remember the past; he cannot allow himself to get caught up in his memories of the southern places as they once were. He tells the boy, “When your dreams are of some world that never was or of some world that never will be and you are happy again then you will have given up. Do you understand? And you cant give up. I wont let you” (McCarthy 189). To the man, the places of his past are a world that never was and never will be again. His memories cannot sustain him in a world where no one shares those memories, and every place he sees destroys their validity. And despite the man's determination in “moving south [because] [t]here'd be no surviving another winter here” (McCarthy 4), the ash-filled landscapes never improve. They stay as gray and as indistinct as ever. It does not get any warmer. The man knows that his dreams and thoughts of the past can never be real again, that the world as he knew it is gray and dead. In his words to his son, the man reflects his own realization that he can only be happy dreaming about the past by allowing himself to give up on the present and on his survival. He has to choose between his son and his memories of the past world, memories that will be lost to the world with his forgetting, as the places themselves, the sites of cultural dynamism, have been irrevocably altered to the point that they have lost all meaning; they signify nothing without his memories to reveal their histories. But even as the man struggles to discard his memories of the South, McCarthy immortalizes his own southern influences within the pages of *The Road*,

however buried they might be beneath the ash. Deprived of the places of the South and the cultures they represent, the inhabitants of *The Road's* post-apocalyptic world exist in a meaningless circle of violence, a circle broken only by the man's lingering southern identity and the values imparted by his culture, an identity that embodies the South within *The Road*.

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