

## Postapocalyptic Responsibility: Patriarchy at the End of the World in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

So, to finally answer your question, no, I never *learned-to-live*. In fact not at all! Learning to live should mean learning to die, learning to take into account, so as to accept, absolute mortality (that is, without salvation, resurrection, or redemption—neither for oneself nor for the other). [. . .] I remain uneducable when it comes to any kind of wisdom about knowing-how-to-die or, if you prefer, knowing-how-to-live. I still have not learned or picked up anything on this subject.  
—Derrida

Can I ask you something?  
Yes. Of course you can.  
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.  
—McCarthy

Can patriarchy narrate its own death? And can it do so in anything other than an elegiac mode that serves, finally, to reinforce its fantasy of immortality? Is it more or less patriarchal to resist what Derrida calls “absolute mortality” (*Learning* 24), and might there, in fact, be more than one way of thinking about the refusal to learn how to die? These questions are raised and complicated in the characteristically terse and affecting prose of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*. In what follows, I want to consider how this novel depicts a decidedly masculine subject contemplating a death that is simultaneously imagined *as*, and as taking place *at*, the end of the world.

*The Road* narrates the death of the father in a historically specific sense (McCarthy’s central figure represents a recognizable moment: the passing of Cold War-era masculinity and American hegemony); but it

also succeeds as a meditation on responsibility to the other and, notably, to the child. The figure of the child (“the son”) in McCarthy’s novel is hard to disentangle from the motif of futurity, and the central character’s relationship to both (and hence to relationality per se) is thrown into relief by the imminence of his own death. Here, too, it is hard to ignore a certain historical specificity. The future, in this bleak text about personal mortality and the “end of everything,” appears drained of hope by an all too familiar post-9/11 fantasy: a father strives to protect his son at the end of the world; there are bad guys out there—protect your own! Read in this light, *The Road* gives us an unforgettable portrait of the family as the smallest unit of the security state. The novel threatens to collapse the response of one father figure to his own approaching death into a more general paranoid fantasy about the end of civilization, and thus the novel’s vision of the future also takes the form of a remarkably “primitive” or regressive fantasy (complete with cannibals!).<sup>1</sup> But it is not enough simply to categorize the novel’s dystopic future as signature McCarthy or as historical symptom; we also need to read its impulse to externalize—to turn structures or conflicts into events or narrative—and ask what *The Road* “knows” and what it simply participates in. Is McCarthy’s novel merely a rather indulgent late patriarchal text featuring a failing virile subject? Is it an example of traditional patriarchy posing as an elegy for patriarchal tradition?<sup>2</sup> Or might there be something new under the sun, after all? Might *The Road*, against all the odds, also give us a depiction of patriarchy narrating its own end?<sup>3</sup>

I want to approach these questions by reading *The Road*’s dystopia as a psychopolitical terrain characterized by what one could only call a primitive and insistent opposition between the good and the bad (“Goodness will find the little boy,” we read; “It always has. It will again” [281]). The father promises his son that the good and the bad will not become mixed up: he assures his son that they are the good guys and that they always will be. “There’s not a lot of good guys in *Blood Meridian*,” McCarthy told an interviewer, “whereas good guys is what *The Road* is about. That’s the subject at hand” (“Hollywood’s”). This repeated gesture places us squarely inside a psychic space organized around Melanie Klein’s charting of a good-bad, paranoid-schizoid kind of splitting. Klein’s trajectory from the paranoid-schizoid to the depressive position (and beyond) provides us with one way of thinking about how a subject responds to loss (and thus to the fear associated with one’s own or another’s death), but it also offers a persuasive account of the developmental movement—insofar as there is any—in McCarthy’s novel. Klein writes:

*Thus there are two sets of fears, feelings and defences, which, however varied in themselves and however intimately linked together, can in my view, for purposes of theoretical clearness, be isolated from each other. The first set of feelings and phantasies are the persecutory ones [ . . . ]. The defences against these fears are predominantly the destruction of the persecutors by violent or secretive and cunning methods. [ . . . ] The second set of feelings which go to make up the depressive position I formerly described without suggesting a term for them. I now propose to use for these feelings of sorrow and concern for the loved objects [ . . . ] a simple word derived from everyday language—namely the “pining” for the loved object. (151)*

For Klein, these two positions, while roughly sequential, are also implicated in one another and therefore not *simply* sequential; psychical crises can produce a return to these earlier “positions.” Moreover, both positions need to be worked through to produce a subject with the capacity for mourning and thus for a relationship to the other. This is why Jessica Benjamin asserts that “the alternative to a defensive fantasy of omnipotence is the labor of mourning” (*Like Subjects* 113). To what extent, I want to ask, does *The Road*’s horrific *mise-en-scène* comprise a labor of mourning and a working toward relation?

*The Road*, as we began by noting, can be read as a dystopic allegorization of patriarchal psychical crisis or of a more general, historical crisis of post-9/11 vulnerability. Klein’s work helps us to see how this allegorization mobilizes a rigid, “schizoid,” good versus bad opposition that, as we know, has profound political implications.<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler gestures toward these implications in her “decidedly un-Kleinian” reading of Klein. While “moral sadism” passes itself off as virtue, Butler argues, “responsibility” must “own” its own aggression: “This is precisely the alternative to moral sadism, a violence that righteously grounds itself in an ethics of purity wrought from the disavowal of violence. It is also the alternative to the ontologization of violence considered to be so structurally fixed and deterministic at the level of the subject that it precludes any possibility of an ethical commitment to safeguard the life of another” (*Frames* 44, 177). While *The Road* might never quite reach the point of “owning” its own aggression, it could be said, at various moments, to witness its own undoing. McCarthy’s text, I would suggest, is not simply stuck in Klein’s paranoid-schizoid position, even if some of its most powerful images seem to belong to this condition; the novel also pursues a poetics of remains that inscribes



the possibility of mourning and thus a distinctive ethics of abandonment and self-mourning that signals the relinquishment of patriarchal grandiosity. This relinquishment, if it can be said to take place, begins, in McCarthy's novel, with a birth and a disaster, and it is not at all clear how these two events might be distinguished.

### *The Trauma of Birth*

In a 2009 interview with the *Wall Street Journal's* John Jurgenson, McCarthy was pressed on what had caused the disaster that precipitates the events of his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Road*. "A lot of people ask me. I don't have an opinion. At the Santa Fe Institute I'm with scientists of all disciplines, and some of them in geology said it looked like a meteor to them. But it could be anything—volcanic activity or it could be nuclear war. It is not really important" ("Hollywood's"). McCarthy's dismissal ("it is not really important"), far from signaling that not much is at stake, suggests instead that "all" is at stake (where "all" means all of those differential systems and their material supports that produce and sustain human life). The cause is irrelevant because what *The Road* actually presents us with is an apocalyptic encounter with the Traumatic Real, with what happens when the Symbolic is blown away, reduced to ashes, and then very tenuously seeks to reassert itself or to merely hold on. In this sense, *The Road* might be said to belong to a post-9/11 moment of crisis for the protective powers of an omniscient patriarchy: "Do you think that your fathers are watching? That they weigh you in their ledgerbook? Against what? There is no book and your fathers are dead in the ground" (196).<sup>5</sup>

One thing we do know about the disaster, however, is that it nearly coincides with a birth: "The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions. He got up and went to the window. What is it? [. . .] What is it? she said. What is happening?" (52–53). "A few nights later she gave birth" (59). The man will then crucially deliver his own son and cut the cord: "*Her cries meant nothing to him*. Behind the window just the gathering cold, the fires on the horizon. He held aloft the scrawny red body so raw and naked and cut the cord with kitchen shears and wrapped his son in a towel" (59, my emphases). The almost negligible reference to "his son" in this passage announces the beginning of a relationship that, in some sense, could be called utopian. There will be little or no room, in *The Road*, for father-son conflict or for the mother.<sup>6</sup> Instead, we are given a father doing his best, his good and vulnerable son, and their life

together. It is as if all that might be experienced as negative and aggressive and internal to a (father-son) relationship is projected, in McCarthy's novel, onto an apocalyptic outside that, in turn, produces an idealized space of goodness in which the father and son can reside together. It would appear that patriarchy loves the apocalypse! Despite all its extravagant acts of violence, *The Road* also tells the story of a father's love for his son at the end of the world and even of his escorting his son toward what looks surprisingly like safety and a new life. The father dies at the end of the narrative, but not before immortalizing and spiritualizing their filial bond: "You have to carry the fire, [he says to his young son]. [. . .] It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it. [. . .] You have my whole heart. You always did. You're the best guy. You always were. If I'm not here you can still talk to me. You can talk to me and I'll talk to you. [. . .] Okay?" (278–79). Does this father's love for his son, his terrifying world-creating, world-destroying love, produce this end-of-the-world scenario? This would be to suggest that (the fantasy of) radical destruction makes (the fantasy of) full presence possible even as the war of all against all that defines the postapocalyptic world produces the possibility for the relationship of absolute care and responsibility that defines the father and son's new state of nature.

These hyperbolic exchanges might be said to translate a banal but insistent question that haunts McCarthy's text as much as it does postindustrial America: who or what is a man at the beginning of the twenty-first century? There are a couple of striking moments in *The Road*, both moving and pathetic, when the man refers to his "job," his job at the end of the world. The novel sometimes seems to suggest that the world ends precisely so that he can know who he is and what he must do, even as this deeply reassuring knowledge surely indicates that it is not the end of the world.<sup>7</sup> The father says to his son: "You wanted to know what the bad guys looked like. Now you know. It may happen again. My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you. Do you understand?" (77); or again: "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" (75). The son's birth, in *The Road*, is identical with the novel's end-of-the-world disaster. It is a trauma for the man who encounters his own finitude and immortality with his son's birth, and, as such, the novel could be read as a version of patriarchy's traditional story. But I would like to consider the possibility that this birth is simultaneously a call to responsibility, a traumatic call with an ego-shattering force beyond calculation. In other words, if the apocalypse might be said to externalize

the ambivalence of Oedipus, thereby producing a kind of utopian/dystopian or paranoid-schizoid (good vs. bad) space, it also precipitates a loss of all the mediating social formations that might function to protect the man from experiencing relationship in its most simple and even primal form.<sup>8</sup> *The Road* thus throws into question whether, or in what sense, this man and this boy are a father and a son. (Indeed, the terms “father” and “son” are used quite sparingly in the novel. The narrative voice refers to the man as “the man” or “he,” and the boy is for the most part “the boy”—he refers to his father as “Papa,” but the man rarely uses any explicit form of address in return.) Can there be fathers and sons when there are no longer any symbolic and meaningful structures? How could there possibly be one father and one son? It seems, rather, that we are meant to experience this father and son as the very essence of the paternal-filial relation, and hence as belonging to this text’s fantasy of a Symbolic relationship purified of contingency.

It is impossible to ignore the extent to which the father-son relationship in *The Road* is sanctified (“The boy didnt stir. He sat beside him and stroked his pale and tangled hair. Golden chalice, good to house a god. Please dont tell me how the story ends” [75]). The novel begins (just about) with the father’s *word*, not just his thought: “He said: if he [referring to his son] is not the word of God, God never spoke” (5); God’s existence and that of the child are interdependent. **The familial and the divine also collapse in the novel’s implicit identification of its “son” with the Son and its father with the Father.** The father and the narrator are in turn closely related if not entirely identified, and this indeterminacy, taken together with the novel’s fragmentary form, poses a question for *The Road*’s reader: what or who holds it all together? Is it the man’s consciousness, the narrator’s voice, the author’s implied consciousness, or might it be nothing at all? Indeed, *The Road* hovers, in its very sanctification, between a kind of biblical/theological paradigm (note its repeated references to gods, tabernacles, anointing, and so on, not to mention **the story’s intense relationship to Abraham and Isaac, Exodus, the story of Job, and the Gospels**) and the discourse of American masculinity in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> In a move familiar to students of American literature, moreover, this still legible form of masculinity fantastically appropriates a version of Native American spirituality. The “good guys” of McCarthy’s text, those who “carry the fire,” are not only Biblical patriarchs and prophets but also cowboys and Indians. Yet, while what I would call the novel’s poetics of transcendence crucially disavows violence and mortality, it also offers us an insistent and materialized poetics of remains. The apocalyptic fantasy in *The Road* works to destroy everything that might

interrupt or spoil a perfectly nonviolent relationship between father and son; but the text's representation of mourning also complicates this account. Mourning must negotiate between accepting death (and even accepting one's implication in the other's death) and a certain resistance to mortality that, in turn, wavers between hallucination and representation. While this negotiation might look different at different moments (this is indeed the *work* of mourning), the doubleness never entirely disappears; mourning is always a resistance to mourning and hence any absolute opposition between mourning and melancholia will not hold. *The Road*, I am arguing, achieves its figurative effects and generates its pathos as it vacillates between a grand denial of mortality (in the form of a poetics of transcendence) and a more partial acceptance-in-process (the poetics of remains).

There is much to be gained, therefore, by reading McCarthy's text alongside the pioneering account offered by Freud in "Mourning and Melancholia." When one mourns, Freud argues, one hypercathects all the bits and pieces (the remains), and this concentrated investment precedes the ability to relinquish the object: "Normally, respect for reality gains the day. Nevertheless its orders cannot be obeyed at once. They are carried out bit by bit, at great expense of time and cathectic energy, and in the meantime the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged" (253). Freud also reminds us that mourning is not necessarily for an individual loved person but can also be for the loss "of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on" (252). Perhaps the missing observation, here, and one that is crucial for understanding *The Road*, is that one can also mourn for oneself, and, in a certain sense, all mourning is self-mourning. Numerous objects and cultural artifacts (valuables? detritus?) take on unusual significance in *The Road*, located as they are amid utter devastation. There is, for example, a crucially minimal reference to an arrowhead and to a Spanish coin. The man picks up the arrowhead and hands it on to his son ("He spat on it and wiped away the dirt on the seam of his trousers and gave it to the boy. It was white, quartz, perfect as the day it was made" [203]), and then, somewhat enigmatically, he does not pass on the coin (204).<sup>10</sup> *The Road* also includes references to stories, both in the sense of children's books as actual material artifacts ("You can read me a story, the boy said. Cant you, Papa? Yes, he said. I can" [7]), and in the sense of a less materializable cultural inheritance. What kinds of stories can be told, what kinds of stories can one still tell? When do stories become mere words that don't seem to refer to anything at all? What kind of story is *The Road*? The father tells his son "[o]ld stories of courage and

justice as he remembered them,” but the boy will later show an impatience with these tales: “Those stories are not true,” he says to his father (41, 268). *The Road* also includes various minimal yet telling references to toys and games as “culture” and as that which a father might hand on to his son (e.g., a yellow truck, a deck of cards), and in one particularly telling passage, the man and the boy come across an ash-covered train:

*They pushed into the cab and he blew away the ash from the engineer’s seat and put the boy at the controls. The controls were very simple. Little to do but push the throttle lever forward. He made train noises and diesel horn noises but he wasn’t sure what these might mean to the boy. After a while they just looked out through the silted glass to where the track curved away in the waste of weeds. If they saw different worlds what they knew was the same. That the train would sit there slowly decomposing for all eternity and that no train would ever run again.*

*Can we go Papa?*

*Yes. Of course we can. (180)*

Such moments resonate beyond the confines of this narrative world and suggest, I think, what remains and what does not remain of the author’s “classic” boyhood. Some things refuse to go.

Mourning almost always requires a set of decisions regarding things. Should one keep them, give them away, throw them away, destroy them, sell them? In McCarthy’s novel the man lays out the contents of his wallet (money, credit cards, driver’s license, a photo of his wife) on the black top “like gambling cards.” He throws the billfold itself into the woods and holds the photo of his wife for an indefinite period of time before laying it down again beside the other pieces and heading on his way. So the apocalypse has come and a man leaves his money and credit cards behind; why not? On the one hand, these cards, documents, bits of legal tender are the mere symbolic trappings of a world blown away, signifiers that only ever signified other signifiers. And yet, of course, they are also the only pieces that allow one to live the fiction of subjecthood and symbolic legitimation: what is a man without his wallet? In such passages, in other words, we encounter one of this novel’s crucial recurring questions: What is the relationship between “social death” and “my death”? Does mortality mean the loss and relinquishment of oneself piece by piece or can a certain sacrifice produce transcendence and the revelation of essential being?



And what about the picture of the man's wife? In "Against Survival," Lee Edelman considers the way that the death drive is "recurrently projected onto those who occupy the position of the queer: those abjected as nonreproductive, antisocial, opposed to viability, and so as threats to the Child who assures and embodies collective survival" (148). In *The Road*, as I have been arguing, the death drive is projected onto an entire world, an entire landscape that is not of the father and son's making (and, it goes without saying, onto its child-murderers and cannibals). And this projection might be said to begin with the novel's disturbing investment in getting rid of the mother. While this might seem to mark a distinct departure from Edelman's account—wouldn't one expect the female reproductive body to be affirmed by the hegemonic social order that Edelman posits?—McCarthy clearly casts a wider net. And indeed, *The Road* betrays a profoundly ambivalent relationship to the maternal. Notably pregnant women accompany both the good guys and the bad guys. The pregnant body therefore becomes the very sign of the text's self-undoing idealization.

An indefinite number of years after the apocalyptic event, the mother decides to leave the man and the boy and to take her own life (58). If she could, she would take the boy with her:

*You have two bullets and then what? [She confronts the father.] You cant protect us. You say you would die for us but what good is that? I'd take him with me if it werent for you. You know I would. It's the right thing to do. [ . . . ] Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They'll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you wont face it. You'd rather wait for it to happen. But I cant. I cant. (56)*

And then, as if that weren't enough: "You can think of me as a faithless slut if you like. I've taken a new lover. [ . . . ] I am done with my own whorish heart and I have been for a long time. [ . . . ] [M]y only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart" (57). The son will later express a desire to be with his mother that the father will misread (who is to say?) as a desire to be dead:

*You mustnt say that.  
But I do.  
Dont say it. It's a bad thing to say. (55)*

And the mother, who is long gone by the time the novel begins, returns in the father's dreams as a corpse bride, "[h]er nipples pipeplayed and her rib

bones painted white” (18). There is not much to unpack here! The woman is she who would call “you” seductively to your death, to traumatic dissolution (*jouissance*) and eternal nothingness. Woman is a dream that calls the man to “languor and death. [. . .] [H]e was learning how to wake himself from just such siren worlds” (18).

McCarthy’s father and son represent the symbolic fighting to hang on, to reestablish itself in a more general field of traumatic *jouissance*: a field populated by women, apocalypse, cannibals. This equation (women = death) is a familiar one, as old as the hills; and yet this project of getting rid of the mother, I would contend, partakes both of the desire to produce a kind of eternal logocentric-transcendent-present-time of masculine relation (for which reproduction is both required and disavowed), and at the same time betrays an identification with—of all things!—mothering. The rewarding surprise of *The Road*, for many readers, seems to be the record of intimate care provided by the man for his son (as he washes his hair, gives him swimming lessons, feeds him, and more generally reassures him). And this is a father who must manage, in the most charged of circumstances, the end of the world, the work of orchestrating separation and individuation. Certainly, *The Road* is a text for our time as we encounter the triumphant rugged masculinization of child care.

### *The Future: Nobody’s Home*

It’s hard to ignore the possibility that *The Road* was generated out of a deep-seated intimation of paternal mortality. McCarthy was seventy-four when the novel was published and was the father of a nine-year-old boy, John Francis McCarthy, to whom *The Road* is dedicated. “I am going to die,” says the fictional father; “Tell me how I am to do that” (175). But the novel can also be read as a rigorous defense against any such experience and perhaps even as a fantasy of escape from the Traumatic Real, a phantasmatic escape that Edelman designates “the Child.”

Edelman’s notorious and provocative association of queerness and the death drive argues that “*queerness* names the side of those *not* ‘fighting for the children,’ the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism” (*No Future* 3). While this may go without saying, it is crucial for Edelman that “queerness” not be thought of as a substantializable identity, but rather as a radically anti-essentialist concept: “Queerness as name may well reinforce the Symbolic order of naming, but it names what resists, as signifier, absorption into the

Imaginary identity of the name. Empty, excessive, and irreducible, it designates the letter, the formal element, the lifeless machinery responsible for animating the ‘spirit’ of futurity” (27). To put this in other terms, Edelman sees a certain critical potential in queerness as a resistance to phantasmatic ontological plenitude, understanding queerness as a resistance to being rather than simply as an “alternative lifestyle.” Making the case for what he also suggests is inevitable (this is one of the odd aspects of Edelman’s project), Edelman describes a queerness that, like it or not, disrupts Imaginary totalization. And the “pervasive” figure of the child, he suggests, is the preeminently fetishistic, totalizing, imaginary figure: the child is “the prop of the secular theology on which our social reality rests: the secular theology that shapes at once the meaning of our collective narratives and our collective narratives of meaning.”<sup>11</sup> “Fighting for the children,” Edelman argues, has become shorthand for a political sociosymbolic order that renders certain subjects abject.

Can we read *The Road* as a raging instance of the kind of fantasy Edelman outlines? Yes. But this is not simply pejorative; such a reading, after all, would place *The Road* in the company of *Hamlet*: “*Hamlet*,” Edelman argues, “no less than the Oedipus complex itself, belongs to the universe in which the Child has become the guarantor of futurity: a fantasy figure produced as the promise of secular temporal closure intended to restore an imaginary past in a future endlessly deferred” (148). Edelman’s reading of *Hamlet* dwells on the figure of Hamlet’s brain as a book that contains and preserves his father’s words:

*Remember thee?  
Yea, from the table of my memory  
I’ll wipe away all trivial fond records,  
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,  
That youth and observation copied there,  
And thy commandment all alone shall live  
Within the book and volume of my brain  
Unmixed with baser matter. (qtd. 154)*

This fantasy of a “living book,” argues Edelman, cheats Hamlet of a future—he can only be his father’s child—and renders him a kind of “monster of normativity” (166): “Futurism in this sense might be understood as a sort of proleptic hindsight: the father’s penetration from behind, from the back of what he thereby conceives as the future in an act of self-affirmation by which the Child, like Hamlet, gets screwed” (161).<sup>12</sup> The fantasy of the living book,

in other words, is the fantasy of logocentrism, of writing that is not material and perishable, but a set of magic signs that would transcend materiality.

*The Road* is similarly concerned with the father's book and also quite specifically with the destruction of the Western cultural tradition as archive (and it is, in fact, the very nature of this "destruction" that we must interrogate). In a crucial passage, the unnamed central character recalls a visit to a ruined library and contemplates the sheer and sodden materiality of writing without a future: "He picked up one of the books and thumbed through the heavy bloated pages. He'd not have thought the value of the smallest thing predicated on a world to come. It surprised him. That the space which these things occupied was itself an expectation" (187). Later he will contemplate "the names of things slowly following those things into oblivion" (88). But to follow Edelman's line of thought here is to ask if *The Road's* child, as a figure for the fullness of being, meaning, and goodness successfully comingled, is the one sign that transcends such ruin? As such, this child would belong to a narrative that vacillates between depicting a world of remains and inscribing an idealized future for the world. *The Road* seems willing to contemplate a kind of absolute mortality (the true end of "education," the last lesson), but this apparent confrontation, as we shall see, might also be said to enable fantasies of otherworldliness.<sup>15</sup>

In *Archive Fever*, Derrida unravels a semantic cluster (starting with *arkhe*) that reminds us of the importance of *housing* an archive. He argues, in fact, that there is no "archic" or "patriarchic" function without such a scene of domicile: "The meaning of 'archive,' its only meaning, comes to it from the Greek *arkheion*: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded [. . .]. [I]t is at their home, in that *place* which is their house [. . .] that official documents are filed. The archons are first of all the documents' guardians [. . .]. They are also accorded the hermeneutic right and competence" (2). These *archons* make an appearance in *The Road*, not surprisingly, as McCarthy's "fathers" with their "ledgerbooks." This novel forces us to contemplate the end of patriarchy and the end of writing, but it achieves some of its most haunting effects with its depictions of placelessness or near placelessness. In *The Road*, haunted spaces or places give way to the terrifying spectralization of place itself. In a telling moment, the father/man makes a phone call to *his* father's house from the remains of a roadside gas station: "The pumps standing with their hoses oddly still in place. The windows intact. The door to the service bay was open and he went in. [. . .] Dust and ash everywhere. [. . .] He crossed to the desk and stood there. Then he picked

up the phone and dialed the number of his father's house in that long ago. The boy watched him. What are you doing? he said" (6–7). Crucially, no one is home; no one could be home.<sup>14</sup> The father is dialing up his past. One hears here "my father's house has many rooms." For why, after all, is it the *father's* house (at once *the* place and the place that transcends spatiotemporality)? It is because according to the terms of this secular theology, this patriarchal ideology, nobody at home means no father, no patriarch, no God. *The Road*, in such moments, attempts to begin to mourn the (patriarchal) self and the whole world of that self, to bear witness to the passing of a cultural moment with its books and stories. *The Road* tells of the end of *this* subject, but it also records the end of his archive, which is *the* archive insofar as it is the patriarchal archive. And yet, as Edelman's work might suggest, *The Road* also seems peculiarly invested in this "death" precisely insofar as it remains tied to the self's immortality in the child. Phallogocentrism (and indeed every "ineducable" self) clings to that death which is not death. Hence, we can begin to think about the ways in which the child, and the father's relationship to the child in *The Road*, represents not merely patriarchal fantasies of omnipotence but also the fragile possibility of a move beyond such fantasies. And it is this possibility that I believe Derridean thought and post-Freudian psychoanalysis might allow us to articulate. For *The Road* is not without its postpatriarchal traces.

Derrida's account of the future, with its distinction between the messianic and messianism (a call to the wholly other to come as opposed to the closed future anticipated by religions of the messiah), differs, not surprisingly, from the critique of futurism offered by Edelman: "It is a question of this performative to come whose archive no longer has any relation to the record of what is, to the record of the presence of what is or will have been actually present. I call this the messianic, and I distinguish it radically from all messianism" (*Archive* 72).<sup>15</sup> What this means for Derrida—who like McCarthy can be said to have witnessed the "end" of his cultural moment and to have written about it—is that the archive is not merely filled with the decaying work of dead white men; rather, the archive poses the very question of the future: "[T]he question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow [. . .] a spectral messianicity is at work in the concept of the archive and ties it, like religion, like history, like science itself to a very singular experience of the promise" (*Archive* 36).<sup>16</sup> And such formulations do not simply locate Derrida on the side of the future, precisely because deconstruction tends to take sides apart. There is no future without (also) repetition, no archive without the death drive:

*If repetition is thus inscribed at the heart of the future to come, one must also import there, in the same stroke, the death drive, the violence of forgetting, superrepression (suppression and repression), the anarchic, in short the possibility of putting to death the very thing, whatever its name, which carries the law in its tradition: the archon of the archive, the table, what carries the table and who carries the table, the subjectile, the substrate, and the subject of the law. (79)*

Death (and this will come as no surprise to any reader of Derrida) always already haunts the archive, and this haunting significantly distinguishes Derrida's philosophy from McCarthy's fictional vision of death as a cataclysmic occurrence that comes from the outside.<sup>17</sup>

Edelman, however, wants no part of the future, even in Derridean terms. In "Against Survival," he writes in surprisingly critical terms of Derrida's blighted affirmation of the future to come: "This fantasmatic future, even when adduced without explicit belief in its possible realization, even when understood as performatively instantiating the openness for which it calls, imposes on messianicity a form that is already our own, reflecting in this the rigor mortis of our attachment to the Symbolic order and to the name of the father that Derrida, like Hamlet, construes as 'life'" (162). For Edelman, in other words, Derrida's future-to-come, his future "if there is any," is still filled in with something like a "form that is already our own." Edelman turns to the interview given shortly after 9/11 in which Derrida designates what is "unacceptable" in the "'strategy' [. . .] of the 'bin Laden effect'" ("not only the cruelty, the disregard for human life, the disrespect for law, for women, the use of what is worst in technocapitalist modernity for the purposes of religious fanaticism. No, it is, above all, the fact that such actions and such discourses *open onto no future, and, in my view, have no future* [. . .]. [T]here is, it seems to me, *nothing good* to be hoped for from that quarter" [qtd. in Edelman, "Against" 163]). Edelman objects to Derrida's attempt to have bin Laden stand for a kind of sheer negativity (incorrectly, in Edelman's assessment), and this, in turn, reconfigures the future as Imaginary projection rather than as locus of the Traumatic Real. "How," Edelman asks, "could an event take place *for us* if the event itself, as the radically unknown, would revoke the ways of knowing by which we understand ourselves and thereby understand our world? How can we survive the event that ruptures the order of survival itself?" (162). While he is certainly willing to endorse Derrida's complication of the opposition

between life and death and his affinity for the specter, Edelman cannot read Derrida's "messianic" as anything but symptomatic. Derrida, despite his critique of phallogocentrism, is tainted by normative secular theology, argues Edelman: he complicates the opposition between life and death but then chooses "life."<sup>18</sup> This, for Edelman, means choosing "death" (because the future, for a heteroimperative reproductive futurism, is really the past). Edelman, on the other hand, chooses "death," which for him means choosing "life": the radical refusal of any recuperative conservative repetitive gesture that leaves the way open to the new, to the event. But these reversals seem to turn us around in circles and bring us back again to the very binaristic terrain that Derrida began by problematizing. Edelman's absolute "no" to the future emerges from a reification of precisely that Symbolic (with a capital "S") that his work would claim to undermine.<sup>19</sup>

And where is McCarthy in this picture? How does he see the future? Some readers have suggested that *The Road* distinguishes itself from other examples of the postapocalyptic genre precisely by not depicting a rebuilding of the world and instead attempting to depict the time and place of no future.<sup>20</sup> But I would like to suggest that *The Road* (for all the ways in which McCarthy's work might resist deconstruction) shares with Derrida a sense of faith in the future precisely as performative. Consider, for example, McCarthy's affecting depiction of the performative force of familial bonds.<sup>21</sup> One of the man's responses to this erasure of the past, with its implication of no future (he hasn't "kept a calendar in years"), is precisely to ignore it, to disavow it, as a gift to his son; this is what it means to make a "world" for his son, since each is to the other the "world entire" (6). Thus the father acts as if there is a future; they have a goal, and it is very important that they reach the coast ("He said that everything depended on reaching the coast, yet waking in the night he knew that all of this was empty and no substance to it" [29]). The son will later return his father's message when he inquires after their "long term goals":

*He looked at his father. What are our long term goals?  
he said.*

*What?*

*Our long term goals.*

*Where did you hear that?*

*I dont know. (160)*

The father's production of a future that he doesn't believe in functions as an act of faith (and this is very much a novel of faith, the father's faith in his

son and the son's faith in his father), and we don't know, finally, quite how to distinguish this faith from a lie:

*Do you think I lie to you?*

*No.*

*But you think I might lie to you about dying.*

*Yes.*

*Okay. I might. But we're not dying.*

*Okay. (101)*

And in an insightful way, the odd temporal space (if one can risk such a formulation) generated by the future/no future moment, the moment of what I'm calling the father's disavowal, is a kind of radical present. Not surprisingly, McCarthy's language repeatedly allegorizes this "moment" in theological terms, but it is also a crucial part of what I would insist on calling the utopian dimension of McCarthy's novel: "No lists of things to be done. The day providential to itself. The hour. There is no later. This is later. [. . .] So, he whispered to the sleeping boy. I have you" (54). The future/no future moment is also the time of the bond, the time of relation.

Hence the world of *The Road* is not only fragile because some traumatic "outside" event has occurred. This fictional premise also allows us to witness the tenuousness of all relation and of all being, a tenuousness that McCarthy also represents for us with a memorably rewritten mirror scene (one that will certainly register with any reader of the psychoanalytic literature). Instead of an infant jubilantly misrecognizing his own autonomy (even as he is supported by his mother), McCarthy's son will save his father from an act of fantastic obliteration: "They came upon themselves in a mirror and he almost raised the pistol. It's us, Papa, the boy whispered. It's us" (132). The novel also conveys this fragility with certain repeated utterances between the man and the boy. A crucial word in almost all of their exchanges is "okay":

*Okay.*

*Okay what?*

*Nothing. Just okay.*

*Go to sleep.*

*Okay.*

*I'm going to blow out the lamp. Is that okay?*

*Yes. That's okay. (10)*



The very spareness of the language foregrounds the function of this minimal and repeated word; its function, as Jakobson would tell us, is “phatic”—it works to ensure that the “channel of communication” is open and that there is indeed a connection between these two beings.<sup>22</sup> And “okay” effects this connection in *The Road* even as it tends to signal the end of a particular verbal exchange. *Okay* says: “Okay. We will keep on going. We will keep on being in relation. Okay.” The text highlights a similar linguistic function with its play on the constative and the performative. Recall, for example, two of the novel’s crucial though minimal sentences: “There’s a little boy” (84) and “There are people” (244). The peculiarity of these sentences is all the more apparent when they are heard out of context: they are nothing if they are not constative utterances, mere declarations or statements of fact; and yet it is as statements of fact that they must be asserted with a kind of blind and performative insistence. The vulnerability of human-being-in-relation is effectively conveyed by such sentences, as it is by McCarthy’s persistent play on “world” and “word”: “the world a lie every word” (75).<sup>23</sup> *The Road* inscribes its own fictionality and its author’s identification with a waning tradition of aggressively minimalist, masculine prose on the surface of an apocalyptic encounter with the near impossibility of relation.

### *An Ethics of Abandonment*

In one of *The Road*’s most disturbing incidents, father and son encounter a house in which a group of captives is being held in a basement and gradually cannibalized: “Huddled against the backwall 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. [. . .] Then one by one they turned and blinked in the pitiful light. Help us, they whispered. Please help us” (110). With its reference to chattel slavery (“Chattel slaves had once trod those boards bearing food and drink on silver trays” [106]), this episode resonates as at once psychologically primitive and American-historical (this is one of few moments in the text that readers have used to establish location in this borderless world of ruin). The boy is profoundly troubled not only by the scene he and his father witness but more crucially by their failure to respond to the call for help. This is something that he must revisit and work through in characteristic conversation with his father:

*And we couldnt help them because then they'd eat us too.*  
*Yes.*  
*And that's why we couldnt help them.*  
*Yes.*  
*Okay. (127)*

and again:

*We wouldnt ever eat anybody, would we?*  
*No. Of course not.*  
*[. . .]*  
*But we wouldnt.*  
*No. We wouldnt.*  
*No matter what.*  
*No. No matter what.*  
*Because we're the good guys.*  
*Yes.*  
*And we're carrying the fire.*  
*And we're carrying the fire. Yes.*  
*Okay. (128-29)*

The boy, as these lines make clear, is principally characterized by his intense anxiety about goodness and about the potential harm done to others. He represents something of a miracle (or a god) to his father in his very wish both to give to and forgive those whom they encounter along the road (the father, significantly, only wants to give to his son, and in so doing expresses a repeated desire for forgiveness for himself). The boy gives “Ely” food, and the father, while questioning Ely, emphasizes the near unthinkability of this gesture.

*People give you things. [. . .]*  
*No they dont.*  
*You did.*  
*No I didnt. The boy did. (170)*

The boy also begs for the life of the thief, and this is in stark contrast to his father’s constant perception of his fellow man as dangerous and monstrous: “This was the first human being other than the boy that he’d spoken to in more than a year. My brother at last. The reptilian calculations in those cold and shifting eyes. The gray and rotting teeth. Claggy with human flesh. Who has made the world a lie every word” (75). The boy’s anxious care even

extends to a possibly hallucinatory other boy, a dog, a dead baby (“If we had that little baby it could go with us” [200]), and other good others who would be just like himself and his father. The father regularly protects his son from anxious dissolution by recognizing his fear (“I know”) and apologizing (“I’m sorry”), and in a particularly interesting protective moment, by participating in his son’s capacity for imagining good others. In the face of “nothing,” the boy posits: “There must be something [on the other side of the water].” The father enters into the fantasy:

*Maybe there’s a father and his little boy and they’re sitting on the beach.*

*That would be okay.*

*Yes. That would be okay.*

*And they could be carrying the fire too?*

*They could be. Yes.*

*But we don’t know.*

*We don’t know.*

*So we have to be vigilant. (216)*

While I hardly want to dispute that this child at the end of the world is “good,” I do want to supplement this (apparently banal) observation by remarking again upon the stark Kleinian schizoid opposition between good and bad and the way in which it is both opposed to and negotiates with a “depressive” possibility. From the perspective of a Kleinian allegory, the son, precisely in his radical vulnerability, and with his language of the vulnerability of the other, represents the developmental emergence of a depressive position in a paranoid-schizoid world. (“The drive to make reparation [. . .] shows a more realistic response to the feeling of grief, guilt and fear of loss resulting from the aggression against the love object” [Klein 189].) This is worth bearing in mind when we consider that to read *The Road* is to experience the good child as at once the man’s projection and a separate character or person (a reality we experience particularly in the novel’s dialogue). And this duality speaks, of course, to the mundane reality of our relationship to otherness: the other is all our projection, and *yet* there is also an other. The same structure describes the father’s relationship to the future: he is torn between the appeal to an eternal present, the utopian space of idealized relation between father and son (and this is also, as I have suggested, the appeal of destruction as logocentric fantasy), and the appeal of a future for his son (hence a future *per se*) that is inseparable from his own death and, thus, from his own abandonment of the child.

These two irreconcilable investments are also haunted by a third investment in his (the father's) own immortality. It is this third dimension that Edelman effectively analyzes in his account of the hegemonic fantasy of the child and the future: "The affirmation of such a survival, which extends the living being's identity, at its preference, into the future, enacts a resistance to the radical event as which the future is also invoked" ("Against" 162). Insofar as this patriarchal desire for immortality does not tell us the whole story, perhaps we need to turn (again) to a Derridean account and witness a father faced with an ethical demand that he performatively produce a future for his child by demonstrating faith in a tomorrow about which he knows nothing except that it would contain his own nonbeing: "Slumping along. Filthy, ragged, hopeless. He'd stop and lean on the cart and the boy would go on and then stop and look back and he would raise his weeping eyes and see him standing there in the road looking back at him from some unimaginable future, glowing in that waste like a tabernacle" (273).

We read literary texts, in part, because we want to encounter representations and experiences of intense psychic conflict, and in this respect, *The Road* surely does not disappoint. As I have been suggesting, McCarthy's novel is characterized by a conflict between mourning, with its acceptance of the need to relinquish so that there can be a future (and its characteristic disruptive moments of resistance along the way), and a more grandiose economy divided between fantasies of radical destruction (no meaning) and transcendent meaning, God's meaning, or destruction as holocaust: the absolute gift. *The Road*, we might say, gives us *mourning* as a "secular theology," complete with all the internal tension that this phrase harbors.

"Any subject's primary responsibility to the other subject," writes Benjamin, "is to be her intervening or surviving other" (*Shadow* 99). Like Winnicott (who famously suggests that "there is no such thing as an infant"), Benjamin invokes a primal relation of care, and her work examines processes of separation as an alternative to radical notions of individuation.<sup>24</sup> The "good enough" parent's job, from this relational perspective, is precisely to strategically and gradually fail the child and thus to be other, separate and real, rather than omnipotent (neither all powerful nor entirely subject to the child's control). To note the extraordinarily charged question of separation in *The Road's* apocalyptic landscape is, perhaps, to come to the recognition that love is always the end of the world. On some level it seems fair to say that *The Road* understands very well the affective complex that would resist development and the relinquishment of fantasied omnipotence: indeed, it figures this resistance as a fantasy scenario of the end of the world. The

father's first words to his son are "I'm right here"; the son's reply: "I know" (5). But the novel also includes traces or glimpses of another world and of what we might call *ethical abandonment*.

An ethical burden realizes itself, for McCarthy's father figure, in the form of an almost unbearable question. *The Road* is full of conversations about the father and the son's radical interdependency: "each the other's world entire." But in addition, the father also considers more privately (this is the father's interiority) whether or not he could kill his son were this the only remaining option:

*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 doesn't 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. (114)*

To suspend the narrative premise of *The Road* is to be reminded of how peculiar it is to be reading a narrative that concerns a parent's sovereign power over his child's life or death (peculiar unless you've read Toni Morrison or are thinking about abortion). *The Road* then comes back into focus as a kind of political origin story (a story that theorizes the emergence of the political from the familial, the origins of absolute paternal power and related questions of ethical judgment). But what does it mean that the father's ultimate answer to his own question here is "no": I couldn't kill my son even if it were the "right" or best thing to do, I cannot make this sacrifice? Should we conclude that McCarthy's father is not Abraham—and not God? Or should we simply note that this contemplated paternal violence constitutes the return of what has previously been banished from this landscape, the ambivalence internal to the father-son relation? And finally, how do we come to terms with the possibility that in the scenario McCarthy depicts, killing the child would also represent keeping a certain promise to the child and refusing to tolerate any separation?<sup>25</sup> At the very end of the novel the son asks his father to

*Just take me with you. Please.  
I cant.  
Please, Papa.  
I cant. I cant hold my son dead in my arms. I thought I could but I cant.  
You said you wouldnt ever leave me. (279)*

*The Road*, in other words, does not completely remain inside what Edelman characterizes as a desire to protect the other who is really only ourselves. Edelman takes on with unmatched wit and vitriol the extent to which we succumb to this false desire, hence misrecognizing Oedipal urges as ethical goals in taking up the side of the children. But I want to suggest that maybe—and just maybe—McCarthy’s father is also able to contemplate his own irrelevance to the son and to the future. Winnicott depicts a clinical scene whereby a subject glimpses externality, “the world,” through a destruction of the beloved object (“Should the philosopher come out of his chair,” writes Winnicott, “and sit on the floor with his patient [. . .] he will find that there is an intermediate position. In other words, he will find that after ‘subject relates to object’ comes ‘subject destroys object’ [as it becomes external]; and then may come ‘object survives destruction by the subject.’ But there may or may not be survival” [*Playing go*]). If in Winnicott’s developmental scheme it is the child who must come to destroy, tolerate, and survive the other’s otherness, in McCarthy’s novel it is the father. And indeed, McCarthy’s paternal and decidedly allegorical figure does seem to minimally register that the future, if there is one (as Derrida would say), is not his and that for him this future is, by definition, unimaginable. Waking from a dream of “creatures of a kind he’d never seen before [. . .] crouching by the side of his cot,” the father “turned and looked at 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” (153–54).

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## Notes

- 1 A crucial precursor text for *The Road*, I would suggest, is Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Roger Malvin’s Burial.” Hawthorne’s tale is the son’s story; *The Road* is the father’s. “Roger Malvin” encodes the prehistory of the United States; *The Road* is about its apparent end. Hawthorne’s tale, similarly situated in the wilderness, leaves a son in the position of either obeying the father (by killing him: abandoning the father in order to go on with the son’s own life) or rebelling against the father (by choosing death for oneself, thereby fulfilling a kind of absolute and purifying responsibility). Malvin wants his son-in-law, Reuben Bourne, to survive him, to live on and remember him, to erect a memorial for him and to him. But the father’s desire and command would also forever after implicate the son in the violence of having killed the father, who is already a kind of undecidably murderous and heroic figure (Hawthorne’s

- story knows before Freud that mourning is also a kind of murder). What Reuben Bourne can't bear is his own implication in this violence. This son hears the father (buried alive?) speaking and calling to him from an interiority that is also the space of the wilderness. Hawthorne thus offers us an account of the formation of the (national) superego that is simultaneously an account of melancholia, that deadly refusal of mourning. A certain masculine fantasy of nonviolence (which can result in the worst forms of violence) also informs *The Road*, as does a powerful, if less complex, mapping of internal and external space. In McCarthy's world, a sense of founding guilt has been transformed into a sense of relentless (undeserved) persecution.
- 2 Another crucial text to place in conversation with *The Road* is David Vann's "Sukkwan Island." Vann has spoken of his irritation with the critical assumption that his text in some way follows from McCarthy's: "I actually wrote it long before he wrote *The Road*. I wrote *Legend of a Suicide* fourteen years ago, before he even had the idea for *The Road*, so it pisses me off that people think it's derivative of the father and son relationship in *The Road*. I wouldn't have written something that had so many parallels with *The Road* because I wouldn't want to be like someone else" (Interview). While Vann's story is also about a father and son who must survive in the wilderness, the very idea of starting civilization all over again is clearly marked as the destructive and pathological fantasy of the father character. Indeed, the father's destruction manages an impossible feat (and rupture of narrative form): he becomes solely responsible for his son's suicide.
- 3 One might consider McCarthy's effort to imagine the end of patriarchy in relationship to Nancy Armstrong's account of the British postdomestic, postfamilial, contemporary novel: "Rather than putting up a traditional defense of family and individual, such novels participate in an international effort to imagine life after the family as both livable and dignified. They renew the novel form" (10). How are we to read McCarthy's turn toward, as opposed to away from, the family? My effort here will be to read this turn as something other than merely resistant, conservative, and symptomatic.
- 4 See, for example, Butler: "Is there something to be gained from grieving, from tarrying with grief, from remaining exposed to its unbearability and not endeavoring to seek a resolution for grief through violence? [. . .] To foreclose that vulnerability, to banish it, to make ourselves secure at the expense of every other human consideration is to eradicate one of the most important resources from which we must take our bearings and find our way" (*Precarious* 30).
- 5 In her reading of *The Road* as grail narrative, Lydia Cooper suggests, "The apocalypticism of *The Road* seems to be a response to an immediate and visceral fear of cataclysmic doom in the United States after the terrorist attacks on 9/11" (221). This position is further nuanced with a turn to Baudrillard's argument that the West's fear of terror is inseparable from a certain fantastic guilty complicity in its own destruction, which is in turn related to a fantasy of omnipotence (221–22).
- 6 I haven't located any reference to the father's mother in the text. There are two brief references to the man's father and to an idealized day spent with his uncle; we

- also encounter the community represented as an all-male archaic society in a recollected scene of mass snake burning (188).
- 7 Hanna Rosin quotes biologist Ronald Ericsson: “Did male dominance exist? Of course it existed. But it seems to be gone now. And the era of the firstborn son is totally gone”; social worker Mustafaa El-Scari addresses his weekly class on fathering for men who have failed to pay child support: “What is our role? Everyone’s telling us we’re supposed to be the head of a nuclear family, so you feel like you got robbed. It’s toxic, and poisonous, and it’s setting us up for failure.”
- 8 Thomas A. Carlson’s Heideggerian reading of *The Road* similarly locates a certain ethical possibility in what he calls “the suspension of the world”: “The suspension of the world—held up here as story—is not absolute darkness but the illumination of darkness, the appearance of a disappearance that itself serves to highlight a founding possibility and the condition of all appearance—and indeed the power of every birth: that, in its essential vulnerability, it well could have not been and could yet cease to be” (59). See Snyder, who traces the significance of a Derridean and Levinasian account of hospitality, for another version of an ethical reading. Snyder suggests that the son represents an ethical crisis for the father that is resolved by an affirmative ending: “Regardless of whether this family can ultimately survive the destruction of the earth, the novel ends with a positive affirmation of hospitality as a meaningful continuing ethic” (85).
- 9 It is surely no accident that the little bit of “paradise” the father and son encounter in their travels is a bomb shelter filled with “the richness of a vanished world.” The father reassures his son that those to whom this shelter belonged were “good guys,” like themselves. This scene registers nostalgia for Cold War America, of course, but it also illustrates the very way in which paranoia functions to produce, through splitting, the ideal or the good.
- 10 The coin and the arrowhead also raise the question of what it means to think of this cultural inheritance as belonging to the (white) father.
- 11 Edelman does distinguish this figure of the child from the lived experience of any historical/biological children: “Though that division is never stable, since the latter is constantly subject to cultural articulation as the former, it provides an important basis for trying to recognize the distinction between an ideological construct and the substrate (unknowable outside of ideology) on which the construct is etched” (“Against” 156). In other words, what is justified in the name of “the Child” may very well work against the interests of children; but at the same time, Edelman doesn’t want to suggest that we can wholly or simply separate out ideal and material children.
- 12 At stake here is the question of how to assess the gift or burden of the father’s writing (hence, we are back in the world of “Roger Malvin’s Burial”). Derrida writes: “[O]ne can sign neither a child nor a work” (qtd. in Edelman, “Against” 152n9). And how can one ignore McCarthy’s publicly declared decision to reserve all autographed copies of *The Road* for his son John, whom, he claims in an interview, is also the novel’s “coauthor”: “[A] lot of the lines that are in there are verbatim conversations my son John and I had. [. . .] There are signed copies



- of the book, but they all belong to my son John, so when he turns 18 he can sell them and go to Las Vegas or whatever. No, those are the only signed copies of the book” (“Hollywood’s”).
- 13 See Zibrak, whose title says it all: “Intolerance, A Survival Guide: Heteronormative Culture Formation in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*.” For Zibrak, Edelman’s analysis entirely accounts for *The Road*: “The future that preoccupies the desire of the man is his own; the boy only serves as an extension of the man’s ideological life, not as a man in his own right” (109). See also Kearney, who argues for more nuance (“[T]he novel wavers in the dialectic between the hope of reproductive futurism and the Real of finitude”), although he ultimately comes down on one side: “This tension between the transcendental and the immanent, between ‘the fire’ and the ‘coldly secular,’ ‘intestate’ world, I argue, tends toward a universe without transcendence and without the assurance of a symbolic Other” (174).
- 14 One might almost have expected the man to have reached an abandoned answering machine. “A spectral response (thus informed by a *technē* and inscribed in an archive) is always possible,” writes Derrida in *Archive Fever*, “a bit like the answering machine whose voice outlives its moment of recording: you call, the other person is dead, now, whether you know it or not, and the voice responds to you, in a very precise fashion, sometimes cheerfully” (62).
- 15 See also Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*: “Can one conceive an atheological heritage of the messianic? [. . .] [T]he messianic, including its revolutionary forms [. . .] would be urgency, imminence but, irreducible paradox, a waiting without horizon of expectation” (168).
- 16 In *Learning to Live Finally*, Derrida speaks of a “double feeling” that his writing will only begin to be read in the future *and* that it will die with him in being reduced to its shelf life/death: “[O]n the one hand, to put it playfully and with a certain immodesty, one has not yet begun to read me, that even though there are, to be sure, many very good readers (a few dozen in the world perhaps, people who are also writer-thinkers, poets), in the end it is later on that all this has a chance of appearing; but also, on the other hand, and thus simultaneously, I have the feeling that two weeks or a month after my death *there will be nothing left*. Nothing except what has been copy-righted and deposited in libraries. I swear to you, I believe sincerely and simultaneously in these two hypotheses” (34).
- 17 McCarthy’s play, *The Sunset Limited*, was published in the same year as *The Road* and reads as a kind of companion piece. One encounters here, too, questions of responsibility (“You run into people and maybe some of them are in trouble or whatever but it doesn’t mean that you’re responsible for them” [4]), belief in “cultural things,” and a “world [that] is largely gone” (25). Indeed, the play more generally explores what might sustain or fail to sustain one as a living being. Problematically and unapologetically, however, *Sunset* allegorizes all of the differences that it wants to explore through an opposition between its two characters: the faithless “White,” a middle-aged college professor who has just attempted suicide, and the evangelical “Black,” the man of a similar age who saved him and who subsequently attempts to talk him out

- of his depression. The most obvious place to begin a reading of *Sunset*, then, would be with Toni Morrison's classic *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Surely, McCarthy's dramatic text is situated in the American tradition that subordinates black characters to the psychological demands of white subjecthood (and it doesn't help that the stage directions regularly refer to Black as "the black" and White as "the professor"!). One could begin to tease out a more subtle thread by beginning with Black's final words after the still (presumably) suicidal White has departed. Black addresses God using a word, "okay," that is crucial in the exchanges between father and son in *The Road*: "If you wanted me to help him how come you didn't give me the words? You give em to him. What about me? [. . .] That's all right. That's all right. If you never speak again you know I'll keep your word. You know I will. You know I'm good for it [. . .] Is that okay? Is that okay?" (142-43). Here, as in *The Road*, "okay" serves to defer a final cognitive/ethical assessment of the question under discussion while performing Jakobson's phatic linguistic function of re-positing and reaffirming a linguistic channel of communication, or a relation (see note 22 below).
- 18 Edelman makes this point when he reads the "dead-ication" to Derrida's *Archive Fever*. Derrida dedicates his text to Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, whose work he is engaged with, and also to his sons and to "the memory of my father, who was also called, as is life itself, Hayim." In Edelman's analysis, this constitutes a return "to the father twice over" and thus the very "figure of vitality" is "mortified" (*Against* 161).
- 19 Edelman's work thus seems to confirm Judith Butler's suspicion in *Antigone's Claim*: "Although Lacan's theorization of the symbolic is meant to take the place of those accounts of kinship grounded in nature or theology, it continues to wield the force of universality. [. . .] [D]oes this understanding of universalization work to usher in God (or the gods) through another door?" (44-45). One might also detour back to Hawthorne at this point and note the odd correlation between Lee Edelman and Reuben Bourne. Bourne is the kind of classically father-haunted Oedipal subject whom Edelman so cannily diagnoses ("His inwardness marks the struggle between two forms of human subject: that of the now-dead model of heroic, because unfathered subjectivity and that of the Child commanded, by the father, to preserve that older model, but helpless, by its very fidelity to the command, ever to succeed in doing so" ["Against" 167]). Nevertheless, I would contend that Bourne's dream of non-implication in violence (other than the violence of self-destruction—and we are obviously still on Oedipal terrain) is not so far removed from Edelman's invocation of an absolute "no" to the future.
- 20 See, for example, Curtis, who argues that *The Road* is one of the exceptions to the postapocalyptic genre in its refusal of "any sustained analysis of starting over" (12).
- 21 Hungerford comments on what one might call McCarthy's faith in the performative capacity of language with her reading of the end of *The Road*. She writes of the novel's final passage: "Who tells us this? [. . .] [T]he description of the trout are the father's words, the narrator's word, and God's words. Their lyricism, their

- sensuousness, flaunt the power of the word to evoke a world. [. . .] [T]he final wordfish of *The Road* feel like sheer assertion, without even the fiction of an immortal character to keep them pinned to the world” (136). For another effective reading of the enigmatic end of McCarthy’s text, see Schaub: “McCarthy closes his novel with a master topos of western belief placed here as a kind of epitaph for the world’s body.”
- 22 Jakobson writes of the phatic function: “There are messages primarily serving to establish, to prolong, or to discontinue communication, to check whether the channel works. [. . .] The endeavor to start and sustain communication is typical of talking birds; thus the phatic function of language is the only one they share with human beings. It is also the first verbal function acquired by infants; they are prone to communicate before being able to send or receive informative communication” (68, 69).
- 23 See Austin’s own dismantling of the constative/performative opposition at the end of his famous series of lectures (145–47).
- 24 In a 1960 article, “The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship,” Winnicott commented on Freud’s surprising neglect of the infant’s absolute dependency on the maternal function: “I once said,” writes Winnicott, “There is no such thing as an infant,” meaning, of course, that whenever one finds an infant one finds maternal care, and without maternal care there would be no infant” (587n4).
- 25 There is one formally very disquieting passage in the novel when the narrative voice markedly shifts. The man speaks in the first person and invokes a time back before the mother’s departure when he attempted to capture and kill a dog but ultimately promised his crying and begging son that he would not hurt the animal. The passage concludes: “The next day it was gone. That is the dog he remembers. He doesn’t remember any little boys” (87). So there never were any other little boys other than his son, we are told. This passage seems to need to perform the work of insisting (but to whom?) that the man would never have deserted a child. It would seem to convey the difficulty of the man’s ethical commitment to his son and by extension to all children. Intriguingly, a particularly famous advocate of the right to death, Thomas Szasz, reads the traditional religious prohibition of suicide as indicative of a profound human anxiety concerning abandonment: “I am suggesting that man’s invention of a God from whom he must never be separated and the prohibition of suicide arise from and satisfy the same basic need—the child’s need never to be separated from his parent” (112).

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