

Spring 2012

**“Shuffling Through the Ash, Each the Other’s World Entire”:
Cormac McCarthy’s The Road in the Wake of 9/11**

Heidi Stoffer

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/jostes>

Recommended Citation

Stoffer, H. (2012). “Shuffling Through the Ash, Each the Other’s World Entire”: Cormac McCarthy’s The Road in the Wake of 9/11. *Jostes: The Journal of South Texas English Studies*, 3(2), 1-20.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of South Texas English Studies* by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. For more information, please contact justin.white@utrgv.edu, william.flores01@utrgv.edu.

“Shuffling Through the Ash, Each the Other’s World Entire”: Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* in
the Wake of 9/11

Heidi Stoffer, Kent State University

Cormac McCarthy has never been one to shy away from acts of destruction, graphic violence, or humanity’s capacity for evil in his work. In fact, he often presents acts of depravity as being central to human experience and the world as being one beyond redemption. McCarthy famously stated in a rare *New York Times* interview, “ ‘There’s no such thing as life without bloodshed. I think the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea. Those who are afflicted with this notion are the first ones to give up their souls, their freedom. Your desire that it be that way will enslave you and make your life vacuous’ ”(Woodward).¹ This statement is reflected in the overarching pessimism of McCarthy’s work in which good rarely, if ever, triumphs over evil, and suggests the author’s potentially nihilistic attitude toward life in general. However, McCarthy’s most recent novel, *The Road*, seems to complicate his previous assertions about reality and the nature of evil in that, comparatively, this novel seems to conclude more hopefully than his others as there is at least potential for goodness in its post-apocalyptic world.

It is difficult to consider the “ashes of the late world” (McCarthy 11) in *The Road* without it bringing to mind the attacks of September 11 in New York City and the swirling ashes that floated through the streets of the city for weeks. *The Road* makes no mention of 9/11, there are no terrorist threats, and there are no planes cutting the landscape of a sunny fall morning. While McCarthy does not engage the events of 9/11 directly as his subject matter, there do seem to be traces of the effects of this watershed moment in *The Road*. The novel is a meditation on the nature of trauma and how the ambiguous event that in effect destroys the world in *The Road*

eludes representation but remains ever-present in the lives of the characters. Naturally, historical traumas like 9/11 call into question issues of good and evil, reality and illusion, life before the event and life after the event. These topics are of particular importance in regards to 9/11 because of the dramatic response of the United States to the attacks in that the unimaginable occurred: “It happened to us.” This event shattered the illusion that America is an impenetrable force beloved by the rest of the world. Rather than treating 9/11 as a wake-up call, the responses to 9/11 seemed to be mainly nationalistic or retaliatory in nature. In this way, these binaries of good versus evil, tradition versus progress, etc. became more distinct and were used as justification for violence and discrimination. McCarthy directly engages these issues in *The Road* and suggests that these dichotomies of good and evil, past and present, truth and lies inevitably begin to overlap in surviving traumatic experience, despite attempts, particularly in the American government’s narrative of 9/11, to view them as separate and oppositional entities. While some may consider McCarthy’s latest work as continuous with his other novels in his interest in the nature of human morality or as heading in a new direction in that it more optimistically endorses the notion of possibility, *The Road* is ultimately a story of a departure from the site of trauma, and, particularly in the context of 9/11, asks whether the borders we impose to protect ourselves both physically and psychically actually prevent the possibility for peace and understanding.

The Road of Departure From Trauma

What is interesting about *The Road* is that the mysterious disaster that has virtually destroyed the world, turning it into a desolate wasteland, is never made explicit in the novel and is paradoxically an absence despite the event’s ever-presence in the lives of the characters. Unlike the ubiquitous image of the planes crashing into the Twin Towers on September 11

burned into the minds of people all over the world, virtually no representations of this event in *The Road* exist and the characters never seem to articulate the disaster itself. The moment of this event is not even mentioned until fifty pages into the novel and the description given is obscure at best. One learns that “The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions...He went into the bathroom and threw the lightswitch but the power was already gone” (McCarthy 52). This merely reveals that the event occurred, but seems to contain no explanation in terms of what happened or why it did. There are traces of the event that appear throughout the text and allude to possible scenarios—the ever-present “ash blowing in loose swirls” (McCarthy 4) and people “wearing masks and goggles...like ruined aviators” (McCarthy 28) as suggestive of nuclear winter, or the earthquakes, storms, “charred and limbless trunks of trees” (McCarthy 8) as aftereffects of some natural disaster—but these explanations are purely conjecture. McCarthy withholds from the reader the nature of the disaster and emphasizes that it is perhaps less important to comprehend the trauma itself than to learn how to go on living when life seems to be over.

While one is able to associate visual images with 9/11, learn of the terrorists’ motivations for the attacks, and consider the media’s role in creating a narrative of these events, like the apocalypse of McCarthy’s novel, in many ways it is nearly impossible to “know” or “understand” 9/11, and the events themselves remain elusive even after nearly ten years have elapsed. This gap in knowledge, the elusiveness of experience, is inherent in the nature of trauma itself. Leading trauma theorist Cathy Caruth suggests that trauma is a wound to the psyche that prevents conscious knowledge of an experience.<2> She explains the paradoxical nature of trauma in that it is “...a crisis that is marked, not by a simple knowledge, but by the ways it simultaneously defies and demands our witness” (Caruth 5). In addition, she claims that the

event or “accident” itself does not enact the shock to the psyche, but, “The trauma of the accident, its very unconsciousness, is borne by an act of departure” the idea that one is traumatized by having to survive after the event has occurred (Caruth 22). In light of Caruth’s definition of trauma, one can view *The Road* as allegorical of the psychic journey one takes when forced to walk away from the site of disaster.

Though the actuality of the events of the apocalypse in *The Road* may or may not be similar to the kind of attack on 9/11, what does seem clear is that the responses to McCarthy’s imaginary trauma and those of September 11 do bear striking similarity. One of the most memorable aspects of the immediate aftermath of 9/11 was the profound inclination to act, or react, after the tragedy, though these reactions varied from philanthropic efforts of hope to violent acts of hatred. According to critic Kristiaan Versluys, the issue of time played a crucial role in the range of responses to 9/11, as it typically does in traumatic events in general. Just as Caruth suggests of trauma in general, he believes that the events of September 11 in particular happened so quickly and unexpectedly that they were virtually inconceivable in their reality as they happened. Versluys contends that “In the instantaneity of its horror and in its far-flung repercussions, 9/11 is unpossessable. It is a limit event that shatters the symbolic resources of the culture and defeats the normal processes of meaning making and semiosis” (1). He goes on to note one of the more prominent responses in the post 9/11 “need to know” and states an “instant discursivization that marked the immediate aftermath of 9/11 comprises the innumerable missing-person signs that were put up all over New York City after the collapse of the buildings” (Versluys 7).<3> Although *The Road* takes place years after the mysterious disaster, there are hints of the immediate response to the tragedy that seem reminiscent of the real-life 9/11 aftermath. As the main characters of the novel, the unnamed man and his unnamed son, travel

down the seemingly endless road toward the southern coast struggling to survive in a post-apocalyptic type of world, “They began to come upon from time to time small cairns of rock by the roadside...hopeless messages to loved ones lost and dead...the soft black talc blew through the streets like squid ink uncoiling along a sea floor” (McCarthy 180-81). Like the prominent image of thousands of posters plastered throughout New York City after 9/11, McCarthy suggests the simultaneous hope and hopelessness that emerge in the wake of disaster.

While some of the immediate post-9/11 responses (the proliferation of poetry after the event, the outpouring of emotion, the banding together in the search for victims) were positive, the gap between knowing and acting that existed and the quick response to this trauma have led many to view the reactions to September 11 as being primarily negative if not dangerous. Critic Mitchum Huehls argues that many novelists who write about the events of 9/11 dramatize the insatiable need to understand the attacks that took place immediately after they happened rather than after a belated period of reflection upon them.<4> He claims, “The point is not that such phenomenological pursuits are misguided, simply that they are representationally challenged, forced to choose between the performative, which embraces time at the expense of meaning and understanding, and the representational, which stabilizes meaning at the expense of time” (Huehls 45). In attempts to make sense of the inexplicable nature of 9/11, time and distance from the impact of the events were sacrificed and as a result, many actions taken post 9/11 did not have the advantage of being formulated after careful contemplation.

The reliance on instinct rather than knowledge that emerged in the aftermath of 9/11 was evident in the actions of everyday American citizens, but seemed guided and affirmed by the United States government’s response to the attacks. After the country had been under attack, Americans were in defense mode, motivated by fear and revenge. For many, their motto became,

“Attack or be attacked”. Shortly after 9/11, the Bush administration initiated the rhetoric of the preemptive strike and used the events of September 11 as justification for invading Iraq. Huehls explains the logic behind such rhetoric and emphasizes, “While preemption removes us from time’s gradual unfolding—from its ‘due process’—it does so not by stopping time but by accelerating it, by determining the future before it has a chance to occur” (46). Preemptive measures are predicated on the idea that there is not sufficient time to investigate or weigh all the options because to do so means leaving oneself vulnerable to eminent attack. The political rhetoric surrounding 9/11 and the subsequent emphasis on action versus reflection certainly trickled down to inform the decisions of individual Americans and set the tone for the “us versus them” mentality that permeated the cultural climate after September 11. It is this establishing of binaries as a mode of protection that seems to be the central issue of *The Road* that is illustrated through the constant dialogue between the man and his son. McCarthy’s novel seems to call into question the extent to which morality can thrive in a traumatized world and implicitly asks, “Where does the survival instinct end and where does human compassion and decency begin?”

Carrying the Fire

In addition to the inherently traumatic nature of a terrorist attack, 9/11 had such a profound effect on our country because it was not only the destruction of so many lives, but it also ruptured the concept of American identity as a whole. The entire history of the United States is based on the notion that the country is the most powerful in the world and exemplifies the ideals to which all other nations should aspire. This theory of American Exceptionalism has been perpetuated throughout the growth of the nation and acts as the justification for many of the decisions made by the American government in the name of progress. When the 9/11 attacks

occurred, the response for most Americans was utter disbelief that a tragedy of this magnitude could befall the most powerful nation in the world and that anyone would come into “our home” and destroy it. Historically, the United States has picked its battles and has reveled in its power to launch or withhold support in regard to the wars of “other nations”. The terrorists of 9/11 usurped this control and immediately following the attacks, the emphasis of Americans was not on questioning our own actions or beliefs, but on gaining back that control in order to re-affirm our position of world dominance.

McCarthy’s novels are frequently concerned with cultural myths and how adherence to such myths often becomes the justification for much of the violence that takes place in our country. Initially, McCarthy wrote exclusively about the South and the mythology surrounding southern Appalachian culture. Upon moving to New Mexico, McCarthy’s writing landscape changed as well and he began to take the American Southwest as his subject matter. According to William E. Cain, despite the drastic change in the cultures about which McCarthy chooses to write, there is continuity in his work as he states, “Postmodernism asserts the failure of the various ‘grand narratives’ of western culture and I shall argue that one of the unifying themes of McCarthy’s work is his depiction of the failure of the ‘grand narrative’ of American Exceptionalism” (5).<5> The bleakness, the graphic violence and the pessimistic tone of most of McCarthy’s novels seem to reflect the suppressed reality of the American cultural climate and stand in direct opposition to the ideals of hope, internal strength, and opportunity perpetuated by the concept of the American Dream. Cain notes the influence that myths have in how we perceive our world particularly in light of 9/11 and claims,

Any thoughts that postmodernism’s assertion of the end of the ‘grand narratives’ of western culture might have undermined the power of America’s identifying myth will

have been dispelled by reactions to the attack on the significantly named World Trade Center. The incomprehension that greeted this grievous event was clearly informed by the view that America is still the 'City on the Hill' standing as an example that can redeem the world, albeit that redemption is now to be economic rather than spiritual.

(253)

While in the postmodern age we are supposed to be beyond these myths that attempt to legitimate our cultural practices, clearly McCarthy dramatizes the American struggle to let go of the American Exceptionalism myth in particular and our discomfort in asking the question, "If we are not exceptional, then what are we?"

One of the more significant implications of the American Exceptionalism myth is the concept of redemption. The United States has often represented itself as "redeemer of the world" such a role has allowed violence and destruction to occur in the name of progress or prosperity. Particularly in regard to 9/11, the redemptive aspect of American Exceptionalism seemed to be a way for some Americans to cope with the trauma. Shelly L. Rambo points out, "An almost child-like optimism was displayed in the face of the disaster. The [rescue] workers exhibited a spirit that refused to see the attack as an ending; instead, they 'simply understood' that something good would come of it" (102). One could argue that while an attempt to make sense of a horrible tragedy, this type of "light at the end of the tunnel" thinking could actually prevent a more self-critical assessment of 9/11 from occurring in that Americans may not contemplate how they are implicated in the disaster or what needs to change in the way Americans view themselves in relation to the rest of the world.

Even more serious than an inflated optimism, a consequence of adherence to redemption could be the establishment of binaries that emphasize an "us versus them" mindset. If

redemption signifies a change for the better, or an act for the greater good, then, by contrast, anything that stands in the way of that progress or that complicates the process could logically be considered evil. Rambo explains the ramifications of redemption in the face of catastrophe, stating,

The conviction of innocence and goodness, interpreted on a national scale, can drive and justify violence internationally. The belief in an identity of 'being chosen' can translate into American Exceptionalism and the belief that we are good and that others are bad.

The redemptive narrative may, at its best, give us meaning and urge us to contribute meaningfully to the lives of those around us; at its worst, it can justify violence and mask self-interest...we need to find other ways of narrating our lives that attend to, rather than smooth over, the complex realities of our world. (103)

This good/bad dichotomy seems to have been an important motivator in the violence and discrimination that took place after 9/11. In viewing America as the victim, the fallen hero, inevitably that makes the terrorists the "other", the villains, and by extension this makes all Muslims or anyone who looks like they may be of Middle Eastern descent, "the bad guys". In aligning all Muslims with evil and adhering to the maxim that good always triumphs over evil, many Americans simply perpetuated the aspects of American self-interest that led to the terrorist attacks in the first place.

At the heart of *The Road* McCarthy shows the complicated questions of morality that arise from the simplified classifications of good and evil that emerge in the struggle to survive a trauma. Akin to the post-9/11 world and the lines of demarcation that were drawn after the attacks in terms of good and evil, McCarthy's post-disaster world emphasizes the opposition of good and evil through the relationship of the man and the boy. The man is responsible for setting

up the “good guys”/ “bad guys” binary in the mind of the boy, but in interrogating the actions of his father in an attempt to truly understand the difference between good and evil, he ultimately shows the failure of this type of thinking.

Throughout the novel the father uses the language of “good guys” and “bad guys” in an attempt to teach his son to always be aware and to ensure his survival. In an encounter with another man who has come upon the father and son, the father assumes that the stranger is there to kill him and his son and take their belongings before he even questions the man. The man does end up grabbing the boy and the father promptly shoots him. Rather than feeling relief, the boy will not speak to his father because he is angry that he killed the stranger. The father explains, “‘You wanted to see 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.’ ‘Are we still the good guys?’ [the boy] said. ‘Yes. We’re still the good guys. And we always will be’” (McCarthy 77). Even though the boy wants to align himself with good rather than evil, he is bothered by the idea that one of the good guys, his father, could kill another human being. Rambo notes the inherent problems with attempting to classify human nature into neat categories in a post-traumatic world, explaining, “Either there is redemption or there is not...I want to claim that this either/or is not the right framework for the world in which McCarthy places us. The line between good and bad and life and death dissolves in the territory of survival. A dissonance emerges when we map an either/or framework onto it” (106). This dissonance is continually questioned by the boy while his father would rather ignore the contradictions and perpetuate his “us or them” mode of survival.

The justification for upholding a good versus evil framework in the United States after 9/11 often turned to the threat to our survival. Immediately after September 11 it was uncertain

whether these types of terrorist attacks would continue or not, and considering culturally “other” immigrants in the United States as potential terrorists became an acceptable defense mechanism. Once again the political rhetoric of the time played a major role in increasing rather than easing our fears about future attacks. Things such as the colored-coded terror alert system put into place in American airports only furthered the idea that evil, in the form of future terrorist attacks, was eminent and we needed to be able to recognize it when it was in front of us. Focusing our attention outwardly rather than inwardly, blaming rather than questioning, the feeling of separation between Americans and the rest of the world seemed to grow even wider after the 9/11 attacks while it drew citizens of the United States closer as though to form a protective shell against the perceived evil threatening to get in. Michael Rothberg suggests that while it is natural to conceive of trauma as a personal threat to one’s vitality, it is necessary to consider the more widespread political implications of trauma as well.<6> He argues, “...any attempt at explanation must go beyond the local events of September 11 and their reception and must include discussion, among other aspects of the historical background, of how the United States has been complicit in preparing the grounds for terrorism, both at home and in the rest of the world” (“Seeing Terror, Feeling Art” 151). Rather than exonerating oneself through blame and flawed justifications of victimhood, it seems that ethical responsibility and questioning in the post-9/11 world are necessary for preventing tragedies of this sort from happening again.

Throughout *The Road*, the father continues to affirm his commitment to be a good guy and to do things in the right way, but many of his actions seem to conflict with the moral code he espouses and are highlighted in juxtaposition with the son’s natural inclination to empathize with others who are suffering. The father emphasizes to his son that if they keep “carrying the fire”, living in a good, moral way, then they will be free from harm. Yet the father seems to mean good

for them, not necessarily good for anyone else, and this distinction acts as a divide between the otherwise close bond between him and the boy. When the father and son notice a young boy on his own, the son wants to adopt him, but the father refuses, claiming that the boy will be fine. The son responds, “ ‘I’m afraid for that little boy...What about the little boy?’ ” (McCarthy 86) as he is in tears. Later the man and boy come across an old man who calls himself Ely and while the father wants to avoid the old man altogether, the boy convinces his father to give him some food. The father says to Ely, “ ‘You should thank [the boy] you know...I wouldn’t have given you anything (McCarthy 173). Once the father and son reach the coast, they are robbed. They catch up to the robber and the father forces him take off his clothes and give the man and boy everything he has. The father says, “I’m going to leave you the way you left us” (McCarthy 257). The boy is nearly hysterical after this encounter and convinces the father to return the robber’s clothes. As the father tries to reassure the son by saying, “I wasn’t going to kill him,” the boy replies, “But we did kill him” (McCarthy 260). In each of these cases, the son reveals the limitations to his father’s goodness in that he will only do things that will benefit the two of them and does not seem to be particularly compassionate toward anyone else struggling to make it along the road.

After September 11, Americans seemed to not only become more aware of the cultural borders within the country, but made attempts to reinforce the existence of these borders as a means of self-preservation. By imposing a distance between the self and the other, one could disassociate oneself almost entirely from the events of 9/11 and become more of a spectator than a participant. According to Richard Gray, those who write about September 11, as well as citizens of a post-9/11 world, need to promote the idea that diversity does not necessitate animosity or opposition and suggests,

Facing the other, in all its difference and danger, is surely one of the challenges now for writers, not just because obscene acts of terrorism were committed by a small group of people, but because the U.S. has become, more than ever, a border territory in which different cultures meet, collide, and in some instances collude with each other. There is the threat of the terrorist, but there is also the fact of a world that is liminal, a proliferating chain of borders where familiar oppositions—civilized and savage, town and wilderness, ‘them’ and ‘us’—are continually being challenged, dissolved and reconfigured. (135)

He goes on to note that McCarthy specifically frequently engages the concept of cultural borderlands in his work. As traumatic events disrupt if not destroy our previous frameworks of the world, it seems logical, if not necessary, that these ruptures cause us to reconsider our beliefs in cultural certainties and absolutes. Unlike Gray, Rothberg suggests that writers in particular and citizens in general should focus more on the global perspectives of the 9/11 attacks rather than on the specifically American meanings associated with the disaster. He claims, “What we need from 9/11 novels are cognitive maps that imagine how U.S. citizenship looks and feels beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, both for Americans and for others (“Failure of the Imagination” 158). While the “us versus them” dichotomy seems inherent in acts of terrorism from beyond the borders of the United States, it is clearly that many Americans have assumed the 9/11 attacks were a problem particular to the U.S., “our” trauma, and have never contemplated the implications that these events had in a global sense.

In *The Road*, the concepts of domestic and foreign tend to blur together and become more difficult to distinguish as do other oppositional frameworks in the response to trauma. In a sense, home becomes everywhere and nowhere simultaneously, and trauma makes everyone a stranger

to not only the rest of the world, but to himself. While their ethical sensibilities often divide the man and the boy, much of this dissonance seems to stem from the way in which each of them have learned to conceive of the post-apocalyptic world. For the man, the trauma signified a loss of a sense of home. Judith Greenberg notes the damage that takes place on both physical and psychological levels during traumatic experience and states, “For those of us who have made New York our home, the attacks freshly complicated those terms—‘home’ and ‘New York’—and proved anew that they signify not just location but also a relation to identity” (22). This identity crisis becomes explicit when the man in *The Road* takes his son back to his childhood home. The man clings to the hope that somehow a return to his home will provide the much-needed feeling of comfort and security that it once did. As he leads the reluctant son through the dilapidated house, “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” (McCarthy 27). For the man, the loss of his home, his previous life, and ultimately his sense of self lead to the realization that paradoxically, traumatic memories are insistent in their longing to return, but trauma also acts as the point of no return to the life before the disaster occurred. Because the man understands what it means to have and to lose, he enacts the “us versus them” moral code in order to protect his son from any potential threat and will do anything it takes, whether or not he compromises his own moral intentions of being a “good guy”.

The boy cannot fully comprehend his father’s seeming paranoia, his quickness to judge, the ease with which he can leave others behind to suffer, and much of this confusion seems to stem from the fact that the concept of “home” for the boy is not one of loss like it is for his father, but rather an absence. Unlike the father, the son was born into the post-apocalyptic world and never knew the comforts of home and stability. His identity has been formed entirely by the idea that

home is not a concrete entity, but a fluid idea in which one's home can dramatically change, be displaced at a moment's notice, and belong ultimately to the world at large. The man is certainly aware that he and his son, by necessity, have interpreted the post-disaster world in different ways, but the man can never "know" his son's understanding of the world simply because he has a past to compare to this post-apocalyptic present. While the father does try to provide a sense of home and routine for the boy, "...he understood...that to the boy he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed. 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 tried to remember the dream but he could not. All that was left was the feeling of it" (McCarthy 154). In this sense, both the man and boy are "foreign" to each other, with the worlds of their childhoods being mysterious and "alien" from what they have always known. However, while the man's morality is based on protecting further loss at the hands of an "other", the boy does not know what it means to lose because he has never had anything to possess. He is more compassionate than his father, viewing life as a constant process of exchange, both of material things and of circumstances. The boy knows what it is to be fearful, to be starving, to suffer, so for him, assisting others does not constitute a potential loss like it does for his father, but a hopefulness that the favor will one day be returned.

McCarthy seems to suggest in the back and forth dialogue between the man and the son that both of their conceptions of ethics are too simplistic and that a balance between defensive self-interest and naïve optimism is necessary in responding to trauma. Though the man and the boy obviously conceive of the world differently, their differences ultimately seem to open the other's eyes, and complicate any quick and easy judgments about how one should react with other citizens who struggle for survival in the post-apocalyptic world. When the man and boy reach the

southern coast, as they sit on the beach staring out at vast expanse of the ocean, the boy says, “ ‘Maybe there’s a father and his little boy and they’re sitting on the beach...and they could be carrying the fire too,’ ” to which the father replies, “ ‘They could be. Yes.’ ” The boy responds, “ ‘But we don’t know...So we have to be vigilant’ ” (McCarthy 216). In this moment, both the father and the son seem to have integrated each other’s beliefs into their own as the boy displays his usual optimistic sense of possibility but blends it with his father’s cautiousness, and the father exhibits his characteristic detachment, but acknowledges that it is possible that good people can exist elsewhere in the world. Once the father has passed away, it is up to the boy to make decisions on his own, and figure out how to deal with the people he will inevitably encounter. When a family finds him alone on the beach, they invite him to accompany them on their own journey down the road. The boy asks, “ ‘How do I know you’re one of the good guys,’ ” to which the stranger replies, “ ‘You don’t. You’ll have to take a shot’ ” (McCarthy 283). It seems that the boy remembers what he has learned from his father in this moment as he hesitates to naively go along with the family without question, but he ultimately does choose to give it “a shot” and heads out into the unknown. McCarthy shows that despite the differences we see or imagine within each other as human beings, the one thing that unites us all is the struggle to figure out how to live, particularly in the face of disaster. Perhaps in the context of 9/11, “carrying the fire” in McCarthy’s world is less about defeating the potential evil that lurks around the corner and more about using that fire to see beyond one’s own narrow conceptions of the world in order to consider the lives of the others with whom we share that world.

The World in Its Becoming

One of the critical questions that arose immediately after 9/11 was, “How are we supposed to move forward after this?” With any trauma comes the shattering of illusions of security and certainty, and with an event with the magnitude of 9/11, these illusions collapsed as rapidly as the Twin Towers themselves.<8> The concerns of most people after September 11 were focused in one of two ways: 1) How will America return to what it once was? or 2) How will America heal from the wounds of 9/11? Both scenarios involve the situation being resolved, a tall order for a moment that impacted the entire world on so many levels. These types of reactions do seem natural in that when one’s world is torn apart, the need to try to put it back together seems to be the only way one can feel whole again. E. Ann Kaplan argues that in the case of trauma, the quest for resolution is often counter-productive, if not impossible, as she states that since 9/11, “We have begun to translate the trauma into a language of acceptance while deliberately keeping the wound open; we are learning to mourn what happened, bear witness to it, and yet move forward” (147). Allowing the trauma to persist, not imagining it away or pretending that we understand it enough to close that wound, leaves the future open to possibility and states that the event was real, the responses to it were real, and wherever the future will lead, this trauma will continue to be a part of it.

The ending of *The Road* has been a great source of speculation in terms of McCarthy’s intentions and how the reader is supposed to consider the future of this post-apocalyptic world. Curiously, after the entire novel has centered on the relationship between the man and his son, these characters are absent in the end, the man having passed away on the beach, and the boy having ventured off with the family who found him. Instead, the novel concludes with a past scene of trout swimming in streams. In describing these trout, McCarthy says, “On their backs

were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery” (287). This “mystery” is one element that follows the man and boy every step of their journey down the road, the uncertainty of the intentions of the people they encounter, the next time they may find food to eat, the decisions they make, and McCarthy seems to connect the natural world before man to the barren landscape after nature has been virtually destroyed. Ashley Kunsu suggests that “...McCarthy uncharacteristically writes possibility into the ending of *The Road* by giving the child a fighting chance...The end and the beginning are inseparable in *The Road*. For it is the end of the old world that signals the possibility of a new one, and the novel’s own ending so clearly harkens back to a beginning, the beginning of time” (67).⁹ In this way, the conclusion of the novel does seem consistent with McCarthy’s overlapping opposites as both creation and destruction are propelled by the same force: the certainty of the future’s uncertainty.

Just as in the fictional world of *The Road*, the real world post-9/11, nearly a decade after the tragedy, it is still uncertain as to how the events will continue to impact life for generations to come. The wound has clearly remained open as controversy regarding the appropriate treatment of Ground Zero continues today. As McCarthy’s novel demonstrates, trauma forces us to depart from our comfortable ways of thinking, whether we like it or not. How we do so is up for debate, but what is certain is that we cannot return to traditional ways of thinking once trauma has created a new map of the world, taken us down a different road. We continue to learn about 9/11, and ultimately ourselves, when we risk not knowing, when we end up with questions rather than answers, when we end up in the middle rather than on either side of the border. McCarthy suggests the necessity of activities such as these in the post-9/11 world and emphasizes that it is

precisely this lack of certainty that fuels our ability to continually re-work what and how we know, and see where the journey may lead.

Endnotes

1. Violence has been a consistent theme that has followed McCarthy despite his change in landscape. *Child of God* and *Blood Meridian* are often cited as two of the most bleak and nihilistic novels.
2. Caruth's theories of trauma stem from the work of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub.
3. Versluys also says that one of the overwhelming responses to 9/11 came in the form of poetry on the subject. He goes on to note that some of the characteristics of good post-9/11 novels include: confronting 9/11 indirectly, preventing a possibility of understanding/working through the trauma, and focusing on depictions of the "other."
4. Huehls's essay is part of a larger collection of essays edited by Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn called *Literature After 9/11*, many of which affirm that literature post-9/11 wants to complicate or prevent a simple understanding of the events of that day.
5. The postmodern "grand narratives" to which he refers come from Jean-Francois Lyotard's groundbreaking work *The Postmodern Condition*. Lyotard claims that while modernism was characterized by metanarratives that harkened back to Enlightenment era ideals like unity and progress, one of the distinguishing characteristics of the postmodern era is the end of metanarratives as postmodern art instead embraces rupture, difference, and uncertainty.
6. While Rothberg suggests that too much emphasis on the private may prevent any real political action from taking place in response to trauma, another essay in Judith Greenberg's anthology by Irene Kacandes explains how previous personal trauma was re-traumatized by the events of 9/11 and may have helped her work through the trauma of 9/11 faster.
7. This "knowing by feeling" is brought up in Richard Glejzer's essay "Witnessing 9/11: Art Spiegelman and the Persistence of Trauma". According to Glejzer, Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* with the shadowy image of the Twin Towers continually looming in the background shows how bearing witness does not involve a cohesive memory of an event but us instead about time and the way that traces of the trauma continue to persist.
8. Jean Baudrillard suggests in his essay "The Spirit of Terrorism" that prior to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 the system of global Capitalism was already so fragile that it was already headed for collapse and that the events of 9/11 just helped this inevitability along. See also *Simulacra and Simulation*.
9. Kunsza seems overly optimistic about the ending of the novel and heads toward a view of *The Road* as being redemptive. As Shelly Rambo emphasizes, it seems dangerous to align McCarthy with the concept of redemption because it implicitly reaffirms American Exceptionalism, a concept that McCarthy continually denounces throughout his work.

Works Cited

- Cain, William E. *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism*. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996. Print.
- Gray, Richard. "Open Doors, Closed Minds: American Prose Writing at a Time of Crisis." *American Literary History* 21(1) (Spring 2009): 128-148. Web
- Greenberg, Judith. Ed. *Trauma at Home: After 9/11*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska P, 2003. Print.
- Huehls, Mitchum. "Foer, Spiegelman and 9/11's Timely Traumas." *Literature After 9/11*. Eds. Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn. New York: Routledge, 2008. Print.
- Kaplan, E. Ann. *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2005. Print.
- Kunsa, Ashley. "'Maps of the World in Its Becoming': Post-Apocalyptic Naming in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *Journal of Modern Literature* 33(1) (Fall 2009): 57-74. Web.
- McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. New York: Vintage International, 2007. Print.
- Rambo, Shelly L. "Beyond Redemption? Reading Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* After the End of the World." *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 41(2) (Fall 2008): 99-120. Web.
- Rothberg, Michael. "A Failure of the Imagination: Diagnosing the Post-9/11 Novel: A Response to Richard Gray." *American Literary History* 21(1) (Spring 2009): 152-158. Web.
- . "Seeing Terror, Feeling Art: Public and Private in Post-9/11 Literature." *Literature After 9/11*. New York: Routledge, 2008. Print.
- Versluys, Kristiaan. *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel*. New York: Columbia University UP, 2009. Print.
- Woodward, Richard B. "Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction." *New York Times*, 19 Apr. 1992. Web. 28 Oct. 2010.