“My Job is to Take Care of You”: Climate Change, Humanity, and Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*

The first great masterpiece of the globally warmed generation.

Andrew O’Hagan, BBC Radio 4

A few weeks ago, I read what I believe is the most important environmental book ever written. It is not *Silent Spring*, *Small is Beautiful* or even *Walden*. It contains no graphs, no tables, no facts, figures, warnings, predictions or even arguments. It is a novel, first published a year ago, and it will change the way you see the world.

George Monbiot, *The Guardian*

The British paperback edition of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) carries one of the most oft-quoted endorsements of the novel, a statement attributed to the author Andrew O’Hagan on BBC Radio 4. The precise utterance, presumably made by O’Hagan as a regular guest on the station’s *Saturday Review* program, is now lost; it is not even downloadable, the program’s podcasts archived only as far back as 2010 (“Podcasts”). In a comparable statement, the British writer and activist, George Monbiot, praised the novel as “the most important environmental book ever written,” in his regular column in the UK broadsheet, *The Guardian*, in October 2007, asserting that it “will change the way you see the world.” Monbiot’s claim is, like O’Hagan’s now-disembodied blurb (which Monbiot probably read, since it appeared on editions from 2007 onwards), one of the most cited of the novel’s recommendations.

What makes *The Road* an expression of human experience in an era of desperate damage to the nonhuman environment? The novel, an account of an unnamed man and his son traveling south in an unimaginably devastated landscape, never explains what disaster
has led to such destruction. Some scholars have steadfastly pursued the task of identifying possible causes, scouring plot and setting for clues, but others have convincingly countered that it really does not matter, and it is this not mattering that is the novel’s point.¹ Whatever the hypotheses turned up by critical games of “guess the catastrophe”—an asteroid strike, nuclear attack, divine apocalypse—it is fair to say that climate change never definitively figures among the events that so transform the world of *The Road.*² In other words, the novel is not easily identifiable as what is now sometimes labeled “climate change fiction” or “cli-fi” (Pilita Clark, n.p.; Glass, n.p.).³ However, the temptation to link the novel to that ubiquitous environmental crisis that is now called global warming and now called climate change is strong. The novel taps directly into a set of concerns that, in a time of climate change, have imperceptibly crept into the inner lives of the privileged, globalized, educated, virtually-networked classes of the world so often described as “us.” In other words, *The Road* may not be a climate change novel, but it is a novel that owes much of its cultural impact to climate change, at least to the anxieties that have accompanied it. O’Hagan’s and Monbiot’s claims are part of a growing exegesis of the novel as a document of and for a climate-changing world. Nonetheless, I will also argue that to make bald assertions about the novel’s relevance is to over-simplify—*The Road* may make sense in these environmentally distressed times but it is no global warming jeremiad.

I begin in this essay with the proposition that at the heart of climate change discourse resides an anxiety about whether we have cared enough, not just about and for each other and the planet but about and for the future. It is, furthermore, children who—not unproblematically—serve as shorthand for the future and therefore as a particularly emotive marker of the problem of climate change. I sketch this collective disquiet—this increasingly apparent sense of failure of stewardship for the planet and its species (including, paradoxically, for ourselves, for *homo sapiens*), and a growing shame at having so
completely reneged on obligations not just to the current inhabitants of the biosphere but to future generations—as the context for the popular reception of The Road.

In the analysis of the novel that follows, I then explore how it enables such an identification. The stripped-down setting and style—from a post-apocalyptic eradication of any sense of place to the distillation of plot and character into the single-minded quest of the man and the boy—create a stark relief between what humanity has lost and what that loss looks like. Through its unflinching focus on the relationship between father and son, the novel ensures that the contrast between past humanity and present inhumanity pivots on the question of care. In other words, the setting of the novel is not just a devastation of the natural environment; more importantly, it is a devastation of what makes humans humane. Against this, the bond that the man shares with his son, accompanied by his valiant efforts to remember the past, is an attempt at salvaging a common humanity.

I note, then, that the novel’s appeal in a time of climate change is far from straightforward. Those who read it as a simple censure of human exceptionalism and a plea for us to “care” more for our children and for the planet fail to recognize the anthropocentrism that underpins its account of environmental destruction—the novel mourns the loss of human rather than nonhuman nature. Even so, at a deeper level—and one easily unexplored—the novel enables a crucial, critical interrogation of humanity and its ability to survive environmental crisis. This understanding occurs at the novel’s much-discussed conclusion, centered on the figure of the boy. While for much of the novel the subject of his father’s anxious care and thus no less than the standard-bearer for humanity itself, the boy emerges by the novel’s end as an ironic facilitator. To the attentive reader, he is a reminder that there are profound drawbacks to reading parental love as the antithesis and antidote to environmental destruction; he serves as a harbinger, too, of viable alternatives.
My reading of *The Road* is thus couched in terms of its reception and in the context of the contemporary, collective anxieties of its readers, rather than staked on any message the book—or, indeed, its author—might seek to make outright. As such, my analysis differs from much extant criticism on the novel, of which there is a great deal, about the novel’s insistent morality—biblical, environmental or otherwise.\(^4\) I begin from the premise that the novel offers opportunities for ethically-based readings mainly because of the historical moment in which it is being read. The novel itself is, in my reading, a bare, minimalist narrative in which nothing really happens, whose appeal lies in its construction of striking reliefs and unforgiving spotlights. My analysis is therefore in keeping with readings of the novel as descriptive rather than didactic, as an end-of-times thought experiment rather than as a prophecy or warning.\(^5\) Predicking their analyses on the novel’s attitude of painstaking empiricism, such critics have concluded that the novel is so startlingly original as to be hardly a novel at all. It must be noted, however, that the analysis I offer deals with the moral reflections facilitated—not made—by *The Road*; it thus finds sympathy with recent critical considerations of the novel’s ethical dimensions, though I focus on its ethical effect.\(^6\) I contend that the effect, if not the intention, of the novel being what it is, it cannot be read as completely morally irrelevant, though, at the same time, it is not an example of outright didacticism.

**Climate Change Concerns**

Much has been written about the profound challenge that climate change poses to the imagination as an object of enquiry. For Sheila Jasanoff, the temporal and spatial scales of climate change drive “sharp wedges between society’s fact-making and meaning-making faculties” (243). “Scale effects,” writes Timothy Clark, “impose unprecedented difficulties of interpretation and imagination” (136) when it comes to climate change. It is for this reason
that Timothy Morton has labeled global warming a “hyperobject” (3). Moreover, attempts to come to grips with climate change contribute to its slippery construction, creating a material-discursive assemblage of scientific data and media reportage, of what Bruno Latour would call the “things” (25-26) of science: news sound-bites compiled from “expert” information such as the latest Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change (IPCC) report, itself a compression of material from specialist journals and therefore of an array of conventions of observation, experimentation, information gathering, statistical analysis, and peer review.

Amidst the vexed questions of what climate change is and what it means, then, the necessity of care—particularly, care for the people of the future—offers a relatively manageable sphere in which to contemplate the uncontemplatable. One might argue that it presents yet another set of uncertainties to add to the already slippery discursive terrain of climate change. But one might suggest, alternatively, that the matter of caring for the future provides a focus, the promise of ethical, moral and behavioral ways forward. Indeed, care for the future is implicated in the standard definition of the obvious solution to climate change—sustainable behavior. In 1987, the United Nations’ Brundtland Commission defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission, 43). Such a notion is in direct opposition to existing, “uncaring” notions of economic development based on future discounting—the idea that the further into the future a reward or obligation lies, the less we value or “care” about it. Environmental ethicists now explicitly challenge future discounting models of behavior with caring ones. Simon Caney proposes that the right not to suffer from climate change should not be subjected to future discounting because “its moral importance does not diminish over time” (126). For Caney, any solution to climate change must recognize that while “our sentiments of … care may diminish over time,” our “commitment to fundamental rights may not” (124). For James Garvey, collective
action on climate change “might be the demand for less stuff, but it is also the demand for
more of something else: maybe justice or goodness or whatever it is about us that is best”
(153).

It is of little surprise, then, that climate change discourse circulates around
representations of children. Not only does the figure of the child metonymically represent
future generations, its status as the ultimate, even primal subject of protection, shelter, and
guardianship means that it readily speaks to contemporary anxieties about whether we are
doing enough to protect, shelter, and safeguard—whether, in short, we are caring enough.
The figure of the child embodies climate change concerns, facilitating an ethical response. It
is worth considering here Emmanuel Levinas’s proposition that our response to the Other is
inseparable from our response to faces, that is, that we must always imagine the Other in
terms of the face—“You turn yourself toward the Other as toward an object when you see a
nose, eyes, a forehead, a chin, and you can describe them” (Ethics and Infinity, 85).7 Invoking
Levinas, it is not too far-fetched to say that the face of the child gives us an Other towards
which we might direct our ethical acts in a time of climate change crisis. One of the best-
known expressions of climate change anxiety, the film An Inconvenient Truth (2006), ends
with Al Gore’s evocation of the child in these terms: “Future generations may well have
occasion to ask themselves, ‘What were our parents thinking? Why didn’t they wake up when
they had the chance?’ We have to hear that question from them, now.” NASA climate
scientist James Hansen, who battled climate change denialism in the White House in the
1990s, has titled his book on global warming Storms of my Grandchildren (2009) and
includes photographs of those grandchildren at various points in the book. In his preface,
beneath an image of his granddaughter at two, he opines, “I did not want my grandchildren,
someday in the future, to look back and say ‘Opa understood what was happening, but he did
not make it clear’” (xii).
The emergence of the child as the face of climate change concern (as in “she is why we worry”) and hence the beneficiary of climate change action (that is, “he is why we have to do something”) brings to mind Lee Edelman’s critique of what he terms “reproductive futurism” (2) and its attendant phenomenon of “prnatalism” (17). For Edelman, the figure of the child dominates both left and right sides of the neoliberal landscape, as “the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention” (3). The child functions as a guarantor of higher meaning and purpose, “the pledge of a covenant that shields us against the persistent threat of apocalypse now—or later” (18), and is thus pressed into service for all kinds of ideological agendas. Edelman’s main concern is with a heteronormative hegemony, which he reads, in Lacanian terms, as exploiting the universal desire for Imaginary wholeness, a teleological impulse that is easily fooled by invocations of a never-achievable future and by appeals to our fears and wishes for it. For Edelman, the figure of the child is the face of such fallacy. For my purposes, Edelman offers an important recognition of the ubiquity of our fascination with the child and acceptance of it as a signifier of the future. One could say that its presence in climate change discourse is only the latest manifestation of this phenomenon.

Certainly, in many literary responses to the global warming crisis, the theme of parent and child relations appears as a psychological and emotional touchstone. It is treated at length in a range of so-called climate change novels, all dramatically reframing environmental responsibility for the future as a question of one’s responsibility for one’s children. In what follows, I contend that The Road allows such a correlative to be made by its readers, although it may not be a climate change novel in the now-accepted sense of the term.

**Apocalypse Now and Then**

For many, the novel is more easily identifiable as an apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic novel, relying as it does on the juxtaposition between a past and present divided by a
cataclysmic event. And yet, this is not as simple as it seems. It is a critical commonplace of studies of literary apocalypticism that the apocalypse gains its imaginative power from its manipulation of our expectations about time. Commentaries of apocalyptic tropes in environmental discourse point out that these rely on a fundamental distinction between the pastoral that has been—or is being—lost and the wasteland that threatens in the present. However, McCarthy’s narrative utilizes such contrast with a determined twist. One way to start a discussion of the novel’s manipulation of our apocalyptic expectations is to examine the usual structures employed by environmental apocalypse, or eco-apocalypse. This helps us not simply to understand the appeal that *The Road* might hold for a so-called “globally warmed generation,” but to consider the complexity of this appeal. The novel eschews the thin conventions of (eco-)apocalypse only to present to us the more profound imagery of intergenerational care and compassion (but it does this, as I will subsequently argue, only to then make possible a critique of such care and compassion).

In an oft-quoted remark, ecocritic Lawrence Buell has described apocalypse as “the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal” (285). Apocalypticism, according to Jimmie Killingsworth and Jacqueline Palmer, is the primary rhetorical mode—a “standard feature” (21)—of early American environmentalism. The especial appeal of eco-apocalyptic rhetoric lies in its distinction between past and present. The *locus classicus* of such an attitude is the prologue to Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), a “Fable for Tomorrow” that refers us to a pastoral that may be redolent of the past but is still one we could recover in the future. Carson’s text set the terms of reader engagement for much environmentalist discourse thereafter; as Ursula Heise describes them, apocalyptic scenarios “are and remain a particular narrativization of risk perceptions” (142) because the “ideal socioecological countermodel” (142) that they present is simultaneously a lost past and an achievable future. Here, Frank Kermode’s 1966 analysis
of the time-scales of apocalypse is still valid: the apocalypse, wrote Kermode, removes us from day-to-day concerns—*chronos* or “passing time” (42)—by asking us to consider the weightier matters of our place in cosmological time—*kairos* or “the season, a point in time filled with significance, charged with a meaning derived from its relation to the end” (42). Environmental apocalypse lifts us into kairotic time when it implores us to think of lost pastoral pasts, trusting that we will be inspired to reverse the devastations of the present.

Nonetheless, the challenge of depicting a hostile tomorrow while maintaining hope that the plenitude of today might be preserved is a delicate balancing act. While too much optimism deprives the message of its necessary urgency, a step too far in the direction of disaster will tilt hope toward alarmism. Indeed, as far as the history of American environmentalism goes, this provoked what Frederick Buell has described as “Chicken Little” (4) accusations and what Killingsworth and Palmer identify as a mass retreat from the apocalyptic mode by environmental writers in the 1970s and 80s (34-37). Such tensions can still be seen in environmental discourse today, for example, in the controversial criticisms made by Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger that apocalypticism—environmentalism’s “tragic narrative” (130)—has been woefully ineffective.

With its relentless focus on the devastated present, however, *The Road* employs little of the hopeful determination—the notion that things can and, indeed, must change for the better—that environmental apocalyptic discourse has employed with differing degrees of success. Refusing to depict catastrophe, let alone name it, it even foregoes the appeal of spectacle that apocalypticism might afford—“disaster,” according to Heise, is one of the “most dated and formulaic clichés” (204) of apocalypse narratives. Its appeal to any reader wanting to interpret its devastated landscape as an environmental disaster zone, then, is a very different appeal from either the temporal or spectacular tricks of eco-apocalypse.
One could argue instead that the novel takes us straight to the post-apocalyptic; yet, even so, it eschews that form’s imaginative potential. James Berger, taking Kermode as his point of departure, notes that the distinction between *kairos* and *chronos* is no longer relevant in a world that has learned to embrace less stable imaginings: “The visions of the End that Frank Kermode analyzed in terms of a sense of an ending have increasingly given way to visions of after the end” (xiii). Teresa Heffernan suggests that post-apocalyptic culture, in subverting the very notion of narrative, offers an emancipatory, postmodernist investigation of identity, a chance for “the self [to be] constituted in a play of difference” (156). But *The Road*, proximal to the dystopian in its unrelenting focus on emptiness, rejects the sense of post-traumatic relief and postmodern opportunity that comes with the post-apocalypticism described by critics such as Berger and Heffernan.

In other words, unlike eco-apocalypse, *The Road* refers to pastoral not to inspire its narrative with possibility but to ghost it with loss. Further, unlike the post-apocalyptic (and precisely because its setting is so resolutely empty), it offers up the present not as unknowable or limitless and therefore as an excess of place, but as not to be known (or to be known only as what it is not), as—for want of a better term—a non-place. The tenor of most of *The Road*, then, is neither hopeful nor speculative; it is elegiac. Much has been made of the lyrical emptiness of the novel’s setting—the “cauterized terrain” (13), the “ashen scabland” (14), “a colorless world of wire and crepe” (123), and the “coastal plain rivers in leaden serpentine across the wasted farmland” (214). Rune Graulund asserts that it “a desert that never ends nor begins, a landscape as devoid of difference as it is of life” (61). Yet this emptiness creates a vacuum which remnants of the past rush to fill—whether such material vestiges as the last bottle of Coke, such verbalized reminders as the bits of information the man gives his son of the world as it used to be, or such psychic specters as memory and dream. But these remnants can give no comfort. What makes the loss so keenly felt is that
what is lost can only return incompletely, as traces.\textsuperscript{12} Because the past is spoken of, thought of, remembered, only in order to know it is not there, loss becomes an ongoing state of being rather than a single event (which is another way of saying that the novel rejects conventional apocalyptic structures of spectacular disaster). That is, these traces of the pastoral past—dream, memories, remnants, stories, bits and pieces—constantly establish and re-establish the present as non-place. Thus, in a feverish dream, the man finds “the vanished world returned” (199); on other nights, he dreams of his long-dead wife and other elements of the long-gone world that emphasize the deathliness of the world to which he awakes: “Rich dreams now which he was loathe to wake from. Things no longer known in the world” (139). The last material residue of this lost world has much the same effect: he remembers “[c]hile, corn, stew, soup, spaghetti sauce. The richness of a vanished world” (147). Even the marvelous plenitude of the bunker upon which the man and boy miraculously stumble underlines the emptiness of the world outside. The same may be said of the man’s countless memories of a different time in the same place (and therefore it is not really the same place), of how “[i]n the long ago somewhere very near this place he’d watched a falcon fall down the long blue wall of the mountain” (19).

These traces possess a double vulnerability. They are not merely impartial; they also threaten to disappear altogether. The objects of the old world are rotting and useless: the telephones, for example, call nowhere, and the once vital contents of the man’s billfold—“credit cards,” “driver’s license” (52)—are now of so little import that he decides to leave them on the road. The man’s memories, the reader learns, are being forgotten: “Like the dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowly fading from memory” (17). His memories of language, too, fade, so that language itself ceases to exist: “The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion” (93). The man’s stories make little sense when they are of a world the boy cannot know, “that for him was not even a memory” (55).\textsuperscript{13} He
comes to realize that the past means nothing without a future to make sense of it, that, like the bloated, useless library books he chances upon, “the value of the smallest thing [is] predicated on a world to come” (199). It is, perhaps, for this reason, that, along with the other items in his billfold, he leaves behind his wife’s photograph. The contrast between the plentiful past and empty presence is a contest that emptiness wins. When the man decides to stop telling stories of the past—stories that have no meaning to the boy, he does so out of an awareness that, because they are marked by the plenitude of the past, they are also scored by the loss of the present:

He 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. He could not construct for the child’s pleasure the world he’d lost without constructing the loss as well… (163)

Though it may seem that the past gives poignancy to the present, it is also the case that the meaninglessness of the present infects the past, ultimately rendering it meaningless too.

**The “Good Guys”**

While one might continue to discuss such loss in terms of place, it is apparent that the novel embodies its elegy for the past in people, and in two people especially—the man and the boy. More than once, memories explicitly situate the pair in the footsteps of others in the long-lost pastoral, the boy standing beside the man “[w]here he’d stood once with his own father in a winter long ago” (33-34). Put another way, the contrast between lost past and hopeless present runs parallel to the contrast between the pair’s bond and the devastated world in which they travel. All this is to say that the father and son explicitly point the reader to the remembered pastoral of plenitude. As remnants of that which is lost, they do not so much mark its presence as highlight its absence—or, at least, its near extinction. In other
words, the relationship between the man and the boy is one of the most important of the novel’s traces. This is not to suggest, however, that they serve as more enduring embodiments of the past, in the face of the failures of memory, the faltering of stories, and the crumbling of so many objects. Such a reading would ignore the fact that they too are impermanent; indeed, they are strikingly fragile. The motif of the man’s chronic coughing is matched by that of the boy’s thinness, a visual and visceral trace of his past health: “There was a cough in his throat that never left. The boy so frail and thin through his coat, shivering like a dog” (29).

Yet, this too-obvious mortality brings that parent-child bond into greater relief, rather than threatening to render it obsolete, particularly because it heightens the most significant link to the past that they carry. That link, more important than memory or story, is care. Not just the fact of their relationship but the nature of it—most obviously, the man’s determination to save, protect, shelter, and feed his son over all else—keeps something of the past world alive. I use the word “care” deliberately, to indicate not just the degree of love and affection in the relationship (“caring about”) but the responsibility that it entails (“caring for”—to which one could add the reminder that “care,” “burden,” and “worry” are synonyms).

The bond, and the parental protection that defines it, is the engine that drives the narrative. Indeed, the novel has some of the characteristics of a picaresque, if a tragic one. The Road of the title is the thread that man and boy follow, and the reader with them: the road is, like them, a constant in the wasteland. The pair are a grim version of the picaro and his sidekick, and the road an ostensibly reliable marker of their progress. Nonetheless, perversely for a narrative of seeming progress, the road affords to characters and reader an almost unchanging experience of constant threat, bare survival, and eternal vigilance—mostly, the man’s vigilance. The appeal lies less in picaresque variety and more in the question of
survival. Faced with this apparent repetitiveness, it is easy to disregard the novel’s chronology of events. Even so, it pays to attend to its opening and the scene-setting that this accomplishes—the establishment of a particular set of “survivalist semiotics” (Gwinner 139). From the first page onwards, the reader’s attention shifts from the man’s awakening into darkness to the gray landscape that is gradually revealed in the daylight, to a realization—with the boy’s awakening—that the man is not alone, to the prospect of another day on the road. All this sets up the narrative’s most important contrast—the juxtaposition of what lies without (a world of environmental devastation and human cruelty) with what lies within (the bond between man and boy, a sanctuary of care). In the first nine pages, the reader encounters the features I have already remarked on: the emptiness of the “[b]arren, silent, godless” (2) landscape and the loss of the past, as the man finds a telephone “and dialed the number of his father’s house in that long ago” (5). But even more significant are the terms of the journey—to head south—and the yoking of these with the father’s unabated care and concern for the boy. Their first dialogue is, in Philip Snyder’s Levinasian reading (74-75), an ethical “me voici” or “Here I am!” moment, establishing this father/son relationship as a type of the Self/Other relationship; this provides, in my reading, a model for responding to the child as the face of generations to come. At the same time, it must be noted that this conversation carries all the unspoken affection of any typical parent-child exchange:

The boy turned in the blankets. Then he opened his eyes. Hi, Papa, he said.

I’m right here.

I know. (3)

This warmth is offset by the assertion of the lines immediately preceding: “This was not a safe place. They could be seen from the road now it was day” (3). These sketch the dangers of the world beyond, and give urgency to the father’s obligations to his child.
As the novel and the journey proceed, the contrast is clarified. The man and the boy are not humans in a dead world as such; they are humans in an inhuman world. The man’s realization that “[o]n this road there are no godspoke men,” that “[t]hey are gone and I am left and they have taken with them the world” (32), is a realization that he constitutes a remnant of morality. This morality is figured in the characteristically McCarthyian compound of “godspoke,” the medieval quaintness of the word bringing an element of the mythical and biblical to the text.\(^\text{18}\) That the world itself has disappeared with the “godspoke men” underscores how the quality of being humane—rather than merely human—is what defined the now extinct world. If humanity, in both senses of the word, is the hallmark of the lost pastoral past in *The Road*, then not simply a lack of life, but a lack of humanity even where there is life, brings about the novel’s present nightmare. Such humanity has as its lodestone the love of a parent for his child, for in the world beyond, children are raped (as the boy’s mother fears he will be) and killed; worst of all, they are eaten. Paedophagy—the most extreme and visceral opposite of parental care—lies at the heart of this inhuman world. It is the unspeakable subtext to the man’s instructions to the boy to kill himself with the revolver or his anxiety about having to “crush that beloved skull with a rock” (120) to save him from their near encounter with cannibals. The remains of a baby they chance upon in the forest—“a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit” (212)—are its material manifestation, but still unspeakable, for the man wonders if the boy (or, perhaps, he means himself) would “ever speak again” (212) after this. In a “world…largely populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes” (192), this particularly grotesque juxtaposition of humanity and inhumanity is at the heart of the father and son’s shared refrains: not just that they are “carrying the fire” (87) but that they are “the good guys” (81). The dialogue that passes between father and son after their escape from the cannibals’ house with its cellar prison establishes explicitly that “[w]e wouldn’t ever eat anybody” because
“we’re the good guys” and “we’re carrying the fire” (136). In other words, their bond—“the fire”—is one of the world’s last vestiges of unconditional (and, one must bear in mind, exclusive) parental love and the shelter it brings.

Because the reader’s attention as it follows the pair on the road is maintained by suspense over their ability to survive, and because the father becomes a marker of humanity by dint of his devotion to his son, the novel draws the reader into complicity with the man. It aligns his need to save his son with (what twenty-first-century society thinks of as) a basic human need to protect our offspring, and it is this that allows the narrative to chime so completely with contemporary climate change anxieties. Michael Chabon, in an eloquent review of the book that first appeared in the *New York Review of Books*, describes it as “a testament to the abyss of a parent’s greatest fears” (120). The novel’s early pages establish the father’s awareness that the boy is “his warrant” (3), this idea underlined later in the novel by a statement of his wife’s—a memory brought on, one might note, by the boy’s fragility: “He held the boy close to him. So thin. My heart, he said. My heart. But he knew that if he were a good father still it might well be as she said. That the boy was all that stood between him and death” (29). The boy’s pitiful thinness is both the source of anxiety for the man and a reminder of his fatherly duty, the phrase, “[m]y heart” offering itself as an expression not just of care but of identification—his son is his heart. The man’s love for his son, rendered so economically here, is his justification and guarantee for living. It takes little for the reader to interpret this as a statement of parental care as the absolute measure of our collective humanity, and very little more to correlate parental care with human survival when the nonhuman environment has virtually ceased to exist.

It must be said that such a “globally warmed” reading of the novel does not, paradoxically, attribute environmental damage to carelessness or inhumanity, nor does it identify environmental rescue with care and humanity. Indeed, the novel is not an
environmental novel in any activist sense of the word, even though some critics have insisted on attaching such eco-credentials to it. The Road is not as interested in the nonhuman environmental as it seems, requiring instead a relentless anthropocentrism for its logic: this is, after all, about what makes us human in a world whose dearth of humans has transformed the remnants of the species into shadows of their former selves, physically and morally speaking. Yet, this reading functions by placing parental care in proximity with—and in contrast to—virtually wholesale biospheric devastation (except for humans, one or two dogs, and, surprisingly, a handful of mushrooms), inviting an easy correlation of uncaring with ecocide and an equally easy identification of uncaring as one of the direst losses that humans will suffer if we continue with ecocide. The novel’s stark contrast between the human and inhuman (not a contrast, one notes, between the human and nonhuman) means that the love between father and son, and the corresponding fear of the disappearance of that love, is where its imaginative power lies. By aligning the death of the nonhuman world with the rise of inhuman humans, the novel enables—though it never says as much—an alignment of environmental disaster with the loss of (parental) care. Thus, its appeal trades, uneasily and not always logically, on contemporary collective guilt and anxiety that any care extended by this current generation to future generations is not enough, nor is it likely to endure.

“The One”

Such are the psychological associations—inconsistent as they are—that necessarily accompany the too enthusiastic embrace of The Road by “the globally warmed generation.” These position the boy as the metonymic stand-in for future generations, the Levinasian face that we must put to the Other if we are to behave in any kind of ethical manner towards it/her/him. As I have already suggested, the contemporary desire to read in our children’s faces the face of the future is enfolded into our climate change anxieties.
Yet, for all this, the boy as proxy for future humanity might indeed offer something to the “globally warmed” reader in return. This something is the potential for consistency in the otherwise skewed environmental logic that I have identified. The boy is the bearer of his own ethic of care (quite aside from his enigmatic quality, inviting readings of him as a messianic figure).\textsuperscript{21} Crucially, this ethic is very different to that held by his father—very different, indeed, to the fears and anxieties called forth in the reader. The boy insists that he be allowed to return the care his father extends to him, asking to share a can of Coca Cola and chiding his father for foregoing cocoa for his sake in language that assumes a paternalistic authority: “You promised not to do that … I have to watch you all the time” (35).\textsuperscript{22} Later, when his father proclaims somewhat self-righteously that he is “the one who has to worry about everything,” the boy’s response is “I am the one” (277). The curious absolutism of the phrase “the one” construes the boy’s capacity to care not as equally valid as the man’s but as valid in a way that the man’s is not.\textsuperscript{23}

The man’s Darwinian brand of parental care—what Donovan Gwinner describes as “survivalist insularity” (153)—necessarily implies saving one’s offspring at the expense of others. Protecting the boy requires harming or killing others who pose a threat to the boy. Here, Edelman’s forthright condemnation of “reproductive futurism” is worth considering once again. As I have already discussed, the figure of the child—which looms large in so much of the novel, which dominates the man’s and thus the reader’s frame of reference—is associated by Edelman with our unquenchable desire for the future; that is, it is the alibi for our false and ultimately narcissistic attempts at realizing our own desires. The child is, according to Edelman, “the site of a projective identification of an always impossible future” (31). For Arielle Zibrak, the man’s survivalism “can be precisely described within Edelman’s model” and is, in her analysis, “unfounded in any real hope for the boy’s future” (109). It is possible to read, in other words, the man’s blinkered, desperate care for his son as also a
brutal inability to care for anyone else, coming increasingly to resemble a selfish, stubbornly masculinist mission to save something of himself—to preserve his “warrant” (3), his “heart” (29). 24

However, in this narrative—and in a scenario never imagined by Edelman nor fully explored by Zibrak—the child talks back. From the first instance of the man’s exceptionalist care ethics in the narrative, the boy raises questions about its tenability. Having shot a potential assailant, the father washes the boy free of blood and gore, musing. “This is my child …. I wash a dead man’s brains out of his hair. This is my job” (77). This job is clarified to the boy: “My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you” (80). Tellingly, the child’s response—“Are we still the good guys?” (80)—questions the code of exclusionary care that underwrites the father-and-son bond. The boy’s alternative approach is crystallized, late in the narrative, in the incident with the old man who calls himself Ely. The encounter is initiated by the boy’s desire to help, feed, and protect others, which runs counter to the man’s assumptions. It is remarkable for, first, showing explicitly that care can originate from that half of the bond too easily constructed as the passive recipient of care and, second, for identifying a third-party recipient, hence breaking out of the confines of that bond.

The boy’s democratic care ethic is further defined against the father’s exclusionary care ethic in their conversations about “good guys” and “bad guys,” a motif that, as I have already noted, signals the import of the father’s love for the boy. For much of the novel, the man acknowledges only in the abstract the presence of “other good guys” (196). But, in noting that a mutual fear of danger conceals “good guys” from each other, he renders their presence as good as absence (or, to turn the man’s own query on to himself: “How does the never to be differ from the never was?” [32]). In contrast, the boy constantly proffers the hope of the existence of other good guys: of tracks in the road, he suggests, “They could be
good guys. Couldn’t they?” (108), and, of whomever constructed the bunker, he asks, “They were the good guys?” (148). But another such question from the boy, “What if some good guys came?” is met by: “Well, I don’t think we’re likely to meet any good guys on the road” (160). Similarly, when the boy thinks of writing in the sand “a letter to the good guys”, this is countered by his father’s question, “What if the bad guys saw it?” (261). Other good guys do not exist in the man’s ethical universe.25

The attitude of the bearded veteran who saves the boy after the man dies is in keeping with the boy’s ethos of open compassion and in contrast with the father’s code of fiercely guarded, filial protection. The decision to come after the pair, over which the veteran admits there was “some discussion” (303), suggests an interest in the welfare of others beyond kinship. The father’s relentless care for his son at this point seems emblematized by their single-minded focus on the road, for the veteran’s advice to “keep out of the road” (303) provocatively suggests an alternative code of behavior and, possibly, ethics. Importantly, this advice suggests a mode of survivalism that is more enlarged than the father’s. After all, the boy is not just a trace of the past and the world as it was; he is also one of the rightful inheritors of this dead past. On the “intestate earth” (138), such inheritors are in danger of being mere traces of the past, of themselves being made extinct, if they do not procreate; thus, the survival of the boy and such other children as the boy and girl of the family who save him is paramount to a wider survivalism, the survival of the human species.

Any attempt to read the novel as a climate change novel is predicated on equating a lack of humanity towards children with a lack of humanity towards the nonhuman world. For some, this may appear to be consolidated by the novel’s quixotic conclusion. The vivid description of brook trout that ends the book, apparently a propos of nothing, is a paean to nonhuman ecology that comes as a relief and a eulogy after the devastation of the novel. Critics have pointed out how it echoes the man’s memory of trout earlier in the novel.26 What
has not been noted in their commentaries, however, is how the coda’s evocative reminiscence of the beauty of the world—“A thing not to be put back. Not to be put right again” (307)—repeats a moment in the narrative when the man “bent to see into the boy’s face under the blanket hood [and] very much feared that something was gone that could not be put right again” (143-144). This occurs after their discovery of the prison cellar of human prey and the child’s awareness of the existence of cannibalism. In echoing this moment in the enigmatic conclusion, the novel seems to correlate the irrevocable violence done to the child’s innocence with the irreversibility of environmental damage.

Nonetheless, this apparent moral must be qualified by a consideration of the conclusion to the plot, the denouement to the narrative proper that is the boy’s rescue by the veteran and the woman who travels with him. It is one thing to associate the inhuman traumas visited on the child with the utter devastation of nonhuman nature, but it is quite another to suggest that the man is able to safeguard against or reverse such atrocities—to “put [things] right again.” The conclusion to the plot refines the definition of what it is to care for and about children, of what kinds of care allow them to survive and thrive in an inhuman world. In Edelman’s terms, the child is a convenient but not particularly meaningful signifier of our unthinking investment in the future. Similarly, a too ready—or even too lazy—belief that caring for our children is a proxy for caring for the environment simply repeats the self-righteousness and self-interest of this gesture. A closer reading of The Road suggests an alternative ethos, that doing the best by our children, inasmuch as they stand for the generations of the future, requires more than simply caring about and them alone. It requires a reaching out to others—to other children and, indeed, other humans.

Readers who travel the sparse landscape of The Road cannot help but give their full attention to the relationship between the man and the boy. At the same time, as the novel’s
critical and popular reception reminds us, many of its readers reside in a wider discursive landscape of doubt and unease over humanity’s inhumanity to the planet and its future. In this context, the man’s vigilant exercising of parental care stands out and easily chimes with our anxieties. But so must the boy’s alternative ethic of compassion, underscored by the actions of the family who save him. While, for some, the appeal of *The Road* might lie in our climate change anxieties, it is also the case that the novel’s unsettled and unsettling conclusion offers—intentionally or otherwise—the possibility of questioning the very foundations of such anxieties.
Works Cited


1 For an example of the former, see Blackmore 18-36; for the latter, see Kearney 164-167.

2 For example, Cooper suggests that McCarthy identifies the disaster as “a meteor strike” (218), Grindley discusses a “supernatural cause” (12), Collado-Rodríguez suggests “nuclear disaster” (45), and Horn (181-240) makes a compelling case for contextualizing the novel in twentieth-century nuclear winter scenarios.

3 It is, however, increasingly discussed as such; see Trexler and Johns-Putra 188 and Stark 71-72. For Squire, the novel is an example of the “preoccupation with death … elicited by the Anthropocene era” (212-213).

4 For example, Josephs 20-30, like Grindley 11-13, offers a religious reading of the novel. De Bruyn 776-81, Kollin 157-171 and Estes 189-216 reads it as a warning against eco-disaster and Blackmore 18-36, like Collado-Rodríguez 45-46, sees it as a warning against our reliance on nuclear technology.

5 See, for example, Gretlund 42-43 and Phillips 172-188.
out in the novel, glosses this statement as an early example of the pair’s “shared precepts” (147) and
qualities.

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As Godfrey writes, “McCarthy is not ambiguous or subtle in setting up a dichotomy between ‘then’ and ‘now’” (171-172); see also Edwards 58.

For these reasons, indeed, writes Phillips, “‘Apocalyptic’ is not how I would have described the
book” (173).

As Godfrey notes, “There is no mistaking that the old geography of the lost, greener world is
revered and mourned in the novel” (171); Palmer, following Georg Guellimin, describes McCarthy as
an “eco-pastoralist”; noting that, in The Road, McCarthy “has expanded the object of grief to an
unthinkable level: to an eco-pastoralist, what is a world without nature?” (63).

One could adopt here the term “trace” and employ some of that word’s Derridean force. Trace, for
Derrida, relates “to what is called the past, and it constitutes what is called the present by this very
relation to what it is not, to what it absolutely is not” (142-143). It is necessary to consider, however,
that, for Derrida, the trace is the condition of meaning-making. This further underscores the novel’s
status as a universal commentary on the human condition, one appropriated, in my reading, by
climate-changed readers as an expression of their climate change anxieties.

Many of the novel’s critics have commented on the tenuosity not just of objects but of memory
and, with it, language; see, for example, De Bruyn 781-785, Edwards 58, Godfrey 169-170, and
Woodson 91-93.

On reading The Road,” Squire notes, “one is quickly struck by its presencing of death’s
inevitability” (220)

Other discussions of the ethical significance of the pair’s relationship have focused on qualities
such as “courage” (Mangrum 267-290) and “hospitality” (Snyder 69-86), though both treat the bond
between the man and the boy as the basis for ethical action. Snyder, for example, describes the
relationship as “the prime directive of their existence whatever other relation might present itself”
(76).

Several critics have described the novel as picaresque (Gretlund 44) or as “road-story” (Kollin 167).
Søfting notes, “External space, the natural physical world, constitutes a strong dystopian element,
while inner space, the psychological inner life of the characters, constitutes a utopian element. In
other words, the opposition between the land and the two main characters is the novel’s discursive
locus geni” (705).

Mangrum suggests that the “innovated word ‘godspoke’ and the antiquated syntax (‘they have taken
with them the world’) require the reader to encounter the text slowly, as though it were summoning
her to prayer” (277).

See, for example, De Bruyn 776-81 and Kollin 157-171.

As Graulund remarks, “On the one hand it is a novel that is squarely anthropocentric, arguing …
that human survival takes precedence over all else. … On the other hand, the second and
contradictory desert lesson to be learned from The Road is that without nature, … there can be no
humanity either” (74-75).

See Grindley 11-13, Josephs 23-29, and Kunsa 65-67 for remarks on the boy’s “messianic”
qualities.

Gwinner, in an otherwise compelling reading of the way in which this clash of ethical codes plays
out in the novel, glosses this statement as an early example of the pair’s “shared precepts” (147) and
misses the son’s appropriation of moral authority here.
In Diprose’s Heideggerian reading of the novel, the boy challenges the “life of bare survival, fear, mistrust, and isolation” (194) offered to him both by the world and by his father with the realization that “dwelling is a collective enterprise” (197); for Pizzino, to read the novel as advocating the boy’s values over his father’s is to appreciate its utopian impulse: “The possibility of human care defined in new (non-familial, non-individualistic) terms is asserted as a fundamental reality that makes utopian thinking and feeling possible” (367).

A discussion of the novel’s gender dynamics is beyond the scope of my analysis, but see Zibrak for a further exploration of the novel’s heteronormativity as profoundly masculinist.

As Gwinner puts it, “there is no model for ‘good guys’ besides the protagonists themselves” (148).

See, for example, De Bruyn 785, Edwards 58, Godfrey 172, Josephs 29, and Stark 81.