The Unbearable Trauma of Being:
Death, Hope, and (in)Humanity in the work of Cormac McCarthy

Kelly Dent

The Unbearable Trauma of Being:
Death, Hope, and (in)Humanity in the work of Cormac McCarthy

Kelly Dent

University of Malta

> 'God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.
> How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers?
> What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned
> has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us?'
> - Friedrich Nietzsche[1]

The ancient Egyptians built monuments to a myriad of gods and goddesses, built pyramids as a direct route to the afterlife, and filled them with all manner of worldly goods ready to accommodate pharaohs in their version of the "next" life, realm of the jackal-headed god, Anubis. The Aztecs understood death as the soul's journey to the sun, the moon, or Mictlan, depending on their circumstances in life. The souls of warriors who fell in combat and women who did not make it through childbirth would become hummingbirds, following the sun on its daily sojourn through the sky, while the souls of Aztecs experiencing less "glorious" deaths went to Mictlan, the underworld in Aztec mythology.[2] Moving forward to modern narratives of the afterlife, the Christian faith promises eternal life in heaven for the good and virtuous, and eternal damnation for the evil, unrepentant sinners, and non-believers. Even with this brief glance at these mythologies, it quickly becomes apparent that wherever humanity exists, so does a narrative of afterlife. It can perhaps be argued that death and the afterlife are, in reality, not about death at all, but about *life*—or more specifically, about making life liveable by virtue of the resilience offered by hope. It is the intention of this paper to delve into the connection between hope and what it means to be human, with observations made based on three of Cormac McCarthy's most pivotal novels: *Child of God, Blood Meridian,* and *The Road.*

Narratives concerning what we so helplessly call 'afterlife' permeate the human experience no matter where—or indeed, when—the human species may find itself. Critical debate barely seems able to come to terms with what it means to live, what qualifies or disqualifies life (cf. Roberto Esposito, Giorgio Agamben); approaching the question of 'what lies beyond' in narratives of the afterlife or afterlives seems almost too great a task. The OED defines afterlife as:

1. The later part of a person's life; a later period in life; later life
2. A life after death; *spec.* (freq. with *the*) a state or condition of everlasting life after death

This closer look at the word seems to imply that the afterlife does not simply signal an end to human physical existence, but can also indicate the end of a version of living, a version of being, or indeed a version of humanity. Moving even deeper into the exploration of the term, 'after(-)life' can be understood as the persistence of 'life' following a 'break' or point of trauma suggested by the dash between the two words. This trauma can come about in the form of physical death, the very human

---

[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York, NY: Random House, 1974), p. 167.
[2] See Dirk R. Van Tuerenhout, *The Aztecs: New Perspectives* (California, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005).

awareness of that mortality, or in the re-definition of what it means to be human. For the purposes of this paper, both the definitions offered by the OED as well as the understanding of after(-)life as that mode of being following a point of trauma will be considered throughout the ensuing discussion of Cormac McCarthy's work.

The contemplation of the after(-)life evidently invites a posthumanist approach which, as it is embraced and adopted in this paper, is strongly influenced by Giorgio Agamben's work on bare life, Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject, Rosi Braidotti's understanding of the posthuman in her work of the same name, and Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter's extensive work on an approach favouring a vision of posthumanism which does away with hyper-technologised visions of the future. These key thinkers in the world of posthuman subjectivity converge to offer an understanding of the human in light of the suggestion that, in Foucauldian terms, the invention of the human as it is familiar to contemporary humanist society is indeed at an end. Approaching the after(-)life implies a rethinking of 'life', and therefore a reconsideration of humanity itself; posthumanism presents itself as a vein of critical thinking which allows for a closer analysis of the after(-)life, opening the term up to deeper discussion on a more granular level. Working in the realm of posthumanism, a more focused look at the dash between 'after' and life' can be understood as a break, not just between two words, but between two distinct forms of *being*. Posthumanism does not simply facilitate discussions surrounding the function of the afterlife, but calls for closer observation on what it would mean to 'be' following a point of trauma.[3]

In his preface to *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences,* Michel Foucault famously states that 'man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end'.[4] What comes 'after' this end? In the wake of what is now called posthumanism, Foucault's observation is proto-posthumanist in that it certainly draws attention to the inadequacy of existing discussion surrounding the human, enticing the reader to ask: what comes after the (humanist) subject?[5] It is precisely this type of critical thinking which, in turn, allows for a reconsideration of the borders against which the human defines itself and a rethinking of the notion of human identity. A more elemental posthumanism is favoured by this study: a 'posthumanism without technology'[6] that allows for a type of discourse that 'force[s] through a rethinking of the integrities and identities of the human'[7], and in so doing encourages a reconsideration of what it means to *be* human, particularly in the face of those acts considered to be 'inhumane'. The sense of doom often experienced in posthumanist discourse is not simply evoked by physical disaster which may surround the protagonists, but by the inevitable epistemological and existential crises of human *being* as represented so poignantly in McCarthy's beautifully bare style. In *The Road,* for instance, the devastation of the physical world is overtly apparent —however it is the penetrating sense of brutality and moral degradation which truly disturbs both protagonist and reader alike. Similarly, in *Blood Meridian,* the sense of apocalypse comes not from any world-ending disaster, but rather from the

---

[3] For the purposes of this paper, the term 'trauma' is understood as both a deeply distressing or disturbing experience and a point of fracture which signifies a distinct shift in the subject's mode of being in or experiencing the world.
[4] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 422.
[5] See Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'Note on the meaning of "post-"', *The Postmodern Explained to Children* (London: Turnaround Books, 1998) for closer examination of the prefix.
[6] Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter, 'Critical posthumanism or, the *inventio* of a posthumanism without technology', in *Subject Matters*, 3.2/4.1 (2007): 15-30.
[7] Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter, 'Posthumanist subjectivities, or, coming after the subject...', in *Subjectivity*, 5(2012), 241-264, (p. 241).

haunting realisation that brutality is not restricted to the realm of monsters or madmen, but is something bubbling beneath the surface. This point is highlighted from the outset, with the following epigraph hinting at this primal violence:

> Clark, who led last year's expedition to the Afar region of northern Ethiopia, and UC Berkeley colleague Tim D. White, also said that a re-examination of a 300,000-year-old fossil skull found in the same region earlier shows evidence of having been scalped.[8]

In *Child of God*, the question of the posthuman is explored through Lester Ballard, a *homo sacer* whose propensity for violence is suggested in the reader's first encounter with the protagonist:

> He is small, unclean, unshaven. He moves in the dry chaff among the dust and slats of sunlight with a constrained truculence.[9]

In *The Posthuman* (2013), Rosi Braidotti seems to echo Foucault in her straightforward identification of the human as 'a narrative convention, which does not make it inherently negative, just highly regulatory and hence instrumental to practices of exclusion and discrimination. [...I]t functions by transposing a specific mode of being human into a generalised standard [...]'.[10] She also discusses the highly constructed nature of the 'human' subject, asserting that '[t]he human is a historical construct that became a social convention about human nature'.[11] The idea of 'being human' and, it follows, what constitutes 'human nature' at any given point in time, is entirely constituted in and by discourse. Following this line of thought, Herbrechter's tentative definition of posthumanism falls neatly into place as 'the cultural malaise or euphoria that is caused by the feeling that arises once you start taking the idea of "postanthropocentrism" seriously'.[12] If posthumanism is in part an unwriting of the grand narrative that is humanism, then the question of (human) identity is one which is in a state of crisis— or rather, one which is put into a 'traumatic' state of crisis when the notion of the human/humanity is placed under erasure; posthumanism emerges as that line of inquiry which throws the subject as constructed in humanist discourse into a state of crisis.

Braidotti also touches upon another key concern in her reference to how questioning the implications of posthumanism in relation to the 'human' subject raises 'deep anxieties about the moral status of the human'.[13] It is of course necessary to question the persistence of a humanistic need for affirmation in terms of morality —a need which is repeatedly expressed by the young boy in *The Road:*

> We wouldnt ever eat anybody, would we?
> No. Of course not.
> Even if we were starving?
> We're starving now.
> You said we werent.
> I said we werent dying. I didn't say we werent starving.
> But we wouldnt.
> No. We wouldnt.
> No matter what.
> No. No Matter what.

---

[8] Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* (New York, NY: Random House, 1985), epigraph.
[9] Cormac McCarthy, *Child of God* (New York, NY: Random House, 1973), p. 5.
[10] Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), p. 26.
[11] ibid.
[12] Stefan Herbrechter, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 2.
[13] Braidotti, p.40.

Because we're the good guys.
Yes.
And we're carrying the fire.
And we're carrying the fire. Yes.
Okay.[14]

He sat there cowled in the blanket. After a while he looked up. Are we still the good guys? he said.
Yes. We're still the good guys.
And we always will be.
Yes. We always will be.
Okay.[15]

It is interesting to note how desperately the boy seeks reassurance of their humanity but it is also disturbing that cannibalism should be an option at all ('would we?'). Morality is a pillar of sorts upon which the human (in part) may seek to position and re-position itself as superior to other subjectivities. In *The Road*, for instance, the man and his son continuously strive to distinguish themselves from the outright savagery in the ash-filled world around them ('we're carrying the fire'). Morality can therefore be identified as a sub-narrative within humanism which serves to affirm and re-affirm the dominant status of 'the human', acting as a sort of measuring-stick against which 'we/they' are defined as 'human/non-human'. What happens when moral codes are laid bare and stripped away? What happens when 'life as we know it' becomes fractured, and an after-life begins?

'There must be something'

Two key points seem to underlie the creation (and perpetuation) of narratives about the afterlife. Firstly, there appears to be a uniquely human inability to accept the permanence of that vast unknown called 'death', and an equally strong need to banish and re-work this unknown through discourse. Secondly, there is the sense of hope, provided by such narratives, which allows the human subject to 'go on' at all. In a 2011 article for TIME magazine, research fellow at University College London's Wellcome Trust Centre for Neuroimaging Tali Shalot explores a phenomenon known as 'The Optimism Bias', a cognitive function common to all humans which leads them to feel a strong sense of belief that the future will be better, or that they are less in danger of going through a negative experience. Shalot suggests this tendency towards optimism is an evolutionary 'tool', questioning whether or not human evolution would be what it is without this desire for a better future:

> Without optimism, our ancestors might never have ventured far from their tribes and we might all be cave dwellers, still huddled together and dreaming of light and heat. To make progress, we need to be able to imagine alternative realities—better ones—and we need to believe that we can achieve them. Such faith helps motivate us to pursue our goals.[16]

Shalot accepts that 'collectively we can grow pessimistic—about the direction of our country or the ability of our leaders to improve education and reduce crime. But private optimism, about our personal future, remains incredibly resilient'.[17] This insistence on looking towards a 'brighter' future,

---

[14] Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York, NY: Vintage, 2006), p. 136.
[15] ibid., p. 81.
[16] Tali Shalot, 'The Optimism Bias', *Time*, 2011
<http://content.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,2074067,00.html> [accessed 6 June 2016].
[17] ibid.

no matter how improbable, seems to be an integral part of a resilience which seems to be uniquely human—a point illustrated in the following quotations from *The Road*:

> Are we going to die?
> Sometime. Not now.
> And we're still going south.
> Yes.
> So we'll be warm.
> Yes.
> Okay.
> Okay what?
> Nothing. Just okay.[18]

> We're survivors, he told her across the flame of the lamp.
> Survivors? she said.
> Yes.
> What in God's name are you talking about? We're not survivors. We're the walking dead in a horror film.
> I'm begging you.
> I don't care. I don't care if you cry. It doesn't mean anything to me.[19]

The first exchange takes place between the man and his son. The brief conversation is indicative of the driving power of hope; although there is no guarantee that the man and his son will be better off the farther south they move, the simple fact that they have some sort of purpose and can imagine a 'better' future is enough for them to go on. The second quote is significant in that it captures the contrast between the man, who remains hopeful in the face of total disaster, and his wife, who is devoid of any hope. With knowledge of this natural tendency towards hope in mind, McCarthy's portrayal of the man and boy in *The Road* emerges as a salient example of the optimism bias as a means of 'going on'. Their need for hope, for the level of optimism and affirmation often inherent in narratives of the 'afterlife', is clearest in their quest to reach the coast by following the oil company map with almost religious dedication, but various other instances can be identified in isolation:

> We'll find something to eat. We always do.
> The boy didnt answer. The man watched him.[20]

> Okay. This is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They dont give up.
> Okay.[21]

> Do you think they'll find us?
> No. They wont find us.
> They might find us.
> No they wont. They wont find us.[22]

The three quotations above aptly show how, despite (barely) existing in a physically and morally unrecognisable landscape, the man and his son insist upon narrating themselves into a future which is somehow 'better'. Whether or not their assumptions are 'true' or wholly illusory is effectively

---

[18] McCarthy, *The Road*, p. 9.
[19] ibid., p. 57.
[20] ibid., p. 135.
[21] ibid., p. 145.
[22] ibid., p. 157.

irrelevant: what matters seems to be the very fact of their existing in the world of discourse. The essence of this sentiment is captured beautifully by Thomas Gunn in his poem 'On the Move', where he writes that 'One is always nearer by not keeping still'.[23] Humans seem to need certain beliefs and future-goals, not only to endure the primordial violence which lies beneath the fragile veneer of humanity, but to be able to exist even in the most mundane 'day-to-day' circumstances. The point at which humans lose their sense of purpose, or the moment an action seems to lose its significance, is also a moment of collapse. Similarly, the promise of a spiritual afterlife (or indeed a new way of living after trauma) allows the human to go on:

> What are our long term goals? he said.
> What?
> Our long term goals.
> Where did you hear that?[24]

The above quote seems to suggest a need to set goals in order to be able to imagine or narrate the self into the future, almost as an act of affirmation.[25] What is significant is that this need for hope and affirmation appears to be inextricably linked to trauma (cf. the journey south in *The Road*), a point which is not only repeatedly identified in McCarthy's narrative world, but also suggested by Shalot:

> I would have liked to tell you that my work on optimism grew out of a keen interest in the positive side of human nature. The reality is that I stumbled onto the brain's innate optimism by accident. After living through Sept. 11, 2001, in New York City, I had set out to investigate people's memories of the terrorist attacks. I was intrigued by the fact that people felt their memories were as accurate as a videotape, while often they were filled with errors. A survey conducted around the country showed that 11 months after the attacks, individuals' recollections of their experience that day were consistent with their initial accounts (given in September 2011) only 63% of the time.[26]

It can therefore be put forward that trauma and the affirmation offered by hope are intertwined; why this link? One possible answer to this question is that 'trauma' (cf. N. Katherine Hayles, Dominick La Capra) implies a deeply disturbing experience which should have 'destroyed' the subject in some way, but has been overcome or survived somehow. This trauma can be said to originate in the innate fear of one's end—or imagined end; if 'I' felt 'myself' to be on the brink of destruction or brought to the precipice of annihilation (physical or existential), then it is inevitable that humanity should imagine its end, perhaps even moving into the realm of what could follow, or what 'I' simply *hope* would follow once 'I' have expired:

> Humanity cannot imagine anything except the worst to come after its projected end. And this is precisely what concerns us, namely the 'unimaginability' of the posthuman despite, or in the face of, the current proliferation of posthuman forms. This is not really a paradox since there is no alternative for 'us' humans, in the face of both the uncertainty and the inevitability of our own 'end', except to attempt to 'reinscribe' our anthropomorphism - our narcissistic projection onto the representation of 'others' - within our post humanity, thus hoping at least to leave a human 'trace'.[27]

---

[23] Thomas Gunn, *The Sense of Movement* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), p. 1.
[24] ibid., p. 171.
[25] Affirmation is understood as a strong sense of optimism that encourages resilience in the individual.
[26] Shalot, 'The Optimism Bias'.
[27] Herbrechter, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*, p. 76.

On the basis of Herbrechter's sound assertion, it becomes possible to suggest that 'hope' is in a sense one way of carrying out this 'reinscription'. The inevitable question that follows is thus: where does the subject look to for this immaterial and fluid thing called 'hope'? In *The Road*, two possible spaces seem to be claimed by hope: religion and the natural landscape. Religion is referred to throughout the novel, perhaps most notably in the man's assertion that his son is the 'word of God' and that they are 'carrying the fire', along with the numerous exclamations of 'oh my god' dotted through the text and the son's emphatic suggestion that they thank the people who left behind all the food for them to enjoy in the bunker, effectively initiating a 'prayer' of sorts. The following quotation is lifted from a conversation which takes place between the man and Ely:

> What if I said that he's a god?
> The old man shook his head. I'm past all that now. Have been for years. Where men cant live gods fare no better. You'll see. It's better to be alone. So I hope that's not true what you said because to be on the road with the last god would be a terrible thing so I hope it's not true. Things will be better when everybody's gone.
> They will?
> Sure they will.
> Better for who?
> Everybody.
> Everybody.
> Sure. We'll all be better off. We'll all breathe easier.
> That's good to know.[28]

This particular quote is fascinating on two major counts. Firstly, Ely makes a crucial connection between 'men' and 'gods', indicating that gods as metaphysical beings only exist insofar as man is there to story them into existence. This point is made all the more intriguing by the realisation that as a particular culture dies, so too does its religion, inviting the subject to question the validity or authenticity of any religion, creating the possibility that it is inherently artificial, created by humans as an anchor of hope, and not something always-already there for 'us' to worship. The implication here is that the human need for affirmation is what facilitates the creation and propagation of religions, mythologies, and promises of the afterlife. Secondly, despite his denial of hope ('I'm past all that now'), Ely utters the words 'I hope' twice in rather rapid succession.[29] Ely's 'hope' is made interesting by virtue of the fact that although he believes in a better future for everyone, his understanding of such a future is paradoxically one without humans, 'when everybody's gone'.[30] This emphasises that hope too is a human construct, and the shape that it takes is inherently subjective in nature; indeed, hope is the wish for something better to happen in the future, however the understanding of or belief in what is 'better' varies from human to human, culture to culture, and time to time.[31] To Ely, a better future is one without humans (cf. Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us*); to the man it is a world where his son is safer; to Lester Ballard in *Child of God*, it may be a piece of land to call his own; to the kid in *Blood Meridian*, 'better' perhaps translates into something resembling stability, or the freedom to sit in a saloon and drink unhindered: no one can say for certain.

---

[28] *The Road,* p. 183.
[29] ibid.
[30] ibid.
[31] This point can be explored further beyond the constraints of this paper, further developing the notion that the end of the human is itself a human construction.

One common factor which unites all visions of hope is that there is a resurgent, renewing movement away from trauma, or a turning away from the all-out exposure of the subject to the violence of bare life, the point inhabited by Agamben's *homo sacer,* a figure defined as 'human life [which is] included in the juridical order solely in the form of its exclusion (that is, of its capacity to be killed)'.[32]

The human subject seems to need this belief that the situation will improve because if not, nihilism is all that remains and it may take hold quickly. Initially, religious systems or belief in some sort of deity emerges as the most likely answer to the question 'where does hope stem from?'; however, McCarthy himself offers little in the way of solace or hope in the form of religion. God still lurks between the pages of McCarthy's novels, but any reference to 'God' the reader encounters generally appears to be conditional, shrouded in ambiguity and set against conditional circumstances, as occurs in the man's declaration that '[i]f [his son] is not the word of God, God never spoke'.[33] The following exchange between the man and his son regarding a flare gun is similarly indicative:

> If you wanted to show where you were.
> You mean like to the good guys?
> Yes. Or anybody that you wanted them to know where you were.
> Like who?
> I dont know.
> Like God?
> Yeah. Maybe somebody like that.[34]

Other similar instances can be observed throughout the novel:

> There is no God and we are his prophets.[35]

> Maybe he believes in God.
> I dont know what he believes in.
> He'll get over it.
> No he won't.[36]

The two extracts above are lifted from *The Road*, roughly at the point when Ely reveals his plan to leave without saying goodbye to the tirelessly optimistic child. A closer look at and assessment of the boy's attitude throughout the novel reveals that there is a strong yet subtle indication that it is not so much a belief in 'God' which sustains him, but a belief in humanity, and a somewhat relentless belief in an essential good at the heart of humans; a belief in *homo sapiens* in the literal sense of the Latin name, appealing to the precious rationality of the human in order to keep a certain primordial violence at bay and perhaps indicating an alternative conception of humanity which harks back to the origins of enlightenment humanity:

> What's on the other side?
> Nothing.
> There must be something.

---

[32] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life,* trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (California, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 2.
[33] ibid., p. 3.
[34] *The Road,* p. 263.
[35] ibid., p. 181.
[36] ibid., p. 185.

> Maybe there's a father and his little boy and they're sitting on the beach.
> That would be okay.
> Yes. That would be okay.
> And they could be carrying the fire too?
> They could be. Yes.
> But we dont know.
> We dont know.
> So we have to be vigilant.
> We have to be vigilant. Yes.[37]

Is this hope viable or illusory, bordering on delusional? McCarthy's work seems to suggest that either way, what counts in terms of the human ability to endure and persist is the fact that the hope, the story one continuously tells, simply exists. Its very existence is propulsive and essential to human resilience.

The optimism bias, this ability to imagine or narrate the self into a more positive future, seems to be a uniquely human trait; perhaps this ability to project an imagined self into the future which is 'better' is an integral part of what it is to be human. The realisation of the fact that hope may arise from this acute awareness of death or mortality as an attempt to overcome it through a re-assertion of existence and projection of the human subject past a specific potential 'end' in the future:

> I'm really scared.
> I know. It's all right. I'm going to get better. You'll see.[38]

Humanity, it can be said, does not 'like' to imagine its own end; it is this acute awareness of 'our' mortality which creates the need for hope —and it is hope which allows humans to 'go on' at all in spite of the weight of that mortality. This connection can be explained thus:

> While mental time travel has clear survival advantages, conscious foresight came to humans at an enormous price—the understanding that somewhere in the future, death awaits. Ajit Varki, a biologist at the University of California, San Diego, argues that the awareness of mortality on its own would have led evolution to a dead end. The despair would have interfered with our daily function, bringing the activities needed for survival to a stop. The only way conscious mental time travel could have arisen over the course of evolution is if it emerged together with irrational optimism. Knowledge of death had to emerge side by side with the persistent ability to picture a bright future.[39]

This reluctance to imagine one's own end (despite its inevitability in constructing a vision of the future) can be discussed in relation to Thomas Hobbes's assertion that the subject must relinquish rights to the sovereign power in order to live, implying that failing to do so would result in a short, traumatic, and extremely violent form of life:

> [N]o knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.[40]

---

[37] *The Road*, p. 231.
[38] ibid., p. 199.
[39] Shalot, 'The Optimism Bias'.
[40] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: Dent, 1914), p. 78.

Here, it becomes almost too easy to overlook the crucial role of 'hope'. It seems impossible to deny the fact that the desire to survive *peacefully* has its roots in a certain belief that something better lies in 'the beyond'. Humans do not simply wish to live, to exist—they wish to live in a certain way which is valuable to them and which affirms what it is that they value, individually and collectively. The man and boy in *The Road* struggle for the assumed 'better life' offered by the fabled warm-climate of the coast; in *Child of God,* Ballard seeks to obtain his own version of a 'better life' removed from the society which displaced him both physically and discursively to begin with; in *Blood Meridian,* Glanton's gang seems to co-exist in bloodshed and brutality with a certain air of camaraderie in their search for wealth and power:

> His name is Glanton, said Toadvine. He's got a contract with Trias. They're to pay him a hundred dollars a head for scalps and a thousand for Gómez's head. I told him there was three of us. Gentlemens, we're gettin out of this shithole.[41]

McCarthy cannot be described simplistically as 'cynical', and he certainly does not appear to subscribe to or support naive understandings of hope in any of his novels. Perhaps his vision of hope or affirmation in the broadest sense of the word lies in a certain confidence that life *does* go on, but it does so regardless of whether or not human consciousness is there to spectate or supervise it. The following quote lifted from *The Road* is intriguing in this regard, and warrants close attention:

> Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. 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.[42]

Is this vision one of hope? If so, for whom? Although inevitably filtered through human consciousness, this extract beautifully captures the essence of the unease which posthumanism evokes—an anxiety pinpointed by Herbrechter who makes the following observation:

> If 'we' humans are no longer the sole masters and possessors of reason or consciousness, 'we' might also be no longer unique in our use of symbolic language, in the anatomy of our hand, in our awareness of our own mortality and so on.[43]

McCarthy's depiction of this idyllic scene is effectively posthumanist in that it negates the assumed centrality of the human; it strongly suggests that man is not required for life to go on. This is a posthuman concern for the simple reason that the notion of 'the human' or 'humanity' is thrust into a liminal space where the significance of the human is questioned, confronted, and thrust into uncertainty. McCarthy's 'brook trout in the streams' and 'maps of the world in its becoming' regardless of man's presence is at once met with relief and perhaps terror: relief at the notion that life goes on, and terror at the realisation that life goes on without 'us' and without the very specific human understanding of 'life'. This preoccupation is reminiscent of Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time,* where he suggests that what distinguishes the human animal from others is Dasein:

---

[41] *Blood Meridian,* p. 84.
[42] Shalot, 'The Optimism Bias'.
[43] Herbrechter, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis,* p. 47.

> Dasein is an entity which does not just occur among other entities. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an *issue* for it. But in that case, this is a constitutive state of Dasein's Being, and this implies that Dasein, in its Being, has a relationship towards that Being - a relationship which itself is one of Being.[44]

Indeed it seems that the human is that entity 'for whom its own being is in question. Only the human experiences such self-reflexive ambivalence; only the human is poised to (im)pose the question, and is destined to do so unto death'.[45]

Can the human construct of hope ever be cast off in pursuit of a greater understanding of posthumanist subjectivity? Perhaps the two are inextricably linked. Braidotti offers arguably one of the clearest articulations of this critical conundrum in her keen awareness of the sense that humanism can never be completely abandoned or escaped, stating that the 'relation to Humanism remains unresolved'.[46] Why should affirmation be encouraged? Could it simply be, as Herbrechter highlights '[b]ecause we are human, or even 'posthuman, all too human'? Yes, but mainly […] because we 'care'—about many 'things', including humans—and because we yearn, in particular, "for sustainable futures [that] can construct a liveable present"'.[47] This approach to posthumanism is one which marks the end of the human and insists that the posthuman subject is one of boundless opportunity. What this brand of posthumanism does is effectively remind the human that it has never in fact *been* the human of humanism, despite its persistent efforts to achieve some idealised manifestation of this form of humanity. This conception of 'human' entails the fabled existence of a single humanity, one created according to socially constructed and temporally bound (allegedly universal) truths, laws, and values. It implies a belief in some sort of essentially 'good' human nature and a privileging of certain representations of the human based on gender, skin colour, class, religion, and so on. Could posthumanism in this sense be more 'realistic' in that it stands ready to accept that not only were 'we' never human, but perhaps 'we' will never arrive at the point of being human at all? What can be said to occur is a perpetual *becoming-human* and *making-other* which facilitate the creation of what 'we' are somewhere in the interchange between the two.

A Different Death, Another After(-)Life

> […] the posthuman does not really mean the end of humanity. It signals instead the end of a certain conception of the human.[48]

The highly constructed nature of what humans call life is apparent in Agamben's observations regarding the ancient Greek understanding of life. The Greek language had no equivalent term for what is generally meant by the word 'life' with all its connotations of value or sacredness, but they

---

[44] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p. 32.

[45] Stuart J. Murray, 'Affirming the Human? The Question of Biopolitics', in *Law, Culture and the Humanities*, (2014), 1-11, (pp. 1-2).

[46] Braidotti, p. 25.

[47] Stefan Herbrechter, 'The Roar on the Other Side of Silence…or, What's Left of the Humanities?', in *Culture Machine*, (2013), 1-13 (p. 10).

[48] N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 286.

did distinguish between two particular *forms* of life or living: *bios* and *zoē*. The latter denotes a basic or essential fact of living, that is being biologically, physically alive, or simply 'existing', and is common to all beings be they animal, human, or god:

> They used two terms that, although traceable to a common etymological root, are semantically and morphologically distinct: *zoē,* which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and *bios,* which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group.[49]

Bios is 'politically qualified' life in that it implies a way of living considered proper to a specific subject or group of subjects; it is a way of living where what is 'proper' is designated as such in and by the dominant discourses particular to that time, place, and culture:

> That children have to be educated is a circumstance which only proceeds from the fact that they are not completely led by nature, not programmed. The institutions which constitute culture supplement this native lack.[50]

If what it means to be human is understood as created and qualified in discourse, then what are the implications brought to bear on the after(-)life? This study suggests that after(-)life can be understood as a distinct shift in one's mode of being which takes place following a point of trauma. It feels impossible, at this stage, to discuss trauma and narrative without referring to Theodor Adorno's assertion that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'.[51] This profound quote calls for closer consideration; it is not, as far as this study is concerned, to be taken in a literal sense. On the contrary, poetry must be written, and stories told, but the key point here is that it can never be done in the same way after such a titanic unwriting of what humanity may have been. It must become something other, something *more* 'barbaric' than what it was in order to retain relevant meaning. Drawing on Adorno's statement as an example, the Holocaust stands as a devastating exhibition of the brutality humans are capable of, causing a total break in existing notions of allegedly 'civilised' humanity. The follow quote from *The Road* perfectly illustrates the traumatic effect of (in)human brutality:

> Huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands. On the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt. The smell was hideous.
> Jesus, he whispered.
> Then one by one they turned and blinked in the pitiful light. Help us, they whispered. Please help us.
> Christ, he said. Oh Christ.[52]

How can the man - or any human - continue to exist after bearing witness to this level of horror? Such a colossal 'break' illustrates and brings attention to a bubbling potential for violence that seems to lie just beneath the surface of what is supposedly normal to *homo sapiens*. This, in a wider context, implies a collapse in meaning and a complete failure-to-mean, and heightens the existing need for hope.

---

[49] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (California: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 1.
[50] Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time,* trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (California, US: Standford University Press, 1988), p. 3.
[51] Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics, (*London: A&C Black, 1966), p. 362-3.
[52] *The Road,* p. 116.

McCarthy's novels do lend themselves to careful inquiry into the question of hope, (in)humanity, and their relevance to the posthuman condition, in that they force the reader to come into contact with characters who are themselves at the limit of what it supposedly 'means' to be human: characters who disturb the very boundaries established in order for the subject to define itself through *différence*. Lester Ballard in *Child of God*, 'the kid' in *Blood Meridian,* and the man and boy in *The Road* inhabit the borders of human existence, and in so doing draw attention to the fragility of man-made laws and narratives of what it means to live (and indeed what it comes 'after' life). These laws, as well as rules of morality and ethics, are inevitably formed in discourse created *by* humans, making them essentially 'artificial' in nature It follows then that notions of morality and ethics are inherently 'unnatural' in that they imply the repression of a primal (and perhaps more 'natural') tendency towards violence - but perhaps it is (paradoxically) this repression which allows the human to 'be' at all in the first place. What lies at the foundation of this animal which calls itself human? It is, perhaps, the ability to do just that: name itself human against non-human others, and create the narratives of life/after(-)life that provide the hope and resilience 'we' need to go on in the face of that essential violence.

List of Works Cited

Agamben, Giorgio, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (California, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998)

Bloom, Harold, *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Cormac McCarthy* (New York, NY: Infobase Publishing House, 2009)

Braidotti, Rosi, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013)

Callus, Ivan and Herbrechter, Stefan, 'Posthumanist subjectivities, or, coming after the subject...', *Subjectivity*, 5(2012), 241-264

——, 'What is a Posthumanist Reading?', *Angelaki*, 13(2008), pp. 95-110

Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Routledge, 2002)

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York, NY: Random House, 1974)

Graham, Elaine L., *Representations of the Post/Human* (New Brunswick, US: Rutgers University Press, 2002)

Hayles, N. Katherine, *How We Became Posthuman* (Illinois, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999)

Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarie and E. Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962)

Herbrechter, Stefan, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013)

——, 'The Roar on the Other Side of Silence... or, What's Left of the Humanities?', *Culture Machine* (2013), 1-13

Hobbes, Thomas, *Leviathan* (London: Dent, 1914)

McCarthy, Cormac, *Blood Meridian* (New York, NY: Random House, 1985)

——, *Child of God* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1993)

——, *The Road* (New York, NY: Vintage, 2006)

Moravec, Hans, *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence* (Massachusetts, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988)

Murray, Stuart J., 'Affirming the Human? The Question of Biopolitics', in *Law, Culture and the Humanities* (2014), 1-11

Shalot, Tali, 'The Optimism Bias', in *TIME*, May 28th 2011 <http://content.time.com/time/health/ article/0,8599,2074067,00.html>

Spurgeon, Sarah L., ed., *Cormac McCarthy: All the Pretty Horses, No Country for Old Men, The Road* (London: Continuum, 2011)

Van Tuerenhout, Dirk R., *The Aztecs: New Perspectives* (California, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005)

Wolfe, Cary, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minnesota, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010)