

Black Lives Matter: Critical Analysis of McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) in the Backdrop of George Floyd's Murder

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Abstract

A large body of American literature deals with the subject of immigration from other parts of world to America and clashes within varied cultures in America. The latest murder of Gorge Floyd, a black American, very inhumanly by white Police Officers has once again brought into focus the issue violence with the idea: the other is not acceptable. This incident has once again raised the ideas of nation, transnationalism and Americanness: the main area of concern in the novels of a contemporary American novelist Cormac McCarthy. His novel, *The Road* (2006) is post-apocalyptic novel. The central idea of McCarthy's *The Road* is making a new world after a big apocalypse with an end of violence and killing of the 'Other' while Geroge Flyd's killing brings this idea to a reverse gear. Its reason appears to be the violence and bloodshed rooted in American soil, in American history. Through the portrayal of a post-catastrophic new world order, the writer asks his American readers to acknowledge the common humanity possessed by the 'Other' through transnational reconciliation.

Keywords: Americanism, Transnationality, Past and Present America, Apocalyptic, Future of Mankind

Introduction

An important area of research in American Studies deals with: What happens when immigrants from other places meet the land and people of North America. A large body of American literature takes it as its subject matter: how to deal with varied cultures in America. The recent killing of Gorge Floyd, a black American, very brutally by white Police Officers has once again brought into limelight the subject mentioned. He was heard to be speaking I can't breathe, while police officers gave no attention on his words. This killing has created a new wave of protests and the movement "Black Lives Matter" not only in America but throughout the world. This killing has once again raised the issues of nation, transnationalism and Americanness: the key topics of the novels of a contemporary American novelist Cormac McCarthy.

This Paper examines the intersection of transnationality and Americanness in McCarthy's fiction: How does he negotiate the conflict between a "hybridity" that seems to challenge hierarchical and binary conceptions of difference and a re-inscription of the conventional narrative of nation-building which seems to re-center white masculinity? How does he negotiate the conflict between the vision of envisaging a transcendent human order based on sympathetic identification that would collapse the position between the American self and the Other and the conventional narrative of xenophobia which gives expression to the anxieties towards the potentially threatening racial others?

Cormac McCarthy, born in 1933, is the winner of both a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award. He has published ten novels. His most famous novels include: *Blood Meridian* (1985), *The Crossing* (1995) and *The Road* (2006). "Violence" and "blood" are the key ideas critics have used most often to generalize the feature of McCarthy's portrayal of the history of the American. *The Road* (2006) is a post-apocalyptic novel by McCarthy. The idea of its analysis came from the Killing of George Floyd on a road in daylight in New York, America. The central idea of McCarthy's *The Road* is putting an end to the killing of the other and end of violence while this incident proves the condition, its opposite. Its reason seems to be the violence and bloodshed rooted in American soil, in American history, the subjects of McCarthy's fiction.

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Theoretical Framework

A major development in American Studies during the last many years has been its transnational aspect manifest in the increasing interest in approaching the study of American culture in a more international framework. Steven Vertovec analyzes the meanings of and approaches to *transnationalism* undertaken by researchers across different disciplines (Vertovec, 1999, p. 450-455). This paper applies Steven Vertovec's definitions of transnationalism to McCarthy's fiction, yet modifies them to serve: 1) as a social morphology, i.e. the dispersed diaspora of tribes of American Indians, the Americanization of Mexicans 2) as a type of consciousness, an awareness of the transnationality of violence, depravity, and alienation from nature; 3) as a reconstruction of "place" or locality, the collapse of borders in *The Road* results in the determination to find a new haven and establish a transcendent human order on the part of the father and the son.

McCarthy's transnational concept is featured by its "Americanness." The word *Americanness* is the noun form of the word *American* which has undergone great changes in its meaning over the history. The American fiction has been traditionally interpreted as having "an essential relationship to the American spirit". This unique "Americanness" is expressed in certain fundamental narrative patterns, the main ingredients of which are: (1) the America as a frontier setting, (2) an American hero, who promotes traditional American values as "competitiveness, strength, democratic sense, and rugged individualism", which distinguish Americans from other nationals (3) a hierarchy of binary oppositions: the civilized and the savagery, the white and the colored, the American and the un-American. (Bakker, 1991, p.158)

Using the above concepts of Americanism and transnationalism, this study makes a critical analysis of the novel *The Road* through which McCarthy reconfigures the theme of nation-building against the backdrop of cultural interactions and negotiations among Americans, African Americans, Indians and Mexicans in the US-Mexican borderlands, which provides valuable insights for knowing in depth the transnational politics of power and possibilities for demolishing transnational hierarchies and inequalities.

Discussion: Post-apocalyptic Survival and inherent Message in *The Road* (2006)

The Road may be the most acclaimed representative of post-apocalyptic fiction, a subgenre of science fiction that deals thematically with "time and eternity, death and dying, ultimate meaning and judgment, cosmic conflicts, divine and demonic forces, salvation and ultimate life" (Leigh, 2008, p.34). *The Road* "presents a very pure example of post-apocalyptic literature". That is, the novel brings fore the story of a father and his son, having a gun and a set of moral, who try to survive by fighting their way out of the hooks of the pointless murderers. Therefore, this paper includes *The Road* as a novel paying close attention to the salient features of post-apocalyptic fiction in the novel. What makes McCarthy's *The Road*, a unique novel, is that his post-apocalyptic landscape is the revelation of modern maladies in American society.

Critics have dwelled on the interconnection between *The Road* and the events of 9/11. As Elizabeth K. Rosen puts it, the novel is not only universally appealing but also socially concrete because it utilizes an "organizing structure that can create a (universally) moral and physical order while also holding out the possibility of social criticism" in connection with a chaotic moment in American history (Rosen, 2008, p. xiii). That is, *The Road* may be seen as a response to the deeply felt fear of catastrophic doom in the United States after 9/11. *The Road* thus, in the context of popular responses to 9/11, explores guilt, terror, and ways out of the darkness for American people.

According to Rikard, the novel indicates "McCarthy's return of a sort to the American South and to the Appalachians" (Rikard, 2008, p.276). That is, the novel is located in or at least is originated in the American South. "What is this place Papa? It's the house where I grew up" (McCarthy, 2006, p.21). This familiar place has been transformed by the unnamed disaster beyond recognition so that the father "pored over maps as a child, keeping one finger on the town where he lived" (ibid, 182). The author deliberately gives no specific referents to those regions. They are "the eastern mountains" or "the valley below" or "the coast" or "the ocean". Human constructions such as skyscrapers have become undifferentiated from the landscape. The father and the son pass through cities mostly burned where there is "no sign of life....cars in the street caked with ash...fossil tracks in the dried sludge" (ibid, 12). Concrete bridges, gas stations, and interstate exchanges are dysfunctional. What they can provide for the father and the son is shelter and occasional pitiful food if they are lucky (Lestienne, 2020).

The apocalypse has changed everything, and it has blurred or demolished the cultural lines of demarcation that used to separate people into different categories. This is particularly true of constructions that were abstract human concepts: states, governments, and nations. When the father explains to his son that they are following the states roads, the son asks:

Why are they the state roads?

Because they used to belong to the states.

(McCarthy, 2006, p. 36)

When region, state, and nation have all been extinguished by the catastrophe, these distinctions are now unimportant. When countries and states no longer exist, the border lines which separate them on maps retain “survivalist rather than patriotic significance” (Swartz 74). In contrast to the westward direction of American manifest destiny and McCarthy’s own previous Western fiction, the father and the son take the vaguely southern route probably to look for some place warmer and more suitable for survival.

For the man, an entire universe of existence has crumbled around him. Even his own identity, and the identity of others around. “Are you a doctor?” he is asked at one point. “I’m not anything”, he tellingly responds (McCarthy, 2006, p. 64). All the lines of social demarcations seem to be extinct: the frailty of everything revealed at last. Old and troubling issues resolved into nothingness and night. (ibid, 24) Old rules, old stories, and old truths are no longer applicable in this post-apocalyptic world. This concept of ideas losing their meaning and significance becomes absolutely essential to *The Road*. The father mourns “the names of things will slowly follow those things into oblivion” and emphasizes that these losses will include “the names of things one believed to be true”, like patriotism, national interest, racial purity, all of which dissolve into oblivion (ibid, 89). They are more fragile than the human beings would have thought.

In this post-apocalyptic world, everyone is finally the same. They are all migrants because in this space everyone is on the road (Allman, 2020). There are no longer any addresses to claim as one’s own. “Everything (is finally) in its place. Justified in the world”. (McCarthy, 2006, p. 182). However, when the concepts and concerns that structure society are gone, “there is no justification and there is no overarching social order” (Rikard, 2008, p. 289). For some survivors, the death of society, taboo, and God becomes a license for anarchy. Murder is “everywhere upon the land”, and cannibalism has become the easiest method of obtaining food (McCarthy, 2006, p. 60). Most of those that did not conform to the Darwinian necessity to survive by eliminating other people “sank down and fell over and died” (ibid, 181). Amid these vivid renderings of unthinkable horror and the imagery of corpses frozen in all kinds of poses, McCarthy takes up such compelling questions as how to behave oneself and how to judge others when nearly every shred of humanity, culture, and society has been obliterated.

Some people, including the wife and mother, are driven to despair at the destruction of the world. She chooses to take her own life and leave behind the man and the boy rather than share the responsibility of taking care of them and figuring out ways to survive. Afraid to face the horrors that a post-apocalyptic world will serve up, she says to her husband: “they will kill us” (ibid, 56). Despite the pleadings and protestations of the man, she repeatedly proclaims “I can’t help you” (ibid, 57). For the man, the mission of his life is protecting the boy and sustaining him. This is his mission: “My job is to take care of you”, he tells the boy (ibid, 77). It is the responsibility to the son that the father undertakes which serves as “the ontological ground” of his identity when physical borders between other and the United States and cultural borders of ethnicity, race, culture, and nation collapse in the post-apocalyptic world (Snyder, 2008, p. 75). That is, the father embraces his responsibility to sustain his son.

The tender relationship between the father and the son brings fore a dim faith in the human beings to be in high morals and true relationships. Indeed, it is truly the first genuine father and son engagement from McCarthy as the father not only does his utmost to sustain his son but also instill lessons in him and helps shape his perspective on the world when the “arbitrary system of values” dies with the rest of culture (Holloway, 2002, p. 15). That is, when there is no “higher” moral or social authority to determine what is “good” or “bad”, the man insists on establishing moral guidelines for the pair in a fundamentally amoral world. Thus, despite the need for survival at all costs, there retains the vestiges of a culture that mandate certain attitudes and actions and prohibit

others for the father and the son. In particular, the prohibition against eating human flesh still remains for them:

No. No matter what.

Because we're the good guys.

Yes.

And we're carrying the fire.

(McCarthy, 2006, p.128-29)

Thus, if physical borders (of region, state, and nation) and cultural borders (of ethnicity and race) no longer "function as a metaphor in the world of *The Road*", the ethical border of good and evil persists for the father and the son (Swartz, 2009, p. 74). "[I]n the face of apparent meaninglessness and of the violence loosed by the struggle for survival", the father promises to the son that they will remain the "good guys" because they are "carrying the fire" (Schaub, 2009, pp. 158). That is, they are holding fast to such human qualities that the novel suggests: love, hope, and courage.

It seems most important that "storytelling constitutes one of the [few] devices available to the father for raising his child to become a [just] man" (Schaub, 2009, p. 164). The father tells the boy "stories of courage and justice" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 41). Zachary Christian Swartz suggests that the father might be telling the boy stories about heroes like "firemen rushing into collapsing skyscrapers" (ibid, 80). However, the father's insistence on the distinction between themselves as the good guys carrying the fire and the bad guys who cannibalize seems to reconfirm "the Turner thesis, where frontier space is defined in a binary collision of savagery and civilization" (Holloway, 2002, p. 193). In fact, the ideological work of the United States rests on the binary between civilization and savagery in its making sense of itself in relation to the inhabitants whom it was displacing. What is more, as Hage argues, their strict moral compass seems to be "an anachronistic quality in a world devoid of humanity" (Hage, 2010, p.142). That is, in such a lawless world, their morality and ethics, their "desire to be good", are impediments to survival for the man and his son.

The boy shows high level of anxiety at his father's verdicts. Their dialogue just after the man consigns the thief to death on the beachfront road illustrates the boy's heightened sense of distress over the issue of morality:

He was just hungry, Papa. He's going to die.

...I'm scared, he said.

(McCarthy, 2006, p. 218)

The son demonstrates spontaneously compassion for the thief while the father argues against such a reaction, it is just. Thus, goodness and justice are central in the debate between the father's view of morality and his son's. What is more, this dialogue indicates the boy's growing agency which culminates in his defying his father, insisting that they give their food to an old man named Ely. The boy gives the old man a tin of fruit cocktail and invites him to have dinner with them.

Acting out of ethical impulses, the boy wants to create a world in which ethical response is made possible because he believes that there are other good guys on the road, which is repeatedly denied by his father. When his father dies, the boy almost instantly finds in another decent family a chance for continued survival. Critics interpret the boy's survival as a hope and goodness. They argue, McCarthy depicts hope and the victory of goodness in the face of terror. The novel thus brings fore a cautious optimism about humanity's salvation, as it brings forward an individual's ability to experience a transcendent and empathic bond with others. This seems to be the "long-term goal" of the son and of the author.

The boy's generosity towards and empathy with other people suggests that the value to human life lies in a categorical rejection of retaliation and violence. Thus, *The Road* presents a world where the power of the ethical all-embracing love needs to be recovered. And in the son's compassion for the "other", *The Road* reveals an "order of things" that transcends the realm of instrumental reason which facilitates mere survival. Hence, McCarthy's apocalypse is a revelation that the modern malaises of the US or even the whole world require ethical willpower to be remedied. A new ethical order must exist for social constructs like names to matter.

McCarthy agrees with Bourne in his suggestion of "a changing ideal of Americanism" which has two meanings: First, America is coming to be a transnationality, "a weaving back and forth, with the other lands", a union of many ethnicities and races who are loyal to their native cultures, instead of a nationality, an imposition of assimilation from the ruling class of the Anglo-Saxon upon the

minorities; Second, America is going to “make patriotism a hollow sham” and to resort to “an intellectual internationalism” which is “an intellectual sympathy” that will reach into the heart of different cultures and feel as they feel (Bourne, 1916,p 91; 92; 96). Yet he differs from Bourne in the following aspects: First, America is far from “the world-federation in miniature” where people are living peacefully side by side and “living here by mutual toleration”; Second, America is not a country with “unique liberty of opportunity” and “the superiority of American organization” qualified to educate “the primitive” and “laggard peoples” outside its borders (ibid, 93; 95; 96). McCarthy’s relentless exposure of the bloody and vicious history of the American nation and demystification of American exceptionalism in his Western fiction makes it clear that this American ideal of “a new consciousness of...a citizenship in the world” can make progress only if the romantic gilding of its past and the complacency of its uniqueness has been removed (ibid, 97).

McCarthy uses an egalitarian leveling of all the survivors in the post-apocalyptic world in which old binary oppositions such as North/South, they/ us and Anglo/Indian, no longer apply. The up-rootedness of all people in a post-apocalyptic world conveys a new sense of cultural identification that is very close to James Clifford’s “dwelling-in-traveling and traveling-in-dwelling” (Clifford, 1997, p.2). Because of the migratory existence of all people on the road and the dissolution of all borders, what it makes possible is a sense of fluid and multiple identities.

In fact, America’s clashes with other religions and civilizations such as Islamophobia must be reviewed as emphasized by Imran et, al in “Islamophobia and Muslim Identity: A Study of the Post 9/11 South Asian Muslim Minority in the West”, (Imran et.al, 2020 p. 467-478).Thus, McCarthy reiterates what Ahmad concludes in his analytical article “Mission Civilization as Mission Failure” (Ahmad, 2011,p.207-219).Although there is a strong spiritual and religious aspect to McCarthy’s commitment to change, he knows this has to be wedded to the struggle for social transformation from the self-outward to the world. McCarthy indicates through his work that one needs to reflect on interpersonal conflict to trigger transformation and lead to understanding. For those attempting this, the father’s restraint against eating other people and the boy’s impartial concern for other people (in *The Road*) are inclusive healing process to seek conciliation and understanding. Such a process emerges from living in a post-apocalyptic world, estranged from the centers of national cultures so that one no longer sees the world the way he is instructed to see it. McCarthy’s abandonment of narrow essentialism and nationalism in the search for common ground echoes Anzaldúa’s brave call for “new tribalism”, which emerges from the borderlands experience and stresses interconnectivity over division.

Anzaldúa calls for “an emerging planetary culture” to bridge nation-states and defined identities, for in this “the narrative national boundaries dividing us from the ‘others’ are porous and the cracks between worlds serve as gateways” (Anzaldua, 2002, p.570; 573). This identity has roots that share with all people and other things to make up a greater identity category. As Anzaldúa puts it, “You look beyond the illusion of separate interests to a shared interest (*ibid.* 574)”. McCarthy’s recognition of this might lead to the formation of new identities and the establishment of new coalition and community in the coming years of the twenty-first century. Similar is the contention of Ahmad in his latest research article: “the salvation for human kind and the construction of a transcendent human order come to the foreground in McCarthy’s fiction” (Ahmad et.al, 2020, p.859).

Conclusion

The study points out that borders are uncanny in McCarthy’s works. On the one hand, the American nation is supposed to be walled off by impenetrable borders from neighboring countries and peoples, who might pose threat to its national security. It is seen as closed, prohibiting any open-endedness, indecision, and indeterminacy, and interconnection with other nations. The negation of borders appears in *The Road* where physical borders and cultural borders collapse in the post-apocalyptic world. Set so specifically in a burned-over and devastated America and invoking the immediate and deeply felt fear of catastrophic doom after the terrorist attacks on 9/11, the novel works as a metaphor for inwardly critical analysis of the US commitment to hegemonic power and its unwillingness to exercise an empathic adjustment with others.

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