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- 1 Julian Murphet and Mark Steven, eds. *Styles of Extinction: Cormac McCarthy's The Road*
- 2 London and New York: Continuum, 2012. Pp 163. ISBN: 9781441185051
- 3 Thomas Mantzaris
- 4 Since its publication in 2006, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* has received critical acclaim, exemplified by the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2007. In the present collection of essays, the editors Julian Murphet and Mark Steven bring together a diverse spectrum of pathways that critically explore the post-apocalyptic environment of the particular novel, offering valuable insights. Emanating from a world of all-encompassing darkness, graying existence, and disintegrating language, *Styles of Extinction* emerges as a thorough illumination of McCarthy's novel and an essential contribution to scholars of American studies.
- 5 The volume begins with the editors' "Introduction: 'The charred ruins of a library,'" which attempts to locate *The Road* within literary history. Establishing connections to Cervantes's *Don Quixote* and Joyce's *Ulysses* via the comparative reading of the libraries represented in the three novels, Murphet and Steven wonder whether "*The Road* is a belated addition to a modernist spirit first energized by Cervantes and reactivated through Joyce" (5). More than that, they view McCarthy's style as attesting the state of literature today; that of "lapsing from a Borgesian library, full of shimmering and terrifying possibility, into a charred ruin of the same, where nothing remains but the disappointment of that expectation" (6-7). The implications they raise thus provide the framework within which the rest of the essays try to respond to McCarthy's novel.
- 6 In his insightful essay "'The cold illucid world': The poetics of gray in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," Chris Danta suggests that "grey marks the sheer fragility of the post-apocalypse" (10). He identifies McCarthy's opening simile in the novel — "the world is like

an eye that is slowly losing its sight" (*The Road* 1) — as one that marks the development from "a glaucomatic world to a poetics of vision" (10). He further suggests that McCarthy "deploys his poetics of vision not just to register the apocalypse that virtually annihilates the human, but to relocate the human within the post-apocalypse" (14). Sean Pryor follows with his essay "McCarthy's rhythm," exploring the transformation of language in tandem with the death of names; "the names of things slowly following those things into oblivion" (*The Road* 93). Pryor suggests "the possibility of prose rhythm as resistance" (40), arguing that "McCarthy's rhythm redeems the wasteland" (37). Grace Hellyer in her "Spring has lost its scent: Allegory, ruination, and suicidal melancholia in *The Road*" explores the "loss of continuity" between the main characters' past and present; "between memories of the departed world and a present experience in which those memories have no traction" (46). Viewing the experience of the man and the boy as one "marked by blindness and contingency" (46), she uses Walter Benjamin's and Sigmund Freud's concepts of melancholia so as to describe the characters' consciousness. Moreover, she argues that "*The Road* represents a world that has uncannily continued to exist beyond its own death, beyond the end of its own history" (53). Examining the intersections of vision, memory, and language, these essays suggest how the fleeting vision of the present tacitly enacts the establishment of anchorless memory and how the representation of McCarthy's world eludes and yet, is captured by, language.

- 7 Mark Steven in his essay "The late world of Cormac McCarthy" argues that in a post-apocalyptic environment dominated by the constant quest for survival, "the division between human life and animal life has receded" (67). Set "against the blasted topography of North America" (64), the man and the boy are described as identifying with "the transient and anonymous figure of the refugee" (68), existing beyond notions of territorialization and global arrangement of space. Paul Sheehan in "Road, fire, trees: Cormac McCarthy's post-America" examines the "state of dispersed homelessness as a national condition" (94), providing a political trajectory of capitalist modernity and its consequences represented in the novel. He centers his "political orientation" to the novel in conjunction with what he identifies as the notion of "McCarthy's bare life," a state Sheehan describes as "austere and elemental—life outside of organized social and political machinations" (91). He thus views *The Road* as "the hinterland between civilization and barbarism" (92) where, together with the natural environment, "language, too, has begun to erode" (93). In his insightful discussion of the function(s) of the road, he views it as "a metonymy of capitalist modernity" (95), concluding that it "convokes a strangely ominous and suspenseful space, suggestive of a threatening, uncanny 'post-America'" (95). Manifesting the implications of McCarthy's universalization of characters, these essays view the world of *The Road* as social and political criticism, relating the abject existence of the man and the boy to the economies and politics of space.
- 8 Julian Murphet in "The cave and *The Road*: Styles of forgotten dreams" links the represented world of the novel to the state of language; "In McCarthy's vision [...] the desolation of the world is a desolation of language" (115). Exploring the excerpt from the novel where the man encounters "the charred ruins of a library" (*The Road* 199), Murphet eloquently wonders: "once we are without world, what becomes of all these book-worlds" (119)? In "McCarthy's fire" Paul Patton invokes Kant's notion of the hermeneutical sublime so as to examine "the nature of morality in world without God" (131). In his own words, Patton proposes that "the fire carried by the father and his son in *The Road* might

be read as a substitute for the belief in a supernatural God that had hitherto sustained European morality" (140). In the final essay of the volume, "Afterword: Acts of kindness — reflections on a different kind of road movie," Mary Zournazi explores the film adaptation of McCarthy's novel, viewing it as "a film of *contemporaneity*" (146, emphasis in the original). Foregrounding the moral implications of the inherent symbolism in the man and the boy "carrying the fire," these essays raise ontological concerns that cut across an array of worlds within and beyond McCarthy's novel; the one the characters are physically experiencing, the one pertaining to their ever-drifting memories as well as the worlds represented in the charred library.

- 9 The journey of the man and the boy towards the Western frontier culminates in the child's disappointment in the realization that the sea is not blue anymore; in the post-apocalyptic environment of McCarthy's novel, the world is devoid of referents, reduced to echoes of the past. In their convincing argumentation, the collection of essays in *Styles of Extinction* redeems the wordlessness represented in *The Road* — it restores the blue color of the sea. The well-crafted examination of the gray landscape of the novel constitutes the road upon which the contributors seek to rebuild the ruins of the library. In essence, *Styles of Extinction* restores the wealth of language, rendering it a pivotal study into McCarthy's novel and an insightful work of American scholarship. By exploring the philosophical, moral, environmental and economic implications of our capitalist modernity, Murphet and Steven's edited volume interrogates the notion of the human as well as enhances our understanding of the values we project upon it. Published in the midst of anxieties concerning the future of literature, Murphet and Steven's work responds with a compelling thrust of signifiers, redeeming the worldlessness of *The Road* by illuminating it.

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