ABSTRACT

"MAPS OF THE WORLD[S] IN ITS BECOMING[S]": SEEKING QUEER POTENTIALITIES IN THE POST-APOCALYPTIC NARRATIVE

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The post-apocalyptic narrative has been imagined time and again in American literature and popular culture. More often than not, it is presented as a dystopian future in which all signs of humanity and the world as we know it is lost. Through an examination of nature and environment, humanity, and time and futurity within two post-apocalyptic texts—Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* and Robert Kirkman's graphic novel *The Walking Dead*—this thesis explores the manner in which heteronormativity is presented and, more importantly, the ways in which this type of dominant order can be and are disrupted. Reading against the grain, I explore definitions of "normative" and "nonnormative," "human" and "monstrous" within the post-apocalyptic narrative in an effort to suggest that these definitions are complicated in an attempt to present the post-apocalyptic future as a space for multiple potentialities and possibilities of living.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE Page

INTRODUCTION

The post-apocalyptic future has been imagined time and again in American literature and popular culture. From the science fiction works of authors like Ray Bradbury and Fritz Lieber to the zombie apocalypse films of George A. Romero, the idea of a potential post-apocalyptic future has penetrated the contemporary cultural history of America in nearly every genre. This trend continues today and with every new representation of the post-apocalyptic future a bleaker and more dystopian outlook seems to be created. While the cause of the apocalypse in said representations always varies—aliens, zombies, environmental devastation, epidemic, technological takeover, nuclear fallout, and the like—the devastation almost always seems to be at the hands of humans. Even in the face of the zombie apocalypse or alien invasion, texts of the post-apocalyptic genre prove the root of the apocalyptic break to be caused by humans. Therefore, texts with different representations of the post-apocalyptic future appear to display a similar narrative message: something has been lost in the apocalyptic devastation that must ultimately be regained. The world has propelled without warning into a dystopian state and it is up to the remaining human population (the "survivors") to somehow fix what has been broken. While an exact conclusion is difficult to come to, the theme of apocalyptic devastation seems to stem from widespread sensations of social ennui and feelings of

"broken" social or cultural ideologies. Thus, texts in the post-apocalyptic genre are presented as a sort of "wake up call" and attempt to insist on a call for change.

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* is perhaps one of the most notable examples of the post-apocalyptic genre in contemporary American literature. McCarthy's novel, which is set in a not-so-far-off post-apocalyptic future, reveals an American landscape that has gravely suffered from the devastating effects of widespread environmental degradation. Born from a realistic fear that our environment will fail to continue to support human life, McCarthy's narrative presents a domino effect of the devastation bound to happen if we allow the world we have today to fail in terms of our current perspective as a society. The heavily dystopian post-apocalyptic narrative employed in McCarthy's novel is also seen in other forms of popular culture. Robert Kirkman's graphic novel *The Walking Dead* (as well as AMC's television show based on the comic) reveals a post-apocalyptic world in which society falls to ruin after the outbreak of an unknown virus that results in the infected population "turning" into reanimated corpses craving human flesh. While both texts present the reader with a dystopian post-apocalyptic America, McCarthy's novel presents a changed earth where Kirkman's text is primarily concerned with a humanity that has changed. In Kirkman's comic, the danger is from within rather than from without, as it seems to be in McCarthy's text. While the causes of these apocalyptic societies differ, the effects are quite similar. Both texts operate in the fashion of the genre, employing a strong (white) male leader who is responsible for trying to return the world to its former "glory"; both works try to reassert the structure and ideologies of heteronormative American society, convinced that it is the only cure for the issues that

have become apparent after the alleged fallout. The texts seem to imply that, as a society, we were adrift and possibly unaware of the damage we can so easily cause. The apocalypse, therefore, is seen as a warning with a desired result of renewed faith in the old system.

However, while both texts attempt to reestablish heteronormative social ideology, the post-apocalyptic world constructed does not allow for such action. It would appear that in the wake of apocalypse the world that remains does not allow for a reassertion of heteronormative dominance but, instead, avidly resists it in an attempt to prove that heteronormative American society as we know it is no longer attainable—nor should it be. Even in post-apocalyptic texts where heteronormative good seems to triumph, there is always some hint, some kind of allusion that the world is still in disarray and, perhaps, that the "good" is not quite as good as it seems. The post-apocalyptic landscape refuses to be dominated by heteronormative forces and, therefore, defined in its terms. Thus, I argue for a queer reading of the post-apocalyptic narrative genre, paying particular attention to the world as it is envisioned in Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* and Robert Kirkman's ongoing graphic novel *The Walking Dead*. While both texts present a post-apocalyptic world that is apparently dystopian, I argue that both portrayals of the post-apocalyptic world can be read as the birth of a new and different world rather than the end of the world. Focusing on the presence of dominant heteronormative social values within McCarthy and Kirkman's narratives, I argue that both authors suggest that the world must be "saved" and "returned" to its former state via such allusions to the heteronormative ideological systems of the past. However, the manifestations of post-

apocalyptic terror (for McCarthy, the environment and for Kirkman, the zombies) challenge these supposed intentions. The post-apocalyptic landscape so strongly opposes the heteronormative values enforced by both McCarthy's and Kirkman's protagonists that readers are compelled to reconsider the ideal trajectory for the future of the narrative and, thus, dominant social ideologies come into question under the conditions of the post-apocalyptic world. Through a queer reading of McCarthy and Kirkman's texts, it becomes evident that the post-apocalyptic landscape is representative of a world in transition and, even perhaps, evolution; though writers of the genre attempt to reestablish heteronormative society, the post-apocalyptic landscape appears to resist such forces and, instead, moves progressively towards a world much different than that which came before.

In this thesis, I analyze the post-apocalyptic narrative in terms of three interconnected elements: Nature and environment, humanity, and time and futurity. The first chapter of this thesis explores the presentation of the physical landscape in the post-apocalyptic narrative, paying particular attention to Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road.* I will discuss how the post-apocalyptic narrative typically communicates the landscape as terrifying and dystopian through use of specific markers and clues that elicit fear within the reader. In my chapter, I argue that these traditional motifs within the post-apocalyptic genre are not necessarily bad, but that they merely appear as such because the natural world is conceived in normative social terms. By examining the post-apocalyptic landscape through a queer lens, it becomes apparent that "terrifying" elements of the post-apocalyptic world are simply characteristic of a different world.

The second chapter focuses on the human element within the post-apocalyptic landscape. In this chapter, I explore the concept of "human" as it is understood as a social construction. Within the post-apocalyptic narrative, there is a distinct binary created between the human and the monster wherein the human typifies normative social characteristics and the monster, therefore, refers to that which threatens normativity. I will use human and monstrous characters within both *The Road* and *The Walking Dead* in an attempt to dismantle this traditional, reductive binary. Instead, I suggest that the presence of seemingly monstrous figures within the post-apocalyptic narrative does not stand as a threat to the survival of the human but, rather, urges the reader to reexamine the notion of what constitutes humanness. I intend to argue that the monster, therefore, is not a negative being but an alternative means through which to define human existence overall.

The third and final chapter unites the discussions in the first two chapters through an examination of post-apocalyptic time and futurity. I suggest that in both McCarthy and Kirkman's texts (and, arguably, all post-apocalyptic texts) the world is conceived as dystopian because the narrative is operating within a normative conception of time that is linear. Though the narratives present a world that seems to simply exist after "the end," I argue in this chapter that it is not a sign of hopelessness. Rather, like the arguments I will be making the first two chapters, this chapter will also suggest that the post-apocalyptic world is making room for more possibilities. This chapter will acknowledge the ways in which normative conceptions of time are still very much present in the post-apocalyptic

narrative but that, perhaps unintentionally, a new means of understanding time and the nature of futurity becomes increasingly more apparent.

In order to break the normative dystopian trajectory typically understood as essential in the post-apocalyptic narrative, this thesis will draw on aspects of queer theory and queer ecological theory. More specifically, this thesis will utilize the work of Timothy Morton, Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, Judith Butler, and José Esteban Muñoz in order to present a multi-faceted portrait of a world that transcends normativity in every sense of the term. I will use more recent works of queer ecology and futurity alongside quintessential queer theory in an attempt to articulate the manner in which the post-apocalyptic narrative not only allows for alternative conceptions of humanity but, also, the state of being in general. In this thesis, I employ tenets of queer theory and queer ecological theory as a means to open avenues of potentiality in terms of understanding nature and the environment, humanity, and time.

In Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson's introduction to *Queer Ecologies* entitled "A Genealogy of Queer Ecologies," the two critics state that "the politics of natural *space*...have had an effect on the organization and regulation of nature as a socially produced set of places...[that] produce and promote (and prohibit) particular kinds of sexual identity and practice" (12). Their argument suggests that natural spaces have been socially appropriated and repackaged as *social* spaces with specific sexual designations; natural spaces have essentially become gendered. In particular, Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson discuss the gendering of wilderness spaces, stating that traditional conceptions of the Natural sphere define it as an essential space for "the

cultivation of heteronormative masculinity" (14) and the development of "moral and physical fitness" (20). This conception of the wilderness is akin to the Emersonian vision of nature which, as Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson seem to suggest, conflates heteronormative masculinity, social order, and Christian ideology. It suggests that the landscape of the wilderness ("natural" space) is merely an extension of heteronormative society used for the purpose of reinforcing accepted social customs. Queer ecology, therefore, is "a transgressive and historically relevant critique of dominant pairings of nature and environment with heteronormativity and homophobia" (22). Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson acknowledge the traditional conceptions of Nature spaces but promote their own perspective that views such natural spaces not as extensions of normative society but, rather, as queer. For Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, natural spaces are separate from normative society and, therefore, represent a state of being that is untouched by heteronormativity and learned social customs.

While Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson's queer ecology draws an unmistakably bold line between society and nature, other works within queer ecology are not quite as black and white. In *The Ecological Thought,* Timothy Morton moves to dismantle this traditional conception of the human and nature, defining the modern ecological thought as "the thinking of interconnectedness" (7). Morton makes a conscious effort to avoid boundaries, closure, or any sense of "totality" (5) and instead conceives a world in which nothing is certain but everything is connected. He argues that, "modern life has prevented us from thinking 'totality' as big as we could...[and that] We may need to think bigger than totality itself, if totality means something closed, something we can be sure

of, something that remains the same" (4-5). In essence, Morton argues that "ecology" as we understand it is not a fixed conception of "Nature" and science, but is a study of all things that is constantly in flux:

> The ecological view to come isn't a picture of some bounded object or "restrictive economy," a closed system. It is a vast, sprawling mesh of interconnection without a definite center or edge. It is radical intimacy, coexistence with other beings, sentient and otherwise—and how can we so clearly tell the difference? The ecological thought fans out into questions concerning cyborgs, artificial intelligence, and the irreducible uncertainty over what counts as a person. Being a person means never being sure that you're one. In an age of ecology without Nature, we would treat many more beings as people while deconstructing our ideas about what counts as people. (8)

In order to better explain the concept that is "the ecological thought," Morton urges us to move away from essentialist modes of thinking and, in particular, conceptions of an idealized construction of Nature that exists outside of the human experience. He argues for an ecological thinking that he refers to as "ecology without Nature," wherein the closed-off construction of a natural realm does not exist and the human presence is constantly part of a larger system. Morton eliminates the borders we construct around the social and the Natural and instead speaks to the idea of intersection; he states that the ecological view does not envision a "closed system" but rather a "sprawling mesh" in which the lines that attempt to construct difference are blurred. Morton's ecology urges us to resist thinking within a binary and, instead, suggests that we approach the question of existence as just that—a question. To think the ecological thought as a set of questions rather than an answer, Morton suggests that the goal is not fully to understand ecology or to know what is human and what is not, but actively to question it. When reading

Morton's argument for conceptions of humanity through an ecological lens, one might ask what this has to do with the natural world—and that is the whole point. Morton's discussion of ecological thinking and thinking human are inherently linked: attempting to understand ecology means attempting to understand humanity.[1]

In the 2014 Wellek Lecture series at the University of California, Irvine, Morton elaborates on this conception of ecology and the human that is, as he states in *The Ecological Thought,* a "mesh" (33). Morton dismantles the rigid construction of a social binary that separates society (here) from nature (away) in his discussion of a dark ecology and, instead, suggests that the seemingly distinct subjects be understood in a singular, constantly changing capacity. Morton presents an ecology in which the human and the perceived "other" actually come from the same place, rather than the assumption that that which is not understandably human comes from without and, ultimately, threatens the space of the human. He eliminates the borders that we construct around the "social" and "Natural" realms, explaining that the allusive horizon has never existed and that there is no "away." For Morton, to understand ecology is to understand that everything comes from and goes to someplace within the same system. Thus, Morton argues that things (and, therefore, ecology) are not essential constructs but, rather, "middles"; things are constantly changing entities comprised of a "weird essentialism" and are, therefore,

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[1] Morton's discussion about ecology in *The Ecological Thought* is an intersection of conversations regarding "Nature" and ecology, as well as humanity; he argues that conceptions of humanity are essential in our understanding of ecology. For the purposes of this thesis, I will expand further on Morton's explanation of the ethics of humanity and personhood in conversation with the more anthropocentric queer study explored in Judith Butler's *Undoing Gender.*

inconsistent. Thus, he suggests that our anxieties about the human condition in relation to Nature occur not because we (humans) are being threatened by an external force but, instead, occur as a result of experiencing oneself as a thing and recognizing oneself as a nonessential being.

Further, Morton explains existence in non-essentialist terms by claiming that to be a thing is "to be in a twist." To be a thing, according to Morton, is to be in a state of constant change and, thus, to refuse definition. The ecological argument Morton makes in his lecture once again places the human within a larger context that does not have borders or limitations, therefore suggesting the relationship between humans and nature is not "this/that" but is, rather, noncontradictory. Since to be a human is to be a thing, and the state of what we might call "thinghood" is not stable, the definitions for what can be considered human are not stable either: to be a human could mean to be a tree and thus to be a tree is to be human which could mean to be a lamppost and so on and so forth. For Morton, concepts like "human" and "Nature" are indefinable constructs that we must attempt to move away from. This conception of ecological thinking as fluid is important when discussing the presentation of "Natural" and social spaces in the post-apocalyptic genre in contemporary American literature because it allows us to look beyond the implication that the two spaces exist independently of one another and, instead, recognize that both realms are constantly changing shape and overlapping: the post-apocalyptic landscape exemplifies what it is like to be—to quote Morton—"in a twist."

In her book *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler explains that the concept of the "human" is defined in social terms and, much like Morton, argues that we must move

beyond such closed off modes of thinking. Making reference to the Hegelian notion of self-consciousness and coming into being, Butler claims that this traditional mode of identification through a desire of recognition is lacking because "[t]he terms by which we are recognized as human are socially articulated and changeable" (2). She continues by explaining that the terms ascribed to "'humanness'" are normative constructions that, subsequently, exclude or produce difference between certain individuals. Within the socially constructed role of the human there is an implied power that dictates which individuals are worthy of such definition. Therefore, markers of race, sex, and gender (amongst other modes of recognition) that do not fit into the normative construction of humanness are thus considered less-than or non-human attributes (2). By this measure, it is clear that to be human is not to occupy a naturally occurring state of being but, rather, to be included in the socially constructed space of normativity.

Though she acknowledges the truth in Hegel's discussion of self-consciousness and identification through social means, Butler clearly articulates that normative notions of humanness and identification therein are flawed. Speaking particularly to the issue of gender construction, Butler suggests that the exclusionary nature of traditional definitions of humanness make it nearly impossible for those outside of accepted social roles to be recognized as functioning members of society and, therefore, deprives said individuals of certain "human" rights. Ultimately, she argues that the constraints of socially constructed modes of recognition enforce a power dynamic that merely creates difference between individuals that are assimilated to the norm and those that are not. To acknowledge this flaw, however, is to critique it. It is Butler's intention to dismantle the process of

recognition through difference and, instead, "open up the possibility of different modes of living...[and] establish more inclusive conditions for sheltering and maintaining life that resists models of assimilation" (4).

José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* also grapples with the notion that the world cannot and should not function when thinking in essentialist terms. Muñoz explores this in relation to humanity and environment; however, his primary focus is placed on time and notions of futurity. Where Butler speaks primarily to the concept of the human and Morton's approach attempts to take the straight notion of human (and the human environment therein) and "twist" it, Muñoz does so with the notion of time as it is typically created in a straight, linear trajectory. In his book, Muñoz considers a new means of understanding our conception of time, as he suggests that something is missing from the present moment; he argues that the present is problematic because it is "a notion of nothing existing outside the sphere of the current moment, a version of reality that naturalizes cultural logics such as capitalism and heteronormativity" (12). Muñoz takes issue with the concept of the present because it operates under the assumption that everything within the current state of the world is in focus and, therefore, normalized. By accepting the idea of presentness, we only allow ourselves to understand what is (or, at least, what appears to be) happening rather than what could potentially happen. Thinking in the present, Muñoz suggests, is to accept the power of a binary structure and, thus, to resist potentiality; presentness adheres to a closed off, unyielding structure that does not allow for a multiplicity of meaning and

potential. Muñoz argues that, in order to "see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present," we must be able to reject the restrictiveness of the "here and now" (1).

Muñoz's critique of the present is necessary for the explication of the post-apocalyptic narrative. In particular, Muñoz's discussion regarding straight time versus queer time. Straight time—or straight temporality—is a concept that Muñoz borrows from Judith Halberstam's *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* which suggests that time exists in normative terms, highlighting and placing value in heteronormative life. Muñoz argues that Halberstam's notion of a straight temporality "tells us that there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life" and that the only hope for futurity can be found in heterosexual reproduction and, therefore, the continuance of the heteronormative present (Muñoz 22). Therefore, the problem with straight time is that it only allows for a future as envisioned by the heteronormative ideals at present and, as a result, conceives a singular understanding of how time operates and what—if anything—time means. Straight time is also "self-naturalizing" (25) and, therefore, constantly needs to be questioned. Muñoz offers an answer to this in the form of an alternative to straight time, something he calls "queer time." Queer time is a critique of straight temporality and its problematic self-naturalization; it is "a stepping out of the linearity of straight time" that jumps around in time and space and ultimately proves to be "a path and a movement to a greater openness to the world" (25). In queer time, different moments are constantly intersecting to present a construction of time that is—to borrow a term from Timothy Morton—somewhat "mesh-like." Thus, queer time does not conform to a conceivable outline for how time *should* operate but creates room

for defining what time actually means and, therefore, allows for potentiality that is to reveal how time *can* operate. It is my hope to add to Muñoz's critique of the present by inserting the post-apocalyptic genre as a vessel through which this is done. I suggest that the post-apocalypse is a period through which the normative conception of time is broken and the "here and now" is actively rejected. In my chapter, therefore, I will argue that the post-apocalypse is a period of potentiality that is characterized by aspects of Muñoz's queer time; the post-apocalyptic narrative is an explication of this notion of time that critiques the heteronormative present and suggests a new, hopeful (albeit oddly hopeful) means of understanding futurity.

Since this thesis will suggest a reimagined manner through which to read post-apocalyptic literature as well as modern American literature as a whole, it is therefore important to draw on both queer theory and queer ecological theory. I put the works of Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, Morton, Butler, and Muñoz into conversation because not only do these theorists acknowledge the issue with essentialist modes of thinking, but because they urge for new and alternative modes of thinking in terms of humanity, nature, and futurity studies; these particular theoretical works envision a new world (or several). Thus, a queer theoretical framework seems only necessary in my analysis of the post-apocalyptic narrative. Reading the genre through such a lens will help support my argument that the post-apocalyptic world is not dystopian but, rather, somewhat idealistic. While most scholarship today argues the obvious point of the terror and destruction present in such texts, this project not only reevaluates the legitimacy of certain dystopian motifs within the narrative but also questions whether or not the

intention of these texts is clearly presented. Though it has been argued that writers of post-apocalyptic fiction aim to reestablish dominant heteronormative ideologies (whether consciously or not), this thesis will suggest that there is more to be said about the genre and the construction of a post-apocalyptic landscape. This project is important because it raises the question about the strength of the heteronormative ideological systems presented in post-apocalyptic fiction. Through the introduction of queer ecology into the study of the genre, I suggest that the intention to reestablish heteronormative ideology often fails. By suggesting that there are complications in the "purpose" of post-apocalyptic fiction, I intend to open the dialogue and further explore the intentions and repercussions of post-apocalyptic fiction.

CHAPTER 1

THE NATURE OF IT ALL: QUEERING THE NATURAL SPACE IN THE POST-APOCALYPTIC NARRATIVE

> What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
> Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
> You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
> A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
> And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
> And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
> There is shadow under this red rock,
> (Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
> And I will show you something different from either
> Your shadow at morning striding behind you
> Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
> I will show you fear in a handful of dust. (T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* 19-30)

In T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, he presents a landscape that has lost all markers of the familiar world. In the poem, the speaker addresses a subject—"Son of man"—who is only capable of seeing the world around him as a barren dystopia because it no longer resembles the world he knows. In the eyes of the subject (quite possibly, the human subject), the world is nothing more than "[a] heap of broken images" because its relationship to the subject has changed. Whereas before the land was a familiar terrain created to benefit the human, now it is something different and, therefore, has become an expanse of "stony rubbish." The speaker, however, implies that there is a goodness in this changed landscape; though the landscape no longer produces what the subject deems

significant and beneficial, the speaker suggests that it is still fertile, just in a different way. The speaker urges the subject to consider the "roots that clutch" and be willing to understand something different than what they already believe to be true.

Though Eliot's work does not fall under the umbrella of post-apocalyptic literature (or even science-fiction, for that matter), the subject's relationship to the landscape speaks directly to the manner in which the subject of post-apocalyptic literature typically relates to the environment therein. The moment of apocalypse—whether it be environmental, man-made, or divine intervention—always changes the landscape of the world to a point at which the human is no longer able to reap the same benefits as those that were available before the fall. Because the human no longer benefits from the land, it therefore loses its value altogether and becomes a benign presence in some kind of never-ending purgatory or, worse, is perceived as a threat. In either case, the environment in the post-apocalyptic narrative loses its significance the moment it loses its recognizability and, specifically, its recognizability as a resource for human life and development.[2] Thus, the human in post-apocalyptic literature imbues the natural landscape with negative characteristics simply because it is no longer a resource or a safe haven; born from a fear of the unknown, the human moves to escape from or take up

[2] The refusal to recognize the post-apocalyptic environment as significant is so often depicted in the genres of dystopian and science fiction literature. One of my favorite examples comes from Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles.* After having created a simulacrum of Earth society on Mars, a group of people watches in amazement as Earth burns in the sky. The response to the changed planet is denial: "That just isn't Earth"…"Not Earth—oh no, it *couldn't* be" (143). The people wonder at the changed state of the world but, within moments, return to their own lives. They think briefly on Earth and their relatives there, but once they realize the planet is no longer of importance to their well-being, it is brushed aside as old news.

arms against the environment. However, the differences apparent in the post-apocalyptic landscape are not necessarily barren or harmful and, as Eliot suggests, should be met with the same level of consideration given to the former world. A new world can be created "in a handful of dust."

It the purpose of this chapter to read the post-apocalyptic narrative considering the same types of questions. Though it may seem barren and frightening, can't the new landscape of the post-apocalyptic world still be something worth engaging with? Does the world actually lose value and significance simply because it no longer seems to benefit the position of the heteronormative human subject? I propose that, while it may be the intention of the post-apocalyptic genre to present a "terrifying" dystopia, the post-apocalyptic landscape ultimately acts as a representation of a *queer nature*[3] in contemporary American literature. In post-apocalyptic texts, natural spaces are typically characterized by seemingly sinister elements that stand in opposition to traditional conceptions of nature and the American pastoral in particular. While this clearly reflects the loss of heteronormativity, it does not necessarily mean that it is given a negative connotation. The queerness of the post-apocalyptic landscape challenges the social and cultural projections on natural spaces that have helped to construct the exclusionary binary by which we attempt to define "human" and "nature." I will utilize Cormac McCarthy's popular novel *The Road* in my analysis of the post-apocalyptic landscape, as

[3] I refer here the concept of "queer nature" as a reimagining of traditional conceptions of ecology in Western thought. A multiplicity of definitions for "queerness" and "queer ecology" abound, but I focus my argument around the definitions presented by Morton and Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson. I outline the specifics of these definitions both in my introduction as well as later on in this chapter.

it clearly presents the effects on the natural landscape in the wake of devastation. In my analysis, I will first examine McCarthy's presentation of a post-apocalyptic American landscape and look at ways in which specific elements of the natural setting are queer and what effect that has on the narrative and genre overall. I hope to prove in my close analysis of McCarthy's text that though it is often the intention of the post-apocalyptic genre to shock and scare by presenting a "dystopian" landscape, it is not necessarily synonymous with "terror" or "lifelessness" but, instead, might simply signal a new age for the earth and humanity therein. By employing the theories presented by Timothy Morton and Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson in their definitions of queer ecology, I hope to dismantle the binary construction that poses "human" and "nature" against one another within a post-apocalyptic setting and suggest that queer ecology and post-apocalyptic ecology can be understand in similar terms. Through specific analysis of McCarthy's novel, I will argue that the post-apocalyptic landscape does not depict a dystopian after-Earth but, instead, reveals a world in transit; the post-apocalyptic genre, perhaps inadvertently, presents an American landscape shedding its old skin while simultaneously working to resist the reassertion of dominant heteronormative values.

Western ideologies about nature have always favored the position of a white, masculine heteronormative social order. Born from Western religious doctrine, the manifestos that have constructed a normative means of understanding nature position it as a realm that exists for the purpose of benefitting man. Nature exists for mankind and, simultaneously, cannot be granted value without a human influence. In John Locke's *Two*

Treatises of Government, he explains that "[t]he earth, and all that is therein, is given to men for the support and comfort of their being" (ch. 5). He claims that nature (and all "inferior creatures" therein) is a space free of definition and, therefore, value until it is imbued with the labor of man. Locke's argument, which seems to have had a ripple effect on Western conceptions of nature, is clearly anthropocentric but, in addition, appears to be Eurocentric as well: what does Locke mean by "man?" What defines a human or, worse, this "inferior creature?"

In a specifically American context, consider Manifest Destiny: the belief in the nineteenth century that Western settlers were destined—and, therefore, had the right—to move west and settle across the continent. Just as Locke defines the rights to property in his *Treatises*, Manifest Destiny firmly believed that this expansion was an indisputable *right* of Western settlers, as the land and its resources seemed to be nothing more than raw material waiting to be used, waiting to benefit Western expansion. This movement did not respect the landscape as it existed before, nor did it consider the peoples that inhabited the seemingly "untouched" wilderness space. Land was ravaged and indigenous peoples were disenfranchised (and ravaged) all for the purpose of developing Western society. The "untouched" American wilderness was claimed in the name of Western society and, soon enough, traces of a "true" nature began to disappear. However, not long after, the same forces that so easily transformed the American landscape in order to benefit heteronormative society, moved to protect it from further defilement with the inception of the National Parks. Through this preservation movement, parts of the American landscape deemed important enough were spared (and continue to be) from the

onslaught of migration and industrialization, lest their natural essence be destroyed. In both the instances of Western settlement and migration into the wilderness as well as the effort to protect and close off such natural spaces, it is difficult to ignore the fact that control of these movements was maintained by a primarily white masculine heteronormative order. Locke's *Treatises* is clearly imbued with traditional Christian ideology (as he is seen calling upon God as the ultimate governance in both social and natural spaces) and, spilling over into the example given about Manifest Destiny, we are able to see that the foundation for American social and natural construction is grounded in the divine "right" of white European settlers.

This foundational construction of natural spaces as inferior to the human remains relevant in contemporary perceptions of ecology. Today, common ecological conceptions present a binary opposition in which the human (and, therefore, society) is the thesis and nature (and all that is considered nonhuman) is thus the antithesis. This means of understanding the human and the natural world is problematic because not only does it suggest that "Nature" exists as some realm outside of the human experience, but also because it forces us to wonder what can even be defined as "human." Contemporary perceptions of ecology have constructed "human" and "Nature" as separate and seemingly opposing spheres with clearcut definitions for both spaces. Consequently, ecological discussion is often closed off and essentialist and appears to leave no room for variation.

In my introduction, I outline Timothy Morton's *The Ecological Thought* in which he makes an effort to change the way in which the relationship between the human and

nature is typically conceived, defining the modern ecological thought as "the thinking of interconnectedness" (7). Morton's notion of "interconnectedness" is interesting in that it removes the borders and definitive lines drawn between the human and nature in traditional Western thought. Morton's ecology is all-encapsulating (meaning "nature" is not defined by trees and rivers alone, but by people and towns and time, as well) and assumes a natural environment that is constantly changing in definition. He claims that, to think the ecological thought and move beyond traditional notions of nature and ecology, we must be open to encountering "all kinds of beings that are not strictly 'natural,'" as our understanding of "nature" is not even natural itself but, rather, a manipulation of different beings and events (8). Morton urges us move away from these essentialist modes of thinking and, in particular, the Western notion of "Nature" as some far-off idealized realm that exists outside of the everyday human experience. The idea presented in his argument—"ecology without Nature"—eliminates the borders created around the social and Natural realms and, instead, meshes the two into a larger system of coexistence and interconnectedness. Morton ultimately urges us to resist modes of thinking within a binary framework and, instead, be brave enough to consider the question of existence as just that—a question. The goal of the ecological thought is not to fully understand a singular truth about the world but to admit that ecological thinking and the human's relationship therein is nothing more than a series of questions and ever-changing truths.

In the Wellek Lecture series, Morton continues to elaborate on this mode of ecological thinking that situates the human and ecology in a relationship of

intersectionality or, as he defines it, a "mesh" (33). In his discussion of dark ecology, Morton alludes again to the ever-changing nature of ecology and the human, arguing that the two are dependent on one another and, therefore, are not mutually exclusive. For Morton, there is no "away": everything must come from and go to somewhere within the same system. The constant contact between the fluctuating essences of ecology and the human leads Morton to define the two entities in non-essentialist terms, referring to them instead as "middles." He elaborates here by claiming that to be a thing (in this case, to be human) is to always be middling or "to be in a twist." Morton uses the Mobius strip as an example, stating that our anxieties as humans comes from our desire to "flatten" the strip but, ultimately, our inability to do so; we seek definition for ourselves and our environment even though the two are constantly in flux. Thus, this type of ecological thinking is incredibly useful in analyzing presentations of the "natural" and social spaces within post-apocalyptic literature. Utilizing the concepts of interconnectedness and non-essentialist definitions for ecology and the human will reveal how the relationship between the two is traditionally presented and, perhaps more importantly, alternative ways in which it can be understood.

In conjunction with Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson's introduction to *Queer Ecologies,* Morton's theory can be applied in this chapter as a means of "queering" the natural spaces of post-apocalyptic literature. The two texts question normative conceptions of ecology and humanity and propose alternative means of understanding these static definitions. Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson suggest that normative conceptions of ecology present natural spaces as extensions of the social space

that are specifically designed to benefit the human and, in particular, man. They argue that the natural realm has been gendered and constructed as an essential space for "the cultivation of heteronormative masculinity" (14). Though this argument that nature spaces are designed as spaces for homosocial masculine development differs somewhat from Morton's argument, the two work nicely together because they present traditional conceptions of nature as a space outside of society. Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson claim nature is linked to social development (Morton, for his argument, claims that the natural world houses the abject) but, even so, they are not related to the human as Morton argues for in his thinking of interconnectedness; in this particular argument, normative conceptions present nature as an extension of the human only in that it provides a space upon which the human can play, a space in which the human can impose heteronormative ideology.

Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* is a significant text in contemporary post-apocalyptic literature in which humanity seems to be clutching at the last remains of heteronormativity. McCarthy's text presents a presumably modern American landscape that has been ravaged by an unknown apocalyptic devastation. The narrative focuses on the relationship between a man and his son (apparently two of the last survivors on Earth) as they attempt to navigate the crumbling world that once was. Though the novel makes token references that suggest the narrative exists in a relatively contemporary context, Kevin Kearney, in "Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and the Frontier of the Human," argues that "an absence of identifiable referents within the text leaves the reader with little sense of specificity in terms of time or place" (160). Kearney continues his argument by

elaborating on elements of anonymity, darkness, and degradation within the novel. Together, such markers (or a lack thereof) suggest that McCarthy's narrative landscape is one intended to be a bleak, dystopian after-Earth that has lost nearly all signs of human life. Thus, while the unnamed apocalypse appears to be largely environmental devastation, it is clear that whatever events transpired did not simply affect the natural realm but caused "the collapse of an entire world" (De Bruyn 782); the natural devastation in the novel is so intense and widespread that it challenges the strength of society and the influence of the human presence. Tim Edwards and Nora Kestermann both suggest that McCarthy's degraded American landscape—a grey and ashen shadow of the old world—is threatening because it unravels the Emersonian image of nature as a safe and spiritual realm and, in doing so, perverts traditional conceptions of American nature and society. Edwards in particular argues that McCarthy's landscape "tells a terrifying tale" because the familiar American pastoral has been transformed into its nightmarish antithesis and all that remains of the old world are uncanny vestiges left as a reminder of what has been lost (57).

This leveling of the American landscape into a grey, darkening expanse of inhospitable and essentially hopeless space leaves the human characters searching for direction and, ultimately, purpose. Anthony Warde and Chris Walsh argue that the post-apocalyptic landscape of McCarthy's novel leaves human characters like the unnamed man and his son adrift, seeking direction. Warde's argument suggests that a decreasing presence of social order forces the man and his son to attempt to "position" themselves within the unknowable landscape, using vague markers of a lost society (maps, roads,

etc.) as guidance. Walsh presents a similar argument in which he suggests that, in the wake of the American pastoral's shift to a "dystopian extreme," the American South—symbolic of a national ideal—serves as a sort of "redemptive agent" where the man and his son can journey and, hopefully, find their place in this otherwise unknowable landscape. However, such arguments do not address any sense of redemption in McCarthy's post-apocalyptic landscape but, rather, elucidate the attempt of McCarthy and his critics to create a sense of hope within normative American social ideology. The concept of the American pastoral (marked on maps and routed by roads) and, specifically, the American South, is not an ecological ideal but a social and cultural symbol for what "true" American nature is meant to look like. To signal very specific conceptions of American natural spaces within a landscape that does not reflect such attributes quite clearly suggests that any sense of goodness or redemption can only be found in socially constructed ideas. Instead of attempting to reconcile the landscape presented in the post-apocalyptic world, McCarthy and his critics appear to seek answers in lost ideologies.

The majority of McCarthy's critics, therefore, argue for a dystopian reading of the text and subscribe to one of two perceptions: first, that nature (in this case, a bad sort of nature) has infringed on the human domain and threatened its power or, second, that the natural sphere has simply stopped producing resources for the benefit of humans. McCarthy's post-apocalyptic landscape is read as a state of dystopian chaos because the once fruitful environmental landscape, now a barren wasteland, is no longer regenerating itself and markers of humanity and social order have almost completely dissolved. Louise Squire argues that the devastated earth is described as a kind of dystopia because

it no longer displays the characteristics of an environment that benefits human life and, therefore, is no longer "hospitable *to us*" (212). Inger-Anne Softing also acknowledges the anthropocentric nature of the text, suggesting that McCarthy constructs distinct contrasts within the narrative, a crucial contrast being the relationship between the parallel binaries of utopia/dystopia and human/environment (705-06). Softing suggests that all things in the text that are human (heteronormative ideology, dreams, language) are utopian while everything that is a part of the physical environment (and, therefore, *non*human) is dystopian. This means of approaching McCarthy's text is problematic because not only is it completely anthropocentric, but it is also in conjunction with specifically American heteronormative masculine ideology. These readings of the landscape suggest that because McCarthy's post-apocalyptic nature does not agree with normative perceptions of nature spaces—as laid out in our discussion of Locke and property or traditional Emersonian conceptions of society and nature—it is, therefore, threatening to the human. However, hearkening to Timothy Morton's conception of ecology and the human, we might ask ourselves what the definition of humanity (and, perhaps, "goodness") within McCarthy's novel might be.

If we are to think about how we define the word "human," it is interesting to note that, though we assume humanity to be a natural state of being, it is something that is socially constructed. We assume to be a human means to be exactly what we are, as characterized by our appearance and behavior; to be human means to walk upright, to speak, to think, and to act on reason rather than instinct. This is the picture we imagine when we think "human" and we assume it is natural. However, to be defined as human is

a privilege granted by heteronormative ideology. To be human is to be a creature that *looks* human and *acts* human and "human" itself is not naturally occurring but defined by the heteronormative order that holds power over society and nature. Thus, to be "human" is to be included in the majority, to be indoctrinated into the dominant order, to be "one of us" (gooble gobble, we accept you). To be a human is to be clearly defined and accepted as the dominant race of being.

The anthropocentric view of humanity is a significant part of the problem that occurs in McCarthy's narrative. By positioning his protagonists, a presumably white man and his son who "carry the fire" (McCarthy 70) through an otherwise darkened landscape, he grants the heteronormative male "human" presence while denying that other entities that we would normally consider human in the post-apocalyptic landscape. This is perhaps why most critics often read this new landscape as dystopian: because it threatens the clearly understandable presence of the human. Yet, as Morton suggests, to be a thing (or, in this case, a human) is to be "in a twist" and, thus, to resist definition. It is the heteronormative anxieties about human identification in contrast to nonhuman entities that forces this unnatural attempt to straighten out the twist and claim definition. Thus, the search for "positionality and directionality" (Warde 1) within McCarthy's post-apocalyptic landscape is not necessarily born from a desire to find oneself physically situated in the American pastoral but, rather, within the construct of a heteronormative social order. Arielle Zibrak and Ashley Kunsa both argue that conceptions of hope and goodness within the novel are established within notions of heteronormative society and family structures. Zibrak suggests that the presence of the man and his son—a

relationship that is both representative of the nuclear family unit as well as Christian ideology—is central to the novel as it helps to construct a heteronormative center where everything else in the desolate landscape (including other humans) pose a constant threat to this essential goodness. Kunsa's argument suggests that the man and his son are essential in McCarthy's depiction of heteronormativity, claiming that the devastated American landscape is simply a blank canvas, a "New Eden," for the man to rewrite heteronormative social order (59). Even considering the seeming consensus amongst critics that humanity was the catalyst for the apocalypse, many critics like Zibrak and Kunsa suggest that the landscape is devastated only to be replaced by the same heteronormative order that came before.

As Edwards and Kestermann both argue, McCarthy's landscape stands to unravel the traditional Emersonian conception of the American wilderness as a truly heteronormative space and presents a dark and terrifying expanse that does not stand apart from society but encroaches on it and threatens its survival; McCarthy imagines a landscape wherein the "natural" space is degrading which, in turn, affects the social realm. In the opening chapter of the novel, McCarthy presents us with a description of the post-apocalyptic pastoral that weaves together "[c]harred and limbless trunks of trees" and "raw red mudbank[s]" with "the sagging hands of blind wire strung from blackened lightpoles" and "billboards advertising motels" (McCarthy 7). McCarthy's initial depiction of the post-apocalyptic landscape is interesting because, despite his apparent push for heteronormative binary order, the image presented suggests that "nature" is a comprehensive term that includes social and cultural constructs. The

elements seem to occupy the same space and, therefore, have the same value. This description of the American pastoral as occupying both natural and social space hearkens to Timothy Morton's concept of the ecological thought which posits that everything is joined together by a sense of interconnectedness (Morton 2). Though McCarthy presents a traditionally "natural" landscape characterized by trees, river valleys, and meadowlands, it is clear in this early point of the novel that his vision of nature (whether intentional or not) is most akin to Morton's definition of ecology. Nature is not presented as some "reified thing in the distance" (Morton 3), unrelated to and unaffected by a social presence, but is a central player in the anthropocentric narrative McCarthy constructs: roads, lightpoles, and billboards have a place amongst the "natural" elements in McCarthy's presentation of the American landscape and vice versa. Thus, "nature" and "society" become entangled and are presented as a single space that appear to share in the post-apocalyptic devastation.

Though his conception of nature is progressive in its awareness of social presence and influence, McCarthy's vision of this new natural landscape is not a positive image in any definition of the word. In reading the novel, the extent of the devastation is clear. The landscape is notably burnt, ashen, and inhospitable to human life. Elements of the environment (both cultural and "natural") appear lifeless and abandoned, "as it once had been save faded and weathered" (7), only existing as a reminder of what was lost. Throughout the novel, McCarthy's version of the earth is depicted in undeniably dystopian terms. Perhaps the most notable descriptor of McCarthy's post-apocalyptic landscape is his constant allusion to the increasing darkness:

> The blackness he woke to on those nights was sightless and impenetrable. A blackness to hurt your ears with listening. Often he had to get up. No sound but the wind in the bare and blackened trees...Eyes closed, arms oaring. Upright to what? Something nameless in the night, lode or matrix. (McCarthy 13)

The darkness or "blackness" that McCarthy describes here is important for the narrative because it suggests there is an overwhelming emptiness and, therefore, an inability to fill the space, to reproduce and replenish. McCarthy's constant reference to the stillness and grey color of the landscape implies that the text is "repro-centric" (Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson 11) in that nature *should* be hospitable to the regeneration of human life but, in this case, is not. The description of the earth as becoming increasingly dark, grey, and still creates an image of nature that is dead—stillborn, perhaps—and unresponsive to the efforts of mankind. This image of a degraded earth hearkens to Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson's reference to the concept of degeneracy theory. Though their argument focuses on the sexual "degeneracy" amongst different animal species and "nonreproductive sexual options," the "paradigm of natural heterosexuality" (11) can easily be applied to the reproductive tendencies inherent in the earth itself. The earth, like the many species upon it, must act with the (heteronormative) purpose of reproducing; any action that does not support the futurity of human life, therefore, is "degenerate." Thus, the darkening of the landscape that is described here seems to suggest that the landscape—no longer an Emersonian nature that exists to reinforce social ideology—is a threatening and "terrifying" presence. Its unwillingness to act for the benefit of human futurity marks it as a dangerous, dystopian landscape.

Within the "degenerate" landscape are "degenerate" entities that seem to threaten human futurity even more closely as they are, for all intents and purposes, human. I am speaking specifically in reference to the cannibals and blood cults that McCarthy introduces at several points throughout the narrative. Though these groups are technically human beings, they lack humanity because they are engaging in behavior that, for most, would appear to be monstrous; the cannibals, by refusing heteronormativity, actively deny the futurity of the human. There are several groups of cannibals throughout (or several instances of the same group) that appear, at least to the man and his son, to reflect "degenerate" behavior. The man refuses to acknowledge other people as human within the narrative because they longer adhere to normative human behavior and, in certain instances, engage in reproductive acts not for the purpose of regeneration but, rather, for consumption. At one point in the narrative, the man and his son observe a group of "[t]hree men and a woman" and "[t]he woman walked with a waddling gait and as she approached [the man] could see that she was pregnant" and, though the description of the group does not suggest anything devious about their behavior, as they pass the man and his son they are said to vanish "into the waiting darkness" (164). The reference to darkness here is highly significant, as it suggests that the group—which includes both men and a pregnant woman and, therefore, a symbol of reproduction and regeneracy—is quite literally fading into the supposedly barren landscape. The group of individuals that *appear* human are not necessarily so because McCarthy includes them within the growing darkness of non-heteronormativity.

Though the group is not "barren," they do not use their reproductive power in order to preserve the race of humans. Rather, they use this power in order to sustain themselves within the new world. The man and his son never see the group again, however, they do see what the group leaves behind: "a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on a spit" (167). Though this image of a human infant roasting like a pig on a spit is undeniably grotesque, it is only monstrous in the sense that the men and woman act outside of normative definitions of humanity. The group uses reproductive power in a nontraditional sense and, therefore, are immediately colored as monstrous and nonhuman figures. However, their actions are not altogether ill-conceived. The group is actually thinking in a rather ecologically conscious way by utilizing the human body as a resource rather than seeking stray materials or hoping to drain the landscape of any remaining supply. Their actions are "dark" because they do not hope to fill in the space created within the post-apocalyptic landscape and, instead, choose to live—however possible—as creatures within it.

The blackness McCarthy refers to is utilized as a reference to the tone of the narrative overall, particularly our inability to conceive such a world that does not benefit our needs and our future goals. This motif of blackness is interesting because it is not a tangible or clearly definable trait of the post-apocalyptic landscape. McCarthy makes reference to everything from the "blackened" trees and the grey skies and sea to the enveloping blackness of the man's senses (even the questionable behavior of the cannibals and the infant they have "blackening" on a spit), suggesting that this use of blackness permeates the entirety of the novel as an illustrative tool for the purpose of

elucidating the dystopian state of the world and the human experience therein. This trope of darkness is a popular topic amongst critics because it suggests that the landscape McCarthy creates is one that is completely unknowable to us (humanity). The fact that McCarthy constructs the narrative so that nearly everything is obscured is what unsettles his conception of the American landscape, making it truly dystopian. As Kearney suggests, it is the lack of "identifiable referents" in McCarthy's landscape that makes it so inhospitable. The increasing blackness and namelessness of McCarthy's wasteland situates it outside of any identifiable point in time or place, thus destabilizing any sense of familiarity that might be associated with the landscape.

McCarthy's purpose in transforming the American landscape into a darkening dystopia that threatens the future of the earth and the human presence is an easily contestable topic, particularly when reading the novel through an ecocritical lens. If we are to read McCarthy's dystopian future through Morton's concept of the ecological thought, the interconnected devastation of nature and society within *The Road* is an example—perhaps even a warning—of what might happen if we abuse and exhaust the natural resources that support human life. McCarthy's portrayal of a man and his son traversing the barren and ever-darkening landscape of a devastated earth could, perhaps, be intended as a traditional environmentalist message suggesting that we must treat the earth properly so that it may continue to benefit our needs. While this type of narrative message is plausible, it is not necessarily spelled out within the text. Though McCarthy makes reference to the loss of an ideal, Emersonian nature (particularly in the man's dreams and flashbacks), there is little focus placed on the recovery of the landscape itself.

Instead, McCarthy—as most critics seem to agree—is placing much of the narrative focus on the presence of the man and his son (a traditional familial bond). He is not so much concerned with the recovery of the natural landscape—or even our place in it—but is instead concerned with the future of the human, despite the elements. This, therefore, clearly suggests that McCarthy's text is not a primarily ecological text but, rather, a social one that is concerned with the preservation of heteronormative social order. McCarthy's natural landscape is not familiar to us and does not appear to support human life and, instead of proposing a change in the way we interact with the natural world, seems to suggest that the only redeeming quality in a world that has come to end is society itself.

While McCarthy conceives a world that is essentially fading into blackness, he makes certain that the landscape is not completely shrouded in it, revealing vestiges of a lost society amidst the environmental decay. Throughout the course of the novel, McCarthy presents socially and culturally constructed spaces that persist (to some degree) in spite of the impending blackness. Across the degrading "natural" landscape, McCarthy places several cultural markers that position the reader, to some extent, in a relative frame of reference so as to create a sense of familiarity. McCarthy breaks through the increasing blackness of the post-apocalyptic landscape by inserting numbered social and cultural references: the crumbling house, telephone, bunker and, of course, the Coca-Cola. All of these references are associated with spaces that are familiar to the reader which triggers a feeling of loss that, in turn, creates the idea of losing elements of society more central issues than losing elements of nature. However, while these references do have a resonating effect, the most significant construct McCarthy utilizes is

the road itself. The road, unlike the other markers, is significant because it creates some sense of "positionality" and direction within an otherwise dark and formless landscape. The road is a unique construct because, despite the increasing darkness, it appears to remain clear (the man's vision improves on the road, too) and unaffected by the overwhelming devastation: the road is familiar. As Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson write, the road is a space that acts as a type of "curative response" (13) meant to manage or navigate the degradation that affects the operation of heteronormative social order. The "state roads" that are designated by "black lines on the map" are conceived as safe, reliable routes within the darkening expanse because "[t]here's nothing to uproot them," there's nothing to change the roads into something other than what they were before, thus suggesting that they are some sort of refuge from the terrifying blackness encroaching upon every other natural and social space within the narrative (36-37). Where the value of the natural world and the other cultural markers McCarthy presents is obscured by the blackness, the road stands out for its ability (or, at least, its perceived ability) to maintain a sense of purpose. Warde suggests that the "ashen amorphous landscape" prompts "spatial anxieties" in McCarthy's protagonist and, therefore, the road—a cultural construct built for the purpose of *going somewhere*—provides the man as well as the reader with a sense of comfort and knowledge that there is an end goal and therefore a means of escaping the encroaching darkness (2).

The road as a central space within the novel strongly suggests that it is McCarthy's purpose to place priority on the presence of heteronormative culture and society over that of nature. While other cultural markers are susceptible to the earth's

decay, the road is an unyielding feature of the landscape, standing as a symbol of the otherwise lost social order. In the first significant scene on the road, the man compares the safety of the road to that of the river. The boy suggests that they travel along the river seeking refuge, but the man states that "the waterfall [will be] an attraction...for others" which makes the river "unsafe" (36). The man, as he does throughout the entirety of the novel, tenaciously opposes the possibility for goodness that might come from the earth. He establishes that the earth is the reason for their unfortunate circumstances and therefore cannot conceive any redemptive or beneficial qualities therein. However, while the man acknowledges the danger of traveling along a natural conduit, he seems to deny the possibility that the road--a socially constructed passageway--could have that same type of danger; he seems to be in denial about the fact that the road, as a clearly marked means of passage, might be another space occupied by other (potentially dangerous) travelers. The man, at some level, is aware of the dangers along the road but still insists that they travel along the road which reinforces the belief that McCarthy's natural landscape is intentionally constructed as a dystopian space. Even though the road is dangerous and the map guiding them along the road becomes increasingly more "tattered" and "limp" (36), the man and his son still seek refuge from nature through artificial means. They do not attempt to resituate themselves in the new world but, rather, look to the crumbling vestiges of the old world for answers and, perhaps, redemption. The road (despite its inherent danger in the text), exists as a suggestion that the only way to escape the post-apocalyptic desolation is by attempting to reestablish a lost set of ideals and following the path set by heteronormative social order.

Though the man attempts to reassert heteronormative social order through a domination over the post-apocalyptic landscape, nature is clearly unwilling to cooperate. Like Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson argue, the heteronormative social perspective appropriates nature spaces as extensions of society used for the purpose of reinforcing certain ideals and values that are, therefore, believed to be "natural." Thus, this denial of the earth to comply with heteronormative social formation is perceived as threatening and, in turn, dystopian. However, while McCarthy perhaps intentionally creates this non-idealistic after-Earth, it appears that he unintentionally creates a queer image of nature. McCarthy's landscape comes together as a sort of "'reverse discourse'" that works "against an assumption of natural heterosexuality" (Mortimer-Sandilands Erickson 24). This reading of McCarthy's landscape complicates the novel's assumed narrative goal, as it renders the man and his son and their ideological identifications not as useless but essentially irrelevant and—to an extent—dangerous. As McCarthy never gives any actual details regarding the apocalyptic event, it can be assumed that heteronormative society is possibly the reason for the downfall. Therefore, a return to this type of society merely restarts the cycle that has already run its course.

If we are to read McCarthy's narrative through a queer lens, can we not then assume that the constant failure of heteronormative structures to provide safety and, ultimately, answers is a means through which normative conceptions of humanity and nature are being dismantled? The seemingly threatening "darkness" that pervades the narrative along with the increasing deterioration of the road and other social markers might, perhaps, be a literal representation of the lines between normative definitions of

humanity and nature being broken. The constant fear and failure the man and son encounter stands in contrast to the sustained lives of the cannibals and blood cults because the latter has chosen to recognize the post-apocalyptic landscape not as a resource for human exploit but, rather, as an entity that can be lived with in symbiosis; the supposed monsters of McCarthy's narrative have already understood the thinking of interconnectedness.

Written as a post-apocalyptic survival narrative, *The Road* can easily be read as a warning tale. It is obvious that McCarthy's novel (especially with its narrative focus placed heavily on the father and son and, primarily, the "goodness" therein) intentionally operates to position the man and his son as recognizably redemptive figures in an otherwise desolate wasteland. However, despite McCarthy's apparent demonization of the post-apocalyptic landscape and the other figures occupying the land—"the bad guys" (78)—it is clear that McCarthy's narrative (either intentionally or not) suggests a different perspective on the state of life after nature and culture as we know it have dissolved. McCarthy's second ending to *The Road*, despite its obvious religious undertones, provides readers with an ending that almost seems to argue against traditional ideology. The reference to the "[m]aps and mazes...[o]f a thing that could not be put back [or] made right again" (241) suggests a continuance of the blackness alluded to throughout the novel that was perceived to be a threatening uncertainty. It seems to deny any possibility of the old ways, whether they be social order or natural practice, returning, at least in the way they existed before. The mention of "maps and mazes" implies that the world—though disjointed and unclear—must be mapped out again but

cannot be done so through a reinforcing of heteronormative social order. Instead, it must be done without a compass, without a social ideology guiding it. The post-apocalyptic landscape McCarthy constructs, therefore, does not depict the "end of the world" but, rather, a world that has eradicated its threats and now occupies a place wherein a new world order must be discovered.

CHAPTER 2

ZOMBIES ARE PEOPLE, TOO!: EXPLORING THE GAP BETWEEN HUMAN AND NON-HUMAN IN THE POST-APOCALYPTIC NARRATIVE

In the introduction to this thesis, I make reference to Judith Butler's *Undoing Gender* and her argument that "humanness" is not something that is naturally occurring within each individual but is, rather, defined by way of socialization and constructions of gender normatively therein. Butler contradicts the traditional Hegelian notion of humanity and, therefore, positions the concept of the human figure within a purely social context. Butler's critique of the manner in which humanness is defined is particularly interesting when such traditional notions of its definition become threatened or are absent altogether. In the contemporary post-apocalyptic narrative, for example, the state of the human is always compromised. Whatever the threat may be (zombies, cannibals, environmental devastation), the post-apocalyptic narrative is most commonly characterized by its valorization of the human in particularly trying times. However, what is most interesting about the post-apocalyptic genre is its failure to provide any concrete notion of what exactly constitutes the "human" (despite obvious efforts to do so), as constructions of humanness within the post-apocalyptic narrative are typically unstable to begin with. This, therefore, leads readers to derive an understanding of the term from preconceived ideas that are produced in a contemporary social context.

Surface readings of such texts suggest that the human is the character that is most akin to us (the readers) and that which is not human is whatever figure or phenomenon proves to be an obvious threat to the normative social and behavioral constructs that we currently understand; any clear notion of humanness is difficult to conceive within the post-apocalyptic narrative and, as a result, such definitions are applied by the reader. I argue that, even if it is the intention of the post-apocalyptic narrative to reinforce normative definitions of humanness, there is mounting evidence to suggest otherwise. The figure of the human in the post-apocalyptic narrative is constantly threatened by external forces in order to reveal the possibility for alternative modes of definition. The post-apocalyptic narrative is left open-ended and the fate of the human therein is uncertain so as to dismantle definitive constructions of humanness which, in turn, opens up the space for understanding what constitutes the human and what qualifies as a livable life. Post-apocalyptic narratives present a conflict between the human and non-human not to reinforce social normatively but, instead, in order to allow for a restructuring of society and definitions of the human therein.

In this chapter, I will utilize Butler's discussion of the human as a socially articulated gendered being to examine ways in which notions of humanness can be understood in contemporary post-apocalyptic literature. I argue that while most texts seem to reinforce traditional conceptions of the human as it is socially constructed, there is room to critique these presentations of normatively in the post-apocalyptic narrative and, in particular, the manner in which difference is constructed therein. Specifically, difference as it is constructed by way of gender. I argue that heteronormative social

ideology guides traditional definitions of personhood and it is apparent that particular aspects of gender normatively play a large role in the construction of the "human." In addition to my use of Judith Butler and her definition of "human" in *Undoing Gender,* I will also employ José Esteban Muñoz's notion of queerness outlined in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity.* My argument will be a queer examination of post-apocalyptic literature in that it will suggest that, despite the glaring attempts to reestablish heteronormative values, the post-apocalyptic narrative does, in fact, provide alternative modes of understanding human life. I am not suggesting that the post-apocalyptic narrative is attempting to redefine such normative conceptions, however, I believe there is room to argue for this type of unconventional reading, as heteronormative constructions of humanness closely linked to gender normatively appear to be an imposing presence in a post-apocalyptic landscape that itself seems more concerned with opening up the space available for definition. In order to elucidate my argument, I will pay close attention to the binary of the human and non-human as defined by way of gender and the manner in which this opposition continues to rupture in the wake of social devastation. I will attempt to explain how the post-apocalyptic narrative pays attention to particular abject figures not as a means of revealing difference but, instead, as a means to disrupt the notion of difference and to provide more room for defining that which constitutes the human. This paper will closely analyze presentations of humanness in the post-apocalyptic genre and suggest that the post-apocalyptic narrative is not a vehicle to present difference but, rather, to present alternative ways of being in terms of gender and

society and how that contributes to a greater understanding of what it means to be "human."

To be "human" in the post-apocalyptic world is heavily reliant on contemporary notions of what constitutes such a definition. As Butler argues, the "human" is nothing more than a socially constructed figure whose attributes are based within the dominant heteronormative ideology (2). A "human," therefore, is an individual who assimilates to acceptable modes of recognition created within a particular time "through [an exclusion of] a wide range of minorities" (Butler 13). Recognition as human, Butler claims, is a recognition of the power differential that delineates a categorical majority from its minority groups (13); thus, to understand that which constitutes the definition of "human" is to understand the workings of a dominant power structure. In defining the human, it is essential to consider the power dynamic present in issues such as race, class, and gender. Gender is particularly interesting and, arguably, the most significant issue when it comes to discussing how humanness is articulated because it is, supposedly, a developmental stage that naturally occurs for each individual. Because it seems to be, traditionally speaking, the foremost concern in the construction of this definition, it is therefore the issue that is most apparent in the survivalist realm of the post-apocalypse narrative wherein markers of gender normatively seem to be essential for the preservation of the human.

Thus, much of the criticism surrounding contemporary post-apocalyptic narratives is based largely around the question of reestablishing social order and gender roles in the wake of apocalyptic devastation. In "The Zombie Apocalypse: A Fictional State of

Nature?," Faiz Sheikh argues that the post-apocalyptic world is "'premodern,' regressing down the scale of modernity and peace...where individuals are no longer bound by any abstract notion of nationhood or even more concrete notions of ethnicity or culture" (196-99). The post-apocalyptic world is traditionally conceived as a blank state of futurity in which familiar physical and social markers of the former world have passed away, leaving the survivors without any means of understanding their current existence or how they might proceed from that point forward. Sheikh continues, claiming that as a result of the apparent loss of social structure and certain guiding ideologies, individuals seek refuge in the vestiges of the familiar social order. Survivors do not understand the post-apocalyptic world as a space of opportunity as much as it is a threat; the different and seemingly dystopian nature of the post-apocalyptic world forces the individual to make the choice to accept the terms of life in the unfamiliar and possibly threatening state of the present or, more simply, attempt to return to the comforting structures of the past.

The latter choice is a popular, if not defining, characteristic of the post-apocalyptic narrative. More often than not, post-apocalyptic narratives reveal individuals who are unable to endure the reality of the present and, therefore, believe things can only be fixed through a return to the normative constructions of the past and through a rediscovery of that which constitutes "human" life. In Cormac McCarthy's *The Road,* the father does not grant any value to and therefore denies any hope for futurity within the post-apocalyptic landscape or its inhabitants and, instead, seeks comfort in the ghostly remains of a world that has since passed away. Throughout the novel, the father tenaciously attempts to create a life akin the previous world, thus introducing the boy to

the things and ideas from a world that the he never knew. The father, it seems, attempts to anachronistically revert to and impose upon the present ideas from the past rather than attempting to live within the world as it is now.

However, the quest to rediscover humanness in the post-apocalyptic narrative is not made successful through a return to heteronormative modes of recognition. Rather than reinscribing difference as a means of defining "human," the post-apocalyptic narrative aims to rewrite the definitions of humanness through a dismantling of difference. In "Undead Is the New Green: Zombies and Political Ecology," Greg Pollock deconstructs the binary of society and nature by addressing the presence of the non-human, or zombie, within post-apocalyptic fiction. Pollock posits that the post-apocalyptic monster (in this case, the zombie) does not contribute to an "'either/or'" binary construct but, instead, represents the "extra-political": "[z]ombies and ecologies are extra-political in that they refuse to engage in talks, circumscribe territories, be satisfied by a dialectic of enfranchisement, or in any other way participate in collective decision-making" (170). Pollock suggests that within the post-apocalyptic narrative there is a "loosening of the very distinctions between [the] forms of life" understood within the social structure (176). Thus, although zombies and ecological phenomenon in the post-apocalyptic narrative appear to be "abject" or threatening, they are actually representative of a "non-difference" or continuity (176) in a world where familiar social and environmental functions have come to a halt. The "non-difference" in the post-apocalyptic narrative is the manner in which the seemingly non-human figure or phenomenon refuses to be defined as such; instead of submitting to the dominant order

and agreeing to occupy the space of "non-human," the abject figure actively challenges this order and, through such a rupture, opens up the space for defining "human." It can be argued, therefore, that the presence of the post-apocalyptic "monster" does not reestablish normative constructions of humanness but, instead, act as a means to break the prevailing definitions.

In *The Road* and *The Walking Dead,* the post-apocalyptic landscape clearly grapple with this notion of "non-difference," as there is an apparent struggle in both texts between the normative human characters and their post-apocalyptic antithesis. The texts seem to suggest that redemption can be found in a return to heteronormative constructions of humanity (both texts follow a male protagonist who subscribe to normative conceptions of masculinity), however, I argue that this suggestion is false and, instead, answers for the futurity of the human can be found in the abject spaces and entities. In both texts, the world has transformed from the familiar to the highly uncertain; not only is the setting of the post-apocalyptic landscape unfamiliar, it is also unpredictable and, thus, appears to be dangerous. However, as Muñoz suggests, this seemingly "apocalyptic" space is not threatening but is "a place where [one's] desires are not toxic...[it is] a stage of in-between-ness, a spatiality that is aligned with a temporality that is on the threshold between identifications, lifeworlds, and potentialities" (105). The post-apocalyptic landscape, thus, can be read as a space that refuses definition and, instead, attempts to provide room for that which is "not yet here" (26) which, in this case, includes the human. This question of redefining the human in the wake of apocalyptic devastation is particularly concerned with conceptions of gender, as the role of

masculinity seems to play a central role. Both texts use the aftermath of apocalyptic devastation as a means to redefine the notion of "human" within terms of gender.

In *The Road,* the apocalyptic devastation is an unnamed environmental catastrophe that leaves a man and his son amongst the only survivors on Earth. Though it is suggested throughout different points in the novel that the man and his son are not the only "humans" remaining, it is made clear that they are the only characters that "act" human, therefore positioning them in a separate space of "goodness" that cannot be conceived in the post-apocalyptic world, either upon the land or within other (technically) human beings. The human characteristics the man and his son display, however, are not born from natural modes of being. The man and his son are, instead, performing the "incessant activity" of "doing" gender (Butler 1). Even in a post-apocalyptic world that has lost nearly all markers of heteronormativity, the man and his son continue to perform the normative behaviors of their gender. Mainly, the father insists on the preservation of himself and the boy—his only understandable notion of family—and does so by way of a paternal "instinct" to protect that is, in normative society, more closely linked to masculinity.[4] But the father is not simply acting in a "manly" fashion to protect his son's life, he is also—whether he is conscious of this or not—acting to protect the preservation of normative society and culture. The man and his son represent a normative familial bond and, especially because they are father and son (rather than father/daughter, mother/

[4] In thinking about protection and preservation of the family unit, the "natural" instinct to protect is a maternal one. Most animals are protected by the mother (often from the father) but, in heteronormative society, it is a father's job to protect because it is the "manly" thing to do.

son, mother/daughter), a legacy of this power. As Butler argues, the recognition of the self as human is founded in repro-centric understandings of our social relationships. Butler suggests that the child is "an eroticized site in the reproduction of culture" that raises the question "whether culture will be defined, in part, as the prerogative of heterosexuality itself" (124). Thus, the man and his son are human because they enact normative gender roles as well as provide the potential for proliferating such ideology. But the man does not understand his and the boy's connection to heteronormativity. Rather, he recognizes himself and the boy as human because they retain a sense of morality and goodness, a sense of the way things were and still should be; the two are seen as maintaining an inherent and almost *natural* humanness that is, in actuality, a preservation of heteronormativity.

Thus, their humanness as it seems to be understood in terms of goodness is falsely measured, as the concept of "human" itself is a social construct. The man defines himself and the boy as "good" because they do not resort to doing "bad" things, even in the face of death: they do not steal, kill (usually), or eat people (or dogs). The man and his son act with "good" intentions, believing they are acting with inherently human characteristics, but are all the while following a heteronormative social order that no longer exists. The man's conception of goodness and humanness is actually an unconscious assimilation to modes of recognition through gender normativity. He conflates humanness with heteronormativity, suggesting that there is some sense of natural "good" that is equivalent to that which is outlined in heteronormative social value systems. Figures like the cannibals and the thief on the beach are characterized as

unnatural and threatening individuals because they do not act like humans *should,* they do not display acceptable behavior aligned with the gender normative human. The man cannot see the actions of other people in the narrative as "good" or human simply because they do not fit within his narrow understanding of livable life; he cannot conceive a world without heteronormative social order (or any order, for that matter) and, therefore, any opposition to his understanding of the way things were becomes a clear and present threat.

As I stated in the previous chapter, the cannibals and blood cults within McCarthy's narrative are painted as non-human figures when, in actuality, they are representative of a "non-difference" (Pollock 176) within the text, as they refuse to conform to normative conceptions of humanity and, in this case, gender. The cannibals that utilize a pregnant woman for food supply perfectly encapsulate the problematic nature of defining humanity by way of gender normativity. In this instance in the narrative outlined earlier, the man and his son see a group of three men and one pregnant woman and are appalled when they learn that the group had killed the infant and left it "skewered over the coals…blackening on the spit" (167). The unsettling nature of this instance moves beyond the presence of a dead, mutilated infant. The relationship between the four individuals is somewhat unclear and, therefore, it can be argued that there is something unnatural happening between them. Once we find out that the group eats the woman's child, it is safe to assume that this is a regular occurrence or, at least, that the pregnancy was intended for this end. It is safe to assume that the infant was not conceived as a result of a heterosexual relationship but, rather, a breeding act for the

purposes of consumption. Who was the father? What was the woman's role—did she play an active part? These questions are all valid ones, and their odd behavior coupled with the ambiguity of their story leaves from for interpretation. But, again, I argue that the cannibals are not perceived inhuman because they kill and eat a child (and are, possibly, engaging in a number of other ethically grey behavior) but because they clearly abandon their roles within a heteronormative social order. None of the men act as such or seem to take up the role of "father"; the woman is not a "mother" in the sense that she does not nurture the child. The men and the woman actively deny their places within the "reproduction of culture" (Butler 124) and choose instead to remain static, but alive themselves.

Thus, in contrast to characters like the cannibals, McCarthy's characterization of the father and son appears to be a redemptive aspect of the narrative. Zibrak argues that the novel "is a far more secular contemporary version of a post-apocalyptic tale" that "establishes hope where we always hope to find it: within the structure of familial relationships" (104). The father and son, amidst an ever-darkening and amorphous landscape, clearly represent familiar social ideology and maintain a strict value system. They are distinctly outlined figures of "goodness" in a vast expanse of lost ideology (impregnating women to eat their offspring), and the reader is perhaps intended to seek out hope for the future of humanity in the relationship between the father and his son. Therefore, the father's insistence that they "carry the fire" (70) might suggest that he and the boy are the light that breaks through the darkness, that they are the answer to the increasing uncertainty of the world. The fire, to the father, is the goodness that he and the

boy live by but, as readers, we can identify as a marker of heteronormativity. The image of the father and son carrying the fire is an interesting one because—if we return to Butler's suggestion that humanity through gender is founded in a preservation of heteronormative culture—it resembles that of a torch that is to be passed. The father and son carry the fire together—the key to reproduction of normatively—and, once the father dies, the fire continues to be carried by the son.

The fire is a concept revisited several times throughout the narrative and, until the end, is only attributed to the father and son. In the final scenes of the narrative, however, the son asks the approaching man if he, too, carries the fire (239). Like the father and son, this man is part of a nuclear family that includes a mother, father, son, daughter, and even a dog. Because they ascribe to the same gendered definitions of humanity and the father and son, they are granted access to the "fire," whereas groups of otherwise human beings are not included because they resist normative definitions. It is for this reason that groups like the cannibals are seen vanishing in the darkness of the post-apocalyptic world (164); a distinct line is being drawn through light and dark imagery to differentiate those that are "human" in the gendered sense of the term, and those that are not. Here we see McCarthy's presentation of two heteronormative units coming together in order to continue the line of culture and normatively. The "fire," therefore, is not inherent "goodness" but, rather, heteronormativity. The father's insistence that they "carry the fire" suggests that they are the last remaining idols of social and gender normatively and, perhaps, the last chance the world has for a restoration of the lost order. It is not until the son meets the family at the end that he is able to see that there are others who "carry the

fire"; there are others within the narrative that resist the darkness of the post-apocalyptic world.

The same normative definition of "human" can be seen in *The Walking Dead.* Just like McCarthy's novel, Kirkman's comic focuses on a heteronormative male protagonist and his son as they traverse the ever-darkening landscape of the post-apocalyptic world. In *The Walking Dead,* the apocalyptic devastation is more closely tied to the notion of humanness, however, as the world's population is being wiped out by an unidentifiable plague that causes the dead to rise and feed on the bodies of the living. More clearly, Kirkman's narrative devastation is a zombie apocalypse. Unlike McCarthy's novel, the landscape of *The Walking Dead* is not quite so desolate—at least not at first. In the comic, the land is still occupied by a large human population but, because of the nature of the apocalypse, this is quickly transforming and the non-human presence is beginning to outweigh the human presence. Even so, the narrative seems to suggest that the human will prevail against all odds. The central figure in the comic is a police officer named Rick Grimes who, before the outbreak, seemed to epitomize masculine normatively. He is a husband, a father, and an officer of the law, which seems to suggest his role as a leader and a decider of what is considered right and what lives are deemed livable.

In the first issue of the series, Rick is seen introducing himself to a man named Morgan Jones and his son, Duane. Despite the fact that Rick recently awoke from a coma and has no idea what is happening around him, he quickly understands what must be done and eventually helps Morgan and Duane survive themselves. Rick states that, as

a police officer, it is his duty to "'protect and serve'" (See Figure 1). In this series of panels, Rick can be seen helping Morgan and Duane prepare for survival. The third panel shows Rick fully dressed in his Sheriff's Deputy uniform handing keys to Morgan and telling him "I'm just doing my job." The fifth frame reveals a seemingly teary-eyed Morgan thanking Rick. These two panels work interestingly alongside one another. In the former, Rick is poised in a position of power, unfazed by the actions he is taking. In the latter, Morgan—with much more attention given in the illustration of his face than previous panels—appears afraid, but grateful. The two panels together clearly depict Rick as the stronger of the two. Rick quickly ascends to the role of protector and decider because he embodies normative masculinity. Not only is Rick a white male, but he performs masculinity in a much more obvious manner than Morgan who, even though very little detail about him is provided, can be understood as displaying more feminine characteristics (dressing wounds, serving food, and, eventually, being unable to act as a result of his emotions). Rick, like the father in *The Road,* insists on performing his gender because it will aid in his survival and, hopefully, help to reestablish the modes of living that have since been lost. He seems to be the moral center and the leader of every group he becomes a part of; even if there is disagreement, his terms of duty and survival supersede all others.

In both texts, the heteronormative man seems to be positioned as the redemptive figure whose inherent goodness is constantly threatened. However, it is difficult to ignore the threat that both men and their gender normative perspectives pose to the post-apocalyptic world. If we are to believe that the men in both *The Road* and *The Walking*

FIGURE 1. Rick the police officer. In this image, Rick's position as a Sheriff's Deputy suggests his dominant masculine presence. Morgan, in contrast, appears less "masculine." The dialogue as well as Morgan's facial expression (frame 6) reveal him as submitting to a white heteronormative masculine order represented in Rick.

Dead are disciples of goodness and natural order, we are then supporting an ideology driven by masculine heteronormative domination. It is not difficult to understand that in both texts, there is a clear subordination of women and, in the case of *The Road,* an apparent absence of women altogether. Though this coincidence may be circumstantial, it is significant to note because in both texts, the female presence is seen as both threatening to heteronormative futurity and, thus, needs to be dominated.

In *The Road,* the father can be seen enforcing a masculine heteronormative way of thinking upon a barren and resistant landscape, seemingly suggesting that a distinctly masculine order is truly "human," especially when the feminine presence does not agree to the terms of gender normatively. The man's presence as representative of heteronormative order and his insistence of this sense of goodness and proper social behavior imposes on the landscape that is not willing to respond. The land, which can perhaps be read as a benign female presence, is a reflection of the man's wife (and the child's mother) who kills herself. The woman does not believe in the man's insistence on the continuance of heteronormative social order and ideology, nor does she agree with his repro-centric perspective; the mother denies her role within gender normativity, as she refuses to support her husband and child in a way that is deemed acceptable. Therefore the earth, like the woman describes herself, is a "faithless slut" (48) that exists without any semblance of social order or loyalty. The earth no longer seems to care whether or not it benefits man and is thus demonized. If we agree with this heteronormative centrality, we are supporting a masculine heteronormative focus that others everyone and everything outside of "man" (woman, earth, etc.). As a result of this perspective, the

man's insistence that he and the boy "carry the fire" (goodness, proper morality, etc.) becomes an aggressive and threatening statement rather than an exclamation of hope; this, in turn, further supports my previous argument that the darkness is not dangerous but merely different. The figures associated with the darkness like the cannibals and, even, the mother—she leaves the man and their son with the "coldness" as her final gift (49)—do not represent negative entities but, rather, alternative ones. However, the man is unwilling to accept a world without any sense of heteronormative social order and, therefore, attempts to impose these beliefs upon the new, ever-darkening world in order to reform it, to return it to the way it was before when it benefitted heteronormative society, all the while disguising this as a quest to find humanity.

In *The Walking Dead* there are a multitude of female characters that challenge gender normativity and, just as it happens in *The Road*, must be dominated in order to maintain a proper understanding of normative social order and "human" life therein. While the female characters in the comic vastly outnumber those in McCarthy's novel, the most notable female figure is Lori, Rick's wife. Lori is depicted in similar terms used to describe the wife/mother in McCarthy's novel; she too seems to be a "faithless slut" in that she defies her role as a wife and mother and, therefore, as a woman. She does not act like a woman because her actions do not aid in the preservation and reproduction of the heteronormative family structure and, therefore, threatens humanity through her inability to perform her assigned role as a woman.

At the beginning of the comic, it is revealed that she sleeps with Rick's partner and best friend, Shane and (presumably) carries his child. After this initial misstep, Lori

continues to be a thorn in Rick's side, acting as the constant nagger and opponent to his decisions. Lori is depicted as being so incapable as a wife and mother that, at more than one point in the narrative, she proves unable to protect her children (See Figures 2, 3). In the first panel of Figure 2, Lori's inability to act as a mother is revealed. When a group of zombies (or "walkers") invades their camp, Lori fumbles in her attempt to kill one and her son, Carl—a child—steps in and does her job for her. This particular image reveals a lot about the manner in which women are portrayed in *The Walking Dead.* In this panel, not only is Lori seen cowering like a terrified animal in the background, but her son—barely big enough to wrap his hands around the gun—stands in the foreground to protect her, all the while wearing Rick's Deputy hat as a symbol of his position of power and authority. This image of Carl in Rick's hat is akin to the "fire" that the father and son carry in *The Road.* Just as McCarthy suggests, Kirkman too seems to be arguing for a heteronormative futurity in which humanity perseveres through a patrilineal line.

The woman's role, therefore, is merely to support this type of reproduction because, as we can see suggested in the second image, the woman is incapable of maintaining a future for the human on her own. In this image, Lori can be seen with her newborn child (it is never determined who the father is) getting shot in a crossfire. Lori is in the center of the frame holding the child with one hand behind its head in a maternal instinct to protect but, even so, is shot down and thus takes the child's life with her own. Lori (among other female characters in the comic book) is the constant reminder that in order to survive and regain humanity, everyone must assimilate to their given roles. Those who do not are not only threatened themselves but, eventually, threaten the lives of

others. Though she is not a strong female character, Lori does refuse gender normativity by choosing to make decisions independent of her husband. Lori seldom consults Rick for her choices and, even though she meets an unfortunate end, her refusal to maintain certain elements of heteronormative order reveals the possibility of a departure from normative conceptions of what is considered acceptable "human" behavior; Lori represents the potentiality of a post-apocalyptic future that refuses heteronormativity. However, as we can see with Lori's death, the female presence in *The Walking Dead* (as well as other post-apocalyptic stories) is often eliminated or dominated in some way so as to maintain the dominant order and heteronormative conceptions of what it means to be human.

Much like McCarthy does in *The Road,* Kirkman seems to be situating the female characters within the same space as the monstrous "other" which is, in this instance, the zombies. Kirkman's protagonist, Rick, is not unlike the father in *The Road,* as both men represent a bull-headed attempt to maintain a heteronormative social order which they conflate all the while with definitions of humanity. Rick and the father in *The Road* characterize the same qualities as "human" and look out for others with similar world-views. Both men are of the assumption that the world can be put back the way it was and, in order to do that, anything that counters this belief must be evaded or eradicated. Thus, the zombie is akin to the female presence in *The Walking Dead*, as both figures refuse to engage in heteronormativity and ultimately move to dismantle it. It is difficult to pinpoint a specific moment within the text wherein the zombie clearly refuses definition because, by its very nature, the zombie is a refusal. Like McCarthy's

FIGURE 2. Lori cowers behind her son, Carl. In the first frame of this image, Lori can be seen cowering in the background while her son, Carl, shoots and kills the approaching zombie. Carl's small stature is bolstered by his wearing Rick's hat, as well as the "light" that emanates from the blast of the gun. In contrast, Lori is hunched over, weaponless, while her face projects a doe-like innocence.

FIGURE 3. Lori and the baby are killed. In an effort to escape an ambush from a warring group of survivors, Lori and her infant child are shot and killed. The action of the shot is vague enough to suggest that the baby was not shot but was merely collateral damage.

cannibals, zombies appear to be human (as they are recently deceased human corpses) but do not act as humans do. Not only do they feed on human flesh (minor detail) but, in terms of society and gender, they are without ties to anyone but themselves. Zombies are de-gendered (their sex is typically visible, however), anti-social beings that act only on their animal instinct to eat. Their inability to understand normative social behavior coupled with their desire to eat living humans, therefore, positions the zombie as a literal threat to the life and futurity of heteronormativity.

However, like the cannibals, zombies are simply being understood as a monstrous presence because they refuse to conform to heteronormative ways of being. They are not acting directly against humanity but, rather, seeking to redefine their place within such a broad definition. It is essential to note that zombies are not choosing their position within the post-apocalyptic world. Zombies—though problematic in that they do kill living people—are ultimately victims themselves which suggests that their actions are not out of malice but, rather, survival. The actions taken by the zombies in the narrative are forced upon them by their situation and, much like the cannibals, they are simply adapting to their new situation. Thus, they cannot be the antithesis to the human presence. They can, however, be the "non-presence." The presence of a non-presence, therefore, opens room for what can be defined as livable life.

Both texts present strong and overbearing heteronormative male patriarchs whose decisions appear to be for the good of everyone, and it is difficult to ignore the fact that both men ultimately fail in their attempts at reestablishing normative conceptions of "human" and society therein. The fact that both men are constantly being threatened by

the post-apocalyptic "non-human" (cannibals and zombies) suggests that their modes of definition for living are inaccurate and must ultimately be overthrown. Though neither work explicitly shows the post-apocalyptic world defeating the rigid constructs of heteronormativity, such a potential futurity is alluded to in both works by the presence of the non-human, a figure who embodies the notion of "non-difference" mentioned earlier. In both texts, the patriarch is—in some way—overthrown.

In *The Road,* the father ultimately succumbs to the conditions of the post-apocalyptic world and dies. And, though his son is immediately handed off to the next nuclear family that appears, it is suggested that the difference the father so avidly tried to mark is no longer quite as clear. This is made apparent in McCarthy's alternative endings. The first ending, which shows the boy speaking with the woman (the new mother figure) clearly suggests a return to proper human life as well as gender normativity, as the woman occupies the role of mother and nurturer. This scene is not set in contrast to but set alongside the second, somewhat pagan ending which makes reference to "maps of the world in its becoming" (241). The double ending in McCarthy's novel proves that there is a rupture in the post-apocalyptic narrative's conception of humanness and livable life. McCarthy's choosing to provide more than one ending clearly implies that there is now room for alternative means of understanding "human" and identification therein.

In *The Walking Dead,* Rick is not dead (at least not yet), but he acknowledges that his role as "human" is no longer as safe as he once believed it to be. There are moments throughout the text that suggest some kind of understanding that the terms of humanness

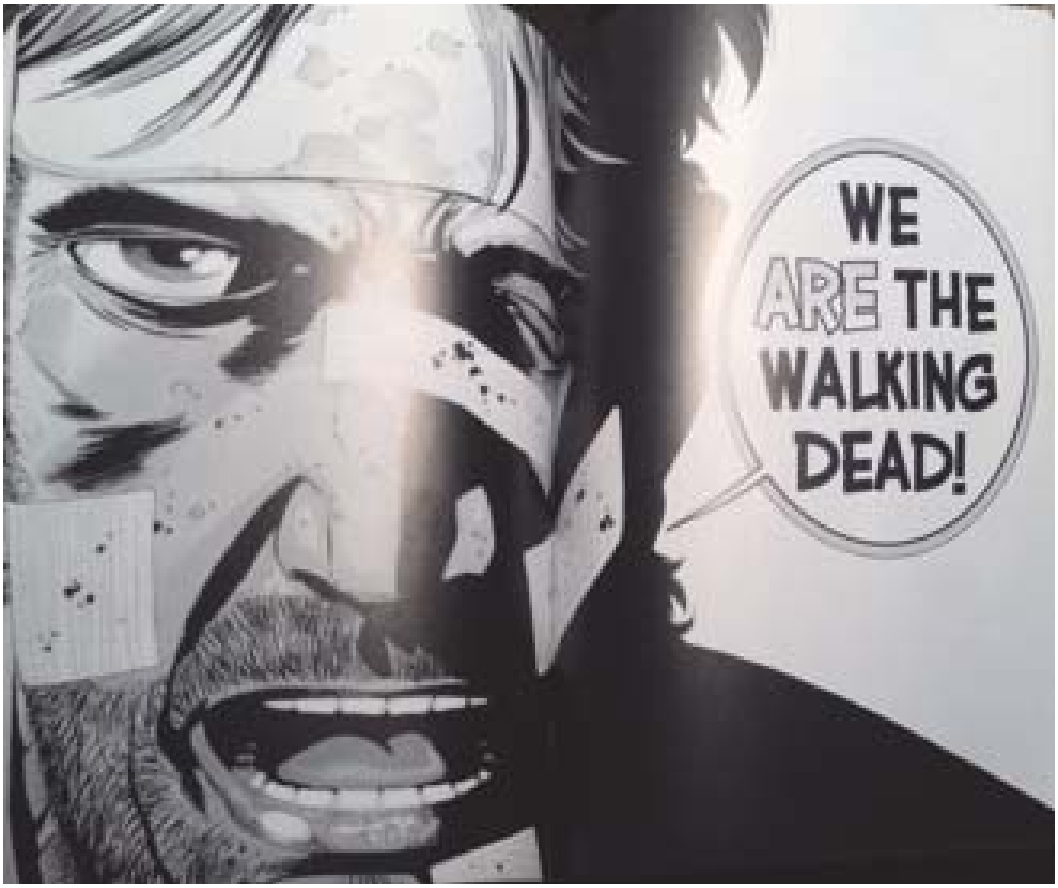

FIGURE 4. Rick exclaims, “We are the walking dead!” In a moment wherein the groups humanity becomes threatened, Rick draws a link between his group and the zombies that threaten their survival. Rick’s exclamation supports the argument that a lack of humanity is not defined by physical and societal markers of otherness but, rather, by actions. Rick suggests that the humanity can be threatened from within rather than without.

are no longer definitively constructed (See Figure 4). Rick's exclamation that "we are the walking dead" implies that the presence of the zombies (the non-human) has had an effect on the presence of the human and the definitions of said role. In this particular frame, Rick acknowledges that the individuals previously assumed to be human are no longer defined in such terms because the circumstances of the post-apocalypse have revealed that the term "human" is not so easy to define and should be expanded to include more modes of definition. Like in *The Road,* Kirkman's comic uses an assumed threat (apocalyptic devastation) to rupture the exclusionary binary that defines the human against the non-human. The zombie enters the picture not to pose a contrast to the human but, rather, to reveal the instability of creating means of identification through difference.

Through a close reading of these post-apocalyptic texts, it becomes clear that the dystopian future is bleak—but not altogether hopeless. Rather than conceiving the post-apocalypse as a realm in which our social constructs have wholly collapsed, these texts reveal it as a space in which, to reference Muñoz, the world is able to restructure itself (Muñoz 105). Instead of writing off threats to contemporary human life as mere devastation, these texts provide certain opposition in order to rupture the belief that social normativity and definitions therein are naturally occurring conceptions. The post-apocalyptic monster exists in order to reveal that definitions of humanity and normative behavior are socially constructed and, therefore, subject to change.

CHAPTER 3

(NO) TIME ENOUGH AT LAST: QUEER FUTURITY IN THE POST-APOCALYPTIC NARRATIVE

> And the best thing, the very best thing of all, is there's time now... there's all the time I need and all the time I want. Time, time, time. There's time enough at last. ("Time Enough at Last," *The Twilight Zone*)

In the now famous episode of *The Twilight Zone* entitled "Time Enough At Last" (1959), a character called Henry Bemis becomes the lone survivor of a nuclear apocalypse. At the beginning of the episode, Bemis is presented as a "bookish" and antisocial bank teller who is both mocked and criticized for his unwillingness to engage in normative social behaviors. However, at the episode's climactic turn, the world as it exists for Henry Bemis is destroyed and he realizes that he is alone. Coming to the understanding that he is alone, Bemis' initial response is to end his life—to no longer continue to live because the society that seems essential no longer exists—until, with a gun to his head, he sees a potential future buried in the ruins of a library. For Bemis, his potential future appears in the form of a solitary existence spent reading and, though his hope for futurity ultimately fails, his ability to see the potential for futurity after apocalyptic devastation speaks volumes about the post-apocalyptic genre. Bemis' exclamation that "[t]here's time enough at last" suggests that the apocalypse does not bring about the end of the world but, instead, ends one *type* of world in order to create the

potential for new worlds to exist. Bemis helps to change our understanding of "the end" and reveals a better means of understanding the purposes of the post-apocalyptic narrative.

I begin this chapter by considering the word "apocalypse" and the manner in which we understand it in a contemporary context. The definition of the word itself, originating from the Greek ἀποκάλυψις ("to uncover"), refers to the Biblical story of John in Revelations, wherein a New Jerusalem is revealed[5] (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Therefore, in thinking of the Western conception of the word as derived from the last book of The New Testament, "apocalypse" can be defined as a moment or period of time in which one world passes to make way for a new, better world. However, as the word has evolved to take on a more general meaning in a non-Christian context, it appears as though the latter half of the definition has dropped off and "apocalypse" has become less of a revelation and more of an end characterized by mass devastation. Thus, in a contemporary context, "apocalypse" does not signal a period of revelation and rebirth but, rather, suggests a non-negotiable "end of the world."

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[5] In Revelation, John states, "And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works./ And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works./ And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death...And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea./ And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." (20.12-14, 21.1-2)

In her article "The Plague of Utopias: Pestilence and the Apocalyptic Body," Elana Gomel considers the meaning of "apocalypse" and how that differs from "post-apocalypse." Gomel makes reference to *The Book of Revelation* and how it prophesied the coming of a new world in her definition of apocalypse, suggesting that the contemporary audience expects a "glorious rebirth" therein but, when it comes to post-apocalypse, are inclined to focus on "the interminable duration of dying" (Gomel). Calling on James Berger's discussion of post-apocalyptic discourse, Gomel suggests that the post-apocalyptic narrative is not about a "radical transformation" as much as it is about a devastating aftermath and the traces of a world that no longer exists. For Gomel, as it seems to be the case for many critics, the post-apocalyptic discourse does not maintain any sense of hope for futurity but is, instead, "a backward-looking narrative of trauma" (Gomel). However, understanding the apocalypse and the post-apocalypse in such drastically different manners is problematic. If the apocalypse is supposed to be a period of revelation and rebirth (a definition that clearly shows an understanding of the origin of the word), then how can the post-apocalypse ("post" suggesting that it is the period following the apocalypse) be nothing but a period of prolonged suffering? At what point does the revelation at the moment of apocalypse begin to develop and change the space of the world? Taking these questions into consideration, we can begin to read post-apocalyptic literature as representing more than a Purgatory-like state of pain and suffering and, ideally, begin to interrogate the true potentialities of the genre.

It is the purpose of this chapter to suggest an alternative reading of representations of post-apocalyptic literature and, in particular, the manner in which we understand time

and futurity therein. I argue that the popular opinion about apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic literature is misguided, as it assumes the genre is concerned with an "end time" that is completely devastated and, therefore, without any hope for futurity. In this chapter, I will move away from a normative conception of time that is both linear and accretive and, therefore, indicative of an "end." Instead, I will suggest an understanding of time in the post-apocalypse that operates outside of the traditional binary of past and present that presents time as a rigid, one track understanding of time. In the post-apocalyptic narrative, the construction of time seems disjointed or absent simply because it does not conform to our normative understanding of what time means or what its purpose is. Post-apocalyptic time does not follow a clear trajectory; it jumps around, crossing different points in time and space and operates on a smaller scale. Unlike the normative idea that time is a clock set in motion by one master hand, post-apocalyptic time is maintained by multiple hands, all at once. In my analysis of post-apocalyptic time and futurity, I will examine both Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road.* Through a critical reading of both works, I will focus on the manner in which time operates and is addressed in the stories as well as how hope is presented to the reader (or not) and what effect that seems to have overall. I argue that, while the post-apocalyptic narrative initially appears to be a narrative of perpetual suffering and death, it is only perceived in this way because it is unfamiliar. Post-apocalyptic time shatters our understanding of what time is but, in so doing, is able to create space for new understandings of time. In articulating of this argument, I call on the hopeful Henry Bemis for inspiration, hoping to convey the point that the post-

apocalyptic period is not indicative of the "end time" or the period of suffering that follows the end but is, instead, a space of potentiality that opens up our conception of time to something greater, some place where there is "time enough at last."

A lens through which we can understand time and futurity in the post-apocalyptic narrative can be found in José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity.* As I outlined in the introduction to this thesis, Muñoz's book offers a means of understanding current conceptions of time and reimagines this, providing alternative modes of conceiving time. Muñoz criticizes a present-focused conception of time because it naturalizes unnatural "cultural logics" and refuses to acknowledge the existence of anything beyond the present moment (12). Presentness, as Muñoz argues, reinforces a binary structure and denies potentiality. For the purposes of this chapter, I will incorporate Muñoz's discussion regarding straight time versus queer time. Straight time (a term developed by Judith Halberstam) suggests that time exists in normative terms and places value in heteronormative life and, as Muñoz argues, is entirely focused on the present moment, placing any hope for futurity in heterosexual reproduction and the continuance of the heteronormative present (Muñoz 22). Muñoz suggests an interrogation of this straight temporality and, instead, offers an alternative: queer time. Queer time critiques the straight temporality of a heteronormative present and refuses to conform to a conceivable outline for how time *should* operate and offers multiple potentialities for how time *can* operate. In this chapter, therefore, I will argue that the post-apocalypse is a period of potentiality that is characterized by aspects of Muñoz's queer time; the post-apocalyptic narrative is an explication of this notion of time that

critiques the heteronormative present and suggests a new, hopeful (albeit *oddly* hopeful) means of understanding futurity.

In most post-apocalyptic narratives, the notion of time as it can be understood in a contemporary context appears to have stopped and that which remains merely exists in a suspended moment between life and death. As Gomel suggests, the post-apocalypse is not concerned with the intricacies of life, nor does it deal with "the sharp moment of death"(Gomel). Instead, it is presented as a period of suffering that appears to be without end and, therefore, is entirely consumed by the circumstances of the present moment. The post-apocalyptic narrative is obsessed with Halberstam's notion of straight time and how it can be maintained even though it is, for all intents and purposes, lost. Thus, the discussion of time in the post-apocalypse is a conflict of presentation; straight time is constantly being imposed even though the post-apocalypse is intent on rejecting it.

This disruption of straight temporality is made very apparent in both McCarthy's *The Road* and Kirkman's *The Walking Dead* through the manner in which they depict the new, post-apocalyptic world.[6] In *The Road,* McCarthy markedly "ends" straight time in

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[6] While both texts provide a dismantled straight temporality, it is important to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the different mediums. McCarthy's text is a novel—a closed system—that follows a traditional narrative structure with a discernible beginning and ending. Kirkman's text, on the other hand, is a serialized graphic novel that is still in production. Kirkman's comic is vastly different from McCarthy's novel because many issues change or go unanswered while the novel always stays the same. Both texts manage to present a semblance of queer time that is characteristically nonlinear, but the changes in form make it difficult to come to a clear understanding of authorial intention. McCarthy's closed story focuses on the dystopian present, but looks ahead (a point that will be discussed later) and, therefore, makes it easy to see the horizon of the narrative's future. Kirkman's open-ended text is successful in conveying the queerness of the post-apocalypse as a result of its state of flux. However, this too can be problematic because—at some point—the aim of the comic might completely change.

the narrative when the man (his unnamed protagonist) states that "[t]he clocks stopped at 1:17" (McCarthy 45). This moment clearly conveys an end for the reader because, as the passage states, the clock (time) quite literally stops. This moment does not signal the death of the physical world but, instead, the death of the heteronormative social order masquerading as a world more extensive than it actually is. McCarthy uses the clock in particular because it is an object that has become a naturalized way in which to understand time; the clock is utilized in the man's recollection of the moment when everything stops because it is a cultural artifact (a non-natural marker of time) and, therefore, reveals that the only thing being lost is heteronormative culture and society. The clock stopping, the Coca Cola drying up (19), and the ever-worsening deterioration of buildings and billboards suggests that the markers of heteronormative culture and time are becoming an even more distant memory to the man as time progresses in the narrative —and time, it is important to note, progresses.

While McCarthy's use of cultural artifacts in representing the "end" of straight time is significant, it is also interesting to note the time at which the clocks stop—1:17. The father does not say the clocks stopped at 1:17 AM or 1:17 PM but, simply, 1:17. In this instance, the father is able to look at the clock and see that the hours and minutes are no longer moving, but he is unable to situate this particular moment in time; he is unable to truly articulate that time has stopped because all he is capable of understanding is the moment in which he currently exists. The ambiguity of what the father recalls suggests the truth that he cannot control his place in the world or understand the circumstances of

his life. Rather, it seems as though there are greater forces at work in McCarthy's narrative.

Earlier in this chapter I make reference to *Revelation* and the "glorious rebirth" of the apocalypse. In reading McCarthy's novel with Christian ideology in mind, it can be argued that, much like John's revelation in the Bible, this moment of apocalypse disrupts heteronormative time and shatters the notion that it has any considerable power. In *Revelation* 1:17 John states, "And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last." John's moment of revelation before God imparts a realization that he is standing before his Creator, before the one who holds such a power as to reign over him and, ultimately, reign over everything that comes before and after. This statement reveals that God not only holds power over John (a man) but, more importantly, that he will hold power no matter John's fate. God states, "I am the first and the last," suggesting his ever-presence. While I am not suggesting that McCarthy's text be read as a religious text, I do find this connection interesting in how it explains the disruption of heteronormative time in the narrative. In the Biblical sense, "the first and the last" is in reference to God but, in this case, it can be applied to the notion of time and humanity's relationship to it. The parallel drawn between the time on the clocks and the passage in *Revelation* reveals a conception of time that exists beyond the human life and, therefore, a human understanding of it; it suggests that while heteronormative notions of time may have come to an end, time itself has not stopped. John's sensation of mortality before God directly correlates to the idea that, in the post-apocalyptic text, time refuses to operate within a normative framework

and, instead, continues to move in a unique trajectory past the death of man and, therefore, heteronormativity.

The man in *The Road* makes a determined effort to convince himself that futurity is possible and that he, at least to an extent, has some effect on what that means. He convinces himself and his son that he still maintains some sense of control over time in the post-apocalyptic world, even though it is clear that he believes time, at least as it was once understood, no longer exists; he states that his "only hope is for eternal nothingness" (McCarthy 47). The way in which the man perceives post-apocalyptic time, thus, appears to be akin to Gomel's argument that it is an indeterminable period of suffering. The man views the current state of the world as dystopian and, though he projects a desire to survive, it is clear that he is merely seeking an end to everything (death). McCarthy's utilization of the clock as a marker for the end of heteronormativity is a strong image that reveals the problematic manner in which time is typically conceived. The man (as most readers are want to do) naturalizes straight time and, therefore, the fact that the clock has stopped does not simply signal the end of normative society and the construction of time therein but, instead, suggests that time altogether has stopped. After the clocks stop, the landscape of the post-apocalyptic world is described as a razed, ever-darkening space in which "[n]ights [are] dark beyond darkness and the days [are] more gray each one than what had gone before" (3); the stopping of the clocks in addition to the change in the natural landscape leads the man to believe that the post-apocalypse promises nothing more than dystopian suffering. Yet, despite the father's insistence that time has stopped and nothing remains but a dystopian hellscape, it is

possible to look beyond the seemingly bleak state of the present. It is possible to "[f]ear not" (*Revelation* 1:17) and, instead, read the disappearance of cultural markers and the changing nature of each day reveal as evidence of a world that is in transit. The seeming darkness cast over the post-apocalyptic world of McCarthy's text does not signal the end time but, instead, suggests that the world has simply cast off an old skin and is restructuring itself before the start of something new.

The Walking Dead does something similar with the disruption of straight time and seems to subvert this notion of temporality on an even greater scale. While McCarthy's narrative disrupts the notion of straight time through the metaphor of the clock and the gradual obscuring of the progression from day to night, Kirkman's graphic novel manages to dismantle straight time in a number of ways. The first manner in which the comic disrupts straight time is the construction of the story itself. While *The Walking Dead* has a central protagonist (Rick Grimes), the extensive narrative's format is somewhat queer because it does not follow a singular, linear trajectory but follows several story lines at once (Rick and the Atlanta group, the Governor and Woodbury, Douglas Monroe and the Washington group, to name a few), jumping back and forth and leaving certain stories open-ended. The narratives each have their own unique trajectory that seem to begin at different, undisclosed moments in the past and, as the progression of the narrative shows, certain timelines overlap and intersect with one another. The multiplicity of narratives and their intersections suggest a means of understanding post-apocalyptic time that is web-like: without any distinct start or end point.

A discussion of the central story line concerning Rick Grimes (attempting to ignore the presence and intersection of other story lines in the narrative) even reveals this nonlinear, obscured conception of time. Though the comic "begins" with Rick's story, the style in which Kirkman introduces him is intentionally unclear. The first issue does not begin at the moment of apocalypse, nor does it begin in the period of the post-apocalypse. Instead, it opens on a memory of the world *before* the apocalypse (See Figure 5). The flashback—revealed through a series of panels—shows Rick (a Sheriff's deputy) being shot in the line of duty and leaves off with his life hanging in the balance. On the next page, time jumps and Rick awakes, alone, in a hospital bed (See Figure 6). This frame, unlike the previous sequence, takes up an entire page and features only one image: Rick in the center of a barren hospital room. While the sequence that comes before provides a great amount of detail relayed in both dialogue and action in each frame, this image appears to lack the same kind of information but, in so doing, provides the reader with an understanding that something has changed in the narrative. Before, Rick's identity as a working member of society is made clear but, here, Rick is stripped of his social presence as he lies speechless and alone in a nearly empty room and the icon which suggests any possible connection to a larger social system—the telephone—is nearly out of frame. Quite literally, the world Rick wakes up in is a blank slate with no apparent ties to that which came before.

Thus, the jarring contrast this frame provides implies a shift in the temporality of the narrative; it suggests that the fast pace of the events depicted in the previous panels has come to a halt. For whatever reason, time is not functioning in the same manner it

FIGURE 5. Rick, a police officer, is shot in the line of duty. This series of images reveals a time before the apocalyptic fall. Rick's position of authority (presented at the start of the comic) echoes throughout the series.

FIGURE 6. Rick awakes from a coma, unaware of what time it is. In this image, Rick wakes up amidst the post-apocalyptic chaos. His inability to understand that the world has changed reflects the rupture in time associated with the post-apocalyptic narrative.

did before. Like McCarthy does in his narrative, Kirkman makes an allusion to the loss of straight time in this transition. The shift from a sequence of several panels on one page to a single panel filling the next page suggests that the normative flow of time has been broken; time is no longer a linear sequence of events and, instead, operates without any specific form. Kirkman intentionally creates this confusion at the opening of the narrative so that, like Rick must do in the story, the reader is forced to come to their own understanding of temporality in the post-apocalyptic world. Kirkman does not provide answers or a guide through which to understand time; rather, the narrative acts as a web of moments that the reader must attempt to navigate.

In addition to Kirkman's queer presentation of time through intentionally obscured perspectives, the narrative also dismantles the notion of straight time through the use of the zombie figure. The presence of the zombies amongst the living not only acts as a physical threat, but also works to threaten the futurity of the human and confuse any conception of straight time. The zombie (the living dead) is integral in disrupting notions of straight temporality because it positions the "end" (death) within the present moment. The zombie as representative of death but positioned within the context of the present breaks the notion of straight time in which death occurs at the end. In his argument, Muñoz explains that straight temporality conceives death as "quintessentially antiutopian" because it "defines the end of potentiality" (Muñoz 149). Death not only marks a physical end but also seems to signal an end in the greater understanding of futurity. Thus, by closely examining Kirkman's placement of death as an active figure within the present moment, we can understand the narrative as markedly queer because it

rejects the naturalized conception of time that suggests death to be the end of life as well as any sense of hope for futurity.

McCarthy and Kirkman both construct narratives that—whether intentionally or not—operate within a queer temporality. However, it is apparent that their characters (and, possibly, their readers) still seek guidance from the structure of straight temporality because it has been naturalized as the only way in which time operates. Thus, survivors of McCarthy's and Kirkman's post-apocalyptic worlds struggle to understand conceptions of queer time because they are so convinced that meaning can only be found in a straight temporality. It is this struggle to conceive time outside of a normative, linear construct that creates conflict within both narratives.

In McCarthy's *The Road,* the major conflict, thus, does not arise from the apocalyptic fallout itself but, instead, from the father's unwillingness to see beyond the trauma at present. As I have made reference to in previous chapters, the problem within McCarthy's text is not his seemingly dystopian landscape but his all-too-stubborn protagonist. The father is representative of the ultimate heteronormative ideal and, as the narrative progresses, he becomes increasingly more insistent on maintaining this type of order. The father's belief that he and his son "carry the fire" (70) suggests that they are the last vestiges of goodness in the world, and therefore, no hope for futurity outside of this can be had. Because the father is unable understand a world that does not follow the linear progression of time to which he is so accustomed, he expends all of his energy clinging to anything that retains some semblance of straight time. This is most clearly depicted in his obsession with the road itself. In my first chapter, I make reference to the

presence of the road in the narrative as a means through which the man attempts to hold on to heteronormative social order. I utilize the road again in this chapter not to rehearse the same argument I discuss previously, but to suggest that it is a metaphor with a multiplicity of meaning in McCarthy's narrative. The road is representative of heteronormative society as well as straight temporality, both of which the man is desperately attempting to maintain. Throughout the narrative, the father and son are on a journey south by way of the road because it appears to be the only reliable means of guidance. As I state earlier, the man distrusts the natural environment and, instead, believes that the road is the safest place to be. However, the road does not simply provide significance for the man because it is a cultural construction but because the road is a clear, direct means of passage; the road is the safest and most logical path to follow. The road is representative of straight temporality because of its origin in heteronormative society and, quite obviously, because it is literally a straight and direct route that travels in one direction (the direction the father and son are going). The road epitomizes the concept of straight time because it is an ordered means of travel as opposed to the unpredictable wilderness that surrounds it. The man's insistence that he and his son travel along the road is significant because it is an attempt at creating a structure or sense of order in an otherwise orderless world. The man follows the road because he believes it will eventually lead somewhere, suggesting that the road promises a linear trajectory of straight time in which each passing moment must be met by some conceivable end. However, what is interesting about the road is that while it appears to operate through a straight temporality, it is only so because the man thinks it is. The road moves south

because south is the direction the man wants to go; however, the man and his son are capable of moving in the opposite direction and even stepping off the road and, therefore, outside of straight time. It is the unfamiliar terrain of the post-apocalyptic period that drives the man to seek refuge in that which he believes might reinforce the familiar and ordered temporality that came before.

Kirkman's text also uses the idea of travel with a specific point of conclusion as a means to convey an attempt at reinforcing straight time. Throughout the comic, the central group (Rick and the Atlanta survivors) is on the road seeking refuge wherever it can be found. However, while Rick and his group seem to be a band of wayfarers, they are not only on the road searching for a place to sleep, but ultimately, a place to settle and call home. Like the man does with the road in McCarthy's text, Kirkman's survivors navigate the roads with the deliberate intention to find answers or some type of end point that will give their current existence meaning and, as it is made clear throughout the text, this meaning manifests in a return to heteronormativity. Thus, travel in Kirkman's narrative functions like McCarthy's in that the characters travel "forward" not only in an attempt to seek refuge and survive, but also because it is what they are used to doing. The idea of traveling on a road is a familiar activity that, once upon a time, promised meaning in the present and ultimately at the end of the road, and it is this instinct that leads the survivors of the post-apocalypse to put faith in such a construct. But, as Muñoz suggests in his criticism of straight time, there is clearly something missing.

McCarthy's and Kirkman's narratives present a post-apocalyptic future moment that operates in queer time as a means to openly critique the straightness at present, the

unyielding straightness of heteronormative society. While both narratives present a temporality in the post-apocalypse that is no longer subject to heteronormative order, it is clear that their characters (and, again, most readers) are unable to understand this queer conception of time and, thus, attempt to revert back to the familiar and seemingly natural order of straight time. As a means through which to reiterate that straight temporality has been lost, both narratives actively work to reject the power of straight time displayed in the presence of the road and the travel motif. Since a nearly complete devastation of the previous world was not enough to signal the end of straight temporality, McCarthy and Kirkman introduce other elements in the texts to elucidate the fact that straight time is no longer a construction in which to place one's faith.

McCarthy points to the unreliability of straight time through the degradation of the man's map. As he and the boy travel on the road, he refers to a "tattered oil company roadmap" for direction (McCarthy 36). The map, which once provided a clear image of the roads and the direction they lead, is described in a way that suggests that it is no longer useful in providing such guidance; it is described as having been "taped together" at some point, but now it is merely a pile of "limp pages" that is "sorted into leaves and numbered with crayon in the corners for their assembly" (36). The deterioration of the map is significant in McCarthy's explication that the post-apocalypse does not recognize straight time. Like the image of the clock stopping, the deterioration of the map suggests that the guiding structures of heteronormativity and straight temporality are fading into nonexistence because they are not conducive to futurity and potentiality. The roadmap provides a holistic, objective picture of where the roads lead and, thus, to what end the

time therein will be spent. The map (as with the clock) provides one unchanging answer for where one is in the present and where they will be in the future. The presentation of the map as deteriorating and disjointed marks a break in straight temporality and signals a potential future in which meaning is not found at the end of one road but, rather, must be sought in a multiplicity of directions.

While *The Road* seems to reject straight temporality gradually throughout the narrative, *The Walking Dead* reveals a cyclical pattern through which it rejects straight time and encourages an understanding of the post-apocalypse through queer time. Kirkman's presentation of straight time as problematic is akin to McCarthy's in that it suggests that meaning and purpose can be found in the present because everything is moving in one direction to one presumably final end; the only goodness in the future can be sought through a mediation of the present. As McCarthy's man literally follows the trajectory of straight time, the characters in Kirkman's comic travel forward, not only seeking some semblance of heteronormativity but actually settling into heteronormative spaces along the way. However, though these spaces provide refuge at first, they are inevitably destroyed and the group is forced to scatter and continue traveling until they find another acceptable place to call home. This attempt to seek refuge in the vestiges of heteronormativity continues throughout the comic and is met each time with destruction because there can be no hope for futurity—no potentiality—in the broken remains of a lost world (See Figure 7).

Even so, the multiple groups we find throughout the narrative are all seeking to find meaning in the reproduction of heteronormative society and living, again, as they

lived before. Again, there is an obvious desire to fall back into the promise of straight temporality because it is familiar, but it is problematic to do so because it reinforces the heteronormative process of exclusion and inequality. To return to the module of straight time is to return to a conception of time that does not recognize queerness or anything that is outside of the normative ideal. In addition to reproducing normative ideology, attempting to reinforce straight time is a nonproductive means of understanding time. Where queer temporality opens up our understanding of what time means and could provide, straight time simply exists without any sense of potentiality. Thus, the continual reversion to heteronormative social order in Kirkman's comic is like playing house. The groups occupy social roles in an attempt to understand their place in the present but, ultimately, they are just biding their time until a future that they are not even concerned about. Each time a group settles into a heteronormative groove, it is disrupted in one way or another and typically meets a violent end (See Figure 8). Kirkman's graphic destruction of each new society is essential, as it reveals the fact that the horrors threatening to devalue the present moment are bred from the notion of straight time itself. The violence that comes to the new societies in the narrative occur as a means through which to elucidate the very nature of straight time as being constructed to meet an "antiutopian" end (Muñoz).

The Road displays a conception of time that is not restricted by an antiutopian conception of death when, in the concluding pages of the narrative, the man dies and the narrator immediately switches his focus to the boy. The man is no longer central to the narrative and, even after his passing, the boy carries on and begins a new life with a new

FIGURE 7. Two zombies "knocking" at the door. In the scene that precedes this image, Rick and Carl find refuge in a suburban home. This image shows their first visitors: two zombies "knocking" at the front door. The zombies performing "human" behaviors serves to rupture the definitions of human and monster.

FIGURE 8. The moment before the car is overcome by a "herd" of zombies. In this image, a herd of zombies prevents the group from proceeding down a highway. This literal invasion parallels the disruption of heteronormativity in the post-apocalyptic world.

family. After the man's death, McCarthy concludes the novel with two endings. The first ending is imbued with religious language, as the woman speaks to the boy about God and underscores His presence "through all of time" (McCarthy 241), and references the boy's relationship with his late father. While the first ending makes allusion to some sense of a future for the boy specifically, the second ending is more interesting because it speaks to the notion of queer futurity on a greater scale:

> 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. (McCarthy 241)

In this conclusion to McCarthy's narrative, the notion of straight time is markedly shattered. With the death of the man and the boy's existence thereafter, McCarthy signals a sense of hope for the individual. Thus, the second ending is intentionally obscure so as to suggest an open but undefined passage for the queer future. While this passage is written in the past tense, the imagery McCarthy uses seems to suggest that the moment being described does not stand alone; there is a thread in this moment that connects it to points in the present and future. The image of the "brook trout" in the stream with "[m]aps and mazes" on their backs can be read as a suggestion of queer temporality because, unlike the deteriorating map the man carries with him throughout the narrative, it is fluid and is not merely focused on the "here and now" that Muñoz claims straight time is too concerned with (22). Where the man's map is a static, man-made object that

presents a singular and unchanging picture of the world (therefore creating in the man's mind a singular truth about the world and his existence therein), the maps and mazes on the backs of the fish are natural representations of the world that are constantly in flux. The reference to "a thing which could not be put back" or "made right again" is, arguably, the end of straight temporality. With this, McCarthy's ending seems to refuse to "right" the heteronormative order of time that has been changed and, instead, suggests a queer temporality driven by multiple potentialities.

Unlike McCarthy's novel, Kirkman's narrative is still in progress. However, because it is a more obvious critique of the present moment, it is already revealing moments in the text that suggest some sense of hope for the future. Like McCarthy, Kirkman's queer future rejects the notion that death merely exists as a means of marking the end. However, what is unique to Kirkman's narrative is the fact that futurity is not only promised to the reader, but is something realized by his protagonist (See Figure 9). At a point in the narrative that follows yet another tragedy, Rick and a few members of his group stand at the precipice of the devastated world before them. In the image presented, Rick, Michonne, and Abraham are positioned in the foreground and a view of a city can be seen in the background. This image is particularly interesting because Rick and the other humans in the text are not dominating the frame or the representation of the world within it. Quite contrary to the rest of the comic where the group is typically presented in a position of power (or, at least, moves to be), this image is an almost sublime picture in which Rick and his group submit to the grandeur of the world before them; as they stare at the immense city nestled amidst a large and sprawling landscape at

FIGURE 9. Rick looks out across the landscape of a post-apocalyptic world. In a moment of what could be called "post-apocalyptic enlightenment," Rick sees the world before him not as it was but, rather, as what it could be.

dawn, Rick acknowledges the "larger world" beyond the fences they build to protect themselves. In this moment, Rick sees the potential in the future of the post-apocalypse and urges his comrades to be "brave enough to accept it." Rick has seemingly abandoned the effort to force himself within a notion of straight temporality that no longer exists and, instead, is open to the new way of the world and is willing to embrace the queerness that surrounds them.

To an audience situated within the present moment, McCarthy and Kirkman's narratives appear to be somewhat cruel predictions of a bleak, dystopian future; the pain that befalls the protagonists (death and suffering, to begin with) is unfair and torturous rather than productive. However, both narratives introduce death into the landscape of the post-apocalypse in an effort to make room for potentiality, to suggest a means of understanding futurity that is not restricted by the finitude of death. Muñoz speaks to the point of death in his discussion of suicide, wherein he states that it is "often the end of hope" that is "snuffed out for a collectivity" (167). He critiques the social collective's conception of death as finality, suggesting that death is not an end but a collective beginning. According to Muñoz, queerness and suicide (which we may substitute here for death in general) are linked and the "queer act" of suicide is "utopian in its negation of death as ultimate uncontrollable finitude" (167). Muñoz's argument (which he admits he takes a risk in explicating) suggests that suicide is an act through which the individual maintains control over their own death and place in time and, in the wake of this apparent loss, the collective is able to grow. Muñoz amplifies the act of suicide beyond the individual and, speaking to a greater collective, makes reference to the art that is

produced after someone's death. This conversation about creativity in the wake of death suggests that death is not necessarily "the end." Rather, Muñoz is urging us to see death as a marker that signals the start of something new. Like Morton's image of the mesh, Muñoz's conception of death is nonlinear but, instead, a web that continues to spread in all directions; death simply links one web to the next.

In the final scene of *The Twilight Zone* episode "Time Enough at Last," the once-hopeful Henry Bemis is devastated when, after laying his plans for the future, his glasses fall to the ground and shatter, leaving him blind and therefore unable to benefit from the new world laid out before him. The episode closes with Bemis weeping over his piles of books next to a broken clock (not unlike the man's notice of the clocks in *The Road*) and exclaiming "That's not fair. That's not fair at all. There was time now." Bemis' unfortunate end suggests what Muñoz makes clear in his text: "queerness is not yet here" (1).

Returning to the discussion surrounding the etymology of the world "apocalypse" as an "uncovering," the purpose of the post-apocalyptic narrative becomes increasingly more clear. If the apocalyptic text is meant to present the moment of revelation, then the purpose of the post-apocalyptic text is to propose ways in which to understand the revelation and what can be done in its wake. The post-apocalyptic narrative, thus, does not wade through the remains of the straight time looking for a way to put it back together but considers queer temporality and what potential it has. Bemis could "feel querness" and understand potentiality but, unfortunately, was unable to move beyond "the quagmire of the present" (1), perhaps because queerness is something that cannot be

reached by the individual but, rather, must be reached as a collective. Therefore, it is clear in the discussion of time and futurity in *The Road* and *The Walking Dead* that the meaning of the post-apocalyptic narrative is not the bleakness and hopelessness of dystopia. Instead, it is a vessel through which to critique the present and propose new ways in which we can begin to think about temporality. Thus, the post-apocalyptic text does not present an "end of the world" but, to use Muñoz's terms, a queer futurity that is "not yet here."

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