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**Abstract** for “A Pilgrimage through Waste: Linguistic Kinship and Ethical Tenancy”

Geographer Simon Springer encourages “a reexamination of earth writing through analogical structures wherein metaphor becomes paramount to enriching our lives with connection, fulfillment, and possibility.” Building on Springer’s insight that poetry can be “critical to geography’s recent affective turn,” this paper acknowledges how metaphor can provoke constructive dialogue among scientists and artists who focus on waste as material and cultural object. Waste as metaphor can demonize toxically or provoke affinity. Insights from the field of vibrant materialism can help us to understand the waste-ridden pilgrimage novels, *The Rings of Saturn* (W.G. Sebald 1995) and *The Road* (Cormac McCarthy 2006).

Sebald weaves pilgrimage metaphors into his humble trek physically through East Anglia and mentally through the universe via literary geography and synchronic chronology. The narrator, “confronted with the traces of destruction” (3), records man’s inhumanity, finding seamless affinity with others—whether human actors or nonhuman (bugs, ducks, landscape, paintings). The very catastrophe Sebald imagines has already taken place in the past in McCarthy’s *The Road*, as another pilgrimage begins. McCarthy’s “wastescape” can be found “in the very vibrancy and agency of matter” (Véronique Bragard) with which characters are enmeshed, I argue, through the use of metaphor and simile. Donna Haraway’s assertion that “‘making kin’” works as “life-saving strategy for the Anthropocene”<sup>1</sup> applies to us linguistically as well, through metaphors which make differing—often opposing—concepts, ideas, and images into kin.

### **“A Pilgrimage through Waste: Linguistic Kinship and Ethical Tenancy”**

Geographer Simon Springer encourages “a reexamination of earth writing through analogical structures wherein metaphor becomes paramount to enriching our lives with connection, fulfillment, and possibility.” Building on Springer’s insight that poetry can be “critical to geography’s recent affective turn,”<sup>2</sup> this paper acknowledges how metaphor can provoke constructive dialogue among scientists and artists who focus on waste as material and cultural object. Waste as metaphor can demonize toxically or provoke affinity. Insights from the field of vibrant materialism can help us to understand the waste-ridden pilgrimage novels, *The Rings of Saturn* (W.G. Sebald 1995) and *The Road* (Cormac McCarthy 2006).

Pilgrimage seeps into Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn* starting with the initial epigraph from Joseph Conrad’s letter to Marguerite Poradowska:

Above all, we must forgive the unhappy souls who have elected to make the pilgrimage on foot, who skirt the shore and look uncomprehendingly upon the horror of the struggle, the joy of victory, the profound hopelessness of the vanquished.<sup>3</sup>

Sebald’s German original has a subtitle the English edition lacks: “Eine englische Wallfahrt” (“an English pilgrimage”), which lends the novel a “genre description,”<sup>4</sup> even before the reader turns a page. Clearly, Sebald imagines his book as adhering to the designation of pilgrimage writing. This thematic recurs. In the German edition of *Die Ringe des Saturn* (37) he refers to Walsingham, near to where he taught at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, as a “Wallfahrtsort” (“site of pilgrimage”), while this description does not appear in the English version (24, 25).<sup>5</sup> Just as Walsingham famously had a replica of the house of Annunciation, so, too, the Sebald-narrator-avatar meets a farmer building his own “model of the temple at Jerusalem” in Suffolk.<sup>6</sup>

Walsingham itself, an epicenter of medieval loss and destruction under Henry VII, exists in tiered moments from bygone days.

After visiting an eccentric Irish family in their decaying estate, Sebald bids farewell to the daughter, Catherine, “holding a broad-brimmed hat like a pilgrim’s, the same red as her dress” (220). Years later in Berlin in 1993, time collapses and he witnesses her once more on stage, “incredibly wearing the same red dress, holding in her hand the same pilgrim’s hat, she or her very image, Catherine of Siena” (221). The montage of her appearance across location and time suggests an emotional and spiritual pilgrimage. Sebald records relics, from those of Thomas Browne (10) to those of “ruined conical brick buildings, like relics of an extinct civilization” (30) [see also 90, 96 “reliquary”]. Time collapses, when, on on stroll, “I felt as if I were in a deserted theatre, and I should not have been surprised if a curtain had suddenly risen before me and on the proscenium I had beheld” (76) the battle between the Dutch and English on Mary 28, 1672. Yet, he asks, “[w]hat manner of theatre is it, in which we are at once playwright, actor, stage manager, scene painter, and audience?” (80) Such is the role of the pilgrimage writer, whose journey (whether literal or figurative) through a conjured paper landscape of physical detail, memory, and metaphor inventories “a treasure house that existed purely in his head” (271). While on a trip to Amsterdam, he “made notes on the stations of my journey” (86; see also 257), thus weaving in pilgrimage metaphors to his humble trek, physically through East Anglia and mentally through the universe via a literary geography and synchronic chronology.

The trash and decay from bygone days form a tissue with connected—however distantly—epochs. The narrator, “confronted with the traces of destruction” (3), interacts with human and nonhuman actors, who lead him to touch distant moments in time and space, though, he acknowledges, “Who can say how things were in ages past?” (84). The decline of East Anglia,

once vibrant in the Middle Ages, even in its Victorian iteration, depresses the narrator, who muses and meditates on other decays and declines linked to this now remote edge of an island. Herring stocks crashed and, while “natural historians sought consolation in the idea that humanity was responsible for only a fraction of the endless destruction in the cycle of life” (57), he exposes that human actors decimated nonhuman ones. Still, “the truth is that we do not know what the herring feels” (57). This presumption Sebald cannot allow.

A narrative visualizes a “world system”<sup>7</sup> with both the cosmological and abstract conception of official space—those rings of Saturn—to the minute specificity of a local, vernacular place—East Anglia. Sebald speculates on cosmic perspective: “If we view ourselves from a great height, it is frightening to realize how little we know about our species, our purpose and our end, I thought, as we crossed the coastline and flew out over the jelly-green sea” (92).

Almost cinematically, he swoops from his vast prospect to zero in on the diminutive:

I saw a solitary mallard, motionless on the garish green surface of the water. This image emerged from the darkness, for a fraction of a second, with such perfect clarity that I can still see every individual willow leaf, the myriad green scales of duckweed, the subtlest nuances in the fowl’s plumage, and even the pores in the lid closed over its eye. (89)

The cosmic and specific have their place in his ranging peregrination across landscape and history as he ambles from Nazi atrocities to Voyager II. This aerial view—and its ethical dimension—recurs in Sebald. He links the Jerusalem replica to the dome of the nuclear reactor in East Anglia, Sizewell, “which can be seen on moonlit nights shining like a shrine far across the land and sea” (248).

*The Rings of Saturn* records multiple voices on Sebald’s pilgrimage while he journeys through Norfolk and Suffolk, particularly noting man’s inhumanity to human and nonhuman

actors. Sebald notes the attraction of the erosion of the once vibrant Dunwich to “melancholy poets in the Victorian age,” for whom the medieval town “became a place of pilgrimage” (159). Such a decayed landscape, knit together through soil, oceanic incursions, and the destruction of vast forests (169), magnetically draws Sebald. “Our spread over the earth was fuelled by reducing the higher species of vegetation to charcoal, by incessantly burning whatever would burn” (170). Confused in his meanderings across the diverging path across the unmarked heath, Sebald takes a view from above, able from this perspective to tie together World War II, animals and humans tiny below him, junk from abandoned homes, Lear cradling the dead Cordelia, the Sizewell nuclear reactor, and the Rhine delta in the far past—all in less than two pages.<sup>8</sup> Making wildly diverse time periods kin, Sebald exposes their intrinsic assemblage with one another.

Narrative acts as both a “form of knowledge as well as an attempt to know.”<sup>9</sup> Sebald knows the cruel ruin that comes to all places; the ravages man commits on both human and nonhuman actors. Linking everyone and everything—pilgrimage path, walker, silkworm in China, bombed out Berlin—is time. The narrator and reader toggle seamlessly—though sometimes with confusion—in this palimpsest of events and time.

The black and white photographs not only commemorate Sebald’s narration; they sit on the page like illuminations in a medieval manuscript, images that form a dialogue with the words. He tells us the process of writing the book, where he begins “to assemble my notes” (5), in an act of amendment and revision. He recalls a colleague’s “virtual paper landscape” and “paper universe”, where the vibrant “paper had begun climbing from the floor” (8). His papers, too, construct an interconnected landscape of literary and artistic musings, from Borges to Flaubert and Stendhal; ecological observation, from swallows to the eruption of Mont Pelée; and historical oddities, emblemized by Thomas Browne’s quincunx, a replica of which Sebald includes. This

structure Browne identified as being “everywhere, in animate and inanimate matter...[O]ne might demonstrate *ad infinitum* the elegant geometrical designs of Nature” (20-1). It serves as a model for Sebald’s own work, where the oddest minor detail—the meeting between Roger Casement and Joseph Conrad, then Józef Korzeniowski—bonds with Conrad’s guilt “which he had incurred by his mere presence in the Congo” (120)—and by extension our work as readers. Korzeniowski/Sebald’s disgust at Belgium’s “bombastic buildings, as a sepulchral monument erected over a hecatomb of black bodies” (122) implicates us—for Sebald’s volume we read would be impossible without “that dark Congolese secret within [us]” (122). The reader becomes stuck in the web of connections woven by Sebald’s narrative. While reading in Southwold’s musty Sailors’ Reading Room from a patrol ship log, “I am astounded that trail that has long since vanished from the air or the water remains visible here on the paper” (93)—and on our paper too, in the volume we cradle.

His visit to Somerleyton Hall sparks connections ranging as far back as the Middle Ages to the bombing raids over Germany during World War II. Sebald’s writing genetics emerge in this scene, where he speaks with a gardener about that violent past. Seamlessly and repeatedly, he switches from third to first person, as though the material encasing of the body of one man fades as the memories of the other emerge in his own voice. This erasure of border he observes with the home itself, famous “for the scarcely perceptible transitions from interiors to exterior; those who visited were barely able to tell where the natural ended and the man-made began....all of it interacted in such a way that one had the illusion of the complete harmony between the natural and manufactured” (33-4). The gardener’s voice retelling of past events merges with Sebald’s manufactured narrative, as though he is there and time and distance recede. His communion with his friend the writer Michael Hamburger, “as if it were not he who had abandoned that place of

work but I” (183), inspires him to ask, “Across what distances in time do the elective affinities and correspondences occur? How is it that one perceives oneself in another human being, or, if not oneself, then one’s own precursor?” (182). This seamless affinity with others—whether human actors or nonhuman (bugs, ducks, landscape, paintings)—Sebald explores in his pilgrimage through space and time. “[W]e all move, one after the other, along the same roads mapped out for us by our origins and our hopes” (187).

Sebald’s novel concludes on Maundy Thursday, a day when Christ washed his disciples’ feet and the feast day of various saints (294). It is also, Sebald reminds us, the day when countless events took place, only a few of which he can recount, such as Henry IV’s Edict of Nantes, the first performance of *The Messiah*, the foundation of the Anti-Semitic League in Prussia, and the Amritsar massacre. It also is the day when his wife’s father passed away. “[O]ur history...is but a long account of calamities” (295). Grief was once acknowledged sartorially through black; even mirrors and paintings were draped, “so that the soul, as it left the body, would not be distracted on its final journey, either by a reflection of itself or by a last glimpse of the land now being lost for ever” (296), commemorated through memorialization in pilgrimage texts such as this.

Losing his way during a dust storm in Rendlesham Forest, devastated by the hurricane of October 16, 1987, Sebald wanders in the haze of particulate matter. Still “in a daze,” he makes his way to Orford Castle, from the top of which he spies out to the medieval and World War II pasts. As though crossing over the River Styx courtesy of her “ferryman” (234), Sebald spends some hours on Orfordness, abandoned by the Ministry of Defense, an “undiscovered country” (234). Here he feels panic by its creepy past. Suddenly a hare rushes by.

I still see what occurred in that one tremulous instant with an undiminished clarity. I see the edge of the grey tarmac and every individual blade of grass, I see the hare leaping out of its hiding-place, with its ears laid back and a curiously human expression on its face that was rigid with terror and strangely divided; and in its eyes, turning to look back as it fled and almost popping out of its head with fright, I see myself, become one with it. (234-5).

Human actor and nonhuman actor—hare, grass, tarmac—fuse in this synchronic moment of union. Later, on seeing ruined military installations intended for mysterious destruction, “I imagined myself amidst the remains of our own civilization after its extinction in some future catastrophe” (237).

In Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, that very catastrophe Sebald imagines has already taken place in the past, as another pilgrimage begins.

### **Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road***

Pilgrimage recurs in the bleakest of historical moments as healing structure and ritual. 9/11 and the Boston Marathon bombing have revived pilgrimage in a “deliberately specializing way.”<sup>10</sup> In the post-apocalyptic wastescape of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, metaphor and simile provide an elegiac lament for a lost world, acting vibrantly, resiliently offering hope for the future. In the novel, metaphor acts as a gift from father to son, quickening imagination, memory, and a deadened world.

Pilgrimage and medieval literature have been consistent thematic mainstays in McCarthy’s oeuvre.<sup>11</sup> The anti-pilgrimage of *The Road* ultimately becomes a sacred pilgrimage in this famously post-apocalyptic McCarthian world. McCarthy explicitly invokes pilgrimage on this very first page of the novel. “Like pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward



parts of some granitic beast” (*TR* 3).<sup>12</sup> The allegory that ensues carries vestiges of scriptural remnants. “Deep stone flues where the water dripped and sang. Tolling in the silence the minutes of the earth and the hours and the days of it and the years without cease” (*TR* 3). Water in a Christian context inevitably suggests baptism, while “tolling” hearkens to bells ringing their own canonical hours. The land itself, “[b]arren, silent, godless” (*TR* 4), becomes both their holy haven and harrowing of hell. A religious calendar of festivals, marking the year in terms of Christ’s life, cannot make a presence here. “He hadnt kept a calendar for years” (*TR* 4). Why should he? The weather never indicates a change in season, liturgical or natural (see *TR* 29).

Yet the sacred seeps into their journey just as the water does in the cavern where they have sheltered. The man wakes from a dream with blessed overtones: “In the dream from which he’d wakened he had wandered in a cave where the child led him by the hand. Their light playing over the wet flowstone walls.” The Biblical overtones—“and a little child shall lead them” (*Isaiah* 11:6)—and light suggesting heavenly glow lends a mystery to this profound meditation on love and survival. “He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke” (*TR* 5; see also 11-12). Even the ash that persists on invading their every vision, their every breath, can be understood in terms of the sacred: “A single gray flake sifting down. He caught it in his hand and watched it expire there like the last host of Christendom” (*TR* 16).

*The Road* seems an anti-pilgrimage with pilgrimage as an archaic element. At a ruined city, they encounter “[t]he mummied dead everywhere” (*TR* 24). Compared to “latterday bogfolk,” they can only be likened to “pilgrims” through simile: “They were discalced to a man like pilgrims of some common order for all their shoes were long since stolen” (*TR* 24). “Discalced” means barefoot or de-shoed. The man reads them in terms of pilgrimage, as pilgrims

walking in humble connection along the humus of the road. The comparison only works through simile, not direct equation, since pilgrims enacting place pilgrimage are, it seems, no longer possible.

Feet and shoes are a continual worry. At one point “[h]e’d wrapped their feet in sacking tied with cord” (*TR* 30). While “sack” appears in English as far back as the Anglo-Saxon period, one of the earliest connotations suggests “material of penitential or mourning garments” (OED). A religious lexis leaches into the novel, largely from the man’s perspective. He seems only capable of making comparisons given what his experience has taught him. Having lived through the pre-apocalyptic world, perhaps a world with God, he perforce constructs parallels linguistically using that archaic wordstock. A forest fire, ablaze in orange, moves him. “The color of it moved something in him long forgotten. Make a list. Recite a litany. Remember” (*TR* 31). A world of color, so long past, provokes his recollection of other connection making activities. Indeed, “[m]ake a list” initiates the list that follows, including the ritual speech of “litany”. These constitute his memory.

After the man kills a would-be murderer of the boy, they kneel in a river of ice and cold.

This is my child, he said. I wash a dead man’s brains out of his hair. That is my job. Then he wrapped him in the blanket and carried him to the fire....[H]e tousled his hair before the fire to dry it. All of this like some ancient anointing. So be it. Evoke the forms. Where you’ve nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them. (*TR* 74).

This profound series of events and reflection upon them suggests how the man makes new rituals of spiritual significance. While they can only be “*like* some ancient anointing” (my emphasis), that comparison alone thickens their weight and magnitude. Like God in a world of decrepit destruction, the man breathes life upon new ceremonies, such as washing brains of a putative

killer from his son's tresses. The boy sleeps. "He sat beside him and stroked his pale and tangled hair. Golden chalice, good to house a god" (*TR* 75). The "golden hair" recurs when the man cuts the boy's locks (*TR* 152). A blessed nimbus. Not thought of as simile, but in a simple phrase. No verb to realise it into an active sentence in this benumbed world. The man reassures the boy. "My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you. Do you understand?" (*TR* 77). We understand his love and sacred duty to his beloved child.

McCarthy typically invokes the sacred and nature through simile—comparison of what something is or isn't—or through phrases with no verbs, since the sacred and nature cannot be dynamically enacted.

The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever. (*TR* 89).

Religious discourse relies on natural comparisons. McCarthy's shards—incomplete sentences and similes that work only through comparisons to missing referent—act vibrantly to stave off annihilation and revive meaning, even love, from the past in the present.<sup>13</sup>

After coming across a "frieze of human heads" (*TR* 90), the man reflects. "He'd come to see a message in each such late history, a message and a warning, and so this tableau of the slain and the devoured did proved to be" (*TR* 91). The man, a remnant of a past world, stills reads allegorically, though allegories have proven spent and depleted. Have metaphors have lost their vibrancy?

I'll be in the neighborhood. Okay?

Where's the neighbourhood?

It just means I wont be far. (*TR* 95)

The boy has lost—no, never knew—this way of thinking. Yet the sacred past persists in religious resilience. At a former slave plantation, where present-day slaves are imprisoned to be cannibalized, the man breaks into a padlocked hatch. “He started down the rough wooden steps. He ducked his head and then flicked the lighter and swung the flame out over the darkness like an offering” (*TR* 110). Offerings of sacred import no longer promise salvation, where they see the pitiable slaves in miserable physical shape. “Jesus, he whispered....Christ, he said. Oh Christ” (*TR* 110). No Jesus or Christ enters this world who becomes cannibalized in the sacred ritual of the mass. Man and boy run away from the captors, “Christ, he said. Run. Run” (*TR* 111).

The man repeatedly heads to high ridges, to place him and the boy in the landscape and determine where they are located, where they are headed (see *TR* 9, 16, 33, 104, 160). The man worries they have gone astray. “In what direction did lost men veer?...Finally he put it out of his mind. The notion that there could be anything to correct for. His mind was betraying him. Phantoms not heard from in a thousand years rousing slowly from their sleep. Correct for that” (*TR* 116). After deliberately leaving his wife's photograph in the road (*TR* 51), he reflects on how “he should have tried to keep her in their lives” (*TR* 54). Getting up in the dark, he moves quietly so as not to wake his son. “Following a stone wall in the dark, wrapped in his blanket, kneeling in the ashes like a penitent” (*TR* 54). Perhaps he seeks absolution when he then says “[his wife's] name aloud” (*TR* 54). For McCarthy, “like a penitent” is a simile. This new world cannot actualize penitence, only shadow the devout past. The cannibalism of this new world is literal, not the sacred consumption of a divine host. Nature only occurs in dead similes. “He'd trained him to lie in the woods like a fawn” (*TR* 118). His parched memory slakes the water he laves up. After

this refreshment, “Then they set out upon the road again, slumped and cowed and shivering in their rags like mendicant friars sent forth to find their keep” (*TR* 126). Religion, like nature, exists in simile drawn from a memorable past. They see bear witness to “a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit” (*TR* 198). No transubstantiation of sacred cannibalism in this world of spent allegory and metaphor.

Sometimes, as the boy sleeps, the man sobs. “He wasn't sure what it was about but he thought it was about beauty or about goodness. Things that he'd no longer any way to think about at all” (*TR* 130-1). Yet he can think of such things through similes triggered by memory, which “here has the sacrificial force of the sacred.”<sup>14</sup> One describes through comparisons, with the man's rooted in a pre-apocalyptic past, while the boy's lie purely in the present and in stories he has heard.

Maybe he understood for the first time that to the boy he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed. The tales of which were suspect. He could not construct for the child's pleasure the world he'd lost without constructing the loss as well. (*TR* 154)

That loss manifests itself in literally dead similes, since all comparisons and allusions are to what no longer exists. He has to explain to the boy what some of what his comparisons mean.

Well. I think we're about two hundred miles from the coast. As the crow flies.

As the crow flies?

Yes. It means going in a straight line. (*TR* 156).

How could the boy know, if no more crows exist to fly?

There's no any crows. Are there?

No.

Just in books.

Yes. Just in books.

I didn't think so. (*TR* 158).

Even extinct metaphors can stir the boy's mind.

In McCarthy's "'wastescap[e]'",<sup>15</sup> the man and boy "establish a new relationship with the matter of objects and [avoid] categorizing them as waste. By breaking their form, viewers re-connect with their materiality, perceived as something neutral with agentic potential."<sup>16</sup> Forced "to re-connect with [objects'] textural and tactile materiality," their senses are reawakened "in a nostalgic framework of memorial re-connection, [which] is equally symbolic of the new ontology." Indeed, redemption, Véronique Bragard argues in her Beckettian-inflected reading, can be found "in the very vibrancy and agency of matter." Though objects materially disappear, they "are recreated in their minds via object metaphors"; characters "are enmeshed in a physical and semiotic relationship with matter."<sup>17</sup> This vital enmeshment with matter emerges, I argue, through the use of metaphor. Over the course of the novel we see how the boy learns to remember and imagine through metaphors his father conveys to him from a past world of good guys and fertility. These vibrant metaphors, animating the boy's imagination, spark life in a deadened world.

Whether God exists or not, the boy conjures His existence up through ritual language he somehow knows through stories carrying traces of sacred memories from the past. The father expresses some scepticism at who they might meet. "Well, I dont think we're likely to meet any good guys on the road." The boy rejoins, "We're on the road" (*TR* 151). As long as they make this pilgrimage, good guys *are* on the road. *Their* road. *Them*. They come across random items on their travels, so random they aren't even placed into a complete sentence, only phrases. "Odd

things scattered by the side of the road. Electrical appliances, furniture. Tools. Things abandoned long ago by pilgrims enroute to their several and collective deaths” (*TR* 200). Pilgrimage, like the stuff they carried, no longer has use, meaning, or purpose. Yet the man’s bricolage of countless tinkeringings suggest an everyday salvation of things for their safety for the future, from readying the cart for travel to fixing the burner.

An old man, the one whose real name isn’t Ely, suggests “Things will be better when everybody’s gone” (*TR* 172). For nonhuman nature, that may be true. But “Ely” recognizes that the boy may believe “in God” (174), since he gives the old man food. After he shuffles way with the gift,<sup>18</sup> the man says to the boy, “When you’re out of food you’ll have more time to think about it. The boy didnt answer. They ate. He looked back up the road. After a while he said: I know. But I wont remember it the way you do” (*TR* 174). The boy remembers differently than the man who has similes of a past inaccessible to the boy save through the mediation of books and stories and similes the man shares. Yet, “[i]f they saw different worlds what they knew was the same” (*TR* 180). The man holds the boy after he has a scary dream. The father says, “When your dreams are of some world that never was or of some world that will never be and you are happy again then you will have given up. Do you understand? And you cant give up. I wont let you” (*TR* 189). So it’s good, in a way, if the boy dreams of his father’s past and the never to be attained again world that was, since it did at one time actually exist.

Little reminders of the past haunt their journey, including “small cairns in rock” (*TR* 180) from the time just after the apocalypse occurred. When pilgrims existed without simile.

Out on the roads the pilgrims sank down and fell over and died and the bleak and shrouded earth went trundling past the sun and returned again as trackless and as unremarked as the path of any nameless sisterworld in the ancient dark beyond. (181).

The earth itself was shrouded, like a dead body cared for by the living, mute and grim in the face of devastation and destruction. Pilgrims died. Pilgrimage, too, passed away, only to be revived by the man and the boy in a relentless determination of survival and, even, hope in “other good guys”. For the boy, his faith remains. “Yes I do believe [in you]. I have to” (TR 184-5).

As the man’s illness causes “[s]ome new distance between them” (190), the boy seems to take new courage or determination. “Why dont we just go on, the boy said” (191), this upon encountering an *Inferno*-esque world with “[f]igures half mired in the blacktop, clutching themselves, mouths howling” (TR 190). They cross a field to a house. “It was the boy who had seen it” (TR 202). The man uncovers material traces of the past, in a button, coin, even Spanish lettering (TR 204). This house replete with English china, chandelier, and carpet no longer carries cultural capital. Food alone matters. Nonetheless, the man is able to make a nest (TR 208, 212) for himself and the boy. Even the map, only in pieces, proves useful to the man who has memorized “the names of towns and rivers” (TR 215), vestiges of a time when place and geography held weight. The boy charts his desire for sociability, his yearning for other peoples, when he plays “in the sand. He had a spatula made from a flattened foodtin and with it he built a small village. He dredged a grid of streets” (TR 245). He even thinks to write “a letter to the good guys” (TR 245). His sociability serves as a sign of the wholesomeness of a past civilization, perhaps boding good for the future. Within David Alworth’s paradigm, both the “human but also the nonhuman other ...helps to facilitate a bond.”<sup>19</sup> Here in the post-apocalyptic wastescape, “material sites mediate sociality,”<sup>20</sup> even “sustain sociality.”<sup>21</sup> We witness the boy’s instinct toward sociality after they find the thief of their goods by the beach. They leave him naked in the road, whereupon the boy cries. The man reassures him, “You’re not the one who has to worry about everything.” But the boy disagrees. “Yes I am, he said. I am the one” (TR 259). He is. And he will be.



Towards the end, the man observes the road and hears a sound he cannot quite place. “A sound without cognate and so without description” (*TR* 261). This new world has no associated equivalent, hence the inability to describe it beyond greyness, trash, and randomness. The old world had cognates as witnessed through similes which the man cannot help conjuring up from his memory, squeezing cans “like a man checking for ripeness at a fruitstand” (*TR* 261), in a world with no more fruitstands, no more fruit. The boy expresses a conviction that stories aren’t true. “But in the stories we’re always helping people and we don’t help people” (*TR* 268). As the father points out, stories don’t have to be happy.

When the man dies, so too do memories of a past that can emerge only through similes. In his final hours, the similes disappear and the boy acts with religious resonance. “He watched him come through the grass and kneel with the cup of water he’d fetched. There was light all about him” (*TR* 277). The kneeling, the baptismal water, the light—all images of salvation from a decayed sacred world, whose only promise lies in this one boy, who carries the fire inside him (*TR* 278-9). Before he dies, the father makes sure the boy can imagine he will still be there to talk with. “If I’m not here you can still talk to me. You can talk to me and I’ll talk to you.... You have to make it like talk that you imagine. And you’ll hear me. You have to practice” (*TR* 279). If the father continues to communicate with the boy, his resilience beyond the grave can persist in purveying his similes from a past world. If the boy imagines them, then he will conjure up that dead world, resurrecting it in his imagination. As T. S. Eliot writes, “For last year’s words belong to last year’s language/ And next year’s worlds await another voice” (*Little Gidding*, 204)—the boy’s voice.

After his father’s death, the boy gingerly, apprehensively, takes a chance with a new bricolaged family with him echoing Christ in the Emmaus story. Bidding his father farewell,

promising to talk to him daily (*TR* 286), he joins his party, only to be embraced by the woman who speaks of the divine. “She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all time” (*TR* 286), even in times of profane denature. The last paragraph of *The Road* in the second person suggests the voice of father, speaking even now of trout he’d mentioned before. No similes this time. Only equivalences in the past. “On their back were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes” (*TR* 287). Not “*like* maps of the world”, but *were* “maps of the world.” This abandonment of similes suggests both the disappearance of making cognates with an extinct world, yet the emergence of life in the present, with hopes for a new ecosphere “of mystery” (*TR* 287) to come. The boy moulds this new pattern, one which hearkens to his father’s past. He may be one of the only remaining good guys. Yet with his new kin cobbled together out of his father’s love, rooted in the man’s abiding devotion, he can act with resilience. “[T]he best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didnt forget” (*TR* 286). For the boy vows, “I wont forget. No matter what. Then he rose” (*TR* 286).

Literature can be understood as a means to ecological healing and a sign of what Michel Serres calls tenancy.<sup>22</sup> We are tenants of the language we embody just for the time we are here, sustaining the vitality of our speech. Vernacular speakers respond to others, not in a hermetic vacuum, but living linguistic biosphere. Donna Haraway’s assertion that “‘making kin’” works as “life-saving strategy for the Anthropocene”<sup>23</sup> applies to us linguistically as well, through metaphors which make differing—often opposing—concepts, ideas, and images into kin. Fostering linguistic biodiversity, we seed the ground for ecological sustainability and resilience through our kinship—linguistic and ecological—with others. Part of that kinship can be nurtured

by conferences such as this, where dialogues among epistemic communities can develop new insights into waste from which we can all learn.

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<sup>1</sup> Oppermann, 3 citing Haraway, "Anthropocene," 160.

<sup>2</sup> Springer 2, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Translation from Karl and Davies, 43. All references to Sebald 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Ryan, 45

<sup>5</sup> Ryan, 46.

<sup>6</sup> Ryan, 47.

<sup>7</sup> Tally Jr., 480.

<sup>8</sup> Ryan, 60.

<sup>9</sup> Tally, 484.

<sup>10</sup> Williams, 122.

<sup>11</sup> See Thompson, 51, 57; Hillier, 58, 53; Vanderheide, 107-120; Snyder, 70; Metress, 149; Cooper, 222, and Kunsu. 59.

<sup>12</sup> All references as *TR* to McCarthy, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> See Murphet, 127.

<sup>14</sup> Murphet, 126.

<sup>15</sup> Bragard, 481.

<sup>16</sup> Bragard, 484.

<sup>17</sup> Bragard, 485.

<sup>18</sup> See Snyder.

<sup>19</sup> Alworth, 78.

<sup>20</sup> Alworth, 81.

<sup>21</sup> Alworth, 120.

<sup>22</sup> Serres, 85-86.

<sup>23</sup> Oppermann, citing Haraway, "Anthropocene", 160.