

# **Anthropocene Bodies, Geological Time and the Crisis of Natality**

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## **Introduction**

What does it say of our epoch that one of the world's largest consumer good corporations has employed several multinational advertising agencies and an academy award-winning director to make the point that its okay to bring a child into the world? Unlocking resources that would make most NGOs weep with envy, UK-Dutch-based conglomerate Unilever has launched what it refers to as a 'movement', promoting worldwide sustainable living. As the company presents the aims of 'Project Sunshine':

Adopting sustainable lifestyles and people using their purchasing power to make consumption choices that are good for them and good for the world are important factors in the drive to reducing social inequality and averting the worst climate change predictions – to make sustainable living commonplace (Zambrano, 2013).

Unilever's global sustainability campaign is spearheaded by a short film entitled 'Why bring a child into this world?'<sup>1</sup> The four minute-plus video, that enjoyed viral transmission worldwide, centres on an ethnically-diverse cohort of expectant couples being shown a barrage of images of poverty and violence. This is followed by a

lengthier depiction of a hopeful global future for today's children. Reassured by an authoritative voice-over commending that a child born today is more likely to see its great grandchild than ever before, the first-time parents are visibly moved, some to tears.

Unsurprisingly, appropriation of the rhetoric of social activism by a corporate actor with a far from blemish-free human rights and environmental record has not gone unopposed.<sup>2</sup> While some critics branded Unilever's campaign a cynical ploy to shift consumer product, such ready dismissal may obscure the genuine depth of fear channelled by the project. It might be more productive, as deconstructive practice counsels, to let the 'text' commence its own unravelling from within.

As one of the fathers-to-be, a bearded white North American addresses the camera towards the end of the video: 'The world needs more good guys. I like to think our baby will be one of the good guys'. If this comment has been chosen to comfortably close the loop opened by the clip's earlier depiction of chaos and deprivation, it bears the trace of a more unsettling reading. For its clearest resonance in contemporary culture may well lie in the exchange between another pale, bearded North American father and his first and only child:

I will kill anyone who touches you. Do you understand?

Yes.

He sat there cowered in the blanket. After a while he looked up. Are we still the good guys? he said.

Yes. We're still the good guys' (McCarthy, 2006: 80-1).

Arguably the environmental era's preeminent literary expression, Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* undercuts Unilever's consumer goods-infused vision of a radiant global future in more ways than one. It is the story of a man struggling to keep his son alive in a landscape rendered lifeless by an unspecified geophysical catastrophe. Fighting off degenerate survivors of a collapsed social order, man and boy shuffle across a barren Earth shunting their dwindling stock of scavenged provisions in a battered shopping cart.

Effectively, McCarthy poses the same question as Project Sunshine: 'why bring a child into this world'? This dilemma is the moral pivot of the novel, the subject of agonized debate by the man and his wife, prior to her taking her own life: 'The hundred nights they'd sat up arguing the pros and cons of self destruction with the earnestness of philosophers chained to a madhouse wall' (2006: 60). As fellow author Michael Chabon conveys the visceral charge of McCarthy's tale:

The Road ... is a testament to the abyss of a parent's greatest fears. The fear of leaving your child alone, of dying before your child has reached adulthood .... The fear of one day being obliged for your child's own good, for his peace and comfort, to do violence to him or even end his life. And, above all, the fear of knowing—as every parent fears—that you have left your children a world more damaged, more poisoned, more base and violent and cheerless and toxic, more doomed, than the one you inherited (2007: 4).

This paper focuses on the last of Chabon's litany of fears in ways that explicate the concern over global environmental change to which he alludes. As Project Sunshine's publicists have gleaned, pregnancy and childbirth are aspects of ordinary human life

in which physical threats to existence are experienced with particular poignancy. To be 'expectant' in a time when catastrophic environmental change has become common cultural currency is to exacerbate what is already a moment of exposure and vulnerability. It is to layer vast, generalized unknowns over a core of immediate and intimate uncertainties. In the context of global climate change and the Anthropocene thesis – which proposes that human agency is now transforming the operation of the Earth system in its entirety - the event of bringing new life into being can be a flashpoint of what are otherwise more abstract, and deferrable, concerns. In the rumbling anxiety of Project Sunshine or McCarthy's *Road*, we might see signs of a looming 'crisis of natality': a waning of that resurgent hope attending the coming into the world of new life of which Hannah Arendt (1958) spoke.

I want to do something other than just probe or propagate these fears. With the help of some literary and philosophical interventions, I suggest that in the very darkest moments of reflection on the current trajectory and fate of 'life itself' there are glimmers of other possibilities – indeterminate, beguiling, hopeful even. Intimations, that is, that what is meaningful or significant in the world might not be limited to or centred upon the living. I am trying to do something here that may seem paradoxical. I want to take the very moments at which the appeal of life – in its newness, its potentiality, its vulnerability – is at its most intense, and to use these as a way to begin thinking beyond biological life. What does it mean, I ask, to implicate natality in the geological formations and dynamics of our planet? How might we imagine the intimacies of and the responsibilities for reproductive life articulating with the inhuman temporalities of the Earth? And how might the encounter with embodied life at its very limit gesture beyond the body itself and towards novel ways of apprehending and imagining the very stuff of the universe?

There is no shortage of material depicting current threats to climate and other aspects of the Earth system. While scientific narratives provide complex accounts of potential shifts in physical systems and their consequences for humans and other living things, the abstract tone and grand scale this research can be difficult to connect with everyday life. Science studies scholar Sheila Jasanoff cogently asks 'How...will scientists' impersonal knowledge of the climate be synchronized with the mundane rhythms of lived lives and the specificities of human experience? (2011: 238). Such dilemmas have led researchers to the question of embodiment: to the exploration of the corporeal and affective experience of environmental endangerment or transition. Understandably, such work has tended to focused on the interchange between *ecological* or *biological* processes and living bodies. Recently, however, with the increasing prominence of the geologic or geophysical dimensions of climate change and the uptake of the Anthropocene thesis. some theorists have begun to test the limits of thinking embodiment and subjectivity through the categories of life or the organism. Without necessarily disapproving of what she sees as 'a general tendency in all academic disciplines to return to questions of life, nature, embodiment and the emergence of systems', literary theorist Claire Colebrook detects a certain unwillingness in recent critical thought to move beyond the bounds of the living organism: a reluctance to 'experiment( ) with the anthropomorphic limits of our capacity to think life' (2012a: 11; 2010: 56; see also Clark, 2011: 23-4). Pushing the idea of a 'geological turn' in the thematizing of embodied and subjective life, human geographer Kathryn Yusoff likewise prompts fellow social thinkers to 'use the Anthropocene as a provocation to begin to understand ourselves as geologic subjects, not only capable of geomorphic acts, but as beings who have something in common with the geologic forces that are mobilised and incorporated' (2013: 781; see also

Mackenzie, 2014). For both Yusoff and Colebrook, the Anthropocene incitement to think with and through the 'geologic' implies more than just imagining that inorganic matter or minerality may be more life-like than we assumed. It is about confronting the possibility - signalled by Anthropocene geoscience's concern with the trace our species will leave behind in the geological record – of our own extinction, fossilization, or becoming mineral.

But to recall Jasanoff's question, what would it be like to actually *experience* this extinction? What would it feel like to live the unliveable, to sense extinction's unfurling, to witness its passage in the succumbing of our own loved ones? Clearly this is not where Project Sunshine's assuaging of any dying of the light is going to lead us. Neither is it the disciplinary business of the natural sciences. Nor is it a priority of the social sciences - unaccustomed as we are to geologic fact *or* speculation. The experiential dimension of planetary cataclysm is, however, offering fertile ground for literary exploration - as evidenced by a growing body of creative writing that confronts the intimate and interpersonal aspects of geoclimatic extremity.

In this paper, working both within and just outside the climate fiction genre, I read McCarthy's *The Road* alongside Anne Michaels *Fugitive Pieces* (1997) - a novel that counterposes childcare and inter-corporeality with the dynamics of the Earth in more tangential ways. Centred on the life story of Jakob - a Polish Jewish orphan who survives the Holocaust with the help of Athos - a middle-aged Greek archaeologist, *Fugitive Pieces* is also a meditation on geological time and Earth processes. Alongside the obvious parallel of a man caring for a boy following the enucleation of a family, what the two novels share is a deep, eloquent engagement with the challenge of sustaining life through social and physical tumult. Rather than simply

affirming the human will to survive, both *The Road* and *Fugitive Pieces* probe the ambiguities of living on, delving into experiences of endurance, loss, and memory. The relative absence of women in McCarthy and Michaels' fictional works provides an opportunity for the two male protagonists to explore a range of masculinities, and each pays a heavy price - physically and emotionally - for the duties they take on.

What is perhaps most intriguing about *Fugitive Pieces* and *The Road* is that in pushing the capacities of the human body – its ability to survive and reproduce – to its outer limits, each novel presses on into realms of force and signification that exceed the human. Both authors, I suggest, begin to question the deep-seated distinction between the sense-making capacity of human subjects and the muteness conventionally ascribed to the inorganic body of the Earth and the cosmos beyond. I approach this in three stages. First, I set up the idea of crises of natality by way of the two novels and some of their literary precedents – before looking at how threats to life are being addressed in the critique of biopolitics and in contemporary framings of climate change and the Anthropocene. Second, I then about contextualizing human life and the passage of generations in relation to the idea of geological or 'stratigraphic' time - and ask what it might mean to think sexual difference, natality and child-raising through the perilously eventful history of our planet. Finally, we return to McCarthy and Michaels' confrontation with the horrors of extinction. Hinting , at alternatives to the unswerving affirmation of 'life', each author, I suggest, offers a glimpse of a universe that does not require a human presence to lend it sense or meaning.

### **Crisis of Natality**

The boy who accompanies his father through the wasteland of *The Road* is not named. This allows him to stand for any child, every child, reviewers have noted (see Macfarlane, 2013). In another sense, he has little need of naming as there are no other children from whom he could be distinguished. When the son glimpses another child, we do not know whether he is real or a figment of the boy's imagination - a materialisation, perhaps, of his yearning for company. Or for childhood itself.

The moment the boy finally encounters an infant is the crescendo to a succession of abominations. The newborn has been killed, the tiny corpse spitted and charred (McCarthy, 2006: 211-2): a scene shot but mercifully edited out of the final cut of the film version of the novel. In *Fugitive Pieces*, a similarly shocking commuting of birth and death haunts Holocaust survivor Jakob Beer. As the boy matures, his compulsive research helps him flesh out the horrors of the death camps, a burden over which he agonizes: 'Some gave birth while dying in the chamber. Mothers were dragged from the chamber with new life half-emerged from their bodies. Forgive me, you who were born and died without being given names' (Michaels, 1997: 168).

Such monstrous contraction of life - the idea that a child's first breath is destined to be its last - is anticipated in the work of Samuel Beckett, albeit tempered by a tragicomic register. The terse and rarely performed play *Breath* (1966) is intended as a single extended take composed of a birth cry and a death rattle, expressed as an identical cry. Between the vocalization of first and last human gasps, according to Beckett's written instructions, a faint light and sound of breathing builds gradually for ten seconds, is held 'for about five seconds', before falling away for another ten seconds (Beckett, 1966; Cohn, 1980: 4). The theme of *Breath* recalls a famous line from Beckett's more renowned *Waiting for Godot*, in which the character Pozzo



departs with the observation: 'They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more' (cited in Cohn, 1980: 8).

If Beckett's absurdist imagery can be seen as expressing the transience and frailty of human existence in general, for Theodore Adorno, Beckett was the exemplary post-Holocaust artist, struggling to find modes of expression apposite to the imploding values of enlightened modernity. For others he is witness to the prospect of nuclear annihilation – or to the dawning of the age ecological catastrophe (Garrard, 2012).. And yet, commentators have noted, Beckett's vision is not one of unrelenting nihilism. If his characters find themselves negotiating a world that is 'beyond (not after) apocalypse' (Garrard, 2012: 395), however reluctantly, they find it in themselves to 'go on'.

For Hannah Arendt, writing like the Becket of *Godot* from a decade that seemed to have fast-forwarded from the death-camps of World War 2 to the threat of nuclear annihilation, there was 'no reason to doubt our present ability to destroy all organic life' (1958: 3). Whereas Beckett's work reveals a distinct ambiguity about human procreation as a way forward (Garrard, 2012: 389-90) Arendt was still able to affirm natality, the process through which new human life is constantly coming into the world. Even in the shadow of a human technicity that seemed to have grown murderous, Arendt stresses that the birth of a child has a miraculous potentiality, repeating - as it does each time - the improbable of emergence of organic life from the domain of inorganic matter: '...each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world (1958: 178).

Yet Arendt was also prescient in her willingness to confront the ambivalence with which vested political interests apprehended this fecundity and openness of life. With a backward glance to a much earlier concern with securing biological survival beyond mere mortal lives (1958: 55), she broke new ground in her diagnosis of a modern totalitarian political-racial imperative so fixated on perpetuating worthy lives that it sought not only to extinguish less worthy lives but to make it appear 'as though they had never been born' (cited in Esposito, 2008: 145). Over subsequent decades, the idea that concern with protecting and enhancing the life of human populations comes with a dark underbelly of life-denial and self-destructiveness has become a staple of critical thought. For Michel Foucault, famously, the merger of the sphere of politics with the biological marked a threshold in the emergence of modernity: 'biopolitics' signalling 'the entry of phenomena peculiar to the life of the human species into the order of knowledge and power, into the sphere of political techniques' (1990: 141-2). In conversation with Foucault, Roberto Esposito has probed the 'immunitary' complementarity of the giving and taking of life. Esposito insists that life is never prior to politics, developing the example of Nazi 'parental' control over the biological life of the nation as evidence of 'the copresence between the biological sphere and the political horizon' (2008: 171). As Penelope Deutscher (2010) observes, such an emphasis puts reproduction – and specifically, the reproductive life of women – closer to the core Esposito's analysis than it is for Foucault. Or as Esposito asserts in the context of Nazi Germany: 'politics is nothing other than the modality through which birth is affirmed as the only living force of history' (2008: 171).

While lively discussion around biopolitical themes continue, it seems timely to ask whether contemporary horizons of endangerment might not be overreaching the remit of the biopolitical. Esposito, for one, remains unequivocal: 'the question of life

remains solidly at the centre of all politically significant trajectories of our time' (2008: 166). But how far can we extend the concept of 'life' before it begins to stretch beyond its useful purchase? Whereas Michaels' image of the imploding of birth into death in the concentration camp offers a harrowing presentation of the lurch of biopolitics into thanatopolitics, perhaps McCarthy's depiction of a condition of the literal consuming of generations to come conjures horrors of a different order. No longer even a pathologization of the logic of securing of life, the utter collapse of the value of human life attends an Earth that has lost its capacity to beget biological life.

*The Road's* dying Earth is, of course, a literary construct. But climate scientists are already considering the potential passage over critical thresholds in Earth systems in relation to the most catastrophic extinction events to befallen terrestrial life across its estimated 3.7 billion year span. As ethical philosopher Clive Hamilton expounds:

Behind the façade of scientific detachment, the climate scientists themselves now evince a mood of barely suppressed panic. No one is willing to say publicly what the climate science is telling us: that we can no longer prevent global warming that will this century bring about a radically transformed world that is much more hostile to the survival and flourishing of life (2010: x-xi).

Such are the risks that scientists are considering under the designation 'Anthropocene' (Crutzen, 2002; Zalasiewicz, et al., 2010; see also Clark 2014). Part geological hypothesis, part planetary alarm, the Anthropocene thesis has captured both scientific and popular imaginations with considerable speed. Much as Michaels meditates on the 'gradual instant' when 'wood become(s) stone, peat become(s) coal,

and limestone become(s) marble (1997: 140), stratigraphers are seeking out the precise world historical moment at which cumulative human activity will have tipped the Earth into a new geological epoch.. If *The Road*, with its premise of a planet abruptly losing its life-supporting capacity is an unsurprising candidate for assaying the 'human response to the events of the Anthropocene' (Squire, 2012: 213), *Fugitive Pieces*, angles more obliquely onto questions of geological upheaval. Replaying all of history through the gradual and sudden movements of a dynamic Earth – it positions or 'stratifies' the human drama within the unfathomably longer duration of 'the great heaving terra mobilis' (Michaels, 1997: 21). Tellingly, sections of the novel dealing most explicitly with the all-too-human traumas issuing from the Nazi era are bracketed by twin chapters entitled 'Vertical Time'.

It is not only that the spectre of extinction strains at the outer limits of the biopolitical, or that the uncertainty attending the passage over thresholds in Earth systems seems corrosive of 'systematic knowledge of life and living beings' demanded by biopolitical imperatives (Lemke, 2011:119). It is that the confrontation with geological time, with the temporalization of the Earth itself, brings into relief elements and forces that do not sit comfortably in the category of 'life', 'body' or 'organism'. The converging of anxieties over planetary futures on the question of reproduction – the crisis of natality – it might appear, draws us back to what is most specific and definitive about 'life itself'. But as Colebrook suggests, perhaps it is the very enthrallment with life and its procreation that has been discouraging serious consideration of the domains in excess of the living, the vital, the organic. Taking a line of inquiry that both inherits and exceeds discourses on the biopolitical, she ventures:

It is because the human organism fears sexual indifference, fears the loss of its bounded being and its differentiated world of fixed kinds, that it has been unable to perceive, consider or allow differences and rhythms beyond those of its own sensory-motor apparatus (2012b: 181).

If *The Road* and *Fugitive Pieces* each revolve around reproduction, nurture and inter-generationality under crisis conditions, this is far from the limit of their concerns. For both McCarthy and Michaels, I propose, the precariousness of futurity itself is taken as an incitement to approach those inhuman 'differences and rhythms' that rumble at the thresholds of the human sensorium. It is as if, at the very limit of life there is still something of a choice for those who still live – if undefined and unexplicated - to turn inwards and turn upon themselves or to turn outwards - in the direction of that which exceeds the human, the living, the organism.

But we need to be careful here if it is not to appear that male parenting is the key to this widening of horizons while women's reproductive roles constrain them to a 'narrower' biological domain. With this in mind, I turn now to the complex role of gender and sexual difference in the two novels in relation to the passage of life between generations. Through the theme of an inter-corporeality that traverses deep or 'stratigraphic time', we consider the opening of bodies – in and through their gendering – to the dynamism of the Earth itself.

### **Living in Stratigraphic Time**

The woman in *The Road* – the boy's mother, the man's wife - takes her own life with a flake of obsidian: that most ancient, most fossilizable, most coldly lithic of human

implements. 'Sharper than steel. The edge an atom thick' (2006: 60). Her characterization, and the role of women more generally in McCarthy's work, has come in for criticism. '(I)t is hard to find anything positive in her portrayal' notes Lee Ann Alexander (2007, see also Conners, 2007, cf. Squire, 2012: 220). And yet, the woman's justification for not living on, and for wishing to take her family with her, is one of the most harrowingly eloquent passages in the book<sup>3</sup>. Hers is a plea for a release from fear and pain, pivoting around a telling reference to the conventional gendering of care – that she quickly unsettles through her own traumatic experience of the doomed world. 'They say that women dream of danger to those in their care and men of danger to themselves. But I don't dream at all' (McCarthy, 2006: 59). She makes a case that life is now not only infested by death but fully taken over by it. Her argument directly concerns the grievously enhanced vulnerability of women and children in a time of social collapse, but also alludes to the corporeal gifting inherent in childbirth, now pathologized by dire circumstance: 'My heart was ripped out of me the night he was born so don't ask for sorrow now' (McCarthy, 2006: 59). Though devastated, the man respects her decision, increasingly so as events bear out her worst fears and as his own body gives to the point of giving out.

In *Fugitive Pieces*, the asymmetrically gendered burden of suffering in cataclysmic times is embodied in the figure of Jakob's beloved sister Bella - , seized by Nazi troops at the moment of his own escape. Confirmation of Bella's fate resists decades of inquiry but is all too frighteningly imaginable. Jakob's enduring empathy with his sister and all the other female victims of the Holocaust is at the moral heart of the novel, as Susan Gubar (2002) and Catherine Coussens (2010) note; an explicit identification shadowed by the more implicit contrast between Jewish matrilinealism and the hyperbolic patriarchalism of the Nazis.

Despite the narrative centring of *Fugitive Pieces* and *The Road* on male protagonists, both stories evince a pained awareness that 'some bodies more than others suffer under the weight of attempting to live through multiple and conflicting time zones' as philosopher Rosalyn Diprose has put it elsewhere (2010: 225). As both Diprose and Lisa Guenther (2006) insist, the definitive corporeal generosity that is the bearing of a child is at once the condition of an undeterminable exceeding of the present and the determination of the profound vulnerability of the maternal body. Arendt's predominantly political imagining of the fresh start embodied in the newborn, they each contend, is insufficiently attuned to the unique, unsubstitutable role of women in the gestation of life. However hopeful the assertion that it is the coming of new life that gives time – that prises open the present to the very movement of futurity – such a possibility remains dependent on a mother's prior giving of the time of her own body on behalf of the yet-to-be-born child (Guenther, 2006). As Diprose concludes, if our wish is 'to hold open the space in which the political disclosure of natality is possible for everyone' then it is necessary to fully acknowledge the priority of the maternal body as the site from which the potentiality and forcefulness of new life emerges (2010: 236).

In the extremity of 'multiple and conflicting time zones' that the two novels depict, the tension between historical time and the lived time of the body is heightened to an agonizing pitch. In *Fugitive Pieces*, as in *The Road* (and more conspicuously across the corpus of McCarthy's brutal genealogies of the American West<sup>4</sup>), the caustic effects of an autonomous, self-making mode of masculinity are laid open. But in the absence of women – or rather, in the absent-presence of their haunting – men are thrown into the possibility of alternative masculinities. At a price. In the course of

their commitment to keeping a child alive, both *The Road's* father and *Fugitive Pieces'* Athos give deeply of themselves. They endure displacement, exhaustion, malnutrition. In assuming responsibility for a single, precarious life, both men must move between swift action in the here-and-now and the slower, more patient temporization associated with sustaining the passage of life across generations. If the protection of a child's life calls for decisive moves, such acts have now been resituated in the context of a chain of bodies, that - in Guenther's words - 'contests any absolute possession of ones own existence' (2006: 3). Positioned within a deep temporal and irreducibly embodied relay of giving and receiving, action comes to be subsumed within a more encompassing, a more radical, receptivity.

Nonetheless, personal deeds and gestures continue to matter for the vital thread between past and future they preserve. '(I)ndividual actions take on immense significance, no matter how small, since they are not for this life only' writes Michaels (1997: 159-60) And again, more expansively: 'The present, like a landscape, is only a small part of a mysterious narrative. A narrative of catastrophe and slow accumulation. Each life saved: genetic features to rise again in another generation' (Michaels, 1997: 48). Against the backdrop of a world whose very atmosphere has been poisoned, *The Road* opens and closes with an image of the animating rhythm of inhalation and exhalation. 'He held the boy shivering against him and counted each frail breath in the blackness' (McCarthy, 2006: 13). '(E)ach precious breath' reassures the father that his son lives on; the same breath that passes 'from man to man through all of time' (McCarthy, 2006: 1, 306). Athos of *Fugitive Pieces* uses related tropes, extended beyond vistas of human descent to the vaster span of aerobic life: 'Think of ... the first breath inhaled by any animal, the first cells



that joined and did not divide to reproduce, the first human birth' (Michaels, 2006: 21).

Colebrook (2009) refers to a similarly complex interplay of historical and embodied temporalities in terms of 'stratigraphic time'. While taking inspiration from Julia Kristeva's (1981) creative conception of 'women's time' – that seeks to reconcile experience of embodied subjectivity and the linear time of historical projects - Colebrook's key reference is the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. For Deleuze, 'stratigraphic time' involves a layering of past events in ways that do not simply entail invariant linear succession, but allow for the potentialities of past times to resurface or be excavated (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 58-9). Although there is a basic superimposition of new strata upon old, both the movements of philosophical thought and the events of the wider world can cut across multiple strata, and bring their contents into novel and unanticipated arrangements. Colebrook writes: 'Time ...is not an unfolding towards a proper end that we grasp in the present ...time is an 'open whole' where the past can always produce new potentials for new futures, which in turn open up new pasts' (2009: 14). Resonating with Diprose and Guenther's gendered conception of corporeal temporalities that destabilize any sense of the subject autonomously shaping its own destiny, Colebrook's stratigraphic time posits an intertwining of bodies and forces such that temporal becomings can never simply be grasped, disclosed, monopolised. 'The self is not owner of itself, created through a past that can never be rendered fully self-present' (2009: 12).

What is important for our purposes is that 'stratigraphy' here is much more than metaphoric. If the temporality conventionally ascribed to the feminine is to redeem something of the fecundity of the natural, then it is vital the 'nature' being referenced

is itself accredited with potentiality and openness, and not simply consigned to endless cyclicity and self-sameness. In *Fugitive Pieces* and *The Road*, the men who answer the summons into inter-corporeal gifting do so in the wider context of a literally volatile and uncertain Earth. Given Colebrook's own engagement with climate change, extinction and the Anthropocene thesis (2012b; 2012c; 2014), it is unsurprising that in her 'stratigraphic' approach the historical unfolding of *human* bodies is fully implicated the *inhuman* productive and destructive forces of the planet itself. Whatever becomes of corporeal or individuated beings, their fate is bound up with what she has more recently described as 'a wilder vitalism that considers life beyond the membrane of the organism' (Colebrook, 2010: 3).

The climate change or Anthropocene credentials afforded *The Road* acknowledge its success in rendering catastrophe in the most intimate terms. In the wake of cataclysm, father and son engage in the definitive Anthropocene inquiry of pondering which human constructions will leave the most enduring traces on the Earth's surface. 'Will the dam be there for long time?' asks the boy. 'I think so. Its made of concrete. It will probably there for hundreds of years. Thousands, even' (McCarthy, 2006: 19). The man wonders whether in the very unravelling of the Earth system might be glimpsed something of its constitutive order and composition: '...a long concrete causeway. A dead swamp .... Perhaps in the world's destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made. Oceans, mountains. The ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be' (McCarthy, 2006: 293).

Fusing 'stratigraphic' themes of inter-corporeal bequeathing and geological becoming, *Fugitive Pieces*, presciently, is no less 'anthropocenic' in scope and impulse. What Athos gifts the orphaned Jakob is an adventure in stratigraphic time:

the spatial and temporal immensity of the Earth offering 'another realm to inhabit, big as the globe and as expansive as time' (Michaels, 1997: 29) as a counterpoint to the tiny, cramped spaces in which he and his people had hidden from their persecutors. 'Even as a child, even as my blood-past was drained from me, I understood that if I were strong enough to accept it, I was being offered a second history ...I sat near him while he wrote at his desk, contemplating forces that turn seas to stone, stone to liquid' (1997: 21, 20). Still more stratigraphically: 'I was transfixed by the way time buckled, met itself in pleats and folds' (1997: 30).

The geological education Athos offers Jakob is a way to help him make sense of the trauma he has endured: the depth and obduracy of geological time - the Earth's 'staggering patience' offering the boy a sort of solace (Michaels, 1997: 35). Geology shows that what is subjected to upheaval will gradually settle down. It reveals that what is buried might one day rise to the surface again. It suggests that the bounded worlds of ideology and nationalism are small and petty in relation to mobilizations of the Earth. Quite literally, 'the great heaving terra mobilis' plays its part in the unfurling narrative: the Earth provides subtending depth to the human drama, only to withdraw it, repeatedly. The ancient village of Biskupin is drowned by the rhythms of climate change, downtown Toronto flooded, Athos and Jakob's sanctuary on the island of Zakynthos destroyed by earthquake: 'The landscape of the Peloponnesus had been injured and healed so many times, sorrow darkened the sunlit ground. All sorrow feels ancient. War occupations, earthquakes; fire and drought' (Michaels, 1997: 60).

As Guenther puts it 'maternal responsibility points to a future in which my responsibility is multiplied across generations' (2006: 107). To a certain degree, I

have been suggesting, this is the responsibility that Athos from *Fugitive Pieces* and the father from *The Road* take upon themselves. What both novels drive home is the way that love, care, and obligation extend through a chain of bodies. But it does not stop there. Responsiveness or responsibility flows on, out into the dangerous fecundity of a dynamic planet. To sustain life is not only to extend the precarious relay of breath from one corporeal being to another, it is to endure the rising and falling, the fracturing and folding of *the Earth itself*. Stratigraphic time, that is, not simply as a figure for human lives decentred by the temporal layering of give and take, but as the unending negotiation of the Earth's unstable strata (see Clark, 2016). The burden falling, more often than not, on women as the negotiators of this knife edge of endurance and survival, putting their bodies on the line in order that birth and life goes on (see Grosz, 2004: 2, Clark and Gunaratnam, 2013). If we are to live on through 'stratigraphic' time, McCarthy and Michaels each remind us, this is a burden to be shared.

But in the very process of imagining an extension of life beyond the limits of individuated bodies, I suggest, both authors gesture still further. In the final section, we turn to some of the ways that *The Road* and *Fugitive Pieces* at once hold life precious and begin to look beyond life itself in the directions of a universe imbued with its own capacity to affect and make sense of itself. And in this way, neither raising nor lowering but somehow shifting the stakes of extinction, we scent an Earth and cosmos that is something more than simply the 'other' of life.

### **Writing Catastrophe, Exceeding Life**

In their unflinching confrontation with ontological precarity and day-to-day suffering McCarthy and Michaels each grapple with the question of how to depict cataclysmic

social and geological change. More than this, they face the problem of how and why to write at all under conditions in which the very act of writing seems woefully inadequate. Echoing Adorno's reflection on the aporia of literary expression after the Holocaust, contemporary theorists have noted how the very act of generating knowledge about global ecological catastrophe serves to undermine the surety that is supposedly what 'knowing' is all about. With the coming of the Anthropocene, and indeed, with the opening up of geological time more generally, literary theorist Timothy Morton argues, we confront 'an abyss whose reality becomes increasingly uncanny, not less, the more scientific instruments are able to probe it' (2012: 233).

In the narrative of *Fugitive Pieces*, it is clear that neither scientific imagination nor poetic writing can undo the efforts of Nazi oppressors to erase from history entire peoples and all their collective memories, just as words cannot resolve Jakob's trauma. 'I tried to bury images, to cover them over with Greek and English words, with Athos's stories, with all the geologic eras...' intones the adult Jakob. 'But at night, my mother, my father, Bella ... simply rose, shook the earth from their clothes, and waited' (1997: 93). McCarthy's musings on the inadequacy of language in *The Road* hinge around the experience of a world that is in the act of its own disappearance, trailing behind it words deprived of referents: 'The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things following those things into oblivion. Colors. The name of birds. Things to eat' (2006: 293). In some ways, elaborates Bradon Smith, 'this is a novel about the death of language, one that is narrating the destruction not only of the world, but also of the material from which it is itself formed' (2014: 60). Which applies no less to Michaels' lyrical probing under the shadow of Adorno's conundrum.

These are dilemmas for any of us –theorists, researchers, campaigners – who take up the challenge of depicting a world in the process of its unravelling or decomposition. It is perhaps in the very acknowledgement of the falling short of language and the falling away of the world it describes that McCarthy and Michaels have so much to offer those who chose to write on, to do ‘theory’, in the face of a ‘disappearing future’ (see Cohen et al, 2012). Alongside their differences, I would suggest, there are common threads in the ways that *Fugitive Pieces* and *The Road* renegotiate between language – or intelligibility – and the domain of embodied and affective human life.

One of these shared impulses, we have seen, is in the conjuring an inter-corporeality – a generous relay between bodies –that seems to overflow the sense-making capacities of language and calculation. But having deprioritized any human proclivity for ordering and articulating its own motivating forces comes a further, no less intriguing manoeuvre. Approaching from another direction, Michaels and McCarthy both begin to redistribute knowing and sensing beyond the bounds of individuated bodies and out into the elementality of the Earth and cosmos. Each in their own way permits the world a scribing and glyphing of its own. There is something in this double movement - the reclaiming of forces passing from one body to another that exceed signification alongside the dispersion of sensate capacities beyond human or even organismic life, I suggest, that underpins the haunting promise of these two novels. Something that speaks – tentatively, enigmatically - to the quandary of using words to prop up the eroding foundations of worlds.

In the previous section, I offered a reading of *Fugitive Pieces* and *The Road* focused on a transfer of provision and potentiality between bodies; a diffusion of

responsibility across generations and beyond lines of biological filiation. This is, arguably, more nuanced in Michael's tale, with its multi-stranded tracery of affective charges or bodily sustenance passing 'between Jew and non-Jew, victim and witness, the dead and the living' (Gubar, 2002: 256). With regard to *The Road*, we have already scoped the Father's care for his son in an extended, relational context. But ultimately, it is the child himself who most emphatically figures for the incitement of an unbounded opening to others. Even as he is starving, he shares his rations with strangers, enemies, other species. It is an imparting of self to others that violates any possibility of a return and exacerbates the boy's own exposure and vulnerability: an exorbitant generosity that refuses the biopolitical imperative to prioritize one's own life and the lives with which we believe ourselves to be blood-bound.

The book provides no tangible inspiration for such overtures. They do not come from the boy's father, whose husbanding of resources – from bullets to food - remains calculating and parsimonious. But readers of McCarthy's earlier fiction, the *Border Trilogy* (2002) in particular, may detect resonances of another, equally unconditional, gifting. In *Cities of the Plain*, hard-bitten cowboy Billy Parham recalls the hospitality he received as a boy from peasant families 'south of the border':

Those people would take you in and put you up and feed you and feed your horse and cry when you left. ... They didnt have nothin. Never had and never would.... That plateful of beans they put in front of you was hard come by. But I was never turned away. Not a time (McCarthy, 2002: 834).

In many ways such ground-swelling generosity from those least placed to provide it is the moral lodestone of McCarthy's corpus, a kind of non-allergic opening to others

that provides a counterpoint to the theme of brutal, self-serving masculinity. It might be fair to say that in the course of the author's predominantly male-centred viewpoints the asymmetry of women's offerings is insufficiently acknowledged. For as Diprose reminds us, narratives of hospitality often tread an uneasy line between their affirming of the unobtrusive or unspoken gesture and their selective silencing of gendered giving (2002: 8-9). Where McCarthy is stronger however, is in pushing the bounds of nonbiological fidelity: in positing an empathy that not only involves the traversal of deep sociocultural divides but extends on to include interspecies crossings. It is in this sense that the vanishing of wild or companionable species in *The Road* is heartfelt, as is the witnessing throughout the *Border Trilogy* of the way that even the poorest of peasants will make provision for the horses of strangers, or *The Crossing's* account of a boy who risks his life for a wolf.

When exposure of self to other reaches across the cellular walls of communal or linguistic consanguinity, when it crosses thresholds of the living and the dead, of compatriot and alien, of one species and another, we are in the realms of forces that overflow signification. Such trajectories of care and allegiance, in their traversing of 'strata', abandon the possibility of linguistic self-presencing or moral calculus. They might convey something like sense from one body to another, but they exceed what is usually understood as legibility or self-knowing. Which is precisely why such events open a future unbound to the past, however tenuous and shaky this may be. But this borderland of sense-making and cognition – the point also at which human language seems to falter and collapse under the weight of events - is where both *The Road* and *Fugitive Pieces* lift off into a radically expanded sensibility. Once love, desire, fidelity are freed from the constraints of biological filiation, it is as if there is no stopping them. In *The Road's* enigmatic cosmology, as in the vibrant



universe shared by Athos and Jakob, signification itself begins to break free of the confines of human being, and even of organismic existence. Figuratively *and* literally. In Michael's words:

It's no metaphor to feel the influence of the dead in the world, just as it's no metaphor to hear the radiocarbon chronometer, the Geiger counter amplifying the faint breathing of rock, fifty thousand years old (Like the faint thump from behind the womb wall). It is no metaphor to witness the astonishing fidelity of minerals magnetized, after hundreds of millions of years, pointing to the magnetic pole, minerals that have never forgotten magma whose cooling off has left them forever desirous (1997: 53)

Athos's lyric geology ...even down to the generosity of an ionic bond. To believe there's no thing that does not yearn....'Perhaps the electron is neither particle nor wave but something else instead, much less simple – a dissonance – like grief, whose pain is love' (1997: 209, 211).

In *The Road*, amidst the Earth's unravelling, comes a glimpse - too late perhaps - of another kind of sense, another knowing, older and more profound than humankind or even life:

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 all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery (McCarthy, 2006: 307).

Something nameless in the night, lode or matrix. To which he and the stars were common satellite. Like the great pendulum in its rotunda

scribing through the long day movements of the universe of which you  
may say it knows nothing and yet know it must (McCarthy, 2006: 14).

In both novels, then, there are insinuations that individual bodies are immersed in an unaccountable field of forces - the inkling of a scripture or sensorium stretching far beyond our own cognitive horizons. Rather than simply reaffirming human bodies as sites of sensory, affective and communicative potentiality, McCarthy and Michaels each extend some of what we perceive to be most precious about subjective existence beyond the organism to which it is conventionally confined. In neither story does the extended reach of desire, expressiveness or intelligibility beyond organismic bodies provide redemption or respite from worldly woes. But it does offer hints of what might be worth preserving in the universe. Or rather, what will sustain itself whatever we do or desist from doing. More emphatically, in both *The Road* and *Fugitive Pieces*, the implication of individuated beings in a connective tissue of bodies and forces serves to elevate the inestimable value of one human life rather than detract from it. This is surely one of the momentous shared achievements of McCarthy and Michaels; to at once deflate the autonomous subject and to exalt a single, unique and fragile life. Likewise, both authors affirm a powerful instinct towards survival – ‘the bare autonomic faith of the body’ (Michaels, 1997: 168) – at the same time revealing the frightening price of placing too high a premium on surviving for its own sake. They show us that there are worse things than not living on.

Disclosing the ambivalence of unmitigated survivalism – tracking the steps from bloodlines to bloodletting – is a key task that critics of biopolitics set themselves. In the context of the Anthropocene, the risks attending a compulsive cleaving to life may be reaching new heights. ‘If extinction is certain as part of the natural logic of

evolving life', Colebrook cautions, 'it is also possible that extinction might—by virtue of the panic that accompanies the attempts to maintain human life at all costs—annihilate organic life as such' (2012b: 169). The most disturbing overtones of Project Sunshine, in this regard, may lie less with its affinity with capital accumulation than in its anguish over the very future of human reproduction. Or what it takes to be futurity itself.

It is not simply that the two novels we have been looking at offer alternatives to the gendered stereotypes, binary couplings and biological filiations to which Project Sunshine nervously clings. In gazing clear-eyed into the face of extinction, *Fugitive Pieces* and *The Road* pose questions of what it is about being human that we might wish to preserve, at the same time as they fuel speculation that the cosmos would spiral on without us, forceful, sensate, cryptic. As Elizabeth Povinelli (2014) recently observed, unsettling the antinomy of the living and the nonliving can serve to de-dramatize the human - to deflate our striving for autonomy and self-preservation – in ways that open up new possibilities for taking responsibility. In the very process of deploying 'drama' itself in a kind of decentring or de-dramatization of the human, both McCarthy and Michaels gesture toward such new intensities of care and cherishing. However tenuously, they attest to the inestimable value of one small human life - not only for those qualities that it make it unique, but also for what it might possibly share with the rest of existence.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Why Bring a Child into this World?' is directed by Errol Morris, and developed with Ogilvy & Mather and DAVID Latin America. It can be viewed at BuzzFeed: <http://www.buzzfeed.com/regajha/watch-what-happens-when-you-ask-pregnant-couples-why-theyre> (accessed 19 August 2014).

<sup>2</sup> See Pelley (2013).

<sup>3</sup> A theme also explored in the context of slavery, most notably in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987).

<sup>4</sup> See especially *Blood Meridian* (1989).