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Cannibalism as Cultural Critique: Survival, Consumption, and the Limits of Humanity in McCarthy's *The Road*

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Abstract

In post-apocalyptic literature, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* is often read as a survival narrative in which cannibalism signals moral collapse. This article argues that such views overlook the cultural and political dimensions of McCarthy's cannibal allegory. Through close reading, I contend that the novel reworks colonial discourse on cannibalism—once used to construct the "Other"—and redeploys it as a critique of American racial history and consumer capitalism. Cannibalism here functions not only as a survival metaphor but as an allegory of cultural self-consumption, exposing the destructive logic of societies built on endless appetite.

Keywords: *Cormac McCarthy; the Road; Cannibalism; Post-Apocalyptic Fiction; Cultural Critique.*

INTRODUCTION

Cormac McCarthy (1933–) is a central figure in contemporary American literature, renowned for his novels set in the American South and West. Beyond his vivid depictions of landscapes and regional cultures, McCarthy—who trained in engineering physics—has demonstrated a longstanding interest in the interplay between scientific and humanistic discourses (Hillier, 2025; Søfting, 2013). This interdisciplinary concern finds its fullest expression in his post-apocalyptic fiction, a subgenre in which technological, social, and environmental collapse intersect with ethical and existential questions. His Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Road* (2006), exemplifies this approach, exploring the potential for societal regression and brutality while reflecting on the fragile relationship between humanistic and technological frameworks. Praised by Andrew O'Hagan as "the first great masterpiece of the globally warmed generation" (qtd. in Stark 71), the novel can also be read as a cautionary tale about environmental catastrophe (qtd in Stark 71), and it is frequently read as a cautionary tale about environmental catastrophe (Cooper, 2019; Godfrey, 2011; Huebert, 2017; Johns-Putra, 2016). Beyond ecological readings, the novel's significance extends more broadly: recognised in both popular and academic spheres, *The Road* has become a key text for examining cultural production amid ecological crises, with Monbiot (2007) describing it as "the most important environmental book ever written."

In *The Road*, McCarthy narrates the harrowing journey of a nameless father and his young son across a post-apocalyptic America. Interspersed with fragile flashbacks to the world before the cataclysm, the story follows their desperate attempt to leave the cold, desolate interior and reach a potentially more hospitable coastline. Along the way, they must secure necessities—food, water, and firewood—while avoiding other survivors, many of whom are part of atavistic bands of cannibals. Their journey unfolds against the ruins of both nature and culture, culminating in the father's death and the boy's eventual adoption by a seemingly

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trustworthy couple. Within this bleak trajectory, McCarthy foregrounds the motif of cannibalism, continuing his literary tradition of exploring violence and brutality. Beyond literal survival, these figures symbolise the ethical void and moral disorientation of post-apocalyptic humanity, highlighting the collapse of normative moral frameworks.

The Road has attracted considerable scholarly attention for its intertextual richness, minimalist style, and ethical inquiry. Critics note that the novel engages with a diverse range of literary traditions, from T. S. Eliot's modernist poetry and Hemingway's short fiction to medieval Grail lore, creating a complex cultural and narrative tapestry (Hillier, 2015; James, 2003). Central to the text is the tension between external and internal space: the desolate, often dystopian physical world and the utopian interiority of the characters' emotional and moral lives. This duality shapes the narrative's exploration of survival, human connection, and the challenge of sustaining meaning in a morally fractured world (Kunsa, 2009; Søfting, 2013; White, 2015). The novel's post-apocalyptic landscape also foregrounds ecological and philosophical concerns.

Scholars have interpreted the father and son's journey as a form of literary cartography, mapping both the devastated environment and human relationships to construct meaning amid chaos (Chen, 2025; Graulund, 2010; Kearney, 2012). McCarthy's anthropomorphised depiction of the Earth, along with recurring visual metaphors of compromised vision, underscores both environmental and ethical stakes, emphasising the interconnectedness of human responsibility and empathy (Banco, 2010; Chen & Chen, 2024; Guo, 2015; Stark, 2013). Philosophical readings further highlight the characters'—and, by extension, society's—coping mechanisms in the face of existential terror and moral uncertainty (Lodoen, 2023; Taghizadeh & Ghaderi, 2016).

Within this critical landscape, one recurring motif has proven especially resonant: the cannibal. It is widely interpreted as emblematic of moral collapse, social disintegration, and the fragility of human ethical bonds (Estes, 2013; Ng, 2015; Wielenberg, 2010). In contrast, the father and son's refusal to succumb to such violence embodies a humanistic ethos that transcends mere survival (Deacon, 2025; Mullins, 2011). Functioning metaphorically, the cannibal also critiques historical, social, and consumerist anxieties, revealing the darker currents of desire, power, and societal failure (Brown, 2012; Crain, 1994; Graybill, 2025; Klarer, 1999). Previous scholarship examined *The Road* through allegorical, ecological, and ethical lenses. However, less attention has been given to how the cannibal motif interrogates the entanglement of America's racial history and consumerist culture. Several scholars, for instance, Zhang & Su (2022) have read cannibalistic imagery in the novel as an allegory of both racial violence and consumerist logic.

Building upon but moving beyond this line of interpretation, the present study argues that McCarthy's depiction of cannibalism not only reflects the nation's profound incapacity to confront its historical racial injustices, but more crucially exposes the self-devouring logic of global racial capitalism—revealing consumption as both a material and epistemic mode of violence embedded in modern civilization. As Brown (2012) notes, "the figure of the cannibal embodies contemporary forms of terror, whether political, economic, racial, territorial, or psychological" (p. 229). By analysing the representation of cannibals in the novel, this article contends that they operate as an allegory of cultural self-consumption and temporal exhaustion, while simultaneously critiquing America's racial history and consumerist culture. In doing so, the novel foregrounds the cultural and political dimensions inherent in post-apocalyptic literature.

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Cannibalism as Allegory for America's Racial Past in *The Road*

The concept of "cannibalism" entered European discourse during the era of Columbus (Arens, 1979; Klarer, 1999; Palencia-Roth, 2008). In 1492, Columbus recorded the existence of the Carib Islands and their inhabitants, although he never personally witnessed acts of cannibalism. By mishearing "Carib" as "Cannibal," he introduced the term and its associated imagery into European thought (Lindenbaum, 2004, p. 477). This mistranslation gradually shaped perceptions of New World peoples as savage "others," reinforcing Eurocentric colonial narratives and offering cultural justification for conquest and domination (Berglund, 2006, p. 172; Cheyfitz, 1997,p. 143). Historically, the so-called cannibals were rarely empirical anthropological subjects; instead, they were rhetorical constructs embedded in European power structures. By casting the "other" as cannibal, Western societies drew a sharp line between civilisation and barbarism, legitimising the domination and exploitation of nonwhite populations (Conklin, 2001, p. 3; Githire, 2014, p. 6). In the American context, this stigmatising discourse also functioned to rationalise white governance over African Americans, Native Americans, and other marginalised groups, thereby reinforcing racial hierarchies.

Critical scholarship has since examined how this discourse functions beyond simple colonial binaries. As Dominy (2015) observes, literary and cultural criticism on cannibalism often reveals it operating in two ways: first, as a marker of racialised barbarism set against European civilisation, and second, as a metaphor for the greed of consumer capitalism—a trend associated with the rise of luxury goods and the expanding middle class (p. 144). However, this binary framework has been challenged almost from the outset of cannibal discourse. Montaigne's famous essay "On Cannibalism" (1580), based on his encounter in Rouen with indigenous Brazilians, turns the anthropophagic trope against Europeans themselves. While acknowledging the horror of eating human flesh, Montaigne contrasts the ritualised consumption of war captives by the Brazilians with the far greater cruelties inflicted by Portuguese colonisers. Montaigne (2003) concludes that Europeans were, in fact, more barbarous than those they condemned: "I am not sorry that we should take notice of the barbarous horror of such acts, but I am sorry that, seeing so clearly into their faults, we should be so blind to our own" (p. 239). Montaigne's moral relativism anticipates later critical uses of cannibalism, shifting it from a colonial stereotype of otherness to a discourse of self-reflection and critique.

Building on this trajectory, literary discourse further develops the cannibal as a critical tool for exposing injustice. As Estok (2012) observes, cannibalism—and culinary ethics more broadly—operates as an early modern environmental and ethical lens that mobilises race, sexuality, and class discourses in response to anxieties prompted by exploration and imperial expansion (p. 2). Cannibalism thus provokes both fear and fascination. In Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Ishmael challenges the assumed distinction between human and nonhuman flesh, rhetorically asking, "Does not that sight take a tooth out of the cannibal's jaw? Cannibals? Who is not a cannibal?" (270). This destabilisation of boundaries resonates with contemporary animal ethicists such as Singer (2005), note that the vocabulary of carnivorism—using "meat" rather than "flesh"—helps maintain a rigid division between humans and other animals. Kilgour (2001) further contends that cannibalism plays a crucial role in defining identities—personal, textual, sexual, national, or social (p. 256)—suggesting that species identity might also be considered. At the same time, scholars highlight its paradox: accusations of cannibalism strip the accused of humanity while simultaneously reaffirming it, since one must be human to be called a cannibal (Price, 2004, p. 88; Sanborn, 2001, p. 194). Bataille (1986) and

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Obeyesekere (2005) likewise emphasise that cannibalism provokes profound ethical reflection precisely because it violates deeply ingrained taboos against harming or consuming fellow humans, eliciting visceral horror absent from conventional meat consumption (p. 71; p. 260).

Within postcolonial frameworks, the cannibal motif is repurposed to expose white racial politics and reclaim agency for those historically misrepresented as "cannibals." As Walton (2004) argues in *Our Cannibals, Ourselves*, colonial narratives of cannibalism legitimised domination, but contemporary writers rework the trope to subvert imperialist discourse. In *The Road*, McCarthy continues this tradition: his depiction of cannibals dramatises moral crises emerging from societal collapse while simultaneously providing a symbolic lens through which readers can examine America's racial history, social tensions, and cultural flaws (Dominy, 2015; Huebert, 2017). By relocating historically demonised "others" into a post-apocalyptic landscape, McCarthy critiques both the violence inherent in American consumer culture and the enduring blind spots of white society. In this way, the literary representation of cannibals in *The Road* serves as a vehicle for cultural and political critique, linking historical injustices, societal collapse, and ethical reflection within a unified symbolic framework.

McCarthy strengthens this historical connection through geographical detail. In *The Road*, the father can orient himself geographically despite the collapse of recognisable landmarks, which creates interpretive space for linking cannibal imagery to America's racial history. During their southward journey, the only identifiable location is Rock City (McCarthy, 2006, p. 9), situated in the state of Georgia. This marker not only situates the narrative in the American South but also invites readers to consider the "power and significance of place in narrative texts" (Kort, 2004, p. 11). Georgia's history makes this resonance particularly clear: inhabited initially by Indigenous peoples, the region was later "discovered" by Spanish explorers, colonised by the British, and eventually became the thirteenth colony of the Empire (Coleman, 1991). With the rise of revolutionary sentiment, Georgia joined the United States in 1788 as its fourth state. In 1861, it succeeded in defending the institution of slavery, becoming a major battleground during the Civil War, and rejoined the Union in 1870. From the colonial era through the mid-19th century, the state's development was inseparable from the displacement of Indigenous peoples and the enslavement of Africans, making it a symbolic locus of America's racial oppression (Carpenter, 2023; Harris & Berry, 2014).

Although the post-apocalyptic world in McCarthy's novel omits explicit references to racial politics, the narrative leaves interpretive "gaps" that readers can fill. Such gaps enable a symbolic reading in which the cannibals operate as allegories of racial violence and oppression in the United States (Dominy, 2015; Estes, 2017; Huebert, 2017), thereby foregrounding the cultural and moral critiques embedded in the devastated landscape of the text. In *The Road*, the cannibals are first introduced not through direct description but as a threatening voice that announces their presence. When the boy's mother urges the father to commit suicide with her, she warns, "Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They will rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us" (McCarthy 48). Here, "they" refers to the cannibals, and the coupling of sexual violence with cannibalism functions as a reciprocal metaphor, one that fuses desire with consumption of the Other (Brown, 2012, p. 187). As Stark (2013) observes, "Her clear logic in the face of his blind optimism continues the familiar trope of blind characters being afforded clarity of vision" (p. 79). The mother's fear thus not only exposes the vulnerability associated with her "Othered" status but also gestures toward the historical realities of slavery in the United States.

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These resonances become clearer when read in conjunction with historical accounts of slavery. Records indicate that enslaved Africans transported to the Americas often resisted violently or took extreme measures such as starvation or suicide, driven by fears of being killed or consumed by white slaveholders (McGowan, 1990; Piersen, 2019; Snyder, 2010). For example, in 1729, enslaved Africans aboard the Annibal rebelled before reaching the Americas, engaging in life-and-death combat with their captors; in 1836, enslaved Africans led a revolt on the Spanish slave ship Amistad, temporarily seizing control before being intercepted off the coast of Connecticut by the U.S. Navy. Scholars also note that enslaved women, in particular, resisted or took their own lives out of fear of being eaten, either during transport or upon arrival (Barber, 1840, p. 19; Hall, 1990, p. 91). Within slave narratives, cannibalistic imaginings also surface: "When we were children, in our homeland, seeing some white people made us fear that they would eat us" (Cugoano, 1995, p. 134). These accounts underscore how Europeans' cannibalistic projections onto Black people were less reflections of reality than Eurocentric discursive strategies—transforming cannibalism into a tool of political domination (Walton, 2004, p. 142). In practice, however, it was the white enslavers who enacted absolute "cannibalistic" control over Black bodies. The persistence of structural racial inequalities in the United States today can be read as an extension of this dynamic, reflecting the ongoing economic, cultural, and social marginalisation of marginalised groups.

Against this historical backdrop, the mother's fear of rape, murder, and cannibalism in McCarthy's novel invites interpretation as a critique of the violent survival logic imposed by the post-apocalyptic cannibals. However, her decision to commit suicide has provoked widely divergent readings. As Chavkin and Chavkin (2019) note, "there is radical disagreement on how to interpret this suicide, however" (p. 195). At one end of the spectrum, Greenwood (2009) views it positively: "The story suggests that the mother's decision to kill herself was one made in the name of love, not cowardice. She died to improve her son's and husband's odds of survival" (p. 78). By contrast, Wielenberg (2010) contends that she no longer cares about her family, perhaps because she had lost faith in her husband years earlier when their son was born (p. 13). Some readers even see her act as wholly justified given the circumstances—"Who can blame her?" (Ellis, 2008, p. 29). Taken together, these conflicting interpretations underline how the mother embodies both vulnerability and resistance, a paradox that deepens the novel's broader allegory of predation. I argue that by drawing on intertextual resonances with historical documents and slave narratives, McCarthy recasts the cannibal not merely as a post-apocalyptic threat but as a symbolic lens for interrogating the moral and social legacies of American racial oppression.

As Dohe (2016) notes, in American cultural imagination, racial minorities have often been depicted as "cannibalistic and uncivilised." The circulation and acceptance of this image not only reinforced the epistemic framework through which white society governed the "Other," but also erased the historical agency of marginalised groups while fostering what Hooks (2014) calls a logic of "consuming the Other" (p. 186). Probyn (2003) further observes that this Western-originated "cannibal figure" ultimately returns to permeate Western society itself, becoming part of both cultural and political imagination (p. 9). McCarthy's *The Road* participates in this critical lineage: following the mother's suicide, the father and son encounter a group of cannibals whose behaviour embodies precisely this logic of domination and consumption. McCarthy depicts the scene as follows: the cannibals lead the way, followed by a cart pulled by shackled enslaved people loaded with supplies; behind them come the captured women, and finally, a group of boys serving the women. Despite the cold, they are scantily clad, with dog collars around their necks (McCarthy 78). Through this disturbing tableau of

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plundered goods and subjugated bodies, the narrative constructs a post-apocalyptic reenactment of the transatlantic slave trade, in which enslaved Africans and material wealth were forcibly transported to the Americas. The scene not only exposes the brutality of the cannibals but also allegorically recalls the historical reality of racial oppression and slavery in the United States, thus providing readers with a lens through which McCarthy's devastated world critiques systemic violence and injustice (Lodoen, 2023; Rickel, 2020).

The atrocities committed by the cannibals resonate further through the father's memories, which explicitly tie the post-apocalyptic horrors to America's racial past. Passing a dilapidated orchard, he observes:

Shapes of dried blood in the stubble grass and gray coils of viscera where the slain had been field-dressed and hauled away. The wall beyond held a frieze of human heads, all faced alike, dried and caved with their taut grins and shrunken eyes. They wore gold rings in their leather ears and in the wind their sparse and ratty hair twisted about on their skulls. (McCarthy, 2006, p. 76)

These gruesome remnants serve as undeniable traces of slaughter and predation. Later, upon entering a decayed mansion, the father recalls that "Chattel slaves had once trod those boards bearing food and drink on silver trays" (90). Anthony (2004) explains that the term "chattel" originates from the German word Kaput, meaning "useless" or "broken," and was later applied to human property in the transatlantic slave trade (pp. 235–265). Before 1865, "chattel slaves" specifically referred to first-generation enslaved Africans transported to the Americas and their descendants, who were considered the private property of white enslavers and could be bought and sold at will. This system, known as Chattel Slavery, has been denounced as barbaric, immoral, and fundamentally at odds with the democratic principle of individual liberty, and has even been described as a form of economic "cannibalism" (Cunliffe, 2008, p. xvi; Pierson, 1993, p. 12). Hoberek (2011) argues that McCarthy's deliberate use of the term "chattel" establishes a direct historical resonance between slavery and the novel's narrative, offering a subtle yet incisive reminder of the lived realities of enslavement (p. 488).

Within this context, the "ungodly stench" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 110) that overwhelms the father and son as they descend into the cellar recalls the fetid holds of slave ships. Similarly, the ominous "heap of clothing" (107) in the mansion's foyer may evoke Holocaust imagery. However, the passage ultimately points toward something more historically particular than a universal human savagery released by social collapse. What emerges instead is a distinctly regional history—encoded in the term chattel and its association with the slave ship's cargo—that frames human beings as commodities. The linguistic slide from "chattel" to "cattle" further underscores how McCarthy's cannibalism does not signify a primitive regression but rather a distorted continuation of entrenched regional practices of dehumanisation and consumption (Hoberek, 2011, p. 489).

While the post-apocalyptic setting constructs a de-racialised narrative space, the story's Southern locale and the explicit reference to slavery nevertheless foreground a symbolic equivalence between cannibalism and the historical oppression of African Americans. In this sense, the novel establishes a parallel that underscores the deep entanglement of violence and racial politics in American history (Berglund, 2006, p. 4). In the narrative, the father repeatedly emphasises to his son that "they [the cannibals] are bad, and we [the two of us] are good" (McCarthy, 2006, pp. 78, 109). Such repetition not only frames the cannibals as barbaric and immoral but also illustrates the father's attempt to maintain moral coherence as a subject. At

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the same time, it signals that the ethical self-represented by 'goodness' is to be passed down to the child, who becomes the symbolic bearer of a new civilisation (Chen & Chen, 2024; Lodoen, 2023). Confronted with cannibals whose actions violate moral constraints, individuals might either surrender to the anxieties of unrestrained instinct or activate superego-driven moral discipline. The father clearly represents the latter path, employing psychological defence mechanisms to contain his fear. He avoids contact with anyone outside his son, keeps his pistol loaded (McCarthy, 2006, p. 54), teaches the boy how to use it, and repeatedly instructs him: "You wanted to know what the bad guys looked like. Now you know. It [cannibalism] may happen again" (65), always "Take the gun" (149). As Hage (2010) observes, the father's actions constitute a process of "imparting knowledge to the son to help him form a worldview" (p. 110).

Moreover, the "knowledge" the father imparts extends beyond the taboo of cannibalism to a set of ethical guidelines for reconstructing a new civilisation in a post-apocalyptic context. This knowledge thus functions dually: it operates as a critical allegory while also assuming a redemptive and transformative role. On one hand, the dehumanised image of the cannibals allegorises the brutality embedded in American racial history, rooted in the exploitation of people of color; on the other, the moral steadfastness of the father and son indicates that future civilisational subjects must establish ethical frameworks grounded in equality to overcome the politics of enslaving the 'other' (Cooper, 2019; Harper, 2022). As the novel demonstrates, although the father and son "were hungry all the time" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 27), they never colluded with the cannibals nor directed violence toward other survivors. This not only affirms McCarthy's advocacy of a morally lucid subjectivity but also exemplifies his artistic exploration of how to transcend the structural legacies of American racial injustice.

Placed within a broader historical context, the demonisation of minorities as cannibals, or the moral distancing of cannibalistic acts, functioned in Western societies to impose order on chaotic ethnic experiences, thereby creating a stable social hierarchy and a sense of cultural purity (Barnard, 2005; Vyrgioti, 2019). Consequently, cannibalism was often understood not as a literal act but as a political ideology, deployed to discredit opponents and to provide cultural legitimacy for colonialism and imperialism (Arens, 1979, p. 94). In postcolonial contexts, however, writers who reframe cannibalistic narratives expose their fictional construction, using them as a tool to satirise colonial practices and critique imperial hegemony, thereby enriching the allegorical potential of cannibalistic discourse. In *The Road*, although McCarthy does not depict explicit colonial expansion or imperial governance, the cannibals nonetheless draw attention to the text's underlying "inhuman, barbaric slavery" or the "logic of cannibalism embedded in organised systems of oppression" (Berglund, 2006, p. 185). Thus, the cannibals emerge not only as symbolic figures of the brutal realities of American racial history but also as ontological signifiers of the racial politics that structure the United States. Finally, with the cyclical recurrence of history, cannibalism is recontextualised in modern times through the figure of the insatiable consumer. This reconfiguration grants McCarthy's cannibal figures an additional allegorical layer, compelling readers to confront the persistence of a 'cannibalistic logic' that underlies contemporary consumer culture.

Cannibalism as Allegory of American Consumer Culture in *The Road*

In examining the relationship between cannibalistic discourse and contemporary capitalist systems, scholars have observed that Western societies have long exhibited a cannibalistic logic, from the accumulation of primitive capital to the expansion of consumer capital (Bartolovich, 1998; King, 2000; Lefebvre, 2005). Within this framework, both

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capitalists and the consumers shaped by capitalism can be read as postmodern evolutions of the cannibal, defined by "capitalism's insatiable desire and the inherent impossibility of satisfying that desire" (Bartolovich, 1998, p. 232). Thus, the figure of the cannibal gradually transcends its earlier cultural role of marking the 'Other' and reemerges in modern society as the consumer, frequently serving as a vehicle for critiques of consumerism. In other words, as Bartolovich (1998) observes, the consumer in contemporary society parallels the cannibal. This analogy reflects the excesses of desire under late capitalism while simultaneously exposing anxieties about scarcity, famine, and ecological collapse. These fears are given concrete expression in post-apocalyptic literary texts, making the genre a "site for the resurgence of cannibalistic behaviour in the twenty-first century" (Brown, 2012, p. 229) and embedding social and historical critique into narrative form (Yar, 2015, p. 90). Seen in this light, the cannibals in *The Road* not only critique consumerism but also metaphorically embody the 'cannibalistic' essence of post-industrial consumption, constructing a powerful allegory of American consumer society (Dominy, 2015, pp. 143–158).

Importantly, McCarthy's novel does not depict the spectacle of consumption directly; instead, it conjures American consumer experience through its persistent imagery of ruins. As Benjamin (2009) notes, "The ruin presents the allegorical aspect of natural history, under which history exhibits an irresistible decay" (p. 177). By analysing ruins, corpses, and death imagery in Baroque tragic literature, Benjamin sought to decode the essence of 17th-century German history: "In the ruins, history is materially absorbed into the background" (177–178). If Benjamin's allegorical critique illuminates the alienation produced by modernisation and industrialisation, McCarthy's depiction of ruins in *The Road* similarly reflects the collapse of post-industrial society (Pitetti, 2019; Skult, 2015; Walsh, 2008).

The novel's disaster-induced landscapes thus assemble a holographic image of a consumer culture that has vanished. Throughout their journey, the father and son traverse ruined cities, encountering "billboards advertising motels" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 7). In a small-town grocery store, they approach "the cluttered shelves" before exiting through the back into an alleyway where "a few shopping carts, all badly rusted" remain (19). At the store's front, the father retrieves a cold metal can from a fallen vending machine, a relic of the globally popular American soft drink, Coca-Cola. Further south, they pass billboards that had been repurposed for survivalist messages, their surfaces "whited out with thin coats of paint in order to write on them and through the paint could be seen a pale palimpsest of advertisements for goods which no longer existed" (108). These remnants evoke "the richness of a vanished world" (117), signifying the prosperity of a once-thriving consumer society now reduced to fragments.

In this commodity-centred society, advertising generates the false needs characteristic of post-industrial culture. Immersed in the illusion of "free choice," subjects consciously enter consumer spaces, such as supermarkets, to satisfy their desires and experience consumption as a form of pleasure. Consumer products in the novel, such as Coca-Cola, symbolise "pure surplus enjoyment beyond ordinary satisfaction" (Žižek, 1999, p. 99), and serve as signs that trigger the subject's "desire for desire" (Žižek, 2006, p. 99). Donnelly (2009) contends that the boy's brief reprieve through a can of Coke underscores the brand ideology Coca-Cola has carefully cultivated since its origin in 1886, epitomised by slogans such as the 1929 catchphrase, "The Pause That Refreshes" ("Slogans for Coca-Cola," p. 71). At the same time, however, the scene also gestures toward the collapse of consumer culture, dramatised by the abandoned supermarket where the Coke is discovered. Here, the "super" market becomes a

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corporate cannibal, devouring weaker competitors and monopolising supply chains until smaller, independent traders are erased. In this way, the supermarket figures as an allegory of the self-destructive economic order McCarthy envisions as having collapsed before the novel begins. Cannibalism thus emerges as a metaphor for consumerism itself, linking acts of consumption with the horrific, the uncanny, and the abject. The sudden appearance of one of modern society's most recognisable commodities—a Coke can—renders this critique even sharper against the backdrop of useless coins, dust, and ash. The boy's unfamiliarity with the brand introduces a moment of irony: when he asks, "What is it?" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 23), the absent answer echoes Coca-Cola's own advertising slogan, "Coke Is It!"

Taken together, the depiction of ruins not only prompts readers to reflect on the material landscapes produced by consumer society and their historical context but also reveals the operational logic of that society: producing individuals as "machines of desire" and positioning them within capitalist ideology. Undoubtedly, *The Road* offers a striking reflection on consumer society. However, how precisely are the cannibals transformed into a critique of this culture? The key lies in reexamining the imagery of Coca-Cola. As Donnelly (2009) observes, since its introduction in 1886, Coca-Cola has undergone more than a century of marketing and promotion, becoming not only a widely recognised beverage but also a significant symbol of American consumer culture. When asked in an interview about the purpose of including Coca-Cola in the novel, McCarthy stated: "Anyone who knows America knows one thing—it surpasses everything you can imagine, beyond cowboys and Indians; it is Coca-Cola. Even in the most remote African village of eighteen people, the villagers will know Coca-Cola" (Jurgensen, 2009, p. A4). Coca-Cola thus functions simultaneously as a medium of American identity, a stimulant of desire, and an emblem of consumption itself (Kahn, 1960, p. 45).

Historically, Coca-Cola's global expansion was inseparable from American geopolitical and economic power. Leveraging the circumstances of the two World Wars in the 20th century, the Coca-Cola Company cooperated with American political forces to expand into Europe, Latin America, and Asia (Huse et al., 2022; Keys, 2004). At the same time, the profits generated within this global capitalist system fed back into the prosperity of domestic consumption in the United States, cultivating a vast population of consumers indulging in sensory gratification. In mid-20th-century America, "the Coca-Cola Company delivered over 600 million pounds of sugar into consumers' bodies" (Elmore, 2014, p. 101). Even at the turn of the 21st century, the company "kept a close eye on global expansion" (Klein & Sawchuk, 2000, p. 17). This multinational business model, grounded in brand influence, reflects the United States' strategy of establishing a "new empire" through economic activity. At its core, Coca-Cola embodies a form of neo-colonial soft capital exploitation and subtle cultural intrusion (Rajesh, 2019; Ruszel, 2020).

Moreover, the global reach of Coca-Cola obscures the complicity of American consumers, whose pleasures are premised on the indirect appropriation of resources and labour from less developed regions, marking them as postmodern "cannibals" (Benson & Kirsch, 2010). Accordingly, in the novel, the imagery of Coca-Cola not only signals American consumer culture but also serves as a metaphor for the cannibals themselves, linking them to the broader critique of late-capitalist consumption (Kaminsky, 2018; Kearney, 2012; Mitchell, 2015; Schleusener, 2017). As Zhang and Su (2022) note in their reading of Mintz's *Sweetness and Power*, sugar was deeply entangled with slavery and capital accumulation (p. 117). Mintz (1986) emphasises that raw sugar from the Caribbean was refined into white sugar in "North American factories" and directed primarily toward U.S. consumers (pp. xviii–xix). As a

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sweetened beverage, Coca-Cola followed this same trajectory: its rise depended not only on domestic corn syrup and maple sugar but also heavily on sugar from Caribbean plantations, where exploitation of cheap labour in Cuba, Haiti, and other small nations sustained production. Thus, in the historical context of mass consumer goods, American consumers were not merely drinking a beverage but consuming the labour and sacrifice of vulnerable "Others."

Even in *The Road*, where most consumers have perished in the catastrophe, the Coca-Cola motif crystallises a central point: consumption itself is cannibalistic. Following Althusser and Balibar (1970), readers should attend to such "symptoms" in the text to uncover what the surface narrative conceals (p. 28). Through the Coca-Cola motif, McCarthy exposes the hidden reality of American consumer society: its subjects emerge as new variants of cannibals, and the structural logic of consumer culture mirrors the literal act of consuming others (Chen & Chen, 2024; Cooper, 2019; Juge, 2009; Walsh, 2008).

As recalled, in *The Road*, McCarthy situates the remnants of consumer goods produced by post-industrial society amid a landscape of ruin, foregrounding human survival under extreme conditions of hunger and deprivation. Through the depiction of cannibalistic groups who prey upon others, the novel allegorically exposes the ultimate endpoint of consumer society. As Somaweera et al. (2020) observe, in a natural ecosystem, humans typically occupy the apex of the food chain, sustaining themselves by consuming lower-order life forms, which constitutes a legitimate predatory relationship between humans and nature (pp. 936–959). By contrast, in McCarthy's world, stores and supermarkets are "looted, ransacked, ravaged" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 109), while natural resources are destroyed. Basic nutritional needs are no longer guaranteed, and the raw materials required for mass production in consumer society have become inaccessible. As a result, the father and son are forced to "navigate the ruins of post-capitalist America" (Kollin, 2011, p. 161), with hunger hanging over them like the sword of Damocles, constantly threatening their lives. Even more terrifying are the cannibals who, already shaped by consumerist ideology, continue to enact the "cannibalistic logic" of consumer society.

As Søfting (2013) contends, these cannibals transport looted goods and captives for consumption in cars—symbols of American consumer culture—thereby reinforcing the memory of a pre-apocalyptic society built upon material abundance (pp. 704–713). In this environment of extreme scarcity, cannibals redirect their consumerist desires toward other humans. The father witnesses captives confined in houses— "naked male and female"—and observes: "On the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 93). Faced with these desperate pleas for help, the father remains powerless to intervene, yet he consistently upholds the survival principle that he and his son "would not ever eat anybody" (108), thereby preserving the moral and humane dimension of his character. Beyond refusing to consume others or animals, the father even shares the limited food he possesses with surviving elders.

This moral contrast between the father and son's compassion and the cannibals' brutality not only undermines the supposed survivalist rationale that the cannibals invoke but also exposes the inhuman essence of a culture wholly aligned with consumerist ideology. Thus, the cannibals in the novel function as an allegory for the predatory nature of American consumer society, laying bare the distorted ethics inherent in such a culture.

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As the narrative of *The Road* unfolds, the father and son increasingly witness the brutal plundering and cannibalistic behavior of others, which intensifies the pervasive horror posed by the cannibals:

They began to come upon from time to time small cairns of rock by the roadside. They were signs in gypsy language, lost patterans. The first he'd seen in some while, common in the north, leading out of the looted and exhausted cities, hopeless messages to loved ones lost and dead. By then all stores of food had given out and murder was everywhere upon the land. The world soon to be largely populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes. (McCarthy, 152).

They walk along roads "paved with bleached teeth" and "fuzzy charcoal-colored eyeballs," resembling "shoppers in the commissaries of hell" (152). The son even sees "a charred human infant, headless," its intestines removed, "gutted and blackening on the spit" (167). These shocking depictions not only expose the cannibals' complete loss of humanity but also sharpen the contrast with the father's survival strategy, which remains both resourceful and ethically grounded. Throughout their journey, the father salvages various discarded objects—tattered clothing, worn shoes, broken utensils, and abandoned food—left amidst the ruins by the cannibals. Echoing Benjamin's notion of the scavenger, he reintegrates this debris back into the ecological cycle, transforming waste into sustenance and opening the possibility for sustainable consumption. This practice not only dismantles the cannibals' logic of "plunder justified, cannibalism excused," but also gestures toward an alternative model of survival that resists the predatory ethos of consumerist ideology. As Lindenbaum (2004) observes, "Abandoning our attachment to consumption… and reflecting on the cannibalistic dynamics between ourselves and others" constitutes an effective way to eradicate the cannibalistic logic of consumer society (p. 493). In this light, the father's ecological mode of consumption represents not simply a strategy of survival, but also a metaphorical critique of consumerist illusions. It stands as McCarthy's corrective prescription for the cannibalistic logic embedded in American consumer culture (Dominy, 2015).

CONCLUSION

In *The Road*, McCarthy's cannibals, though fictional, function as an allegory that resonates disturbingly with the logic of American consumer society. Their anonymity, like that of the father and son, underscores the universality of their role: they represent not individuals but systemic forces of consumption, whose horror lies less in literal violence than in the cultural critique they enable (Banco, 2010; Bruyn, 2010; Søfting, 2013; Stark, 2013). As Hulme (1998) notes, notes, cannibal narratives serve a "function of cultural critique" (p. 37), and McCarthy's use of the trope exposes the dangers of a society ensnared by its own predatory appetites. By juxtaposing the cannibals' exploitative practices with the father and son's ecologically mindful survival, the novel urges readers to reflect critically on consumption and its ethical limits (Dominy, 2015; Huebert, 2017; Pudney, 2015). The haunting refrain "There is no later. This is later" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 46) eliminates the possibility of deferral, confronting consumption as an immediate existential crisis rather than a distant abstraction.

In exposing consumption as both an ethical and existential crisis, McCarthy destabilises the cultural narratives of progress, redemption, and futurity that have long sustained Western modernity. However, he refuses to resolve the allegory through redemption. If the acts of cannibalism symbolise the predatory logic of American consumer society, their ultimate consequence is not only moral collapse but also temporal exhaustion. A culture that devours

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itself inevitably consumes its own future, leaving no possibility of renewal. The boy's survival is often read as a flicker of hope. However, it is less a promise of continuity than an anthropocentric illusion—an instinctive effort to preserve meaning in the void. As Schleusener (2017) observes, although the novel invokes "grace, human goodness, and compassion," there is no evidence that these qualities can enable humanity to escape decline (p. 2). Here, survival does not equal meaning; kindness cannot arrest entropy. Cannibalism thus functions not merely as a metaphor for consumer greed but also as a temporal mechanism that devours futurity itself. Scholars who impose optimism on McCarthy's novel—by framing it in terms of empathy, redemption, or renewal (Cooper, 2019, p. 234; Mavri, 2013, p. 12; Wilhelm, 2008, p. 142)—risk obscuring its darker insight.

The novel's enigmatic coda reinforces this insight. The trout's vermiculate patterns, described as "maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 287), do not—as Kaminsky (2018) suggests—signify a return to a prehistoric state. Instead, they testify to an irreversible condition: history has reached a point of no return. Nature persists, but only as the silent witness to human extinction, indifferent to cultural and religious frameworks once promising redemption. From this perspective, McCarthy dismantles the temporal structures on which Western culture has traditionally relied—progress, rebirth, and futurity. Thus, *The Road* fuses the allegory of cannibalism with temporal pessimism, producing a critique that is at once cultural and ontological. Cannibalism signifies not only the predatory logic of consumer society but also the exhaustion of time itself, situating humanity at a terminal stage where nothing remains to be consumed but the self. Confronted with this vision, the reader is stripped of consolations of hope and compelled to acknowledge the stark truth of finitude.

This absolute negation of the future is not only the outcome of consumer society's self-destructive logic but also deeply entangled with the ideological function of cannibalistic discourse in Western tradition. As a taboo, cannibalism has long demarcated civilisation from savagery, colluding with state power to sustain stable national identities and notions of cultural purity while concealing ideologies of racism, imperialism, and colonialism. As Berglund (2006) observes, many writers have reconfigured the topos of cannibalism to expose its complicity with imperial policy and racist ideology (p. 3), thereby correcting the ethnocentric and Eurocentric biases it carries. In this light, the cannibal gangs in *The Road* function simultaneously as probes into America's racial history and as satirical reflections of consumer society. Their presence encapsulates McCarthy's dual critique of racial politics and consumer culture, laying bare the corruption and malaise long suppressed within white society. Accordingly, *The Road* enacts a "double negation" of American culture through the trope of cannibalism: it reveals the self-devouring logic of consumer society while interrogating the racial and political discourses underpinning Western civilisation. Ultimately, McCarthy situates humanity within an inescapable terminal condition, where cultural survival collapses into ontological finitude.

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