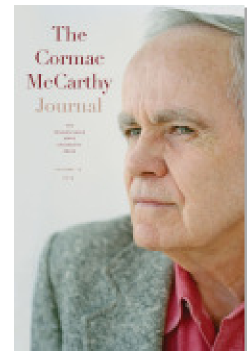
Cannibalism, Consumerism, and Profanation: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and the End of Capitalism



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Cannibalism, Consumerism, and Profanation

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and the End of Capitalism

Jordan J. Dominy

ABSTRACT: Cormac McCarthy's 2006 novel *The Road* uses archetypal images of cannibalism appearing in contact period travelogues, eighteenth-century abolitionist writings, and more recent narratives. These connections between *The Road* and earlier writings demonstrate how the novel evokes imagery of insatiable anthropophagy in the same way that authors prior have done so in a critique of capitalism and emphasize the novel's critical portrayal of American consumerism. Critics writing on *The Road* have certainly addressed the novel's cannibalism as an ethical divide and as a metaphor for blind consumerism. However, they do not explore at length the prevalence of other kinds of consumption in the novel remaining in its landscape, which the narrator often describes as having been consumed by some manner of ecological disaster, and the somewhat less visible—but surviving—apparatus of consumer society. *The Road* envisions a world ultimately resulting from an utter drive to consume and can be read as a grim, extreme parable warning of an entire globe commodified and consumed, leaving only waste—a literal dust heap of history—and advising that this end could be difficult to avoid. KEYWORDS: Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, cannibalism, consumerism, capitalism

The cannibalism prominent in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) significantly places the novel in conversation with depictions of cannibalism in earlier literatures and portrays an imagined end of capitalism linked with other manners of unbridled consumption. Critics and reviewers examining the novel have addressed religious symbolism, relationships between trauma and storytelling, the novel's status as extrapolative science fiction, and its importance as a predictor of impending environmental doom, many of which broach the notion that the gruesome, explicit cannibalism in the novel is a metaphor for blind consumerism.[1] However, they do not explore at length the prevalence of other kinds of consumption and even consumer decisions in the novel, a

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theme present in terms of the visible remnants of a landscape consumed by some manner of ecological disaster and the somewhat less visible, but surviving, apparatus of consumer society. *The Road* envisions a United States resulting from an utter drive to consume and can be read as a grim, extreme parable warning of an entire globe commodified and converted to waste (a literal dust heap of history), advising that this end could be difficult to avoid, and that even such an end does not spell the termination of consumerism. Connecting *The Road* more readily to critiques of consumerism, the novel evokes imagery of insatiable anthropophagy that scholars have identified in earlier literatures—colonial travel narratives and British abolitionist writings, for example—that sensationalize cannibalism, use it to define civilization, or critique imperialism and excessive consumption.[2] While it is true that the most recognizable ethics to which the father and son adhere revolve around their adamant stance against cannibalism—consuming other individuals—the father and son are consumers nonetheless. The real challenge left facing the son at the novel's end is whether or not he will be able to retrieve nature, objects, and even human beings and their experiences from the realm of commodification and consumption for which the wasted civilization serves as a metaphor. Whatever ethics or moral code rules the postapocalyptic society of *The Road*, it revolves around consumption literally and figuratively: what matters to the man and especially the boy as they continue on their journey southward on the road is whether they, the things, and the individuals they encounter become objects consumed and cordoned off from further use (through destruction or possession) or subjects of the commons.

The Road follows a long tradition of literal and symbolic depictions of anthropophagy in both fiction and nonfiction writing. The topic has garnered scholarly debate for the last three decades, beginning with anthropologist William Arens's assertion in his 1979 book, *The Man Eating Myth*, that ritualistic cannibalism was a creation of imaginative European colonizers. Sensationalized accounts of cannibalism have appeared with frequency since the travel writings and captivity narratives of the first European visitors to North America during the sixteenth century, through historical tales of survival, such as the ill-fated Donner Party, and even in news and novels about serial killers of the late twentieth century. Surveying literary and cultural criticism on cannibalism reveals it as a trope operating in two ways: as a way to emphasize the difference between European civilization and racially different barbarism and as a metaphor or tool to emphasize the greed of consumer capitalism, a trend that comes about with the emergence of widely available luxury goods and the flourishing middle class. Charlotte Sussman demonstrates within the context of

eighteenth-century British imperialism how accusations of cannibalism were used to reinforce differences between cultures, in particular the cultures of west African and Caribbean slaves and the cultures of the white plantation owners who enslaved them (14–15); Europeans who were absorbed into the culture of Native Americans were said by commentators of the period to have been eaten by those tribes that accommodated them (88). Jeff Berglund traces the use of cannibalism to emphasize racial difference through the nineteenth- and twentieth-century United States, too. He points specifically to P. T. Barnum's exhibits on Fijian cannibals (exhibits that presented a positive portrayal of American influences on the South Pacific), Edgar Rice Burrough's Tarzan of the Apes (who does not cannibalize the black men he kills not because he is human but because he is a civilized gentleman by birth), and the murder and barbecuing of the violent Frank Bennett in the film *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991).

Beyond being used to draw clear lines between civilized and uncivilized, white and nonwhite, right and wrong, authors have also employed cannibalism as a tool for criticizing capitalism and consumer culture. This use also surfaces during the rise of the middle class at the height of England's imperial power. The consumption of luxury goods imported from the colonies—sugar, for example—was compared with the actual consumption of the enslaved bodies that toiled to produce it (Morton 180; Sheller 89; Sussman 14). Timothy Morton, writing about the ways authors imagined the flow of new goods from the colonies to Britain, identifies poems of social acitivism written around the turn of the nineteenth century by Robert Southey that compare consumerism with cannibalism (197). The eighteenth-century social critic Jonas Hanaway went so far as to characterize the rampant purchase of commodities imported from colonies to England as a kind of "auto-cannibalism" to describe the manner in which the English were wasting—or consuming—their own wealth in order to procure such goods (Sussman 28). Importantly, cultural critics identify depictions of cannibalism as sites that require the pressure of deeper investigation. Maggie Kilgour argues, "the function of cannibalism in culture and criticism today lies in its utility as a form of cultural criticism. Where in the past the figure of the cannibal has been used to construct differences that uphold racism, it now appears in projects to deconstruct them" (242).

There are significant parallels to draw between these earlier representations and readings of native ritual cannibalism and the hunger-driven anthropophagy from which the man and the boy flee in the barren countryside of *The Road*. On first reading, cannibalism serves the same function for the father and son in the novel as it did for Europeans' early encounters with indigenous Africans and Americans: to clearly mark the line between civilization and post-civilization,

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though seemingly without the trappings of racial difference. The novel's postapocalyptic setting is one in which civilization has been obliterated; its burned, fragmented earth littered with artifacts of the late industrial society has elicited more than one comparison to the ruins of Eliot's *The Waste Land* (Gray 262, 269; Schaub 154–55). There seems no longer any "civilized" society to which the man and boy belong. According to the tattered map the man consults, he and his son are following "state roads," called as such, he explains to his son, "Because they used to belong to the states. What used to be called the states" (McCarthy 43). Every social institution and convention that could serve as a hallmark of civilization has passed so far into oblivion that, as Ashley Kunsa argues, the names of places, road, and people have passed into meaninglessness, leaving only the deeds of individuals to providing meaning and morality to the world (61–63). The most important dividing line for the boy is the assurance from his father that they will not eat people:

> We wouldnt ever eat anybody, would we?
>
> [...]
>
> No. We wouldnt.
>
> No matter what.
>
> No. No matter what.
>
> Because we're the good guys.
>
> Yes.
>
> And we're carrying the fire.
>
> And we're carrying the fire. Yes. (128–29)

This seems at first the most significant dividing line separating the pair from the human-eating antagonists of the book. In an environment where what the reader would perceive as civilization does not exist, the boy and man differentiate themselves from the bloodcults in their refusal to consume the remains of people. The aversion to cannibalism becomes a method for emphasizing the man and boy's humanity. This turns the folks who do eat people into others. The "carrying the fire" phrase is repeated throughout the novel in order to emphasize this difference: if fire in prehistory is a marker for the beginning of civilization, it follows that carrying the fire in posthistory would mark enduring civilization.

Beyond emphasizing difference, the scenes in *The Road* depicting cannibalism reproduce archetypal scenes in earlier literary portrayals of cannibalism. Peter Hulme argues, "there is no more typical scene in the writing about

cannibalism in whatever genre than that in which a witness stumbles across the remains of a cannibal feast" (3). That is to say, in cannibal literatures the readers rarely ever witness the act of consumption, but stumblingly arrive to view the scene in its aftermath, creating a strange, dreadful sight. Hulme himself cites the account of Dr. Diego Alvaraz Chanca, who accompanied Columbus on his second voyage, in which sailors recover human bones from a hut abandoned by fleeing natives (16–17); sometimes later, embellished retellings of his encounter with cannibalism feature severed limbs and heads littered around a large cooking pot (18). These same scenes parallel with ones in McCarthy's novel in which the protagonists uncover evidence of cannibalism's prevalence in the postapocalyptic setting. They significantly serve similar functions for the readers of the novel as they do for readers of some contact period accounts, providing just enough details to make the butchering and consumption of humans explicit while leaving the act to the imagination, detaching the reader from the deed and leaving the mind to visualize its own terror. This archetype appears first in *The Road* upon the man returning with his son to recover their belongings from the place where he killed the road rat who held the boy at knifepoint. The man finds "the bones and the skin piled together with rocks over them. A pool of guts. He pushed at the bones with the toe of his shoe. They looked to have been boiled. No pieces of clothing" (70–71). The passage presents the same content as classic portrayals of cannibalism. Rather than viewing the butchering of the dead road rat, discarded bones, skin, and viscera provide evidence that the victim was cannibalized by his cohorts. The use of the definite article ("the bones" as opposed to "*his* bones") also dehumanizes the road rat's remnants as simply waste. A scene much later in the novel functions similarly; the man and boy, investigating the smell of cooking, approach and scare away a small group of travelers on the road, who leave behind for them to discover the macabre feast of an infant roasting over the fire. The only thing that would have been more macabre would have been if they had witnessed the actual eating. Instead, dead bodies litter the novel's landscape, either frozen in ghastly terror or presented as remnants of a cannibal feast. The environment proves to be a "tableau of the slain and the devoured" (McCarthy 91). The father and son witness a marching formation of red-scarved cannibals followed by their violently won spoils, including slaves treated like livestock—pulling wagons, "yoked each to each," and presumably available to satisfy every hunger of their captors (92). Humans left alive are both consumers and the potentially consumed.

Yet the most significant legacy of earlier literary portrayals of cannibalism in *The Road* is cannibalism as a critique of unchecked consumption of environmental resources and the products made with them. Images of marketing,

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branding, and shopping have survived the catastrophe and serve as markers of past consumption that have outlived its own heyday. The landscape of the novel features "billboards advertising motels. Everything as it once had been save faded and weathered" (8). In some towns the pair travel through, billboards are painted over to create a clean space to write warning messages, but "through the paint could be seen a pale palimpsest of advertisements for goods which no longer existed" (127–28). The communication that endures is the plea to purchase a product; at other times in the novel, the enduring artifact is a consumer product itself. Coca-Cola is the one identified brand name product that the man and the boy find in the ruins of a supermarket (22) and a Cold War-era fallout shelter that provides a few days of respite (148). As a sugary consumer good made for literal consumption, Coke becomes a link between anthropophagy and consumer capitalism. Brian Donnelly emphasizes this point in his close reading of the appearance of one of the world's most recognizable brands in the novel. He interprets the supermarket where the protagonists recover the Coke as a cannibal of smaller locally owned and operated markets, an element of a "self-consuming society" (71). Jonas Hanaway levied this same criticism in eighteenth-century England against the growing middle class's hunger for luxury goods. Donnelly reads cannibalism "as a metaphor for consumption," and goes on to explain, "it articulated a relationship between consumption and the horrific, uncanny, and abject" (71). On the other hand, the familiarity of Coke as a product also universalizes consumption with a particular assigned meaning: gratification. Cannibalism, then, manifests in the novel as "detrimentally excessive consumption" (72). Indeed, shopping for Coca-Cola at supermarkets has given way to a grimmer consumerism in which shoppers are replaced with "men who would eat your children in front of your eyes and the cities themselves held by cores of blackened looters who tunneled among the ruins and crawled from the rubble white of tooth and eye carrying charred and anonymous tins of food in nylon nets like shoppers in the commissaries of hell" (McCarthy 181). The association of looting the city with shopping at the company store emphasizes not only the totalizing reach of commercialism, but also conflates the consumerist and survivalist impulse. Other images, such as the pharmacy lunch counter that holds a dried, decaying human head under a cakebell like a grisly daily special (184), tie the eating of humans more closely to the market. It is the one out-of-place item in the pharmacy, which the man finds to be looted, but "oddly intact" (184). The appearance of the head within an otherwise quotidian object is another example of how portrayals of cannibalism, as Berglund explains, estrange readers from our everyday experiences (43–44).

This estranging of ordinary things strongly links cannibalism and consumption to Giorgio Agamben's notion of capitalism as a religion with a sacred realm in opposition to a profane one. Agamben argues, "Religion can be defined as that which removes things, places, animals, or people from common use and transfers them to a separate sphere" for the use and purpose of gods (74). Christianity, whose imagery appears often in the novel, certainly has traditions and rites that estrange people and things from ordinary use: ordination, consecration, sacraments. Once items are in religion's sacred sphere, according to Agamben, they must be *profaned*, that is, retrieved from the exclusive sacred use by religion, in order for them to be used in common by people again. Agamben argues that capitalism mirrors the manner in which religion divides the sacred—what belongs to the gods—and the profane—what humans can use in common—except that capitalism in its most extreme form "aims at creating something absolutely unprofanable" (82) or irretrievable for common use by people. The remnant society of *The Road* has reached the totalizing end of capitalism, one in which everything and everyone is subject to ownership, exchange, and acquisition for consumption. According to Agamben, something belonging to the sacred realm of capitalism is consumed—destroyed and turned into waste by use or accumulated as stockpiled possessions that restrict use—and thereby removed from shared common use. Every commodity

> is transformed into an ungraspable fetish. The same is true for everything that is done, produced, or experienced—even the human body, even sexuality, even language. They are now divided from themselves and placed in a separate sphere that no longer defines any substantial division and where all use becomes and remains impossible. (81)

This sacred realm of capitalism is both consumption and spectacle. When something is consumed it becomes property or is destroyed and therefore is removed from the commons; when something becomes spectacle, it is "exhibited in separation from itself" (82) as in museums or exhibitions of artifacts, historic or otherwise. The packaged experiences of retail shopping, media, and tourism—hallmarks of American consumerism—all point to "the irrevocable loss of all use, the absolute impossibility of profaning" (85). The great problem, Agamben concludes, is to figure out how to profane what late capitalism has appropriated and made unprofanable.

The postapocalyptic world of *The Road* can be read as a realization of the religion of consumer capitalism. The prevalence of cannibalism is evidence that absolutely everything has crossed over to Agamben's sphere of separation,

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even the human body, by being consumed or becoming a spectacle, as in the aforementioned "tableau of the slain and devoured."[3] Reading the novel in light of Agamben's work runs counter to how critics have perceived what might typically be perceived as the sacred and the profane, and these serve as instances in the book that illustrate Agamben's paralleling of religion, specifically Christianity, with capitalism. Lydia Cooper identifies the prevalence of grail motifs in *The Road* and argues that they function as a method of preserving humanity at the end of the world, most significantly in the boy portrayed as the grail and his role as a "grail-bearer." The boy serves as a keeper of the sacred, emphasizing that in such a reading the only thing separating Christians practicing the Eucharist and the violent cannibals of the novel is the blood of Christ, or otherwise the blood of a sacrifice (225). But in light of Agamben's ideas, many images related to religion can also be related to cannibalism as consumerism metaphor. The bloodcults have essentially covenanted to eat people and each other when they die, and the red-scarved members might be described as men of the cloth, but the bloody cloth of utter consumption. The most powerful is a snowflake dissolving in the father's hands "like the last host of Christendom" (McCarthy 16), suggesting the giving way of Christianity as the most prevalent religion the United States to a consumer capitalist religion and that the father and the boy are in danger of being consumed in a cannibal sacrament. *The Road* presents a gruesome transubstantiation in which cannibalism and the keeping of slaves as catamites and livestock becomes a rite that irretrievably removes human beings into the realm of consumption and spectacle. Furthermore, the father says of his son, "If he is not the word of God God never spoke" (5). In this figuration, the boy represents Christ, who is called the Word in the Gospel of John, and is thereby in danger of becoming both the literal and metaphorical host of the Eucharist.

This strategy for reading *The Road* answers the question posed by Shelly Rambo, who in interpreting its narrative as a harrowing of Hell in which the boy more or less remains in Hell, asks how one formulates a theology in which life and death are one in the same. The boy's mother, before she leaves him and her husband to commit suicide, tells the father that they are already dead, "the walking dead in a horror film" (McCarthy 55). (She is concerned they could become people-eating zombies, a cultural icon long used as a metaphor for unbridled consumerism.) The man and his son talk frequently about starving, dying, or being close to death. Moreover, the narrator consistently describes the landscape as dead, with essentially no fauna or flora extant. The new religion is one in which everything is given over to consumption or spectacle. What matters is not life or death, but that everything has become an object of consumption or otherwise

abstracted from itself. Ben DeBruyn argues that since the scenes in this spectacle of annihilation bear no relation to the character's memories or their past, their identities begin to fade, for "the meanings we have attached to space and time dissolve" (782). When all that is left is consumption and spectacle, identities do not matter; they succumb to the same fate as the snowflake host.

Many readers of *The Road* have identified that the ethics of the novel revolve around the question of eating people, and Rune Graulaund has emphasized it as the one line the boy repeatedly insists that they do not cross (73). Cooper characterizes this line as a "radical commitment to mercy in a world where an act of mercy just may be a death sentence" (232–33). Where consumption is the status quo, the ethical challenges facing the man and the boy are really two fold. First, with consumption unavoidable, they must determine what is appropriate for consumption, but also how they should consume it. The second and the more daunting task is for them to find a way to profane what the extreme consumption of the novel has tried to make unprofanable: how are they able to remove items from the realm of consumption and property and restore them to common use? As illustrated by the beat-up shopping cart that they use to push their belongings, the father and son are without a doubt consumers, and throughout the novel the pair must decide what items they should carry with them and which ones to discard. But it turns out the ethical divide the boy cares about is not whether an individual consumes (for all individuals are consumers) or even eats other people, but rather what motivates that desire. In her reading of the fire-carrying metaphor that permeates the book—a metaphor that has obvious associations with the Prometheus myth[4]—Jessica Datema argues that the father and son understand the people they meet as either "good [or] bad fire-holders," a determination made when considering the motivations of the individual (144). In this light, "cannibalism is the corollary of consumer society run amok and the inability to respect or negotiate provisional borders" (145). What matters ultimately for the boy, who asserts to his father that he is indeed the one who must worry about the ramifications of their decisions, is the motivation for their choices about consumption, how they consume, or if this consumption could be countered by profanation, that is, acts or behaviors that return items and individuals to common use and collectivity.

Cannibalism appears on this front again, for some of the most jarring scenes in the book are the ones that turn individuals into the objects of consumption. Such was the case with the depiction of the redscarves marching with their human chattel, but such human property appears again. The house containing the ghastly scene in question is a large one with prominent "doric columns" and a "port cochere" that resemble an old plantation manor (105);

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the fear and dread expressed by the boy during the episode is even a bit of heavy-handed foreshadowing. What the father should recognize as archetypal remnants of a cannibal feast are spread out in the back yard of the house: a smoke house, and a menacing "forty gallon castiron cauldron of the kind once used for rendering hogs," the word "once" indicating that the pot has been repurposed, all items and facts that the man "saw and did not see" in his own search for something to consume (109). The pursuit leads them to the house's basement, where they find a herd of naked people being kept as livestock. As the property of the people who live in the house, they are utterly given over to the realm of consumption. The scene evokes earlier portrayals of cannibalism; the resemblance of the house to a plantation estate harkens to the antebellum South, where chattel slavery persisted through the middle of the nineteenth century even after it had been banned in the British Empire, where its detractors likened it to cannibalism.

The pervasiveness of consumption in *The Road* is evident even in the word choices of its characters and narrator. If the novel portends an end of capitalism, its setting presents an environment that is merely what is left after absolutely every resource has been harvested or appropriated, leaving only refuse, junk, and litter. The destiny of the consumed thing is to become *waste*, a word that appears several times in *The Road*, always as descriptions of the ashen dead landscape. In the manner that McCarthy uses the word, two denotations are relevant. First, the word can refer to land that is uninhabited, desert, or uncultivated, and such certainly applies to the land in *The Road*. However, the word can also mean refuse matter or the byproduct of industrial processes. Near the book's ending when the protagonists are wandering along the coast, the narrator describes the father observing the lifeless surroundings, saying, "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. The sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular. The silence" (274). In this passage, both meanings coincide: the world is both vast and empty and also the waste of itself, spent, used up, the leftovers from the passing away of the consumer society and the society of vagabonds and bloodcults wrenching nearly every last resource from the land and finally killing and eating each other. Moreover, the description of it as "secular" suggests the passing of traditional religions into the secular religion of consumption. The waste is even individuals, such as the lightning-struck man and the thief whom the father leaves naked after recovering their belongings, all of which had been stolen by the thief. The boy's compassion drives them back to where they left him, "halooing mindlessly into the waste" in their search for him in order to return at least his clothing (260). The thief does

not appear, for—having been spent by the father and son in recovering their goods—he has become part of the waste of the landscape.

Multivalences appear in the word *stuff*, as well. The word can refer to equipment, stores, or stock, and quite often the word appears in reference to the supplies the pair and others on the road carry with them. But in the language of commerce, *stuff* can also refer to commodities and moveable property, that is, all of the things a consumer accumulates. This is the sense the word is used as the man and boy prepare to leave the stocked bunker with what they can carry in just one shopping cart. The boy, wanting to push a second cart to accommodate more things, asks when his father explains that they should only take one cart, "What are we going to do with all the stuff?" (150). The boy does not call it "*our* stuff"; rather, the boy earlier gives thanks to the people who left their stuff, saying they use it only because the original owner now cannot (146). Still, the boy recognizes it as moveable property, items that are subject to possession, the same way that a person might wonder upon moving that to do with all of his or her stuff or handle the disposal of an estate.

Yet in McCarthy's imagined destruction, there is the hint there could eventually be no one to do the possessing. This possibility is posed by Ely, an old man that the father and son meet on their journey, and who benefits from the boy's willingness to share resources with others. The old man says, "When we're all gone at last then there'll be nobody here but death and his days will be numbered too. He'll be out in the road there with nothing to do and nobody to do it to. He'll say: Where did everybody go? And that's how it will be. What's wrong with that?" (173). Ely anticipates oblivion to be the end of any society of absolute consumption. Eventually, the consumers become the consumed; all becomes waste.

No doubt, there is a moral reading of the consumption in the novel, as cannibalism is problematic for most readers precisely because it closes off the possibility of rebuilding any resemblance of modern society by having a relationship with other people that does not involve viewing the person as a resource. Erik J. Wielenberg notes this when he argues, "The cannibals of *The Road* may survive, but they have paid a heavy price for doing so. By turning their back on morality, they have cut themselves off from genuine human connections forever" (14). There is the promise in the end of the novel that the boy will be able to build some meaningful human relationship, having been found (somehow) by the nuclear family in the middle of the nuclear winter. Yet the real challenge for the boy will be determining how to profane, that is to say, how to recover and make available items for the common use again rather than just commodities owned and consumed. Agamben suggests that one of the ways that profanation happens

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is in play, and notes that children do this all the time. Children "make toys out of things that also belong to the spheres of economics, war, law, and other activities that we are used to thinking of as serious" (76). However, Agamben also argues that modern capitalism has gradually eliminated opportunities for true play, which profanes items given over to property and consumption. "Once profaned, that which was unavailable and separate loses its aura and is returned to use," he explains. Profanation, achieved through play or other means, is significant because it "deactivates the apparatuses of power and returns to common use the spaces that power had seized" (77). The challenge for the boy and the family that he has joined at the end of the novel is to resist the drive to appropriate and own, which would reinforce the consumerist paradigm and culminate with the end Ely alludes to—when all has been consumed and there is nothing left.

Yet in the novel the opportunities for play and therefore profanation appear limited. Actual instances of play are few; there is a yellow toy truck the boy has, but it is just one item among others carried in the shopping cart. Play is not on the boy's mind because he had forgotten he had it (McCarthy 35). Also early in the narrative the boy is awakened by a nightmare involving a windup toy penguin. In the dream, he sees himself and his dad in their old house, where the penguin appears from "around the corner but nobody had wound it up and it was really scary"; the boy reiterates, "The winder wasnt turning" (36; 37). The terror that the boy has for the penguin demonstrates that the toy is something familiar that has become ultimately estranged, limiting the possibility of play. Rather than having been wound up for play, the penguin is now an object more akin to the bloodcult marching down the road like "wind-up toys" (91).

When there are moments of play in the novel, they are fleeting. When a bloodcult raids the man and boy's shopping cart, they take a set of "four big steel washers they'd [the man and boy] found in a hardware store" used to play quoits (76). However, that game does not appear in the novel. It is instead a possibility that is closed by the theft. An opportunity for play presents itself again when the boy discovers an abandoned passenger train one morning. There is some hint that the boy, born after the cataclysm, perhaps played with model trains earlier (he's able to identify the engine as a diesel). After the father has combed the cars for any supplies, he and the boy explore the engine cab, where he puts the boy in the seat to touch the controls. The man even makes noises to mimic the sound of a train, "but he wasn't sure what these might mean to the boy" because he would never have heard them (180). The narrator explains further, "After a while they just looked out through the silted glass to where the track curved away in the waste of weeds. If they saw different worlds what they knew was the same. That the train would sit there slowly decomposing for all eternity

and that no train would ever run again" (180). The father and son do not have a common experience with trains, at least in understanding their function as a mainstay of public transportation or even what they sound like. This inhibits any chance that the pair could play with the train, profaning it from the "waste of weeds." In their imaginations, they see not a train, but an unsalvageable train spent by others, no longer available for collective use.

The train is not the only attempt the man makes at getting the boy to play. The man whittles a flute out of cane for the boy; he eventually plays it a few steps behind the man as they walk down the road. In this moment the boy does seem engaged in play. The dead cane is used by the man to create what he intends to be a diversion for the boy, and the flute does that, for he becomes "lost in concentration" playing it (78). Its purpose is not provision or property, and so it is a kind of play, for the boy at least. However, the man himself seems doubtful of the music's efficacy for himself. The father hears the notes played by the boy as, "A formless music for the age to come. Or perhaps the last music on earth called up from out of the ashes of the ruin" (77). The child does not even hold this possibility open for himself. To the surprise of this father, he discards the flute (159). Eventually the boy also rejects hearing one of his father's stories because they "are not true," because "in the stories we're always helping people and we dont help people" (268), nor do they swap stories again. The collectivity that play should help to restore grows to be unrealistic to the boy, and he seems close to rejecting play altogether as ineffective and hopeless for restoring the commons.

The chance for play appears a final time, but does not resolve, in the novel's problematic conclusion. The greatest challenge critics have identified in the ending is the sudden appearance of the nuclear family to adopt the boy after his father dies (how did the boy and his father travel as far as they did and happen upon the first family of "good guys" the day the father can travel no more?). The shotgun-toting man exhibits the same kind of resourcefulness and discernment as the boy's father in his carrying of a bandolier of improvised, handloaded shotgun shells and his sorting of the boy's belongings (McCarthy 283, 285); this man, too, is a careful consumer. McCarthy does not show the reader what this nuclear family eats to survive or what property or stores it has. Indeed, the boy seems safe from the end of capitalism through the collective that is the family, for now. But even if these folks do not eat people now, what about in the future? And most problematically for the case of play, the father of this nuclear family mentions to the boy that he has a son and a daughter, yet the children are never seen; only the boy's interaction with the first woman in his life is recounted. Rather, at the novel's conclusion, this imagined end of capitalism does not terminate or replace capitalism at all but

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ultimately reaffirms it by suggesting that the kinds of consumerism that thrived during the prior civilization will endure into the postcivilization.

The closing paragraph of the novel furthers this affirmation through its compelling, fleeting image of the past, before the religion of capitalism takes hold. "Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains," it begins, the past tense suggesting that there are trout no longer, perhaps no longer mountains even (286). The image suggests items in the world held in common: resources not yet possessed by humans, such as the streams that could be used in common for food, like the trout, but were dammed to create the reservoir the man and boy saw near the beginning of their journey south. Before being possessed within the realm of consumption, the trout provide "patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery" (287). If humans can maintain a common use relationship with the stream and trout, they will be maintaining, according to Agamben, "a relationship with something that cannot be appropriated" (83). The maps and mazes exist only in nonconsumptive use. This image of nonappropriating use "lays bare the true nature of property, which is nothing but the device that moves the free use of men into a separate sphere, where it is converted into a right" (83). But the past tense of the paragraph indicates that a human hand does eventually take the trout for its own possession, giving it over to the realm of property, closing off the common use and the cognizance of that mystery and wonder of the "world in its becoming." The novel closes with vast uncertainty that its world could ever be profaned; Agamben declares it a difficult but necessary task, and in McCarthy's vision, where the end merely suggests better times in the past, it remains a nearly impossible task.

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NOTES

1. See works subsequently cited in this article by Lydia Cooper, Shelly L. Rambo, and Erik J. Wielenberg, as well as works by Francisco Collado-Rodriguez, Susan Kollin, and Christopher Pizzino.

2. See works subsequently cited in this article by Jeff Berglund, Peter Hulme, Maggie Kilgour, Mimi Sheller, and Charlotte Sussman. Also of interest for establishing the critical context of cannibalism in literature (especially trans-Atlantic literature) is the larger volume in which Hulme's and Kilgour's essays appear, *Cannibalism and the Colonial World* (Ed. Barker, Hulme, and Iversen). The volume also contains Crystal Bartolovich's close reading of Peter Greenaway's film, *The Cook, the Thief, his Wife, and her Lover* (1989), as a critique of consumerist culture. Her essay reviews the ways Marx pointedly uses terms that are explicitly connected to cannibalism to describe capitalist enterprise. Bartolovich also posits that cannibalism can symbolize the problem of an old order passing away without something ready to replace it, such as the West's shift from manufacturing to service economies, which parallels the world of *The Road* and its passage from civilization into postcivilization.

3. Deborah Root, in *Cannibal Culture: Art, Appropriation, and the Commodification of Difference*, argues, "it is also useful to extend the definition of cannibalism to forms of consumption that occur beyond the physical body of the individual or even the community. It is possible to consume somebody's spirit, somebody's past or history, or somebody's arts and to do so in such a way that the act of consumption appears beautiful and heroic" (18). Though Root is concerned primarily with problems with Western appropriation of art by cultures it categorizes as *native*, her paralleling of culture consumption and appropriation with cannibalism provides another precedent for my reading of cannibalism in *The Road* as a metaphor for totalizing, appropriating consumerism.

4. See Daniel Luttrull's "Prometheus Hits *The Road*: Revising the Myth" for a thorough examination of the Prometheus allusion in *The Road*.

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