

Cannibalism and Other Transgressions of the Human in *The Road*

Andrew Estes



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/12368>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.12368

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Andrew Estes, « Cannibalism and Other Transgressions of the Human in *The Road* », *European journal of American studies* [Online], 12-3 | 2017, Online since 12 December 2017, connection on 18 December 2017. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/12368> ; DOI : 10.4000/ejas.12368

This text was automatically generated on 18 December 2017.

Creative Commons License

Cannibalism and Other Transgressions of the Human in *The Road*

Andrew Estes

- 1 Although many readings of McCarthy's 2006 novel *The Road* emphasize cannibalism,¹ most critics see cannibalism as a symbol for something else, such as consumerism, or, like Jordon J. Dominy, present it mainly as a method of "othering." In doing so, they neglect important statements on moral relativism and cannibalism, such as we find in Montaigne, as well as the fact that the figure of the cannibal provided the starting point for many philosophical investigations into the origins of civilization. Most postcolonial discourse on cannibalism follows William Arens, who maintains that Europeans created the idea of ritualistic cannibalism, imposing it on the newly discovered Americas (7). This concept seems inadequate to describe *The Road*. This is because McCarthy's post-apocalyptic vision differs so greatly from the historical world of the Americas in early modernity. The present article contributes to McCarthy scholarship by an emphasis on the act of cannibalism itself. Furthermore, I situate cannibalism within a few important historical texts before turning to modern anthropologists and literary historians to support my close reading of McCarthy's novel. The topos of flesh-eating does not debut in *The Road* but appears in earlier McCarthy texts such as *Outer Dark* (1968). While I focus on *The Road*, insights developed here can serve as a base for critical readings of other texts.
- 2 For the purposes of this article I use cannibalism and anthropophagy as synonyms, although, in fact, they are different. Cannibalism in modern usage is generic. The word comes from Columbus's rendering of the Caribs' name for themselves. It since broadened to mean individuals of a species which consume individuals of the same species. Anthropophagy literally means "man-eater" and thus applies uniquely to humans.

1. Contextualizing Cannibalism

- 3 In his article "Cannibalism, Consumerism and Profanation," Dominy points out that

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 (144).

- 4 Yet almost from the beginning, discourse on cannibalism that uses anthropophagy as the litmus test for civilization spawned a relativizing counter trend. Montaigne exhibits this in his famous essay “On Cannibalism.” In 1592, in Rouen, France, Montaigne met with some indigenous people from Brazil. He compares the so-called barbarism of the native Brazilians, who eat prisoners taken in war, with the abominable acts of Portuguese soldiers who subjugated them. He comes to the conclusion that the contemporary Western world was actually more barbarous than the newly discovered Americas, despite well-publicized propensities towards anthropophagy. Indeed, according to Montaigne’s sources, some of the crueler Brazilians stopped the practice of eating captured prisoners of war and, in order to better punish their enemies, started employing methods of torture learned from Portuguese soldiers. All in all, Montaigne finds it quite correct to condemn the Brazilians’ flesh-eating, but he lashes out at those in the West who turn a blind eye to what he considers far worse practices occurring close to home: “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” (239). Montaigne’s essay is interesting in its introspection, its rejection of xenophobia and, above all, its moral relativism.
- 5 Of course, the position taken by Montaigne in his essay is only possible because of the special place occupied by cannibalism. Anthropophagy marks a sort of ground zero of human culture. It serves to define the Other, to mark people as either belonging to or being excluded from humanity. It is the ultimate and original transgression and, in many ways, its suppression is the point of departure for any sort of social contract, for any sort of society.² In the past, cannibalism was used as a starting point for conjectures on the “natural” state of man.
- 6 Though cannibalism is often set up as a moral nadir and as an incarnation of horror, it also exercises a strange attraction. Take, for example, its near universal presence in all known literary traditions. The anthropologist Laurence R. Goldman claims that anthropophagy often points in two directions simultaneously, “somehow evil and abhorred, somehow attractive and desired” (12). Summing up the research of many anthropologists, cannibalism reveals itself as both horrible and alluring. It serves to define morality and spurs iconic statements of moral relativity, such as Montaigne’s. These contradictions deserve a brief exploration.
- 7 Starting with Aristotle, debates on natural law were formative for culture in the Greco-Roman world. These developed, with many changes, through the Middle Ages and into the modern period. Aristotle famously positioned nature as opposed to custom. Laws and customs, he argued in *Rhetoric*, are always particular and regional. They must bow before nature, which is universal and timeless. Behind this division lies an idea of nature as good, providing a model which society should copy.³
- 8 This idea of nature survives, with much modification, down to Hobbes who inverts Aristotle’s thinking. Here, humans are imbued with a “natural proclivity...to hurt each other;” they claim “a Right to every thing, even to one anothers [sic] body” and “nothing can be unjust” (Hobbes 80). For Hobbes, an apologist for absolute monarchy, men bind

themselves together because of what they fear, not, as Cicero would have it, because of a certain social spirit. Hobbes argues that men are roughly equal in body and mind and that this lack of clear superiority leads to conflict (75). In the primitive state, nothing is unjust because men have sworn no allegiance and are engaged in a primeval struggle for survival, “a warre of every man against every man” (78). Conservative thinkers, such as Hobbes and his followers, need nature to be violent and anarchic in order to justify their imposition of order (Robin 41).

- 9 The chaotic, value-free, ur-state of nature is not unique to the reactionary Hobbes. The figure of the cannibal plays an important role in Enlightenment debates on morality, natural law and the origins of culture. Diderot’s much-read *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville* (1796) presents a dialogue where two philosophers discuss what human culture must have looked like in its earliest, most primitive stages. Here, the philosophers consider population growth on an island with limited resources and cut off from the rest of the world. Cannibalism must have occurred here, conclude the philosophers, as it must have occurred for all peoples at some point in the past. Yet for most cultures this history belongs to an unrecoverable and almost unimaginable past. Contemporary cultural and religious institutions have their origins in the suppression and forgetting of these acts.⁴ The true nature of nature is bloody, speculates Diderot. Cannibalism, castration, infanticide, and murder were eventually incorporated into religion. Religion became more complex and was able to deny its origins. From religion came, eventually, civil institutions, reason the philosophers in the dialogue.
- 10 Although the figure of the cannibal was often used as a starting point for reflections on the origins of civilization, as in Diderot’s dialogue, this is no longer the case for contemporary philosophy. Catalin Avramescu’s monograph *An Intellectual History of Cannibalism* (2003) argues that the figure of the cannibal becomes radically altered after the Enlightenment. In modern times, eaters of human flesh are no longer invoked in discussions of limited resources, the nature of nature, and the origins of culture:
- Beyond this point [the Enlightenment], the anthropophagus will become the creature we know today: a product of particular circumstances. Extreme hunger, extinct customs in regions now invaded by tourists, and the manifestations of a profoundly deranged mind: all these are glimmers of a causality once described by distinct sciences. The anthropophagous nation has been reduced to a sad rabble of eccentrics, who each separately lead a tortured existence within a small ecological niche, incapable of constituting any starting point for the articulation of a moral philosophy. (Avramescu 2)
- 11 Cannibals do however continue to command attention in literature. One thinks of literary anthropophagi such as found in the work of Herman Melville and McCarthy, but also of zombies and vampires, which seem to be ubiquitous in print and on the screen. If anything, the figure of the cannibal is increasing its presence within modern, popular culture.⁵ Still, if Avramescu is right and the cannibal has disappeared from philosophical debate, this disappearance is mirrored within the discipline of anthropology.
- 12 In 1979, the anthropologist William Arens became famous among his colleagues and in academia in general by claiming never to have found direct, reliable evidence for the custom of flesh eating by a society (Goldman 13). This debate shaped anthropology not only because it marked a shift from colonialism to postcolonialism, but also because it became standard reading for undergraduates when approaching the discipline, thus informing the views of a generation of anthropologists. A few lines from his groundbreaking 1979 article deserve direct quotation:

I am dubious about the actual existence of this act as an accepted practice for any time or place.... I have been unable to uncover adequate documentation of cannibalism as a custom in any form for any society.... the idea of “other” as cannibals, rather than the act, is the universal phenomenon. (Arens qtd. in Goldman 13)

- 13 One can then add “radical doubt” to the picture of cannibalism sketched thus far. Arens’s contention may have raised questions of epistemology, historical reconstruction and provided a window on how anthropologists do ethnography (Goldman 14), but his unequivocal positioning of cannibalism as “myth” meant that the actual act of anthropophagy or existence of cannibals became obscured by debates on methodology and ideology. Maggie Kilgour, following Arens, argues that “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” (qtd. in Dominy 145). This seems of limited use in analyzing the literary world of *The Road*, because it restricts cannibalism to discourses on race. While race is important in any American text, this has been covered by Dominy (144) and other scholars and I wish to focus on other aspects of cannibalism. Goldman provides additional intellectual background to anthropophagy that is more conducive to my own reading McCarthy’s novel.
- 14 In the last few years, anthropology has been able to absorb the lessons of Arens’s essay. Research on the discourses and act of cannibalism has become a more accepted, if still fraught field of enquiry. Goldman’s 1999 survey, *The Anthropology of Cannibalism*, was a watershed moment for the discipline. In his text he proposes three categories in which anthropophagy has occurred or has been said to occur. The first is *survival cannibalism*. Humans eat each other in emergency situations. This is almost certainly a fact, as examples like the 1846 Donner Party attest.⁶ Another famous incident was a plane crash in the Andes in 1972, a 70-day ordeal chronicled in the film *Alive* (1993). The second is *exocannibalism*, which refers to the consumption of outsiders. Montaigne’s Brazilians, who ate captured enemies, exemplify this second group. Finally, *endocannibalism* refers to “the consumption of flesh from a member of one’s ‘insider’ group (possibly kinship or descent) and seems usually associated with ideologies about the recycling and regeneration of life-force substances” (Goldman 14).

2. Cannibalism in *The Road*: Re-thinking the Nature/ Human Divide

- 15 After having reviewed some important discourses on cannibalism, I would like now to turn to *The Road*. Upon first glance, one finds evidence for all three of Goldman’s categories. In the novel, some people do consume each other to survive. Furthermore, there are instances of exocannibalism in that certain groups prey on other groups. The horror house that the man and the boy discover with humans used for food stored in the basement speaks to this, as does the line “this tableau of the slain and the devoured” (*The Road* 91). Perhaps the novel’s “bloodcults” can be aligned with endocannibalism. Myths from many different cultures refer to the necessity of sacrifice in order to counter the infertility of the land, which must be replenished by blood (Goldman 8–9).
- 16 After some consideration, Goldman’s categories seem inadequate to describe the world of *The Road*. They can be useful though as a foil in an analysis of the new community formed

by the man and the boy. The first category mainly applies to emergency survival situations where people could count on being re-integrated into larger society. The world of *The Road* is, however, a permanent emergency with no hope for reconnecting with pre-apocalyptic society. This lack of hope makes *The Road*'s flesh-eating fundamentally incompatible with survival cannibalism as established by anthropologists. In the same way, it is difficult to speak of exocannibalism, because there do not seem to be stable groups. One hears of "the communes" ("He was an outcast from one of the communes" [255]), "bad guys", "good guys" and "road agents," but these appear to be much more impromptu and casual groupings. They are much less well defined than, say, warring tribes with distinct histories, cultures and languages, as with Montaigne's Brazilians. Endocannibalism seems the most appropriate category for *The Road*, given the mention of blood cults and their link to agricultural regeneration. Yet again here, the lack of stable groupings makes this category problematic. Moreover, McCarthy's text does not tell us whether the victims of the blood cults are drawn from within or without their ranks.

- 17 Anthropologists have established that the idea of cannibalism—not the act but the idea—is ubiquitous in human culture and that it is almost always imputed to other groups, with whom there is little or no contact (Ramsey qtd. in Goldman, 105). Furthermore, in the historical record, few attest to anthropophagy actually taking place. Rather, a topos of the genre is the witness stumbling over the remains of a cannibal feast, with the flesh eaters themselves absent (Dominy 147). Yet in *The Road* cannibalism is a normal part of a new culture which the man and the boy experience firsthand.
- 18 The unnamed protagonist often repeats that he and his son are the good guys. This assertion rests at least in part on the accusation of the bad guys being cannibals. Of course the man and boy do not consume human flesh. Still, the claim that the man and the boy are the good guys can be judged by readers to be highly subjective beyond the one crucial fact of not committing cannibalism. The boy knows that they are not cannibals but still challenges the good guy narrative increasingly as the text nears its conclusion. There are also at least two other incidents where the son questions the legitimacy of their "goodguyness." The first is their encounter with an old wanderer; the man thinks he could be a decoy for bandits and when this turns out not to be the case is still unwilling to share their supply of food (161). The boy wants to feed the old wanderer and take him with them but the man refuses to accept the responsibility and risk. In the second incident the man shoots a bandit with the flare gun in self-defense (263). Directly afterwards, the boy refuses his father's offer to tell him a story, "Those stories are not true.... in the stories we're always helping people and we dont help people" (268). The boy is starting to suspect that the father's ordering of the world is not based on universal moral principles but entirely on his own limited perspective and self-interest. This is but one instance of the cultural chasm opening up between the boy and the man as the novel continues: "he understood for the first time that to the boy he was himself an alien" (153).
- 19 If Goldman's categories seem inadequate for this textual world, one could instead investigate the links between cannibalism and nature. Anthropophagy is continually referenced implicitly (often) and explicitly (less often) throughout the novel. This is because the destroyed wilderness spaces retain an eerie power; they lie outside the purview of human understanding. The barren landscapes are often malignant and align better with Hobbes than Aristotle and Cicero. McCarthy uses cannibalism in precisely the opposite way as Montaigne's moral relativism. In McCarthy's fiction cannibalism serves

as a marker of depravity; anthropophagy becomes the symbol and example of evil. In this sense, it recalls pan-cultural myths of flesh-eating such as the Polyphemus episode in *The Odyssey*.⁷

20 Thus, *The Road* places readers far from Arens's postcolonial doubt. McCarthy's cannibalism is not something projected by the dominant culture onto the Other. It is not an intellectual tool used to emancipate the postcolonial subject. It is real and indisputable; it is the true nature of nature.⁸

21 In *The Road*, cannibalism interrogates categories such as the human and the natural. In the novel, nature as commonly understood has disappeared altogether. This is important because our modern moment often defines nature as needing protection (the Environmental Protection Agency), as a picturesque backdrop or something studied by specialists—science is divided up into ever smaller and more specific fields. In *The Road* nature, as understood by wilderness spaces, is no longer under threat by built environments and human pollution. It has been irrevocably altered by the apocalyptic event. The text does not specify whether this event was human caused but for the two protagonists the result is the same. The natural has ceased to exist yet the other half of the binary, the human, has been decimated as well, with the man and the boy representing one of the last recognizably human communities. The grey skies, bad air and lack of agricultural fertility eventually kill the man (although he technically dies from some form of respiratory disease). The wanderer who gets struck by lightning (50) and the many trees that threaten to smash the man and the boy (97) attest to the sudden withdrawal of the natural.

22 But if the man and the boy represent humanity's last gasp their depiction is still remarkable when compared with other texts. *The Road's* obsessive focus on the damaged nuclear family and the impenetrable brutality of nature (blasted landscapes inhabited by flesh-eating road agents) are by no means forgone conclusions in survivalist narratives. Just the opposite point has been made by Rebecca Solnit. She argues that one often witnesses a coming together and human flourishing in times of natural catastrophe. Solnit's position aligns itself with more established thinkers such as Thomas Paine who observed that during the Revolutionary War social order and harmony were maintained despite the absence of government. In *The Rights of Man* (1791) Paine argues:

There is a natural aptness in man, and moreso in society, because it embraces a greater variety of abilities and resources, to accommodate itself to whatever situation it is in. The instant formal government is abolished, society begins to act. A general association takes place, and common interest produces common security. So far is it from being true, as has been pretended, that the abolition of any formal Government is the dissolution of society, that it acts by a contrary impulse, and brings the latter closer together. (64)

23 McCarthy's novel would have it otherwise. Instead of exploring new ways of social organization and cooperation, *The Road* falls back on the nuclear family and the father-son relationship as the lynchpin of society. This can be read as reactionary, but is wholly in keeping with the dark vision of nature outlined above.⁹ There is a symbiotic link in *The Road's* devastated natural environments (wilderness spaces) and decimated human communities. So much so that the binary ceases to hold and what the text depicts is a gray sameness.

24 The presence of cannibalism in McCarthy's texts questions the humanity of those who engage in the practice. They are liminal figures, much like the murderous necrophiliac

Lester Ballard or the bandit trio of *Outer Dark* or *Blood Meridian*'s Judge Holden. Stylistically, *The Road* echoes this liminality. The text turns away from humans in its use of minimalist dialogues and lack of speech and thought tags. Lydia Cooper argues that "the visual starkness of the text reflects an equal absence of subjectivity. The lack of commas, ellipses, and parentheses—all of which often indicate the presence of an evaluative consciousness—mirrors a syntactical refusal to acknowledge evaluative consciousnesses other than that of a distant, removed narrator" (3).

- 25 Through cannibalism, *The Road* has managed to return people to their status as animals. The novel upends traditional humanist notions and makes people "killable" in Donna Haraway's sense, when she speaks of animals raised for consumption. (296) *The Road* can be understood as posthuman in at least two ways: the very literal sense of a world depopulated and the collapse of philosophical order called humanism (Callus and Herbrechter 144).¹⁰ Through humans' (near) disappearance from the earth, and from narration that shifts the locus of action away from the psychological, we have a move away from the human "evaluative consciousness" typical for art produced under humanist aesthetic codes. *The Road* depicts the end of humans, but also the end of humanism. This end, curiously, resembles the beginning: "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" (*The Road* 274). Nature in the form of wilderness spaces has ceased to exist. Likewise, the human communities have been (almost) wiped out as well. The natural and the human depend upon each other to such an extent that the destruction of one necessarily entails the other's demise.
- 26 If, for Diderot, cannibalism marked an early, irretrievable stage in the development of human culture, McCarthy's novel allows us to observe these beginnings in the late stages of the world's unfolding. Here, civic institutions and religions are ripped away to expose the raw underpinnings of culture. And, just as the philosophers in Diderot's dialogue feared, these are murder, infanticide and cannibalism.
- 27 Many mythical traditions associate cannibalism with the beginnings of the world. Goldman, summarizing, argues: "The cannibal race is portrayed as inimical to any continued habitation by humankind *until some cataclysmic event*, which heralded their complete or partial destruction" (Goldman 8; my italics). This is but another instance in which *The Road* aligns itself with pan-cultural myths in its evocation of apocalypse and flesh-eating. A focus on cannibalism allows readers to see it as a brilliant reworking of the very oldest and most established tropes that literature possesses.
- 28 Anthropophagy defines perpetrators as human while at the same time placing them outside this category. Only a human can commit cannibalism by definition. Yet this act is enshrined across many cultures as one of the most extreme forms of transgression and thus becomes a marker of the *inhuman*. Positioned this way, cannibalism questions the very notion of the human.
- 29 *The Road*'s depiction of nature (understood as non-human, wilderness spaces) differs from other apocalyptic literature in that nature and culture are so closely intertwined—so much so that the fall of one entails the destruction of the other. This connectedness explains the odd embrace of consumer culture, which is often linked to environmental problems. Why, in a text where the end of the world perhaps results from over-consumption, should a Coca Cola be so celebrated?¹¹ *The Road* has often been read as a dire eco-disaster (Kollin), along the lines of Ursula K. Le Guin's 1985 novel *Always Coming Home*.

Yet, when the man and the boy stumble upon a fallout shelter, the remnants of this same consumer culture are invoked in a thoroughly positive, un-ironic way:

Crate upon crate of canned goods. Tomatoes, peaches, beans, apricots. Canned hams. Corned beef. Hundreds of gallons of water in ten gallon plastic jerry jugs. Paper towels, toiletpaper, paper plates. Plastic trashbags stuffed with blankets. He held his forehead in his hand. Oh my God, he said. (*The Road* 138)

- 30 Because the world is shrinking “down about a raw core of parsible entities” (88), these objects, normally associated with today’s overly commodified world, take on new meaning. The above items reflect the normally mundane contents of a typical American supermarket, but they achieve epic status in this post-apocalyptic world. If Don DeLillo in *White Noise* (1985) could poke fun at the way consumer culture permeates every aspect of American existence, there is no such irony here. In McCarthy, the few cans of beans and paper towels mark the last instances of American superabundance. Whereas most of *The Road* depicts the man’s skepticism about the existence of God, God is directly and unproblematically invoked in this scene. Indeed, more than a list, this passage reads like a litany; it is a reading out of God’s blessings accompanied by the man’s fervent response.
- 31 Linking God and an abundance of food is entirely appropriate. If the text has represented cannibalism as the ultimate evil, its opposite, a high-calorie pre-apocalyptic feast, must necessarily be the ultimate good.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arens, William. *The Man-Eating Myth: Anthropology & Anthropophagy*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979. Print.
- Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*. Trans. and ed. H. C. Lawson-Tancred. London: Penguin, 1991. Print.
- Avramescu, Catalin. *An Intellectual History of Cannibalism*. Trans. Alistair Ian Blyth. Oxfordshire: Princeton UP, 2011. Print.
- Badmington, Neil. “Posthumanism.” In *The Routledge Companion to Science and Literature*. New York, USA: Routledge, 2011. Print.
- Callus, Ivan and Herbrechter, Stefan. “Posthumanism.” *The Routledge Companion to Critical and Cultural Theory*. London: Routledge, 2013. Print.
- Cooper, Lydia R. *No More Heroes: Narrative Perspective and Morality in Cormac McCarthy*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2011. Print.
- Diderot, Denis. *Supplement au Voyage de Bougainville*. Trans. and ed. Peter Jimack. London: Grant & Cutler Ltd., 1989. Print.
- Donnelly, Brian. “‘Coke is It!’: Placing Coca-Cola in McCarthy’s *The Road*.” *Explicator* 68.1 (2010): 70-73. Print.
- Dominy, Jordan J. “Cannibalism, Consumerism, and Profanation: Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* and the End of Capitalism.” *Cormac McCarthy Journal* vol. 13 (2015): 143-158. Print.

- Girard, René. *The Scapegoat*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986. Print.
- Goldman, Laurence R. *The Anthropology of Cannibalism*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1999. Print.
- Haraway, Donna. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008. Print.
- Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Pacific Publishing Studio, 2011. Print.
- Kollin, Susan. "Barren, silent, godless': Ecodisaster and Post-abundant Landscape in *The Road*." *Cormac McCarthy: All the Pretty Horses, No Country for Old Men, The Road*. Ed. Sara Spurgeon. New York: Continuum, 2011. 157-171. Print.
- McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. New York, NY: Vintage International, 2006. Print.
- Montaigne, Michel. "On the Cannibals." *The Complete Essays*. Trans. and ed. M. A. Screech. London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2003. 228-241. Print.
- Paine, Thomas. "The Rights of Man." *The Civil Society Reader*. Virginia Hodgkinson and Michael Foley, eds. Lebanon, NH: UP of New England, 2003. Print.
- Rambo, Shelly L. "Beyond Redemption?: Reading Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* After the End of the World." *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 41.2 (2008): 99-120. Print.
- Robin, Corey. *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011. Print.
- Solnit, Rebecca. *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster*. London: Penguin Books, 2010. Print.
- Wielenberg, Erik J. "God, Morality, and Meaning in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *Cormac McCarthy Journal* 8.1 (2010): 1-16. Print.

NOTES

1. See, for instance, Cooper (2011), Rambo (2008), or Wielenberg (2010).
2. According to the anthropologist Kerry Zubrinich, the notion of cannibalism speaks to "what it means to be human" (qtd. in Goldman 5).
3. "It will now be well to make a complete classification of just and unjust actions. We may begin by observing that they have been defined relatively to two kinds of law, and also relatively to two classes of persons. By the two kinds of law I mean particular law and universal law. Particular law is that which each community lays down and applies to its own members: this is partly written and partly unwritten. Universal law is the law of Nature. For there really is, as every one to some extent divines, a natural justice and injustice that is binding on all men, even on those who have no association or covenant with each other. It is this that Sophocles' Antigone clearly means when she says that the burial of Polyneices was a just act in spite of the prohibition: she means that it was just by nature" (Aristotle 1373b).
4. René Girard has expounded on the idea in his work on the scapegoat mechanism (9).
5. They are also important for posthumanist discourse (Callus and Herbrechter 152).
6. The Donner Party was the name given to one of the most famous instances of cannibalism in the modern world. George Donner and James F. Reed led a party of 87 settlers for California in 1846. Trapped in the mountains, the group resorted to cannibalism in order to survive. This was documented in letters which later circulated. Only 48 members of the group were rescued; they reached California in 1847.

7. There are other links to Polyphemus. His monstrous body and diminished eyesight recall the cave creature at the beginning of *The Road*. Eyesight (perception), the status of the human (by invoking monsters) and flesh-eating are often found together. One prominent example of this threefold association is children's literature, but the phenomenon is much more far-reaching than just this.

8. This positioning of nature also manifests itself in *Outer Dark* and perhaps *Blood Meridian* (1985) and even *Child of God* (1973), as Lester Ballard drifts further and further away from the human.

9. The adoption of the boy by the survivalist family at the end of the novel would, admittedly, connect McCarthy to Solnit and Paine. However, the optimism of the ending seems to be out of keeping with the rest of the novel and thus to be the exception that proves the rule. Other McCarthy critics will disagree.

10. Neil Badmington's entry on posthumanism in the *Routledge Companion to Literature and Science* (2011) sums up humanism in this way: "the human being occupies a natural and eternal place at the very centre of things, where it is distinguished absolutely from machines, animals, and other inhuman entities; where it shares with all other human beings a unique essence; where it is the origin of meaning and the sovereign subject of history.... In the humanist account, human beings are exceptional, autonomous and set above the world that lies at their feet" (374). Since all of this is very much at stake in *The Road* one can thus classify it as posthumanist. For me the decentering of the human comes with the destruction of wilderness spaces and, as I have argued above, with the normalization of cannibalism.

11. Donnelly links cannibalism with consumerism, represented by the Coke (72).

ABSTRACTS

The concept of cannibalism is essential for the dark vision laid out by Cormac McCarthy in his novel *The Road* (2006). This article sketches a brief history of the idea of anthropophagy in the Western intellectual tradition. Examining the various twists and turns the idea has taken throughout time enables a better understanding of McCarthy's use of the trope. Cannibalism commands a particular moral force and is often associated with ultimate evil or the antithesis of civilization. The recent emergence of posthumanism as an area of philosophical and literary enquiry adds further urgency to the topic of anthropophagy, which serves both to define the human and to place individuals outside this category. Finally, a focus on cannibalism allows reexamination of important issues for McCarthy scholarship such as the human/nature binary and consumer society.

INDEX

Keywords: Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, cannibalism, natural law, ecocriticism

AUTHOR

ANDREW ESTES

Andrew Estes is originally from Nashville, Tennessee and now teaches American literature and history at the University of Munich (LMU). He earned his BA at the University of Georgia, his Masters at Johns Hopkins and completed his PhD at the University of Munich in 2011. His dissertation treats environmental criticism and Cormac McCarthy; it was published in 2013 in the series “Spatial Practices” at Editions Rodopi.