Individualism in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*: the Highway to Unsustainability

Narie JUNG
Sungkyunkwan University, South Korea
narie.jung@skku.edu

Abstract: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* demonstrates the centrality of individualism to the unsustainability that defines consumer culture in the Anthropocene. His representation of cannibalism not only reflects the main problems of consumer culture but also sheds light on individualism as its driving force. While the cannibalistic world of *The Road* presents a struggle of individuals for autonomy, the novel's unnamed boy protagonist shows that empathy can be a viable solution for that struggle. The novel suggests that making consumer culture sustainable means recognizing the violence of individualism and the significance of empathetic consciousness simultaneously. To exit the highway that leads to unsustainability means taking the road of empathy, for only this will potentially lead to sustainability in the Anthropocene.
Keywords: empathy, individualism, *The Road*, unsustainable consumerism.

INTRODUCTION

One of the things missing from the *UN 2015-2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (see https://sdgs.un.org/) is the role that individualism plays in creating and reinforcing unsustainable practices and ethics, and because individualism is so central to Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, it is a wonder that few critics in the Environmental Humanities address the topic in their discussion of the novel. Scholars have focused on McCarthy's cannibalism as a metaphor for consumerism, but the problem is that their focus tends to be limited to only those aspects of consumerism. In other words, previous research has failed to address other important aspects of consumerism, such as what it is that drives this consumerism. McCarthy's depiction of cannibalism exposes the major problems of unsustainable consumer culture and provides a hint about the driving force of this untenable, unsustainable consumer culture. The world of *The Road* is one of egotistical individuals. As with cannibalism, other central themes of the novel, such as consumerism, isolation, and dominance of autonomy over

mutuality, also clearly attest to the fact that the driving force of unsustainable consumer culture is individualism. McCarthy puts forth empathy as a possible solution for turning unsustainability into sustainability. McCarthy brings into sharp relief the connection between unsustainable consumer culture and individualism and warns that any campaigns for sustainability in the Anthropocene will be futile as long as individualism remains humanity's primary value.

CANNIBALISM AS UNSUSTAINABILITY

McCarthy's cannibalistic post-apocalyptic world shows the unsustainability of capitalist consumer culture in the Anthropocene. For Brian Donnelly the novel's cannibalism is "a metaphor for consumption" (2010: 71); Jordan J. Dominy regards it as "a critique of unchecked consumption of environmental resources" (2015: 147); and Lydia Cooper mentions depictions of cannibalism as "the form of consumption most commonly employed as a shorthand for unchecked cultural depravity" (2017: 547-8). Such views have their own justification because along with depictions of cannibalism, the novel is in fact replete with images of shopping with supermarkets and shopping carts scattered through the various settings. As Susan Kollin points out, throughout the novel the cart remains an indispensable object and functions as a "symbol of late-capitalist consumer culture" (2011: 161). Similarly, Simon Schleusener addresses the topic of the shopping cart and the Coca-Cola can as remnants of "late capitalism and American consumer culture" (2017: 6). In other words, the novel represents a consumer culture that is "driven to consume for its own sake, without thought, discretion or taste" (Bartolovich 1998: 205), a consumption that when turned inward becomes cannibalistic. The prevalence of cannibalism, shopping carts, and supermarkets, and the appearance of cans of Coca-Cola are evidence that the novel is a critique of capitalist consumer culture. The apocalyptic images of late-capitalist indiscriminate consumption clearly critique the utter unsustainability of such culture. However, while it is evident that this consumption is fatally destructive, what it means to be affected by it is hardly discussed, and what propels it remains largely obscure.

About a third into the novel, there appears a scene in which the unnamed protagonists, a man and a boy, find a hidden space under the

pantry floor for people captured by cannibals. The scene reveals four critical issues with respect to unsustainable contemporary consumer culture. First, consumer culture involves the problem of othering. People are othered like livestock and treated as such. A man whose leg stumps are seared clearly shows that the status of captives is that of animals—objects of consumption. Second, consumer culture is self-destructive. It not only "consume[s] for its own sake" (Bartolovich 1998: 205) but also consumes itself, as suggested by the very act of cannibalism—one's eating of its own kind. In this sense, consumer culture is suicidal. Third, consumer culture has become dominant. Even in the novel, it is structurally central. Finally, consumer culture involves real people and real pain. Although McCarthy's cannibalism has metaphorical implications, this scene clearly warns against overlooking the nonmetaphorical implications. In "Cannibalism and Other Transgressions of the Human in *The Road,*" Andrew Estes claims that McCarthy's cannibalism is "real and indisputable" (2017: 6). He claims that it is important to remember that the cannibalism in the novel is homicidal. In other words, it is inappropriate to interpret the cannibalism in a solely metaphorical sense. Their suffering is real, and there is no way to deny it: it resists being reduced to some abstract sense.[1] Dominy claims that witnessing the actual eating of human flesh would be "the only thing that would have been more macabre" than the witnessing "the macabre feast of an infant roasting over the fire" (2015: 147). It seems, however, by far the most horrendous thing is to witness living victims of cannibalism—livestock that remain alive, vivisected for parts. The poignancy of this scene resides in our ability to empathize with the people, and this empathy, may, in fact, translate further to an empathy for all livestock, not only human. With the vision of the legless man and sound of the desperate whimpers for help, McCarthy shows that the othering of consumer culture can be immensely destructive and, more importantly, that this destructiveness involves actual people and actual pain. In other words, those who are subject to unsustainable consumer culture are real people, and thus it is necessary to listen to their pleas for help and to think of a possible cause that has put them in such a dire situation. Contemporary consumer culture causes pain, is destructive and pervasive, and is untenable and unsustainable, yet ubiquitous.

ABUNDANCE AND DEARTH

The ubiquitous absence of food in the novel is a sharp contrast to what consumer culture touts as its greatest achievement. Dearth in *The Road* affects all economic classes. From the beginning of the novel, the man and the boy have no food. They meet hostile others looking for food, and it is clear that these hostile others might do violence to them. Later they stumble into a room of captives and subsequently into an underground bunker stocked with provisions. It is necessary to view the entire food economy in the novel in a tri-partite capitalist framework. The source of the income (in this case food) is not constant, not replenished, and not part of a working ecosystem and is not sustainable. The 'lower class' has a non-stable source of income, as suggested by the scavenging of the protagonists in the early part of the novel. The 'middle class' (the man and the boy) has a relatively stable source of income. Even so, income is limited, and life is sustainable only temporarily. The upper class (no actual characters—only a bunker) has no income problem yet, but the resources of the underground bunker are finite, though impressive. The bunker is so fully packed with provisions that it almost appears to be a small-sized supermarket. It is, however, obvious that consumption without production cannot last forever. The reason McCarthy delineates exuberance in the bunker as "the richness of a vanished world" (2006: 139) is that sheer exuberance, like Ozymandias, is destined to the vanish. Eternal richness is an illusion, as is the seemingly eternal monopoly of the richness of the world. Contemporary consumer culture is unsustainable, and so are lives of people in such culture, regardless of class.

The question that must rise then is whether there is any way to make unsustainable consumer culture sustainable. What propels this non-viable culture? A possible answer for these questions lies in the exploration of cannibalism. In *From Communion to Cannibalism*, Maggie Kilgour asserts that eating reflects how one comprehends the world that exists outside. This comprehension reveals two very different aspects of eating that are relevant to *The Road*: cannibalism and communion. As the novel's cannibalism has figurative and literal implications, the economy of cannibalism straddles Kilgour's view of cannibalism and communion. Cannibalism is a destructive way of eating. Communion, on the other hand, is a productive way of eating in that it concerns one's unity with an

imagined god—the transcending of self. While cannibalism means division between individuals and external elements and others, communion means identification or incorporation of individuals with external elements and others—except, of course, that communion involves symbolic cannibalism. Communion, as in the eating of the flesh and the drinking of the blood of Christ, is about the intertwining of the eater and the eaten and their mutual and symbiotic relationship. Cannibalism, on the other hand, is about the complete division of the eater and the eaten and the control of the latter by the former, a hierarchical relationship. The aim of establishing a rigid boundary between the two is to achieve absolute autonomy. As Kilgour explains, "Autonomy is desirable for a self who wants, […] to contain and know everything without in turn being known or contained: to be only a subject and never an object, to eat without being eaten. For such a self, autonomy in the other appears as infernal" (1990: 245). There is a struggle for autonomy among selves, and this struggle has become one of predominant features of the contemporary: struggle for autonomy, a struggle "to eat without in turn being eaten" characterizes the "identity of modern subject or individual" (7). In light of Kilgour, the individual who regards others as objects of consumption (objects of control) is a cannibal, and the modern world is one of cannibals. The cannibalistic world of *The Road*, presented as the "tableau of the slain and the devoured" (MaCarthy 2006: 91), is that of individuals who want to eat without being eaten. The driving force of unsustainable, unchecked consumerism is egotistical individualism.

INDIVIDUALISM AND SUSTAINABILITY

As with cannibalism, the theme of isolated individuals in the novel reveals a connection between unsustainable consumer culture and individualism. One of main features of the novel is a lack of communities based on mutual relationships. Through the novel's fingerless man, a man who is "an outcast from one of the communes" (255), McCarthy suggests that there are some communities, but the man and the boy do not come across one as they move southward. All the people they encounter on the road are on their own, with the exception of the cannibals:

> An army in tennis shoes, tramping. Carrying three-foot lengths of pipe with leather wrappings. […] Behind them came wagons drawn by slaves in harness and piled with goods of war and after that the women, perhaps a dozen in number, some of them pregnant, and lastly a supplementary consort of catamites illclothed [sic] against the cold and fitted in dogcollars [sic] and yoked each to each. (92)

This march of cannibals with their slaves clearly shows that cannibals form a group, but their group lacks mutual trust on any level. This scene demonstrates critical problems, such as the hierarchization and oppression of socially disadvantaged individuals, and, of course, we see violence. The scene brings into relief the problem of othering in the same way that the scene with the legless man does. Groups that cannibals form here are based on businesslike relationships. These groups pursue a desire to eat without being eaten.

As with the theme of isolation, the prevailing of autonomy over mutuality reveals egotistical individualism as a driving force of unsustainable consumer culture in the Anthropocene. We witness an abortion of social intimacy and love, the only remnants of which are in the man and the boy. The night that has fallen on the Earth has brought with it a virtual halting of all forms of production, including reproduction. Involved with isolation in the novel, obviously, is sexual politics—a topic that has received virtually no critical attention. This theme, however, is closely related to the core theme of the novel, cannibalism—a destructive form of eating. As Simon C. Estok writes, "the analogies between food and sex have many implications. Food, like sexuality, is obviously a very personal matter. Both have to do with bodily penetrations" (2022: 181); thus, it is necessary to view them on ethical levels. Kilgour likewise draws a link between them: "Like eating, intercourse makes two bodies one, though in a union that is fortunately less absolute and permanent" (1990: 7). As with eating, sex is the most direct and palpable activity showing that individuals are connected to the world and others and are not autonomous. The ultimate goals of eating and sex are also similar in that they reveal a desire for complete unity (similar in some ways to the unity between a mother and child during breast feeding). Eating and sex expose an original human identity: humans are connected to others not only physically but also psychologically. Furthermore, eating, like sex, reflects

how people interact with each other. Interactions in the novel are profoundly damaged and reveal individualism's effects on individuals.

For modern individuals who firmly assert their autonomy, mutual connections, physical or psychological threaten the notion of autonomy. In this sense, individuals are likely to shun certain forms of eating and sex that confirm their interconnectedness with others. In *The Road*, a "supplementary consort of catamites" (McCarthy 2006: 92), who are yoked in dog collars, presents the most conspicuous feature of relationships that individuals choose in the name of autonomy: relationships they form lack psychological aspects. The status of boys as slaves (potentially sex slaves)[2] in the novel exposes the utter grotesqueness of the world in which psychological incorporation is wholly removed while physical incorporation prevails. As Estok writes, food and sex "can be commodified and exploited" (2022: 181). Although both demonstrate in the most palpable way mutual connections between individuals and others, when their psychological aspect is eliminated leaving only their physical aspect, they can function as a fulcrum for a fantasy of control over others. This is because individuals can, to some extent, monitor and regulate their bodily absorption of the external, and this possibility gives them an illusional feeling of controlling the external (Kilgour 1990: 10). Here, an illusional autonomy that individuals enjoy is what Slavoj Žižek might describe as "I know, but still …" (2008: 12). Individuals well know that autonomy is a fantasy, but still … [they believe it is more than a mere fantasy]. They act "as if" they do not know the truth. In other words, they act "as if" autonomy is a real thing. When individuals can self-deceptively maintain their fantasy about their autonomy, they can efficiently deal with an unsettling truth that they are corporeally vulnerable, and, more importantly, that their original identity is ambiguous.[3] In other words, individuals can be oblivious to the fact that they are incessantly affected by others, physically and mentally. The consequences of their oblivion are seriously damaging. Such oblivion means an alienation of individuals from themselves and, of course, from others. It also means a failure in acknowledging a social-ethical responsibility of individuals for caring about others. The juxtaposition of unsustainable consumer culture and cannibalism, isolated individuals, and the predominance of autonomy over interconnectedness with others clearly shows a socioeconomic and ethical problem of egotistical individualism.

EMPATHY AS SOLUTION

Through the boy, *The Road* shows a possible key to solving the problem of unsustainable individualism and the consumer culture to which it leads: an awareness of interconnectedness with others. The boy is a unique character in that he is associated with goodness (McCarthy 2006: 129), light (277), fire (83), paradise (150), angels (172), a Golden Chalice (75), the word of God (5), the breath of God (286) and so on, all of which seem to have disappeared altogether in the post-apocalyptic world of the novel. His uniqueness, however, is not limited to those ideal images of the past. What makes him indeed special is his unconditional empathy for others. The boy shares his food with a stranger, Ely, and empathizes with a thief who could have put him and his father in serious danger by stealing everything the two have. The boy even sees himself as "the one who has to worry about everything" (259) and feels the pain of others as his own. Others, including his father, find it hard to understand his actions. The boy is, however, what Jeremy Rifkin might describe as "Homo empathicus" (2010: 43). In *The Empathic Civilization*, Rifkin claims that humans have a fundamental drive for empathy, and this drive is the most basic and primary of all drives.[4] The boy, as an embodiment of "Homo empathicus" (2010: 43), has profound implications for empathy. First, empathy is a central drive, as suggested by the boy's unconditional empathy for others. Second, empathy has become a strange rarity, since individuals repress it in pursuit of autonomy, as indicated by other characters and their inability to understand the boy. Third, empathy can extend itself based on an awareness of the human will to live. What lies at the core of the boy's empathy for others is his recognition that all humans—regardless of age, sex, and race—have the will to live. The boy, therefore, shares his food with Ely, whom he knows will die soon, and pleads with his father to help the thief while acknowledging a simple fact that the thief was "just hungry" and "scared" (McCarthy 2006: 259). The boy's empathy for other people's will to live is the basic drive. It is also sheer goodness. What is, however, necessary to remember is that his empathy has a potential to go beyond the personal realm. One's empathy for other people's will to live can make unsustainable consumer culture sustainable.

Empathy for other people's will to live can be a key to resolving the problem of unsustainable consumer culture in the Anthropocene. Rifkin explains the importance of recognizing one's will to live as follows: "The recognition of another's finite existence is what connects empathic consciousness to entropic awareness. When we identify with another's plight, it's their will to live that we empathize with and seek to support" (2010: 40-1). Here what he calls "entropic awareness" is an awareness of the increase in "the loss of usable energy" (27-8) due to human activities. In other words, "entropic awareness" refers to a recognition that the sustainability of the earth is in peril. Awareness of the rights and will of others logically leads to more sustainable practices than selfishness does. Moreover, the will to live is not uniquely human—Rifkin mentions "diverse others" (42). Empathy is arguably critical to sustainable ethics. Taking a cue from Rifkin's perspective on empathy, an acknowledgement of the will to live as a common denominator of all livings can be effective in coping with the unsustainability of individualism in the Anthropocene: in other words, such awareness can make humanity "avoid [the] collapse of civilization and save the Earth" (3). This awareness involves "a reconsideration of all systems through which we perceive reality and of our myths about our own autonomy and self-sufficiency" (Kilgour 1990: 247). This awareness is entangled with the difficulty of establishing a rigid boundary between Self and Other and between human and nonhuman. In other words, it involves "Reconstructing individualism" (247) because it is related to fundamental interconnectedness with others. A recognition of mutual connections can render unsustainable consumer culture sustainable by going beyond autonomous individuals and humanity and by ultimately reaching diverse others.

CONCLUSION

Through the theme of cannibalism, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* reveals individualism as a driving force of unsustainable consumerism in the Anthropocene and makes people feel that unless they radically change how they perceive themselves and others, unsustainability will continue. The novel's cannibalism reveals contemporary consumer culture's major problems: othering, (self)-destructiveness, pain, and cultural homogenization. Unsustainable consumer culture affects all economic

classes, as indicated by the role of food in the novel. While cannibalism shows various facets of unsustainable consumer culture, it also allows the reader to think of a possible driving force behind such culture. Maggie Kilgour's insight that how one eats reflects how one perceives oneself and others suggests that cannibalism is essentially about a struggle for autonomy. The cannibalistic world of *The Road* is about individuals who, in pursuit of autonomy, 'eat' others. What impels unsustainable consumer culture is autonomous individuals and their individualism. Through the boy, McCarthy proposes empathy as a cure for individualism. *The Road* demonstrates that in order to make unsustainable consumer culture sustainable, a new road involves empathy, for this recognizes both the will of all the livings to live and the interconnectedness of these lives. This is the road to sustainability in the Anthropocene.

Notes

[1] In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry examines various aspects of physical pain. Among them is its inexpressibility and invisibility. Physical pain is indisputable to those who experience it, but it is only "Vaguely alarming yet unreal" (1985: 4) to those who hear that other people have pain. A visibly damaged body, however, can readily render invisible pain visible. Through the naked people and legless man in particular, McCarthy tries to convey real physical pain to the readers.

[2] In "The Absurdity of Hope in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," Alan Noble puts forth a possible scenario of sexual exploitation by cannibals when he writes about "roaming bands of cannibals with what appear to be sex slaves" (2011: 98). As Noble claims, the scene of marching cannibals with slaves strongly suggests such possibility. In the scene, armed cannibals walk in the front, followed by their slaves in harness. Among the slaves are some boys and women, including pregnant ones. The fact that the pregnant women walk with the slaves and the boys who are not only yoked in dog collars but also referred to as "catamites" (McCarthy 2006: 92) indicates that it is necessary to consider the problem of a sexual exploitation in the novel.

[3] The child initially cannot distinguish self and other. It experiences its mother's breast as its own, and thus it is hard to say who is eating whom. This ambiguously unfixed identity is the child's original identity. Subsequently, the child begins to establish a boundary between itself and its mother, develops the notion of Self and Other, and achieves an illusional sense of autonomy. As eating and sex reveal, the individual's identity is not completely fixed or determined.

[4] Rifkin asserts that empathy is the most primary of all drives, and thus the prevalence of violence in the world is, in fact, an anomaly: "widespread wanton violence has not been the norm in human history but, rather, the exception, that is, if one considers

the entire span that anatomically modern human beings have existed on Earth" (2010: 22). Drawing on anthropologist Marija Gimbutas, Rifkin explains that the emergence of serious violence on a large-scale dates back to 4400 BC when Eurasian nomadic horsemen invaded Europe. These horsemen could successfully invade Europe, because, thanks to their tamed horses, they could enjoy "a superior military advantage" (2010: 22). Violent control of others obviously establishes a hierarchical relationship. This includes human/nonhuman relationships. Greta Gaard's remark that "socially responsible sustainability begins where animal exploitation ends" (2017: 17) thus deserves consideration. Escaping unsustainable thinking means firstly abandoning individualism and hierarchical relationships and secondly rediscovering empathetic consciousness for others, including nonhumans.

References

Bartolovich, Crystal. "Consumerism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Cannibalism." *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*, edited by Francis Barker *et al.* Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 1998, pp. 204-237.

Cooper, Lydia. "Eating at the Empire Table: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and the Anglo-Irish Gothic." *MFS*, vol. 63, no. 3, Fall 2017, pp. 547-570.

Dominy, Jordan J. "Cannibalism, Consumerism, and Profanation: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and the End of Capitalism." *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, vol.13, 2015, pp. 143-158.

Donnelly, Brian. "'Coke Is It!': Placing Coca-Cola in McCarthy's *The Road*." *The Explicator*, vol. 68, no. 1, 2010, pp. 70–73.

Estes, Andrew. "Cannibalism and Other Transgressions of the Human in *The Road*." *European Association for American Studies*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2017, pp. 1-11. http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/12368

Estok, Simon C. "Afterword: Toward Shifts in Global Food Systems." *Anthropocene Ecologies of Food: Notes from the Global South*, edited by Simon C. Estok *et al.* New York and London: Routledge, 2022, pp. 180-184.

Gaard, Greta C. *Critical Ecofeminism*. Lanham: Lexington, 2017.

Kilgour, Maggie. *From Communion to Cannibalism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1990.

Kollin, Susan. "'Barren, silent, godless': Ecodisaster and the Post-abundant Landscape in *The Road*." *Cormac McCarthy: All the Pretty Horses, No Country for Old Men, The Road,* edited by Sara L. Spurgeon. London and New York City: Continuum, 2011, pp. 157-171.

McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. New York: Vintage Books, 2006.

Noble, Alan. "The Absurdity of Hope in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *South Atlantic Review*, vol. 76, no. 3, Summer 2011, pp. 93-109.

Rifkin, Jeremy. *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis*. Cambridge: Polity P. 2010.

Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985.

Schleusener, Simon. "The Dialectics of Mobility: Capitalism and Apocalypse in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *European Association for American Studies*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2017, pp. 1-14. http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/12296

Žižek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London and New York: Verso. 2008.

Bioprofile

Narie Jung works at Sungkyunkwan University in Seoul, South Korea as a doctoral candidate. Jung's area of research includes ecocritical theory, climate change literature, and the posthuman Anthropocene. She has published in *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes, and Reviews*; *Cultura: International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology*; *Neohelicon: Acta comparationis litterarum universarum*; and others. She expects her dissertation to be published by Routledge as a book (entitled *Activism in Anthropocene and Climate Change Narratives: A Primer*) in 2023.