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# Another World Entire: the Posthumanism of Cormac Mccarthy

Margaret Henson Pless

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ANOTHER WORLD ENTIRE: THE POSTHUMANISM OF CORMAC MCCARTHY

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of English  
The University of Mississippi

by

MARGARET PLESS

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## ABSTRACT

Cormac McCarthy's novels are thought experiments in what it might mean to write posthuman works of fiction. In a close reading of three of his novels, *Child of God*, *The Crossing*, and *The Road*, this project reveals how McCarthy's stories paradoxically unravel the dangerous human desire to make of our world a story. His characters, Lester Ballard, Billy Parham, and the boy, become posthuman as they live increasingly outside of narrative. Their existences extend beyond the page, in a radical intimacy with the world, evident in the haunting and elusive presences, and absences, of wolves, hawks, trout, and even the sun itself in these novels. McCarthy demonstrates how the reality of the world is "another world entire" from the written page and the humanist project. At the end of his novels, McCarthy would point us to an existence beyond the novel.

## DEDICATION

For Vereen Bell, with inexpressible gratitude for the hours upon hours you let me sit in your office and talk to you about books. And for introducing me to Cormac McCarthy.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank Jay Watson for being the most wonderfully thorough and caring reader I could ever have asked for in an advisor.

I am also grateful to my brother Weldon, for thinking through McCarthy, posthumanism, zombies, and Deleuze alongside me. Finally, I want to thank my parents for their refuge of love and support, in which I have always been free to read, write, and think.

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## INTRODUCTION

1940: the world plunges into war. In September of that year, four blue-collar teenage boys rambling through the countryside with a dog stumble upon a cave that will change their lives, and humanity, forever. Marcel Ravidat and his friends discovered Lascaux's famous cave paintings, an unparalleled and uniquely preserved archive of ancient artwork.

The story of the Lascaux discovery reads a lot like a Cormac McCarthy novel: a dog leads a boy into a fateful encounter with nature and history. Marcel Ravidat feels like a real-life Billy Parham. Furthermore, the historical moment of the Lascaux cave discovery aligns with that of McCarthy's *The Crossing*, a novel set around 1941 between the World Wars (Wegner 73, Sanborn 134). Beyond the Lascaux discovery story, these paintings obscured for so many years in darkness bring to light all the things I wanted to investigate when I began writing on Cormac McCarthy's novels. What does it mean to make art that testifies to the human's place in this world? How might the animal factor into that place? Why and how do we create such art in the world? Furthermore, how do we create relevantly— as the hunting society did in those caves? How does the twentieth century and all it entailed transform what art means for us right now? Like the caves, Cormac McCarthy's novels communicate something vital to us about how humanity fits in the larger landscape of life.<sup>1</sup>

In a particular Lascaux scene, art historians identify one of the first appearances of a figure that will later become quite common in art: a man (Kleiner 9). Between a rhinoceros and a bison, this stick figure man floats diagonally on the wall of a Lascaux well shaft. The Gardner

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<sup>1</sup> To provide historical context for the European man's relationship with the wolf, Wallis Sanborn references the Lascaux caves in *Animals in the Fiction of Cormac McCarthy* (131).

Art History textbook's exposition of this painting draws our attention to some of the puzzling aspects of the scene, as well as its supposed significance in the history of art:

The position of the man is ambiguous. Is he wounded or dead? ...Which animal, if either, has knocked the man down, if indeed he is on the ground? Are these three images related at all? Researchers can be sure of nothing, but if the painter placed the figures beside each other to tell a story, then this is evidence for the creation of complex narrative compositions involving humans and animals at a much earlier date than anyone had imagined only a few generations ago. Yet it is important to remember that even if the artist intended to tell a story, very few people would have been able to "read" it. ...Like all Paleolithic art, the scene in the Lascaux well shaft remains enigmatic. (Kleiner 9)

First, we read that the man's position in relation to his surroundings is, artistically speaking, ambiguous. I love this description because it can apply to more than compositional uncertainty; a man's actual position in the world is an uncertain one. This ambiguity in the Lascaux man may be a statement as much as it is a question. Second, we read that this scene might be our first known example of a narrative composition about man and animal. The irony of such an observation is that the author here is drawing us a timeline of timelines; here is one of our earliest narratives in *our* narrative of humanity via art. But why should we draw this timeline in the first place? Third, we read that our chronological and physical disconnection from these deep, ancient caves keep them enigmatic to us. However, such mystery might not only be a product of our distance from this art, but also a necessary part of the questions of placement that art asks.

The Lascaux caves certainly show us that our artistic attempts to understand the world and ourselves in it are nothing new. I first encountered the caves on day one of an art history

survey my sophomore year of college. My professor led us from the caves' more rudimentary figures all the way to the proclaimed glory of the Sistine chapel. My Art History 101 syllabus told me a story of linear progression, creative improvement. The professor did not say that the Sistine chapel was superior to the Lascaux caves, but she didn't have to. We saw it in the order of her slides and I read it between the lines of my Gardner's textbook.

But elsewhere I was learning something other than a story of progress. World Wars, trenches, Auschwitz, Darwin, Hiroshima and Nagasaki: these words each in their own way became for me synonymous with two realities I could not escape: namely, that human beings are capable of unpredictable, unimaginable violence and that human beings are far less central in the world than Descartes had made us think we were.

Posthumanism is a critical angle that emerged as early as the 1960s in the thinking of people like Michel Foucault, who writes: "As the archeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And perhaps nearing its end" (quoted in Wolfe xii). Posthumanism, according to Cary Wolfe, "opposes the fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy, inherited from humanism itself" (xv). Wolfe reveals how humanism convinces us that to be human means to be something greater than the physical or animal body that we inhabit. "Posthumanism names a historical moment in which the decentering of the human...is increasingly impossible to ignore, a historical development that points towards the necessity of new theoretical paradigms" (xvi). But for Wolfe, we must not only recognize this decentering but also acknowledge the paradox of centering in the first place: because humanism's values "are undercut by the philosophical and ethical frameworks used to conceptualize them" (xvi). In posthumanism, Wolfe seeks to bring to light the flawed, self-reflexive nature of humanist thought in order to refresh our understanding, for he knows we cannot escape our understanding altogether. His goal is summarized as follows:

The perspective I attempt to formulate here...actually enables us to describe the human and its characteristic modes of communication, interaction, meaning, social significations, and affective investments with greater specificity once we have removed meaning from the ontologically closed domain of the consciousness, reason, reflection, and so on. It forces us to rethink our taken-for-granted modes of human experience, including the normal perceptual modes and affective states of Homo Sapiens itself, by recontextualizing them in terms of the entire sensorium of other living beings and their own autopoietic ways of “bringing forth a world”—ways that are, since we ourselves are human animals, part of the evolutionary history and behavioral and psychological repertoire of the human itself. (xxv)

Coming from a more specific angle on these issues, N. Katherine Hayles in her book *How We Became Posthuman* chronicles how the advent of information technology has radically shifted the way we define ourselves. For Hayles, our current tendency is to see the body as the original prosthesis (3). We do not see embodiment as an essential part of being human. Hayles is interested in seeing re-embodiment. She wants us to “put back into the picture the flesh that continues to be erased in contemporary discussions about cybernetic subjects” (5).

A critical perspective that I will engage in its similarities to some forms of posthumanism is ecocriticism, particularly as it is practiced by author Timothy Morton. Morton suggests that Darwin’s discoveries have broad implications in the way we must see the world, though not necessarily the social implications that we fear. According to Morton, if we accept Darwin’s evolutionary idea of the world, everything we thought was concrete becomes an abstract process. So the horse we ride becomes simply a momentary expression of cells in flux, an abstraction instead of a reality. Morton explains:

There is indeed something humiliating about this reversal of immediacy into abstraction, in the same way Copernicus and Galileo brought humans down to Earth. . . . Evolution strikes another great nail into the coffin of common sense. It is worth pausing briefly to let this stunning conclusion sink in. We cannot see, touch, or smell evolution. It evades our perception. (“The Mesh” 20)

Morton goes on to explain, “All of this is profoundly antiteleological. . . . The lack of teleology is humiliating— literally, it brings us down to Earth, which must be good news for ecology” (22). Morton offers a vision of the world through the analogy of “the mesh,” which “does away with boundaries between living and nonliving forms” and emphasizes the interconnectedness of all things (22). Like posthumanism, ecocriticism would undo the categories we live in by “humiliating” the human being’s placement in the world against the backdrop of the natural world. Ecocriticism complements posthumanism because both movements would drastically transform our realities. Ecocriticism would transform us in light of natural processes and posthumanism would transform us through a totally new way of thinking (more precisely, “*non-thinking*”) about who we are.

A few other thinkers add greater dimension to this conversation. Georges Bataille, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and Jacques Derrida, all come into play in my posthuman reading of McCarthy. Bataille offers a vision of animal intimacy with the world through violence apart from individual human identity. Deleuze and Guattari provide a model of “becoming” that I use to more realistically describe what the characters in McCarthy novels are, as they are outside of traditional humanist categories. Derrida imagines how philosophy born from Descartes has underestimated the importance of the animal gaze in its understanding of humankind.

I am not the first person to see how McCarthy's novels join posthumanism's work of radically shifting how limiting our visions of ourselves and the earth can be. Vereen Bell calls McCarthy's tour de force *Blood Meridian* "a critique of our culture's anthropocentrism" (*Achievement* 124). Dana Phillips goes a step farther, arguing that "Bell's treatment of McCarthy's style does not recognize how radically unanthropocentric it is" ("History and the Ugly Facts" 446). Phillips fleshes out how in McCarthy, we are not experiencing competition between human and natural but rather see how the human fits into the natural order (think Morton's "mesh"). Phillips explains that McCarthy writes within the sort of updated worldview that posthumanism calls for:

The favored discourses of the novel— religion, ethics, psychology, and politics— suffer the fate of most other humanist discourses when the anthropocentric view is abandoned. So does nihilism. ...*Blood Meridian* hints at a descriptive discourse which might capture within its net religion, ethics, psychology, politics, and nihilism too, a discourse which limits the outlines of the arena in which humans...contend without any vested interest in the outcome. ("History" 452-453)

Phillips recognizes that the posthuman context will affect the novel generically, as a traditionally humanistic enterprise. He outlines how a novel like *Blood Meridian* survives this shift by carving out a new space for a novel to exist in, one that does not offer judgment but just "rides on" through it all.

What does this new territory for the novel look like, according to Cormac McCarthy? Informed by the posthuman perspective introduced above, I will perform close readings of three novels to answer that question. *Child of God*, *The Crossing*, and *The Road* each represent different phases of McCarthy's writing and thus they offer us a good cross-section of his work.

Timothy Morton predicts that art with updated perspective will become “about ‘unworking’ rather than about the precious *work* of art as such” (*The Ecological Thought* 105). I hope to show the radical unworking of the novel’s form that McCarthy’s novels are all about. His novels fiercely undo our prior definitions of what it means to be human. In the same vein as Cary Wolfe, McCarthy cuts all the way to the bone, questioning the very fact that we define ourselves in the first place. McCarthy offers us a taste of how art can dethrone the tyrannical reign of the human consciousness since Descartes in the face of the radiant power of the world.

In the haunting narration of *The Road*, McCarthy reflects on the forlorn position of art, of writing, in that apocalyptic time and place:

No sound but the wind. What will you say? A living man spoke these lines? He sharpened a quill with his small pen knife to scribe these things in sloe or lampblack? At some reckonable and entabled moment? He is coming to steal my eyes. To seal my mouth with dirt. (261)

Here, from within the limits of the posthuman artist, McCarthy imagines those limits. This is the giant paradox, present both in the philosophy of posthumanism and in the writing of Cormac McCarthy. Can we as humans escape humanist renderings of the world? Likewise, as Michael Chabon succinctly expresses in his review of *The Road*: “To annihilate the world in prose one must simultaneously write it into being” (2). In fact, as Chabon continues, the only way to imagine such a world apart from the human “would be a book of blank pages, white as ash” (2).

McCarthy boldly demonstrates how the reality of the world is indeed “another world entire” from the written page and the humanist project. As the endings of all three of these books communicate, these novels point us towards a world beyond the novel. What if a book’s most

poignant use might just be to imagine its own limitations? Novelistic self-destruction may be deeply paradoxical, but this does not mean it is any less real.

In what follows, I will read three of McCarthy's novels as thought experiments in posthumanism. In McCarthy's novel *Child of God*, Lester Ballard disrupts the normalcy that his Sevier County neighbors try to weave with their stories of him, as well as their stories of the world around them. Ballard's ambiguity also undoes the readers' categories for a protagonist. Ballard becomes a case study in what novels usually say the human is while McCarthy's novel refuses to categorize Ballard as such. But Lester Ballard remains a proto-posthuman. *Child of God* hints at the radical self-destruction that McCarthy more fully realizes in the next two novels.

In *The Crossing*, McCarthy offers us characteristically stunning prose that appears to build a novel of traditional, humanistic meaning and identity. But beneath McCarthy's own storytelling and behind the many stories within his larger plot, this novel opens up to a posthuman angle. The presence of the wolf, Billy Parham's becoming wolf, and the embedded tales combine to give us a novel of posthuman scope.

In *The Road*, the most posthuman of McCarthy's novels, he offers the character of the father as a promoter of the old humanistic order of life. Though the father tries to pass on to his son a linguistic understanding of the world in his older categories, the son escapes such categories. In the son, McCarthy portrays, within the inherent limits of the written page, what a posthuman existence could look like.

## **I. *CHILD OF GOD*:**

### **THE BEGINNINGS OF POSTHUMANISM IN LESTER BALLARD**

It pains me to say this as I launch into my own piece of academic writing, but I have already forgotten a majority of the critical texts I have read thus far in graduate school. However, when I encountered this 1973 McCarthy novel in my postsouthern fiction seminar, the criticism included both dramatic proclamations and scathing denouncements. It was, in short, quite memorable. Two critics, Lewis Simpson and Walter Sullivan, situate McCarthy at “the end” of something with this book. Though their reactions to this novel and its shocking nature come through Southern lenses, I think these properties of *Child of God* become a good jumping-off point for a posthuman reading of this novel. These critics push McCarthy into new and paradoxical turf, which is exactly where I want to meet him.

In Lewis Simpson’s tracing of Southern pastoral, he forecasts that a stage of literature approaches that will dispossess the Southern Renaissance itself, in “a shifting of the terms of the controlling conflict in the Southern literary imagination” (90). In 1975, when Simpson predicts this, he closes by announcing that this shift “has not quite occurred yet, and the literary imagination will continue no doubt to find ways to imagine its own survival” (100).

In the same year that Simpson chronicles this shift, another critic, Walter Sullivan, describes a similar trajectory. Sullivan does not attempt to hide his feelings concerning this chapter-close in Southern literature, and his final chapter’s title, “Rainbow’s End,” gives us a clear idea of where Sullivan’s good opinion lies. Like Simpson, Sullivan laments the loss of a

humanistic value system that offers boundaries, though traversable, to previous works of Southern literature. Sullivan predicts a course of self-destruction for the modern Southern author, arguing that art cannot survive “the destruction of nature and society” (70). Sullivan specifically targets *Child of God* and accuses McCarthy of committing this artistic suicide with his “destructive impulse” (71).

In their final forecasts, neither Simpson nor Sullivan seems to have it quite right. Simpson closes with the assumption that the authorial imagination will troop along and make its usual meaning nonetheless in the approaching twenty-first century. Sullivan sees art as doomed when it loses a traditional value system and the system’s accompanying language. But McCarthy’s novels would undercut both predictions.

Sullivan writes that “in the destruction of nature and society, art itself is destroyed” (70). What Sullivan means as criticism sounds strikingly similar to a moment of creative vision in McCarthy’s novel *The Road*: “Perhaps in the world’s destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made” (274). Likewise, McCarthy’s character Lester Ballard collects his first female corpse in the apparent hope that “he would see how she were made” (92). McCarthy seems to require destruction in order to create or build anything. While Simpson invests hope in the everlasting literary imagination, McCarthy sees the potential breakdown of such human imaginings. Sullivan says that with the loss of a value system comes the death of art. Yet few would argue that McCarthy’s novels are anything less than art. Regardless of whether Sullivan is right or wrong, his proclamation begs the question I am very interested in asking: what, then, is a modern artist like McCarthy up to?

In *Child of God*, Sullivan might actually be right: McCarthy commits artistic suicide. McCarthy plunges us into a violent man’s story and forces us to come to terms with how we

need to undo our old definitions of the human. In Lester Ballard, McCarthy gives us a character who falls farther and farther out of sync with his community as he begins to murder women and collect their corpses. McCarthy, through Lester Ballard, explodes our categories for understanding our experience. *Child of God* reveals the inadequacy of our current definition of the human. *Child of God* acts in continuity with Wolfe's vision for posthumanism, which "forces us to rethink our taken-for-granted modes of human experience" (Wolfe xxv). In Lester Ballard's existence and in the inadequacy of Sevier County definitions, McCarthy moves us outside our known boundaries of the "human."

What Lester Ballard is doing in *Child of God* is not summed up in words like necrophilia, murder, or loneliness. Rather, Ballard is shedding his humanity. His violent rituals, which look like attempts to be more like his human neighbors, are really attempts to *stop* being human. While Ballard eventually returns to human community, he does momentarily experience a posthuman existence of intimate belonging in the world.

This intimacy with the world is a concept at the center of Georges Bataille's text *Theory of Religion*. For Bataille, our human problem is our distance from the world, in contrast to what he sees as animals' intimacy with the world. Immanence is what we long for: "If man surrendered unreservedly to immanence, he would fall short of humanity...and eventually life would return to the unconscious intimacy of animals" (53). Just as McCarthy's creative impulse seems forever manifested in destructive form, so Bataille sees a link between a return to the intimacy he desires and violence:

The deep affirmation of sacrifice, the affirmation of a dangerous sovereignty of violence, at least tended to maintain an anguish that brought a longing for intimacy to an awakened state, on a level to which violence alone has the force to raise us. (77)

To Bataille, even religion itself is fundamentally a search for our lost intimacy (57). Ritualized violence wakes us up to the dawn of an existence that is less individualistic or humanistic, and more animal in its relation to the world.

Just as Bataille appeals to the existence of what we call “animal” to describe how we need to update our identity, so Deleuze and Guattari also discuss the animal as they think outside the box about identity in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Moving beyond binary narrative definitions of “man” and “animal” that exist in terms of progress or regress, Deleuze and Guattari offer up a more nomadic style of definition: “a *becoming*.” In fact, “becoming” is less a definition than a description. When writing on “becoming animal,” Deleuze and Guattari discuss such a becoming as a way to examine an idea without fencing it off in a crippling fashion. For them: “The history of ideas should never be continuous; it should be wary of resemblances, but also of descents or filiations; it should be content to mark the thresholds through which an idea passes” (235).

Bataille, Deleuze and Guattari offer us a vocabulary necessary to execute a posthuman reading. Wielding some of these terms, I might more accurately suggest that we will follow Ballard’s becoming, as violence and humiliation lead him to a moment of existence where he belongs to the world. However, *Child of God* is a fledging thought experiment in the posthuman. Lester Ballard does not achieve a posthuman existence, leaving us to wonder whether such an existence is possible, and if so whether a novel can present it.

Vereen Bell and Diane Luce are two McCarthy scholars who offer a good introduction to my reading of *Child of God*. In his chapter entitled “The Ambiguities of Innocence,” Bell brings to light the homelessness, isolation, and immature humanity of Lester Ballard. While Bell’s insightful analysis of *Child of God* generally remains in a traditional humanist context, he

references some groundbreaking aspects of this novel which I intend to draw out in my chapter. When analyzing Ballard's death, Bell writes:

We are most aware of Lester's humanness at the point at which it is irrevocably extinguished, and through that paradox McCarthy causes the status of humanness itself to seem intolerably ambiguous and frail—nugatory even, in the unimplicated, insentient otherness of the world. (68)

Twenty-four years ago, Bell was already alluding to what I am calling the posthuman elements of McCarthy's novel. What he sees as the inconsequential humanness in *Child of God* is something I wish to address more fully.

Dianne Luce discusses *Child of God* in her 2009 book *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy's Tennessee Period*. Here Luce analyzes *Child of God* by setting the book up against actual cases of murder and necrophilia, occurring around the same time that McCarthy was writing the novel. Luce explains how McCarthy might have used these cases as source material. Luce also draws parallels between Alfred Hitchcock's film *Psycho* and McCarthy's novel. She concludes by noting that Lester Ballard's final emergence from the caves and return to the hospital leave him "unenlightened" (175).

Bell's final commentary that the status of the human is ambiguous, even inconsequential, links nicely to Luce's final comment that Ballard remains "unenlightened." If we remove the negative bias from the word "unenlightened," we can use these two readings to begin our posthuman reading of McCarthy's novel. Ballard's humanity is "nugatory" and he is "unenlightened," and for both of these reasons, readers must reevaluate what it means to be human in the first place. By reading Sevier County's storytelling as a humanist activity, we watch Lester Ballard's otherness bring us towards the posthuman.

Bell and Luce both draw out a compassionate response to the character of Lester Ballard. Bell accomplishes this by noting how Ballard is made out of our own human insecurities. Luce sees McCarthy's unbiased gaze at this criminal as inviting our sympathy: "By looking dispassionately at Ballard's life, McCarthy invites us to see him compassionately" (Luce 151). In my reading of Lester Ballard, I hope go beyond a compassionate response to a response that is not necessarily devoid of compassion but different in scope: something Morton might call "kinship," and Bataille might call "intimacy."

One noteworthy moment in Luce's chapter is her account of the Wisconsin necrophile Ed Gein, a murderer and collector of dead bodies whose story contributed to the creation of Hitchcock's infamous Norman Bates in *Psycho*. After Gein's arrest, Methodist minister Kenneth Engelman visited him in his jail cell. Engelman explained his visit to the press in what follows:

I'm a Christian minister and Mr. Gein is a child of God. ...God may be nearer to Mr. Gein than the rest of us because God comes closer to people in dealings with life and death. Mr. Gein is closer to such things than the rest of us. (Quoted in Luce 146)

Engelman's words provide a meaningful entry point into the novel. Engelman unflinchingly declares that this man, who robbed graves to collect dead bodies for incomprehensible purposes, is a child of God. Furthermore, Engelman attributes a kind of superiority to Gein, whose struggles may bring him closer to God than the rest of us. McCarthy may not present Ballard as existing in closer proximity to the divine, but his portrait of Ballard should be even more disorienting to readers than Engelman's portrayal of Gein as God's child. As Engelman does in his description of Ed Gein, so McCarthy will take Lester Ballard outside of our preconceived judgments. Beyond Engelman, McCarthy suggests that Ballard is not wholly child, man, divine, animal, story, or storyteller; he is another being altogether. And Ballard's ambiguous status,

rather than being a liability, leads him to a momentarily harmonious belonging, a closing of the gap between himself and the world, in a manner that humanistic meaning inhibits.

### **Who is Lester Ballard?**

*“Some halt in the way of things seems to work here. See him.”*

From the cover of the book, the conceit of McCarthy’s title forces us to grapple with what it means to be a human being. Readers first encounter the title’s phrase when McCarthy introduces us to Lester Ballard:

He is small, unclean, unshaven. He moves in the dry chaff among the dust and slats of sunlight with a constrained truculence. Saxon and Celtic bloods. A child of God much like yourself perhaps. (4)

Here we see how Ballard’s physical presence does not fit into the world around him. We watch him move through the dust and sunlight without that aura of novel’s protagonist. Already McCarthy communicates to us that Ballard is seen and unseen. Ballard is a paradox of “constrained truculence,” latent cruelty. He is in conflict with the people around him. Ballard watches the goings on in his hometown, his home even, from a distance. He is ghost-like, otherly. Ballard’s ancestry, his “Saxon and Celtic” past, alludes to an identity based in human history and society. But such ancestry already rings emptily like the auctioneer’s voice in the background of this scene: “In the pines the voices chanted a lost litany” (6). The fact that Ballard is Saxon or Celtic means nothing to the rest of *Child of God*. Finally, in a line that gains significance when read in the context of the rest of the novel, we are implicated in Lester Ballard’s fate: “A child of God much like yourself perhaps” (4).

Unless you are reading this from your cell on death row, we can assume that the commonality McCarthy initially posits between Ballard and us is at least slightly disturbing to readers. But this potential for kinship is the essential glue for the rest of novel. Without it, we as readers are tempted to judge, laugh at, or at least maintain an apathetic distance from Ballard, as his neighbors do, and as we are wont to do with a novel's main character. With it, we must carry on with him until the end, knowing that our fate might be connected to his.

Furthermore, to be a child of God requires relinquishing a fully human status. If Lester Ballard is a child of God, he is something other than human. But then, we cannot know whether Ballard has such a divine heritage. That "perhaps" tacked to the end of such a surprising supposition gives McCarthy and readers a maddening freedom. McCarthy undercuts his own proposition with a winkingly ambiguous word. Because of this "perhaps," we do not assume that Lester Ballard is our fellow sibling in God's family. We do not assume divine ordinance of his existence. Instead McCarthy forces us to investigate what sort of a being Lester Ballard might be. Then the larger question looms beyond the "perhaps:" who are we?

Another way to put the central question of *Child of God* is this: how do we take the Western Judeo-Christian conception of man as unique child of God, implied by the title, and take an evolutionary understanding of humanity as part of earth's processes and reconcile one or the other of these in the creature that is Lester Ballard? Answering this proves difficult, for Lester Ballard ultimately resists both understandings. In asking such a question, McCarthy's novel blazes new territory because he reveals the flaws in such limiting definitions. Doctor-turned-author Walker Percy observes that the

two traditional Western ways of thinking about man, the Greco-Judeo-Christian and the scientific-organismic, may presently do us a disservice. ...They may conceal more than they reveal. (Percy 113)

McCarthy, like Percy at least in this moment, sees that a dualistic understanding of man is insufficient. But McCarthy would move radically beyond Percy to posit that *all* ways of thinking about the human, not just these two, do us a disservice. More specifically, McCarthy shows how our way of thinking about the human through the vehicle of the novel is wildly inadequate. Alan Bourassa argues that the novel “stakes a claim to a definition of the human” (3). Bourassa goes on: “The human is but the creation of a system of meanings and values that must in large part be called literary” (18). Thus we can define our word “human” as a literary category, a system of meaning that comes out of our narrative of the world. Bourassa lists what he sees as the central concepts in the novel’s definition of the human, including emotion, inwardness, individuality, experience, and meaning (3-15).

As we witness Ballard’s struggle to place himself in the world of humanistic identity, both as the protagonist of a narrative and as a resident of Sevier County, we see that such placement is impossible. Ballard consistently resists the novel’s and his neighbors’ attempts to define him, which is why he tends to strike readers as one of the oddest protagonists ever to grace the page. In what follows, I want to show how *Child of God* reveals the failures of such “ways of thinking” about Lester Ballard as a novel’s kind of being. Then I hope to reveal how, within the novel, Lester Ballard’s community parallels McCarthy as they unsuccessfully attempt to contain Ballard in their stories.

In contrast to Bourassa's definition of the human of novels, Ballard is a being devoid of emotion and inwardness. The novel does not allow us to enter into Ballard's thoughts or his feelings, keeping us from investing in him as we might want to invest in a traditional protagonist. McCarthy accomplishes this on the simplest level by never opening Ballard's mind to us as readers. McCarthy offers precious few insights into Ballard's inner world, leading us to almost suspend our belief in the interiority of Lester Ballard. Interiority, as Bourassa sees it, comes most often in twentieth century novels through a "stream of consciousness" (8). This is entirely absent from *Child of God*. McCarthy leads us through Ballard's life of eating baloney sandwiches, using the outhouse, collecting female corpses, tramping listlessly through creeks, snow, mountains, prisons, and stores. Ballard does no thinking, musing, and little dreaming to which we are privy. As the novel advances and Ballard's murders accumulate, no blush of guilt appears. Ballard never evinces sorrow over his activities.

Granted, McCarthy offers us a few moments in the novel when Ballard seems to have Bourassa's human category of inwardness. We read that as "he watched the diminutive progress of all things in the valley, the gray fields coming up black and corded under the plow, the slow green occlusion that the trees were spreading," Ballard is reduced to tears (170). But should we read his tears as guilt, sorrow, or loneliness? McCarthy does not lead us to any of these conclusions. Perhaps in Ballard's tears he joins the creek he sees in the valley, sinking into Bataille's desired intimacy with his surroundings. McCarthy gives little reason to see in Lester Ballard the emotion or interior life that a novel's human character usually possesses.

Ballard's experiences do not additively make him a novel's human center. Bourassa outlines the way a hero like Homer's Odysseus experiences things that teach readers what to expect, and not expect, from him in the future (12). But with Lester Ballard, we have no

paradigm of experience in which to read him. McCarthy does include various Sevier County citizens' narratives of Ballard's past. However, these do not come to us as *his* experiences, but rather as *their* stories (more on this later). Odysseus's classic story revolves around a journey home, and the experiences that move him closer or further from home. In contrast, Ballard's story is a parody of a journey, and home is a space that forever eludes him.

If a human being is a creature with a home in the world, then Ballard is not human. *Child of God* opens with the repossession of Ballard's home and land by the county. After he is kicked off what was once his property, Ballard tries to take up residence in an empty cabin in the woods. He sweeps it and drags his possessions there till "he had all he owned about him in the barren room" (15). But in little time, Ballard's cabin is overrun with foxhounds, who trample him and undo the trappings of his home, "carrying first the muntins,<sup>2</sup> then the sash, leaving a square and naked hole in the wall" (24). As the foxhounds reveal, the other creatures of the world refuse to recognize Ballard's home as distinct from the space they inhabit. Later in the novel, Ballard wakes in the night to find this cabin on fire: "Through the rives in the boards above him he could see a hellish glow of hot orange" (104). Ballard narrowly escapes being burned alive. He stumbles out into the snowy night to watch the flames consume the place he called "home," though McCarthy will give it no such fixed title: "Long before morning the house that had kept Ballard from the elements was only a blackened chimney with a pile of smoldering boards at its feet" (105). Ballard collects his corpses and brings them into a new "home" in the caves, but from here he is arrested and imprisoned. No space offers Ballard respite. When his experiences are lined up together, they read more like a non-voyage, coupled with the loss of homes, rather than the classic novel's journey home.

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<sup>2</sup> Muntins are those cross-bars that hold together panes in a window.

If the human being is a creature separate from the animal, then Ballard is not human. McCarthy consistently uses our vocabulary of “the animal” to describe Ballard. Ballard gives the carnival worker a “cold cat’s look” (62). Ballard listens to his own echoing voice “with his head tilted like a dog” (132). He pokes his head up through a hole in the mountain “like a groundhog” (155). He howls in the cave and makes “a sound not quite crying that echoed from the walls of the grotto like the mutterings of a band of sympathetic apes” (159). Ballard becomes a “crazed mountain troll” (152). When he awakes in the hospital he is “a part-time ghoul” (174). In his final wanderings in the caves, Ballard “scrabbled like a rat” (188). When Ballard encounters a cat early in the novel, then narrator remarks: “The cat looked at him without interest. It seemed to think him not too bright” (26). In an ironic turn of ordinary definitions, Lester Ballard sinks further below the human, lower than the traditional “other” of the animal.

If human existence is one defined by relationships, then Ballard is not human. As Ballard watches two hawks, we hear that “He did not know how the hawks mated but he knew that all things fought” (169). Mating is certainly beyond Ballard’s grasp, as evidenced by the necrophilia. As Ballard violently kills and collects female corpses, his practices divorce sexuality from human relationship. Ballard seeks physical continuity with others, but he does so without metaphysical connections to his fellow creatures. In so doing, he defies existence based on rational or relational connection in favor of violent, physical connections. From Bataille’s perspective, Ballard’s violent rituals may in fact be raising him to that awakened state of intimate belonging to the world.

If all of these descriptions of Ballard strike us as ultimately puzzling, then I think we are reading him correctly. Somehow, outside of all these categories we call human, Ballard exists. In a moment when a flooded creek threatens to carry Ballard away, a narrator interjects to wonder

why Ballard is saved from such wrath: “How then is he borne up? Or rather, why will these waters not take him?” (156) And that is the largest question, addressed to the waters of this creek and the novel’s current, too. How does Ballard cohere in the enterprise of the novel? As his community grows increasingly suspicious of Ballard’s different behavior, a law enforcement officer gives Ballard two options: “You are either going to have to find some other way to live or some other place in the world to do it in” (123). But McCarthy hints at a third option for Ballard, an explanation as to how he is “borne up:” becoming posthuman. The river’s water proves itself to be capable of erasing old human categories, and bringing continuity. What is buoyed up in the flooded river is the posthumanism of Lester Ballard.<sup>3</sup>

Ballard finds a kind of belonging in the world, an existence, though it is not the one we usually imagine. Ballard’s collection of female bodies, both discovered and gathered through murder, along with his necrophilia, distance him from expected human behavior. His violence raises him to a level of continuity with the world not unlike that of the animal. Late in the novel, an angry mob of townspeople forces Ballard to lead them to where he has stashed these bodies. Ballard brings them to the caves, but once inside, he separates himself from the group and disappears in the caves. In Ballard’s escape from his vigilante kidnappers, the earth’s caves initially appear to offer respite to him. The townsmen are at a total loss in the caves, showing that they are not in control in this natural environment. But Ballard ends up as lost as his neighbors. Ballard wanders through the caves with a flashlight, stopping to sleep and then waking only to wander on. He collects a tooth from a jaguar skull like a tourist, and then he realizes that his own body will be subjected to such a fate: “Perhaps [mice would] nest in his skull, spawn their tiny bald and mewling whelps in the lobed cavern where his brains had been” (189). His human

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<sup>3</sup> Ballard is born up in the creek much like the trout are standing in the stream at the end of *The Road*.

existence seems destined to dissipate into a habitat for mice. The parody of a home that Ballard built in the caves parallels the home that the mice will build in the caverns of Ballard's body. Here we see Lester Ballard as a being of physical matter to be repurposed and used even after his own consciousness ends. In these caves, Ballard sees that the world is not built as a home for men. Ironically, he is more "at home" in this vision of his death than he has ever been in his life.

In *The Animal That I Therefore Am*, Jacques Derrida meditates on the gaze of the animal upon the naked human: "The gaze called 'animal' offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human" (12). While the actual animal gaze is something the next two novels will bring into the conversation, Ballard's time in the caves spent becoming animal is his fullest realization of the limitations of the human. Here deep in the cave, a space free from stories and human boundaries, he comes closest to a posthuman existence. Perhaps this is why the narrator offers Ballard this strange compliment while he wanders in the caves: "He was half right" (189).

Though Sevier County never accuses or tries Ballard for his activities, he spends the rest of his days imprisoned in a state hospital, where his neighboring prisoner is "a demented gentleman" accused of cannibalism (193). In giving such a genteel title to Ballard's fellow prisoner, McCarthy subtly mocks such traditional human categories, for neither this man nor Ballard qualify as "gentlemen." Caged and ignored save when he is "taken out for airing," Ballard eventually dies after contracting pneumonia (193). For McCarthy though, death is not the end of Lester Ballard. Upon his death, his body travels to the state medical school in Memphis, where students dissect him.

His entrails were hauled forth and delineated and the four young students who bent over him like those haruspices of old perhaps saw monsters worse to come in their configurations. (194)

Over the spread of Ballard's organs, these medical students transform into something other than scientists. Haruspices were ancient religious men who examined the remains of animal sacrifices. In a more general sense, haruspices look at destructed matter for some kind of significance. The medical students attempt to see in Ballard's cells, ribs, and arteries that human potentiality, interiority, and meaning Bourassa sees as central to the novel. The medical students look in the matter for new monsters, but perhaps they miss what is really there. Ballard's matter may decay, not into new monsters, but into the home for mice he imagines himself to be in that posthuman awareness in the caves. The medical students haul forth and delineate Ballard's entrails much like Ballard once studied and engaged dead bodies. We too have this desire to find meaning in the human existence, which is why we dissect and why we write novels. Ballard's dissection under the scalpels and saws of the medical students parallels Ballard's dissection in McCarthy's pen. Neither successfully captures Ballard's real existence.

### **Sevier County's Stories**

*"I'll tell ye another thing he done one time"*

After commenting on Lester Ballard's rifle, a Sevier County man recounts his own trip to a Newport carnival, where he encounters an ape in boxing gloves, whose owner offers fifty dollars to anyone who can stay in the ring with him for three minutes (58). Egged on by his friends and whiskey, he volunteers to get in the ring with the gorilla, thinking "Well hell. He ain't big as me" (59). Circling the gorilla and showing him "a little footwork," the man successfully punches the animal twice and feels confident that he will win this fight. He describes what follows:

Well, well, how sweet it is. I'd done spent the fifty dollars. I ducked around and went to hit him again and about that time he jumped right on top of my head and crammed his foot in my mouth and like to tore my jaw off. I couldn't even holler for help. I thought they never would get that thing off of me. (59-60)

The outcome of the exchange between man and beast is not the only surprise in this story. The very entrance of this man into the trapped environment of the gorilla reverses the way Sevier County cages Lester Ballard for his violence against their community. Indeed, Ballard is twice placed in a cage in the novel (54, 193).

Morton writes: "Humans maintain the human-animal boundary by erecting rigid walls made of quasi-humans, humanoids, ambiguous nonhumans, or unhumans" (*The Ecological Thought* 88). Boundaries are how Sevier county citizens deal with animals, and eventually with Lester Ballard. Morton's boundaries here are scientific ones. I think McCarthy adds to Morton's point in *Child of God* by revealing the way that humans erect boundaries to maintain their superiority through *stories*.

*Child of God* alternates between narrative sections about Lester Ballard and narrative sections following the sheriff or the general happenings in Sevier County. Among these narrative sections McCarthy inserts vignettes, colorful with the dialect and imaginings of people from Sevier County. These vignettes are told in the first person, and the reader quickly realizes that they generally begin or end in conversations about Lester Ballard.

McCarthy's inclusion of these stories is an interesting way to grow his protagonist, the "child of God." McCarthy could explain Ballard's family and past through Ballard's own memory, or through "objective" narration. Instead, he defines him through the community's collective consciousness. The sum total of their stories is a sense of superiority, or at least

differences from Lester Ballard. In this way, the stories stand in opposition to the commonality that McCarthy's title/conceit offers. The stories keep Ballard as "other" from Sevier County society, refusing to recognize continuity between them and him.

A flood is a force capable of erasing boundaries that separate and define physical spaces. Floods eliminate, at least from the larger view, fences, rivers, and roads, bringing the world into a united whole. Beyond just physical topography, the water of the flood that occurs in *Child of God* also undoes man-made boundaries in Sevier County, just as we see the river's water holds Lester Ballard. The flood reconfigures roads into rivers, upon which we watch the law enforcement of the county ride in boats. Sheriff Fate and his deputy make cracks about giving tickets to speeding motorboats rather than cars. The sheriff quips, "You ain't seen an old man with a long beard building a great big boat anywheres have ye?" (161). In their jokes and conversation, the flood "becomes simply another aspect of the daily routine and is absorbed into the reassuring authority of the normal" (Bell 56). Fate feigns linguistic control over a force far beyond his control.

The ways the citizens of Sevier County use stories, words, and histories reveal, to use Bell's phrase, the "unfailing human capacity for suppression and evasion" (58). This community ignores continuity in their reality in order to maintain what they see as distinction; they escape that intimate belonging with the world through their stories. Humanity's attempts to suppress and evade stand in contrast to nature's power to reveal. "In the spring or warmer weather when the snow thaws in the woods the tracks of winter reappear on slender pedestals and the snow reveals in palimpsest old buried wanderings, struggles, scenes of death" (138). In the snow's melting, McCarthy's universe tells its secrets: "Tales of winter brought to light again like time turned back upon itself" (138). This melting, like the flood, is an example of what we might describe as

naturally destructive or decaying processes that are, for McCarthy, revelatory and constructive. Flowing water embodies and reveals the continuity of reality, without superiority.

McCarthy shows that the people of Sevier County are neither superior to nor in control of their world. Rather, readers see the human activity in the novel as a small part of life. McCarthy construes the human activities that Sevier County's citizens see as meaningful as puppeted acts. When Ballard walks into church, "The congregation... would turn all together like a cast of puppets at the opening of the door" (31). McCarthy also likens the party who goes to the cave to retrieve the bodies to "puppeteers" (196). The people of Sevier County are only masquerading as inhabitants of an orderly, controlled universe where justice is served. What we are really left with is an image of nature's enduring watch over the affairs of men: "...basking nighthawks rose from the dust in the road before them with wild wings and eyes red as jewels in the headlights" (197).

Beyond Bell's point that humans suppress and evade, McCarthy tells us that we do this not only in a negative and avoidable sense, but innately because of our epistemological limitations. Human stories shape their content, and if the only way we know is through such oral histories then our knowledge is forever limited. The stories undermine themselves with their continual anchoring in the collective or personal memory, not fact: "They say he never was right" (21); "I'll tell ye another thing he done one time" (35); "I'll say one thing" (57); "They wasn't none of em any account that I ever heard of" (80). This is exactly the circular reasoning that Wolfe warns against when he explains: "the world is an ongoing... construction and creation of shared environment... by autopoietic entities that have... their own forms of embodiment" (xxiv). As that final glimpse of the hawks' eyes communicates, the human story may not be the final story.

Morton addresses the problematic way human beings let the possession of a consciousness—as manifested in such activities as storytelling—sanction them to act in a superior manner:

We assume that consciousness is a special bonus prize for being more “highly evolved”—a suspicious idea from a Darwinist point of view. ...If we use science only to justify our superiority to other beings, the most we shall offer them is a condescending sympathetic hand. (*The Ecological Thought* 73)

Morton goes on to complicate this with the paradoxical reality that we cannot escape our consciousness:

Yet as soon as we try to exit the model that puts humans on top, we run into trouble. The ultimate philosopher of superiority was Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche threw down a significant gauntlet: he reduced living to asserting mastery, and mastery to domination. What happens when you try to rise above his argument? You fall prey to his logic of mastery. Nietzsche’s idea eats away at all positions that strive to overcome it. How do we get out of this trap? By crouching low and crawling away, like a sensible small mammal. ...Consciousness then becomes a property of lowliness and weakness, rather than of power. (*The Ecological Thought* 73)

Morton explains that if we try to be above superiority, we are still falling into the superiority trap, and are inescapably living as Nietzsche thinks we are. Morton’s suggestion that the way out of the paradox is the way down is poignant to our discussion of the person of Lester Ballard. For, as Lester Ballard descends into caves and into violence that the human community seeks to contain and repel in their stories, he begins to participate more intimately with the world.

In a surprising twist then, Lester Ballard may become a protagonist with something to teach us. The disturbing kinship linking him and us leads away from false domination of our surroundings and into a cave. In Lester Ballard's emergence from the cave, we see a transformation in him. He is not repentant or redeemed in a religious sense, but he is reborn. When Ballard makes it back to the hospital, he is "a weedshaped onearmed human swaddled up in outsized overalls and covered all over with red mud" (192). Swaddled and covered in blood, Ballard appears to be a wild infant, born out of the earth. As Morton offers escape from human superiority through crouching low, Lester Ballard has his first and only identity epiphany in his submersion the ground. And in a significant word choice for me, McCarthy tells us that Ballard is "human."

Ballard's transformation is not just in his time in the cave, for he comes out only to encounter the same darkly combative world he knew before: "He cast about among the stars for some kind of guidance but the heavens wore a different look that Ballard did not trust" (190). What happens next though impacts Ballard. As a church bus passes him on the road, Ballard looks into the face of a small boy. Once the bus passes, McCarthy tells us:

He was trying to fix in his mind where he'd seen the boy when it came to him that the boy looked like himself. This gave him the fidgets and though he tried to shake the image of the face in the glass it would not go. (191)

Why is this so significant for Ballard? I think, to again use Morton's imagery, Ballard experiences literal humiliation, in his time in the caves and his encounter with the boy. He is brought low by an awareness of a kind of kinship to other lives. Perhaps it is a totally narcissistic kinship, as he sees himself in the boy. But for the first time, Ballard is continuous with another life form. When Ballard thinks of the boy as himself, he is able to see himself from the outside.

This thought experiment of getting outside one's own consciousness is quintessentially posthuman. Ballard is the little boy and the little boy is Ballard; their lives both become part of the larger mesh that is life.

However, after he resurfaces and sees this boy, Ballard returns to human community. As the roosters herald dawn, a muddy and half-starved Ballard presents himself to the nurse at the hospital, announcing: "I'm supposed to be here" (192). He returns to the hospital, a choice that, were we an emotionally involved studio audience of readers, we would implore him not to make. Why does Ballard experience rebirth only to recommit himself to the hospital? Why must he "belong" there?

Although Lester Ballard consistently resists this novel's confinement to the realm of the human, he returns to that community when he goes back to the hospital. The hospital is the source of the dissection that Ballard is eventually subjected to; the hospital, like the novel, propagates a limiting definition of his existence. Hospitals treat people based on a series of quantifiable, knowable facts and experiences. At least for now, McCarthy's novel does not entirely escape the human. In *Child of God*, McCarthy does not seem ready to commit to the fullest implications of the ideas that he is entertaining. Can we blame him? Taken in full, posthumanism requires us to follow Lester Ballard outside of our literary, communal definitions of life. Becoming posthuman is not a comfortable process. As *Child of God* hints, and as the next two novels I examine reveal, to write posthumanly is to violently unwrite all that we know of ourselves. *Child of God* reads as McCarthy's "warm-up" posthuman novel.

But *Child of God* still possesses these momentary flights into the posthuman. *Child of God* does share something with McCarthy's more fully realized posthuman novel, *The Road*. In Ballard's encounter with this little boy on a bus, McCarthy's reader might see a foreshadowing

of a little boy we will meet in McCarthy's latest novel. Towards the end of *The Road*, the father sees his son, "Standing with his suitcase like an orphan waiting for a bus" (275). On first glance, crass necrophile Lester Ballard would seem to have little in common with the gentle boy in *The Road*. But in this reading, both are orphans, pushed outside of old categories of identity, who must find a new way to exist. Both Ballard and the boy are experiments in life outside the traditional confines of language, history, and religion. Lester Ballard stands as a precursor to the little boy, who is our first fully fleshed-out posthuman character in McCarthy's canon.

Ironically, an account of Ballard's dream offers another moment of posthuman flight. Ballard dreams he is riding a mule along a ridge, gazing out over a grassy field of deer. We read:

Each leaf that brushed his face deepened his sadness and dread. Each leaf he passed he'd never pass again. They rode over his face like veils, already some yellow, their veins like slender bones where the sun shone through them. He had resolved to ride on for he could not turn back and the world that day was as lovely as any day that ever was and he was riding to his death. (171)

Ballard may be riding a mule, but McCarthy uses the same word "ride" to describe the play of the leaves over his face. In a strange reversal, we sense that Ballard is not the only one riding. Leaves ride, too. Dominion subsides and mutuality prevails. McCarthy describes the "slender bones" of these leaves, and we sense the satisfaction that Ballard is finally glimpsing "what stuff they were made of, or himself" (139). His dream offers transparency and unity with his natural surroundings, answers to Ballard's real longings, it seems. Ballard's desire runs deeper than the need for home, family, romantic love, or work. Instead, Ballard has an abiding desire to belong in the world outside the confines of the human. Accompanying this clarifying stillness comes "sadness and dread" as Ballard is "riding to his death." But clearly Ballard sees no point in trying

to escape death. He rides on, and recognizes the normalizing presence of the world: “the world that day was as lovely as any day.” This is the posthuman in *Child of God*: even in his dream, a realm of human subconscious, we see a man coming to terms with his smallness in the face of a resplendent world that pays no mind to his existence. Loveliness in the world comes coupled with death (“the world that day was...lovely...and he was riding to his death”) because only through the death of the “human” can we exist inside this loveliness (171).

### **Final Thoughts: Tattoos and Novels**

Lester Ballard wanders into the Sevier County post office, where he looks at a “Wanted” poster, and McCarthy tells us:

The wanted stared back with surly eyes. Men of many names. Their tattoos. Legends of dead loves inscribed on perishable flesh. A prevalence of blue panthers. (55)

These men’s tattoos show us how in spite of our othering of “the animal,” we still identify with animals. *Child of God’s* passing mentions of gang communities, with names like “panther,” reflect our need to move outside of human identity into a more animal one. These tattoos also reveal our desire to inscribe words in flesh. This flesh is described as perishable though, which cuts the significance of the “legends of dead loves” with the awareness that neither the lovers nor their ink remembrances will last. The tattoos have something in common with the novel. Novels are words imprinted into leaves, chronicling tales of human activity. Like the wanted men and their tattooed bodies, McCarthy teaches us that the novel’s days are numbered. The residents of Sevier County can tell stories all day, they can claim power over their history and their present, but readers leave unassured of such power. Instead, the futility of human existence strikes us as we watch the molded corpses lifted out of the caves in the novel’s last few pages.

Still, McCarthy is a living, working novelist. In scribing this legend of the death of Lester Ballard, McCarthy's work as author parallels the medical students' work as haruspices. Both find meaning in the dead body for our future. McCarthy understands his need for the destroyed body, hence the "artistic suicide" that began this conversation. McCarthy creates and kills Lester Ballard in *Child of God*. McCarthy kills in order to reveal death as a transformation rather than an ending. He does this because, like Morton, he wants us to crouch low and crawl out of our current identity into an updated humanity that understands that we are simultaneously insignificant and connected to the world in which we live. We must learn that our stories do not end in superiority. *Child of God* closes not with an oral history or even an account of protagonist Lester Ballard. *Child of God* ends with those haunting red eyes. The final word becomes something other than a "human" word.

## **II. *THE CROSSING*: STORIES TO END ALL STORIES**

In the previous chapter, I argued that in Lester Ballard and the stories of *Child of God*, McCarthy unravels what we know of the human. In form as well as content, *Child Of God's* storytelling becomes increasingly impotent. Stories cannot explain or control Lester Ballard. Stories cannot contain the world. The hawks' eyes lead us out of the human story and into something other than a story.

*The Crossing*, on the other hand, seems at first to affirm the idea of storytelling as a necessary and praiseworthy endeavor. *The Crossing* offers a recognizable hero in Billy Parham and his brother Boyd. Billy's relationships with the wolf and with his brother are heart-warming and heart-breaking, neither of which are descriptions that lend themselves to *Child of God*. Within his pastoral context, Guillemain acknowledges the sentimentality of *The Crossing* which "exposes the novel to the charge of being invested with a false, hyperbolic pathos" (126). Bourassa writes that *The Crossing* is among McCarthy's novels that "seem much more familiar, even to the point of being adventurous" (82). Bourassa posits: "In *The Crossing* we have all the elements for the building of a narrative line" (82).

Deeper than just the humanistic trappings of this novel, the stories within the larger story of Billy Parham also testify to the power of storytelling, basing a definition of the world upon it. As one storyteller who Billy encounters tells him: "For this world also which seems to us a thing of stone and flower and blood is not a thing at all but is a tale" (143). As Billy's failed quest to

return the wolf to Mexico turns to a story of his subsequent wanderings, Billy's story becomes almost submerged in the stories of the men and women he encounters as he wanders. Their tales offer a reading of Billy's sufferings in a narrative pattern. So how do we reconcile these weighty stories with our posthuman reading of *Child of God*? And how do we read Billy Parham as something other than a traditional protagonist in a humanistic storytelling enterprise? Does Cormac McCarthy tear apart what we know about humanity and the world via the novel only to turn around and feed traditional definitions of these?

In spite of the weight and beauty of the stories that fill *The Crossing*, they are working in much the same way as the stories in *Child of God*. *The Crossing*'s storytellers use their tales to try to make sense of the suffering and death around them by allegorizing it. Stories are still an attempt to control (Guillemin 141). McCarthy proves himself capable of writing powerful, meaningful, humanistic narratives. But he goes on to reveal how his own narratives can actually inhibit our existence in the world unless they become something other than human, and thus not narratives at all.

*The Crossing* is dressed as a classic novel. But reading beneath the mesmerizing prose of the novel's many storytellers, I think we find a new, posthuman bend to this book. In the presence of the wolf, Billy Parham's "becoming wolf," and the embedded tales, *The Crossing* is yet another thought experiment in what it might mean to write a posthuman novel.

At the beginning of *The Crossing*, the Parham men attempt to trap a wolf that is threatening their livelihood as she kills their cattle and roams their land. The Parhams seek the advice of more experienced trappers. One such trapper vocalizes his disdain for the anthropocentric world, and asks the Parhams to learn from the animal world. "The old man said

that no man knew what the wolf knew” (45). So Billy Parham seeks to remedy this: “He tried to see the world as the wolf saw” (51). This shifting in Billy’s outlook is crucial to understanding *The Crossing*.

How do we read the wolf in *The Crossing*? We may be tempted to use the wolf as a metaphor for something or an analogy to Billy’s other relationships. Certainly drawing comparisons between the human and animal is worthwhile and useful. In a similar method, Guillemin brilliantly reads how the character Lester Ballard manifests a “wilderness within” that matches “the wilderness without” (39). Like Guillemin, Scoones draws out the parallel between McCarthy’s characters and their environment. Writing on the border trilogy, Scoones suggests:

The three novels...reveal the profoundest correlations between the ways in which humans construct their relationships with the natural world and the manner in which they construct their relationships to each other. (137)

Though his perspective is not that of a literary critic, Barry Lopez draws similar correlations between animal and human. Writing on Nunamiut society and wolves, Lopez supposes “a correspondence between the worlds of these two hunters” (86).

Dana Phillips is hesitant about drawing such parallels too quickly, lest they become conflateions. Phillips communicates that “the possibility of ecocriticism does not hinge on the question of whether or not there is an inherent relation of resemblance between literature and nature” (144). Phillips actually references Barry Lopez’s concept of interior landscapes and exterior landscapes, and respectfully counters:

I can think of no compelling reason to accept the premise that we must establish and maintain firm connections between our inner and outer worlds, which is to

say....connections of likeness between those worlds, with likeness understood or rather misunderstood as identity. (11)

For Phillips, we are on thin ice when we try to establish our identity outside culture, technology, or modernity, in what we perceive to be the respite of nature. As he rightly prods: “Science, discovery, and technological achievement do not mark our final alienation from nature: they mark our ever greater involvement in it” (*Truth* 31). The ecocritical desire to redirect our gaze to the world is problematic because we are assuming a definition of “the world” as apart from the human.

I hope my analysis does not commit simplistic connotations of world and text. I do not want to argue that the wolf is a purer life form that the posthuman strives to be; that is far from what I see Lopez doing in *Of Wolves and Men*, and it is certainly not what McCarthy is doing. Instead the wolf is a category-exploding other. The wolf is not a parallel or alternate way to see the world, but a being that exists outside of our “sight.” If Billy does later become wolf, however briefly, this is because he loses his humanistic, narrativizing sight of the world.

Were we to read this novel as a traditional road story of cowboy Billy Parham’s fall from grace, there are a number of moments in the plot we might point to as the beginning of that fall. But Billy Parham’s real problem is not that he smuggles his family’s food to a stranger in the novel’s opening chapters. Nor is it his bold mission to free the wolf in Mexico. Billy does not lose his bearings because he desperately seeks to get back his father’s stolen horses. *The Crossing* is not a story of Billy’s fall but rather a picture of what results from his lapse in vision. For, when confronted with the wolf, Billy realizes that his eyes do not see the world entire. He senses his lack: “He tried to see as the wolf saw” (51). Billy’s efforts actually look a lot like the efforts of some posthuman scholarship. He tries to get outside of his human understanding and

into the wolf's world when he tries to rescue her and take her home. His intentions are valid in that he longs to see something larger in the world than himself. But in such "seeing," Billy inserts the wolf into a narrative. He tries to "read" the wolf into his story. He does not acknowledge the abyss between his eyes and the wolf's, and the difference in what those eyes see. Only after the wolf is dead by Billy's own hands does he see this difference. Then Billy becomes wolf. Then the work of getting outside the human, and human language, begins.

Deleuze and Guattari's term might help us understand McCarthy's wolf: "becoming animal." I want to talk about Billy and the wolf as a becoming. Billy becomes wolf, or at least he begins to. Perhaps the easiest way to explain how Deleuze and Guattari's term operates is to say what it is not. Becoming animal does not imply progress, regress, correspondence, resemblance, or evolution proper. It is a creative process (239). "What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which that which becomes passes" (238). Reminiscent of Wolfe's point that the posthuman may help us get at the human, here I want to wield Deleuze and Guattari's term in order to get past these fixed terms (wolf, boy, conscious, sentient, compassionate, violent, hunter). The wolf helps us out of these categories in order to seek a definition that is refreshed and useful once again.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida adds helpful perspective in our look at Billy and the wolf. In Derrida's *The Animal That I Therefore Am*, he philosophically unpacks the way Descartes' model of existence excludes animals, and how this exclusion matters. What would it look like for philosophers to factor in the gaze of the animal? How might this change how we define ourselves? For Derrida, this is not only an ontological issue but a linguistic one. "The animal" is quite literally a word, "an appellation that men have instituted, a name they have

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<sup>4</sup> Alan Bourassa also uses this idea of "becoming" in his analysis of *The Crossing* in his book *Deleuze and American Literature*.

given themselves the right and the authority to give the living other” (23). Thus, Derrida’s discussion flows meaningfully into McCarthy’s novels: how is the problem, the limit, of current human identity a product of human language? How might we write a new human identity, or unwrite the one we have now?

### **Billy and Wolf**

Leaving Grant County New Mexico behind, the Parham family travels to a freshly minted county to the south. Hidalgo County, where they make their new home, appears to be a boundless place: “You could ride clear to Mexico and not strike a crossfence” (3). “Crossings,” a word the title forces us to listen for, are obsolete in this expanse. But after the Parham family’s crossing-less journey and before Billy’s many crossings, we hear this: “The wolf had crossed the international boundary” (24). The she-wolf’s entrance into the novel introduces us to the presence of boundaries:

She would not cross a road or a rail line in daylight. She would not cross under a wire fence twice in the same place. These were the new protocols. Strictures that had not existed before. Now they did. (25)

Crossing implies definitions— whether of nations or people or species. To cross in this novel is an act of unmaking manmade categories. Like maps, man-made boundaries are arbitrary not explanatory. What does it matter to the wolf that she is crossing an international boundary? She does not pledge loyalty to any nation, though the human rhetoric repeatedly assigns her to Mexico as she brings destruction and violence to American ranchers.

But to cross also implies a linearity to events and spaces. Crossing means there is a here and a there, a point A and point B. But McCarthy will try to unmake this too. And all of this

work begins because the wolf crosses. She crosses into Billy's life, into the United States. She crosses out of the multiplicity of animal existence and into isolation. For Deleuze and Guattari, every animal is fundamentally a pack (239). This matches Morton's picture of life as the mesh, not individualistic existences. Thus we meet this wolf outside of herself, out of context in two important ways. Out of context first because she is alone, and secondly because she is on the page.

When Billy finally catches the wolf, his world transforms. Heart racing and mind spinning, Billy "was in no way prepared for what he beheld" (53). When Billy appears to be riding off to get his father he hesitates: "He sat the horse for a long time. The sun warm on his back. The world waiting. Then he rode back to the wolf" (53). This mention of "the world waiting" is interesting because I don't think McCarthy means Billy Parham's world, the Southwest, or the wolf's world, even if these are all one. In McCarthy the world never waits for men. I think McCarthy here means the novel's world, the world we enter too as readers. The hinge for us is Billy's turning back to the wolf. This matters for the story.

Billy proceeds to take the wolf, not home to his father, but on to Mexico. He sets out on a rash voyage to return the wolf to the place Billy believes she belongs. His efforts to protect her and learn from her end in her death. One way to read this death is to see the environmental lesson: "McCarthy uses a lone wolf, the pregnant she-wolf, to present his argument that man kills that which he cannot control" (Sanborn 148). We might argue that in spite of Billy's seemingly noble intentions to respect the wolf, "Even honorable acts go horribly awry" (Sanborn 143).

But there's more to this. Billy's actions thus far go horribly because he is unable to escape imposing a narrative structure on the world. Wolfe addresses a problem in the discipline of animal studies, noting that such studies can commit the very error they are trying to avoid:

Just because we direct our attention to the study of nonhuman animals, and even if we do so with the aim of exposing how they have been misunderstood and exploited, that does not mean that we are not continuing to be humanist—and therefore, by definition, anthropocentric. (99)

As Wolfe criticizes this discipline, so Billy is culpable of murdering the wolf despite his good intentions. From the moment Billy catches the wolf, he makes the fatal error of failing to acknowledge the abyss between himself and the wolf. Derrida strongly disavows the existence of “homogenous continuity between what calls *itself* man and what *he* calls the animal” (30). To assume that animals operate like humans is not compassionate; it is narcissistic. When Billy thinks that the wolf longs to return to Mexico, he puts inside her his own desire for a home. The concept of home offers Billy both an origin and a destination; thus “home” reaffirms linear structure in the world. But Billy mistakenly reads such order into the world of the wolf. Derrida goes so far as to call this kind of conflation “a stupid memory lapse... a naïve misapprehension” (30). The following are examples of Billy's naivety in putting the wolf's existence into his human narratives.

Initially, the wolf violently resists Billy's roping and muzzling with every fiber of her (physical) being. Frustrated by her resistance, Billy tells her, “You aint got no damn sense” (57). If only Billy could understand the meaning of these words, for they mean quite the opposite of what he intends. The wolf's absence of “sense” is not her downfall; rather, Billy's possession of sense causes rupture in *The Crossing*.

When the wolf is taken from Billy by Mexican authorities, he finds her again in a circus, tied up, and prodded with a stick for the entertainment of paying attendees. Billy approaches the cart where she is tied. Once there, he speaks to the wolf, wishing upon her the desires of his own heart:

He said what was in his heart. He made her promises that he swore to keep in the making. That he would take her to the mountains where she would find others of her kind. (105)

Billy engages the wolf in what he thinks is an exchange. He shares his desires with her and pretends to know hers. Again, he assumes that the wolf wants return to her origin, the mountains, where he assumes the other wolves await her. He makes promises, agreements with her, which she is in reality not a part of.

When a man passing him on the road asks Billy just what he plans to do with the wolf he is dragging alongside his horse, Billy responds: “Fixin to take it home” (58). “Home?” the old man incredulously replies, “Whatever in the contumacious hell for?” (59). Here Billy assumes that the wolf, like man, possesses a discrete mappable “home” in which she exists. His assumption is childish, for the wolf does not live like the Parhams. Furthermore, the narrative of unwanted beings crossing from Mexico into the United States is one that Billy accidentally adopts: “She come up from Mexico,” he tells an old man in a pickup truck. “Ever other damn thing does,” is the man’s vicious reply. Unfortunately, Billy’s narrative of home and belonging hinges on exclusion. The wolf is from Mexico, thus she must be taken back to Mexico. Though Billy never engages this nationalistic tension, his actions imply that the wolf cannot become a part of *his* home. His world is sectioned into human and nonhuman spaces of belonging.

Billy cannot but read the wolf into a tale of his world, a tale that requires a journey to return her to Mexico. “He squatted there watching her with the rope in both hands. Like a man entrusted with the keeping of something which he hardly knew the use of” (79). This is the problem: Billy does not understand the wolf because he continues to see her in his own terms of use, home, and existence. Billy’s efforts make no impact: “He talked to her about his life but it didnt seem to rest her fears” (89). His linguistic meaning is not something the wolf shares. His boundaries, and crossing, do more harm than good for the wolf, in spite of his intentions, because they make of her what she fundamentally is *not*: a tale.

In Mexico, Billy must relinquish the wolf to authorities at least as destructive to her as Billy’s father would have been. Once her time in the circus proves less than profitable, they bring the wolf to an arena where she fights with dogs. This fighting draws a crowd of spectators. When Billy finds her here, he cuts silently through the crowd, “and when he reached the wooden parapet he stepped over it and walked out into the pit” (116). Here, perhaps for the first time, Billy starts to become wolf. He crosses a man-made boundary without regard, much as the wolf herself did not recognize boundaries. Taking his stance beside her, Billy responds to the young hacendado and he finally begins to explain his actions: “I never thought about this country one way or the other” (119). Billy realizes that “the wolf knew nothing of boundaries” (119). Billy finally begins to see as the wolf sees, though ironically, and intentionally, his becoming aligns with what we perceive to be the loss of the wolf.

Readers are tempted, even invited, to emotionally invest in this wolf as Billy does. The Mexican men drag and kick the wolf, calling her a coward, and this feels far more disgusting than when Billy gently feeds the wolf entrails of a rabbit he has caught for her to eat (133). But is their dragging of the wolf into the arena really all that different from Billy dragging her into

Mexico? McCarthy shows us the dangers of such emotional investments devoid of the reality of the wolf. When we absorb animals into our humanistic understandings, we limit them and render them false to their realities.

McCarthy recounts Billy's last moments with the dead wolf before he buries her. Rather than talk to her as he has done, Billy does what he could not do while she lived (at least, not with her consent): he touches her:

[He] put his hand upon her bloodied forehead and closed his own eyes that he could see her running in the mountains, running in the starlight were the grass was wet and the sun's coming as yet had not undone the rich matrix of creatures passed in the night before her. Deer and hare and dove and groundvole all richly empaneled on the air for her delight, all nations of the possible world ordained by God of which she was one among and not separate from. (127)

The key to Billy's becoming wolf is that he must shut his eyes. Here he realizes the impossibility of using his vision as hers. The wolf's world is one of multiplicity, many and different lives belonging to the world together in kinship. But it is the wolf's bloodied and dead skull that produces such a vision, forcing us to wonder if McCarthy is telling us that this sort of kinship is only possible in death. For when Billy holds the dead wolf, McCarthy tells us "he reached to hold what cannot be held, what already ran among the mountains at once terrible and of great beauty" (127).

An important question follows: if Billy's efforts to understand the wolf end only in her demise, does McCarthy do violence to the wolf in narrativizing her as well? When Billy visits Senor Don Arnulfo in his early efforts to help his father trap the wolf, Arnulfo gives Billy an important analogy: the wolf is like a snowflake.

You catch the snowflake but when you look in your hand you dont have it no more.

Maybe you see this dechado. But before you can see it it is gone. If you want to see it you have to see it on its own ground. (46)

Arnulfo understands what Billy must learn. The wolf will not be muzzled and understood by men, and under such control she ceases to be what she otherwise is. I think McCarthy understands, unlike Billy, that the wolf he writes is not the she wolf standing there, but his own version of her. The wolf of *The Crossing* is like a crushed and evaporated snowflake beneath McCarthy's pen. But we can read her murder at Billy and McCarthy's hands, not as loss, but as sacrifice. In Bataille's understanding, "Killing is only the exhibition of a deep meaning" (49). In his important concept of sacrifice, Bataille sees how something passes from the violent consumption of the humanistic world to the "violence of unconditional consumption" (49). McCarthy, like Billy, does violence to the wolf when he brings her into his story. But McCarthy's kind of violence against the wolf acts, much like sacrifice, to reveal to us how to live deeply entrenched in the world, at one with violence and apart from the control of language. McCarthy's sacrifice of the wolf allows Billy to enter her immanent world. As he touches her dead body, he starts to become wolf.

### **Becoming Wolf: Violence**

In what we know of her life and her death, the wolf is both a perpetrator and a victim of violence. As such, she demonstrates that the world is a cycle of violence and death.

When the flames came up her eyes burned out there like gatelamps to another world. A world burning on the shore of an unknowable void. A world construed out of blood and

blood's alkahest and blood in its integument because it was that nothing save blood had power to resonate against that void which threatened hourly to devour it. (74)

The wolf's perspective is one in which blood, death, and violence are intrinsic to life. An "alkahest" was an alchemical term for a universal solvent that could dissolve even gold. This image connects to the final passage about the wolf, which references "what cannot be held never be held" and has "power to cut and shape and hollow out the dark form of the world" because this is what an alkahest would be and do (127). The wolf's world consists of blood and fire: in a word, violence.

Barry Lopez explains that what seems to us to be a senseless, excessive kind of violence is part of the wolf's way of life:

Wolves do not kill just the old, the weak, and the injured. They also kill animals in the prime of health. And they don't always kill just what they need; they sometimes kill in excess. And wolves kill each other. The reasons for these acts are not clear. No one...knows why wolves do what they do. (4)

Lopez, like McCarthy alludes to the disconnect between human understanding and the wolf. When we meet McCarthy's wolf, she is feasting on stillborn calves:

Twice she found these pale unborn still warm and gawking on the ground, milkblue and near translucent in the dawn like beings miscarried from another world entire. She ate even their bones where they lay blind and dying in the snow. (26)

Here the wolf's activities, as Lopez suggests, do not align with human sensibilities or appetites. But Billy's relationship with the wolf is never outside of this violence. A mutual respect between boy and wolf is achieved but it is not a friendship. Each party senses impending murder from the

other: According to Bataille, intimacy is violence. Thus, as Billy becomes wolf, gaining intimacy with the world means involving himself in its violence.

After the wolf's death, something about Billy changes. We hear that he "wandered on into the mountains. He whittled a bow from a holly limb, made arrows from cane. He thought to become again the child he never was" (129). Billy is reborn in the violence of the wolf's death and life. He starts over as the child he never was, with a sense of belonging.

Billy now enters into a strange blood covenant with the world, evident in his actions immediately following the wolf's death. After launching an arrow into the breast of a hawk, Billy tries to find the hawk's body. He fails to find the bird but instead sees "a single drop of blood that had dried on the rocks" (129). Billy then slices his own hand with a knife and "watched the slow blood dropping on the stone" (130). We can read Billy's giving of blood for blood as his participation in the world in a deeper way than only "reading" it. This giving of blood reflects what Sanborn explains:

The trapper and the wolf are in a blood covenant, the result of which is loss of trapper and loss of wolf and perhaps the ancient rituals of blood between man and wolf are part of the collective unconscious of each, and of both. (136)

Billy enters into life by acknowledging that his elemental material, blood, is a part of the world's elemental materials.

### **Becoming Wolf: Leaving Language**

The most important evidence of Billy's becoming wolf is his growing distrust of language. At the novel's start, Billy is naming things for his younger brother. He seems to have an abundance of words: "He carried Boyd before him in the bow of the saddle and named to him

features of the landscape and birds and animals in both spanish and english” (3).<sup>5</sup> In an echo of Eden, we see man as a creature with the power to name and thus exercise dominion over the creatures of earth. But Billy’s name-giving powers quickly dissipate.

When Billy tries to speak to the wolf “his voice seemed only to make her shudder” (56). Later Billy surrenders his rifle in order to take the wolf and bury her. The sheriff asks Billy what he traded his rifle for, and Billy answers:

I dont think I could say.

You mean you wont say.

No sir. I mean I ain’t sure I could put a name to it. (170)

Billy realizes that the wolf is outside the boundary of his language. He gives up control over the world outside himself when he acknowledges that he cannot name her. Billy’s earliest glimpse of wolves also goes outside of language: “The wolves twisted and turned and leapt in a silence such that they seemed of another world entire” (4). Billy responds to their silence with his own: “When he got back to the house Boyd was awake but he didnt tell him where he’d been nor what he’d seen. He never told anybody” (5). Billy’s silence implies not only the reverence Luce ascribes to it, but also a sense of escape from the control of human language (*The Vanishing World* 175). As Bourassa summarizes:

The becoming-wolf of Billy Parham is his residence in the world that cannot be touched, his loneliness is no longer human; his humanity, if it is still there, is just one more name in a world that cannot be held down by names. (114)

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<sup>5</sup> Interesting that McCarthy doesn’t offer languages the reverence of capitalization

**Post-wolf: The Stories**  
***“This picture of the world is perilous” (293)***

After the world’s death, Billy, like Cain, seems doomed not to die but to wander the earth. In his wanderings, he lives off of the kindness of strangers. As men and women he does not know feed and house Billy, they tell him stories. These stories amass into a weight that threatens to consume the second half of the novel. But weaving all these stories together we still follow the story of Billy, Boyd, and their father’s stolen horses.

“Doomed enterprises divide lives forever into the then and the now” (129). These words interject the presence of a narrating authority and signal the beginning of the second half of *The Crossing*, the post-wolf part. This is the very trapping of storytelling that *The Crossing* contains without possessing. Billy’s life is only divided if we are in that waiting world of storytelling.

Stories within stories always alert the analytical reader to take note, for an author seems to be revealing something about his craft in such a moment. But could an author use his characters’ storytelling as a kind of smoke screen? These tales may be, to use Macbeth’s words, “full of sound and fury/signifying nothing.” Furthermore, like Billy’s efforts to put the wolf into the human story, the tales go so far as to obstruct what is real. What if, rather than making sense of our world as they so often claim to do, stories dangerously increase our distance from the world?

In his book *Deleuze and American Literature*, Alan Bourassa explains McCarthy’s unique perspective on what it is to be human and what novels have to do with this. Bourassa writes of how human beings understand ourselves through stories: “the meaning of the human must be given in the form of a narrative, of happenings that are bound together with the human—the humanity of the human—as its telos” (76). Fiction generally lends itself to interpreting the

human in this way. The characters of the story live, die, murder, eat, or marry and these moments contribute to our definition of human. But what about fiction that does not want to offer meaning to the human life? Bourassa asks:

But surely there are fictions that have no truck with meaning, that short circuit all the mechanisms of meaning, that fragment time, flatten character, affirm no value, play intellectual games, refuse direction, unmask the myth of reference for endlessness of signification. (77)

Such fictions respond to meaninglessness in the world with an emptying of meaning in words. Bourassa offers an honest challenge to these fictions by admitting that readers miss the authority of the old kind of narratives:

Are we forbidden to ask for narratives that speak of the human, that are ethical, passionate, and authoritative but that also, in keeping narrative, strip it bare? Can we seek stories where the materiality of language does not leave narrative behind but occupies it like a sort of benevolent parasite? (77)

Bourassa admits that this would be “strange writing,” that would “have direction, but direction to no end” (77).

I include lengthy quotes because Bourassa’s analysis offers such a perceptive explanation of what is going on in McCarthy generally, but especially in *The Crossing* and its stories. Bourassa posits that McCarthy’s narratives “employ something like narrative while taking away narrative’s own world” (78). I think this is the paradox at the heart of *The Crossing*: McCarthy’s tale is unworking the meaning that the embedded tales, and even his large tale, attempt to make.

These stunning tales that fill the latter half of the novel call out to us like sirens to interpret the world through stories, but they *take us nowhere*. Or to clarify: they take us nowhere

of linear significance. Here lies a spatial paradox to match the artistic one. As I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, crossings imply a linear structure of things (journeys on maps, starting points and destinations, roads). Likewise, stories imply beginnings and ends, with events that have additive meaning in a narrative progression. But *The Crossing* uses the linear to overthrow this sense of progress.

Georges Bataille explains how human beings create tools in order to maintain their distance from intimate, animal existence in the world: “The developed tool is the nascent form of the non-I...The tool brings exteriority into the world” (27). Though Bataille does not suggest this, I wonder whether or not a story can act as a tool does. Perhaps stories can break our continuity with the world by bringing existence out of immanence and into human consciousness.

In McCarthy’s embedded stories in *The Crossing*, we see a meta-meditation on the power and peril of human storytelling. The three tales I examine here are those of the ex-priest, the eyeless veteran of the revolution, and the gypsy hired to return an airplane. The stories make us ask: can human storytelling actually impede intimate existence in the world? The stories come to terms with this danger, but in some moments, they deny it by continuing to build these pictures of the world. The latter denial serves only to increase our human blindness.

### *1<sup>st</sup> Tale*

As Billy makes his way back towards the United States after the wolf dies, he rides up to a collapsed adobe church. In the doorway of the church, a figure beckons him to come inside. This man fixes Billy some eggs, sits him down with his clutter of cats, and tells him a story. The man builds his story out of his past wanderings, which he likens to Billy’s wandering. “I thought that men had not inquired sufficiently into miracles of destruction,” he begins (142). He tells of a

man who lost his parents in fights between Mexican locals and American invaders. “This is a story of misfortune,” he tells Billy, “Or so it would seem. The end is not yet told” (144). The man goes on to lose his only son in similar political violence. After abandoning his wife, he wanders to the capital where he becomes a messenger: “He carried a satchel of leather and canvas secured with a lock. He had no way to know what the messages said nor had he any curiosity concerning them” (147). In such a job, this man begins to lose his humanistic moorings in his world. Rather than investing words with a sense of purpose himself, he becomes nothing more than a carrier of words, without meaning to him. Instead he realizes that the human narratives, “those aims and purposes with which they imagine their movements to be invested are in reality but a means by which to describe them” (148).

This man imagines God as a destructive force as well as a creative one. He pictures God bent in the work of “weaving the world...the world in its making and its unmaking” (149). The man takes up residence beneath a perilously hanging dome of an old church, a space the villagers nearby are too scared to enter into because the structure may collapse at any moment. Here a priest comes to the man, intrigued by his location, and attempts to preach to him. The man tells the priest the story of his life, his conclusions, but refuses the absolution that the priest would offer him. When the priest attempts to give the dying man last rites, the old man “seized his arm midway in its crossing there in the still air by his deathbedside and stayed him with his eyes... ‘Save yourself, he hissed’” (157). This priest, as it turns out, is the narrator of this story.

The priest tried to offer a structure to the world with his religion. His attempt to “cross” the man reminds us of the crossings this novel recounts. Such crossings, as noted towards the beginning, try to render the world travelable, knowable, and containable. But the priest learns that this is not so; he gives up his profession as a “man of words:”

He'd no answers to the questions the old messenger had brought from the capital. The more he considered them the more knotted they became. The more he attempted even to formulate them the more they eluded his representation and finally he came to see that they were not the old pensioner's queries at all but his own. (157)

"Every word we speak is vanity," he tells Billy (158). Yet, the vanity of words is further evidenced, as the priest does not heed his own words. Instead, he takes up the dead man's failed career of messenger, and tries to teach Billy a world of words and tale: "This world also which seems to us a thing of stone and flower and blood is not a thing but a tale" (143). With his toothy one-eared "cat of counsel" in his lap, he submits: "All is the telling. Do not doubt it" (155).

This man recognizes the dangerous trap of believing that his world is one of story even as he falls into this trap. The man's concise summation, "All is the telling. Do not doubt it," implies that we can arrive at conclusions like this (155). Our ex-priest abuts against the limits of a religious narrative of God and of the world but he remains unable to get outside of such limits.

### *2<sup>nd</sup> Tale*

After a fight with the men who have the Parhams' stolen horses, Boyd is badly wounded and Billy must send him on with strangers to get help while Billy escapes in the other direction. Billy finds shelter at the home of a woman and her blind husband. Blind is an understatement. This man tells Billy how during the revolution a German mercenary sucked out his eyes and left him with holes in his head. The blind man is an interesting case study in the human. What does a loss of physical vision help us learn about what life means? The blind man believes that "men with eyes may select what they wish to see but for the blind the world appears of its own will" (291). He thinks his blindness takes away his control over the world. His blindness is like a

posthuman awareness, if we imagine sight as a metaphor for humanistic pictures of the world. In losing his eyes, he loses the world as his eyes capture it:

He said that in his first years of darkness his dreams had been vivid beyond all expectation and that he had come to thirst for them but that dreams and memories alike had faded... Of all that once had been no trace remained. The look of the world. The faces of loved ones. Finally even his own person was lost to him. Whatever he had been he was no more. (291)

Because this man cannot see, he “is not” in a sense. He is no longer a human being if to be human implies to control the world with narrating vision: “He said that in his blindness he had indeed lost himself” (291). McCarthy continuously shows us how men dream that they control things with their language when they do not. Thus, the man’s blindness gives him the gift of increased intimacy with the world from which our internal vision hinders us. This must be why he acknowledges that his blindness is a kind of blessing (294). Things we claim to see become “no more than obstacles to be negotiated in the ultimate sightlessness of the world” (294).

This blind man offers us an idea of what it would look like to totally give up our human vision of the world and submit to darkness. “The picture of the world is all the world men know and this picture of the world is perilous,” he tells Billy (293). To put it another way, we only know our story of the world and that story is dangerously deceptive to us as we are the authors of it. With this narcissistic vision of the world, a man will fruitlessly “call upon the world to testify as to the truth of what are in fact but his desires” (293).

The blind man tells Billy that man “may seek to indemnify his words with blood for by now he will have discovered that words pale and lose their savor while pain is always new” (293). Here he reminds Billy that words are something less real than pain, implying that life is

outside of words. In the pain of his blindness, *not* his stories, this man shows us how the linear narrative of the world is inadequate.

### *3<sup>rd</sup> Tale*

On his way to bury his brother, four horsemen accost Billy and stab his horse in the chest. Shortly thereafter, he meets a band of gypsies who help care for his injured horse. While they camp together, one gypsy offers to tell Billy the true history of the airplane they are carrying with them. Billy smiles wryly at such an offer, for the phrase “true history” is an oxymoron (404). The gypsy submits his idea of a “third history” to acknowledge such paradox:

It is the history that each man makes alone out of what is left to him. Bits of wreckage.

Some bones. The words of the dead. How make a world of this? How live in that world once made? (411)

The gypsy meditates on this idea of a third history, one of our own building, in the content of the “history” he tells. He recounts for Billy how two young American pilots crashed two similar airplanes in the mountains of Mexico. One pilot’s father hired this gypsy to bring his son’s wrecked plane to him. Billy tries to understand whether it would make any difference to the father of this pilot if the plane was actually the one his son crashed or the other. But the gypsy reminds him: “The identity of the airplane would be brought into question which in the mountains was no question at all” (406). Our human story tries to pull meaning from objects in which the world recognizes no meaning. Our questions of individual identity become irrelevant in the wider reality of the world.

This gypsy tells a great story about a journey to identify a plane, but McCarthy draws extra attention to the crafting of his tale. Phrases remind us throughout that this is *his* story: “He populated the terrain for them with certain birds and animals” (407) “He shaped his mouth and

said...” (410). His story, much like their efforts to reclaim the plane, must be subjected to the natural force of the world. This is evident in his description of their surroundings when they reclaimed the plane:

...the way the river went howling through the narrows like a train and at night the rain which had fallen for miles into that ultimate sundering of the earth’s rind hisses in their driftwood fires and the solid rock about them through which the water roared would shudder like a woman and if they spoke to one another no words formed in the air for the awful noise in that nether world. (407)

Here the water takes on a crafting power greater than the gypsy’s, because his words cannot even come into being against the roar of the river. Likewise, they cannot bring the plane out against the river: “All of their enterprise had vanished in the flood as if it had never been at all. The river continued to rise” (408).

When Billy tells the gypsy that he is returning to his country, the gypsy smiles knowingly, much as Billy did at the gypsy’s oxymoronic offer to tell a true history. His smile tells us that returning is impossible. The gypsy eventually responds that, contrary to what humanity so often thinks, the way of the world is not fixed in any place (413-414). Here he points us to existence that would likewise be unfixed, in keeping with the world’s reality. The gypsies embody this in their nomadic life. Billy sees them as “world wanderers...at once vigilant and unconstrained. They stood in no proprietary relationship to anything, scarcely even to the space they occupied” (409-410). Here McCarthy taps into something that is essential to intimate existence in the world, apart from humanistic structures. This nomadic lifestyle, also progressively adopted by Billy in his becoming through the course of the novel, keeps these people from living in the humanistic pretense of ownership and dominance in the world.

To portray this kind of existence for Billy, the gypsy recalls objects from his childhood. This gypsy's father collected old photographs of strangers and hung them up above his cart, for his son to see. To his son, these pictures later taught him how

every representation was an idol. Every likeness a heresy. In their images they had thought to find some small immortality but oblivion cannot be appeased. (413)

Like these "yellowing daguerreotypes," the gypsy's story hangs strangely suspended between the events of McCarthy's story. And like the gypsy boy staring at his father's collection, we could try to take from human stories "some secret thing" (412). But to do so would be to commit an idolatry that disregards the transient reality of the world.

Each of these embedded tales is a story of reckoning with loss, violence, and destruction. Readers will inevitably want to read them as allegories of McCarthy's own tales, because in a sense they are. But in reading meaning into the tales, we must recognize the danger of such an act. These storytellers, each in his own way, recognize such danger even as they tell their tales. Thus, McCarthy communicates to us that his own allegorizing is not an end in itself. Human narratives can act as siren songs to the world itself rather than being the worlds they pretend to be. In other words, narratives dangerously lure us to interpret reality when reality exceeds interpretations. As these storytellers, and McCarthy, acknowledge between their lines, worlds do not wait on human stories to advance. To think they do is to radically misunderstand our positions in the world.

The violence that the stories try to make sense of is ultimately the reminder that we are more than stories. And even more importantly, the stories themselves commit violence to the world when they make the tangible intangible. The blind man warns Billy: "That which was given him to help him make his way in the world has power also to blind him to the way where

his true path lies” (293). He rightly acknowledges that this narrative of life will blind Billy more than it will direct him. But the blind man does not go quite far enough, still implying that Billy has a true path. The gypsy knows better when he tells Billy that the world is not fixed. By the novel’s end, Billy realizes that the real lie is that he has a “true path” at all in this world. So, instead of continuing to make his way through the world, Billy sits down in the middle of a road and weeps. This story, *his* story, can carry him no further, but the world’s larger life carries on. The novel’s final line reminds us of this: “The right and godmade sun did rise, once again, for all and without distinction” (426). To me, this final line reads mockingly, as though McCarthy is parodying how the novel *should* end. Terms like “right” and “godmade” resound empty at the end of *The Crossing*. McCarthy’s description of the sun’s rising places it in hopelessly limited human terms because the sun only “rises” in our perspective. But the sun’s radiant presence is a picture of the life that lies outside Billy’s story, McCarthy’s story, or the humanist story in general.

This is indeed strange writing, directionless direction, as Bourassa suggests. McCarthy provocatively leads us into a kind of trap, luring us into what appears to be a winning story of boy and wolf and then unraveling them both through the narrative and narratives that follow. Of Billy we might rightly conclude: “His actions have not added up to a story. Instead his story has been stripped from him episode by episode” (Bourassa 84). Stories surround Billy like the icons and gifts surround Boyd on his pallet (299). But McCarthy tells us that Billy knew “that there was no certainty to any of it” (346). “What the hell good are papers without the horse?” Billy learns the hard way that sometimes ink and paper cannot contain the world he inhabits (248). Billy’s mistakes run deeper than his decision to take the wolf to Mexico. His true error lies in assuming that such an action will add up to a story.

When Billy sits down in the road at the novel's end, he finally stops trying to build his actions into a moving story. No longer trying to cross or return, Billy subsides into still, silent weeping, letting his own body's water flow into the world. Such an activity demonstrates his harmony with his surroundings, "water in water" (Bataille 19). His story is stripped from him, so now he can be posthuman.

### **FINAL THOUGHTS: FIRE**

Billy first discovers the elusive wolf by investigating the remains of a campfire. We read that he "sat his horse looking down at the dead black fire. Something had been digging in the ashes" (49). Billy Parham's becoming posthuman began in those ashes. His encounter with the wolf undoes him and his story of the world. But fire is not just an external clue leading Billy to the wolf. The wolf is, in a sense, *on* fire, for fire is present inside the wolves Billy saw as a child: "Their breath smoked palely in the cold as if they burned with some inner fire" (3). Fire, much like the wolf, is a paradox. Fire is essential, life giving, and yet fire is indicative of the destruction of life: "at once terrible and of great beauty" (127).

Fire reveals to Billy not only the wolf but also the larger reality with which she is continuous. Fiery destruction seems to be the only way for Billy to understand the world:

In that wild country he'd lie in the cold and the dark and listen to the wind and watch the last few embers of his fire at their dying and red crazings in the woodcoals where they broke along their unguessed gridlines. As if in the trying of the wood were elicited hidden geometries and their orders which could only stand fully revealed, such is the way of the world, in darkness and ashes. (130)

Again McCarthy's fire is a paradox: only in the dark ashes of destruction is this hidden geometry of the world revealed. Perhaps we can apply the same paradox to Billy. Only after fire's work on him, only after the wolf's destruction, can he live in intimacy with the world, like water in water.

Fire's destruction parallels the work of McCarthy's novels. Both are paradoxical, creative and destructive. Fire's destruction is transformative, a becoming in some sense. McCarthy's novels too are alive with this transformation. The sun that rises in the novel's end is the ultimate consummation of this paradox. The sun exists as fire that burns but does not consume. Its glowing self-sufficiency and radiance embody Bataille's concept of immanence. The sun's ontology is ultimately outside of language or narrative. And the sun is what McCarthy's novel points us towards. Outside the story lies reality.

After the epilogue to the border trilogy's final novel, *Cities of the Plain*, McCarthy's includes these lines called "Dedication:"

I will be your child to hold

And you be me when I am old

The world grows cold

The heathen rage

The story's told

Turn the page. (294)

McCarthy ends emphatically: "The story's told." The human narrative, the empowerment of language in story form, is finished. What is left after such is to "turn the page," to move outside of narrative and hopefully closer to intimate existence in this world, closer to the wolf.

Crouching low like Lester in the caves, sitting down like Billy in front of the sun, we sink closer into intimate belonging.

But another fire looms towards the end of *The Crossing*, a fire that parodies the sun's paradoxical radiance. From afar, Billy witnesses the Trinity nuclear testing at Alamogordo in 1945 in what he sees as "The white light of the desert noon" (425). This reference to historical events offers the novel's largest framing story, that of the twentieth century. In Sanders' house, Billy sees the ashtray from the world's fair: "It was cast from potmetal and it said 1833-1933. It said A Century of Progress" (345). But "progress" is an empty word, a souvenir slogan and not a reality. For humanism's "progress" culminates in the man-made fire of the atomic bomb.

In his press release following the drop of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, President Truman described the nature of bomb's power: "The force from which the sun draws its power has been loosed" (quoted in Kelly 339). Truman's words echo this connection between the sun and the bomb. But for McCarthy, this atomic bomb is a parody of the radiant sun. The bomb is the sum total of the human project of meaning-making. All our consciousness, our rationality, scientific discovery, and imagining produces this. Secretary of war Henry Stimson called the bomb "The culmination of years of herculean effort...the greatest achievement of the combined efforts of science, industry, labor, and the military in all history" (quoted in Kelly 343). The bomb is not only the culmination of human efforts, but also of the definition of the human begun by Descartes, a thinking entity seeking to subdue the world through scientific reasoning. The dominating narrators of the American story would place the bomb as the climax of such efforts.

But the bomb's fire parodies the sun's; it is an attempt to control and consume nature, in direct contrast to the transformative and continuous fire of life that that comes from the sun. After the war's end, J. Robert Oppenheimer gave a speech before the scientists he had worked with to develop the bomb. In this speech, Oppenheimer reflected on the use of the bomb:

If you are a scientist you believe that it is good to find out how the world works; that is it good to find out what the realities are; that it is good to turn over to mankind at large the greatest possible power to control the world and to deal with it according to its light and its values. (quoted in Kelly 368)

Here Oppenheimer appears to be about the same business as McCarthy: heightened reality through destruction. Oppenheimer explains that humanistic science, via the bomb, tried to understand how the world works, and then harness such workings for mankind. But isn't Oppenheimer doing exactly what Billy Parham does with the wolf, when he thinks that he can control and contain the world through his discoveries? Oppenheimer enlists nuclear science in the narrative of human domination. But nuclear destruction clearly goes outside of our control, and nothing, no one, is left in the wake of the bomb. The posthuman fire's ashes would offer radical continuity within destruction, rather than the nuclear ground zero of Hiroshima.

Humanism's story entails apocalypse, as the atomic bomb proves. Because stories have endings, existence in narrative will find a way to conclude. Ironically, posthumanism does not require such apocalypse. Bataille's immanence, outside of time, is an existence of constancy, without beginning or end.

In *The Crossing*, McCarthy directs us towards becoming beings who do not seek to contain the world in our stories, but rather "turn the page" and enter an existence with the wolf, possessing that "inner fire" of intimate belonging to this world that we glimpse in the wolf and in the sun. Such becoming, such page turning, gains urgency in the light of Oppenheimer's fire. Unless we become something other, this is how the human narrative ends: not with a whimper after all, but with a bang

### III. *THE ROAD*

#### “SOME UNIMAGINABLE FUTURE”

At the end of *The Crossing*, Billy Parham witnesses the testing of the atomic bomb in a flashing of false sunlight over the desert. McCarthy alludes to the destructive capacity of mankind here. In his 2006 novel *The Road*, McCarthy will expand on this total destruction. In many regards, *The Road* could “constitute a new phase of McCarthy’s authorship” (Graulund 58). In the previous novels, his characters’ voyages occur in recognizable terrain. From East Tennessee to Mexico, the earlier novels showed us instances of violence which paralleled the natural world they existed within; they were isolated, not total. But in *The Road*, we face the potential collapse of humanity and the living world itself in an unrecognizable time and place. Granted, readers can identify in *The Road* an American landscape. The “See Rock City” still emblazoned on a barn roof offers us concrete proof that this place was the United States. However, when the son asks his father along their road, “But there’s not any more states?” his father replies, “No” (43). We find ourselves reading a novel of post-American literature.

McCarthy’s characters in *The Road* are an unnamed father and son, whose journey carves out the space of this novel within the dark wood we enter on the first page. McCarthy writes this whole novel without naming them. To name them would be to suggest a solidity that they do not possess. Names place us in a human lineage. But their identities are opened, without history or occupation to fence them in. Several of their exchanges with other survivors highlight this. When the boy asks, “Who is it,” the reply is: “I dont know. Who is anybody?” (49). When the man

holds an approaching stranger at gunpoint, he asks the man, “Are you a doctor?” to which he responds, “I’m not anything” (64). An old man they meet asks, “What are you?” (162). That is the million-dollar question of this book, but “They’d no way to answer the question” (162).

The exact cause of the proliferation of ash is not clear. Potentially nuclear disaster, potentially natural disaster. That the cause is unclear is important: we are not allowed to place blame but rather we must move forward with the man and boy. Furthermore, the results of the disaster are strikingly unrealistic: what disaster could conceivably destroy animals and trees, without destroying humanity too? There are no fish in the lake but there is still water. But we should not read the lack of realistic destruction from an author seemingly entrenched in scientific study and meticulously realistic description as a lapse in research. Instead, McCarthy seems to confidently wield a destruction of his own choosing to tell the story he wants to tell. That story singles out human beings. But such a singling out does not venerate the human. Rather, McCarthy’s isolation of the human species forces the question: who is a man apart from that other category “animal?”

Removing the animal from the world, from Derrida’s perspective, might further McCarthy’s posthuman thought experiment. For without the animal, man loses that linguistic dominion which the Biblical narrative gives him in the world. Derrida analyzes the creation narrative, in which human beings receive power over the animal as man gets to name the animal. Naming for Derrida implies a limit: “Naming involves announcing a death.... Whoever receives a name feels mortal or dying, precisely because the name seeks to save him” (20). Derrida aptly explores how the practice of naming is an attempt to unduly control and limit the world. Derrida questions the reality of nominative dominion as he subtly reminds us that naming came after existence: “Who was born first, before the names? Which one saw the other come to this place,

so long ago?” (18). McCarthy’s universe in *The Road* lacks animals, not necessarily because the human world has destroyed them, but in order to undress human identity apart from naming, relating to a living other. When the man tries to explain a distance to his son, he uses the expression “as the crow flies,” the meaning of which is clearly lost on the son (156). “There’s not any crows. Are there?” his son asks. “No. Just in books” (158). This exchange illustrates how the loss of animals empties human speech of its power in reality. Without “animals” differentiated as such, we are in the realm of the posthuman.

When commenting on a passage from *Outer Dark*, Bell notes how in McCarthy’s world, “Roads are helpful to us only as long as we believe they are taking us somewhere but...in the long run they don’t” (1). Though written long before the publication of *The Road*, his comment seems a fitting place to start. In a novel with such a title, the longtime reader of McCarthy will appropriately wonder: will this novel be about the futility of this road too? Roads function here much like maps and stories in *The Crossing*. They represent a way to interpret our existences and movements. They organize us, offer us meaning. Roads have survived whatever apocalyptic disaster preempted this story, but their further duration is questionable. “But the roads are still there,” the son observes to his father (43). “Yes. For a while,” the father adds (43). “There’s nothing to uproot them so they should be okay for a while” (43). But as we examine this novel, the father’s prediction about the future of roads is increasingly tinged with irony. *The Road* becomes a story of uprooting what roads mean. Roads, as Bell noted years ago, require our belief in their meaningful direction to function. Roads are physically present here but we see quickly that they are purposeless. Roads symbolize old humanistic meaning. The man carries his driver’s license, a personal identification intrinsically tied to the concept of the road, in his pocket long after it is obsolete, until we watch him wordlessly abandon the contents of his billfold. Likewise,

McCarthy carries his story on roads but all the while he is plowing up the concrete. Roads are to this world what the license is for the man, because instead of traveling somewhere, man and boy are “Treading the dead world under like rats on a wheel” (273). In other words, the man and the boy move through the world without origin, road, or destination.

Through the characters of the man and the boy, *The Road* offers a dialogue between the fading humanistic world and a budding posthuman world. The boy is a thought experiment in what a posthuman could look like. So how does McCarthy update and illuminate our description of life through the character of the boy in *The Road*? His setting certainly offers us a place to build new descriptions from ground zero. The old building blocks of meaning have turned to ash. Who the people of this new world are and how they live, the meaning they make of it, must be new. Or perhaps even further than this, people will stop making meaning of life. McCarthy begins to imagine a new kind of existence. To understand this new kind of existence, two familiar voices will harmonize with McCarthy’s here: Georges Bataille and Timothy Morton.

Morton’s ecological thinking is present throughout my thesis, but here it may be helpful to refresh your memory concerning some of his ideas. In his attempt to catch us up with the implications of evolutionary science, Morton offers the model of “the mesh” as a concept for understanding life. Seeing life as a mesh entails both that each life form is unique and that there is no “fixed identity anywhere in the system of life-forms” (“The Mesh” 22). Thus Morton sees life in an essentially paradoxical way. In Morton’s view of our current state of environmental peril, he calls for an aesthetic of dark ecology. Such an aesthetic would utilize “negativity and irony, ugliness and horror” (*The Ecological Thought* 17). This is because Morton sees that ugliness and horror “compel our compassionate coexistence to go beyond condescending pity” (17). Certainly readers of *The Road* can already hear a resonance with McCarthy’s narration in

that novel, where he uses atrocity to peel back points of view and call for a new sort of compassionate existence.

Georges Bataille unravels what he sees as the rupture of man in the world. In contrast to animals, humans seek separation from the world through the use of objects, positing themselves as separate instead of immanent. For Bataille, this is a major ontological problem. Instead, Bataille chronicles an unconscious intimacy with the world that animals experience as superior in a sense to the lives of human beings. “If man surrendered unreservedly to immanence, he would fall short of humanity...and eventually life would return to the unconscious intimacy of animals” (53). Such a surrender and return resonates with Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of becoming animal, also referenced in previous chapters. Violence and death play important roles for Bataille in this return to intimacy. Through his accounts of war and sacrifice, he shows how intimacy is achieved only through violence; violence is necessary for intimacy (80).

In *The Road*, I want to investigate the character of the man as symbolic of the project of an old, humanistic order of life, not unlike our own. The man initially endeavors to recreate this order for his son in a project of storytelling, linguistic education. But by the end of the novel, the father recognizes that such an attempt is not only futile but also detrimental to his son. I want to examine the character of the son in order to see what posthuman identity might look like. I want to argue that the boy comes much closer to achieving the intimacy with the world that Lester Ballard and Billy Parham seek but do not totally attain.

This reading of *The Road* diverges from much of the criticism concerning this novel. In the 2008 special issue of the *Cormac McCarthy Journal*, about half of the articles on *The Road* have titles with words like “ethics,” “compassion,” “divinity,” and “hospitality.” Such readings reveal that critics can successfully place *The Road* in a traditional conversation about the novel

and humanity. The fact that Oprah Winfrey selected *The Road* for her book club further illustrates the accessibility of this novel.<sup>6</sup> More than any previous McCarthy novel, *The Road* emotionally involves us in the lives of its characters, and calls us to empathize with their story. This is a book that blatantly offers a rhetoric of reassuring humanistic meaning. But in spite of this, *The Road* would have us question such rhetoric. My reading is against the grain of this novel in many respects, but my entire argument is that McCarthy intends a reading of his novels against their own grain. Because reading itself is, after all, a limiting act.

### **The Father**

The father tries to tell the story of the world he knew to his son. For about the first half of the book, we watch the father attempt to “rehumanize” his son with his old stories: “they sat warm in their refuge while he told the boy stories. Old stories of courage and justice as he remembered them until the boy was asleep” (41). The stories, like the warmth of their refuge, provide momentary escape from the darkness of the outer reality. The father’s work of storytelling is not only for the boy but also for himself. When a forest fire moves the man, we hear him think: “Make a list. Recite a litany. Remember” (31). “Evoke the forms. When you’ve nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them” (74). The ceremonies of old meaning are not present in this world. But the man builds them out of thin air because he does not know how else to exist.

The father’s storytelling works alongside his narrative of their lives as journeys, according to a map and towards a destination. “We have to keep moving,” the father tells his son (42). Such movement implies that they are creatures with a purpose. Using an old oil company map, the man and the boy navigate south towards the ocean, where “he hoped it would be

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<sup>6</sup> I don’t mean to imply that accessibility is a negative thing. Rather, I want to show how this novel can be accessed as a traditional story, *and* it can and should also be read as an anti-traditional story.

brighter” (213). As the opening paragraph of Melville’s *Moby Dick* confirms, a narrative directed towards the sea is one of hope, life, and escape. The man continues to check their location, “studying the twisted matrix of routes in red and black with his finger at the junction where he thought that they might be. As if he’d see their small selves crouching there” (86). The man hopes to locate them in the world by another paper form of meaning: this map. But he sees how futile following the map is: “In what direction did lost men veer?” (116) The father begins to realize that he is directionless, not in spite of, but *because of* this map. His journey is not really a journey at all, as the map would have him believe. The ocean, their intended destination, proves to be “One vast salt sepulcher. Senseless. Senseless” (222). The ocean does not offer them the physical or metaphysical life that the man imagined it would.

But the father’s narrativizing project is not limited to the pages of his son’s book or even to the map he tries to use. His most dangerous narrative work is the story he tries to build out of his own son. From the opening of the novel, we hear the father thinking of his son as the centerpiece of a divine story: “He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke” (5). For the father, his son is the Word. In building a story out of this word, the father fulfills the vicious prophecy that his wife made to him before she committed suicide (more on her later):

The one thing I can tell you is that you won’t survive for yourself. I know because I would never have come this far. A person would be well advised to cobble together some passable ghost. Breathe it into being and coax it along with words of love. Offer it each phantom crumb and shield it from harm with your body. (57)

Much as Billy Parham did to the wolf, the father hurts his son as he tries to make of him a story. In his efforts to protect his son and instill in him a humanistic, linguistic-based worldview, the father is actually making of his son a “passable ghost,” pushing him farther from the being he is.

The man mourns the loss of “beauty” and “goodness” which are “things that he’d no longer any way to think about at all” (129-130). He sums up what he has lost in a memory of a day spent on the lake near his uncle’s farm. Crossing the lake in a rowboat with his uncle at dusk: “This was the perfect day of his childhood. This was the day to shape the days upon” (13). This cherished lake has experienced natural destruction: “a riprap of twisted stumps, gray and weathered, the windfall of trees of a hurricane years past” (13). This place has also been the object of human violence: “The trees themselves had long been sawed for firewood and carried away” (13). The memory that the father idolizes, that serves as a mold for his future disappointment in the world, is exactly that: a memory.

The man mourns the world of his dreams but this is not an actual world. Morton addresses the literature of nature elegies as being “a paradox...about losing something we never really had” (105). Perhaps the man’s elegiac work of storytelling to his son fails because he is trying to give reality to unreality; he is about a contradictory work. That perfect day was not a perfect day, nor was that world a perfect world. The difference may in part reside in the time: the man’s memory holds this lake so that the man can possess it, remember it and place it into his narrative as he wants, while the world of the present does not offer him such control. Additionally, that day on the lake was his “perfect day” as the man recalls that neither he nor his uncle “had spoken a word” (13). Perhaps the perfection the man craves has less to do with the world and more to do with his relationship to it. And maybe, without even realizing it himself, the man shows us that such perfection comes outside of language.

The man distrusts his dreams of “siren worlds” but he cannot escape them (18). He continues to have “rich dreams which he was now loathe to wake from” (131). The function of the man’s dreams is difficult to decipher. In some respect, the dreams represent how the human imagination can provide a means of escape. If our understanding of man is that his consciousness is the centerpiece of his being, then that capability offers escape from even the dire circumstances of *The Road*. But in *The Road*, respite through dreams proves crippling, reminding us that this definition of man as conscious being must be inadequate. The man can escape in dreams but he must awake to dark reality. The dreams then serve as more of a taunt than a comfort. Though he goes back on this statement later, the man tells his son: “When your dreams are of some world that never was or of some world that never will be and you are happy again then you will have given up...And you can’t give up” (189). The man admits that his dreams are not worth having.

The father’s attempts to recreate his familiar Western humanity for his son fail because they inadequately attempt to contain or escape from the world in which he lives. Ultimately the man must submit to this ashen reality: “There is no other tale to tell,” he thinks (32). Watching his son, he aches that the story of life will end in darkness: “Please don’t tell me how the story ends” (75). Still the father must position himself upon a narrative line, now placing himself “at the end” of something. The fullest expression of the inadequacy of the man’s humanistic project occurs in the bunker, after the man dreams of alien-like creatures approaching him:

Maybe he understood for the first time that to the boy he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed. The tales of which were suspect. He could not construct for the child’s pleasure the world he’d lost without constructing the loss as well and he thought perhaps the child had known this better than he. (153-154)

The man realizes that his stories do not matter now. Like the aliens of his dream, he is himself an alien in the world where the boy is a native inhabitant. Finally the man is trying to be posthuman when he realizes that his son is “himself an alien” to his father. In his attempts to story the child, he made the mistake of teaching his son that he lived in loss. Without the stories, the boy does not expect a world different than the one he experiences. In giving the child stories, the father falsely promised his son placement in a story too, even if only at “the end” of the human story. But the father must admit, “that he could not enkindle in the heart of the child what was the ashes in his own” (154). He eventually forsakes such an effort because he realizes that, in imposing the past upon his child, he only condemns him to unfilled desire turned despair. The novel’s end congruously brings the father’s end too, for he cannot exist in a world where tales are suspect. Because the story ends, because stories all end, the father must also end.

### **The Son**

Shortly before the father dies, he observes his son in front of him on the road of time, both physically and metaphorically: “Looking back at him from some unimaginable future, glowing in the waste like a tabernacle” (273). The boy is a new kind of being, one that is unimaginable for the father. His father’s world “for him was not even a memory” (53-54). McCarthy makes it clear in the father’s description of the boy’s birth that this is no being we have encountered before: “Always so deliberate, hardly surprised by the most outlandish events. A creation perfectly evolved to meet its own end” (59). Moving past the father’s world of creation or evolutionary narratives, we might say that this boy is a new being ready to meet, not its *end*, but its posthuman existence.

While the father tries to map their existence, “The boy wouldn’t look” (86). “I always want to stop,” (93) the boy tells his father, interjecting his resistance to the life of continual

motion that is the *modus operandi* of McCarthy's characters. When his father asks him to tell a story, the boy replies, "I dont have any stories to tell" (268). Furthermore, the way the boy relates to our concepts of death, time, dreams, and ethics reflects his posthuman shift from the world of his father to this new world.

### ***Death***

The boy lives every moment in an awareness of death. He knows that death is inevitably coming to himself and to his father. When the boy acts rashly in his effort to get a glimpse of a little boy he thinks he sees, his father chastises him: "Do you want to die? Is that what you want?" (85). The boy replies "I dont care" (85). His apparent apathy may actually demonstrate that he desires some sort of death over his individual survival. He asks his father about death constantly: "Are we going to die now? (87). "If we were going to die would you tell me?" (94). "You think we're going to die, dont you?" (100).

If McCarthy is engaging in a posthuman redefinition, then he may be opening up not only the definition of human life but also the definition of death. Death itself can be a humanistic boundary, marking the end of our conscious existence. Our concept of death is a part of our anthropocentric worldview. To think posthumanly, to understand the boy, we have to adjust this concept. In a more holistic ecological framework and a posthuman framework, what we call death is only a redistribution of our atoms into the rest of the world. We separate out but we do not end. For Bataille, death reveals the façade of living for what it is. Bataille writes, "Death is the great affirmer, the wonder-struck cry of life" (46). In death, Bataille finds the reaffirmation of that animal intimacy with the world instead of the closure of living. The boy has this broader concept of death, at least broader than his father's concept of death. In the face of the dark reminders of destruction, piles of corpses, Pompeii-like friezes of burned people, the father sees

his son remain “So strangely untroubled” (191). When the father suggests that his son look away from the gory scene because it will become lodged in his head forever, the boy replies: “It’s okay Papa...They’re already there” (191). The boy is continuous with the gore of his world. He does not require his father’s, or readers’, pity.

The boy clearly sees death differently than his father, but there is another parental legacy of death in his life. The boy’s mother committed suicide sometime after the disaster that precedes the novel. Though we do not know exactly how old the boy was when his mother killed herself, we know that he is old enough to look at his father and ask, “She’s gone isn’t she?” when he realizes what his mother has done (58). His mother’s decision, much like the gory friezes, is not hidden from the boy. While the father lives in an abiding terror of death, his wife calls death her “new lover” (57). Dreamless, sorrowless, and numb to the world, she submits to “eternal nothingness” (57).

Drawing out the differences between the mother’s concept of death and the boy’s should help us understand what this posthuman redefinition of death is *not*. For the boy to have a different concept of death than his father has does not entail that he longs for death like his mother. Neither depiction of death matches the reality of this world. Because the boy recognizes continuity in death, he neither seeks it nor dreads it. Unlike his mother who is indifferent towards any other survivors, the son invests in the lives of those around him (Eli, the dog from the past, the “little boy,” his father) because they are all a part of him. The boy accepts living otherness.

## *Dreams*

Unlike the father's reoccurring dreams of past beauty, the boy seems only to dream of a darkness like that in which he lives. "I dont have good dreams anyway. They're always about something bad happening," he tells his father (269). One night, the boy's dream becomes significantly conflated with reality. When he tells his father, "I was crying. But you didnt wake up," his father apologizes. "I meant in the dream," the boy corrects his father (183). This exchange demonstrates the continuity between the boy's dreams and his reality. His father finds in the boy's dark dreams some encouragement, as he acknowledges the difference between himself and his son:

When your dreams are of some world that never was or of some world that never will be and you are happy again then you will have given up. Do you understand? And you cant give up. I wont let you. (189)

While the boy's dreams are not colored with the beauty of his father's dreams, McCarthy tells us: "The child had his own fantasies" (54). What we know of the child's fantasies centers around his idea of another little boy. He is obsessed with the hope that somewhere, another little boy exists. The little boy, his double, symbolizes how life outside himself continues. This shows his involvement in the mesh of life outside him, in contrast to his mother's indifference towards her own little boy. He also asks his father about Mars and the potential for life on another planet: "There could be people alive someplace else," the boy says (244). These repeated thought experiments in life outside himself reveal that the boy is thinking the ecological thought, in Morton's definition of it. The boy subsumes his individuality in order to increase his sense of life as a mesh.

The boy has another noteworthy dream, a nightmare that he tries to share with his father. He dreams that a wind-up toy penguin approaches him without being wound up: “The winder wasn’t turning” (37). This nightmare is significant because what the boy is encountering is arguably an animal, something he knows little to nothing about. A penguin that moves freely without a winder would simply be a living penguin, an animal as evidenced by the presence of motion without mechanical means. Perhaps the boy’s dream of animal reflects that whatever subconscious he possesses, unlike his father, includes more than his own memories or desires. In this dream, the boy imagines life that he does not recognize, but life that implicitly reminds him of his place in the world. In a small echo of Derrida’s meditation on the gaze of the animal, we might imagine that for this boy, the approach of a real penguin “offers to my sight the abysmal limit of the human” (12). Encountering the penguin without a sense of his own control (the winder) or even the dominion of a proper name for this being (animal), the boy experiences humbling placement in the world inside the gaze of this being. In contrast to the dreamed penguin, the troop of people that pass father and son later on the road are “marching with a swaying gait like wind-up toys” (91). The marching people represent humanism gone wrong, disconnected bodies that are only machines, running without the enmeshed identity of the boy. Between the dreamed penguin and the real wind-up beings stands the posthuman child, aware that his embodiment comes with belonging to the world as the animal does, like water in water, and unlike the robotic bodies of the other humanoids he sees (Bataille 24).

### *Time*

The boy’s life is directed towards survival. In this becoming- posthuman world, the anguish of philosophizing, fretting, thinking, planning is replaced for the boy by an in-the-moment existence. Even in the book’s form we see this manifested. As Lincoln observes: “The

books unfolds...one foot or event after another” (168). Stylistically and thematically, the book forces us to be in the present with the boy, because in this new world, we cannot know or expect what will come next. In one of those spare moments of humor, the boy asks his father, “What are our long term goals?” (160). The boy’s question is humorous to us because we are deep enough into this world to realize that there is no “long term.” We know that even the idea of making “goals” echoes emptily in “the crushing black vacuum of the universe” (130). The boy remembers his father saying this phrase a long time ago. But the question dissolves in this age. Future and goals are not part of life now. In Bataille’s thinking, this means the father and son are giving up the idea of duration, which is what keeps humans in consciousness and separate from animal intimacy with the world. Thus, if they could lose the concept of future, duration, they could become more closely attuned to their new world. We begin to see this in the boy’s existence: “No list of things to be done. The day providential to itself. The hour. There is no later. This is later” (54).

The boy’s waning concern with time, duration, signals a movement into a less “conscious” existence. As posthumanism explains, consciousness becomes a curse not a blessing. Our human sense of time, the father’s memories, doom him to live in comparison. But the boy does not do this. Consciousness was “regarded as the seat of identity in Western tradition” (Hayles 3). But posthumanism understands that consciousness “is trying to claim it is the whole show when it is only a minor sideshow” (Hayles 3). Life greatly exceeds consciousness.

### *Ethics*

While his father lives by an older code of good guys and bad guys, with his son he simplifies all that we might call morality into one image: “we’re carrying the fire” (83). For the

father, the ethics associated with “carrying the fire” probably refers back to carrying “the seeds of civilization” (Wielenberg 3). The father carries the dying embers of humanism with him along the road. In one sense, it might seem that this is the same fire the boy carries. But the boy does not actually operate out of a system of ethics because this would be another form or ritual of human control in the world. Rather, the boy begins to live in the fire, as the wolf possessed inner fire, in an elemental communion with his world that is outside humans.

Reading the father’s moral code, we watch him wrestle to live in his “good guy” category. The father kills a man who threatens to harm the boy. He contemplates the potential virtue of killing himself and his son, as he imagines no worse evil than to leave his son in this dark world alone. But in the end, the father finds himself incapable of enacting such self-destruction or the destruction of his only son: “I cant hold my dead son in my arms. I thought I could but I cant” (279). The father’s fire carrying boils down to an ethics with one clear limit: cannibalism. Throughout the novel, when the father and son encounter instances of cannibalism, they agree that they will never eat people.

Just as he is relatively unfazed by the death that surrounds him, the boy seems less shocked than his father by the people who do eat other people. After they find a storage room in a house filled with imprisoned people barely alive, he asks his father: “They’re going to kill those people, aren’t they? ... They’re going to eat them, aren’t they?” (127). When his father confirms that they are indeed going to kill and eat their captives, the boy acknowledges: “And we couldnt help them because then they’d eat us too.” “Yes,” his father admits. “Okay,” the boy succinctly replies. Later the father and son discover the cooked corpse of a human infant. The boy buries his face against his father’s body. “Oh papa,” he says (198). But the boy’s apparent aversion to cannibalism might be nothing more than instinctual self-preservation. In the previous

passage, the boy's calmness in the face of such seemingly grotesque acts suggests that, in spite of his father's perseverance to refrain from cannibalism, the boy accepts this practice as continuous in existence. For Bataille, animals eating other animals demonstrate immanence. When animals eat one another, they live without hierarchy or transcendence from one another. In their "cannibalism," they live "like water in water" (19).

The boy seems to remain loyal to his father's creed: he does not eat people. And the survivor the boy encounters at the end confirms that he too refrains from cannibalism. *The Road* offers no suggestions that the boy will engage in this animal continuity by eating other people. Rather, he seems to remain true to his father's limit. Perhaps this reveals a way that the boy's becoming posthuman is incomplete, and he lapses back into the fire of old civilization by which his father leads him.

Though it is not like McCarthy to shy away from the most horrible conclusions, I also cannot help but wonder whether McCarthy is backing down from the conclusions towards which his novel leads. Does McCarthy refrain from accepting cannibalism in *The Road* because he wants to sell books? No one wants to read a version of *The Road* where the boy ends up becoming a cannibal, eating his dead father's body at the end of the road. But posthumanism must by definition disconcert our humanness. Cannibalism as immanent, intimate existence so jarringly disrupts our human narratives that even this posthuman novel cannot house it. Perhaps the novel's safe distance from the immanence of cannibalism reminds us that such existence cannot truly be present in these pages.

“I’m not a retard,” the boy tells his father (252). His father asks him basic questions in an attempt to ensure that his son has not suffered any brain damage after several feverish days. The line elicits one of the few laughs we can get from this book. The humor is ironic. The boy’s sarcastic comment rings emptily in our ears because we know that the boy does not know what he says. Firstly, it seems unlikely that he has encountered any mentally retarded people in his life. Secondly, he has not socialized with any immature peers who would use this word in the derogatory way that he is using it. Thirdly, and most importantly to me, the boy does not live in a world that defines itself by mental capacity. It’s funny for him to distance himself from a “retard” because the posthuman boy need not differentiate with these categories.

Instead, the boy is able to enter a world apart from his father’s humanistic one. The darkness of his world leaves him “Mute as a stone” (66). Bataille explains how the animal’s inability to transcend itself offers it an immanence that has eluded mankind (23). Because the boy is a member of a world not built by language, history, religion— meaning-making elements of our humanity— he is able to exist more like a stone, in a world that does not revolve around himself, his mind, or his species. Stonehenge stands long after its original use expired into the unknown. Mountains of stone outlast the geographic names we give them. Even the paintings on those stone Lascaux caves last only because they were so aptly married to that material of independent stillness. When the boy becomes like a stone, this need not be a negative description; he is becoming more continuous with his world.

There are certainly moments in the book that call into question my hypothesis that this boy is a posthuman child. Although the boy’s world is ash, this does not stop him from producing art, which might initially strike the reader as a humanistic project. He colors on his mask, he plays a flute and plays with a toy truck. While he abandons many of these projects by

the end, they are nonetheless present in the story. His prayer of thanks to the dead for their leftover food reminds us of the forms that his father vigilantly maintained.

These artistic endeavors and a moment of old ritual lead me to a few possible conclusions. Firstly, we might see these moments as indicating that the boy is still haunted by the father's humanistic work. We might see his metamorphosis into posthuman as incomplete. Secondly, rather than being incomplete, we might read in his humanistic lapses how this total loss of consciousness to achieve intimacy is impossible, or is possible only briefly. Thirdly, the boy's art might show us that a posthuman world is still a world with art. Though the boy throws away his flute, he carries on a linguistic practice: he talks to his father. It seems significant that these words between father and son survive, since McCarthy wrote *The Road* for his own son. I will put off my thoughts on the paradox of posthuman art until the conclusion. But for now, I want to note that McCarthy might leave some regained value for words lingering in his posthuman world.

In an address to a conference in Knoxville, Jay Ellis concludes his analysis of *The Road* by seeing in the novel's end "Hope beyond reason" (Ellis 38). Taking Ellis's phrase quite literally, in this novel I see a hope outside of hopes we *know*. The only way to read the book's end as hopeful is to acknowledge that the hope lies outside of our strictly human intelligence or vision, because the world is more than this. The fire of destruction becomes the fire of survival when it teaches us that life is more than a narcissistically human project.

To see the world in a posthuman way means not only to undo the meaning making strategies of the past, but to know that life goes on outside of the meaning we could make. While the novel follows the man and boy on the road, it does not end there. The survivor that meets the boy upon his father's death explains that they must get off the road: "I don't know how you

made it this far” (283). Roads are not taking us anywhere. Human life needs to become something other than a linear journey. Intimate existence in the world, *off* the road, is where survival is possible.

When the man is on the brink of death, he gazes at his son and sees him “looking back at him from some unimaginable future” (273). For the man, the boy’s world remains unimaginable. Perhaps even for McCarthy, it is unimaginable. The only inroads into the lives of these two we have comes through the father. Once he is gone, we are offered a brief vision of the boy’s survival, but that is all. Whatever the remaining posthuman lives become is outside the scope of the novel’s power to chronicle.

*The Road*’s final paragraph completely removes us from the human story. In a powerful ending, McCarthy writes, not about man, boy, or future, but about trout in the past:

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. (286)

Here the narrator seems to openly engage in the same kind of idealization of the past natural order that the father lived on through his dreams. What if this is simply the end of the dream of natural beauty that past humanistic rhetoric dreamed, embodied in the father? What if we finally get to shut such a book and survive with the boy? McCarthy tells us:

On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (287)

We cannot put back together the old humanity. The destruction, especially if we are to understand it as of human origin, is irreversible. Humanity's maps expire and come apart like the man's tattered map pieces, showing us the danger of trying to insert linear meaning into human life. In fact, McCarthy's connecting of the words "maps and mazes" forces us to juxtapose meaning-making direction and meaningless space. In this phrase, he unmakes our meanings, our past, into absurdity. Mystery, not meaning, prevails.

In another reading of this ending, those trout represent an intimate existence. This is the existence Bataille eloquently describes when he writes of how an animal is in the world like water in water, seamlessly a part of life (24). The trout are withstanding the current, at once exerting themselves against the flow while being a part of it. But because this cannot be made right, we sense that such intimacy is impossible. That space eternally taunts us, man or fish. Still we seek it. The boy lives in a different relationship with the world than his father; his deepened awareness of his part in the rest of life is evident. But the space remains.

In *The Crossing*, we see Billy's father bent setting a trap for the wolf. We hear that to either Billy or the narrating eye, or both:

He looked to be truing some older, some subtler instrument. Astrolabe or sextant. Like a man bent at fixing himself someway in the world. Bent on trying by arch or chord the space between his being and the world that was. If there be such space. If it be knowable.

*(The Crossing 22)*

Such an image of narrowing this mysterious space between world and man comes to us again in *The Road* as the man stumbles upon an old sextant in the ship: "It was the first thing he'd seen in a long time that stirred him" (228) While the reader is not made fully aware of why this instrument moves the man, this passage from *The Crossing* gives us a clue. The mapping

instruments we make to give us our bearings in the world do quite the opposite. For McCarthy, the human attempts to try the space between himself and his world. Intimacy is what we crave, the collapse of this space. But such intimacy remains a mysterious impossibility in the human world of our making.

## ENDINGS

*“The world has no name”*

If we take this posthuman reading of Cormac McCarthy to its fullest realization, we must conclude that McCarthy’s novels cease to be novels at all. Though his books may be bound, published, sold, and read, they are anti-books. This radical unworking of the novel as a genre is evident in the plots, settings, characters, and general epistemology present in McCarthy’s “novels.”

First, as evidenced through *Child of God* especially, his novel’s narratives center around human beings while simultaneously refusing to center around human beings. Lester Ballard is the common thread running through the course of *Child of God*, but he does not generate this thread. We do not see a consistent flow of action from him, nor do the windows we get into his life serve to clarify our understanding of him. We see a few of his crimes, we go with him into an outhouse, a cave, a prison, and a store. But it is not necessarily Lester’s most important, unimportant, ethical, or unethical actions that occur in the pages of this novel. The sampling of Ballard’s activities we read is not just unnerving in its deviation from traditional ethics, but unnerving in its *randomness*. Likewise, in *The Crossing*, readers grab onto the familiar narrative of boy and animal, and the obstacles they must overcome on a journey home. But then, the boy kills the wolf, and wanders endlessly, with no home to which he can return. McCarthy’s plots refuse to be plots at all. Rather than orient us in his fictional worlds, they serve to disorient us.

McCarthy captivates his readers with the way he writes about the world. There is no prose more gorgeous, more vatic, more striking, than that of McCarthy's landscapes. In *Blood Meridian* we read:

The jagged mountains were pure blue in the dawn and everywhere birds twittered and the sun when it rose caught the moon in the west so that they lay opposed to each other across the earth, the sun whitehot and the moon a pale replica, as if they were the ends of a common bore beyond whose terminals burned worlds past all reckoning. (86)

Such a world is mesmerizing but not approachable. We recognize mountains, birds, the sun and the moon, but their sharp and polarizing existences do not invite us in. The experience of reading these landscapes in McCarthy can feel more like an encounter with a storm than with a page. Such an experience testifies yet again to the radical unworking of these novels. For, just as the narrative's plots disorient us, so McCarthy's settings are places in which we cannot exist. His world entices us while also expelling us. His spaces are simultaneously lush and desolate, gorgeous and horrifying, and in such paradoxical creation, McCarthy unweaves the fabric of his settings. As Bourassa writes:

The greatness and much-praised beauty of McCarthy's landscapes is that they are not settings, not geography, not obstacles. In fact, properly speaking, they are not: they escape being... (75)

Novels should build places that are real in the sense that we can successfully enter them as readers. McCarthy's settings offer no such entry.

Furthermore, the protagonists of McCarthy's writing become something other than humans. If the novel is, as Bourassa cogently argues, a fundamentally human enterprise, then we are forced to conclude that these are not novels. Bourassa captures this when he writes: "There is

no story without the human, no human without the stories” (18). Thus, as Lester Ballard, Billy Parham, and the boy, become posthuman, their stories cease to be stories at all.

Finally, McCarthy’s novels undercut the philosophy of the novel. We traditionally read novels under the assumption that we live lives of story. We believe that these fictional stories will offer insight, escape, parallels, or criticisms of *our* stories. This is the entire premise of Christianity: that we should enter our story into the story of God in his word the Bible and his Word, his son. Such an understanding of the novel’s meaning casts the human as the protagonist in the world’s story. In contrast, McCarthy’s novels would imply that we do not know the world, or ourselves, through stories. Sevier County fails to understand their world when they cage it in stories. Billy Parham likewise steps out of reality for McCarthy when he reads the wolf into his story. The father in *The Road* endangers his son when he tries to give him a world of stories. The storytellers in *The Crossing*, like McCarthy himself, say between the lines of their own tales that to know the world in a story is not to know the world at all. “The world has no name,” thus the world cannot be a story (*Crossing* 387).

Novels for McCarthy, like those yellowing photographs the gypsy father hangs above his cart in *The Crossing*, are heretical to the reality of the world: “In their images they had thought to find some small immortality but oblivion cannot be appeased” (TC 58). In *The Road*, our narrator muses: “Do you think that your fathers are watching? That they weigh you in their ledgerbook? Against what? There is no book and your fathers are dead in the ground” (106). Here is one of McCarthy’s clearest strikes against an epistemology of stories, the basis of the novel’s power. McCarthy’s speaker sets up our expectation as readers: using history, the stories of people from our past, we weigh our actions in books. But for McCarthy, “there is no book,” at

least no book with this weighty of a meaning. In McCarthy's hands, the novel becomes a self-destructing case against an epistemology of story.

Does McCarthy ultimately contradict himself, if he must use books to communicate the limits of books? Have we really gotten around this paradox of the posthuman artist? I think we have not, and I think we should not. Here's why. The refreshment of the human that Wolfe's posthumanism calls for is a paradoxical transformation. The "self-recovery" at the end of the thought experiment, for Wolfe, is a paradox: "The achievement of the self is now seen not as an active willing but as a maximally (and paradoxically) active *passivity*" (262). In other words, the posthuman is not a being but a becoming, an absence of the active being (*cogito ergo sum*). When discussing the poetry of Wallace Stevens, Wolfe finally gets at the poignancy in the paradox of posthuman art:

The fact that observation is multiple, contingent, and paradoxical in its self-reference...cannot be overcome, and it's a good thing too. It both creates and partakes in a world that is "imperfect," that "lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds," because the world is thus riven by paradoxical difference...that can never add up to the "simplified" "world of white and snowy scents." (Wolfe 281)

Cormac McCarthy goes after the dangerous manner in which we try to control the world through our language. We are doing violence to reality, including ourselves, when we imagine that we can simplify it into the map of our language. No, what is real is another world entire than that of words; it is "what cannot be held" (*Crossing* 127). So the best language will remain deeply entrenched in paradox, which allows for the multiplicity of abundant life outside it. And such language can build novels that, like McCarthy's, unwrite our old clarity.

To close, this excerpt from a poem by Robinson Jeffers concisely communicates the paradoxical work of McCarthy's posthuman writing. Jeffers describes how the so-called death of the human actually invigorates and frees the human:

I am not dead, I have only become inhuman  
That is to say,  
Undressed myself of laughable prides and infirmities,  
But not as a man  
Undresses to creep into bed, but like an athlete  
Stripping for the race.  
The delicate ravel of nerves that made me a measurer  
Of certain fictions  
Called good and evil; that made me contract with pain  
And expand with pleasure;  
Fussily adjusted like a little electroscope:  
That's gone, it is true,  
(I never miss it; if the universe does,  
How easily replaced!)  
But all the rest is heightened, widened, set free. (372)

"Basking nighthawks" rise from the ending of *Child of God*, and the "sun did rise, once again" at the close of *The Crossing* (197, 426). Along with the brook trout at *The Road's* end, "standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow," these endings all bear witness to the freedom that comes at the end of ourselves (286).

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## VITA

Margaret Pless graduated from Vanderbilt University in 2010 with a degree in English and History. She attended the University of Mississippi from 2010-2012 where she completed this thesis to receive an MA in English.