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Revisiting the Desert Sublime: Billy's Ecotheological Journey toward Compassion
in Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing*

Michael John Riding

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Revisiting the Desert Sublime: Billy's Ecotheological Journey toward Compassion
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Michael John Riding

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While McCarthy studies have emphasized elements of the sacred in his writing, this thesis adds a new historical perspective and synthesis to reading paradigms of Cormac McCarthy. *The Crossing* combines the patterns of the ancient pre-Hebraic genre of the desert sublime with the basic formula of the American Western genre to interrogate McCarthy's question of whether in the postmodern moment one can still divest oneself in the desert and find access to the sublime. In an era of an invisible or absent God where post-humanist thought erases the anthropocentric supremacy of human over animal and the earth itself, the one constant in the desert sublime genre is the physical reality of the desert itself. Thus, McCarthy's recourse is to infuse the desert sublime with contemporary ecological thought. In the desert Billy Parham encounters other desert dwellers who share with him shards and traces of belief while Billy also learns bodily from the material experience of his physical sojourn. Billy is a nascent postmodern saint whose journeys into the desert reveal to him the ecotheological principle of the interconnectedness of all things as a natural physical law that undergirds the spiritual truth guiding ethical behavior. Billy arrives at a point of radical transformation that teaches him the necessity of choosing compassion, affiliation, simple service, and humility in a world of interconnected beings and living forms.

Keywords: Cormac McCarthy, Edith Wyschogrod, David Jasper, crossing, desert sublime, ecotheology, ecology, interconnectedness, compassion, ecocriticism, western

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I experienced the spiritual dimension of interconnectedness as I sensed the support of my parents and the saints in Ghana.

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Brigham Young University

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Introduction: Postmodern Desert Journeys and Ecotheological Revisions in *The Crossing*

Here I found love. It was born in the sand,
 it grew without voice, touched the flintstones
 of hardness, and resisted death.
 Here mankind was life that joined
 the intact light, the surviving sea,
 and attacked and sang and fought
 with the same unity of metals.
 Here cemeteries were nothing but
 turned soil, dissolved sticks
 of broken crosses over which
 the sandy winds advanced.

—Pablo Neruda, *Canto General* (299)

The second novel of Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy, *The Crossing*, shares themes with many of McCarthy's other Southwestern novels: a young man's bildungsroman as Western, heavy use of desert landscape and eloquent nature writing, and a pervasively melancholy mood. However, Edwin Arnold, calls *The Crossing* "the philosophical heart of his Border Trilogy" ("Stonemason Evening" 1), while John Cant points out, "*The Crossing* is at once the most overtly philosophical and profoundly human of all McCarthy's works" (195). *The Crossing* features a young protagonist, Billy Parham, who seems drawn to the spiritual and sacred in the world. During his three desert journeys through the Sonora and Chihuahua deserts of Northern Mexico, Billy encounters other classic desert pilgrims who relay to him a variety of philosophies and traces of belief. He also learns from the desert landscape itself, crossing into the desert pursuing spiritual mystery and a transcendent order of being in the world he initially glimpsed encoded in the eyes of a beautiful and mysterious wolf. It is a novel mapped out of ancient desert journeys and invested with certain post-humanist ecological assumptions where all life is interconnected.

The crisis of postmodernity, a crisis of shattered myths, failed religious paradigms, decentered sites of meaning, and of multiple belief systems, however, makes McCarthy's a more

fraught literary process than simply importing the assumptions of the desert journeys of Semitic and biblical antiquity. McCarthy's protagonist foregoes historically failed beliefs and resorts to the Southwest desert for an originary and unmediated experience of the sublime uncontaminated by history or a denominational transcendent, for a manifestation of the divine or spiritual order of the world. To make this marriage of ancient and contemporary religious endeavor, McCarthy infuses the ancient Middle-Eastern literary genre of the desert sublime with a postmodern ecotheology informed by current ecological principles and imports these directly into his now revised ancient literary genre of wandering desert saints and the sublime desert journey. This coupled with his use of the popular American Western genre suggests a postmodern desert saint living in the ecotheological postmodern moment that forgoes a Judeo-Christian God or institutional religion, but which nevertheless requires a new morality of sacred connection to all other life forms as the truer way to traditional "saintly" compassion.

Responses to McCarthy as a writer of the sacred, the environment, and the revisionist Western are varied and abundant. Sarah Spurgeon analyzes McCarthy's use of mythic and religious imagery to ascertain his questioning of the sacred ("Sacred Hunter" 80) and Spurgeon also submits that McCarthy deconstructs the Western genre urging readers to see the postcolonial consequences of the Western myth ("Pledged in Blood" 94). Meanwhile, George Guillemain contends in *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy* that McCarthy's pastoralism is ecopastoral in that all nature is interrelated while, James Lilley proposes that the body interacts with the environment as a hybrid borderland, the site of experience (149-50). Likewise, Edwin Arnold discusses the juncture of the sacred and ecology as a central part of *The Crossing* (see "McCarthy and the Sacred"), but, like all other McCarthy critics, omits any indebtedness that McCarthy has to the ancient genre of seeking the sacred in the desert.

This essay begins by demonstrating the history of the genre of the desert sublime and its tropes with which McCarthy builds *The Crossing*. McCarthy adapts the ancient desert sublime journey to postmodern conditions by first infusing it with the ecological principle of interconnectedness then and situating this new desert sublime into the structure of the Western novel. Specifically, McCarthy's adaptation of the desert sublime pattern of sublimating the body to the desert and encounters with other desert dwellers produces his ecotheological ethic of necessary compassion towards other sentient beings. However, this time it comes not via exclusive ancient biblical theology, but via the shreds or traces of it imported inside contemporary ecological insistence on the ground *qua* ground, as opposed to ground as an historically suspect transcendent.

The Desert Sublime

Set in the desert of the Southwestern United States and Northern Mexico, *The Crossing* shares its existential concerns with much older literatures of the desert. In Judeo-Christian cultures, the most accessible literary form of these ancient desert tropes is found in the Bible, where believer pilgrims subject themselves to possible annihilation while pursuing the sublime and theophany. Moses is the model of this quest, along with Jacob, Elijah, John the Baptist, and others. By the fourth and fifth centuries, the era of the Christian Desert Fathers, these same tropes are recodified. In flight from the radical theological revisions and political upheavals in Constantine's fourth-century Christian church, the Desert Fathers elected a wandering ascetic lifestyle in the primordial desert in order to recover an older, simpler form of Christianity. Saint Anthony of Egypt (c. 251-356 AD) becomes the emblematic desert saint of this era due to the literary efforts of his biographer Athanasius (c. 293-373 AD). The particular shape of this fourth-century narrative is imported from Semitic desert cultures and used in the Bible, then becomes

the literary form that is the basis of prolific medieval hagiography. It now undergoes another genre transformation in McCarthy's ecologically grounded postmodern text.

The early fourth-century Desert Fathers typically sought contact with the divine in the desert through spiritual journeying, radical humility, and simple Christian service. The prerequisite for the journey was to step into the desert, an ecological zone already immemorially saturated with myths and tales of unmediated divine encounters. As the noted Oxford scholar Peter Brown writes:

The myth of the desert was one of the most abiding creations of late antiquity. It was, above all, a myth of liberating precision. It delimited the towering presence of "the world," from which the Christian must be set free, by emphasizing a clear ecological frontier. It identified the process of disengagement from the world with a move from one ecological [climatic] zone to another, from the settled land of Egypt to the desert. (216)

Removal of the self from city to hostile desert signified a release from the reach of corrupt civilization where the self can (in the desert) experience the pastoral purity made purer by starker wilderness. Critic Gloria Cronin explains that "the desert functions as spiritual 'theatron' or 'seeing place' where the self is finally opened to the mystical basis of spiritual identity." The physical realities of desert landscapes give place for metaphysical explorations because, as prominent Bible and desert literature scholar David Jasper explains: "in the desert the categories of human experience, as of time and space, are disintegrated and extremes meet. At the very edge of physical possibility, the mind turns inward and the oppositions which we create between physical and spiritual, body and soul, collapse" (6). The arid anti-human climate on the fringe of the human biosphere combines with the desert's empty silences, swirling sands, brilliant

sunlight, poisonous plants, labyrinth canyon networks, rolling dunes, and vast plains to challenge human perception and threaten the human body with annihilation, thereby creating an environment which evokes metaphysical inquisitions and considerations of one's place and purpose for being.¹

After crossing the ecological border into the immemorial desert, the ancient journey toward spiritual enlightenment, according to Jasper, in *The Sacred Desert*, consisted of four stages: First, *ekstasis*: a belief in the eternal presence of deity and spiritual renewal. Second, *kenosis*: a purging, emptying out of all passions to qualify for divine manifestation. Third, *gnosis*: absolutely unmediated saving knowledge of the transcendent. And fourth, theophany: the manifestation of deity to the desert pilgrim. (The desert wanderings in *The Crossing* are instigated by Billy's *ekstasis*, his belief that there is a transcendent order that he senses in wolves. The novel focuses on the process of *kenosis*, the emptying and purifying process of sojourning in the hostile desert which eventually leads to a *gnosis* where Billy experiences an epiphanic realization of his connection to other beings.) Jasper explains that the objective of this sublime desert journey is a reunification with the divine: "This unity is the persistent theme of the early Christian literature of the desert, a recovery of the unity inherent in creation but which was lost in the departure from Eden, a unity with God that is the final ground of human 'being'" (19). The stages of this reunifying journey are mediated by encounters with helpers and hinderers, grace and temptation, angels and devils. The archetypal shape of Biblical and fourth-century desert hagiography also includes altruistic service, asceticism, ethical musings, and primarily the willingness to face death for an unmediated encounter with the sacred. This is the ancient pattern which lies behind this enduring literary genre of desert wandering.

While interest in the Desert Fathers persisted through the centuries (Gustave Flaubert attempted three times to novelize the history of Saint Anthony and finally published *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* in 1874), the tradition and literary genre of the sacred desert and its spiritual journeying resurges in twentieth-century literature for the same reasons the desert saints fled Constantine's empire—political and religious instability heralding dramatic historical and theological paradigm shifts. Out of the modern and postmodern paradigm shifts and complexities in Euro-American life emerges a renewed literature of the desert sublime by such writers as: Mary Austin (*Land of Little Rain*, 1903), T. E. Lawrence (*Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 1926), D. H. Lawrence (*The Plumed Serpent*, 1926), Willa Cather (*Death Comes for the Archbishop*, 1927), Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (*Wind, Sand, and Stars*, 1939), T. S. Eliot (*The Four Quartets*, 1935-1942; 1943), Edward Abbey (*Desert Solitaire*, 1968), Leslie Marmon Silko (*Ceremony*, 1977), Edmund Jabès (*From the Desert to the Book*, 1980), Cormac McCarthy (*Blood Meridian*, 1985), Michael Ondaatje (*The English Patient*, 1992), Terry Tempest Williams (*An Unspoken Hunger: Stories from the Field*, 1994), and Jim Crace (*Quarantine*, 1997), to offer just a few. These writers play the role of mystagogues and purveyors of the tradition of investigating sublime truth in the desert. McCarthy utilizes the desert sublime genre to write the tale of a twentieth-century desert wanderer, pursuing the same truths as the ancient saints. However, he does so in a postmodern era where one turns not only to God for understanding, but to material, thus he advances the desert sublime genre by employing ecological principles to write the journey of seeking the desert sublime in a postmodern world.

The Desert Sublime and Twentieth-Century Ecotheology

In an age of environmental concern and burgeoning human settlement in the American Southwest, both writers and literary critics have taken particular interest in this desert region.

Anthropological ecocritic Catrin Gersdorf recently published *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert: Landscape and the Construction of America* (2009), a comprehensive study of American imagining of the Southwest desert which suggests that such unfamiliar terrain, inhospitable to Jefferson's agrarianism and the nation's ideal of Manifest Destiny, causes Americans to take multiple routes to understanding this formidable topography. Gersdorf then arranges the economic, aesthetic, ethical, and socio-political responses to the desert as four "eco-spatial metaphors": respectively, the desert as garden, orient, wilderness, and Heterotopia. She writes: "This practice I propose to call the eco-spatial rhetoric of America ... a practice catering to the entire spectrum of ideological and political responses to America" (32). However, she seems uncomfortable addressing the metaphysical notion of the sublime from her secularist position and is perhaps unaware of or deliberately ignores the ancient mystical tradition of desert spiritual journeys originating from antiquity, the Bible, and the early Desert Fathers. Gersdorf fails to account for significant spiritual responses to the desert unlike McCarthy who assertively imports this ancient literary genre of the desert sublime into *The Crossing*.

Gersdorf is not alone in her neglect of the spiritual and existential undertones within contemporary desert literature. The general body of current ecocriticism has taken a scientific-secularist position in its analysis, which is understandable considering founding ecocritic Cheryl Glotfelty's definition of ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment ... an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (xviii). To analyze texts that implicitly or explicitly address nature, ecocritics frequently focus on secular, scientific analysis, considering primarily nature's physicality. Ecocritic John Gatta questions this approach when "belief in the rejuvenating and spiritually sustaining capacities of outdoor experience has remained an article of faith in the United States long after belief in pastoral idealism should have

expired. Incredibly, belief in the more-than-material ‘strangeness’ of material nature has somehow managed to survive” American culture’s deep industrial, scientific, intellectual, and technological transformations (4). While human physical survival is contingent on the survival of the natural world, it is rarely this singular survival instinct that propels literatures that incorporate nature thematically, aesthetically or otherwise. Broadly speaking, literature that involves nature frequently addresses the subject’s metaphysical or spiritual relationship to nature, and literary analysis should follow suit by utilizing critical tools that incorporate the secular and spiritual.

The study of ecotheology specifically aims to close the rift between texts traversing nature, often imbued with the sacred, and the secular element of material nature itself. Ecotheologian Celia Deane-Drummond recently defined ecotheology as “that reflection on different facets of theology in as much as they take their bearings from cultural concerns about the environment and humanity’s relationship with the natural world” (x). Ecotheology arises in part out of environmental concerns—and similar to the threat of annihilation in the desert, the imminence of human extinction due to ecological collapse gives place for existential considerations of humanity’s place as a species and its ethical and moral behavior toward the planet. Likewise, ecotheology asserts that for theological consideration of the human condition to have any foundation, theology needs to be grounded in nature and place. This essay will utilize a broad definition of ecotheology as a spiritual and existential understanding informed by contemporary ecological principles.

John Gatta, asks: “If there can be no such thing, in post-Enlightenment culture, as an animistic faith that gods or spirits dwell directly ‘in’ the tree, precisely what kind of religious responses to the nonhuman world *have* remained viable in American life and letters?” (4). As if in answer, McCarthy’s ecotheological postmodern text, *The Crossing*, deconstructs the great

divide between science and religious belief created by the Enlightenment by mirroring the patterns of the ancient genre of seeking the sacred in the desert and infusing it with constructive postmodern assumptions and contemporary ecological theory.² McCarthy uniquely adds what I am calling a spiritually-oriented fifth metaphor to Gersdorf's four secular eco-spatial metaphors: the metaphor of the sublime desert journey.

McCarthy's crucial religious question is whether in the postmodern moment the religious tenets that sustained Biblical saints and the fourth-century Desert Fathers have the potency to supply the seeker in the desert with sublime experience. In the postmodern era of an invisible or absent historical God, where post-humanist thought has erased the anthropocentric supremacy of human over animal and the earth, the one constant in the desert sublime genre is the physical reality of the desert itself. Now in the postmodern world the physical becomes an essential ground for discerning spiritual truths. As critical theorist Edith Wyschogrod explains in her postmodern, cross cultural, and transhistorical *Saints and Postmodernism*, "most hagiographic accounts think of the body as a hindrance to the development of a sought-for spiritual inwardness" (14). Relegating the body in order to sense spiritual truth has been the road to transcendence since Plato's idealism separated the ideal from the real, and later Christian theology's divine from the here and now. Ethics originated from and were disseminated by a divine source, but Wyschogrod explains that since ethics is the behavior of one physical body toward a physical other, in the postmodern world ethics can originate in the material body: "The saintly body acts as a signifier, as a 'carnal general' that condenses and channels meaning, a signifier that expresses extremes of love, compassion, and generosity. In their disclosure of what is morally possible, saintly bodies 'fill' the discursive plane of ethics" (52). The desert truth-seeking wanderer learns an ethic of compassion toward the other not just mentally, but as a

physical liberation “from the towering presence of ‘the world’” (Brown 216) across the alien ecological zone of the desert. McCarthy's Billy Parham is yet another desert wanderer and nascent postmodern saint making that same immemorial journey in the desert in yet another time of religious crisis, and whose “pilgrimages” into the desert reveal to him the ecological principle of interconnectedness of all things as a natural physical law that suggests related spiritual truths guiding ethical and moral behavior. Ecology demonstrates an interconnected world where removing any part of the system could lead to catastrophe, thus inviting a choice to live ethically and consider and respect all things—whether considering the interconnected tales and lives of humankind, or the ecocentric interconnection of the larger world. Interconnectedness is made implicit in *The Crossing* through the early narrative theme of wolves and explicit by character dialogue. The hermit priest teaches the lesson of interconnectedness to Billy after he fails to return the pregnant wolf to the mountains: “There is but one world and everything that is imaginable is necessary to it. ... So everything is necessary. Every least thing. This is the hard lesson. Nothing can be dispensed with.” And the horrifying fact: “We have no way to know what could be taken away. What omitted” (*Crossing* 143). Which links in the balanced ecosystem are dispensable and which are not? Scientists do not know, but the catastrophic implications of ecological collapse from species extinction are terrifying. Ecocritic Eric Rozelle calls this terror the “ecosublime.” The alarm implicit in McCarthy’s statement “We have no way to know what could be taken away” (143) demonstrates an ecosublime moment Rozelle defines as “the awe and terror of a heightened awareness of the ecological home” (Rozelle 1) and “this moment prompts both viewers and readers to realize their purpose as a niche in a realized organic system” (8). In a fragile organic system, one’s “purpose” is to maintain the system by supporting and perpetuating life. This is the ethics that can ensue from ecological understanding. Billy’s tutoring

as he encounters others in the desert includes discourse on the integrated organic system of the world. Billy is only a nascent saint, and does not complete the journey toward theophany. But like the ancient desert saints, he too risks annihilation to arrive at a point of radical transformation that teaches him those same truths and ethics—the necessity of compassion, affiliation, simple service, and radical humility in a world of interconnected beings and living forms.

McCarthy's Ecological Approach

McCarthy accepts the physical world as the ground to spiritual inquiry and stays well connected to progressive scientific studies at the Santa Fe Institute. Kenneth Lincoln provides insight into this milieu in his 2009 survey of McCarthy's works, *Cormac McCarthy: American Canticles*, about the scientific discussions ongoing at the Institute:

Bioscientists like Lynn Margulis are exploring Serial Endosymbiosis Theory (SET) that posits the evolutionary interconnectedness and fusional reciprocity of all life-forms crossed and crossing into each other from the beginning. As with microbiologists tracing life to a single protocist, geologists like Vladimir Verandsky argue for a global hypersea of continuous living matter, “animated water,” including rocks that give off vital elements hydrogen and oxygen. ...

The hybrid crossing of fractal Southwest borders is a set theme of a writer inhabiting office space at the Santa Fe Institute where related scientific discussions take place daily. The novelist serves as interdisciplinary translator among the heavy thinkers, including his friend the Nobel physicist Murray Gell-Mann—not without true empirical skepticism, ironic honesty, and agnostic need to track a god unknown. (Lincoln 113)

Lincoln has alluded to two related principles evident in *The Crossing* that play a role in modern ecology and scientific consideration of the earth: interconnectedness and fractals. Current theories of interconnectedness and reciprocity stem from research on the origin of living organisms. The principle of Serial Endosymbiosis Theory (SET), initially formulated by American biologist Lynn Margulis, contends that organelles were created when prokaryotic cells (cells lacking a nucleus) worked interdependently and cooperatively, engulfing one another yet remaining distinct and thereby evolving into the organelles mitochondria and plastids which enabled the evolution of eukaryotic cells (cells with a nucleus), the building blocks of life. From the beginning, life has been interconnected and interdependent with porous borders.

Second, the geometric patterns of fractals are shapes that can be broken apart with each part retaining a smaller approximate copy of the whole. Ferns and snowflakes are examples in nature, mountain ranges and desert canyon geography are rougher examples on a larger scale. The ecological significance of fractals is the concept of shifting shapes and shared, porous borders within an integrated whole or ecosystem, evidencing interconnectedness much like Serial Endosymbiosis Theory. The interconnected ecosystem of the desert world Billy inhabits is thematically addressed through wolves and ranching.

Ecological Interconnectedness and Fractals in *The Crossing*

Billy Parham's first of three crossings involves returning a wolf trapped on the family ranch in Southwestern New Mexico south to the mountains of Northern Mexico, presumably the wolf's place of origin. Published in 1994, *The Crossing* was written during one of the most ardently debated environmental initiatives of the later twentieth century: the reintroduction of grey wolf packs from Canada south to designated wilderness in Idaho and Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming. The United States Fish and Wildlife Service proposed the reintroduction in

1987 and after Congress provided funds for an environmental impact assessment in 1991, the progress of the initiative held public attention until (and beyond) the actual releasing of wolves into the wild in 1995 and 1996. The wolves flourished and adapted to their new (old) environments, returning to play an important role in that ecosystem. While the wolves were exterminated in the early twentieth century and reintroduced in the later twentieth century without major ecosystem collapse, scientists do not guarantee that the same result would hold true for other species, nor do they understand the longer-term implications of the wolf species absence. McCarthy's focus on the pregnant wolf is likely not accidental.

The novel carries a sense of ecological apprehension as McCarthy alludes to ecological concerns such as nuclear testing and ranching. In the closing pages of the novel Billy witnesses the atomic blast of early nuclear bomb testing, possibly the Trinity test held at 5:29 a.m, July 16, 1945, thirty-five miles southeast of Socorro, New Mexico. McCarthy establishes an additional ecological apprehension by instancing the response of the wolves to the unnatural presence of cattle in New Mexico: "The ranchers said [the wolves] brutalized the cattle in a way they did not the wild game. As if the cows evoked in them some anger. As if they were offended by some violation of an old order" (25). Unsuccessful in trapping the wolf, Billy seeks the nature-wisdom of the elder sage Don Arnulfo who states that "the wolf is a being of great order and that it knows what men do not: that there is no order in the world save that which death has put there" (45). Ecologically unfit for the arid landscape of the Southwest, it is unlikely that cattle would have survived without human maintenance. The cattle's living in the desert contradicts the ecological order, which perplexes and frustrates the wolves. The wolves demonstrate an ecological understanding to which Billy is exposed throughout his desert journey.

Billy begins with an innate, yet presumptuous, ecological awareness and sensibility. As a young boy, he's fascinated by the wolf packs chasing antelope across the snowy plains of his new home in Hidalgo County, New Mexico, and crawls through the snow of a frigid pre-dawn winter morning just to glimpse them. A pack of seven stops and examines him with "their almond eyes in the moonlight" and Billy can "feel the presence of their knowing that was electric in the air," yet he keeps this encounter to himself (4-5). Years later, he ventures into Mexico to return the wolf compelled by a sense that all things have a place in the world and presuming the mountains near the border to be the wolf's only acceptable home. By not exterminating the wolf Billy defies Mr. Echols ominous "No. 7 Matrix," wolf bate made of dead animal viscera "Liver, gall, kidneys"—so vile Billy's father can only whisper "Good God" (17), and thus manifests his conflicted relationship with a ranch culture that destroys wolves to make room for cattle.³ Billy elects to preserve the wolf's life and explore his relationship with the broader world, rather than death and the imposed boundaries of men.

Perhaps he denies his father's orders to kill the wolf because he sees in the wolf's eyes the same bright ancient order of knowledge he felt in the wolves when he was a child. Now, while making his way to the mountains of Mexico, Billy stirs the fire and notices the eyes of the wolf which "burned like gatelamps to another world. A world burning on the shore of an unknowable void" (73). It is those burning gatelamps and the idea of a spiritual world inside of the physical creature that compel him onward in his quest for the sacred. When Billy's attempt to return the wolf fails and he shoots it to save it from the merciless death of sport dog fighting (122), he is in effect repudiating the circus that represents the evil and base in the world which stands between him and the wolf, his symbol of transcendent possibility. Initiated into the unholy realities of the world, he affirms his moral code by carrying the wolf's carcass to the mountains.

As the wolf's blood crosses the boundary of sheeting and clothing, he explores his physical and spiritual connection to the wolf when he instinctively "put his hand to his leg and tasted the blood which tasted no different than his own" (125). Blood is literally the alkahest, the universal solvent that testifies of the interconnectedness between physical bodies and perhaps serves as conduit to the "unknowable void" he seeks. In *The Crossing*, all such interconnections are figurative and literal, spiritual and physical. All is reconnected in the post Enlightenment moment.

Ecological interconnectedness is further exemplified by fractal imagery which represents an integrated whole composed of interacting smaller like elements, the precondition of landscape. The topography of the desert is fractal-like with smaller canyons constituting larger canyons of similar appearance, mountain ranges that pile upon themselves, and clouds that shift, amass, and evaporate only to reform elsewhere. Fractals are demonstrated in the pregnant wolf carrying pups, as one creature is shaped by smaller creatures within, themselves shaped by the larger creature without. Likewise, fractal properties are explicitly symbolized by the notion of one's palm representing one's past present, and future, as suggested by Billy's palm-reader (367-70). McCarthy's desert displays a fractal-like interplay of fine elements—as the land and creatures within the land constantly merge into and out of one another as they interact. During Billy's journey, "gusts of wind were blowing dust off the top of the road. ... the wind making little furrows in [the wolf's] hair" (62). The wind touches the road whose dusty particles become part of the wind which in turn shapes the figure of the wolf, embedding and releasing dust while carving patterns in the wolf's fur. What was the road becomes the wolf and back again as finite elements never leave the system. While crossing a river, "He could feel the horse's hooves muted on the cobbled rocks of the river floor and hear the water sucking at the horse's legs. The

water came up under the animal's belly and he could feel the cold of it where it leaked into his boots. ... They crossed through the ford and rode dripping up out of the river" (125). The horse and boy enter the river and immediately interact as the horse strikes the rocks on the river floor which sound is muffled to Billy's perception. They become part of the river as the river sucks at the horse's legs and fills Billy's boots and touches his skin, drawing dust into the river's constitution. As they cross the river's edge they take part of the river with them, dripping across and muddying the boundary. The boundaries are reduced between boy, horse, water, and dirt as they interact with one another.

Shifting borders, integrated wholes, and repeating shapes are not limited to the literal in *The Crossing*. At a point of decision, Boyd asks, "What do you think the old man would of done?" The murdered father is no longer there to voice his opinion, but Billy states, "Someways I think he'll always have a say" (256). The impact of one life, one story on another carries forward in infinite ways. McCarthy applies physical fractal principles and interconnectedness to metaphysical human experiences. After Billy loses his brother Boyd to the desert, Billy has a dream in which Boyd has a dream. In addition to the fractal notion of a dream within a dream, Billy's dream is infused with images that flow and blend into one another, making up the whole with smaller fragments: The wolves in the dream nip at each other's flanks like the proverbial snake eating its own tail, the snow is infused with the color of the moon, and the crescent formation of the wolves reflects the crescent moon. The breath freezes in the air, and then vanishes into the air, air that recycles between humans, animals, and plants. The wolves vanish smoking into the winter night, similar to the image of them swirling about Billy kicking snow with steaming breath and bodies; the whole scene is a cauldron of motion and swirling snow much like the "cauldron of breath" about him (295). The hardly inseparable elements swirling

and passing from minor to major images and back again emphasize interconnection of the world, and in the middle of this “cauldron of breath” Billy stands exposed as a part of this matrix, capable of choosing how to act toward these life forms. McCarthy utilizes the ecological realities of the desert journey to further inform Billy of his interconnected status and bring him to a sublime experience that magnifies the necessity of choosing compassionate treatment of all beings. At the same time, the desert sublime genre that frames Billy’s journey is itself revised by way of postmodern allowances that in turn permit a young Southwestern American cowboy to follow a saintly archetype.

McCarthy’s Postmodern Desert Sublime

McCarthy utilizes the above ecological principles to craft a revised genre of the desert sublime better suited to pose possible answers to the existential questions of the desert wanderer and the readers of this late postmodern era. Taking his cue from biblical desert saints and the fourth- and fifth-century Christian Desert Fathers, McCarthy patterns inside a Western novel a “hagiography” of a postmodern saint of the ancient desert sublime. It succeeds the Bible in familiarizing American readers with the desert and reinforces current scientific ecological philosophies as it documents Billy’s truth-seeking desert wanderings. The American genre of the Western particularly lends itself to a desert sublime paradigm, while the theories of Edith Wyschogrod are helpful in re-visioning saintly lives in a postmodern context. Specifically, the desert sublime genre tropes of ascetic sublimation of the body, learning from the bodily experience in the desert, and encounters with other desert dwellers and their narratives, are much in evidence.

The Western genre has gone through various transitions and epochs, but maintains a basic formula: a white male upholding social justice and morality amidst cultural tension via a pursuit

or journey that pits him against nature or other humans. Western motifs also include facing death as the road to becoming; either eschewing language altogether or engaging in witty banter; setting in a stark, hard, and primitive landscape and mirroring those attributes in order to survive such a place; self-reliance and prevailing justice; and the horse as the sign of man's connection to and control over the earth.⁴ While the western genre can perpetuate damaging myths, there are productive links between it and the genre of the desert sublime. Similarities between the Western cowboy protagonists and the Desert Fathers include a solitary ascetic life of wandering and sacrifice, insistent integrity, and viewing desert landscape as a place of individual transformation, to name a few of the powerful symbols that hold the American imagination. While these similarities and associations make the Western genre capable of fielding the ancient desert sublime journey, McCarthy's postmodern inclusion of the ecological (where the cowboy can't privilege cows over wolves) makes this an atypical Western demanding a different reading paradigm. Edith Wyschogrod's theories of postmodern saintly lives help establish such a paradigm.

The Crossing is postmodern hagiography of a desert sublime journey in the American Southwest. As Wyschogrod explains, hagiography is not limited to a specific time, nor the "tale of a holy life," nor is it confined to "religious literature but in biography, autobiography, and the novel" (6). Wyschogrod attempts to create a postmodern ethics by examining the life narratives of diverse literary saintly figures who fall outside the archetypal definition of Christian sainthood. Billy's is not a traditional "holy life," but the desert sublime quest for truth within *The Crossing* supersedes old definitions of saintliness as it puts forth a character who follows saintly attributes and patterns to produce a revisioned moral life and ethics. Wyschogrod argues that the saint is "one whose adult life in its entirety is devoted to the alleviation of sorrow ... and pain ...

that afflicts other persons without distinction of rank or group or, alternatively, that afflicts sentient beings, whatever the cost to the saint in pain or sorrow. On this view theistic belief may but need not be a component of the saint's belief system" (34). The essential saintly attribute is altruistic devotion to relieve the suffering of other beings, whether human, animal, or otherwise, regardless of one's own pain. Although Billy begins the novel with an unsophisticated compassion for the Other, his desire to safeguard the wolf, recover his father's horses, redeem his brother's bones, and serve others on the road, evidences that he is attempting to live a code of ethics. Billy is no conventional Christian: he prays to the wolf, to his brother Boyd, and occasionally to God. While he is raised in a Christian home whose mother insists on saying grace before meals and honoring the Sabbath Day, there is no mention of a religious affiliation; yet, pious worship and belief in deity do not preclude anyone from saintly pilgrimages and are no longer necessary for saintliness in postmodern desert hagiography. If part of Billy's Western cowboy code is to ignore institutional sanction with a fierce individualism, he nevertheless demonstrates a revisionary interest in the sacred and spiritual. While cradling the dead wolf he has a vision of the eschatological possibilities for living things:

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 where the grass was a 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 empanelled 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)

This matrix of life contrasts starkly with Mr. Echols No. 7 matrix of death. Billy instinctively senses a spiritual order to the world, attributable to some form of God, and he attempts to further

comprehend it by touching one whose physical body has already given way to the ecological law of death, but perhaps in this touch he can approach the metaphysical being and gain access to “the presence of [the wolf’s] knowing” (4) which he sensed as a boy. Like the ancient saints, his departure into the desert is one of spiritual necessity at risk of annihilation for spiritual truth. By sublimating his body to the harsh desert he learns through bodily experiences the ecotheological ethic of compassion through interconnectedness.

Ascetic Sublimation of the Body

Desert saints have always been ascetics, but within McCarthy’s paradigm the saintly body will additionally take on the role of telling the tale of the saintly pilgrimage. It is the narrative, the text, the tale that testifies of saintliness. As Wyschogrod explains, “the saintly body acts as a signifier ... that expresses extremes of love, compassion, and generosity. In their disclosure of what is morally possible, saintly bodies ‘fill’ the discursive plane of ethics” (52). The withering of the body testifies of the altruistic deeds performed in the wilderness and the commitment to the spiritual pilgrimage. Learning comes not only intellectually, but bodily as the desert pilgrim materially experiences the journey. The body is ecologically part of the interconnection of all things, and the sign of the truth of that principle. If the body steps outside of the human biosphere to serve and pursue truths in the desert, this ascetic sacrifice attributes to the process of *kenosis*, the purging of the body and will preliminary to enlightenment. Within *The Crossing’s* interconnected postmodern matrix, both the human body and accompanying animal bodies all testify of the journey.

Billy’s desert journeys make him physically frail and withered, at one point on his first crossing tightening his jeans with rope “where they hung from his hips” (*Crossing* 130). He becomes so emaciated, the priest calls him “puros huesos” (“pure bones”; 138), and neither he

nor his horse are recognized by his neighbor, Mr. Sanders (164). After being deserted by Boyd, his more spiritual brother, he spends weeks on the road trying to reclaim his lost spiritual better: “he grew thin and gaunted in his travels and pale with the dust of the road” (331). Billy’s wandering pushes him and his equine companion toward a return to their dusty elements in the hostile desert. As Billy and his horse share the bodily trials of the saint’s pilgrimage: “They rode the high country for weeks and they grew thin and gaunted man and horse and the horse grazed on the sparse winter grass in the mountains and gnawed the lichens from the rock and the boy shot trout with his arrows” (129). Although they sleep in the cold and become “ragged and half starving” to the point that a woman asks Billy if he’s sick (130), the horse stays with his human companion. “Blackened rags atop the bony horse,” (132) they both begin to take on the wild shape and form of the wilderness. The horse sheds his shoes and “The constant currying of the brush and greenwood in the mountains had harried off all trace of the stable and the horse gave off a warm and rooty smell” (136).

Wyschogrod exclaims that saintliness is not just evidenced by the body, it *is* the body: “Thrown into saintly experience are not only the ensemble of perceptual, tactile, and kinesthetic structures that constitute everyday bodily experience but the viscera and bones, in short the saint’s entire body” (17). Billy and his horse begin to not just live in the landscape, but become it in smell and appearance; they begin to interconnect with the land itself. James Lilley explains that “In McCarthy’s texts, the boundaries that hold the body in its discrete, impenetrable place soon begin to distend and reconfigure themselves, transforming the site of interface—the frontier body—into a fluid, hybrid borderland” (149-50). This is the McCarthy’s “matrix” of an interconnected world (not Mr. Echols poison matrix), the experience of sublimating the body and will to the desert, to the spiritual pilgrimage and the altruistic acts within the desert along the

journey toward the sublime. Billy and his horse companion both subject themselves in service: Billy gets his leg cut saving a young girl from rape (211) and the horse gets stabbed in the chest, nearly martyred in the service of carrying bones (396). The bodies of the pilgrim and his horse are purged interchangeably and concurrently. McCarthy is revising the Western, hagiography, and the notion of desert sainthood. Billy Parham asks the same questions as the ancient desert saints: What is my place in the world? How am I supposed to act? What do I need to know? What moral values shall I enact? The answers to these questions may be found in this sublimation of the body, and Billy also finds answers to some of these questions through traces, shards, and remnants of belief McCarthy's desert helpers and storytellers impart to him along the road.

Desert Encounters

Encounters with other desert dwellers is also a standard pattern in the desert sublime, and in *The Crossing*, these others provide hospitality and guide Billy on his journey through narratives of their own experiences and diverse beliefs. Cronin explains that "In this complex locus, the desert saint seeks solitude, yet constantly encounters an entire caste of other saintly ascetics, artists, mad men, dreamers, angels, prophets, adventurers, malefactors, heretics, scapegoats, tempters, demons, and even Satan." While some desert dwellers intentionally lead astray, like the judge in *Blood Meridian*, most that discuss their views with Billy do so non-objectively or with the intent to assist. It is through these narratives of lives fractally resembling Billy's own that McCarthy further elaborates an ecotheology: the stories told are saturated with ecological interconnectedness saturated as they are with all the shards and traces of ancient religious ideas and formations. Hence, these numerous philosophies mediate the relationship between the physical and metaphysical. While guidance comes through many characters,

Quijada, the blind man, the gypsy, and the hermit priest are particularly relevant to Billy's developing ecotheological existential understanding.⁵

Quijada, the Yaqui *gerente* that released their father's horses and later invited Billy to his table while on his third crossing to recover Boyd's bones, affirms the metaphysical world Billy sensed in the eyes of the wolf, and where he suspects Boyd's visionary horizon now resides. Likewise, Quijada expresses a combination of Native American fatalistic and deterministic beliefs. "Your brother is in that place which the world has chosen for him. He is where he is supposed to be. And yet the place he has found is also of his own choosing. That is a piece of luck not to be despised" (*Crossing* 387-88). As a Yaqui, distant from his home in Western Sonora, Quijada is a mercenary who without familial or political ties espouses diverse ideologies. "Do you believe in God?" Billy asks him. "On godly days," he responds. Again, Billy questions, "No one can tell you what your life is goin to be, can they? / No" (387). Billy is constantly formulating his own belief system, and considering the fateful circumstances of his tragic life, he'd like to have a map of his future. Yet God, according to Quijada, is whimsical and subject to circumstance. Quijada then submits a cosmological position regarding one's place in the world and the human need to give signification and names:

The world has no name, he said. The names of the ceros and the sierras and the desert exist only on maps. We name them that we do not lose our way. Yet it was because the way was lost to us already that we have made those names. The world cannot be lost. We are the ones. And it is because these names and these coordinates are our own naming that they cannot save us. That they cannot find for us the way again. (387)

Quijada's counsel is to ignore the human constructs of nature and to pursue the unmediated experience with the world—humans are lost to the world by our own devices with which we try to understand that word. Billy has been on this unmediated journey throughout the novel and while conversing with Mr. Sanders' cook admits that "he did indeed have a long journey. He said he did not know what the end of this journey would look like or whether he would know it when he got there and he asked her in Spanish to pray for him" (354). Aware of his plight Billy is blindly grasping for spiritual aid.

Riding to reunite with his injured brother, Billy encounters a woman and blind man whose paths also have elements of the desert sublime journey. As they feed and house him for the night, it is obvious the unnamed saintly helpers have learned kenotic emptying and the subsequent lesson of interconnectedness and interdependence. The woman was orphaned in the Mexican revolution; yet, unlike Billy, who chooses to remain an orphan, she adopts the blind man as family during her family's funeral.

The blind man's emptying has come as a revolutionary fighter when a German captain of the Mexican federal army sucked out his eyes. He has sightlessly wandered toward a northern town following "the road. The wind. The will of God" (279), coming across helpers that bestowed upon him gifts of food, clothing, and conversation. With no intent to entertain or instruct but only to "tell what was true and that otherwise they had no purpose at all" (284), the blind man now imparts his story to Billy, a similarly blind pilgrim. McCarthy tells the blind man's story through both the woman and the man to illustrate the primacy of the tale and the interconnection of the tellers, emphasizing the lessons of alternate ways of knowing and the truth of an unseen, non-subjective world: "He said that in his blindness he had indeed lost himself and all memory of himself yet he had found in the deepest dark of that loss that there also was a

ground and there one must begin” (291-92). In his *kenosis*, he experiences the unmediated contact with the earth that is the bedrock to further understanding of physical and metaphysical truth. The blind man’s closing words recount the spiritual truth his blind contemplations afford him: “ultimamente todo es polvo. Todo lo que podemos tocar. Todo lo que podemos ver. En éste tenemos la evidencia más profunda de la justicia, de la misericordia. En éste vemos la bendición más grande de Dios” (“ultimately everything is dust. Everything that we can touch. Everything that we can see. In this we have the most profound evidence of justice, of mercy. In this we see the greatest blessing from God”; 293). When Billy asks why this is such a blessing, the blind man explains that “because what can be touched falls into dust there can be no mistaking these things for the real. At best they are only tracings of where the real has been. Perhaps they are not even that. Perhaps they are no more than obstacles to be negotiated in the ultimate sightlessness of the world” (294). Referencing the theological debate over justice and mercy, the blind man concludes that God’s greatest act of both justice and mercy is that all physical things turn to dust because then we know that there is a metaphysical reality, a reality that does not decompose. The physical, that which can be held in hand, is the blind man’s and Billy’s path to understanding the metaphysical. Billy frequently tries to approach the spiritual and metaphysical via the physical housing often after life has departed—he tastes the wolf’s blood, touches her fur, and obsesses over Boyd’s bones. The blind man’s wife demonstrates that it is not in death that the metaphysical is apprehended, but in life and appreciating the interconnection of all creatures. As Billy departs, McCarthy reiterates the woman’s saintly position. While feeding her domestic chickens, we read “Wild blackbirds flew down from the trees and stalked and fed among the poultry but she fed all without discrimination” (294). This non-preferential treatment mimics the animal-human bond of Saint Francis of Assisi, suggested the patron saint of animals and

ecology. Only minutes later Billy demonstrates he has not yet learned this principle by calling his own dog a “dumb-ass” (294) despite the fact that Billy is the recipient of unconditional kindness many times throughout his desert journey. Other travelers, like the gypsy, recognize the eternal connection between all things. While carrying his brother’s bones back across the border, Billy’s horse is stabbed by bandits. The next day he is approached by a caravan of gypsies who offer to buy the wounded horse and when Billy declines, they revive his horse with herbal medicines and poultice. Billy offers payment, and the gypsy declines stating that the goodwill is “Para el camino” (“For the road”; 414). As they depart Billy denies that he is a “man of the road.” His rejection of his condition as an orphan earlier in the novel, and then as a man of the road, plus his continual insistence on reciprocal payment for certain services all demonstrate that Billy still resists affiliation to community, unlike the gypsies who have maintained community after centuries of nomadism within a larger global community.

To emphasize the eternal nature of metaphysical communities, the gypsy tells three tales of two airplanes, one of which may be the skeleton airplane transported by the gypsies (the caravan resembles Billy who is carrying his brother’s bones). The validity of these tales of the airplane is questionable, but that ambiguity between the physical airplane’s history and the metaphysical world of the tale is part of the gypsy’s belief: “what the dead have quit is itself no world but is also only the picture of the world in men’s hearts. He said that the world cannot be quit for it is eternal in whatever form as are all things within it” (413). By telling three tales, McCarthy’s gypsy instantiates the concept that all tales are interwoven. The stories and history of humanity is only a picture, and as the blind man emphasized, there exists a world outside of the physical. While the interwoven physical communities are essential, the spiritual communities

are eternal and Billy's continual rejection of these communities demonstrates his urge to draw boundaries and deny his interconnectedness.

Perhaps the most poignant encounter for this reading of McCarthy is the meeting with the unnamed hermit priest and the tale he tells, poignant for no less a reason than that all tales are intertwined and all journeys are one: the context *and* conclusion of this encounter. The priest, who was "seeking evidence for the hand of God in the world" (142), had undergone his own evolution of beliefs: "I was a Mormon. Then I converted to the church. Then I became I don't know what. Then I become me" (140). Leaving institutional religion behind, he came pursuing the divine through death. "I came because of the devastation ... I thought man had not inquired sufficiently into miracles of destruction" (141-42). Whereas the Bible starts with a creation story and salvation is the objective of Christianity, McCarthy's priest deconstructs *gnosis*, or belief in divine manifestation, apophatically seeking death and destruction to inform him of God. Cronin notes that in the genre of the desert sublime the desert seeker allows himself to be "surrounded by eternally present desert winds which either threaten a theophany or total obliteration." Harkening back to the ecological wisdom of Don Arnulfo who stated that "there is no order in the world save that which death has put there" (*Crossing* 45), the hermit priest places himself within scenes of death, to inquire after the order of the world and the source of divine manifestation.

The hermit tells Billy the history of the flooded and demolished chapel of Caborca, Sonora, and of the tragic life of the heretic who for years resided under the draconian church bell in an effort to reveal the hand of God so he could better reconcile the tragedies in his life and his current state of existence. Thus, Billy is introduced to the concept of life as an integrated tale, which tale can never lose its "place in the world for it is that place. ... And like all corridos it

ultimately told one story only, for there is only one to tell" (142-43). Billy will learn from Quijada that the corrido sung about the guerrito is about his brother Boyd, but it is older than Boyd, and sings of all guerritos: "It tells the tale of that solitary man who is all men" (386). This lesson of interconnecting tales and lives applies to the heretic, the hermit, and Billy, similar to the interconnections McCarthy builds between Billy and the blind man and Billy and the gypsies. As the tale is the world and infinitely connects all humankind, the heretic's tale is the hermit priest's tale: "The more [the priest] attempted even to formulate [the heretic's existential questions] the more they eluded his every representation and finally he came to see that they were not the old pensioner's queries at all but his own" (157). Likewise, Billy cannot represent his spiritual yearnings and questions either. Both the heretic's tale and the concurrent hermit priest's tale are a microcosm of Billy's tale. McCarthy's strategy is to illustrate that this interrelationship refers not only to the narrative tale, but to the idea that the tale is the construction of the human world. The lesson of the interrelated tale mirrors the interconnected property of all tales. Understanding and living the principle of interconnectivity of all men, animals, and the world is the answer to the ethical question of how to approach and treat the Other as if the Other were not the Other, because the Other is not ever totally other. In the interconnected world of physical beings and metaphysical tales, the strife lies in the boundaries created between one and another, boundaries that humanity constantly tries to determine. The boundaries the heretic was trying unsuccessfully to draw lead him to lash out at God under the bell tower:

He pored over the record not for the honor and glory of his Maker but rather to find against Him. ... what we seek is the worthy adversary. For we strike out to fall flailing through demons of wire and crepe and we long for something of

substance to oppose us. Something to contain us or to stay our hand. Otherwise there were no boundaries to our own being and we too much extend our claims until we lose all definition. (153)

Yet the heretic found that he cannot stand opposed because boundaries are fluid and often a human delimitation. Like the heretic, Billy continually asserts his borders and separation from his orphan and “man of the road” community. Standing outside of these communities is contrary to the ecological principle of interconnectedness and ecology proposes a dissolution of the self within ecological communities. In *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy’s desert landscape and all things in it are equal in an “optical democracy”:

In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence. The very clarity of these articles belied their familiarity, for the eye predicates the whole on some feature or part and here was nothing more luminous than another and nothing more enshadowed and in the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships. (247)

In the optically democratic landscape all living things equally progress toward death. Georg Guillemin elaborates that “human constructs such as morality and aesthetics have no dominion” (98). On one hand the notion of optical democracy and an egalitarian march toward death disrupts the argument that an ethic can stem from ecological principles. However, within the ecological community, humans possess a consciousness that allows a choice—a choice to participate in the community and treat others compassionately, or to remain alone. Edwin Arnold suggests that “McCarthy does indeed ask ... that we acknowledge and engage our oneness with

the natural, atomic, and finally cosmic world” (“McCarthy and the Sacred” 217). In the face of nihilism, acknowledging and caring for the community nurtures life (like the nurturing Billy received throughout his journey) and regenerates the world and its communities. Kindness and compassion sustain communities and make human life worth living.

McCarthy has taken these scientific concepts to generate new spiritual thought, adding the ecological principle of interconnectedness to renew traditional ethical and moral behavior. The heretic had tried to teach this ecotheology of interconnected lives to the hermit, who in turn teaches the principle to Billy through the telling of the tale:

It is God’s grace alone that we are bound by this thread of life. He held the priest’s hand in his own and he bade the priest look at their joined hands and he said see the likeness. The flesh is but a memento, yet it tells the true. Ultimately, everyman’s path is every other’s. There are no separate journeys for there are no separate men to take them. All men are one and there is no other tale to tell.

(*Crossing* 156-57)

The priest initially misunderstood, thinking the heretic was confessing and began to absolve him of his sins by blessing him with the sign of the cross, but the heretic did not want to be cornered by a religious convention. He stopped the priest’s arm midair and hissed, “Save yourself. Then he died” (157). As Wyschogrod reminds us, there are postmodern “saintly lives among the canonized and among those who neither sought nor found institutional sanction.” (Wyschogrod xxvii). In the heretic’s case, we have a saintly life in one who rejected institutional sanction, like Saint Anthony and the early Desert Fathers in their search for a purer form of their religion and unmediated encounters with divine epiphany and the sublime. The heretic’s *kenosis* and spiritual

and physical journey taught him the ecotheological principle of porous boundaries and interconnected beings.

Epiphany of Interconnectedness and Necessary Compassion

Billy's preliminary instruction on the interconnection of humankind and moral behavior toward the other comes from the hermit priest: "there is no man who is elect because there is no man who is not. To God every man is a heretic. The heretic's first act is to name his brother. So that he may step free of him" (*Crossing* 158). The heresy lies in drawing unnatural boundaries between one and another because boundaries spurn compassion for the other. Billy does not receive this same enlightenment as paradigm-altering and ethic-building epiphany until he realizes the cruelty of evicting a crippled dog from its roadside shelter in an act of "step[ping] free of him."

Now twenty years-old, after returning from his third crossing into Mexico to retrieve Boyd's bones, Billy has spent a summer drifting from one position as a ranch-hand to another. En route, Billy and his horse find shelter in the outbuilding of an abandoned gas station where he discovers a pile of hay compressed by something sleeping. As Billy makes his bed in this hay an old dog appears in the doorway. In McCarthy's closing symbolic gesture, this dog appears to be corporally interconnected: "it might have been patched up out of parts of dogs by demented vivisectionists" (423). Like the saint's body, this misshapen dog had seen its share of road abuse in the service of another as "it had perhaps once been a hunting dog" (424). However, in contrast to everything about hospitality and the law of the road he should have learned, when this fetid dog approaches its bed, Billy throws mud and rocks at it and threatens it with a pipe, sending it out again into the rain. The desert hospitality and affiliation that had been offered to Billy throughout his sojourn is notably withheld from this poor creature. The next morning, realizing

his transgression and wanting to repent of his inhospitable behavior, Billy calls after the dog, but the opportunity to serve and the physical form of his epiphany has eluded him so Billy sits in the road and weeps

Billy's continual crossings into the desert witness that he is seeking an epiphany of certain fashion. Jasper explains that physical desert pilgrimages produce epiphanies in physical form: the "sense of the mystical [is] not . . . a subjective, bodiless experience of the Divine, but [is] a physical encounter with the 'other' and a narrative which is recovered for us in text and word" (38). When that epiphany comes in a foul and misshapen form, Billy does not recognize it for what it is—the face of the Other that compels love and acts as a call to serve—thus he rejects it, unlike the beautiful, powerful, and mysterious wolf in which he saw the sacred with little effort. Yet in the interconnected world this ugly dog should be equally compelling. After the initial encounter, Billy recognizes that this patchwork dog is emblematic of all creation: this dog's blood would taste just like the mystical wolf's blood and his blood, this dog could be his cut throat domesticated dog, this dog could be his brother Boyd, and this dog could be Billy himself: homeless, orphaned, withered, and road weary. The figure of Billy sitting on the road weeping countermands the image of the stoic cowboy hero riding triumphantly off into the sunset; in this moment Billy sheds his self-reliance and accepts his affiliation with others. This is Billy's epiphany and final *kenosis* in *The Crossing*, the emptied precondition for further steps toward the sacred and sublime in the world as he realizes his ungracious treatment of a creature with whom, like all creatures, he has a deep connection. In the desert, like Neruda's narrator in the epigraph, Billy "found love. It was born in the sand" (Neruda 299). Billy realizes that "mankind was life that joined the intact light" and the rest of interconnected world, physical and spiritually eternal where "cemeteries were nothing / but turned soil, dissolved sticks / of broken

crosses over which / the sandy winds advanced” (299). Neruda’s abiding desert sands deny religious signification and the devoiced cemeteries recall McCarthy’s blind man’s words that ultimately everything is dust—words that surely, like his other desert experiences, facilitated Billy’s arrival at this turning point where Billy finds love via the material experience of the desert.

While the novel maintains its melancholy mood through this final scene, reading *The Crossing* as McCarthy’s ecotheological postmodern revision of the genre of the desert sublime, allows us to see that this novel closes with a message of hope. Billy’s weeping is symptomatic of his new found awareness of ecological interconnectedness and compassion as the ethical choice guiding moral behavior toward all sentient beings. In a fragile world of interconnected and interdependent beings, choosing love acknowledges the permeability of boundaries between creatures and sustains the ecological community.

Notes

1. Entering the desert on a saintly pilgrimage is not an exercise of gazing at the exotic Other and colonial views of landscape. Laurence Buell writes: “What the first European settlers of North America saw as primordial or ‘empty’ space, and what their descendants persist in thinking of as ‘wilderness,’ had been somebody’s else’s place since the first humans arrived millennia before—and much longer than that, if we allow nonhumans to count as ‘somebodies’” (67). Humans, animals, and plants live quite well in the desert. The pilgrim moves and acts throughout the desert, journeying and performing service; therefore, the body subject to the desert is the body in motion, utilizing energy with infrequent opportunities for replenishment in the desert.
2. I use “constructive postmodernism” as an alternative to “deconstructive postmodernism.” Coined by Jay McDaniel, “constructive postmodernism seeks to build upon the best of modern

ways of thinking and also move beyond its worst aspects” (22). In this fashion, postmodernism becomes constructive by deconstructing restrictive systems and paradigms and opening nontraditional connections.

3. Though conflicted about ranching, Billy constantly returns to cowboying to support himself. Phil Snyder points out that “only Billy, the trilogy survivor, displays enough flexibility and pragmatism to compromise rigid cowboy ideals” (200). Billy only expresses despair to Boyd while they are living the supposedly healing pastoral ideal of ranch hands in Mexico: “Talk to me.” Billy asks Boyd. “Go to bed. / I need for you to talk to me. / It’s okay. Everything’s okay. / No it aint. / You just worry about stuff. I’m all right. / I know you are said Billy. But I aint” (*Crossing* 330). Billy frequently leaves ranchland returning to the desert ecological zone where he seeks the desert sublime possibly as a cure for his emotional distress.

4. Reaching a zenith during and shortly after the two world wars that threatened American society, American readers clung to the hope and idealism of their supposed definitive frontier past. Democracy emanates from the frontier chaos via the cowboy hero, echoing Fredrick Jackson Turner’s thesis that the highest social values originate at the frontier by the virility of the American people. Cormac McCarthy’s Western novels utilize the standard Western pattern while they deconstruct and expose the myths of the Western and these post-western and anti-western revisions of the genre are frequently cited by McCarthy critics. Concerning the first of McCarthy’s Border Trilogy, *All the Pretty Horses*, Sarah Spurgeon explains that “McCarthy lovingly evokes that [Western] myth and at the same time strips away the layers of fantasy that make belief in it possible” (81). *All the Pretty Horses* documents the fallacies of pursuing pastoral idealism and the concluding volume of the Border Trilogy, *Cities of the Plain*, continues with Billy “in search of a balance between the demands of idealism and pressures of reality,”

(200) as explained by Phil Snyder. Snyder elaborates that “the most significant border McCarthy explores in the trilogy [is] the one that lies in the gap between the ideal and the real” (201).

While the Border Trilogy negotiates employing Western myths to debunk them, his first Western novel, *Blood Meridian*, also challenges its own genre by exploring the violent history of expansionism.

5. Many of these belief fragments have no voice save the narrator’s. For instance, in the beginning of the novel we see traces of animism: “As if the darkness had a soul itself that was the sun’s assassin hurrying to the west as once men did believe, as they may believe again” (*Crossing* 72-73).

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