“EVERY LEAST THING”: READING CORMAC MCCARTHY’S LITERARY ECOLOGIES FOR A PRACTICE OF THINKING ETHICS

by

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of
The University of Utah
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Education, Culture, and Society

The University of Utah

December 2015

The University of Utah Graduate School

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ABSTRACT

Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Crossing* presents an ecocentric cosmology that diverges radically from the traditional anthropocentric model, which centralizes the primacy of humans. McCarthy's vision of "joinery" reformats the place of humanity to a position of equality with "every least thing."

My focused reading of McCarthy's three novels from the Border Trilogy articulates the ramifications of this vision for a new ecological ontology, agency, and ethics. Specifically, I argue that the vision of "joinery" revises philosophies of ontology and agency to admit the force of animals and matter as co-constituting agents in a dynamically vibrant world. The attendant ethical vision from such a revised ontological and agential view centralizes the profound dilemmas inherent in so many relations.

My close reading of McCarthy's novels explicates his ecological vision of "joinery" as coherent with theoretical visions espoused in Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory and Jane Bennett's vibrant materialisms.

By weaving together an analysis of the trilogy with these frameworks, I advance a practice of reading that positions learners to think through the complexities of expansive human and non-human relations. This reading practice for thinking relational ethics ruptures many of the trends in education today that orient students in standardized and noncritical modes of learning. I argue, however, that the demands of an ecological age during a time of climate change and mass extinctions necessitates an education where students wrestle critically with the dilemmas of a world understood as interconnected.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The premise of this manuscript is that human life happens in a pattern of assemblages. Thinking in this way over this long project has meant that I realize my own life as indebted to the contributions of so many others, some I can name and others I cannot. This recognition of the ways my own living and thinking have been and continue to be supported means that I exist perpetually in a space of humility and gratitude, a good space for a teacher and writer to occupy.

Because thinking in assemblages grounds any individual work in a collective of varied contributors, the listing here on this acknowledgements page could be very long indeed. Yet on this page in a gesture of abbreviated but sincere thanks, I will formally recognize only the members of my committee. All the others will be acknowledged in different ways.

Frank Margonis has been a friend and an editor to me over these years. This is a tough mix to master, but he has always been both well. Clayton Pierce opened my mind to Bruno Latour and presented through the introduction a new way of making sense of the world. Harvey Kantor and Donna Deyhle emphasized through their teaching the first obligation to think of those hidden, oppressed, and marginalized. Stephen Tatum has been a constant support for me directly and through his scholarship. I treasure my conversations with him about McCarthy and the American West and theory and teaching.

CHAPTER 1

JOINERY: "EVERY LEAST THING"

The scene that expresses Cormac McCarthy's cosmology happens in the best of his three related western novels, *The Crossing*. After an event of doomed enterprise where a boy named Billy Parham tries but fails to save a wolf, the boy wanders out of a mountain range in Mexico that seems "depopulate and barren," a place seemingly void of all game and birds. From this setting he comes upon a different type of ruin in the form of a wrecked town, which, in its fallen condition, seems to slump "back into the mud from which it had been raised" (134, 137). The boy takes in the atmosphere of ruin:

> Most of the buildings still standing were at the farther end of the town and toward these he rode. He passed the wreckage of an ancient coach half crushed in the zaguan where the doors were fallen in. He passed a mud horno in a yard from within which the eyes of some animal watched and he passed the ruins of a huge adobe church whose roofbeams lay in the rubble. (C 137)

In the doorway at the rear of a church stands a man who later admits to being the sole human occupant of the town. The boy follows the man inside his modest room, a simple space of rudimentary provisions, including a table and chairs, a stove, an iron skillet, a kettle, a pair of cups and some saucers. Cats of every color and type lounge about. In a generous offer that McCarthy will recursively highlight as an act of ethical significance for its display of generosity, the man feeds the boy despite having little food to share.

While Billy eats, the man tells him a story of his life that highlights points of convergence, so that other lives are noted to intersect and alter the trajectory of his fate, and the force of his life too is seen to intersect with and alter other fates as well. The

narrative composes, then, in this parallax way so that an individual story situates within a larger, longer, and more expansive narrative, one that can be said to issue from human placement within a vast collective of diverse human and more-than-human lives and forms.[1] In fact in the man's telling he states, "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. And all in it is a tale and each tale the sum of all lesser tales and yet there also are the selfsame tale and contain as well all else within them" (C 143). In this enfolded, seamed, and complex way, the man's story meshes with the story of the collapsed town, with the lost or dispossessed people from the town, and with another man in particular, a heretic who stands out as an especially significant figure based on a series of encounters that draws his life into relation with the life of the man now living amongst so many ruins.

In the telling of his story through these enfolding layers of relationality, some presences are clear and indisputable. These might be understood as 'local' contacts in the sense of proximity or familiarity. Still other presences exert an influence that is substantial and yet withdrawn from any full exposure or knowledge. These might be 'global' contacts in terms of being seemingly distant or removed. Yet recognizing these 'global' others as intimate still, in that seemingly unrelated others exert a powerful influence through the crosshatch of connective relations, recalibrates the radius of responsibility and opens a new sense of expanded relevance. From this place and vantage, the decision of a politician plays as consequential even on lives far removed from seats of government. The influence of a single person, a stranger or a person met briefly in a random moment, can be immense. This is McCarthy's cosmological vision, where fragment stories that involve characters on the fringe interweave through main narrative lines from the basis of constantly converging energies.

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[1] David Abram coined the term "more-than-human-world" in his work *The Spell of the Sensuous*.

The forces that brought Billy to the man's door are not teleologically directed. The boy arrives rather according to the kind of chance that comes from cosmic forces working always to put bodies and forms in conditions of encounter and convergence. The man's way of telling his story through other stories reveals to Billy and, by extension, the reader an existential reality made in dense, complex, and crosscut relations. Even the boy becomes a part of the man's story by hearing it. In turn, the man becomes a part of Billy's experience by telling a tale to him, by inviting him inside, by feeding him. The reader holds the tale within as well. In ways then that are on-page and off, lives are experienced as crossed, fates as connected. Despite its complex nature, the message from the man resonates in Billy with a force of truth, as he is in Mexico from New Mexico exactly because of imbricated lines of fate that have linked his life in a most unexpected way to that of a wolf. In this, his own path has been made, at least in part, from the interventions of an outside body and from a nonhuman body at that.

The field of relations that has one life intersecting with other lives and has stories told through densities of interconnection presents existence as correspondent to narrative in that both are complex, seamed, and transposed in layers, like a palimpsest. This pattern of storytelling, which signifies McCarthy's narrative technique over three books, serves as a platform into existential understandings that revise a tradition of individuality, autonomy, and self-reliance. The seams in the story that bring to presence other outside entities as forceful construe a vision of existential space as a kind of latticework of interconnective threads. To read of lives in this formation is to detect in one site the encrypted presence of another site. It is to see in one body, the multiple presences of other bodies within and through. It is to read an event by tracing the multitudes of occurrence across time and space, so that a single moment enmeshes complexly within a longer trajectory of time and occurrence. Ultimately to read in this way is to assemble a collective of bodies, sites, events, and forms that may be just off-

page but still substantial to events on-page, in the way that all is nested. I will articulate in this project the needed capacity for an ecocentric vision and thinking practice from a way of teaching and engaging literature that aims to detect and understanding complicated relations where human lives are broadly entangled.

All of this is of course complex, and it will take some time to fully elucidate my vision. Yet, what is important at this stage is seeing the singular site within a sprawling crosshatch, where one space issues a vantage into another, with each space as types of 'shadow geographies' to use McCarthy's phrase. This project will read for these encrypted sites. It will read the body in conjunction with other bodies and forms. In fact, it will hold to the ecological principle that a body in isolation cannot exist at all. As such, there can be no tale of individual lives for individual life cannot exist.

Readers familiar with McCarthy's works may argue that reading his novels presents a tough enough challenge given their complexity. Why read then in a way that demands attention even to that which is not explicitly present within scene? In other words, why complicate the complex text through ways of reading that would assemble the presence of hidden collectives? My simple answer at this stage is that reading to see interconnective relations across the page so as to detect the diversity and complexity of relations in real life produces a sense in the reader of the ecological collective, and this formation of joined bodies and forms issues an imperative toward thinking ethics from the basis of constant interrelations. This focus puts engagement with literature in both an ecocentric and an ethical frame, so that learners are thinking of the more-than-human world and wrestling actively with questions of deep ethical relevance for life scenes that transpire like text scenes in moments of convergent relation. In a noteworthy essay that I will explicate more fully at a later point in this chapter, an essay entitled "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam," Bruno Latour argues that the real task of the critic is not to debunk, but to assemble. To assemble the collective in the place of the

individual or singular is to move from an emphasis on “matters of fact” to “matters of concern,” which connotes more than a mere cognitive transition but also an affective one.

The imperative to articulate the collective, which is to seek and see some of the many hidden beings and forms that have been hidden from a tradition that overlooks, stems principally and most urgently from contemporary ecological dilemmas that play out today on such massive scales. To understand these issues at all requires a capacity to think in opposition to the traditional framings of knowledge, which come through tidy disciplines or fields and through circumvented lines of relevance or concern. This is to say that ecological dilemmas today present as complex imbroglios where “social” and “natural” elements or “cultural” and “environmental” domains thread thoroughly, indelibly together. Poverty as a social issue, for example, is indelibly linked with extinctions in the natural realm. Humans very often must do work that requires by result or design the eradication of plants and animals and habitats or both. Pollution of the environment forces migrations of human populations or develops illnesses within these populations. Destabilizing humans in space can cause strained relations, political turmoil, even violence. Indeed violence accelerates from scarcities of resource or from inequities of distribution.

So all of these general examples show the way that tidy designations fail to contain issues of ecological scope. Reading practices must strive to capture and uncover these over-spilling formations if reading literature is meant to in some way impart an understanding of realities that are complex and expansive. Yet as I will explain throughout this project, learners (and I use both teachers and students in this term) who have been educated according to binaries, borders, and bifurcations are poorly trained to think outside divided domains and lines and disciplines. Very often learners fail to detect the convergence of issues. They miss the level of concern needed for dilemmas of

mounting scale and increasing urgency. Without the capacity to see how such realities in the collective are interconnected efforts to address them fail, and students in classrooms miss a most crucial opportunity.

As an intervention, therefore, my project will use Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy as a literary lens to rethink a tradition of divides. My articulations will bounce from text to theory to real life in the unbound movement that I find necessary to make living sense of what is encountered on the literary page. I will claim that this pattern of thinking from the basis of text is a model of engagement that reinvigorates literary studies for the cognitive and affective dimensions that emerge toward seeing the collective of beings and forms as a vast assemblage. From this view, I will argue that thinking branches outward to make connections of what are inherently connected realities. I will argue that affective investments deepen from a sense of collapsed distance, meaning that what is read is not just book knowledge but is instead a way for thinking about text to life translations that can make sense of living in convergent space and with a whole rowdy host of other lives and forms and entities.

To show how the man in ruins comes to ultimately leave the tradition of divides behind for a new cosmological vision, we must return to the collapsed church. In his tale to Billy, the man notes that he was once a priest within the church. In fact, the man recounts the trajectory of his belief subscriptions in the following way: "In Utah. I was a Mormon. Then I converted to the church. Then I became I don't know what. Then I became me" (C 140). These avowals and disavowals are important because the man's story will ultimately be one of leaving a tradition of belief behind. This Judeo-Christian, Western tradition privileges borders. In the church the reader sees clearly a reasoning framework that has some as chosen and others as condemned, has forces of 'good' working against forces of 'evil.' In fact, the terms 'priest' and 'heretic' stand as indexes on a history of binary orientations. Importantly in ruins, where borders of belief are

collapsed like so many toppled physical structures, the two beings come to encounter each other through an extended interaction that unsettles the secure placement of either referential label. The scene of collapse allows a confrontation not merely with two figures who represent the binary ideals of Christianity but a confrontation with a larger trajectory of belief that is typically Western in orientation and outlook.

In his work *What Is Posthumanism,* Cary Wolfe notes that so much Western genealogy of thought depends upon borders to split the world in disparate realms. Wolfe underscores the mind/body split that defines Cartesian philosophy. He notes too that Kantian philosophy depicts humans as "reasonable" then places all nonhumans on an opposing end, so that they define as unreasonable, irrational, merely instinctual. Wolfe notes additionally that dominant strands of sociology segregate humans as rights-yielding, property-owning beings. Latour's scholarship in the same way inventories Western tradition as operational from a system of bifurcations. The inhered divides of the "modern constitution" according to Latour segregate humans from animals, life from matter, and culture from nature. The world comes through as split in a formation of dualities.

As unsophisticated as such binaries may be they do present as a normative way of thinking. George W. Bush relied on a binary view of the world, for example, to justify war. In a display of the ubiquity of this kind of mental orientation, Bush stood on the White House lawn after 9-11 to announce that America would defeat the "evil-doers." During the press conference, he proclaimed, "I said a long time ago that our objective was to smoke 'em out and get 'em running and bring 'em to justice." His comments, of course, captured nothing of the complexity of the situation or of the identities involved in an event. In fact, the identities of "evil-doers" like the identities of "terrorists" and "aliens" and "combatants" are wholly effaced in such language. This is an example of not only the philosophies embedded in words but of the way that language can be deployed

to distort reality, even as it is meant to represent it. Part of the appeal in deploying dualisms lies in the way that these terms do not strive for accuracy as much as an appeal achieved from the reinforcement of a simplified, popular rendition of the world. To talk in binary terms is to talk in a common language. Binaries are at the very core of the conventional Western. These narratives stereotypically call for a hero in white to defeat a villain in black. Such a trope relies on the established distance of "us" and "them" polarizations to draw readers and viewers into scene. It is important in my project to underscore the ubiquity of this outlook as an ascendant orientation, so much so that a cowboy president relied on its traction to move a people toward war.[2]

McCarthy's portrayal of the collapsed church means to illustrate the thorough crossing of the long entrenched borders that run down the world, splitting it in two domains. Aside from the physical ruin of the church, McCarthy depicts an even more insidious wreckage in the form of ethical failures within the church, a site that is paradoxically meant to foster compassion and goodness of course. As the man in ruins recounts the story of meeting the heretic, his story fleshes out the failures of this ascendant tradition. Readers come to realize that the man known as a "heretic" has lost his family, home, and faith in the earthquake. After, he wanders aimlessly. His abject presence is itself a summons for compassion and empathy, as his condition personifies vulnerability. On the road, without a home, he ruminates on questions of human meaning. He tries to account for agency in the world. He decides that "every act soon elude[s] the grasp of its propagator to be swept away in a clamorous tide of unforeseen

[2] Stephen White in his essay "Weak Ontologies" considers the example of George W. Bush after 9/11 when he began to reference "evil." White writes, "It was evident that he felt he had found a word of great significance. Going on the basis of his demeanor and subsequent actions, it seems as though that word simultaneously exuded both a sublime power to steel the will and a deeply comforting balm. The unambiguous naming of evil helped Bush to radically simplify the world, to galvanize his righteousness, to draw a shining boundary between us and evil, and, finally, to clear his conscience of doubts. This continual interplay of words and theistic ontology creates a frame for action in which others who disagree are rapidly transformed into obstacles and enemies" (17).

consequence" (C 147). And so, years pass. Later, the man enters into the fallen church to take up residence under what is called "the dome of the ruinous church," a description that insinuates much more than physical collapse (C 156). Of course, his presence is unwanted by the architects of such an exclusive domain, for its legitimacy depends on the purity of its facade.

Through extended confrontations with the priest of the church, who is the same man who later feeds Billy and lives amongst the collapse, the reader detects that the failure that prevents an ethical exchange happens from the priest's orientation and outlook. It happens, ironically, not from a lapse in faith, but exactly from a rigid orthodoxy. This is to say that the heretic is seen as someone to be converted before he can be accepted and admitted. In this way, the reader is presented with a portrait of an ethical tradition that parses belonging and acceptance for some at the disavowal of so many others. In this portrayal, then, readers find a view of an ethical tradition that assigns value provisionally, exclusively. Yet from the aperture of the church's ruin after the quake, the sustainability of this ethical outlook becomes a point of critical evaluation. How ethical can a religious tradition be that extends belonging from such narrow parameters, in a radius that points back in a narcissistic bend to inclusions of those most identical to self?[3]

It plays as no small irony that the heretic interacts with the priest from a place of sincerity and regard that far eclipses the priest's own capacity. The heretic lacks any belief structure that would prohibit sympathetic identifications. For example, when the heretic encounters the priest, he engages him by taking his hands and holding them in his own and sharing, as a kind of communion, the story of his life. "He held the priest's

[3] Lionel Trilling remarked on the tyrannical conscience from assumed moral superiority: "We must be aware of the dangers which lie in our most generous wishes. Some paradox of our nature leads us when once we have made our fellow men the objects of our enlightened interest, to go on to make them the objects of our pity, then of our wisdom, ultimately of our coercion" (*The Liberal Imagination 221*).

hand in his own and bade the priest look at their joined hands and said see the likeness. The flesh is but a memento, yet it tells the true. Ultimately every man's path is every other's" (C 156). This hand-on-hand gesture, a web of flesh, communicates what will be a thematic concept of interrelation as a principle that is central to McCarthy's cosmological vision. This hand-on-hand gesture becomes an important symbolic refrain throughout the course of the books as it presents not only an image of an ethical view more profound than divides, but also an image that is foil to the priest's conception of oppositional divides, a view that is complementary of course to the long Western lineage of binaries. The description of interaction between priest and heretic in the ruins of the church operates however as context for the need to move beyond such limiting ethical visions.

When the man in ruins identifies as a renounced cleric, when he presents himself as "just a man" outside two former superstructures of faith, he develops as alternative cosmology that incorporates the lessons from his encounter with the heretic. The new cosmology is called "joinery." In the central scene from the three books, he tells Billy of this new vision by proclaiming:

> So everything is necessary. Every least thing. This is the hard lesson. Nothing can be dispensed with. Nothing despised. Because the seams are hid from us, you see. The joinery. The way in which the world is made. We have no way to know what could be taken away. What omitted. We have no way to tell what might stand and what might fall. (C 143)

It is a compellingly beautiful passage, but it works as I have argued already with a fictional force against so many traditional tenets. If, as the man suggests, "everything is necessary" because all is seamed together, including the "least things" of the world, then hierarchies of rank collapse, like walls in a quake. If the way of the world is seamed, so that threadlines interlace as to make boundaries and distinctions blurry, that is, leaving us guessing as to what may stand or what may fall, then erecting, maintaining, and reinforcing borders that in their form connote certainty and fixity, that privilege some

but dismiss so many others from belonging and even from view, becomes an exercise in delusion. Against the bulk of so much history and tradition, joinery reformulates the world outside borderlines. It presents an ecologically composed view of existence that is fundamentally different from the anthropocentric paradigm that animates Judeo-Christianity and Western humanism.

Throughout this project I will claim that McCarthy's fiction is ethically provocative in ways that not only call to question a lineage of belief but that make future reformations of thought a critical point of address from a practice of reading. Such a claim might strike those who are familiar with McCarthy's works as strange, as his novels are known to be violent and grim. Yet, it is exactly through portrayals of violence or cruelty or oppression that the reader is positioned to reevaluate paradigms of normative relation. His works are not then antithetical to an ethical reading because they show in their depictions the failures of still operative relational paradigms; rather they are ethically insightful because the portrayal of western history requires this sustained and difficult engagement with realities of relation that unsettle the settled and comfortable outlooks and orientations that run under such damaging ways of existence.

By placing the reader through characters within complex relational constellations a view opens to the dynamisms of exchange and actions. McCarthy's narratives direct attention at points of relational convergence, where beings and forms are brought to friction, where lives are seen to intersect, and where ideologies of individualism collapse.[4] The scene of failed congress, for example, between the priest and the heretic illuminates ethical foreclosures that come through ascendant philosophical traditions

[4] Dana Phillips in "History and the Ugly Facts of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*" argues that McCarthy readers tend to formulate in Southern or Western camps. Those who read McCarthy as a Southern writer tend, in Phillips view, to want to find "something redemptive or regenerative" in his works. Yet, the violence in McCarthy is just that, "it is not a sign or a symbol of something else." For the Western camp, Phillips notes a tendency to see McCarthy's career in a trajectory toward "wider relevance and a broader worldview" through an examination of Western culture and philosophy.

when beings on opposing ends of a binary meet. From the vantage of a cosmology of joinery, the accent falls on bodies and forms in co-constituting moments of encounter and contact, so that singular will, as an agential force, becomes instead composite. From this place of joined force, ethics are strained to account for expanded levels of responsibility. These views at a different ontology, agency, and ethics initiate a tension in the reader because the borders that mean to hold one body from another, the borders that have organized philosophies of belief and policy, do not in fact function in the way they have been characterized to function.

To return to the question of ethics in literary reading, there is a key distinction to be made between morality or moralization and ethics. In my project, ethics happen most difficultly, that is from a register of active, reflexive thinking concerning that which is most just in the most expansive dimensions. While McCarthy is not, as I have said, a moralizing writer in the sense of telling readers what to think, his fiction is ethically provocative because it regularly initiates questions that interrogate tradition, question authority, and reappraise standard or default moral codes. By recounting failed paradigms of relation in the Border Trilogy and in the work *Blood Meridian* and in the later novel *The Road*, McCarthy's technique opens the reader to new ways of thinking and new modes of perception and even potentially to new modes of existence.

In this way, I want to underscore that an ethical reading slanted in the direction of implicative questions from both historical records and from present-day realities is profoundly pedagogical. It will be my claim in this project that McCarthy's scenes of discord, resistance, violence, and even his scenes of compassion, empathy, and generosity, emerge to sponsor a worldview that centralizes the complexity of ethical questions when beings and forms exist in states of constant contact and interrelation. Seeing the dimensions of meaning inhered in McCarthy's cosmological vision, a profound cosmology meted for this time, amounts to a radical revision of nearly tacit

presumptions about human place and human responsibility. I submit that the kinds of provocations uncovered in literature from a reading angle on relations in a more-than-human world are pedagogically crucial for pushing learners (again both students and teachers) out of positions of comfort and certainty. So, while McCarthy's writings invite this kind of interpretative focus for the reasons I have expressed, I will advance more generally a way of reading the page to detect the collective so that readers think from the standpoint of this formation for a most just ethics.

The former cleric underscores the affective dimensions of joinery when he tells Billy that the world that was composed through borders and understood in binaries allowed for the construction of clear and worthy adversaries. This organizational schema made living easier by orienting thinking away from expansive entanglements and thus limited ethical engagements. The man in ruins tells Billy of the motivation in constructing borders on land and in the mind:

> 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 must extend our claims until we lose all definition. Until we must be swallowed up at last by the very void to which we wished to stand opposed. (C 153)

The former cleric's statement explicates the difficulty of joinery as a vision that refutes binaries by highlighting the comfort imparted from an outlook that relied on binaries. Where binaries allowed distance, joinery prohibits it. Joinery means feeling, at times, "swallowed up" by the demands inhered in a philosophy that has everything as necessary, every least thing. The bordered outlook allowed for an affective disassociation. When the former priest steps out of a bifurcated structure of belief, he steps out of a framework that has allowed, even fostered distance.

Reading from a lens that propels thinking through joinery promises then to immerse students within complex densities, so that there are no escapes or reprieves. There are not, as I will elucidate throughout this manuscript, zones of "nature" as

wilderness sanctuaries where humans can escape the complications of the social. There are not "social" spaces absent "nature." The human body holds an encrypted wilderness of nonhuman action. Simple acts no longer seem simple. Decisions must be deliberated with a caution that honors more than the individual life. The collective that is impinged in a single move must register as consequential. This has values and ways of perception in need of reevaluation. A sense of responsibility swells now as consequences are known to overspill the boundaries of any tidy containment in any individual life. From the force of all of this, there is the melancholia of more complex decisions, more constrained freedoms.

Yet if joinery is an accurate spatial metaphor for the dynamics of existential life, and if ecological problems do reveal the porosity of borders, then thinking in ways that foster disassociation, in ways that inculcate against a "swallowed up" sense, sustain ways of thought and emotion and deed that are themselves unsustainable. This is to say that something about the time and about the realization of interconnection as a life physics demands melancholia in us all, and this is not to be feared. More frightening would be the absence of any affect tuned to the times, as if we faced the problems of modernity but did nothing to change and felt no need. In an age of human caused climate change and pollution and extinction, we need to feel the force of the problems inherent to ascendant ways of living. And where are the spaces that might allow for these issues to be sincerely discussed? The classroom is one of the only remaining public spaces not yet foreclosed to articulations of this kind.

I wish to show at this point that the way of thinking interconnectively about relations opens difficult questions concerning justice. I want to emphasize that leaving a bordered outlook means entering into a world of collisional fates, massed lines of agency, and new ethical demands. It is my view, as I have stated already, that this is a far more complex world than the one decreed through neat binaries and bifurcations. To follow

McCarthy's lead, readers of the trilogy visit the space of the church as a critical site to witness the high order of so much tradition. Yet this tradition reveals vast gaps of ethical inclusion. Masses of beings and bodies and forms and entities are not contained in a sufficiently significant place. In the first book of the Bible, for example, where God is said to make each thing in a separate move, where after making the fish and the fowl and the whales and "every living creature that moveth," God is said to make man, and man is said to "have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth," we find incoherence. This framework of belief segregates humans from other creatures and instructs humans to exercise dominance over creatures when dominance is incompatible with ethics. Yet this arrangement where humans sit atop a hierarchy and exercise supremacy characterizes predominant ontological views in the West that have all living things assembled vertically, in an order of rank according to perceptions of value. Later I will examine the Renaissance idea of the Great Chain of Being as a model of this ontological vision.[5] Thinking of ontology, however, in this vertical way arranges the human body in an oppositional way to other bodies and forms. In fact, in the work *Sustaining Affirmations*, Stephen White notes that "ontological commitments" are indelibly "entangled with questions of identity and history, with how we articulate the meaning of our lives, both individually and collectively" (3). White's insight reveals that any ontological vision that places the self also arranges in an inevitable fashion the placement of many others. In this way, ontology cannot help but be associated with ethics.

The conception that humans have dominion over "every thing that moveth" comes through in a time of mass species extinctions as most nefarious. It is a belief that

[5] Arthur O. Lovejoy's work, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*, studies the transformations of this idea through various incarnations including Plato, Aristotle, Shakespeare, and the Bible.

sponsors ruinous relational stances. This is a position I will substantiate more later in this chapter when looking at Matthew Scully's work *Dominion*. Yet in the way that things are interconnected, dominion also violates human life to the extent that it dissolves and occludes perceptions of responsibility between humans and animals, so that animals can be violated and ecologies harmed without the perception that these actions and ways impact human survivability. That humans situate and rely on the same ecologies as animals implies the way that violence directed in a seemingly outward splay can turn destruction inward. In the essay "Human, All Too Human," Carey Wolfe argues compellingly that "violence against the animal is ethically permissible" exactly because of the assumption of human primacy (567).[6] His view has the vertical framework of so much tradition, even moral tradition, perpetuating violence from distortive certainties concerning ontological primacy.

McCarthy's collapsed church and the failed capacity for ethics within and through that church mark a similar point of critique against so much inherited belief. Latour notes in an important statement from his essay "Some Experiments in Art and Politics" that no representation of humans as separate from the vast support systems that sustain human existence makes any sense today (3). On a round planet, the view of human place must alter to emphasize the ways that human life depends on so many animals, elements, and entities. From this altered vision, there might be correspondent reforms in ethical ides. The needed revisions would not just sustain human life but also honor life forms as inherently and intrinsically valuable. The connection between ontology and ethical significance holds then important ramifications for understanding extractive economies as grounded through belief systems. The belief that nature can be polluted without any consequence for the city or the suburb gets sustained from outlooks

[6] Wesley J. Smith argues that attention to animal existence or environment is antihumanist; see *A Rat Is a Pig Is a Dog Is a Boy: The Human Cost of the Animal Rights Movement*.

dependent on dualisms. Extractive economies and corporatism rely, for example, on a perception of splintered relations between people, between humans and animals, between humans and material entities to thrive.

Yet realities that emerge from the phenomenon of climate change have human health suddenly jeopardized by toxicities of air, water, and even food, have national borders upended in problems of global inequalities and displacements, have the shape of reality today at odds with tradition. In this way, rising sea levels as a sample issue of ecological significance not only threaten coastal cities but also revoke a view of the world made for human dominion. In fact this revocation may be why so many deny the reality of climate change. The denial may attest not to the skepticism of scientific evidence as much as the threat the irrefutable evidence presents to superstructures of belief that may collapse or must at least be reformed if the view of a warming planet holds. Clive Hamilton's essay "Why We Resist the Truth About Climate Change" argues that the endemic resistance to global warming in the U.S. "can be understood as a last-ditch attempt to re-impose the Enlightenment's allocation of humans and Nature to two distinct realms, as if the purification of climate science could render Nature once again natural, as if taking politics out of science can take humans out of Nature" (15). I will argue that the interconnective outlooks that come through global economic paradigms, through climate change, through species extinctions, unequivocally refute bordered ways of thinking and demand new approaches that must be cultivated for sustainability through more just relations, including relations between humans and nonhumans.

Joinery presents a more complex account of living co-existentially for a more rigorous thinking approach toward densities of relation and what these densities entail for ethical responsibility. This advance marks a potentially more sustainable orientation given its emphasis on justice expansively defined. My project will present joinery and other theoretical articulations that emerge today in the context of intertwined social and

natural issues as provocations for a revitalized practice of thinking that reformats understandings of human place as relationally composed and dependent. I will argue that to think in terms of joinery is to dive into the deep end of ethical complexities. For example, my project will explore how the conceits of freedom and individualism, conceits so prized in the West and in the Western genre particularly, leverage from a tradition of belief that composes the world according to simplistic divides. A world subdivided must parse ethics. Subdivided formations tend to celebrate freedom from the remove that is provided by borders and binaries so that difficult entanglements can be avoided through a distancing outlook. Yet joinery asserts that nonvolitional entanglements are existentially constant, which is to say that humans exist every moment within relationally dense constellations that they do not design, choose, or control. The emphasis on individualism and self-reliance narrows the perception of relations and forecloses a sense of obligation or responsibility by imagining the self as unitary and ruggedly alone. It will be my position that joinery's revocation of borders inducts the reader into a world of increasing complexity, a world that demands greater cognitive and affective energies. In a world from the literary word, the self presents as joined with other bodies through actions that translate widely across a field animated by a physics of convergence.

This different cosmology presents not only a confrontation with dominant Western anthropocentrism but with the future that comes through continuations of this philosophical lineage. In this way, as I note in Chapter 5, I see McCarthy's catalogue of literary works moving in a trajectory where the paradigms of the American West gets replicated to a point of desolation, like that depicted in *The Road*. My reading of McCarthy in this way departs from critics such as Diane Luce who argue that the trilogy presents an elegiac portrait of the vanishing cowboy and his world ("The Vanishing World of Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy"). This vision according to some critics has

McCarthy wistful and nostalgic for a simpler, lost time, for, say, the black and white rendition from a cowboy gloss on a complex world. I diverge from this view of wistful longing to concur with the position of Stephen Tatum, a McCarthy scholar, who argues instead in his essay "Topographies of Transition" that the disorienting effect of McCarthy's texts on the reader comes from a depiction of "exchanges and comminglings of bodies and things" that are "destabilizing" and "…disruptive of myths of human control through reason's compass…" (315).

According to my reading, McCarthy depicts the West largely to interrogate its record of ruinous relations and show same philosophies emergent in contemporary times and contexts where ecological problems amass on such scales and to such degrees of severity that even popular thought turns routinely speculative on the odds of long-term human survival. In my view, the American West serves as an important stage for illustrating relations that cannot be sustained. Ruin runs rampant beyond physical structures, like the collapsed church, to landscapes in the American Southwest that have been thoroughly evacuated of native flora and fauna for the economically styled remake of rangeland. Of course to pick this record up in the contemporary time is to see, as James Lovelock portrays, a planet in pathological condition. In *The Revenge of Gaia*, Lovelock notes with accuracy the severity of environmental issues. Yet his articulation of revenge, a kind of "humans will get what they deserve" outlook, seems problematic to me for the way that this view of earth and human in duality reinforces the binary of old, which should instead be the focus of any corrective vision. To see humans as only spoilers is to slide too easily into potential degradations of human life.

In *Politics of Nature*, Latour argues that Western culture has always consumed nature as an ideology.[7] He might see Lovelock's position in defense of "nature" as oddly

[7] Latour argues that Western culture can learn much from cultures that do not pit nature and culture in opposition. In leaving nature behind, Latour notes, we still retain the valuable

enough conforming to a belief structure that allows humans to position themselves beyond the natural. I make this assertion from an extension of Latour's arguments that have him politicizing nature or environment to show how the term is really an imbroglio of culture and humanity as well. This approach forces the extrication of humans from any framework that treats nature with either the reverence or exploitation reserved for an encounter with the exotic (43). In *Ecology Without Nature*, Timothy Morton argues that ecology gets experienced as dark when human life and culture are found to be inextricably natural. Morton writes that "dark ecology" stems from an arc of thought that has humans settling in a view that they will save the world only to find that they implicated in its destruction and that its destruction is their own end. This experience of implication is necessary, then, in my view to affectively register the ramifications of interconnection as an ecological principle to dimensions of personal life. To talk of the falsity of borders and the need to dismantle means that at least on one level the borders that have kept 'here' from 'there' and 'us' from 'them' and 'humans' from 'nature' dissolve. Complexity ensues.

This inevitable belonging of the human to the earth may somehow be an even more difficult certainty than the idea of apocalypse. In Chapter 3, for example, I will show how the idea of human belonging propels a portrayal of human death as a material, corporeal rejoining of plant, soil, and microorganism. Bodily ruin like structural ruin ruptures the notion of purified domains. In ruins bodies of humans and animals, along with the detritus of matter and waste, cohere to produce a scene of heterogeneous actors assembled. When Billy enters into the collapsed town, for example, he sees in the evidence of disarray animals and humans living together, without walls. It is a strange sight. He sees overturned or unused objects reused or remade by critters looking for

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elements: "the multiplicity of nonhumans" and the "enigma of their associations{s}" (*Politics of Nature* 41).

dwelling. We read that Billy "passed the wreckage of an ancient coach half crushed in the zaguan where the doors were fallen in. He passed a mud horno in a yard from within which the eyes of some animal watched and he passed the ruins of a huge adobe church whose roofbeams lay in the rubble." This aperture of ruin is a way of noting that the purities of order that would keep human settings clear of animals and keep objects under human control fail.

Ruins present, then, a view that might alter existent ways of belief by sponsoring an alternative vantage. The temple, as I have noted, initially represents a site imagined to be beyond any tainting influence. Base, low, elemental entities like dust, mold, insects, and animals are barred from entry. It is often a professed achievement of spirituality to exist unmindful of such "least things." An architectural staging of a church will very often compel vision upward, toward some otherworldly realm or upward to signify some transcendent state. The church in *The Crossing*, however, is thoroughly and unsacramentally grounded, in dirt and dust and creaturely presence. In its collapsed form, it presents an image through contradiction of infiltrated, infested space, which is inherently ecological space.

It is not that the presence of materialities or animals or weeds or mold or even nonbelievers is less *real* in states of highly-maintained order, but that they are cloaked from view by beliefs maintained in purified domains and by the attendant practices that obscure subterranean, elemental, and nonhuman presences. It is in states of ruin that these unruly things emerge vividly. When animals borrow or birds nest in corners or dust and detritus accumulate, when trees grow from concrete cracks and weeds root in the gaps of structural seams, when water seeps into rooms that were never suddenly revealed as airtight or pure, when these things happen, and it must be admitted that they happen all the time outside human maintenance, then a vision of the enormous efforts needed to sustain a purified, human-only rendition of the world come through. All of

this connects to a principal thesis in my project. I want to suggest that ruins present a portal to the collective, that this vantage will be valuable in thinking through a more just relationality.

It is a conceit of the Western genre that the cowboy very often gets depicted in pristine space or within a compromised space that must then be made pristine by eradicating the unruly and unwanted.[8] In McCarthy's trilogy, however, cowboys not only occupy collapsed structures as we have seen, but they occupy lands made barren through deliberate campaigns to make unwanted plants, birds, animals, and even some humans extinct. Instead of a depiction that validates conquest in the form of 'new' land or land that is void of settlement and ready for the taking, McCarthy's reader is directed to social and natural settings that have been destroyed in a manner that makes nature and culture conjunctive, intertwined, and composite. Inscriptions of social history emerge, for example, in records of land and plant and rock and materiality. Very often they emerge in the form of ruins, bones, broken objects, and abandoned dwellings: kinds of fragments found construed together in scenes of ruin. Such displays register the scene of the American West as an ancient site, a place of long history beyond the presence of a gun-slinging cowboy. McCarthy gets at this timespan in the first book of the trilogy, *All the Pretty Horses*. The "westernmost section" of John Grady Cole's grandfather's ranch is said to cut across an "old Comanche road" (5). Riding at the chosen time, "when the shadows were long and the ancient road was shaped before him in the rose and canted light like a dream of the past," Cole encounters shadow presences from a history that precedes him.

> When the wind was in the north you could hear them, the horses and the breath of the horses and the horses hooves that were shod in rawhide and

[8] Jane Tompkins notes in *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* that Western novels generally, and in the particular case of Louis L'Amour, centralize the human as hero. Tompkins writes, "The hero's passage across the landscape has ultimately a domesticating effect. Though it begins in anxious movement and passes through terror and pain, it continually ends in repose. A welcoming grove of aspens, a spring, and a patch of grass provide shelter and sustenance" (71).

> the rattle of lances and the constant drag of the travois poles in the sand like the passing of some enormous serpent and the young boys naked on wild horses jaunty as circus riders and hazing wild horses before them and the dogs trotting with their tongues aloll and footslaves following half naked and sorely burdened and above all the low chant of their traveling song which the riders sang as they rode, nation and ghost of nation passing in a soft chorale across that mineral waste to darkness bearing lost to all history and all remembrance like a grail the sum of their secular and transitory and violent lives. (APH 301)

This portrayal positions even a lone cowboy squarely within a collective. Cole is not alone. He is instead squarely in the midst of a 'dark ecology,' in the sense of undesired intimacies with ghostly presences from a haunted past, one that is both beyond his time and one that he is implicated securely within. To bring forward these presences from this past, McCarthy's breaks the rules of conventional time and perhaps even of storytelling to show the ghosted others still evident despite all the attempts to remove and wash them from view.

The above passage showcases the narrative optic that I will explicate in this project as an ecological lens. This lens assists an ecocentric practice of reading for a way of thinking that frames in parallax the single being or thing against a vision too of the collective. The collective is of course the mass assemblage bodies and forms in postures of interrelation. Much of interpretative focus has removed the human from these enmeshing contexts so that humans come through as alone, apart. Yet an ecological lens that shows the single body or object or animal within the collective so that beingness and action frame expansively changes the thinking focus of readers. It qualifies an account of goodness for an individual with a question of ramification on others. In ecology a thing alone must always be framed within a vision of the broader joinery. So the lens highlights a physics of unions and aggregations, competitions and resistances. It emphasizes especially ethics and the kinds of questions that emerge in the wake of these convergences. McCarthy's technique of enmeshing human bodies with nonhuman animal bodies, with objects, and within vast material frames of wind and sun and plant

and mineral reveal the human-animal-object assemblages that are always real formations, whether on-page or off, but that haven't received sufficient critical attention. These constellations of being and matter evoke profound consideration to the ways that humans exist conjunctively. In some ways "joinery" is ordinary, a commonplace insight, for we admit quite readily the influence of family and friends on our lives, seeing the way our own fates are tied to these 'local' others. On another level, however, joinery presents a challenging view to the ways that human life is always happening from conjoint relations, even with 'global' or distant or unfamiliar others that now must be seen.

In *Risk Society*, Ulrich Beck infers that ruins propel a sense of connection. Beck notes that contemporary risks transact today on such extreme scales that they radiate across all the dividing lines that were meant to contain or channel their flows. Where bordered views propagated a sense of curtailed consequence, risks spread now expansively. This is certainly evident in the risk from climate change. Yet it is also shown socially in the example of predatory loan practices by too-big-to-fail banks, institutions that trapped would-be homeowners into loan repayments that they could never repay. In housing bubbles, the bankruptcy of one family or one community radiates within larger market arenas so that a housing crisis may spur a bank crisis which may result in a full-blown recession.[9] To see radiant consequences in this way is to see one community within a state economy within a federal economy within an international framework. According to an ecological parallax, then, global economies connect through local sites even as consumer choices construct global markets. A consumer dictates factory conditions. A politician makes a vote that decides a worker's

[9] In the book *The End of Normal*, James Galbraith presents a lucid indictment of an economic system built along the philosophical lines of unending growth. Galbraith argues that the rising costs of resources, the futility of military power, the effects of the digital revolution, and the abandonment of ethics in the financial sector will translate to increasing destabilizations. Galbraith concludes that "We have become very large, very complex, very efficient——and therefore we have become very fragile" (238).

wage. An insurance executive determines the care a patient will receive by deciding the extent of funding for his treatment.[10]

This interwoven composition where one event propels other events reveals an existential fabric made to an ecological pattern. The ruptured well of the BP oil spill of 2010, for example, discharged oil into the ocean over 87 continuous days. Yet in another measure, the spill has not yet ended, even now these years later. Besides the fact that some researchers claim that oil is still leaking from the submerged well, the effects of the spill are undoubtedly still in occurrence. An event on this scale challenges any neat way of keeping time or tallying loss, to recall Beck's insights about the nature of risk today. Such scales challenge the wish for a clear, singular culprit. Eleven human lives were lost on the day when the rig exploded, but the dying of flora and fauna, fish and birds, oceanic plants, and nutrient systems continues. How far forward can this dying extend? Ecological consequences commonly spread in submerged, subterranean, elemental, and occluded zones, like under ocean floors, so that confrontations with such questions of reach make for difficult ways of detection. Corporations take advantage of these difficulties. However, at the same time that interconnective channels can be occluded impacts splay out in a formation that shows connectivities. Impacts disrupt life forms and entities that may have gone overlooked before they became damaged, broken, endangered. Coral reefs, for example, emerge as essential when they are in a state of decline that propels other concussive deaths. The tally of an oil spill becomes then both an unknown calculation and a figure of a certain too great an expense.

Joinery links strangers across time and space so that economies of personal finance intersect with global structures. This creates, as Galbraith noted, an economic sense of both complexity and fragility. In this sense of vulnerability, people become

[10] Often the language to depict this mass unraveling was the language of dominoes falling. See *The New York Times* 2008 article "Bush's Philosophy Stoked the Mortgage Bonfire" by Jo Becker, Sheryl Gay Stolberg, and Stephen Labaton.

aware that the pattern that works inwardly on the fate of the worker or the family is a pattern that works outwardly as well, so that one being impinges and is impinged simultaneously. Just as a family looking to buy a home becomes a potential externality to fraudulent banking practices, this family too exerts a force on vast other lives. They do this in every move, from the small to the big.

A mode of reading toward comprehension of these types of interconnection frames ecology as "dark" indeed, to recall Morton, because the emphasis moves from being environmentally conscious in the sense of, say, recycling paper or aluminum to being environmentally-and-socially conscious by understanding the range of beings connected to and through even routine or unthinking choices made in the most basic of day-to-day frames. This is to say that even simple, routine, quotidian acts weigh with force on the lives of bodies out of view. To note this is to experience the force of this kind of ecological thinking as a sensation that feels like what being caught in a web, in, say, the symbolic web of ecology feels like.

In my project the space of ruin where borders are shown not to have held becomes a crucial terrain for garnering insights concerning ways of living relationally outside a grid of ordering lines. The thesis of my project is that this vast terrain where lives intersect and where lines are crossed marks the place learners must visit and then stay within. Specifically, I advocate developing a literacy that reads off-page realities in a mode that translates to understanding the complexities of contemporary contexts. My use of the term literacy draws on Brian Street's scholarship that frames practices of literacy as pliable to contextual demands. His is an attractive view for a project that sees the demands today as strikingly different so that literacy must evolve. The traditional defining involves reading and writing of course. These activities mark what Shirley Brice

Heath calls clear "literate events."[11] Yet practices in literacy today need extend to new approaches concerning different ways of thinking about reading and writing from the standpoint of broad cultural contexts, so broad in fact that the environmental in held within as well.

My spin, then, is twofold: first, the social context for literacy today is found in the ecological dilemmas that join nature and culture together. These conjoined realms demand a new critical framework to see and articulate the vast multitudes of post-other bodies and forms that have been out of view for so long. This ecological frame constitutes a multitude of vibrant, forceful actors. From an expanded lens, the collective emerges into view, and space, as Bennett describes, morphs from defined parameters to some varied "mobile configuration with all manner of people, insects, odors, ink, electrical flows, air currents, caffeine, tables, chairs, fluids, and sounds" (*Vibrant Matter* 35). Second, the only way to read the range, pattern, speeds, and scales of contemporary events, so as to glimpse the complexity of convergences, is through a reformatted lens that trains specifically on interconnective relations that happen from bound ontologies, distributions of force, collapsed geographies, and local-global interrelations.[12] These realities necessitate a literacy that uncovers assemblages so as to understand human life as mediated in human-nonhuman exchanges. To view this, the roster of actors held as relevant to any singular moment or event or consequence expands.

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[11] In the 1970s Shirley Brice Heath conducted literacy research concerning how communities enact different ways of literacy. Literate events refer to specific literate occurrences: reading a note, reciting a poem or a song, writing a recipe, etc.

[12] While the Occupy Movement centered in proclamations of solidarity, "we are the 99 percent," for example, the Tea Party amplified its exclamations of both independence and division. In "The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism" the authors Vanessa Williamson, Theda Skocpol, and John Coggin note a virulent trend among Tea Party activists to highlight their own work ethic and opposition to government "handouts," though, the authors note, many Tea Party adherents collect government entitlements in the form of social security, Medicare, and disability, with a steadfast belief in the laziness of others, categorized as "freeloaders," and contrasted to frequent declarations of self as of "hard-working taxpayer" status.

By seeing McCarthy's representation of the American Southwest as lexical for this kind of ecological vision, I will translate scenes of ruin from the three books to scenes of ruin and discord and withdrawal in real life. This model will not only premise literature as a way to understanding lived experiences and realities but will reinvigorate an education in the humanities through textual studies as a way of developing a critical intelligence that can map and understand complex events, even as they present as hybrid, fused, and vast, even as they depend on more-than-human actors. I locate my scholarship in a historical turn that is animated by both a promising resurgence of attention toward the collective and by a troubling, pronounced, and powerful movement to disavow the formation altogether. This movement forecloses the collective, or the public, or the commons as too costly of spaces. These arenas compel distrust, as if they show the vulnerability of humans on each other and so assert the way that humans need care for each other, even of those of unknown relation. The suspicion comes through in a virulent rhetoric of doubt about need or about the character of those in need. Public trust fades. These common spaces, I wish to assert, provide however the literal grounds for democracy as well as places to experience an interrelationality that compels a sense of concern as a principle of common life.

In a moment that seemed potent with promise the Occupy Movement pushed to reinvigorate a sense of collectivity by highlighting the fact that the economic practices of the one percent translated tangibly to the quality of living conditions for the other ninety-nine percent. These two statistical populations were presented in the street democracy movement as groupings thoroughly braided together despite the very apparent disparities. For example, ballooning corporate profits could be shown to connect very definitively with cut wages and outsourced jobs. However, while the Occupy Movement sought to reestablish a notion of the public good in a time of mass privatization, another prominent movement emerged to deride the notion of the

collective through revival discourses of American exceptionalism and founding ideals. The Tea Party's slogan "Don't Tread on Me" undermined the composition of the state as a drain on individual liberties. Instead of reasserting the commons as a site worthy of collective investment, the Tea Party sought to rid government influence from education, health care, transportation, and markets.[13] The emergence of both of these divergent groups in the same historical moment indexes the mounting urgency related to questions of relational ethics today. Questions of this type will, of course, only accelerate on a planet of more than seven billion people, as the challenges of living justly present central concerns in future sustainability campaigns.

While my project will not delve into physical spaces as commons beyond the site of the classroom, I will seek to compose the experience of the commons in a way of reading text from an ecological lens.

The Contours of Joinery

Ontology

The view of flat ontology that emerges in a concept of joinery and that becomes operational throughout The Border Trilogy is also explicitly described in the novel *Blood Meridian*, an earlier Western work in McCarthy's catalogue. In this work, McCarthy relays a world of radical equality where ontologically all things, including even all least things, assemble in equality.

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[13] A 2010 noteworthy article in *The New Yorker* entitled "The Covert Operation" unmasked the presence of the billionaire Koch brothers behind the Tea Party. Though self-styled as a grass-roots movement of regular, working people, the article deconstructed the group's funding sources to reveal hidden financing by the brothers, who represent the face of corporatism. The Koch brothers own a giant conglomerate of industries from oil, lumber, and plastic to paper and carpet. Jane Mayer, the writer of the article, performed an admirable feat of investigative journalism to map and connect expansive and hidden lines of powerful presence in the modern political-corporate imbroglio. Telling the story relied on the work of finding the seams even when they hid from view. Mayer's piece not only demonstrated the clear lines linking the brothers to the Tea Party movement but detailed the way that the brothers fund climate change denial campaigns to misinform the public about the critical issue. I highlight this piece for the way that it reveals the connective dynamics across seemingly separate realms.

> In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena 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)

The critic Dana Phillips reads this literary technique for an "optical democracy" as a profound critique of so much Western anthropocentrism. In McCarthy's revised view that is an ecocentric view, humans are presented as enmeshed *within* and not separate *from* the rest of the life or material world. This formation is highly unusual in the Western tradition and Western novel because, as Phillips notes, the human is typically staged in a state of primacy or ontological supremacy. Phillips writes that in the Western trope, "men are men and landscapes [are] something else" ("History and the Ugly Facts of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*"12). This view translates the world according to a horizontal frame so that human life happens in an adjacency of power and vibrancy to other nonhuman lives and to other material forms. This view embeds human life within ecological systems that include soil, plant, air, and animal. It is not merely that human health and prosperity depend on these things, but more radically that the human exists on an ontological par.

To extrapolate this vision of ontology, the reader may imagine as well that social categories are flattened. Just as the human comes through as enmeshed in nonhuman ecologies, we may imagine these same intertwinements enmesh each person in large and complex social networks. This becomes a key point to underscore again in a time when such contentious debates rage about the just obligations of one to another in, say, social assistance programs or education. It bears noting that there have been few pieces of legislation as contentious as the affordable Health Care Act, or what critics call Obama Care exactly because of the question of social, humane responsibility.

In an effort to elucidate an ontological vision that supports a flat orientation, Bennett devotes time in *Vibrant Matter* to examining the mixed genetic portrait of humanness that comes through in DNA research. She writes:

> My 'own' body is material, and yet this vital materiality is not fully or exclusively human. My flesh is populated and constituted by different swarms of foreigners . . . the bacteria in the human microbiome collectively possess at least 100 times as many genes as the mere 20,000 or so in the human genome . . . we are, rather, an array of bodies, many different kinds of them in a nested set of microbiomes. (*Vibrant Matter* 112-13)

Her statement underscores the way that human ontology is really at the most basic level a blueprint composition of more-than-human presences under the human skin. Bennett joins Haraway, who argued in *When Species Meet* that genetic joinery links the human to the nonhuman in ways dominant philosophies all but overlook or underthink. Doing the same work, Bennett highlights the fact that human genomes are found in only about ten percent of the human body (5). The other ninety percent, she writes, are genomes of "bacteria, fungi, protists, and such" (3). These are so many least things indeed. This genetic portrait reconstitutes the ontological idea of humanness by placing humans squarely in what Haraway calls "knots." These ontological tangles are genetic forms of convergence or collusion. Haraway underscores the weighted realization held in such genetic findings when she declares, "I am a creature of the mud, not the sky" (3). This statement resounds like a line from McCarthy's trilogy. It is a line that sums up the essence of the scene involving the collapsed church.

The ontological vision announced in *The Crossing* in the collapsed town and announced in *Blood Meridian* against a "neuter austerity" of land and rock uses narrative to challenge traditional language and definitions. The challenge comes through in a radical reframing of ontology as relational. In this, the human is not more alive than, say, a blade of grass but is instead enmeshed in the world in the sense of deep corporeal belonging. To think of the ramifications inherent in this view is to see what

philosophical lineages come undone in the demolition of vertical ranks. The reigning and nearly implicit tradition of vertical hierarchies places humans above all earthly entities so that connections between top-ranking bodies and low-ranking forms become difficult to see or understand, at least outside a relationship of instrumentality. In a vertical cosmos there is, in other words, no imperative to see relations recomposed outside of subject/object dualities. This allows humans to be positioned as very distant and disconnected from protists, animals, plants, fish. Importantly, this kind of ranking equates to a lessened sense of ethical significance for lowly critters, which is a way of saying that a vertical view promotes distance by accentuating a false gap in between each. I want to underscore now, though I will explicate this concept throughout this project, that this distance allows and even necessitates an ethical withdrawal. To incorporate a previously referenced idea from Wolfe, this kind of framing of existence not only perpetuates violence against creatures perceived as belonging on lower rungs but perpetuates violence against human others who can be and have been associated with animality in a justification of violence.[14]

This ontological vision becomes a pedagogical point today because learners grapple with headline stories that have so many "least things" dying from human activities. Bee colonies are collapsing. Bats are dying in droves. Frogs continue to perish. We routinely read of the rampant poaching of elephants and rhinos, of the escalating loss of habitats. Coral reefs are endangered. Rainforests are in steep decline. Glaciers are melting. It becomes critically important today to intervene in a way that learners can make sense of these kinds of extinctions.

[14] Later I will discuss the ideas of Joanna Bourke who finds the justifications of racism and sexism and classism to be consistent with devaluations of animals.

Agency

I address these critical issues from the standpoint of seeking to initiate a practice of thinking that trains toward interrelations between beings (human and animal) and forms (matter and objects), as these are forceful bodies and entities in the joined world. The formation obtained through binaries that have humans on one side of a decisive ontological line that bestows agency in an otherwise passive world mutes nonhuman vibrancies. Joinery has events instead occurring from the combined or conjunctive forces of multiple actors. This presents an ecological rendering of agency where all beings and forms elicit force. As agents, then, nonhumans co-create the conditions of existence right alongside humans. Underscoring the sense of material vibrancy and referencing the mutt ontologies of humans, Bennett notes that "human agency is always an assemblage of microbes, animals, plants, metals, chemicals, word-sounds, and the like –indeed, that insofar as anything 'acts' at all, it has already entered an agentic assemblage" (120). Because nothing exists individually in the ontological sense, there is a shift too in understandings of agency so that actions happen from congregational energies that play out in complex dynamics of force and resistance.

This rendition finally moves beyond the false binary of freedom and determinism, moves beyond a conception of the human as the sole agent of force or significance. It shifts instead to a vision of the world as richly, complexly alive from a myriad of interactions. The paradigm of free agency so prominent in the West coupled with a philosophy of individualism has long sustained the sense that a person is only responsible for his/her own life and that a person can be individually praised or blamed, found innocent or guilty, declared good or evil depending on decisions made from the standpoint of free and intentional choice. Descartes argued that man alone has the unconstrained ability "to do or not to do something" (*Meditation* IV).

For my purposes I want to zero in on the ways that this conventional sense of agency establishes a correspondent view of ethical responsibility limited to considerations of those human beings in direct radius. Freedom, after all, suggests that humans are free of expansive influences and impacts. Individualism suggests that humans make their lives alone, on their own terms. We may question this agential version in terms how it situates us to think if at all of complex, nonfamilial relations. In other words, does free will inspire a too narrow sense of collective responsibility? Does it serve the contemporary age?

In my view, free agency propels a sense of justice in a retributive vein because, as Bennett notes, the human subject is judged as the root cause of an event (31). A distributed view of agency, on the other hand, places action in the world according to varying and hybrid force fields, which generate from the energies of a myriad of diverse agents. Recognizing the distribution of agency through the world doesn't mean that humans escape culpability, but rather that the sense of being implicated within constellations of other actors makes our position in joinery a point for careful deliberation.

All of this is to claim that a relational view of agency produces a sense of expansive obligation by understanding force as a webbed constellation with active bodies and vibrant material forms in convergence. This view holds tremendous ramifications. My focus lies in thinking about these ramifications in the space of education generally, in the fields of the humanities more specifically, and in English classrooms particularly. According to my argument, literature opens a critical dimension for the study of events because occurrences on page can be analyzed with an attention that traces actors in movement. In *All the Pretty Horses*, one of McCarthy's characters articulates a version of agency that expresses the complexity of both multiple actors as agents and crosscut lines of force. In an articulation of the Butterfly Effect, Rawlins notes the potential for a

least thing to disrupt a whole life, a whole trajectory of history. He says it like this: "Somebody can wake up and sneeze somewhere in Arkansas or some damn place and before you're done there's wars and ruination and all hell. You don't know what goin to happen" (APH 92). In his statement, he captures both the world of lively, reverberant force, where a granular thing holds a potential immensity as well as the discomfort of living within this kind of agential tapestry. One's life is not only affected by one's own decisions. One's fate does not play out according only to one's best plans and best intentions. The accident waits for us all. So McCarthy's works carry a kernel sense of the tragic all the time.

A version of collective agency that has human and nonhuman actors in assemblages dislodges the split domains of nature and culture, of environment and society, or freedom and determinism, of nature and nurture. The accent rests instead on "collaboration, cooperation, [and] interactive interference" from a mass of human and nonhuman forms (*Vibrant Matter* 21). This articulation issues ways of making sense of stories from our time by providing a way to understand projected climate increases of one or two or three degrees, which could seem through a different lens like such small and inconsequential changes, like the flapping of a butterfly's wings. The lens of joinery, however, provides a way of understanding relational agency through forcefields and feedback loops. For example, temperature increases from changing climate trends result in protracted lifespans for a least thing, a thing like the lowly bark beetle in a forest of trees. The beetle relishes the extended days of feeding, yet the forests are munched away, which allows wildfires to burn more intensely and more expansively. How do we understand these potential fires? With a networked vision with a view to a cast of participants in scene, the decimation of trees and all the other beings and things linked through trees and forest ecologies connect through the bark beetle, but not without first connecting through an understanding of warming temperatures from the standpoint of

human activity and from the effects of these changes on animals and insects and the way that these critters make the ecological space of a forest too so that one thing means many potential things in a nonlinear splay of consequence. What comes through in this example is that way that a typical view of human agency as free and conscious and intention fails entirely to open the event to an understanding of the kinds of composite energies within any event.

Ethics

From a point of emphasis that takes up ecological ontology and agency, one must also articulate ethics. Ontology through joinery constructs *being* as flat not in the sense that human life is devoid of vibrancy. This would be a vision more suited to a standardizing lens on the page. Instead, 'flat' means that all is significant, that everything has meaning, that every actor builds the world. Remember joinery: "So everything is necessary. Every least thing. This is the hard lesson. Nothing can be dispensed with. Nothing despised" (C 143). Joinery registers bodies in states of intimacy with even those who are seemingly removed or distant. In this way, the ethical implications of distributive agency lie in the unsettling realization that actors impact other actors and that a broad distribution of agency expands not only the range of actors contingent within an event but in the radius of effect even those in seeming out-of-distance regions. This is to say that joinery registers bodies as intimate with undiscovered others. The world comes alive in a dimensional way that hasn't been rendered in schools or through reading from a lens split to divide and deaden the nonhuman.

Recalibrations of ontology and agency lead importantly to a centralization of ethics, because if we exist with so many masses, even when we exist alone from the basis of swarming networks under skin, then we are compelled to look at justice differently,

more expansively from the standpoint of how 'we' each and together do things that ripple through. I see ethics as centered on relational justice given this myriad of potential contacts within a joined world. My focus on ethics stems from the aleatoric quality of events that occur from the force of multiple bodies and forms framed perpetually in conjunction. This convergent formation underscores the vulnerability of any one being within the tangle. This view, I believe, comes through powerfully especially in literature.

Yet aside from seeing the conduciveness of this extension of vision and thought to literature and the teaching of literature, the view is essential for understanding real life as well, where scalar extremes in industrial expansiveness, neoliberalism, and mass corporatism propel the need for a recalibrated framework for ethical responsibility.

In tracing the confluences of beings and forms and geographies and times through the lexical dramatizations of The Border Trilogy, I will show patterns of coexistence where local lives link with global others and induce a sense of weighted recognition. In the trilogy, lives, events, and objects initiate energies that overspill the boundaries of any singular dimension. In the work *Cities of the Plain*, for example, a character in the story articulates a pattern of agency by stating, "Our plans are predicated upon a figure unknown to us. The world takes its form hourly by a weighing of things at hand…" (COP 195). This view of agency, where an unknown figure predicates another's fate, establishes the link between ethics and flat ontology so that agency is broadly distributed. To see decisions of some constituting the lived conditions of others initiates thinking around ways of living that call forth expanded and difficult ethical extensions.

I find this realization to be underneath the comments of the man in the film *No Country for Old Men*. In an opening scene, the sheriff, played by Tommy Lee Jones, proclaims that he doesn't want to push his "chips forward" and go out and meet something he can't understand. To do so, he states, would mean that one "would have to

put his soul at hazard. He'd have to say, 'O.K., I'll be part of this world.'" To be part of this world is to be responsible to and even for the vast range of events that happen through conjunctive energies. It is to see oneself as a participant alongside beings encountered in moments of connection, contact, and friction, and these moments inhere in every existential moment of life. The sheriff's fear of meeting something he doesn't understand marks the way that living in ecological frame brings one into awareness of entanglements that are ethically demanding. Yet, to be a part of the world is to be attached to it, and to be ethically attached is to confront obligations that will most likely be strenuous.

Bifurcations, Borders, and Binaries

I have highlighted the site of the collapsed church and the space of the old Comanche road as both an edifice and terrain that emblematize failed relations from ruinous paradigms. In the scene within the church and along the road, the reader sees in the figure of the heretic and in the decimation of a culture and people the way that ethical regard can be constructed to leave so many out of inclusion. By taking the reader into these scenes through these settings, McCarthy shines a light on relational failures. This move of narrative opens the historical record of the American West to critical reappraisal. I want to suggest that for today's reader these scenes of a cowboy past generate pause, for the contemporary moment shows the strain of too many cowboy mentalities. In a time of mass extinction and climate change and disparate access and continuing wars, the cowboy becomes an evaluative figure for the ways that traditional ethics have failed.

One of the most striking areas of failure comes in the relational history between humans and animals. John Berger notes in his excellent essay "Why Look at Animals" that before mass industrialization and corporate capitalism, "animals constituted the

first circle of what surrounded man. Perhaps that already suggests too great a distance," he writes. "They were with man at the centre of his world" (3). Earlier, I highlighted a passage from Genesis that establishes human dominion over "every living creature that moveth." This ascendant theological vision operative today uncovers the paradigms of belief that run under ruinous activities. As a kind of context, then, for understanding the radicalness of joinery, it is necessary to note that the habit of overlooking animal significance stems from a long history of ontological philosophy, one which borders the human and animal on different sides and creates a fragmented outlook concerning the prosperity of one being and the survivability of the other.

Matthew Scully's work *Dominion* locates the biblically rooted premise of dominion as a governing mentality today. Through a presentation of different contexts of human abuse, exploitation, and violence toward animals, Scully's book locates a legitimizing rationality in theology. In one scene, readers are taken to the International Whaling Conference to see a concerted focus on developing and implementing more lethal ways of killing marine life. In another scene, readers attend the annual convention of the Safari Club International, where members can hunt elephants, lions, and other animals abroad or even, it is noted, within American "ranches" for a cool asking price of upwards of $20,000. The proprietors of these ranches guarantee a kill, as the animals are fenced within enclosures. These kinds of scenes present the resonance of dominion as a concept that allows fro animal lives to be moved outside ethical significance even under a guise of moral fidelity. Scully explicates dominion as a philosophical valance where the purpose of every living thing on earth constructs as a resource for human utilization. I will reference the hegemony of this kind of thinking in Chapter 5 when I will look closely at neoliberal influences in higher education that formulate students as capital.

Where Scully's genealogy traces through formations of belief focused on Christian tenets, Georgio Agamben in his work *The Open: Man and Animal* notes that humanistic philosophies assemble human identity in contradiction to the animal. Agamben points out that more than simply arranging the human against the animal, the dichotomy of human/animal provides a rationale for treating animals poorly but also treating some designated humans as animal-like. In this claim, he notes that the "anthropological machine," which is a mechanistic way of thinking that runs on a fuel of tacit assumptions, such as binary oppositions, is responsible for violence against humans through the indirect objectification of animals.

> If, in the machine of the moderns, the outside is produced through the exclusion of an inside and the inhuman produced by animalizing the human, here [the machine of earlier times] the inside is obtained through the inclusion of an outside, and the non-man is produced by the humanization of an animal: the man-ape, the *enfant sauvage* or *Homo ferus*, but also and above all the slave, the barbarian, and the foreigner, as figures of an animal in human form. (37)

The oppositional way of categorizing the human against the animal produces violent, even nihilist tendencies. Agamben argues that Western culture suffers a lost sense of meaningfulness today from such traditions of belief, which ironically posture as means to meaning. We find ourselves in the contemporary moment disconnected from each other, from the material world, from animal significance. Agamben suggests that the attraction in disconnection lies in the way that so much worry can be avoided from so much disassociation. Yet, this is also estranging. Such a recognition is important to accentuate the former cleric's claims that borders allow for the construction of 'worthy' enemies. While the cleric's assertion is legitimate, it is important to consider that a move toward dismantling borders will induce an experience of proximity that is out of the affective norm.

Carey Wolfe notes in *What Is Posthumanism?* that the study of the animal does more than bring to view an overlooked other. Wolfe claims that humans benefit from such a focus because they are realized as enmeshed within relations. He writes:

> It [this scholarship] 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 the world'- ways that are since we ourselves are human animals, part of the evolutionary history and behavioral and psychological repertoire of the human itself. But it also insists that we attend to the specificity of the human- its ways of being in the world, its ways of knowing, observing, and describing- by (paradoxically for humanism) acknowledging that it is fundamentally a prosthetic creature that has coevolved with various forms of technicity and materiality, forms that are radically 'not human' and yet have nevertheless made the human what it is. (xxv)

Wolfe's observation draws my attention to the ways that traditional belief systems operate to isolate the human in a unitary remove that is supposed to be elevating. In this, human "ways of being in the world" and "ways of knowing, observing, and describing" get fundamentally distorted. Human life and experience is missed when it is placed wholly outside the relational contexts where it occurs. Resituating the human within what Wolfe calls "the entire sensorium of other living beings" doesn't just recompose an understanding of other "living beings" in all of their neglected complexity, but also reinvigorate an understanding of the human as a figure perpetually in congress with so many other forms. In my project joinery becomes another term for Wolfe's "sensorium."

Into the Classroom

Education must be especially aware of the danger in (re)producing students who only reenact dominant paradigms, even as these paradigms show the ways that the modern record cannot be sustained. In his critique of banking models, Paulo Freire warned that education must avoid reproducing dominant and domineering mindsets.

For if this is the focus, education cannot then be transformative. The future becomes only a replication of the past. Such a blueprint for indoctrination marks a way of schooling over education, to recall Russell Baker's discernment.[15] This is especially problematic in this age as the reality of climate change and the severity of social injustice demands a different way of learning and living. To continue educating students in imperial modes of behavior is to educate them in a way that destroys the collective world and makes, in a terrible twist, their education complicit in a destruction of their future. Timothy Morton notes in his work *The Ecological Thought* that just as we have ways of behavior that are clearly unsustainable, ways of schooling students out of a critical capacity, we also have ways of belief that cannot hold. The challenge of an ecologically oriented practice of thinking is not centered in learning to recycle or consume less or reify nature as so many environmental education models would have it, but to change the systematic ways of belief that propel unjust ways of living in relation with other beings and entities.

In her excellent work *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, Wendy Brown notes that border-making movements across the globe happen forcefully today. Whether in contexts of "entrepreneurship, global markets, global citizenship, or global governance," nation-states and reigning economic paradigms construct more and more walls. This happens even as "we confront not only barricades but passageways through them segregating high-end business traffic, ordinary travelers, and aspiring entrants deemed suspect by virtue of origin or appearance." Brown argues that these transversals happen in a contemporary timeframe that is characterized by the high "potency, miniaturization, and mobility" of so many instruments and mechanisms of death, from biochemical

[15] In "Education vs. Schooling" Baker relays the diverse ways of becoming educated, ways that happen outside the walls of school. Inside the walls of school, he critiques practices that inculcate students to meaningless activities, like so much testing. "During formal education, the child learns that life is for testing," he writes. "This stage lasts twelve years, a period during which the child learns that success comes from telling testers what they want to hear."

toxins to drones to bodies wired for death. This uneasy awareness propels stratifications, blockings, and exclusions that take literal shape in barricades and fence lines and borders. In psychic shape, this profusion of lines creates what I have already alluded to as an "us" versus "them" mentality. Brown's scholarship focuses on the significant threats to democracy that occur from these constructions.

I want to direct Brown's thinking toward the mentalities and affective orientations of walled states as they translate in education, though, to be fair, this is already a move she makes. Education is a compelling point of analysis because in the school so many forces converge. It is impossible to disconnect the classroom from political, economic, social, and environmental realities. One cannot, in other words, gain a portrait of the classroom by merely zooming in tightly on that one space as an exclusive site. Rather, the portrait must come from a panning optic that registers other dimensionalities without sacrificing complexity. In the ample evidence of intertwinement, the nested formation altogether challenges the idea of that education, or any other realm for that matter, have ever been pure by being separate.

As a facet of detecting the intersective realities that come through education, it is essential to note how funding for the humanities specifically and the liberal arts more generally have been eviscerated by neoliberal values. Brown argues in her same essay that knowledge in these fields articulates poorly according to the favored metrics of a neoliberal regime. The problem is not, of course, that study within these fields fails to produce worthy student learning. The problem is that evidential proof is more difficult to generate given the favored tools of measure, and that the potential learning from these fields gets defined in such limited terms and ratified through such exclusive valuations that student learning of certain kinds is not desired.[16] At a deeper level still, Brown

[16] In "Ordinary, Incredulous," Judith Butler notes that the metrics which place the humanities in a stage of crisis are metrics that need to be critically interpreted. She writes, "Oddly, our very

asserts that knowledge from fields of literature, philosophy, history, and political science, for example, become degraded by neoliberal proponents because these fields potentially develop minds in ways that might counter the orthodoxy of instrumentalization, a basic tenet in neoliberal frameworks. To learn, then, off the preformatted track in a way that is creative and critical becomes suspicious. The heightened surveillance through test taking reveals schisms of deep distrust.

To flesh out this collective affect of distrust we may examine closely neoliberalism as the dominant economic rationality of our time that itemizes life and living activities as commodities according to an ascendant market matrix that turns everything into a capital venture. The impetus of this orientation is toward foreclosures of the commons or public spaces within communities for gains in profit. Consumerism is fostered, it seems apparent, by losses in connection and communication, in social alienation, and in an anxiety that makes people buyers of widgets. Foreclosing places of common gathering and attachment, then, diminishes the experience and the language of value for the collective. Neoliberalism in education construes a sense that this normative mode is natural and intractable. Ideas that counter this formation and orientation very often register as merely romantic, untenable, or even suspect given the degree of entrenchment toward zealous capitalizations.

In his excellent book *The Fragility of Things: Self-Organizing Processes, Neoliberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism,* William Connolly shows how neoliberal practices resonate to a troubling degree with evangelical constructions. "One ironic contribution the evangelical movement makes to neoliberalism," Connolly writes, "is in displaying just how important the quality of an embedded cultural ethos is to economic performance and the state . . . . The problem is only that all these parties embrace the

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capacity for critically re-evaluating is what cannot be measured by the metrics by which the humanities are increasingly judged. This means that the resource we need to save the humanities is precisely one that has been abandoned by the metrics that promise so save the humanities if only we comply" (33).

wrong ethos" (68). Connolly's statement insinuates that economic philosophies rely on philosophical principles. Buying and selling may be seen as virtuous if consumerism is held as a public good. After 9-11 George W. Bush incited Americans to serve their country's interests by "Get[ting] *do*wn to Disney World in Florida. Take your families and enjoy life, the way we want it to be enjoyed."[17] Connolly notes that this reigning ethos, which presents an "inordinate confidence in impersonal markets," propels growth expectations for the economy from the basis of individual hard work. Yet, when economies are extractive, so that they pillage environments and exploit social fabrics of trust and community, the destruction compounds from the expectation that all profit performance is good.

Clayton Pierce's book *Education in the Age of Biocapitalism* reveals the troubling extent to which corporate paradigms have overtaken schools. Pierce shows that implementation of the lauded "value-added" metric comes not from educational scholarship concerning best practices, but instead from the same actors who push high stakes testing and school/teacher accountability. These actors are also the players structuring corporate paradigms within schools. Pierce explains that this way of doing education actually works to dissolve "variables" of race and class, gender and sexuality, as these metrics seek, in Pierce's words, to:

> . . . produce subjects who embody laissez-faire habits and desires by controlling and regulating educational populations and individuals through governmental strategies that attempt to compel people and groups to embrace an ethic of self-care that views things such as competitive enrollment in high achieving schools, disinvestments in failing urban schools, debt servitude to financial giants such as Sallie Mae, and merit pay for teachers as simply choices within a calculable economic field of decision making. (69)

Pierce's mapping of this landscape examines inculcated habits from ascendant modes of education, to government sponsorship of certain paradigms, to competitive models of

[17] A *Washington Post* story by Andrew Bacevich claims that Bush meant to distract the public through a consumerist binge from the depth and severity of issues facing the country.

sociality. The compulsion toward an "ethic of self-care" has students pressured into divesting from each other and from their communities in the skewed hope that they can gain individually. Here is the 'us' versus 'them' formation evident in bifurcations. These pressures in the social and familial zones come from economic spheres. Yet such a system of economy that would make these options a point of choice between tends already toward the evisceration of the individual life from a ceaseless emphasis on private wealth and ownership to the sacrifice of the commons, the community, even the family as well. Pierce writes that, "the story of value-added assessment, at least in the field of educational assessment, has a very discernable beginning that can be traced back to a familiar neoliberal mode of economic analysis" (64).

The problem of this kind of closing off of learning becomes especially poignant in a time of ruin because necessary thinking must be divergent, open, and critical. It must be imaginative and creative for the possibility of new ways. The imperative for twenty-first century education diverges, then, from learning skills to join a prefabricated world in decline to learning new skills and new literacies for a new ecologically just vision.

Critical Turn

The theoretical vision I will consult most predominantly in this project comes from Bruno Latour, who presents an ecologically centered vision of ontology and agency from the basis of a theory that has varied actors in expansive networks of relation. This theoretical view attributes ontological significance and agential power to all the living and material things of the world. Both humans and nonhumans care actors. The term "network" refers to the way that actors mingle and collide, resist and cooperate, in complex relational dynamisms. It is my claim that Latour's theory is highly complementary to McCarthy's cosmology of joinery in that both visions assert the meaningfulness of every least thing, the ontological equality of things, and the ethical

significance that comes from everything being necessary because all is flat and related. Like joinery, which undoes the entrenched anthropocentric tradition of seeing the human in an apex point upon a hierarchy, a vision that shapes according to an ecocentric outlook, Latour's excellent work *We Have Never Been Modern* uncovers the premise of modernity as a false premise. This construct, he argues, lies in the belief that nature and culture, humans and nonhumans, life and matter are separately housed within purified categories. In the articulation of a theory that debunks this view, he explains that 'we have never been modern' because the divides that have been erected to cordon humans from animals, life from matter, nature from culture have never held. The notion of separateness is a delusion of human hubris.

Seeing all manner of things and bodies and entities assembled together does not subsume difference into a false monolithic unity. All things are actors, yes, but all actors are different and unique too. This is to say that all actors share a radical ontological equality and an agential force, but all actors are not divested of their unique characteristics. In this way, "no object is inherently reducible or irreducible to any other" (6). This means that despite existence composing according to relations, all entities from animals to objects to plants to materialities to insects to humans are ineffably unique without being unitary or disconnected from each other.

In Actor-Network Theory charting the interconnections between one actor and another becomes the work of "translation." This means that an action happens differently depending on the frame of reference. From a particular time or space, an act may seem beneficial. Yet from another nook in time, the same act may register as quite harmful. The act of invention and manufacture of the automobile must register in such a skewed frame given climate change. Drone warfare must be admitted as complex depending upon one's geographical place. An act 'good' for one person or one community or one nation holds a negative potential for another person, another

community, another nation. So, understanding an event becomes a complicated task from a view of joined lines and interconnected fates. The range of angles open to pedagogical investigation extends for the multiplicity of interpretations possible from any one scene, event, or act.

I will utilize this interpretative dimensionality as a pedagogical resource by claiming that opening the text to divergent and multiple ways of developing meaning places readers as co-constituting creators of a text, working alongside authors to make meanings of the word and world.[18] The open dimensions in translating events and actions are real and significant not merely because of the pedagogical possibilities, but because the character of reality itself is emergent depending on relations. William Connolly calls this potential "becoming" an emergent reality based on different relational configurations and dynamisms that are real from a vibrant world. To understand the fuller range of consequences, to understand the dimensions of actors in scene, to understand the shifting ways of relation is to work at the level of translation, a mode ideally suited for students in a literature classroom. Translation utilizes the interpretative capacities of literary scholars to make active sense of the world. It frames an emphasis on literary studies from the direction of skills that are not so much marketable in the sense of employer desirability as necessary in the sense of democratic participation, where such a literacy comprehends events in highly complex times through a complex encounter with text.

In the kind of times that have neoliberal models of business issuing paradigms of learning then gearing educational movements toward these testing paradigms through the creation of discourses on accountability, such a practice of reading for a way of thinking upsets the trend. Yet the testing paradigm of education does little for the

[18] Paulo Freire established the vital connection between "word and world" which has learning in school meaningful in life. This translation across domains perceived as undivided results in a model of schooling divergent from banking approaches.

development of divergent minds. This is to say that minds today must be trained to stay tuned to the intricacies of movement through webs. The crucial kind of education needed today must map events in translation across different regions, bodies, and timeframes. Assembling a vision of the ways that diverse bodies and forms assemble, whether competitively or cooperatively, takes effort and must happen in the rebuke of a limited, safe learning. The lens of joinery unleashes to mind the ramifications of any least thing. This kind of outward pattern, where expertise comes from making connections rather than insulating from complication one's expertise, formats comprehension to the nonlinear and indirect ways of relational interaction.

I will focus on these kinds of ramification in reading and teaching and thinking. It will be from these contexts that assembling a collective vision through textual engagements will be held as a proper response to the set of crucial questions posed by Judith Butler in the book *The Humanities and Public Life*. Butler asks that teachers consider an "ethics of reading" from the basis of two questions: "For whom and for what do we read, and in the service of what kind of world" (102). Her explication of these questions motivates my own thinking toward ways of teaching that turn on the inward experience of reading outward toward a common world made in the service of an awareness of fragility and responsibility.

Networks and assemblages mean, then, as theoretical formations to represent the collective. It will be my claim that joinery corresponds to these and other theoretical frameworks that mean finally to capture wild, profuse minglings within existence. "Assemblages," "networks," "hybrid geographies," "knots," and "mesh" are all different but related theoretical articulations that capture this chaos of existential interconnection. Held within the overarching category of posthumanism, these theoretical terms reconceptualize human life as placed within and not above. This situating of the human within joinery happens from a stark awareness of not only genetic findings that compose

the human body with nonhuman DNA, as Bennett and Haraway noted, but from the contexts of climate change and intensifying social inequities. These realities show the human body genetically enmeshed within the nonhuman and show environmental and social injustices happening in concert rather than isolation. In their form, they present as ruinous a history of thought that means to privilege humanity by removing the human from any earthly or material belonging, a focus I see as instead misanthropic for the way that sustaining ecological systems are destroyed. In the demarcations of nature and culture, one space perceived as separate becomes an instrumentality for the sake of economic profits.

From outside the kinds of vertical hierarchies that have provided such comfort, the life field is instead recognized as a vast, dynamic, and connected as a middle space between the poles of bifurcation. Latour calls this ground the "middle kingdom" to signify the congress of relations that gather beings and bodies, entities and elements toward a dynamic, hybrid middle where all is movement and exchange and interaction. Suddenly a variety of relations emerge as significant though they have been neglected of critical attention. The interdependence that is implied in the image of joinery, where the location of the other is put into proximity with self and where the call to develop a greater care, compassion, and generosity promises to strengthen neglected social ties so that the self benefits are all potential differences in cognitive and affective ways of thinking from this approach.

Adorno's work *Negative Dialectics* is helpful in spatializing this middle ground, as he articulates the "non-identifiable" as that which falls outside the parameters of the binary zones and so escapes recognition or acceptance. The tradition that has excluded this zone from view turns a blind eye to the vast contradictive forces that constitute a "third entity," or that fall between the accepted poles. Confronting this "third entity" forces to view the contradictions of a totalizing logic where everything is supposed to

conform to two points of belonging. Confrontation with unruly others is pedagogically beneficial in that this recognition highlights the imperative for a new way of thinking that takes into account that which hasn't been considered as possible. Such a confrontation may evoke a creative, critical form of thinking that dislodges the stale orientations of a bordered past. Adorno's claims are useful to my work because the excluded others who (humans) and that (nonhumans) I will bring to view are of such diverse form and so outside prevailing considerations that their inclusion will seem quite odd. Yet from this encounter, I hope to generate ideas for ethical thinking, realizing that this is a process of thought that prizes questions more than answers and emphasizes unsettledness as a place of potential learning. For example rather than reconciling human-animal issues in the manner of dominion, reading through joinery for thinking through interconnections propel questions of a complexity that discounts any simplistic and formulaic answers. This is not to say that this way of thinking is inept for the challenges of the day. It is rather to say that the challenges of the day afford no easy answers and so the ethical imperative lies in the formation of the question and in the capacity to wrestle with question in an unsettled diligence.

The third entity in early posthuman theory, as that held outside either of the acceptable points, came in the form of scholarship that responded to developments in "scientific and bio-technological" fields during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Ferrando 25). Technological advances raised questions concerning human exceptionality given the evidence of human-machine interactions, computer intelligence, and advanced robotic capabilities.[19] The elevation in status of the machine blurred a long-standing line of delineation that had separated domains of life/matter and subject/object. Donna Haraway's work *A Manifesto of Cyborgs* (1985) and Katherine

[19] Developments in bionics technology that read human thought and act from neuron-indicators intrigue ethicists by the frontier of questions subsumed in human/machine interactions.

Hayles' text *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (1990) both destabilized a unitary human ontology by showing co-constituting cross-transfers between humans and computers or robots. Haraway noted that these discoveries compelled a complex reevaluation of the cyborg in accent of trans-category features between human and machine. In the figure of the cyborg, the third entity, "the human and non-human, the organic and technological, carbon and silicon, freedom and structure, history and myth, the rich and the poor, the state and the subject, diversity and depletion, modernity and postmodernity, and nature and culture" were brought together in the strange middle previously discounted (Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto* 4).

While my work is not centered in an analysis of technology, except in the address of objects and materialities, the scholarship of Haraway and Hayles is crucial for the way that it disrupts a multitude of entrenched borders. After exposure to the capabilities of cyborgs, the list of intellectual or emotional attributes that can be reserved exclusively for humans diminishes substantially. As a third entity, the cyborg opens dimensions of contemplation that continue today in the provocations issued by animal and plant studies. These studies increasingly insinuate questions of nonhuman intelligence and agency. For example, a recent essay in *The New Yorker* entitled "The Intelligent Plant" by Michael Pollan describes the emerging view from a contingency of botanists that plants possess and exercise "will," in the sense that they make choices from a place of "intention." Words like "will" and "choice" and "intention" are weighted because they have traditionally only been used to reference human capability. The research that extends these descriptive terms to plants is research that carries profound philosophical bearing on more than the study of plants. As Pollan writes, placing nonhuman entities such as plants and animals within "the same semantic umbrella" is a philosophical move with important consequences "for how we see ourselves in nature." In other words,

language is connected to cosmology and changing language alters or at least disrupts settled cosmological views.

Philosophical adjustments made from these alterations of language produces anxiety because it would reformat the traditional domains of nature and culture for a hybrid, dynamic, and fluid middle space, a space I will call "ecology" throughout this project. In *Ecology Without Nature*, Morton jettisons the term "nature" for ecology as well. Of course his strategic shift in language owes much to the seminal work of William Cronon. In Cronon's collection *Uncommon Ground*, he challenges the narrow framing of "environment" or "wilderness" as spaces outside the influence of the social or the human. His arguments galvanize thought towards the ways that "nature" becomes reified so often even in the midst of environmental destruction. Cronon's essay refutes the legitimacy of nature as some separate sphere or environ. He points out that this term derives from cultural employments and conjectures: "Nature is a human idea, with a long and complicated cultural history which has led different human beings to conceive of the natural world in very different ways" (20). In his essay "The Trouble of Wilderness," Cronon chips away at the environmentally sacrosanct notion of wilderness by challenging the idea that "wilderness" like "nature" is a place or a region or a locale 'out there,' never here where the human lives. This belief in tidy, delegated sites produces a "vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural" (80). To believe in a view of nature as "outside" the human, as belonging "over there" but not "right here" is not only to demonstrate a remarkable arrogance that molds the world in a pattern imposed by human thought but that mandates the "human presence" as the reason for "nature's fall" (80-81).

Cronon's deconstruction of these terms still challenges conventional thinking patterns and language usage today. Environmental movements that rely on wilderness as a designation of nonhuman space propagate instead of rupture divided outlooks.

Ironically a divided worldview from environmentalism runs in alignment with the Judeo-Christian outlook that removes human beings from earthly belonging and presents such a troubling ethical dilemma in conceits like dominion. The Judeo-Christian worldview has been critiqued notably by environmentalism as in the famous ecocritical essay by Lynn White Jr. entitled "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis." In this essay, White examines the culpability of Christian theology "especially in its Western form" to generate environmental problems of staggering scale. In White's view Christianity represents the "most anthropocentric religion the world has seen" (9).[20] The power of Cronon's challenge lies in linking the semantic terms of "nature" and "wilderness" with the same genealogical line of thought that environmentalism seeks to rupture.

Today a host of thinkers and theorists join Cronon in exploring the theoretical ramifications of subverted binary terms. Yet the active exploration of this critical learning away from bordered domains and the implications of this on ways of living are underexplored in pedagogical settings. In fact, environmental education typically emphasizes nature as a removed place, consistent with the positionality of an ideal. Richard Kahn in his recent work *Critical Pedagogy, Ecoliteracy, and Planetary Crisis* argues that the traditional mode of environmental education does more harm than good. In the same way that "wilderness" relies on a distinct domain, one that is distant and disjointed from city or suburb, environmental education relies on an overt "nature" that is accessed, for example, through a tailored curriculum of, say, nature readings and field trips to designated locations. This kind of education installs a sense of distance, which is to say that subdivided outlooks allow and even necessitate that the learner engage in a choice of concern. Should one care about environmental justice or social justice?

[20] Dismayed at the staying power of Christianity as a belief structure, White argued that no new values have emerged to displace Christianity's hold. He wrote, "Hence we shall continue to have a worsening ecological crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man" (14).

Attendant issues within a false domain may be further carved and diced in ways that even well-intentioned activism may miss its target.

My project works as an intervention to join social and environmental learning to join social and environmental justice. These are inextricable pursuits. Yet arriving at a view that recognizes the lattice of lines connecting each to the other is difficult. I present one way through reading that aims to establish connections. Collapsing borders for the proffered view of crosscut domains sponsors, I argue, an ecological literacy that sees and understands interconnections. Education that interprets the world from divides so that issues of poverty, racism, and social justice disconnect from environmental racism or neoliberal mentalities fail, in my view, to make sense of the ways that realities today converge and conflate in unison. Anthony D. Cortese in "The Critical Role of Higher Education in Creating a Sustainable Future" argues that "compartmentalized knowledge without connection to larger system interactions results in viewing many interdependent challenges as separate, hierarchical, and competitive. The net results are often unintended, narrow, ineffective solutions . . ." (18).

From the basis then of Cronon's ground-breaking interrogation of the standard terms and designations, through to Latour's development of an alternative view that dislodges a tradition of bifurcations, to Bennett's portrayal of assemblages that centralize instead of dismiss material vibrancies, and with McCarthy's radical Western to critique a vast history and to issue a corrective cosmological view, my work stitches together all of these complementary threads to form the basis for a practice of literacy that is ecocentrically centered so that reading and understanding animal bodies and material forms as co-constituting forces with human life becomes a formation for understanding life within joinery. I will show that McCarthy's books represent and refract the chaos of existence by moving outside safe, traditional orientations that frame existence as individual or free. His portrayal of the divergences of human experience through

convergences of bodies and forms results in an ecological literature, where ordinary occurrences in the form, say, of meeting someone in a quotidian moment becomes endowed with potential profoundity. This infusion of meaning into common moments from a focus on relations and interinvolvements has the effect of creating scenes that are highly poignant. With the field of existence joined, a tragic potential lies in even the most common exchange. Through this kind of authorial vision in an extended narrative over three books, readers connect to characters because their vulnerability gestures even to our own. For example, there is a powerful scene where a boy named Blevins is killed in a clear way and in a clear moment, and yet his death is a kind of unsettled mystery because no story presents with an absolute start or stop point. The actors who take his life seem to act from commands leveled in some distant place by some unknown figures, and so the scene, which is not unexpected, is still puzzling. The portrayal of agency at work in such scenes is through shifting fields of relation that show up best in the compressed and stylized treatments of literature, which presents a lens on the susceptibility of bodies to other bodies in off-page contexts. The exposure on-page brings us, I will argue, to confrontation with such charged moments of meeting so that reading is not an escape from the world but an immersion into the profound moments of living together. Knowing why or when or how Blevins comes to his fate is a question as tangled as the relational lines that compose his existence.

I will work to explicate these difficult patterns in McCarthy's text in the gambit that this way of reading initiates a way of thinking that is useful for the development of a new, expansive, material ethics. All of this is to say that McCarthy's novels will be used as a cracked lens to throw light in the direction of coexistent relations. Such an intervention generates a pedagogical approach that centralizes encounters made in contemporary living conditions where the reach of one act extends vastly so that

mapping an action becomes a way into assembling a collective of bodies and forms neglected before.

A Practice of Literacy for Ecological Complexities

Toward seeing the configuration of joinery, I suggest that one imagine a composition of dots with each representing an actor, event, or object. Imagine as well that lines emanate from each dot so as to represent the interconnections that produce consequences in a pattern of rippling, radiating flows. The image in my mind assumes the composition of a Jackson Pollock painting, with its mass of tangled lines and drip points. The image presented is like George Seurat's famous work Un Dimanche Après-midi à l'Île de la Grande Jatte. Troy Rhoades argues in his paper "Brimming With Vitality" that the pointillist technique used by Seurat strains the viewer's vision, as thousands of microscopic dots work conjunctively to produce a coherent image. Rhoades notes that the multicolored dots generate a vibratory sense through contrasts of relational color, and this seems to generate movement on the static canvas. Rhoades references Henri Bergson's explanation of color as that which "amounts in itself to a series of extremely rapid vibrations." The image, in this way, relies for its compositional force on dynamisms of adjacency. By removing any certain number of dots, the image is made incoherent. Both painters provide ways of seeing the movements and momentums within networks and assemblages, as both painting techniques happen from a dynamic of interrelationality.

This training of vision to detect in one line or one dot the presence of many other connected lines or dots translates as a perceptive capacity for seeing the collective in the singular. I want to suggest that zooming in on such single points does not increase the size of the thing that is specifically under analytical focus but emphasizes instead the

diversity of inhered connections that amplify beyond any single point.[21] If we imagine that each of the lines in Pollock or the dots in Seurat represents a site or space or event or being or form within a joined field, like the bound together space of a canvas, a spatial dimension that is true to McCarthy, each line or dot can be imagined as an actor, true to Latourian philosophy, and a fuller comprehension emerges from tracing or mapping the lively interconnections across. This analogy provides an image of the analytical capacity needed in a time when divides fail to cordon interrelations. A trained orientation toward animal and matter, toward seeing ontology and agency and ethics as constellated is imperative in an age when the complexity of events entangles the registers of local and global, human and nonhuman, nature and culture. My project is made, then, to advance an on-page experience of reading that opens dimensions of scale, which are commensurate with the extremes of modernity. These extremes have "least things" of human or nonhuman form initiating powerful, radiant consequences. Latour notes in "Waiting on Gaia: Composing the World Through Art and Politics," that "there is no way to explore a way out of the disconnect if we don't clarify the scaling instrument that generates the global locally" (6).

Much of ecological art today attempts to depict these extremes of scale where the consequences of even small things are not only profound and sprawling, but the borders meant to regulate national affairs and divide nature and culture and organize economies from politics are eroded. To capture this kind of dynamism, the photographic works of Chris Jordan show the scale of a particular item in a collective frame. Jordan zooms in on one thing, say, a plastic bottle and then pans out so that the single entity becomes contextualized within an expansive frame that shows the scale of plastic pollution, for example. In this way, the single entity assumes a degree of consequence from the

[21] A well-rehearsed argument in science studies is that "there is no zoom effect" to quote Bruno Latour. He continues, "…things are not ordered by size as if they were boxes inside boxes. Rather they are ordered by connectedness as if they were nodes connected to other nodes" ("Waiting for Gaia" 6).

dimensions that inhere in the basis of collective life. The vision confronts the viewer in an implicative way as a single decision, a single purchase frames in amplified, intensified consequences from the basis of multiple other similar decisions. The recent documentary film entitled *Midway* performs this same optical effect by showing the consequences of plastic waste upon an island in the Pacific Ocean. Situated more than 2000 miles from the nearest continent, this island becomes a trash heap as refuse washes ashore from the sway of tides and currents. The film shows the effects of plastic on albatross that feed on the beaches and in the waterways of the island. During their feeding, the birds inadvertently ingest plastic waste: golf balls, utensils, lighters, bags, pens, toothbrushes, and bottle caps. A parallax optic, which is an important lens for thinking ecologically, presents an item that may appear inconsequential in a frame that shows its collective consequence in its compounded scale and scope so that one thing, like a plastic bottle becomes immense in an island of plastic waste.

In the book *Eating Animals*, Jonathan Safran Foer positions consumers of meat as people sometimes unknowingly within vast assemblages. Each lift of the fork places, as Foer writes, "ourselves in one relationship or another to farmed animals, farmworkers, national economies, and global markets" (261). This powerful idea shows the way that the study of animals as food translates to other contested, connected realms. Foer acknowledges that his book about eating meat could have turned into an "entire book about public health, workers' rights, decaying rural communities, or global poverty" as "all of which are profoundly affected by factory farming" (260). This statement underscores the way that events hold other events in store, actors influence other actors, and time connects to a long-range trajectory.

Yet to note the scale of dimensions that connect through a simple act like eating illustrates the challenges of comprehension in understanding fully what we do when we do one thing. In this way, the pattern to living in contemporary time is ceaselessly

toward comprehending the vast and complex imbrications that bring other actors, sites, nations, policies, and technologies into contact. To uncover these radiant dimensions one must go behind the scenes. The practices within factory farms and slaughterhouses must link to practices and mindsets within corporate boardrooms because the determining forces within farms are no longer farmers and the determining forces within factories are no longer workers. Hidden figures must emerge for us to see who is really pulling the strings.

One of the ballast claims of this project is that students in a traditional humanities class are unprepared to detect agency through a plurality of actors because they are taught in the convention of divides and with a unitary human as the sole causal agent, even as events are not reducible to such a singular locus. A literary distinction that suspends the human from real contacts and immersions, one that sees humanity as separate from elements of nonhumanity, only propagates a reading that cannot be lived. It makes reading literature an escapist pursuit — an exercise for the dilettante — when it should be a confrontational, implicative engagement; it should tap into ethical issues of living with. Privileging the human by situating the human in an isolate space actually reduces human capacity for ethical interactions in a broad, diverse world of many beings and forms. We are trained poorly to detect the diversity of nonhuman forms that our lives intersect with and occur through. This narrow perception translates to a narrow ethics.

This project is made in the claim that the anthropocentric lens we have held to the word to read the world is broken. Rather than employing a new lens, I advocate transposing the old, cracked lens on the page so that we read through its shattered contour the refractions of connected lines to see a pattern of convergence and reverberation. No new lens may be as effective without the context of history showing

where 'new' has been made necessary. So rather than washing the history out of practice, the long Western tradition should serve as impetus for this new approach.

While I make no claim that this thinking practice is easy or even compatible with so much of the structure in place to direct learning and frame inquiry, it nonetheless seems like a fitting time for some breakthrough given the signs of calamitous breakdown. In my experience as a teacher in the classroom, students respond well to difficult information, challenge, and complexity when the difficulty is meaningful. In other words a struggle toward something that is important enlivens engagement, especially contrasted with the simple and narrow dimensions of so much schooling. The teacher Christine Cziko describes a phenomenon that she witnessed repeatedly with students in her school: "You see this with so many kids. In the hall, in the cafeteria, in their communities, in all these places there are these active, engaged, bright, funny kids. They come into the classroom and they turn into a ghost of themselves, like a shroud just drops over them. Their academic identities are these fragile, ghostly things, not robust in the way their whole person identities are because of so many things — repeated failures, being told what they can and cannot do, being mystified by what is asked of them in school" (9).

In reading McCarthy through the theoretical lens of actor-network theory and new materialisms, my project will advance current scholarship by applying a framework of thinking about conglomerations of bodies and forms, about nonhuman agencies, for the creation of a practice of literacy that reinvigorates understandings of what it means to live ethically. In this way, my work very consciously connects the academic with the real. The idea of the university being unrelated to the 'real world' is another projection of false borders. My focus centralizes ethics through a mode of literacy because ethics present a space to connect ideas with action.

Organization

Chapters in this dissertation are arranged to highlight instances in what I am arguing to be a different way of understanding the world through a practice of reading the page that orients a way of thinking for off-page living. Each instance of animal, object, and human represents a focal point within joinery. By highlighting these instances, especially as they redefine ontology, agency and ethics, I establish a new line of scholarship in McCarthy criticism. The next three chapters will enact an analytical method that enmeshes the human in a collective so that agency is redistributed and ethics are considered from the mingling of bodies and forms across all traditional divides of distance and time. The last chapter of this project will take up the ethics of relation from the specific context of teaching literature given the demands of the age.

Chapter 2

More specifically still, Chapter 2 will focus on human-animal relationality through a depiction of wolf trapping. Sites of encounter between humans and animals will be highlighted to demonstrate an ecological reality that has being happening from a place of shared space. The Western tradition has sought to order these encounters through bordered lines of human/animal ontology, human/animal agency, and human/animal ethics. By attending to unitary human characters as sole agents in an otherwise passive world, classic liberal-humanist modes of interpretation complement larger Western philosophies that move the animal from view and certainly from bearing. This is to say that the animal typically becomes a symbol, a curiosity, an object. Yet in McCarthy's texts, animals propel actions not merely in their own lives but in common life. This is a radical orientation that reads as profound in an age of mass extinctions, an age where we clearly do not live well with those we live with.

McCarthy's redescription of human-animal relationships will rebuke the classical tradition. It will also subvert ascendant critical readings, which tend to handle the animal as a discursive subject. Dominant modes of literary study frame analysis of the animal as an object constructed in discourse. In this view human language becomes the measure of the world. And even though this view often serves as the starting point for a critique, a deep anthropocentrism is still at the center of the linguistic turn. Through the contrast allowed through McCarthy's work, the animal exceeds what has been said. Animals come through as irreducible to human language and even knowledge.

Chapter 3

Just as a renewed interest in phenomenology or the philosophy of things turns a reinvigorated eye toward the animal, as a vibrant force in the world, so too does this critical turn reevaluate *things*. The ossified view that has material things as inert objects in a world dead beyond the human presents a foil to McCarthy's vision. In Chapter 3, then, my focus will center on an analysis of The Border Trilogy's vision of matter. I will place this vision in a larger frame of theoretical reference so that matter emerges from the background to subsume substantial presence. Where Chapter 2 will highlight the animal as force in the world, Chapter 3 will focus on interactions between bodies and material things.

I will trace how McCarthy's vision of ontological democracy through a materialist focus elides the nature/culture binary by highlighting the interplay found in material transactions. The material object deserves attention in a project that seeks to reconcile nature and culture because in its form there is a presentation of 'nature' (elemental composition) with the 'social' (social use and modes of production) in aggregate. As Latour writes, "Real artifacts are always parts of institutions, trembling in their mixed status as mediators, mobilizing faraway lands and people …" (*Pandora's Hope* 193).

Latour writes extensively of "quasi objects," as those things that fall disobediently outside containment in any life/matter polarization. Quasi-objects instead are both social and natural. This is to say that there is something artificial in the organic, something animal in the human, something human in the animal, and something mechanistic in the animate.[22]

An analytical project in literary studies that gets at matter, objects, and elements as vibrant is against the grain. According to Bill Brown, a leading theorist of material culture, literary criticism of the past decade or more has been preoccupied with "image culture and the logics of vision," and consequently has "hardly begun to bring material culture into full view" ("The Idea of Things and the Ideas in Them" 17). Brown notes that literary analysis has focused on identities, especially those related to "national subjects, gendered subjects, hybrid subjects" (17). He quotes the critic Francois Dagognet, who in his "eulogy of the object," notes "we remain the prisoners to 'subjectivity'" (17). The intervention of matter into literary studies and English pedagogies emerges as necessary given the startling capacities of things that surround and immerse and act with and against human life. In the presence of plastics, waste, food, pollution, in the presence of objects in malls and objects in dumping grounds, from a gun in hand to emission from a car to air to climate, we confront objects and materialities that defy the easy characterizations stemming from a bordered outlook.

Chapter 4

Joinery brings animals and materialities to the forefront of consideration. It also reconfigures a more just relation to human others. Yet to say that a flattening of

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[22] Latour writes, "… frozen embryos, expert systems, digital machines, sensor-equipped robots, hybrid corn, data banks, psychotropic drugs, whales outfitted with radar sounding devices, gene synthesizers, audience analyzers, and so on, when our daily newspapers display all these monsters on page after page, and when none of these chimera can be properly on the object side or on the subject side, or even in between, something has to be done" (*We Have Never Been Modern* 50).

ontology and a dispersal of agency registers interconnection as a harmonious phenomenon would stretch the truth. Instead of accord, McCarthy's portrayal of life in a field of joined lines means that ethical junctions come in every point of contact, every place of encounter. My project will not treat "interconnection" as a sort of trite platitude. McCarthy's narrative does not support any glib affect. In fact, in the same scene referenced at this chapter's beginning, the scene that so powerfully articulates the message of joinery, readers are advised that leaving the tradition of binaries behind means entering into a philosophical dimension that is fraught with taxing questions. The attractiveness of borders lies in the seeming distance they generate, which allows in turn for disconnection, for a sense of freedom, and for diminished responsibilities. In Chapter 4, I will explore McCarthy's view of human-to-human inter-relationality as a bind that holds us to considerations that are difficult.

The sense of intimacy provoked through joinery means that lives and trajectories are understood as constituted through relational dynamics, where a decision made in one locale impacts another region. Because an event in one place radiates consequences in a host of other potential places, because an act in one life radiates consequences for other potential lives, developing a capacity for reading the tangled lines between becomes an imperative. Such knowledge is essential in understanding the shape our own lives take and in understanding the shapes we impose on other lives through the demands of our own.

Chapter 5

I see the ethical questions that assert so powerfully from a practice of reading made through this joined lens as essential to securing the place of literary studies and reading pedagogies and eco-literacies in an age of neoliberal governance, even as the

market-based metrics from an ascendant style of rationality call into question knowledge that is not easily, clearly convertible to monetary terms.

While there has been much work done in articulation of the theoretical frameworks that move us from a position of oppositional stances in the form of binaries, there is little articulation for how this theoretical move will translate to a practice of reading and teaching text. Chapter 5 will articulate a new engagement of literature from a lens of joinery. This lens will work to better map the interactions and commotions between human and nonhuman actors. My interpretative work in the four preceding chapters will be presented in terms of developing a new learning that moves beyond the borders that sustain anthropocentric orientations and that keep the humanities locked narrowly in a version of human life that is no longer factual and no longer ethically coherent. Specifically, I will center on the affective registers that emerge from a view of life as interconnected.

CHAPTER 2

ANIMALS

The first scene in *The Crossing* takes the reader into New Mexico, a region where "you could ride clear to Mexico and not strike a crossfence" (3). The young brothers Billy and Boyd Parham come as settlers to the "new country." Along the journey, one brother inducts the other into a language of place. McCarthy writes, "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). This naming through language is important because the boys will think of the land as "new" even as "most of the game [has been] slaughtered out of the country," and even as most of the forests have been "cut to feed the boilers of the stampmills at the mines" (C 25). The reader finds in the language of the boys an encoded cosmological outlook. The assertion of American land as "new country," despite the records of indigenous culture and national history, sets time at the start of a Euro-American calendar. Deployment of the word "wild" sets up a binary between "nature" and "culture."[1] The barrier between these two terms sponsors ancillary divides that have animals cut off from humans, life cut off from matter. Yet, there is a contradiction made apparent for the reader between the language used in the

[1] David Holloway's excellent study *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy* notes in his chapter on "The Ideology of Representation" the paradox of language to destabilize the concepts it relies on in expression. Holloway writes that McCarthy's language is full of contradictions that "will eventually point us beyond the novel and back to the broader ideological and material horizon within which these issues are played out" (28). By directing the reader to the ambivalence of language, which shows connective lines through words like "progress" to other words like "eradication" and "conquest," McCarthy sets up a dynamic reading that requires a critical reader.

descriptions of the boys and the language possible from other vantages within same scenes or events.

By situating the reader within a landscape where land is ravaged and other beings are ghosted from relations that end in such trajectories of violence, McCarthy reveals a record of relational ethics in the West as thoroughly blood-soaked. In McCarthy's telling, the ground of the West is "composted with the blood of ancients" (C 148). Remnant wolves eking out a place of survival in the valleys and canyons are said to evoke "ghosts of wolves" (C 31). The "new" nation recalls ghosts of nations (APH 5). Against so many displacements and eradications, time comes through as longer in span than any national record would indicate and longer in span than even the record of human life. His protagonists move in landscapes with skulls and bones white in the sun and littered across the land, with abandoned dwellings that reveal and conceal displaced and lost lives, with ancient footpaths as evidence of so many others who and traveled along the same pathways.

Against this long and complex backdrop white settlers are not really in a "new" land at all. Artifacts from the past challenge the certainty of delineating borders that would demarcate time on a calendar of then and now. In other words, with a view to such history the past is not held neatly away in a recess but instead emerges in the reality of the present and within a trajectory that constitutes the future. McCarthy's sense of time corresponds then to Faulkner's in that "The past is never dead. It's not even past" ("Requiem for a Nun").

In a terrain that is inscribed with natural and social records, like layers in a numismatic script, human violence against wolves offers a key analytic in understanding broader relational paradigms, including those that have been operative in past human and animal relations and those that are operative still. Richard Slotkin in his famous three-volume study of frontier violence draws a sharp connection between the figure of

the cowboy or hunter and the prototypical entrepreneur or capitalist. In *Regeneration Through Violence*, Slotkin writes that the "man on the make," whether in a suit or in boots, embodies essentially the same attitude "toward the world" and its fellows. Slotkin argues that both cowboy and capitalist rely "on material success on a massive scale." The capitalist privatizes land and space "to prove the power of engrossing more profitable land than [any] competitor" and the cowboy or the hunter kills "more beasts" and cuts "down more trees" than the other man (413). It is in this place of both dream and doom where the books in the trilogy transpire. The boys in *All the Pretty Horses* travel far and long to find an elusive place of belonging. Billy in *The Crossing* moves too as a traveler across the U.S. Mexico border looking for a home after his home is brutally lost. John Grady Cole in *Cities of the Plain* constructs a cabin to build a life with a girl he loves, a girl who will not ever cross the threshold of the built home with him.

In these unfolding narratives where disappointments and foreclosures shadow the dream of American prosperity, Jacqueline Scoones argues in her essay "The World on Fire" that *The Border Trilogy* presents a record on "a variety of extinctions both past and possible." In this description, Scoones suggests that McCarthy's novels work to insinuate the present moment as a reality emergent from a trajectory of past events. Scoones writes, "McCarthy portrays a variety of extinctions both past and possible: the extinction of families and homes, customs and beliefs, governments and nations, civilizations, salt seas, the fish that once swam in them, grey wolves and, by inference, all living things" ("The World on Fire" 131-132). It is as if the past makes the possible. This vision of ruin through extinction from certain ways of belief dislodges the favored notion of time in the West that has the nation getting ever stronger by getting ever bigger and more industrialized. In these early scenes of the second book, McCarthy instead trains the reader's view of what has been lost and destroyed through the reckless momentum of

conquest. This perspective in the wake of destruction challenges so many of the storied Western myths.

I will argue that cowboy narratives come through in the three books from a shattered lens where the myths have failed to hold. The old ideas that held the value of animals, for example, as hide or bone or meat show as ways of belief that endanger so much of the West and, by extension, so much of the planet. The mass extinctions happening across the planet today in the real time of the reader have no precedent in terms of scale or scope except for the dying of the dinosaurs over sixty-five million years ago. Yet, in a recent article in the journal *Nature* entitled "Has the Earth's Sixth Mass Extinction Already Arrived?," the authors note that "biologists now suggest that a sixth mass extinction may be under way, given the known species losses over the past few centuries and millennia." E.O. Wilson's language is even less subtle. In his work *The Future of Life*, he argues that mass extinctions characterized by the loss of at least seventy-five percent of species in a short amount of time are undoubtedly occurring today. Additionally, Elizabeth Kolbert in her noteworthy 2009 article writes, "It is now generally agreed among biologists that another mass extinction is under way. Though it's difficult to put a precise figure on the losses, it is estimated that, if current trends continue, by the end of this century as many as half of earth's species will be gone" ("The Sixth Extinction?"). So living within this contemporary time, with this scale of dying as a backdrop reality, changes the way readers engage text. The demands are different. Text must open an understanding of very endangered world.

One of the challenges that assert from a reading of *The Border Trilogy* during this time relates to the iconic figure of the cowboy, a being who sponsors a national identity as much as any individual one. The conventions of the Western genre imagines the cowboy as ruggedly alone, a romantic figure in his desire to flee messy, contentious

social issues through the reprieve of nature. In Don DeLilio's book *The Names,* he writes of Western space as prototypically empty and void:

> the classic thing has always been the space, the emptiness. The lines are drawn for us. All we have to do is insert the figures, men in dusty boots, certain faces. Figures in open space have always been what film is all about. American film. This is the situation. People in wilderness, a wild and barren space. The space is the desert, the movie screen, the strip of film, however you see it. What are people doing here? This is their existence. They're here to work out their existence. The space, this emptiness is what they have to confront. (198)

This perceived emptiness has in McCarthy's telling boys on horseback imagining old land as new.

As I noted in Chapter 1, however, McCarthy's cosmology permits no divides, so nature does not reveal the absence of society. Dana Phillips notes that McCarthy's vision thoroughly integrates nature and culture as "parts of the same continuum" ("History and the Ugly Facts" 446). From this, then, the cowboy is radically repositioned. He is positioned in an ecological frame that has contacts as constant. In fact, it may be said that this existential dimension marks a new kind of 'wilderness,' more radical in type than the old version in that humans and nonhumans mix together in every motley variability without the ordering or orienting grids of border and fence that might keep everything straight by keeping everything apart and distant.

So, this version of a "wild," where bodies are always in states of relation with a heterogeneous mix of other bodies and forms necessitates a reappraisal of ethical ideas. Suddenly mundane actions become transactions of a global potential. The emptiness of space that practically summoned a colonizing spirit gives way to space as crowded, rowdy, and vibrant. From this, animals are not removed from ethical significance but become actors of force. To recall Latour's notion, every thing in the world does something and, in this doing, every thing exerts a constitutive force upon reality. In "Hybrid Geographies: Rethinking the 'Human' in Human Geography," Sarah Whatmore

notes that a view of actors within interlocked networks establishes a view of activity as "constituted in and through . . . connectivities with heterogeneous others" (340), so there can be no apartness in emptiness.

Wolves

From McCarthy's sense of time and from the physics of joinery that has beings connected, ghost wolves lost in campaigns of extermination emerge in the early scenes of *The Crossing* as shadowforms to remnant live wolves and even to the human killers who have eradicated them. These humans are portrayed as oddly forlorn after the achievement of such death, as if suddenly and unexpectedly lonely in landspaces that they constructed discursively and philosophically as empty but that now register really as more barren given ways of activity. In one scene, a rancher in a Model A encounters Billy and draws him into a scene of memory where wolves animated the valley with sound. He remarks on the dead silence of the plains now, stating, "And you could hear em all across the valley. Them first warm nights. You'd nearly always hear em in that part of the valley. I aint heard one in years" (C 60). Further, in the book *Cities of the Plain,* a character named Johnson recalls:

> The day after my fiftieth birthday in March of nineteen and seventeen I rode into the old headquarters as the Wilde well and there was six dead wolves hangin on the fence. I rode along the fence and ran my hand along em. I looked at their eyes. A government trapper had brought em in the night before. They killed em with poison baits. Strychnine. Whatever. Up in the Sacramentos. A week later he brought in four more. I aint heard a wolf in this country since. (COP 126)

There is a note of loss in these recollections as if silent plains register an affect of grief even as the killings have come from deliberate attempts to eradicate an unwanted species. In his detailed study *Vanishing Lobo: The Mexican Wolf and the Southwest,* James C. Burbank writes that after the extermination of wolves those dedicated to their

eradication often spoke with more than a hint of mourning.[2] Burbank attributes this to a "haunting sadness" that "fill[s] the void remaining after so much death and destruction" (100). In a work entitled *A Feathered River Across the Sky*, Joel Greenberg documents the extinction of the passenger pigeon in America. Once one of the most abundant bird species in North America, Greenberg explains that after the pigeon was eradicated false sightings continued to circulate. It was, as Jonathan Rosen writes in his review of the book, as if the conjured "flocks were like phantom limbs that the country kept feeling," (*"The Birds"* 65). Rosen wonders if these sightings indicate a psychic strain from killing, as if "the bird's disappearance, and the human role in it, was simply too much to bear" (65).

The wolf, of course, has long signified the "absolute alterity of the neighbor," to use Derrida's term ("The Animal That Therefore I Am"). This is to say that for many Westerners the wolf has been a proximate being that cannot be lived with. Burbank notes that the very image of the wolf is seen historically as "the dreaded 'Other'" (*Vanishing Lobo: The Mexican Wolf and the Southwest* 67). Encoded in this comment is the idea that borders and fences, traps and bounties have not held this dreaded other sufficiently at bay. The wolf like the coyote or the magpie or the crow or any other perceived pest keeps intruding, keeps confounding. In the way that McCarthy portrays the wolf, the reader finds that the animal in his fiction is not always lovable, agreeable, or utilizable. This recognition registers the existential intimacies that happen in a cosmology of joinery with difficult and strange and onerous others as challenging to the moral guideposts of the past, in that ethical progress must come with that which is difficult to admit.

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[2] In his book *Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold recorded what is now a well-known story of encounter with a wolf and her six pups. Leopold killed the wolf as custom prescribes, yet the image of her extinguished eyes, her recumbent form in the sand of a river bank, haunted his life and his writings.

Posthuman theory emphasizes these difficult associations as well, as the figure of Frankenstein, for example, receives ample attention, along with the replicants in the film *Blade Runner*, or genetically modified animals, such as the rabbits made to glow in the dark from the insertion of jellyfish DNA, or the radical creatures sculpted by the artist Patricia Piccinini. Her creatures provide affective reactions of repulsion or ridicule by comprising hybrid ontologies or by appearing as radically different yet related according to ecology.[3] In this, creatures fall outside traditional moral frameworks. In Donna Haraway's essay "Speculative Fabulations for Technoculture's Generations," she notes that Piccinini's nondefinable creatures are not human and are not animal. Their forms combine features and qualities of both, so that they belong nowhere. They are in their mixture out of place in a world of cute and cuddly animals that inspire environmental campaigns. Piccinini's creatures challenge the viewer. In this, they make an ethical appeal, for their faces and postures evoke vulnerability. In the encounter with these strange post-others, the viewer is poised to decide what to do with beings of no clear utility, of no easy identifiable sameness and, yet, still with a measure of relatableness given the summons of their expressions and postures. In the work *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature,* Val Plumwood indicts the ascendant tendency to homogenize difference when constructing the bounds of community that will determine ethical obligation. Her insights are important in an interconnected world because a new, coherent ethics must support exactly those beings who have fallen beyond care. In this recognition, we come to the question of the animal. What is the metric of value for

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[3] A very recent BBC story boldly proclaims: "We hate to break it you, but you're not totally human. It's nothing about you personally. It's just that more than 90% of the cells in the human body are actually parasites. You might feel like a single being, but you're really more of a bug city, teeming with different species" ("The Disgusting Creatures Inhabiting Your Body" April 2015). Bennett notes too that human bodies are not only "material," but that this materiality is "not fully or exclusively human. My flesh is populated and constituted by different swarms of foreigners . . . the bacteria in the human microbiome collectively possess at least 100 times as many genes as the mere 20,000 or so in the human genome." This has the human body really "an array of bodies, many different kinds of them in a nested set of microbiomes" (Vibrant Matter 112-13).

nonhuman beings?[4] Is value measured only in utility, so that animals attain significance only in the economic terms of a value held in hide, horn, bone or meat, which is to say that the animal must die to register? And if this is not ethically good enough, how do we move outside a provisional framework that constructs a sense of concern from sameness or utility?

With those questions in mind, readers of *The Crossing* hear the wolves before they see them. Within the first year of dwelling in the "new" land, Billy wakes to the sound of "wolves in the low hills to the west of the house and he knew that they would be coming out onto the plain in the new snow to run antelope in the moonlight" (4). In this important scene, the howling voice of the animal breaks the border meant to bound home, as a domesticate realm, apart from nature, which would exist as an opposing space, "a physical place to which we can go" ("Otherwordly Conversations" 66). Yet in this scene, the border is of insufficient width, for the *outside* pulls *inward* and the *inside* moves *out*, underscoring all the while the movement of borderlines and the porosity of erected walls.

> He pulled his breeches off the footboard of the bed and got his shirt and his blanketlined duckingcoat and got his boots from under the bed and went out to the kitchen and dressed in the dark by the faint warmth of the stove and held his boots to the windowlight to pair them left and right and pulled them on and rose and went to the kitchen door and stepped out and closed the door behind him. (C 1)

To analyze this scene in light of humans and animals in perpetual relation, a view that weaves nature and culture together through the animal and human, a view demanded by McCarthy's narrative technique, the reader detects the way that the *inside* and *outside*

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[4] In A Sand County Almanac, Aldo Leopold confronted the wolf as a being with not "economic validity." Leopold shot and killed a wolf and marked the experience as a turning point in his life. He writes, "We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view."

become indivisible. The house is lit by the moon and warmed by a stove fed on wood. The interior of the home is enlivened with the sound of outside animal life. Billy and his family are clothed and kept in wool, leather, and other fabrics or materials provided by animals and plants. Tools are shaped forms of matter in the form of iron, wood, leather, and rock. Human bodies are fed on water, vegetable, mineral, and protein, so that humanness is substantiated directly from and indirectly through nonhumanness. The home sits squarely upon a foundation of dirt and stone.

It may seem that all of these statements are of such a simplistic nature that they deserve no mention. I will suggest that they have a radical quality given the extent to which human life has been suspended above material relations. Human thinking directs very rarely at the subterranean level where, say, roots and mites, algae and insects, worms and microorganisms perform the underground labors that make above ground living possible.[5] Yet a focus on these subterranean energies, on bodies and forms and processes traditionally held out of frame, may finally open critical attention to entities and spaces that haven't been thoroughly or thoughtfully explored. To see, in other words, the radical connection between *below* and *above* might mean developing a more complex and more expansive sense of ethical relationality. From a mode of analysis that brings to view the connective energies happening through vast life fields, attention may direct at the ways of existence from enmeshed states instead of from the far more common posture of individual formations. In the first book of the trilogy, *All the Pretty Horses*, the protagonist John Grady Cole looks up one evening "at the stars in their

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[5] Mick Smith in "Dis(appearance): Earth, Ethics and Apparently (in)Significant Others" references contemporary research suggesting that soil biodiversity is far more diverse than we suspect. Science has had a difficult time measuring the level of diversity for so many of the "species" break the parameters for defining in that they are symbiotic and of uncertain "taxonomical unit" (23). Smith writes, "What is more the 'individuals' constituting the soil community are not isolable in other senses, including their intimate inter-dependencies on each other, exemplified by the symbiotic relations…" (24). The soil terrain one of "branching networks" where fungi (a type called Glomeromycota) depend symbiotically on plant roots and together these forms "are never found in isolation" (25). This interplay evolved more than 400 million years ago.

places and the hot belt of matter" that is said to run "the chord of the dark vault overhead" and he feels, with his back flat against the dirt, with "his hands on the ground" the world "all of it taut and trembling and moving enormous and alive under his hands" (APH 119). Tim Ingold in his essay "Temporality of Landscape" writes that "forms of landscape are not . . . prepared in advance for creatures to occupy, nor are the bodily forms of those creatures independently specified in their genetic makeup" (63). Rather, life is a "processual unfolding of a total field of relations" (63). This has the human happening with these other beings and forms and forces, so that attention away from these relations misses the way life unfolds. In another scene where cranes pass overhead in flight their movement is said to reveal in "thin echelons" a kind of hidden trail, not just a trail in the sense of a flight path but a trail imprinted in "unseen corridors writ in their blood a hundred thousand years" (C 328). In these descriptions there is a vision of life where the line between space and corporeal body blurs. In fact, McCarthy's representation of evolutionary time lies in the very depiction of an integrated body, a material body. The body issues from the emergent conditions and trajectories that happen within a joined life field. In this way, to rid the world of wolves or cranes or any other creature would be to dissolve a vast record of evolutionary history.

The constant interexchanges and interrelations that connect human existence within a field of collective relations become the basis for understanding the animal as a being of ethical significance. On the plains when Billy first encounters wolves in a pack, he sees the animals, "Loping and twisting. Dancing. Tunneling their noses in the snow. Loping and running and rising by twos in a standing dance and running on again . . . they passed within twenty feet of where he lay" (C 4). This image of interrelational movements compels a visceral change in the boy. In the same scene, Billy is said to "see their almond eyes in the moonlight. He could hear their breath. He could feel the presence of their knowing that was electric in the air" (C 4). There is a force from bodies

in relation, in radius. The wolves "bunched and nuzzled and licked one another." Then, because they too recognize another presence they stop. "They stood with their ears cocked. Some with one forefoot raised to their chest. They were looking at him. He did not breathe. They did not breathe. They stood. (C 4) In this moment of encounter, the pack is corporeally synchronized. In movement, they appear to dance together. The dance represents both the differentiation of the body from the pack, in that each wolf is unique, and the body's integration within the pack, in that the unique being cannot *be* except to *be* within a collective. Positioned in contact with the wolves, Billy's breath alters to issue in phase with the breathing of the group.

Remnant Wolf

When Billy reaches the age of sixteen, all of the wolves except one are essentially eradicated from the region of New Mexico. A remnant being, this last wolf, is said to carry her first litter. Initially from Mexico, the wolf moves into a region converted to rangelands that are meant to grow cattle. She feeds on calves owned by the Parham family, which has Billy and his father locating stored traps and vials of scent for baiting. Despite repeated efforts to trap her, she moves across landscapes where wire fences are strewn like "bad sutures." She is out of a place to live. She moves carefully, attuned to cues that come through the intelligence of her bloodline. These ancestral others, wolves that had "hunted camels and primitive toy horses on these grounds" are literally non-present but still vibrantly real (C 24-25). The wolf "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 are the rules of a redrawn world, one made in the blueprint of ownership that expels. "These were the new protocols. Strictures that had not existed before. Now they did" (C 25).

In these depictions of the animal, the traditional representation that presents an

animal as blank and mute, a kind of stock object, is undone. The wolf is a being of intellectual depth and emotional attachment.

> She carried a scabbedover wound on her hip where her mate had bitten her two weeks before somewhere in the mountains of Sonora. He'd bitten her because she would not leave him. Standing with one forefoot in the jaws of a steeltrap and snarling at her to drive her off where she lay just beyond the reach of the chain. She flattened her ears and whined and she would not leave. In the morning they came on horses. She watched from a slope a hundred yards away as he stood up to meet them. (C 24)

In fact, her character capacities actually work to redirect the optic of analysis back on the human, so that readers are prompted to ask about philosophies that have made animals less. Why do different beings so often come through as lesser beings according to some human belief systems? McCarthy encourages this reflexive line of thinking not only from his depiction of the wolf but from his presentation of humankind through her gaze. John Berger's excellent essay "Why Look at Animals?" argues that animals are not only held by the look of man but that they look back at mankind. Berger notes, "The animal scrutinizes him across a narrow abyss of noncomprehension. This is why the man can surprise the animal. Yet the animal — even if domesticated — can also surprise the man. The man too is looking across a similar, but not identical, abyss of noncomprehension. And this is so wherever he looks. He is always looking across ignorance and fear" (*The Animal Reader* 252).

Picking up in this place where the animal looks across an abyss of made separateness, man is seen in McCarthy's telling as a "malignant lesser god come pale and naked and alien to slaughter all his clan and kin and rout them from their house. A god insatiable whom no ceding could appease nor any measure of blood" (C 17). This alien being imagines himself as put upon the earth but somehow not of the earth. This alien being imagines other creatures of the earth as less for their irrefutable belongingness. This "lesser god" makes a stark contrast to the more ascendant notion of humanity as imbibed with divinity, touched, as it were, in Michelangelo's depiction by the tip of God's

finger. In Chapter 1, I noted the staying power in the Christian concept of dominion, which establishes the supremacy of the human over "every thing that moveth." It might be from the basis of this biblical formula, purporting as a moral guide, that Scoones offers another biblical verse as a preface to her essay: "The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every bird of the air, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered" (*Genesis* 9.2). These passages together capture a trajectory of relations with animals that has dominion inspiring dread in the beasts of the earth.

The record of exterminating wolves in the American West exists as an opus of cruelty. In the book *Of Wolves and Men*, Barry Lopez states that in the thirty years after 1865 wolf killers, or "wolfers" as they were known, slaughtered "virtually every wolf from Texas to the Dakotas, from Missouri to Colorado" (178). During the period from 1875 to 1895, killing wolves with strychnine reached a zenith. Poison released into the matrix of connected life radiated outward, so that killings spread to creatures that fed on infested wolf carcasses, spread to soil and water, spread long in time and expansively in range. How to calculate this kind of dying? With no measurement easily available, we know still that the killing of wolves tallied in a wide, more profound biocentric dying.[6] Lopez writes:

> No one knows how many animals were killed on the plains from, say, 1850 to 1900. If you count the buffalo hides and the antelope for backstraps and the passenger pigeons for target practice and the Indian ponies (by whites, to keep the Indian poor), it is conceivable that 500 million creatures died. Perhaps 1 million wolves; 2 million. The numbers no longer have meaning. (*Of Wolves and Men* 180)

[6] Barry Lopez in *Of Wolves and Men* recounts that killing wolves in the American West despite attempts to rhetorically legitimize wolf killings – even to situate the slaughter as a kind of human "righteousness" —often resembled a form of blood sport. Lopez writes that "wolfers," "set wolves on fire and tore their jaws out and cut their Achilles tendons and turned dogs loose on them. They poisoned them with strychnine, arsenic, and cyanide, on such a scale that millions of other animals — raccoons, black-footed ferrets, red foxes, ravens, red-tailed hawks, eagles, ground squirrels, wolverines — were killed incidentally in the process" (139).

This passage that registers death as a kind of contagion through a joined field undoes a notion of autonomous bodies disconnected from one another. It undoes the idea that an act done in "nature" stays within that segregated realm. In tracing the lines on fatalities over time, the shape of spreading death happens in a pattern that reveals a connected circuitry. The image might resemble something like a Jackson Pollock painting with its mass of lines, drip points, and splashes of varied color.[7] In fact in the essay "Fractal Expressionism: Where Art Meets Science," Richard Taylor argues that Pollock's accumulative layering of paint, vibrancy of color, and composition of lines evoke an ecological topography. I suggest that Pollock represents a visual guide for imagining a difficult, even unpopular conception of violence. To think through the historical record of wolf extermination is helped by thinking through Pollock's nested, convergent patterns which present activity in a pacing that stalls in the thick lines and intensifies or ruptures in splashes. We see in this image too the way that lines intersect and join so that a fate can be shared.

True to historical records that portray the wolf's wily intelligence, the she-wolf digs out traps without being caught in their teeth. "She circled the set for the better part of an hour sorting and indexing the varied scents and ordering their sequences in an effort to reconstruct events that had taken place here . . . " (C 26). And, "By evening she'd found all eight of the sets" (C 26). With his efforts to catch her foiled, Billy goes to visit an old trapper named Don Arnulfo for guidance. The old man speaks of wolves, but does so in an intonation of grave loss. In fact, the whole atmosphere surrounding the man is permeated in grief.

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[7] In the essay "Fractal Expressionism: Where Art Meets Science," Richard Taylor argues that Pollock's work in its cumulative layering, its vibrancy of color, and the relational dynamics that accent line intensities demonstrates characteristics common to ecological topologies.

Arnulfo lies prone in a corner in a room, "in a dark cell of a room at the back of the house" (C 42). He "looked as if he'd been thrown there" (C 44). The old man tells Billy that all the wolves of the region are gone, caught by trappers like him. Despite his study of wolves as a hunter of wolves and his proximity to them from this basis, Arnulfo proclaims that the wolf is a being beyond comprehension:

> You want to catch this wolf, the old man said. Maybe you want the skin so you can get some money. . . . You can do that. But where is the wolf? . . . If you want to see it you have to see it on its own ground. If you catch it you lose it. And where it goes there is no coming back from. Not even God can bring it back. (C 46)

The old man's description of the wolf puts the animal outside human knowing and language. This positionality of the other evokes Levinas who argues that ethics cannot hinge on knowing or comprehension. The worth of the other may be elusive, but the worth of the other need not present itself to ensure an ethical reaction. Beings most in need typically defy understanding, as they can occupy places of criminality or rebellion or heresy. Yet these are the beings most in need of an ethical response. Arnulfo states that humans see "only that which they name and call out to one another but the world between is invisible to them" (C 46). Later in the book, in a scene where spectators pay to see the captured wolf in a cage, Arnulfo's statements resonate. The wolf is described by some in the scene with language that has little to do with her beingness and more to do with the preformulated beliefs about her.[8]

> An old woman said that the wolf had been brought from the sierras where it had eaten many schoolchildren. Another woman said that it had been captured in the company of a young boy who had run away naked into the woods. A third said that the hunters who had brought the wolf down out of the sierras had been followed by other wolves who howled at night from the darkness beyond the fire and some of the hunters had said that these wolves were no right wolves. (C102)

[8] When Renee Askins testified before a House committee on the reintroduction of the wolf to Yellowstone in 1995, she highlighted this constructed being made to human form. "Wolves have never been just wolves: the wolf is the devil's keeper, the slayer of innocent girls, the nurturer of abandoned children, the sacred hunter, the ghostly creature of myth and legend."

Latour notes in *Politics of Nature* that, "We all work constantly to make things relevant to what we say about them" (85). What if what is said is at least said from a recalibrated place of human existence as *alongside* other life forms? What if what is said comes iterated from a place of humility that acknowledges the noncomprehension of beings and things? Would this reframing through language and its deployment work to reframe ideas or to initiate new thinking? Would the animal register differently from a mode of description that accents relational connections instead of segregations? It is, of course, my claim in this project that interpreting the animal as an agent in the affairs of the world sponsors a different kind of ethical attention to animal welfare and even to human welfare. In fact, ethical concern for the animal in a space of joinery translates to a conjoint ethical attention toward human justice, given that one is not separate from the other at all. This attention forbids then any easy foreclosure of responsibility, but it demands much for practitioners, as the move is made beyond an ethical defining sponsored only in self-interest.

Arnulfo

Before getting to a crucial scene where Billy finally comes to encounter the wolf directly, I want to zoom in upon an equally important scene involving the character of Arnulfo. In this scene with a human other, the reader is presented with a portrait of similarities between the life of the man in the back room and the life of a beast relegated to extinction. Before Billy encounters the wolf directly, he encounters this old man. The woman who is supposed to care for the man does not, and further she "seem[s] untroubled that the old man lay alone in the dark at the rear of the house" (C 47).

The basis of the woman's neglect keeps with McCarthy's theme regarding conventional morality as a framework that issues from narrow or parochial kinds of affiliations. Indeed, the basis of the woman's neglect, like the neglect of the priest for the

heretic in the fallen church, issues not in contradiction with her moral vision but in accordance with it. This is a striking concept in *The Border Trilogy*. Ethical failures are not deviant from the frameworks that sponsor them but adherent to them. Thus the site of the church shows most profoundly the lapses in ethics. Though the man is probably related to the woman, she claims no relation. She argues instead, "He is nothing to me. No hay parentesco," which translates to 'he is not my relative or kin' (C 48). The reader gathers from this scene that because the old man thinks outside the catechisms of religious thought, he is labeled "brujo" and accused of "know[ing] better than the priest" or knowing even "better than God" (48). With this declaration, the woman abandons the man in the certainty that God no longer cares about him because she no longer cares about him. Unsettled by the scene, Billy attempts to leave. Yet, she stops him to ask, "You know what a terrible thing it is to die without God? To be the one that God cast aside?" (C 48).

In the collapsed church scene, the former cleric expresses the way that a different cosmological vision issues a different ethics because how one situates oneself in relation determine a range of felt responsibility. He tells Billy that the "heretic's first act is to name his brother." This is an act of heresy against an ethical outlook from a joined cosmology because there can be no such view of an elect man "because there is no man who is not" (C 158). The woman's sense of morality, which is propped and supported by her religion, extends care and compassion to some but excludes multitudes of others from the basis of seeing some as elect and others as not. Thus the old man, like the heretic in the fallen structure, represents a figure on the short-end of a world outlook made according to borders that enclose the needed and loved from the unwanted and despised. It is my claim that the semblance of moral systems structured from this orientation close obligation in a justification of unworthiness or cost or inconvenience. And in this way, the portrait of the woman is really a representation of a normative

morality. Billy is changed by the encounter with the old man and by seeing the woman in a stance of relation to the old man.

Two days later, by chance, Billy sees the marks of the wolf and makes "two blind sets," though "his heart was not in it" (C49). Returning to the sets in the morning light, the wolf stands to meet him with her right forefoot held in the metal teeth. In the formulaic trope of a Western novel, the hero meets his nemesis in a climatic moment. From spaghetti westerns, readers expect perhaps that the white-hatted hero will prevail triumphantly. Yet, this is a new Western narrative from a different vision, and the tropes are gone. When Billy stands before the wolf, his desire to kill her has been largely neutralized by both the memory of in an earlier time wolves "loping and twisting" on the plains in a kind of relational dance and by the encounter with the old man, who in his message to the boy and in the evidence of his life's condition undermines the project of further killing. When the reader arrives with Billy, then, upon the scene of capture, the terms "good" and "evil" fail in both directions, and we get two beings facing each other in a stance symbolizing the contact always happening at some level in a cosmology of joinery.

Before the wolf, Billy is "in no way prepared" for the encounter (C53). There are long pauses, long moments of stilled movement. Finally, Billy stands "the rifle before him and [holds] it by the forestock and he squatted there for a long time" (C 52-53). The wolf "crouched slightly. As if she'd try to hide. Then she stood again and looked at him and looked off toward the mountains [. . .] When he approached she bared her teeth but she did not growl and she kept her yellow eyes from off his person. White bone showed in the bloody wound between the jaws of the trap" (C 52). The wolf's gaze is both attentive to the human and removed. Judith Butler has written that the defenselessness of another being works unpredictably to cue an ethic of compassion or to incite a reaction of violence. These divergent outcomes seem as contradictory responses, not

supposed to be potential within the same moment but vulnerability opens both possibilities. The wolf avoids meeting Billy's gaze, whether from a pride unsubdued even by the circumstance of her confinement, or from a recalcitrance in her blood to a fate statistically predicted at her birth or perhaps from a place of resignation given the way that wolf killings are commonplace. Whatever it is, the reader only knows that "She looked toward him with her yellow eyes and closed them slowly and then looked away" (C 54). Even in their refusal to look, however, her eyes reveal intelligence and an inner-world beyond the physicality of body. The reader waits in the narrative moment and contemplates internally the right thing.

In *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, Hans-Robert Jauss articulates a merged horizon that happens as a place within the reader during states of engagement that come through as states of dispossession from an immediate reality to an attunement to the realities of the characters. J. Hillis Miller in *The Ethics of Reading* argues that the act of engaging literature submits the reader to the injunctions of the text and situates him or her within the framework of "I must." This "I must" thought is really more a question than a certainty of action or thought in that the statement alludes to the thinking through of options given the particulars of the narrative scene. The force of the narrative inducts the reader out of his or her real frame and induces a dispossession of self that marks a movement like the movement of cognition and affect like the required movement transacted in empathy.

The decision of the boy surprises the reader. In a most strange turn, he elects to release the wolf in the mountains of Mexico, accompanying her there, where he hopes she will be safe from traps and rifles. Assigning this decision to the boy comes from a habit of placing the human as the locus of action. Yet an assemblage view of action opens the decision to the force of other agents. If there can be no individuals, as Haraway argued, then there can be no individual decisions. The scene presents, then, a

way into seeing not only an agency that is collective but an ethics made from the summons of existence as interconnected. What forces play on the scene? Who are the actors? In other words, what things exert a force? With these questions in mind, we need to enter back into the narrative.

Billy is looking at the wolf and then moving to rig together a muzzle and a leash that will hold: "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" (C 79). This last line indicates a sense of responsibility for the wolf, even though he cannot place her within a frame of value except as bounty. At the crossroads, when Billy turns his horse away from home and toward distant mountains to travel with the wolf in the linguistic formation of "they," he damns the expectations that would require the wolf's death. "Damn all of it, the boy said. Just damn all of it. He tuned the horse and crossed a ditch and rode up onto a broad plain that stretched away before him south toward the mountains of Mexico" (C 63). This moment becomes an event in time that will sponsor other successive moments. Because *being* entails a process of *being with* and because agency is distributed across bodies so that even nonhuman bodies and forms exert force, all manner of beings may find themselves implicated in lives besides their own. This is the "haltstictch in the workings of things," as McCarthy writes (COP 285). The anxiety in each event reveals "only at the surrender of every alternate course" (COP 274). In this we confront, as the man under the interstate pass in *Cities of Plain* notes, the limitations of preparation for our own course and for the radiating consequences a single life compels on other lives.

The trapping scene presents a moment in text that allows the reader to uncover in a creative and critical way the variety of hidden, encrypted presences that are ultimately present in life as a textured joinery. The work of assembling these actors so as to reveal the beings and forms and technologies and policies behind the obvious actors becomes a

way of opening vision to the multitudes who exist as other presences behind beings, perhaps seemingly individual beings, behind perhaps seemingly singular events, to give rise to a vision of the collective as a formation. This way of seeing multitudes where there have been only single forms or events opens a new view to existence as crowded and conjunctive. The implications for this way of seeing create a sense of the public behind the singular. This public includes nonhumans as constituting actors. It is my claim that readers trained to see moments of convergence in text, so that multiplicities of actors emerge as forceful, can participate in the ecological work of reframing human life as life intimate with vast others, distant others, "least" others, and even animal others.

The trapping scene very obviously brings beings into contact. The scene presents the wolf, pups in her belly, a horse, a human. To look deeper, however, is to encounter the presence of politicians who compose bounties, to see Billy's father and other trappers like Echols and Arnulfo. It is to see the presence of authors of books, communities of neighbors, fellow ranchers. The very ethos of ranching is evident in scene. It is to hear voices from the pulpit. To see widely enough, other wolves join this particular wolf, so that an immense pack assembles behind this remnant being. Even the "least things" such as snow and wind, tree and plant life occupy the scene vibrantly. For example, without snow imprinting tracks, Billy would not have seen the wolf's mark. Without this simple, small thing, everything would have turned differently. The plant plays on the scene by showing the way that grasslands become range for grazing, for the way that a vast diversity of flora get subsumed as feed. Ingold writes, "plants and animals have been caught up in socio-technical networks with humans for more than 30,000 years, before we recognized ourselves as homo sapiens" (1995b 344). Even the geography of New Mexico, the small patch of ground where the boy and wolf meet, would open from the proper ecological optic to reveal encrypted other settings, sites such as the valleys and mountains of Mexico where the wolf originates or Washington, D.C. where wolf

bounties are established as policy. Oneida, New York would intersect through New Mexico as it marks the manufacturing site for the Newhouse trap that holds the wolf and suspends the action.[9] To some extent, then, all of the actors, sites, and events just mentioned have something to do with the boy and with the wolf coming to friction.

I want to suggest that training a perspective that sees more fully the range of factors behind an on-page event or a single character develops an off-page ability to understand the complexities of human and nonhuman interactions. From this approach, learners may become more tuned to the ways that animals and materialities operate co-constitutively alongside humans to create living moments. This way of reading marks an interpretative framework that moves beyond the centralization of human life, which positions the human in a kind of existential vacuum, to a view of assemblages.

Classic liberal-humanist modes of interpretation have typically worked correspondent with larger Western philosophies to posit the human as unitary and agentic in an otherwise brute, passive world. This interpretative method complements the Western novel's trope of a hero in quest of unbounded freedom, a freedom usually achieved in the tranquility of some pristine natural setting, a setting removed from society and from human entanglements. In a paradoxical way, then, this exclusive focus on the human actually establishes more than a false premise for human existence. It establishes a view of human life as a corruptive presence in nature. It is as if any movement across the divides that have separated humans from nature forsakes the integrity of the divides by showing their feeble construct, and whole organizing schemes collapse like architecture built upon sand. The analog for this collapse lies in the detection of impurities, which is to say that evidence of nature and culture enmeshed shows the divides that have staked them apart as faulty and the thinking behind this

[9] Sewell Newhouse's traps provided a key economic support to the religious community that was experimenting with perfectionism through a concept of eugenics. Bill J. Leonard's book *A Sense of Heart: Christian Religious Experience in the United States* recounts the evangelical order of the original Oneida society.

move as distortive. A relational paradigm, on the other hand, moves conceptualizations away from the polar formations of a false, unattainable purity toward the vast middle ground where everything comes together, sometimes cooperatively and sometimes frictionally. Graham Harman notes that, "When subject and object are identified with human and world, we have a disaster on our hands, since truth and falsity are now apportioned among two distinct kinds of beings" (*Prince of Networks* 111).

Journey

The portrait of the boy and the wolf and the horse – a motley "they" - on a journey together into Mexico is never presented as an easy journey or one of guaranteed outcome. It is at times comically absurd, tragic, and poignant. It is at times merely baffling. Yet Billy and the wolf do come to some kind of affinity. To get her to drink without loosening the muzzle, Billy trickles "water between her teeth." He touches "the pleated corner of her mouth" and "studies the veined and velvet grotto into which the audible world poured" (C 76). He even begins to talk to her. In the work *When Species Meet*, Haraway writes of the importance of touch as a way of imprinting commitment.

> My premise is that touch ramifies and shapes accountability. Accountability, caring for, being affected, and entering into responsibility are not ethical abstractions; these mundane, prosaic things are the result of having truck with each other. Touch does not make one small; it peppers its partners with attachment sites for world making. Touch, regard, looking back, becoming with –all these make us responsible in unpredictable ways for which world. (36)

This communication through touch conveys a sense of concern and care for the wolf's survival. It communicates Billy's sincerity. He is bound not just from a sense of obligation for the wolf's future, but from the sense that his own future moves forward in a trajectory that incorporates the response that is made in the moment. Of course, the difficulty of this acceptance lies in the outcome not being known, and the unknowingness calling into question the cost of the investment. This acknowledges the lack of reward in

an act of ethical goodness. In religious frames there is the belief that a good deed unnoticed in this life at least finds reward in some other realm. The secular dilemma, however, comes in the lack of promise. Each small act, each attempt must be made on its own without accolade.

On the road, the human-wolf union never reaches a romanticized accord. Billy is always watchful of the holding strength of the muzzle, and the wolf keeps an eye on him: "He woke all night with the cold. He'd rise and mend back the fire and she was always watching him. 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" (C 73). This accent on a "void" reiterates the ethical exchange as happening outside the expectation of knowing or ease or simplicity.

When the wolf is taken from Billy deep in Mexico, the events that play out happen from interactions that transpire behind the scenes. For example, after being taken from Billy, the wolf is loaded onto a cart and sent to a fair where spectators pay to see her. She is then moved to a hacienda equipped with an elaborate dog-fighting arena. In between transports, Billy pleads his case, her case, and waits for decisions that will inevitably alter his fate, her fate, together, differently. These decisions come or they promise to come from these hidden forces. In the dog-fighting arena where Billy shoots the wolf to spare her a more brutal dying, humans gather in tiered bleachers and become in this arrangement a visual for the rowdy, chaotic congresses that gather always in even subtle or routine life moments. The possible other bodies that come to bear on events show the complexity of relational networks that contain humans and nonhumans. Yet they also show evidence of lives as indelibly interwoven, which captures the vulnerability inherent to living.

Dog

I have in this chapter traced over lines of connection to highlight their convergent shape, inking them in darker and darker contrast so that the pattern of relation emerges to view. In this inking, connections come through as vast, and, in this vastness, the ease of moral distance gives way to intimacies that are constraining and taxing. The final jarring scene from *The Crossing* picks up with an older and worn version of Billy, no longer a boy. At this point in the narrative a lot has happened. He has lost his family and even his brother, Boyd. At this point, Billy has met the former cleric and has been exposed to the message of joinery. He is weary of life that holds such reservoirs of implication and consequence, for there is no space for withdrawal.

Perpetually on the road, Billy rides in country "all catclaw and creosote" with "no fences and little grass" (C 422). The absence of fence and grass mark the space as unclaimed, as a site of ruin:

> The castoff tirecasings from the overland trucks lay coiled and corrugated by the highwayside like the sloughed and sunblacked hides of old dryland saurians shed along the tarmac roadway there. The wind blew down from the north and then the rain blew down and went gusting in sheets across the road before him. (C 423)

Billy is hungry and cold and alone. He sees "three buildings of adobe set just off the road that had at one time been a waystation in that country" and notes that though "the roofs were all but gone and most of the vigas carried off" and though "[t]here was an old rusty orange gas pump out front with the glass broken out of the top of it" (C 423), he will use the buildings for shelter. In the abandonment, Billy eats "sardines out of a can and [watches] the rain." An old yellow dog enters. The reader placed in this moment is presented with an analog that references the earlier trapping scene. The intrusive presence of the yellow dog disrupts Billy. The dog may very well find the human presence a nuisance.

The description of the old dog works along the favored lines of posthuman creaturely characterization in that his form challenges any easy belonging:

> It was an old dog gone gray about the muzzle and it was horribly crippled in its hindquarters and its head was askew someway on its body and it moved grotesquely. An arthritic and illjoined thing that crabbed sideways and sniffed at the floor to pick up the man's scent and then raised its head and nudged the air with its nose and tried to sort him from the shadows with its milky half blind eyes . . . It stood there inside the door with the rain falling in the weeds and gravel behind it and it was wet and wretched and so scarred and broken that it might have been patched up out of parts of dogs by demented vivisectionists. (C 423)

Unlike the earlier scene with the wolf, Billy does not respond to the needs of the dog even minimally by, say, allowing it to continue sleeping at the opposite end of the building. He usurps the dog's place and drives it out into the storm. "He pried a loose clod of mud from the wall and threw it" (C 424). Finding that the dog would not move, he "rose to his feet and cast about for a weapon" (C 424). "He crossed the room and went out in the rain and walked around his side of the building. When he came back he had in his fist a threefoot length of waterpipe and with it he advanced upon the dog. Go on, he shouted. Git" (C424). His reaction in the scene is out of character. Even after the dog reluctantly leaves, Billy follows it outside in the rain and wind. The long passage to follow shows the exchange:

> Outside it had stopped at the edge of the road and it stood in the rain looking back. It had perhaps once been a hunting dog, perhaps left for dead in the mountains or by some highway. Repository for ten thousand indignities and the harbinger of God knew what. He bent and clawed up a handful of small rocks from the gravel apron and slung them. The dog raised its misshapen head and howled weirdly. He advanced upon it and it set off up the road. He ran after it and threw more rocks and shouted at it and he slung the length of the pipe. It went clanging and skittering up the road behind the dog and the dog howled again and began to run, hobbling brokenly on its twisted legs with the strange head agoggle on its neck. As it went it raised its mouth sideways and howled again with a terrible sound. Something not of this earth. As if some awful composite of grief had broke through from the preterite world. It tottered away up the road in the rain on its stricken legs and as it went it howled again and again in its heart's despair until it was gone from all sight and all sound in the night's onset. (C 424-425)

The howl of the dog is as the sound of all deprivation and injustice and rejection. The aggression Billy shows in driving the dog from the shelter is well out of proportion with the situational demands, for he must only allow the dog to sleep in a corner of a big abandoned space. Yet, the larger demands, I want to emphasize, come in facing the dog in its state and meeting the demands its state requires. This 'facing' task which is different from the 'face' so central to Levinasian philosophy requires a broader confronting toward the summons that evokes obligation, that is any obligation and from any particular face or even, as the dog presents, any being or form or entity without a face. Billy, of course, comes from a context where facing the wolf in an earlier scene from his life bound him to her being, so he knows of this as binding. Levinas knew that to behold another being in a condition of suffering was to obligate oneself, to be as a hostage to the other.[10] In the excellent work *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler notes that "moral address is important for understanding how moral authority is introduced and sustained if we accept not just that we address others when we speak, but that in some way we come to exist, as it were, in the moment of being addressed, and something about our existence proves precarious when that address fails" (130). Butler's insights propel consideration toward the idea that the failure to heed an address by another – even a dog or perhaps especially a dog – violates an existential contract that is as inscribed in the blood of relation, where beings must be accountable to each other from the basis of their precarity, which is the condition of vulnerability common to existence. The dog's address, made in the form of its gray muzzle and its crippled body and its grotesque movements, made in its howl and its broken hobble communicates its corporeality as a warrant.

[10] Levinas did not, however, extend his ethical philosophy to the animal, though his view may be moved in that direction, I argue, by the force of its high regard for those beings held outside belonging.

If we think only of agency as issuing from humans, if we think of human lives as cut-off, separate, or isolable from other lives, whether human or nonhuman, then demands "that come from elsewhere," as Butler writes, "sometimes a nameless elsewhere, by which our obligations are articulated and pressed upon us" fall into a void made not from a lack of summons but from lack of capacity to hear and see and respond (130). The aggression by which Billy responds to the dog's address, "an utterance that is, strictly speaking, not linguistic," indicates his awareness of the dog's assertion, and, at the same time, its defenselessness (*Precarious Life* 133). In the encounter, what comes through is "at once the temptation to kill and the call to peace . . ." (*Peace and Proximity* 167). The call to peace is not a version of peace as comfort and ease and confidence, but is, as Levinas articulated, a steadfast swearing off of violence. This is to say that peace is not harmony but is the refusal to hurt or to kill even in contexts where these can be made justifiable. This uncommon peace, a peace different from the goodness of Christian orientations, which so often allow and even encourage violence, arrives in the acceptance of ethical obligation as constrictive by nature of beingness being bound.

Billy's reaction the next afternoon indicates his recognition that he has failed to heed an important summons:

> He woke in the white light of the desert noon and sat up in the ranksmelling blankets . . . He kicked out of the blankets and pulled on his boots and his hat and rose and walked out . . . .He looked down the road and he looked toward the fading light . . . .A cold wind was coming off the mountains. It was shearing off the western slopes of the continent where the summer snow lay above the timberline and it was crossing through the high fir forests and among the poles of the aspens and it was sweeping over the desert plain below. It had ceased raining in the night and he walked out on the road and called the dog. He called and called. Standing in that inexplicable darkness. Where there was no sound anywhere save only the wind. After a while he sat in the road. He took off his hat and placed it on the tarmac before him and he bowed his head and held his face in his hands and wept. (C425-426)

When Billy encountered the trapped wolf, he joined with her not knowing what it would mean. He made his decision from the basis of trying to save the wolf and put the

collateral of his own life as backing. To give him the benefit of the doubt in this moment of rejection is to propose that Billy knows at this later point what it means to commit to a world of joined fates. From his history, it means to admit a loss of choice from the intimacies that cohere from a nonvolitional relationality. There is not an expansive pallet of possible choices before any one being, not merely because, as the unnamed man in ruin states, "all is lost in a clamorous tide," but because each possible move situates within a matrix of linked ramifications. Intent then does not secure a result. These dynamics related to flat ontologies and relational agencies have Billy reluctant to accept the obligation. He wants a space, a waystation, for himself. In McCarthy's cosmos to avoid sharing is to deny the ethos at the heart of the world. It is as the line from the screenplay of *No Country for Old Men* suggests to deny being "part of this world." So, his sorrow for the dog the next morning is a sorrow for himself as well. It is sorrow from the rejection of a pressing obligation and the sorrow for living in a world that presents so little choice, ultimately.

In *Ecology Without Nature*, Morton argues that ecological ethics will be melancholic for the range of commitments that register concern now. "Unable fully to interject or digest the idea of the other," Morton writes, "we are caught in its headlights, suspended in the possibility of acting without being able to act. Thus is born the awareness of the intensity and constraint of critical choice" (186). So, I want to underscore that Billy's response the next morning suggests his reckoning with the message of joinery. He would not be upset for excluding a dog, an ill-joined dog at that, if there was not an idea planted that this act of exclusion marks a deep secular injustice. If the animal doesn't mean much, if this world is only a testing ground for a greater world to come or to be lost, as in the paradigm of Christianity that the former cleric renounces, then, depending on the God of belief, Billy might be punished for not caring about a dog, or let off the hook because it is only a dog and one that serves no purpose.

Yet, if this world is the world we're *with*, *through,* and *of,* and if this world is not a testing ground at all, and if the concept of a test delimits a fuller engagement to live with and among so many others, then the choice in the wrecked building is a choice between the illusion of separateness and the willed assuagement for the existential fact that living is conditioned upon living with.

CHAPTER 3

MATTER

Chapter 2 read McCarthy's animals through the narrative lens of joinery and with the correlative theoretical lens of assemblage theory as a framework to get at the complex entanglements that enmesh human life with nonhuman animal existence. From this, a rendition of agency came through joined imaginary and theoretical topographies toward a radical dispersal that has humans and nonhuman animal bodies as agents, both singularly agential and in conjunction, a union that may be potentially cooperative or frictional or somewhere infinitely in between. This formation of force in the being or form and this formation of force that happens in collision or resistance of multiple beings and forms provoke profound ethical questions, ones that diverge sharply from considerations of mere sameness or instrumentality and toward imperatives of vast inclusion from an expansive connectivity. The ethical impetus shifts toward imperatives based on inclusions within vast collectives. In fact, the test of ethical mettle in an ecological approach lies in the extent to which significance may be extended beyond comforting dimensions, beyond the identical other. It comes, I wish to assert, in the extent to which the masses that have been held outside traditional frameworks of inclusion find admittance into significance. This ethics in places of least regard clearly marks a break with traditional moral outlooks that privilege some but forsake others by defining some as worthy and others as insignificant, too distant, too different, or too difficult to matter.

Through an explication of ideas in McCarthy's narrative, I have highlighted ethical sites of contact and gathering as profound pedagogical sites in that beings meet and mingle in these spatial dimensions so that intimacy happens nonvolitionally. I see this disorienting infiltration where there is an absence of distance as an inherent formation today in a world where life is lived always within shared space. The human public is more than seven billion in number. The nonhuman public is incalculably vast. So despite all the pressure to turn public spaces into private reserves, the force of ecology works in an oppositional trajectory toward the radical enmeshment of others within what have been exclusive domains of home, office, church, government, or nation. And, do we not see this blurring across all borders when we read headline news stories that have, say, the dynamics within a poaching field in Africa crosscut with economic exchanges happening in sites of souvenir shops, where an ivory crucifix in a tourist market holds encrypted killing scenes beyond even the death figurated in Christ, or in the headline story that has corporate employment policies in an electronics factory in China formatted according to consumerist spending patterns in the United States, or the headline that has decisions made in the aisles of a supermarket pregnant with a capacity to initiate, sustain, or rupture conditions for animals held as meat within industrial feed lots in corners of Oklahoma or Texas.

The pedagogical force behind this way of uncovering other spaces and events and forces within seemingly simple sites or seemingly singular occurrences or seemingly solitary figures becomes a way of reading for a way of education that centralizes the contentions inherent within a truly robust concept of justice, a concept made in the inclusions of so many formerly discounted others. In this turning toward what has been effaced from view, I see a potential shift in learner sensibilities that holds promise for an alteration in value for altered ways of living lives more meaningful than lives pursuant to the acquisitions of an elusive lifestyle.

This is to suggest that a reading pedagogy trained to the collective may ultimately develop a will to reform education more expansively toward modes of sustainable and just relationality within what are collective frames of coexistent living. I want to suggest, then, that the disorientation that occurs when readers engage stories that have elephants poached for their tusks and have ivory trinkets sold in sites seemingly unrelated to the killing fields comes not just from the complexity of seemingly different scenes revealed instead as interconnected but from the way that obligations suddenly mount in moments that have been constructed as unweighted, as even leisurely, as moments, say, for shopping or, to follow the crucifix, worship. So part of living in this time is living with ethical demands that issue inherent tensions, conflicts, and uncertainties. This turmoil results when lives are recognized as held within stances of global dimension, within expanses that are no longer regulated by types of topographical borders or by conceptual binaries or by philosophical bifurcations.

So, on the plains of the American Southwest where the boy encounters the wolf or in the scene where Billy encounters a hapless dog or in the countless scenes where riders synchronize their bodily movements in accord with the corporeal force of horses or in the scenes where wolves breathe together or move in a dance across the plains, all of these moments come through as points of relational contact and interaction. They are not just points of narrative significance but points to study in the text for the kinds of challenge they extend beyond the text to conventional, normative outlooks. By focusing explicitly on these kinds of relational gatherings, many of the tropes in Western thinking open to critique, so that readers may ask how free we are really when we are inherently bound together? How must human identities reclassify within considerations such as these given such broadly enmeshed relations? What are the ramifications for educators when so much of education is structured to staunch borders of various types, and, in this, to position students as both knowledgeable and erudite and as relationally unconcerned

and unaware? Shouldn't education foster an imaginative and critical sense in the learner so that in a bind the learner can enact critical and creative reforms for ways out of oppressive and unjust paradigms? Of course, the framing of these questions shows my hand as I will play it.

This project, then, emerges from a will to advance a way of learning that fosters modes of living beyond a consumerist or biocapital paradigm. By delving into scenes from the trilogy where a motley mix of bodies and forms come together, I hope to advance a portrait of existence that happens through constellations of intimate and mingling bodies and forms and elements, rather than a formation that has bodies individually situated in states of autonomy or loneness. The implicit turn in all of this toward ways of learning and thinking and living is a turn that might potentially advance ways of seeing the multitudes that exist under, through, and within every singular being or form and in every particular existential moment of common life.

As I demonstrated in Chapter 2, the human in McCarthy is part of material ecologies even corporeally so that the actions of his scenes reveal these micromoments of eating, traveling, talking, and working as scenes of living in common. We saw this in an explication of Billy's house, a dwelling sustained by more-than-human forces, forces of animal and materiality. This setting dramatized humanness as a relational happening from sustaining systems of animal, plant, matter, and element. By rendering the human in such a state of interrelation and interdependency, the killing of wolves came through as problematic from a basis that humans made decisions from the false premise that they had the right to decide what things lived and what died. Choosing to eradicate other life forms manifests in joinery as a most dangerous hubris, one with the force to ricochet backward on the killer.

According to my claim, the philosophical history that emerges in the historical record of campaigns of wolf eradication or bison slaughter or deforestation or, even,

biocapitalization of life reveals a history of deed and philosophy and a present course of action and belief that has been and is still most ruinous. Encountering this ruin in narrative, photograph, film, or theory at least opens a space for critical questions about the destructive course of so much human activity given philosophies of belief. I submit that immersions and experiences through these mediums can generate a powerful critique of the deep and nearly tacit anthropocentric traditions that have organized humans separately and apart from earth systems. Seeing the human recontextualized in horizontal adjacencies, like the one sponsored in McCarthy's joinery, reframes finally the conceits of supremacy and dominion that have been such costly fictions for so long. The falsity of these anthropocentric beliefs comes through in evidence of the construction of reserved space, in the domain called "culture," which is meant to stand as a purified space of only human action and another opposing domain called "nature," which is meant to stand as purified or pristine in the absence of human and social infiltrations. Such barrier lines between these domains are not just abstractions of philosophy, irrelevant to how we live, but are deeply orienting outlooks that sponsor modes of living. Students socialized in these systems of belief must struggle to think outside a grid pattern of divisionary lines that render human existence independent and disjointed from the larger world, from other beings, from materialites.

Sara Spurgeon in her essay "The Sacred Hunter and the Eucharist" notes the cordoning of the West when she writes about fencing practices that strewed barbed wire across otherwise open lands. I consult her insights as an example of the material kinds of practices that come from certain ways of thinking. Spurgeon notes that such a fencing tactic represents a "potent and deeply paradoxical symbol." She writes, "On the one hand, it is the triumphant emblem of Anglo America's conquest of the land once referred to as the Great American Desert, of the sheer force of human will necessary to empty it of those animals like the buffalo that do not serve Anglo America's needs and to fill it

instead with cattle — nature tamed and controlled by the sharp-edged product of Eastern factories" (98). Yet this compulsion to segregate also emblematizes the "loss of the wandering horseman's right to travel freely and without restriction across the landscape" (98). It is then no small paradox that the cowboy who strings fenceline actually fences himself very often out of a livelihood. "That wandering horseman, the lone cowboy with his bedroll and his rifle, is the most commonly recognized modern American expression of the sacred hunter, the lone male in the wilderness, here digging [as dramatized in *Blood Meridian*] the postholes that mark his own demise and performing the final fencing in the natural world" (98).

Of course besides just obscuring the force of animals, these kinds of ontological borders also cloud vision into human-and-human relations. A kind of stock discourse today in media and political arenas has the United States secure from the stability of borders that prevent other nations or foreign others from infiltrating. This discourse sounds from the amplifier of a philosophy that imagines immigrants as bodies that drain and degrade white communities and economies. How radical it would be to suggest even against realities of increased surveillance and militarized borders that immigrant populations actually benefit, contribute, and buoy communities that can never be and have never been pure according to some unadulterated notion of homogeneity.

Situating the reality of borderlines within a frame of contested human belonging establishes parallels between ascendant discourses that blockade minorities from social belonging from a virulent rhetoric to the kinds of barriers that isolate humans ontologically, agentially, and ethically from nonhumans. It is my position that a cosmological vision that allows some to be chosen and others to be eradicated presents a way of relation that hovers perpetually in the potential of violence. The history of thought that leans away from recognition of interdependencies thus amounts to a history that jeopardizes life and living from the standpoint of parochial, narrow belongings. To

recall Spurgeon's insights, line drawing like fence building paradoxically endangers the privileged beings by separating them from what sustains.

Instead of continuing in this trajectory, a view of vibrant existential interactions radically disrupts the concept of purity altogether, with the lines between nature and culture collapsing to show the hybridity of interrelation between. In this revised vision, which is a kind of ruin of the entrenched order, life is messy and bodies are mutts of mixed ontological strands. Bennett underscores this when she explciates the make-up of her genetic self.

> My flesh is populated and constituted by different swarms of foreigners… the bacteria in the human microbiome collectively possess at least 100 times as many genes as the mere 20,000 or so in the human genome… we are, rather, an array of bodies, many different kinds of them in a nested set of microbiomes. (*Vibrant Matter* 112-13)

From the basis of such are recognition, the ethical sense that hinges upon human primacy and dominion, that sees human life as apart from nonhuman life and sees time as a steady progressive march comes undone. It is important to emphasize the potential of a recalibration through joinery within the space of the classroom, for learners exist within a time in American society when it is easier to construct dystopian visions of ruin and collapse than to construct visions of reform and change. Fredric Jameson commented on this in his work *Future City* when he declared that humans have an easier time imagining the end of the world than the end of capitalism:

> For it is the end of the world that is in question here; and that could be exhilarating if apocalypse were the only way of imagining that world's disappearance (whether we have to do here with the bang or the whimper is not the interesting question) . . . .Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world.

A lens on the page made in the topography of joinery incorporates the human and animal and object within a cosmology that has ontology as flat, agency as distributed, and ethics as accountable to and for the range of vibrant, heterogeneous others that

suddenly emerge as relatable to humans, as within the same existential field. Both on the page and off for a way of discussing and appraising ways of relational living, this lens brings matter into the popular purview and brings animal ethics out of the delimited framework of animal rights, the most common placing. The work of Tom Regan and Peter Singer for example has framed animal rights from the premise of empirical evidence concerning animal sentience. Given the evidence of animal's intelligence and emotion, there is a push to endow the animal with rights. My own approach diverges from this approach by instead seeing "rights" as an inadequate basis for ethical significance. As Robert Harrison notes in his essay "Toward a Philosophy of Nature," rights "exist solely because they can be violated" (435). This is to suggest that *rights* codified in legal terms are ultimately insufficient to the forms of animal neglect and abuse happening even routinely, as a matter of, say, agribusiness or laboratory science. Whole corporate structures premise their profits in the supply of cheap, inhumanely produced and raised animals for sales as food, as fur, as research subjects to ultimately sell other things. Devising legal codes to tackle this practice works at too shallow a level to take up the systemic origins. Changing sensibilities, on the other hand, from the basis of a vastly reimagined cosmology formulates ethical relations outside narrow legalistic spheres for a more democratic conversation. What better place for this conversation than classrooms?

So the efforts within Chapter 2 continue in this chapter, which is designed to initiate an understanding of matter as a powerful and vibrant force in the world, a force that works alongside human power and animal agency. Just as animals have been denied agency and ethical significance by ontological barriers strewn like so much barbed fenceline so too has matter been separated from life and from the qualities or features of life, with this same division rendering matter as inconsequential except in the ways that it endows humans with degrees and types of status. I will show that through

McCarthy's highly materialist prose the force of matter comes into a new frame. This will be to suggest that McCarthy's aesthetic vision positions the human in conditions where material objects exercise a constituting force so that they are objects that make emergent realities too. In joinery the conjunctive energies of human and thing and animal redefine events as complexly alchemic occurrences.

Theory of Matter

The recent theoretical resurgence toward matter and objects and material agency comes in the context of a time in history when *things* are increasingly understood to evade the parameters constructed for them. This is to say that a plethora of unruly objects regularly exasperate human will. Plastics, for example, do not adhere to the lifespans assigned to them by human manufacturers. Oil and coal overspill the bounds of accepted use by contaminating air, water, and soil. In fact, the massive phenomenon of global warming registers as a kind of object lesson in that heterogeneous technologies, objects, bodies, elements, policies, and discourses gather together in a single, diverse phenomenon. The effects of climate change register as more intense from the basis of their capacity to amalgamate. As a vast assemblage of human and nonhuman forms, climate change melts glaciers, increases ocean depths, displaces human populations, destabilizes weather patterns, and results in extinctions of plants and animals, insects and birds. While humans are unequivocally responsible for these warming trends and thus for the events that ensue, subsequent events will evade human control at this point as well. The longevity of greenhouse gases and the force of aerosol emissions guarantee that warming trends will continue even if humans minimize their reliance on fossil fuels. There is, in other words, a trajectory in line given the momentum from so many actions in a common direction. In this kind of bind, humans are both remarkably powerful

given their capacity to alter climate systems and strikingly limited given their seeming inability to reform and given the way that events do not conform to human desire.

Earlier I mentioned that an object and a body collide in points of contact within scenes of living and that the resulting collisions can be seen as kinds of fusion that have the force of the thing and the force of the body in exchange. This makes action unpredictable, nonlinear, and complex. In *Pandora's Hope*, Latour explicates the force of matter through a useful illustration that highlights the dichotomous view present in many discussions regarding gun control or gun rights. He accurately notes that the framing of the issue revolves around some recursive arguments. For example, the well-worn NRA slogan announces: "Guns don't kill people; people kill people." In this proclamation the view of an object is as a neutral tool in the hand of an intentional human agent. The gun itself is forbidden any force that might sway the human or that might put the human in a particular affect or stance. In such an outlook, the gun is, as Latour writes, only "a passive conductor" (177). Latour critiques this view despite its popularity by arguing that matter and objects have a force that plays on the human will. The gun, he argues, transmits certain kinds of propensities to the gun owner. Imagine as an exercise how difficult it is to hold a gun and not aim it, or to pick up a loaded gun and not shoot it. The force of the thing in hand seems to *will* actions that would not take place without the *thing*. Latour theorizes that both human and object enter then into a relationship with both body and form being consequential. This argument propels an outlook that has the energies of objects and humans working conjointly. To see combined agencies is to open a view to how politics and economics and ways of socialization become forces too. Admitting all of these into relevance radically reformats conventional notions that would align force to one or the other side, either to subject or to object.

Latour's articulation of an alternative view is a vision of relational agencies that have the human and the object enmeshed and within a relational composition that produces events. So the gun like the human is an "actant" in what is a more vibrant, active, convergent world than typically rendered.

Bennett continues this daring theoretical work by highlighting the agency within a power grid. During a blackout when the grid goes blank, propensities within the massive circuitry of lines emerge into prominence exactly because of their failure. Yet agents within the grid withdraw too. It is difficult to see everything involved. Of course, humans are poorly trained to look and to imagine an object as having a complex force or propensity because of the traditional dualisms that place objects on an opposing side to subjectivity. To see and think of the grid is to note that no single thing is solely responsible for an outage, just as no single tweak repairs the brokenness of a massive generator. In a recent *The New York Times* story power outages across the nation were attributed to the activities of a most unlikely culprit.[1] Squirrels use electrical lines like a suspended freeway system. Power grids provide an apt and obvious illustration of a network from the ways that multiplicities of players are seen to use or intersect through the circuitry.

Border Materiality

In *The Border Trilogy* both space and time are materially represented. In the novel *The Crossing*, for example, the reader is presented with the view that that which survives presents "hard evidence as to past events" (410). McCarthy's character Quiijada explains that the nature of the world is emergent depending upon variables in moments of daily interaction. This view contemplates time and space as arrangements happening

[1] The author, Jon Mooallem, notes that a squirrel in 2013 "chewed into high-voltage lines near a water-treatment facility" and initiated "a chain of improbable events that forced the city of Tampa to boil its water for the next 37 hours. . ." ("Squirrel Power!" Aug 23, 2013).

from nearly infinite potential arrangements. This view sustains a cosmology of joinery where every least thing counts because every least thing factors within the spatial composition. Quiijada continues by stating, "People speak about what is in store. But there is nothing in store. The day is made of what has come before. The world itself must be surprised at the shape of that which appears. Perhaps even God" (C 387). His statement insinuates the time beyond human existence so that he world is not an anthropocentric stage. In *Cities of the Plain* the maestro proclaims that, "The world takes its form hourly" (195). Within the same work, a man coming down the road is seen to be smiling slyly at an idea in his head that has "the world past" as "the world to come" (71).

I take this last line as less deterministic than it might initially appear. Past configurations do give rise to future networks, and some network relations will be more grooved than others to show hegemonic patterns, but reality as an emergent event holds at least the possibility for change. A view to relational interactions aligns nicely with the focus on materiality, for, as Serenella Iovino notes, to acknowledge and articulate the vibrancy of matter is to perceive " the condition through which bodies act with and relate with each other, shaping other bodies," shaping, as it were, the future landscape that is assorted through biological-material-social-political-environmental relations ("Material Ecocriticism" 51).

One of the key claims in this chapter will be that ruins provide an unparalleled vantage into the power of matter, object, and element. Such an observation asserts that ruins emerge into prominence through the destabilization or erosion of borders, so that in ruinous states nature and culture are witnessed as thoroughly interwoven domains. This means that disrupted order very often produces a view to the nature of imposed order. The vantage from ruins reveals the ways that nature and culture are not really separate at all.

Ruins

McCarthy's fondness for ruins is apparent in all of his works, but his novel *The Road* presents arguably the most extended depiction of absolute ruin in his catalogue. It is in this work that the "frailty of everything [is] revealed at last" (28).[2] In ruin, the frailty of existence, structure, and order comes through not only in a tragic light, but as ground for potential reimaginings. *The Road* opens tragedy to view because all societal infrastructure is gone, including institutions of government, religion, and education. Nature in the sense of wilderness is absent as well, as there are no living trees or birds. The boy of the book keeps imagining the sight of a dog, but a dog never appears. The only deer the boy ever encounters is the taxidermic head of one on the wall of an abandoned grocery store. There are no national parks, and there are no cities to serve as counterpoints to such parks so as to construct a neat binary. In this, the realms of nature and culture are gone, but the absence of staked lines permits a perception of existence as happening really in the crosshatch.

Materialist prose that emphasizes routine acts initiates a kind of rubric for detecting the relations between humans and animals and matter because the flatness of existence comes through in ordinary exchanges that have humans living very close to soil and plant and animal and enclosed within social webs.[3] In the following passage, for example, the human acts within a material field that has objects as impinging agents too.

> The grass between the house and the barn looked untrodden. He crossed to the porch. The porch screening rotted and falling away. A child's bicycle. The kitchen door stood open and he crossed the porch and stood in the doorway. Cheap plywood paneling curled with damp. Collapsing into the room. A red formica table. He crossed the room and opened the refrigerator door. Something sat on one of the racks in a coat of gray fur.

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[2] While the specific event of destruction is never mentioned, it is disturbingly easy for the reader to imagine all the possible ways that might produce such a wasteland. In other words, the storyline works from a premise of unease in the audience regarding the unsustainability of our lifestyles. This is of course a very popular theme in popular culture.

[3] In *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett argues that materiality provides "a rubric that tends to horizontalize the relations between humans, biota, and abiota" (112).

> He shut the door. Trash everywhere. He took a broom from the corner and poked about with the handle. He climbed onto the counter and felt his way through the dust on top of cabinets. A mousetrap. A packet of something. He blew away the dust. It was grape flavored powder to make drinks with. He put it in the pocket of his coat. (*The Road* 119)

In a way that should be expected by now, this passage reveals McCarthy's existential terrain as a most democratic landscape. The ruin of the house serves as a corollary space to the radical equality of phenomena found on the plains and mountains featured in *Blood Meridian*. Here in *The Road*, the flat ontological plane operative throughout has bodies and forms in adjacent postures, so that a man, a screen, a bicycle, refrigerator doors and paneling, a table, some trash, a broom handle, a mousetrap, and a packet of drink mix all assemble in scene. Nothing in this litany of *things* exists more than anything else. The explicit listing of each item issues a democratic significance. Each thing has a force or carries consequence. The grass in the yard is trodden where the man steps through, but the grass impinges the man's movement as well. He pushes through; it pushes back. Force and force in actor and actor. In the scene, the door opens from the exertion of the man, but the door enacts a resistance as well.

Again to zoom in on these aspects is to take a micro approach, to highlight the mundane. I did this in Chapter 2 in an explication of Billy's ranching home that is so squarely situated upon the dirt and stone of land within the sustaining systems of plant and animal. In this kind of emphasis I wished to underscore not only the rudimentary ways of existence in such simple, potentially overlooked or underlooked scenes. Here, I want to show the way that moving across a yard or into a room becomes an act with the power to issue force in a joined life field. There is a two-way contact between body and form, a mutual flow. For this, human life is reframed because it is replaced within a vibrant world. Of course in reframing an outlook, old views are rebuked. This vision rebukes so much of Western tradition, but it provides a way too for readers to rethink their place. To rethink one's place is to investigate one's perceptions and values.

Teachers cannot be aware of contemporary problems and stand before students in classrooms and not feel a charge to deliberate upon ways of life that might avoid the replications of ruin. I wish to suggest that contemporary issues scale beyond even the scalar extremes of modernity in settings of education where children and adolescents and adults assemble to learn because this activity and process embedded so thoroughly in a sense of the future.

To the extent that ruins break apart bifurcations, they challenge, to quote Coole and Frost from their work of collected essays called *New Materialisms* "some of the most basic assumptions that have underpinned the modern world, including its normative sense of the human and its beliefs about human agency, but also regarding its material practices as the ways we labor on, exploit, and interact with nature" (*New Materialisms* 4). In his essay "Waste Matter," Tim Edensor notes the rapidity of objects in states of ruin to reveal a different order. He writes that material entities "usually confined to marginal spaces through constant human vigilance," emerge in wrecked space to "take possession of space following abandonment . . ." (319). The photographs of ruin from Chris Luckhardt reveal the way that trees and grass and insects and animals and birds reclaim in time structures that have been abandoned. His photos of the island Hashima, an island close to Nagasaki, present ghostly scenes where former inhabitants left and nonhuman inhabitants emerged to take possession. These photographs transport the viewer to a vibrant, energetic, and rich place of middle ground, a space where life and material forms are shown to converge chaotically. The reigning categories of nature and culture, of time, become composite.

The father from the novel *The Road* may utilize the things he finds in one way or another, but the existence of the thing, that is its material reality does not depend upon human utilization. In fact, many of the objects itemized evade utility altogether. What does a bicycle mean in an atmosphere of utter ruin? What is the purpose of a broom in

such upheaval? Within the novel there are no longer any swarming networks of exchange to lend sense to the cars and garages and gas pumps, and yet these things continue to exist. It is through the lack of normative context, a lack that leads ironically to broader questions concerning the conventional defining, that objects and things come through in such a different way. A world in ruin shrinks, as McCarthy writes, "down about a raw core of parsible entities." From a space where all is fragile and where things and bodies exist in radical equality, vision formats toward the force of things. The flatness of ontology in joinery does not mean that everything is rendered one-dimensional, according to a standardizing view. It means instead that seeing and thinking about different beings and forms within joinery opens the potential for different perspectives. Each actor holds a view. The inclusiveness of joinery toward these beings and forms must translate to an inclusiveness in articulations of vantage, so that conversations open to the perception of overlooked positions and experiences.

To return to the crucial scene of this project, to the wreckage of the church, I want to emphasize that leaving the divides of old behind does not hamper an ethical vision nor prevent an ethical way of living. Once the cleric rejects the orthodoxy that has parsed and divided saints from sinners and believers from heretics, he finds a way out of a deeper ethical ruin than even the ruin of architecture. Similarly, the boy in *The Road* possesses a remarkable ethic despite the absence of religion. "There is no god, and we are his prophets," McCarthy writes (143). The vision of goodness in these works may be realized in the figure of the boy and in the figure of the former cleric as correspondent to the goodness that comes in another literary dramatization, *The Grapes of Wrath*. According to Steinbeck's portrayal, Jim Casy must leave religion behind before achieving a truly coherent ethic. When Casy sees that there is no sin and no virtue but only what people do, he articulates a critique against authoritarian frameworks. Casy's comments show the way that he has come to think about human action outside dualities that

present the world in too simplistic a cast. Like so many of McCarthy's protagonists, Casy lives on the road without money or security. He is always susceptible to exploitation. Yet his way of living has him walking where he goes and eating what he finds and talking directly with those he might claim to know. He lives then in a materialist framework that is very similar to that of McCarthy's protagonists.

Body and Form

McCarthy's phenomenological style opens human relations to study from the standpoint of cross-directional interplays between bodies and forms and elements. In a passage from *All the Pretty Horses* that is typical, the reader encounters plotline that is through the interactions of bodies:

> They dismounted and tied their horses at the little mud tienda and entered. A girl was sitting in a straightback chair by a sheetiron stove in the center of the room reading a comicbook by the light from the doorway and she looked up at them and looked at the comicbook and then looked up again. She got up and glanced toward the back of the store where a green curtain hung across the doorway and she put the book down in the chair and crossed the packed clay floor to the counter and turned and stood. On top of the counter were three clay jars or ollas. Two of them were empty but the third was covered with a tin lid from a lardpail and the lid was notched to accommodate the handle of an enameled tin dipper. Along the wall behind her were three or four board shelves that held canned goods and cloth and thread and candy. Against the far wall was a handmade pineboard mealbox. Above it a calendar nailed to the mud wall with a stick. Other than the stove and the chair that was all there was in the building. (APH 49-50)

In this scene, the narrative action finds pace according to a bodily metric of movement. The riders dismount and tie their horses. They enter into a dwelling made from mud. They encounter a girl. She sits in a chair by a stove in the center of a room. She reads a comic book by the light of the doorway. She looks up, looks to the book, looks up again. She stands, glances back, puts the book on the chair, and crosses to the counter. She turns and stands. McCarthy traces her movements. He is particular about placing her feet on the packed clay floor. He is particular about emphasizing the way that the chair

straightens her back, the way that the stove generates enticing warmth. In all of this, the reader is made to note corporeal movements of bodies perpetually in contact with things. A back forms according to the line of a chair, a rope shapes a hand, feet adhere to cool clay floors. This contact with texture, this sensual experience from living in a material world generates a reader experience sponsored from relational exchanges. Objects mold, shape, bend, and train bodies. Bodies mold and shape and bend and train objects, each with or against the other. The emphasis on jars, cups, on a dipper and a lid, shows the prominence of tools in human life. This attention on bodies and things is a focus seemingly mundane, of course, for there are no transcendences. There are only commonly, unremarkable interactions that bring to exposure the materially grounded ways of living common life.

This way of reading through a materialist lens trains a way of comprehension that evokes the demands of relational life. This kind of learning positions learners to think about local and global relations so as to develop a coherent ethics from the telescoping way that lives move across both dimensions. It is this kind of learning that presents the best chance of disrupting consumerist paradigms that have people only buying and not thinking about what is bought and sold and owned. McCarthy's ecological representations direct attention to foundational aspects of living, yet these aspects are overlooked so often for the easier concerns held in metaphysical imaginaries. Nietzsche noted that 'nutrition and place and climate' occupy a much lower level of emphasis in Western society than "God," "soul," "virtue," "sin," "beyond," "truth," and "eternal life" (*On the Genealogy of Morals*, 158-9).

Object Force, Corporeal Force

Coole and Frost note that though "we inhabit an ineluctably material world" and though "we live everyday lives surrounded by, immersed in, matter" and though "we are ourselves composed of matter," we "take such materiality for granted, or we assume that there is of little interest to say about it" (*New Materialisms* 1). Matter is not seen as a productive force, certainly not as an agent. The influence of the railroad on commerce, transportation, and manufacturing has been documented from the angle of social change, but attention to the corporeal aspects of the railroad, to the way that the iron horse affectively shaped bodies or formatted minds, is a neglected study. From the philosophical basis that erects lines between subjects and objects, between life and matter, Westerners prefer to hold things such as steam engines in a utilitarian frame and not as corporeally constitutive. It is a strange scene in a Western novel when an object impinges humans. In *All the Pretty Horses*, John Grady Cole encounters a train in that generates a visceral force.

> He could feel it under his feet. It came boring out of the east like some ribald satellite of the coming sun howling and bellowing in the distance and the long light of the headlamp running through the tangled mesquite brakes and creating out of the night the endless fenceline down the dead straight right of way and sucking it back again wire and post mile on mile into the darkness after where the boilersmoke disbanded and slowly along the faint new horizon and the sound came lagging and he stood still holding his hat in his hands in the passing groundshudder watching it till it was gone. (APH 3-4)

In this passage, Cole's ears are inundated with the train's sound. His eyes are presented with a "new horizon" from the cast light of the train's headlamp. In the projected light the appearance of the land is of a seeming disappearance, so that the fenceposts plotted in straight lines seem to be sucked back into the churning, consuming engine as the train barrels down the tracks. In proximity to the force, Cole's lungs expand with the billowing boilersmoke. His feet destabilize from the force of groundshudder. This iron object translates effects across a joined field of other beings and forms so that the force

of the train alters and transforms space, experience. In the work *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Karen Barad notes that the energy of existence lies not in finished stages, as we might suppose, stages that would have beings and forms meeting from the positionality of being already formed, static and fixed. Instead, she argues that processes of life happen through an "ongoing materializations" (151). The train in this scene is an object that exerts a force of change upon land and animals and plants and rocks and people to sustain a materializing process that happens from relations of all kinds of force and interaction.

Things endowed with such energy create a narrative plotline of materialist emphasis. In another scene from *All the Pretty Horses*, the protagonist is in a jail in Mexico. The violence of the place means that each simple movement or approach becomes suspect. Senses are hypertuned. Cole is on edge, attentive to the smallest of details. In a scene within the cafeteria, in a mood of anxiety, the reader encounters the enfolding movement from the vantage of a slow-motion framing. This is to say that McCarthy slows the scene to better capture the detailed but chaotic choreography of objects and bodies in states of violent exchange.

> When the boy reached the end of the table he suddenly turned and sliced the tray at his head. John Grady saw it all unfold slowly before him. The tray coming edgewise toward his eyes. The tin cup slightly tilted with the spoon in it slightly upended standing almost motionless in the air and boy's greasy black hair flung across his wedgeshaped face . . . He fell back fending him away and the trays clanged and he saw the knife for the first time pass under the trays like a cold steel newt seeking out the warmth within him. (199)

To step back for a moment before delving into this scene, I wish to recall earlier efforts in Chapter 2 where I analyzed McCarthy's tendency to choreograph bodies as proximate with other bodies. I showed the way that human and animal forms cross-communicate in a language that works at a level beneath words, at the level of gesture and touch. As evidence I zoomed in tightly on a scene upon the plains under the night

stars where Billy sees wolves moving in coordinated motion, in a kind of dance for the degrees of interexchange. When the wolves come close enough to Billy, his breathing is said to match the breath of the wolves gathered before him in moonlight. Both human and animal gaze at the other. Pulse and breath translate in a tuned cadence across the thresholds of body. The reader sees this reiterated as well in a scene that has the stallion that has just been bred being ridden out of a stable in a sidestep of adrenalized energy. The rider, Cole, hopes that the girl, Alejandra, will see him atop the charging animal. So after the horse is bred, he makes a habit of riding the animal in a hard charge out of the gates and down the road. "With the air still fresh and cool he and the stallion would come sideways out of the stable with the animal prancing and pounding the ground and arching its neck" (APH 127-128). The horse trembles underneath him; Cole speaks to the horse "in spanish" and "in phrases almost biblical repeating again and again the strictures of a yet untabled law" (128). Here the affects of body translate across the joined existential field, so that communication happens at a corporeal level. This emphasis of the corporeality is essential in a materialist technique. McCarthy therefore takes the reader even inside the space of horse to see the inner workings of blood, organ, and bone, to see the pumping and pulsing and flexing and drawing of internal movements:

> the darkly meated heart pumped of who's will and the blood pulsed and the bowels shifted in their massive blue convolutions of who's will and the stout thighbones and knee and cannon and the tendons like flaxen hawsers that drew and flexed and drew and flexed at their articulations and of who's will all sheathed and muffled in the flesh and the hooves that stove wells in the morning groundmist and the head turning side to side and the great slavering keyboard of his teeth and the hot globes of his eyes where the world burned. (128)

Finally when Cole encounters Alejandra, his exchange with her happens according to an energy contained in a prior scene. His interaction with her happens then according to an energy relayed out of another context. This presents time as flowing from the

momentum of prior events in what might be a kind of wave. There is a difficult idea at core in this view: each moment each being exists slightly out of tune with any present reality. Every moment comes edged in a slight disorientation.

To visualize this concept it is helpful perhaps to imagine space as crosshatched with suspended threads, so that a moving body in a threaded room moves with the force to move all connected threads. One form entangles another from any single movement and force reverberates. This description actually references the sculptural works of the artist Tomas Saraceno, who depicts in his work the dynamics inherent within ecology. Interconnection is visualized in one of his projects from the suspension of delicate lines through a museum spaces so that visitors experienced the sensation of reverberant force. Such lines apply aptly to McCarthy's vision as well. From the basis of his narrative, the physicality of one being, say, the corporeality of a horse transmits energy to other beings for the effect of a forcefield.

To step back into the scene inside the prison, I wish to suspend imaginary lines in the prison cafeteria to capture the sense of force from both the bodies of the fighters and the objects they use and are used by. The steel knife and the cafeteria trays co-act with the human actors in a material dynamism that flows across barriers of body and form. The scene dramatizes a cacophony of sound from falling utensils and tin cups and clanging trays, a rush of movement in bodies colliding.

Food

Food provides perhaps the best medium into seeing the way that matter can transfigure. As transient matter, food is inherently unsettled and in process. We see this in the trajectory that has seed forming to plant, fruit becoming ripe, then over-ripe, then decomposing in stages of rot. In this trajectory is a materializing energy. Food also shows the way that matter crosses borders. For example, in its initial state food is a

substance outside the body. Through the act of eating, it enters in and integrates with the body. Again, this observation presents a mundane phenomenon in a refractive way to elicit a degree of wonder. How remarkable the way food can integrate in the body to sustain it. Human health and sustenance depend on this capacity to traverse 'outside' and 'inside' borders. In this way, food illustrates the porosity of the body border. Further through a thinking of food, the assemblage of relations necessary for food to make these transitions and traversals comes to view. Food depends on a series of complex interexchanges through a vast biotic community. In Chapter 2, the scene of the wolf trapping served as a place to note the roster of actors in scene. This explication highlighted the hidden forms both within an event and behind a single person. An item of food encrypts within similar expansive networks. Plants and animals and elements and insects are encrypted within any edible thing.

McCarthy's focus on food stems from his materialist aesthetic. In scene after scene, characters are shown to be eating and sharing food, such as beans and tortillas, goat and steak and chicken, eggs and coffee, chili and stews. They cook foods they get from animals and plants in big clay pots on stoves and over fires. They make coffee from ground beans. They sip coffee from tin cups and share coffee as a secular sacrament. The sacrament of shared food and shared drink consecrates a binding dynamic that has lives lived in connection and has lives connected within material systems. This ethos animated farming before farming became corporate. Animals would be cared for and in turn animals would care for the human lives that surrounded and contextualized their own. This care came at the most basic and fundamental level. The animal became worker, producer, food, but the animal was more than any of these because the animal was worked for, produced for, and fed in ways that registered a value beyond mere profit.

Food places human bodies squarely within relational systems of material inter-exchange. Humans gather wood for fire. Fires are started from sparks that turn to

flames that cook food given, gathered or hunted. Smoldering embers from dinner fires get stoked in the morning light to heat a breakfast made from leftovers. Immersion within these scenes has eating as a ritual with the consistency of prayer. The material embeddedness of human life through food frames the body within ecological assemblages. Thinking of human life as composed within fields of relations diminishes imperial orientations. Flattened ontology disrupts this orientation. Distributed agency complicates the story of event to hold the animal and object as actors.

Death

Literature and poetry routinely open readers to experiences of the tragic. As I will underscore in Chapter 5, students in literature classrooms very often remark on the depressive nature of literary works. They wonder why good books seem so often to be tragic books. The question captures one of the paradoxical strengths in literature and art: these mediums open human thinking and emotion to the most searing and profound experiences of life in a way that these experiences can be reflected upon, deliberated, articulated. To be literally caught in a tragic event closes the experience in a way that one must merely survive it. Literature immerses but at the same time buffers enough to provide a critical dimension. From the vantage of vision and thought that comes from the slowed pace of engaging literature and seeing scenes and events unfold across pages of text and reading characters in both the vivacity of interior and exterior dimensions, the textual world constitutes a kind of diorama of the real. While reality may be left through a dispossession allowed from narrative, the reader too has the experience of entering more thoughtfully into a space of self-deliberation, where ideas open to review and critique. The place where the reader comes to be vulnerable emerges in the shared experiences of the characters in text whose lives happen with them, to them, and sometimes against them. For the reader who is engaged, concern comes from

empathetic identification. A character's life may be taken off a projected course in a single moment outside his or her choosing. This happens, for example, with Billy when he attempts to save the wolf and is compelled on a journey that will put him outside his family home on the day when most of his family members are killed. Readers see Billy kneeling on the plains and watching the wolf in the trap. They participate in the moment, imagining what they would do. When it is revealed that Billy's family is dead, the reader experiences the vulnerability of being. There is no reason that makes sense of the deaths of the family, and so the event happens according to a cruel fate that makes everyone susceptible. Because books open this kind of affective awareness, learners experience tragedy for the cultivation of empathy. Such learning tinges the accomplishment of learning in a more than cognitive challenge.

McCarthy's rendering of death opens a view to the materiality of the body. Though Westerns are typically violent with every principle of value needing to be fought for in a gunfight, Western films and books very typically evade a real view of the outcomes from such shoot-'em up tactics. Yet McCarthy zooms in upon such aftermaths. From a materialist lens, the body is not preserved in death, and loss is not assuaged in a view that death can be recovered in a realm out of the earthly realm. In a remarkable scene that illustrates the inconsolable loss inherent in death, Cole stands unsteady on the "unmarked earth" at the site of the grave of a woman he regards as his grandmother. We read, "for a moment he held out his hands as if to steady himself or as if to bless the ground there or perhaps as if to slow the world that was rushing away and seemed to care nothing for the old or the young or rich or poor or dark or pale or he or she" (APH 301).

In another scene from *All the Pretty Horses*, Cole shoots a deer for food, and "When he reached her she lay in her blood in the grass and he knelt with the rifle and put his hand on her neck and she looked at him and her eyes were warm and wet and there

was no fear in them and then she died" (APH 282). Cole sits next to the deer as the sky turns "dark and a cold wind ran through the bajada" (282). In the "dying light" the doe's eyes turn a "cold blue cast" and the body of the deer is said to be "one thing more of things she lay among in that darkening landscape" (282). Placing the body as McCarthy does among the things of the landscape does not drop significance out of death, even the death of a deer, and it does not allow an easier resolve. Instead such a dramatization induces a sense that the deer is gone as so many beings been lost before and will be lost still, but that each thing is still ineffably precious, and each thing cannot be restored when it is gone. This view toward death reiterates the cosmology of joinery where "everything is necessary. Every least thing" and "Nothing can be dispensed with. Nothing despised" (C 143).

In still another scene from *All the Pretty Horses*, Cole holds a white washed horse skull and studies what is left after time. "Frail and brittle. Bleached paper white. He squatted in the long light holding it, the comicbook teeth loose in their sockets. The joints in the cranium like a ragged welding of the bone plates. The muted run of sand in the brainbox when he turned it" (APH 6). The attention that Cole gives the skull raises the issue of its meaning. This might be Hamlet looking at Yorick. It is even a more strange moment for the fact that the skull belongs to an animal. But this is a flat world where everything matters, so the reader is positioned to think of death, even of this long ago death, the death of an animal, intently. Readers think with Cole about the ways that death has been rationalized, the ways in which meanings have been assigned and removed.

It is, in fact, especially important to think of these things from the standpoint of this moment in history where death happens so effortlessly and so often without sustained thought. Consider drone warfare. Think of the too common lack of vision into scenes of death that come from killings made faster and easier than ever before.

Advanced technologies vaporize bodies and so annihilate structures that there is literally less to see, even if one were to look, and looking rarely follows such killing. Of course, seeing scenes of death may not facilitate an ethics of life, but what meaning can be made when these scenes are blocked from view, even from the view of those who press the killing buttons within the rooms of computerized war? The expression "theatre of war" finally has an eloquence to it that has been missing since so much of modern warfare is done now in spaces that look like theatres.

When Cole holds the horse skull and ruminates upon death, the fact that his thoughts are held internal, which is to say that the reader is not told what Cole thinks or further what anyone should ever think, opens the scene and the thinking to each reader in a kind of interdependent coordination with text, a negotiation between fiction and reality.

Because events within joinery happen within a connected matrix of existence, a kind of web that forbids any life from not mattering, forgets no single act, and allows every single "least thing" a force, there is a weightedness to things that hasn't always been felt. I want to argue here, though I will explicate the point in fuller terms in Chapter 5, that the melancholia inherent in the ecological vision evidences the depressive recognition that all things do matter, that one must think about every least thing, that there is no undoing what is done. This imbues moments in time with a tender poignancy.

The melancholia of ecology is not just from the heightened consequences and cognitive demands for living in joinery, but is from the fact that every least thing mattering means that every least thing deserves attachment. McCarthy's depiction of death happens in awareness that everything, from flesh and blood, to soil and water and air is earthly. In a scene from *The Crossing,* a gypsy relates the memory of seeing a body of a drowned man in a rising, rushing river. He recounts that "a drowned man shot out

of the cataract upriver" across from the place where he sat on shore and the dead man was "like a pale enormous fish" and he "circled once facedown in the froth of the eddywater . . . as if he were looking for something on the river's floor and then he was sucked away downriver to continue his journey" (C 408). McCarthy is deliberate about forcing the reader's attention upon the body even in or especially upon the exposure of its decay:

> He'd come already a long way in his travels by the look of him for his clothes were gone and much of his skin and all but the faintest nap of hair upon his skull all scrubbed away by his passage over the river rocks. In his circling in the froth he moved all loosely and disjointed as if there were no bones to him. Some incubus or mannequin. But when he passed beneath them they could see revealed in him that of which men were made that had better been kept from them. They could see bones and ligaments and they could see the tables of his smallribs and through the leached and abraded skin the darker shapes of organs within. (C 408-409)

In another scene, Billy exhumes the body of his brother Boyd. To reach the body he moves layers of packed, rocky soil. When he finally reaches the box that holds the remains, "the box had collapsed and he could see Boyd's bones in their burial clothes through the broken boards" (C 392). The reader is taken further, inside the coffin, just as the reader has been taken inside the horse in an earlier referenced passage:

> [Billy] walked over to the saddlebags and got out his matches and came back and lit one and held it out over the grave. The box was badly caved. A musty cellar odor rose from the dark ground . . . . Finally he climbed down into the grave and by that pale and fluttering light he began to pry apart the boards with the spade and cast them out until the remains of his brother lay wholly to sight, composed on a pallet of rotting rags, lost in his clothes as always. (C 392)

This difficult exposure continues as Billy transports his brother's remains in a travois across Mexican plains. Along the way a band of riders try to rob him. He has little to steal. In the chaos of the attempt, a single rider kicks aside the "coverings to reveal in the light Boyd's poor form" (C 395). Again, the reader engages the scene: "In the loosely fitting coat with his hands crossed at his chest, the withered hands with the bones

imprinted in the leather skin, lying there with his caven face turned up and clutching himself like some fragile being fraught with cold in that indifferent dawn" (C 395). Later, Billy discovers "a column of red ants [that] found the bones and he squatted in the leaves and studied them and then rose and trod them into the dirt" (C 399).

It is worth noting though it is a difficult point that McCarthy's portrayal of bodily death very often features life in the forms of insects or microorganisms that invade and feed and recorporealize the body. To see the ants within Boyd's body is to see an unceasing existential energy. On the one hand, such processes are realities of dying. On the other hand, such exposures to death change the way death is thought about because the image of death in McCarthy contradicts the illusions of death as it is so often represented.

If all of this seems too bleak, if such a focus on the material body seems too depressive for the classroom, it may be worth noting that articulating death as irreconcilable provides at least a platform for a more developed sense of ethical appreciation for life. This is to claim that seeing the enmeshments of corporeal form in material planes unfolds ways of thinking about the significance of beings and things that are too often discounted for outlooks that construct death as transitory. Is violence perpetrated from a view that dying is unreal? Would a pedagogical training at the levels of root, slime, insect, organ, and bone reposition the reader to experience anew concepts of death and life? In *Ecology Without Nature*, Morton writes, "Instead of trying to pull the world out of the mud, we could jump down into the mud" (205).

Operative moral frameworks too often fail. Those who identify as "pro-life" today can be at the same time for war or for capital punishment or for the torture of others or for larger prisons or for increased militarization. In the work *Critical Pedagogy, Ecoliteracy, and Planetary Crisis*, Richard Kahn notes the strange contradictions that emblematize in a figure like George W. Bush, a man who postures as adamantly prolife

despite initiating and sustaining wars, despite carrying out death sentences for those in prison, despite upholding irresponsible gun rights policies. In fact, Kahn takes note of the "outright" wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the "indirect" wars through neoliberal policies, and the "ecological" wars from continuous destructive campaigns against the environment" (Kahn 135). In all of this, there is a lot of blood from a man who self-describes as prolife. The point in this example through a former president is to think through the ways that operative moral frameworks seem to allow for certain acts of violence and killing. This is an important discussion for classrooms because this age has mass deaths happening without an affective sense of what such mass deaths mean.

In McCarthy's works, attention to rot grounds the being in the earthly dimension, subject to all of the repulsions that might have been suspended given the comforts of a bifurcated outlook. These kinds of repulsions or difficulties cannot safely be avoided now because the ease and scale of killing has reached such proportions. Where the view of split domains allowed the body to occupy the natural or physical realm while not being of it, material death washes the border between nature and culture and voids ascendancy. Death is final. There is no leaving the material realm because the body is not separate to any degree that would grant an escape. This revised view might very well reform the too easy political maneuverings that propagate violence and war and extinction. A reframed discussion about war and violence would work through considerations of consequence from every possible vantage of the collective, admitting that some voices cannot be heard and so they must be imagined, like the creative extensions that occur in reading when readers imagine the feelings and positions of characters. This has to be qualified with an affective stance of humility. We can imagine, but not know. Humility keeps us thinking. This is a turn of the mind toward ethics.

McCarthy's portrayal of animals and matter comes through as a referendum to rethink relations. Specifically, as this chapter has highlighted, there is an impetus to

rethink what it means to die, what it means to kill, and what it means to live against an existential backdrop that always contains death but experiences death justly, absent of detachment or desensitization. This focus is imperative today when so many deaths happen to beings who and that are held without any ethical value. The economization of life results in an outcome where so many beings and things cannot be held as ethically significant because they cannot be made profitable or because profits come from their destruction.

CHAPTER 4

HUMANS

Human existence viewed through an ecocentric rather than anthropocentric lens reads the page for understandings of relation that translate to ways of living within a coexistent world. The anthropocentric lens of tradition contrasts the ecocentric glass of joinery by closing views to the myriad of impinging relations that enmesh human lives with nonhuman entities. The human is alone, cast from belonging. Or is that everything else in the world is cast out of frame. The lens of joinery refracts light upon impinging relations so that questions of ethical obligation present in nearly every scene, for every scene reveals in the proper approach a convergence of forms and forces. It is a complicated way to cast the page, because the light is very often toward contention and friction. One of the comforts of the old lens that is difficult to lose was its presentation of obligation according to neatly contained local dimensions. This is to say that the anthropocentric lens formats radiuses of contact around self in a series of concentric rings. From this optic, events register as meaningful to the extent that they register impactful to one's own community or friends or family or self. This has the page working to sponsor a narcissistic analysis, whatever one's own communitarian frame, where ecological thinking moves the focus from self to implications of self in networks that hold more than local ramifications.

On the one hand, an optic trained on the ways that events happen locally presents a reasonable interpretative frame. Local impacts are important to note and to analyze.

They deserve concern. Yet, the local must be understood as broadly expansive, so that thinking about one's own life, family, community produces an impetus to think beyond one's own immediate radius. This is to suggest that really understanding the way that the local is impacted and creates impacts requires looking beyond a narrow realm to dimensions of broader reach. Like all borders in joinery, the border around the local region becomes porous.

A lens that pans out is crucial for an interpretative practice to register the dimensions of ethical responsibility for life in the twenty-first century. Too narrow circles encased around self or around others of sameness present inadequate formations for an ethical participation in the world that happens in transactions today of an interlocked shape: the local is indelibly interlocked with the global; the human interlocked with the nonhuman. Seeing consequences of an event, therefore, only through circles of immediate relation to self actually endangers the welfare of self and community through an ironic twist that has chosen beings and narrow realms of existence disconnected from larger and more complex forcefields.

As I hope to have made clear at this point in the project, there is no exclusive existential realm reserved for the human alone. So single bodies are indelibly crosshatched in complex relations with others, with posthuman others that include nonhumans. This has meant that an ecocentric lens expands in surface to show the vibrancies of animal and matter alongside human actors. It has been my claim that suspending the human in a kind of false existential vacuum where humanness is isolate and cut-off from nonhuman beings and material forms has resulted in ironic, costly privileges. This way of segregation ultimately undermines and even violates human life. So while it is difficult, no doubt, to add other actors to the roster of ethically significant beings and forms for the way that an expanding roster increases demands in time and thought and concern, the move designs from an outlook concerned with sustainability

and justice. The burden of this lens, then, carries at least the potential of installing a more just world for better collective living.

The really important alterations for sustainable learning and living involve changes more than mere green gloss, such as the too simple university implementations toward recycling and energy conservation. These are mere glosses for their failure to systemically tackle tougher issues of financial structuration, including investments in fossil fuel industries. The paradox of universities capitalizing off of industries that wreck a planetary future is rich in irony. My approach has been toward reformatting the sensibilities of learners at the microlevel of engagement with literature and text. I see the possible change allowing students to be more reflective about the ways popular definitions of success result too often in detrimental effects within the collective. A narrow approach on the human, on nation, on self forecloses an ethical development that might train a more expansive sensibility toward the patterns of broad interrelation of life on a round planet.

Reading and analyzing literature is very rarely done from a standpoint that seeks to especially highlight relations between humans and animals and matter. Instead, English classrooms staunch a view of the human as a Cartesian being, cut off and alone from the rest of the world. This formation encourages and sustains an imperial outlook, where the world is constructed as 'mine for the taking.'

Throughout this project Latour's theoretical work has been presented as a viable alternative way. In *Pandora's Hope,* Latour argues that everything constitutes from an inherent context of relations. "Nothing is by itself ordered or disordered, unique or multiple, homogeneous or heterogeneous, fluid or inert, human or inhuman, useful or useless. Never by itself, but always by others," he writes (161). Latour's statement strikes me as pedagogical because it traces and articulates and understands relations through densities of interconnection. A reading lens trained on these relations and

contexts through relations positions learners to decode and articulate hermeneutical accounts of what it means to be living commonly by living in different many possible formations of power, opportunity, and inclusion within a joined field.

Centralization of the collective doesn't undermine difference, but promotes its recognition and expression. Centralization of the collective doesn't issue one interpretative frame as the 'right' framework in a kind of standardized formula, but instead it allows for an untold number of possible vantages and creative imaginings. All of this is to say that a proper hermeneutical account given a cosmology of joinery opens text to the interpretative energies of readers as much as the creative acumen of writers.

To expand the roster of actors receiving notice, Chapter 2 of my project focused on bringing animals into frame as beings of ontological equity, agency, and ethical significance. Through an account of wolves in the West, I showed relational paradigms that end in ruin, that end in what Jim Jarmusch's excellent film *Dead Man* depicts as expanding frames of violence from senseless, riotous killing. In the film, westbound settlers shoot bison from the windows of a moving train for the thrill of sport killing. The scene dramatizes an insatiable violence in the American character of frontiersmen and pioneers and cowboys. The scene works upon the viewer like McCarthy's depictions work upon the reader in the sense of calling to question the nature of the American character, a reexamination that may conclude as D.H. Lawrence concluded that the "myth of the essential white American is hard, isolate, stoic and a killer."[1] This scene from the film evokes, then, a relational history that Chapter 2 meant to capture and explicate for its future dimensions. The accounting of the record of ruin in McCarthy happens by way of reappraisals with history. As a character in the trilogy states, "old ledgerbooks and records of history" from "the vanished folk" present evidence of "the

[1] The full quote from D.H. Lawrence's work *Studies in Classic American Literature* reads: "But you have there the myth of the essential white America. All the other stuff, the love, the democracy, the flourishing into lust, is sort of a by-play. The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer. It has never yet melted."

path that they followed in the world and their reckonings of the cost of that journey" (COP 288). This past vision sits in the reader today with the force of a projection forward as well. The record in the West of relations as revealed in the story of the wolf forecasts a ruinous future with nonhuman animals. McCarthy's record of human/animal contestations comes through in his story of wolf trapping. The relationship is gleaned in *Dead Man* from the image of travelers gunning down bison, a killing that goes beyond animal deaths to killings of indigenous people. The relationship is historically recalled as well in the famous black and white photograph from the Michigan Carbon Works. Against a backdrop of massed bison bones and skulls, proxy figures for white settlers pose in a stance that visually captures the outcome of a philosophy of human dominion. With human arrogance in mind, Chapter 3 worked in the same vein as Chapter 2 to uncover the presence of missing material masses by locating the vibrancy of matter in the world, right alongside humans and animals, as actors.

Both of these chapters troubled, then, the anchoring conventions of the Western genre. In the essay "Authorship and Genre: Notes on the Western," Jim Kitses argues that the thrust of the Western has been in staging a setting where "options are still open" (60). This means that very often nature comes through in film or book as unspoiled or pristine, as free from the taint of the human and human society. This view relies upon a series of philosophical antinomies that Kitses lists in a diagram. This listing tells that the individual is posed against the confines of community, with nature against culture or society, and with the West in rivalry with the East. The author notes that in the West and in the Western the individual is characterized from the basis of such terms as "freedom, honor, self-knowledge, integrity, self-interest, and solipsism" (59). On the other hand, community is associated with "restriction, institutions, illusions, compromise, social responsibility, and democracy" (59). From this arrangement, the

cowboy moves into nature to avoid entanglements that would bind or constrain his freedom and autonomy.

We may consider the extent to which human identity has been constructed as free from the basis of these kinds of segregated domains. This is to suggest that in collapsing nature and culture to the point of a complex fusion, a reliable concept of agency emerges to account finally for the diverse bodies and forms that have been typically held out of frame and out of significance. These old antagonisms present a foil to McCarthy's narrative vision and technique. His narrative collapses borders. This comes through profoundly, as I have noted, in scenes of ruin. Yet these scenes where human order has crumbled reveal a more abiding order underneath the ruin, an older order that is convergent in its energies, an order articulated in Latour's writings as a "middle kingdom" for the variability and vibrancy of mingling.

To show this middle kingdom in the space of the West, I spent time in Chapter 2 explicating Billy's home as situated very deliberately within more-than-human systems of animal and plant. In Chapter 3, I showed how McCarthy's materialist prose further positioned human lives squarely within material ecologies. McCarthy's detailing of the human in material dimensions, through even recursive scenes of death, where the human body is depicted as a form of matter, asserts attention to human life through more-than-human interdependencies. The human enmeshes instead of dominates. Evidence of the substantiation of this outlook comes through when in the third novel, *Cities of the Plain*, a test detonation of an atomic weapon at the close of the chapter registers as a violation of human life as much as nonhuman life. Because joinery assembles humans in densities of contact, actions that would have been perceived as occurring in a wasteland of sagebrush, in a place of only *empty* space, these actions come through instead as intensified violations from advanced technology from yet old mindsets fixed in ways that have made plenty of other violent acts across time.

In this chapter I want to highlight the potential of a joined outlook to significantly reframe human-to-human relations. One might suppose that a cosmology that flattens ontology so that animals, humans, objects, plants, matter, and elements exist in radical equality, where, for example, a plant is not less alive than a horse or a human not more alive than a wolf, might be an ontology that skirts the dilemmas of human-to-human ethics. After all, so much of philosophy from an anthropocentric slant articulates visions of ethics among people, but this is, in part, the point and the problem. The context of enmeshment as a framework ultimately decenters and replaces the human in a way that ethical ideas reconfigure for a view of the densities inhered in expansive relations. So, the ethics that came through before came through distortive. This is to say that the ruinous ecological record of contemporary time presents an impetus to articulate alternative visions, as the challenges encountered press human populations to care about other humans across all demarcating lines of class, sexuality, religion, and nationality. We are, however, untrained in this. It is important to note too that the ecological crisis as presented in popular environmentalist approaches couches the crisis of climate change in terms of impacts to animals and plants and birds and water and air but effaces the toll upon human communities. This happens, of course, from an environmental view that privileges nature as separate and that sees the role of environmentalism as related to the protection of nature independent from culture. That the toll will be most egregiously experienced by those least responsible for warming trends, and that these least responsible others include human actors, registers the problem of climate change as a problem of a new kind of socio-environmental ethics. It is worth noting that when the World Bank in 2009 assembled a list of the five main threats arising from climate change, threats of drought, flood, storm, rising sea levels, and food scarcity, "four of the world's poorest nations topped the list of the 12 countries at the highest risk" ("Global: Twelve Countries on Climate Change Hit-List).

In the deeply troubling work entitled *Climate Wars: Why People Will be Killed in the 21st Century,* Harald Welzer argues that global warming and violence will go hand-in-hand together. Human conflicts, such as "civil wars and . . . reigns of terror, illegal immigration, border disputes, unrest and insurgency" will escalate as the planet warms, for a hotter planet means disruptions to services of health and government, mean scarcities of food and water, means contestations over depleted resources, which, in turn, means escalated tensions and increases in the potential for violence. From such a vantage, society becomes a feedback loop informed indelibly by environment. In a way especially significant to my project, Welzer notes that modernization actually develops the problem of fading responsibility. This happens in his view when the line between cause and effect becomes difficult to trace. Such lines tend to be transgenerational, for example. In support of this claim, Welzer notes that climate change has its origin in a time "at least half a century" past, so people today could not have foreseen the shape and scale of the issues that confront them. In this confrontation, they will likely feel dislocated or powerless. Further, any enacted solution to the problem of changing climate will only work prove effective after the death of the people who are now positioned to enact solutions. This means that solutions must come from actors who act not from the basis of personal gain but from a point of ethical obligation beyond their own lives. This means that a move forward from this place of so much ruin hinges on the development of an ethic that constructs the self beyond a narrow reference of self-interest

While I read McCarthy's authorial vision as a posthumanist vision in the way that the human is radically decentered, I will articulate this vision and the attendant approach to reading that comes through a lens of joinery as expressly humane. This is an important point, and it is important to me that my project not be construed in any antihumanist light. Judith Halbertstam and Ira Livingston in *Posthuman Bodies* argue

against claims of antihumanist by asserting that the "posthuman does not necessitate the obsolescence of the human; it does not represent an evolution or devolution of the human. Rather it participates in re-distributions of difference and identity" (10). The basis of the acknowledgement of difference stems from the ways that humans have been used to define others in an equation of negative difference, so that, as I have argued, the animal is less. This same negative formulation gets applied however to other humans through chauvinisms related to race, class, sexuality, and gender. Halbertstam and Livingston note that, "The posthuman does not reduce difference-from-others to difference-from-self, but rather emerges in the pattern of resonance and interference between the two" ("Posthuman Bodies" 10).

McCarthy's narrative explicates a more full, coherent human-to-human ethical philosophy because it situates the human in the mix of more-than-human relations. In this mix, obligations that could have been ignored, say, to wolves or dogs or matter, emerge forcefully. By dismantling the borders that have allowed demarcations between nature and culture, the human becomes more broadly enmeshed and more deeply sympathetic and perhaps more deeply responsible. Do the bifurcations of modernity sponsor moral visions that propel colonizing outlooks? It has been my claim that a vision that knocks the human from the top rung of an ontological chain is not a vision that knocks the human from significance. To see the horizontal instead of vertical formation of bodies and forms, to see collective force instead of singular agency, is to note the profound significance of the human as an actor but an actor within relational network of other actors too.

Orphans

Both Cole and Parham live throughout much of the three books as orphans with parents who only visit as specters in dreams or in the sepias of memory. Both are in consequence always vulnerable because they are outside any traditional framing of relation that assembles in concentric circles around family or blood kin. Living on the road and traveling on horseback, Cole and Parham are abraded by severe weather, susceptible to robberies and injustices, and dependent on the kindnesses of strangers. Their migratory lives mean they carry little in the way of possessions. More than not, they lack money and food. They rely perpetually on the goodness of others to eat or sleep indoors. The conditions of their lives come through in their appearance. In a scene from *All The Pretty Horses*, for example, townspeople encounter Cole suspiciously from the basis of his "ragged, dirty, hungry" appearance. "When he walked out into the sun and untied the horse from the parking meter people passing in the street turned to look at him" (APH 170). Cole appears to be "something in off the wild mesas, something out of the past. Ragged, dirty, hungry in eye and belly. Totally unspoken for" (APH 170). McCarthy continues, "In that outlandish figure they beheld what they envied most and what they most reviled. If their hearts went out to him it was yet true that for very small cause they might also have killed him" (APH 170).

In this representation of exposure, what Levinas would call "pure exposure," the human figure in need depends upon the vibrancy of a sense of responsibility for the other. Yet the cultivation of this sense must happen, it follows, from a willingness to be proximate to suffering. This proximity requires positioning oneself in relation to that which is difficult to witness or assist. Levinas underscores this difficulty when he notes that this sense of obligation feels like being "hostage" to the vulnerabilities of others. By placing Cole outside the security of family, McCarthy extends responsibility for his welfare to the collective. Cole belongs to no one, and, by this, he belongs to everyone.

His figure is a challenge, then, to conventions of morality that subsume in family line or parochial dimension. In this way, the figure of the orphan pushes the reader into considerations that are of an ethical cast. I have argued throughout that McCarthy's writing technically and thematically works to provoke unsettledness in the reader from confrontations with difficult issues of relation and justice. By recursively staging the reader in terrains of ethical dilemma, she is positioned to encounter complex problems of no easy solution.

In McCarthy's novels, conventional morality emblematizes most powerfully in the figure of a woman who is meant to care for the old man, Don Arnulfo. I mentioned the woman in Chapter 2 as a figure who embodies ascendant morality from the way that she disassociates from others who are perceived as different or 'impure.' Purity as a quality of distilled character relates back to a conception of dualities as arranged in an oppositional spectrum. Where *good* stands opposite to *evil*, placements to one side of the spectrum or the other side are meant to be pure, fixed, and stable. However, with a view centered to the vast middle ground of day-to-day living, purity amounts to a long lost fiction. As Latour writes, "Everything happens in the middle, everything passes between the two, everything happens by the way of mediation, translation, and networks, but this space does not exist, it has no place. It is the unthinkable, the unconscious of the moderns" (*We Have Never Been Modern* 37). Latour's compelling critique of modernity argues that according to purified realms humans cannot exist within an ecological reality. The space where all living and all relation occur is a space between the poles in a binary and so is a place not supposed to exist given the inheritances of belief.

In *The Crossing*, the woman's pronouncements are made in speech and indirectly in action.

> "No one comes to see him. That's too bad, hey?"
> "Yes mam."

> "Not even the priest. He came one time maybe two but he don't come no more."
> "How come?"
> "She shrugged. People say he is brujo. You know what is brujo?"
> "Yes mam."
> "They say he is brujo. They say God has abandoned this man. He has the sin of Satanas. The sin of orgullo. You know what is orgullo?"
> "Yes mam."
> "He thinks he knows better than the priest. He thinks he knows better than God."
> "He told me he didn't know nothing." (C 48)

Her comments illustrate an attempt to isolate the old man across a divide, in opposition to her place where she believes herself in affiliation with the priest and so connected to the authority of the church. Sponsored in such a way, she is certain of her goodness and of the old man's evil. He falls outside all claims of status. I wish to suggest that evangelicalism of this type invokes a consenting deity even or especially in displays of exclusion and violence. Yet, the man hardly appears as the woman describes him to be. In fact, his encounter with Billy serves as a point of contradiction to the language of the woman.

> The old man was in a dark cell of a room at the back of the house. The room smelled of woodsmoke and kerosene and sour bedding. . . . There was an iron bedstead in the corner. A figure small and dark prone upon it. The room smelled as well of dust and clay. As if it might be that which the old man smelled of. . . It was cold in the room and he could see the pale wisps of the old man's breath rise and vanish in the cold. He could see the black eyes in a weathered face where the old man lay on the bare ticking of his pillow. (C42)

The man's care must come through the compassion of others, as he is too old to care for himself. Yet the structuration of belief that depends upon a deity encourages moral actions to secure transcendence. Joinery, on the other hand, situates squarely within this earthly frame.

Hand on Hand

There are two physical gestures reiterated in the trilogy that overlap in meaning and significance. The first, as I mentioned, is the hand-over-hand contact. I wish to highlight the way that the old man holds and will not release the hand of the boy. Coming toward the prostrate figure in the corner, Billy sees that "He was holding up one hand. It hung trembling in the partial light, disembodied. A hand common to all or none. The boy reached it and took it" (C 43). Holding the boy's hand, we read that the man has "a strong grip for all his frailty and he seemed loath to release the boy's hands until he'd searched out his eyes" (C43). In several textual places, McCarthy reiterates the pressure of the man's grip: "The old man did not turn loose the hand" and "His grip on the boy's hand remained as before" and "He continued to hold the boy's hand and they sat that way for some time" (C 43-44). This gesture of hand-on-hand contact is represented in the scene of the fallen church as well, where the still ordained priest exploits the weakness of the heretic. "The priest seeing opportunity in the weakness of others in the normal human way took up where he'd left off those weeks before and began to declaim to the old man concerning the goodness of God" (C 155-156). But the hand-on-hand touch signifies a break from coercion to a symbolism of shared reality, of vulnerability and imbrication. We may read in this gesture an evocation of lives that enfold like fingers entwine.

Hand-on-hand touch expands the sense of contact or connection. This is a gesture born of a philosophy of joinery. It is, therefore, recapitulated in the collapsed church scene. "Beneath the dome of the ruinous church," the man outside religion takes the priest's hand:

> He took the priest's hand as the hand of a comrade and he spoke of his 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 every man's path is every other's. There are no separate journeys for there are no separate men to make them. (C 156-157).

In another scene at the end of *Cities of the Plain*, Billy, as an old man living raggedly still, encounters another wandering man. Together the two sit under a concrete interstate pass and eat crackers and listen to each other's stories. At one point the man holds up his hand to Billy in the gesture of a pledge.

> "Hold up your hand like this."
> "Is this a pledge of some kind?"
> "No. You are pledged already. You always were. Hold up your hand."
> "He held up his hand as the man had asked."
> "You see the likeness?"
> "Yes."

The ganadero too makes the same gesture when he holds his hands slightly apart "as if he held something unseen shut within an unseen box." The character is talking about agency and his physical iteration raises a question at the heart of ecological ethics: what is the distance between? Does the space between prevent relational justice or serve as an interstice that might open a new potential in ethics?

Ecology recalibrates the distance separating one nation from another, one industry from a community, and one body from another body. Of course as the ganadero continues, it becomes explicit that distance is an illusion. He tells Billy, "You do not know what things you set in motion. "No man can know. No prophet foresee. The consequences of an act are often quite different from what one would guess. You must be sure that the intention in your heart is large enough to contain all wrong turnings, all disappointments" (C 202). Training vision toward all potential wrong turnings requires an ethics of thought because any event measures by fuller dimension than can be easily seen or articulated. A narrow frame for a narrow concern frames events in a scale of importance based on consequences within one's own life. To move the analytic for a fuller range, however, is to scale consideration to events that happen in broadly

connected frames throughout the collective. It is to see how events produce consequences for others and for other types of beings and forms in zones of proximity. This positioning of the mind requires much contemplation of a type that never finishes, for the answer of impacts and consequences is never certain or complete. Further, the answer may change in time as events can alter over time depending on how judgments change given changing contexts. In this frame of thinking that calls forth a practice of mind, the learner is cautious from humility and affectively invested.

Ethics need not be about arriving at one right answer or one good deed. Instead ethics can be about a process of thought, in terms of degrees of engagement and receptivity. As such, good ethics come more in this process than in some final product. The gesture of hand on hand communication and affiliation signifies not only a gap that must be worked on to bridge, but admits in the bridging capacity of touch an ethical response to perceptions of the void.

Vulnerability

Within a vision of interwoven beings, the condition of dire need as held in the shape of the orphan indicts distance. As I said earlier the orphan challenges the illusion of separation by placing beings in contact with a version of need that does not need to be owned or claimed. In *All the Pretty Horses*, the character Jimmy Blevins is a corollary figure to the wolf and to the "wet and wretched and so scarred and broken" dog at the end of the second book, and to the fragmentary presence of a kid in another scene who peddles newspapers where there "aint a soul in sight and him standin there with his papers under his shirt just a hollerin," and to Arnulfo who is kept in "a dark cell of a room at the back of the house" (APH 212; C 42). The thirteen-year-old Blevins meets Cole and Rawlins early on in his journey into Mexico. All three American boys ride together in the cohesion of a shared nationality. Yet from the first moment, Blevins is

presented as most vulnerable, as an example of "bare life," to recall Agamben's phrase. Blevins' only wealth is his great bay horse, and yet the fineness of the horse makes the boy and anyone he rides with a target. In recognition of this, Rawlins suggests at one point that they " trade that horse off for one less likely to get us shot" (APH 47).

As the story continues, the depth of Blevins' need grows and his dependency increases. The boy's fear of lightening has him lose his clothing and boots along with his horse and weapon. With nothing left now, Cole finds him "crouched under the roots of a dead cottonwood in a caveout where the arroyo turned and fanned out onto the plain. He was naked save for an outsized pair of stained undershorts" (APH 69). In this, the boy is presented as wholly reliant. His skinny, pale, naked figure is a summons. We get "a goddamn pitiful sight" in a boy with "bony legs . . . pale in the firelight and coated with road dust and bits of chaff. . . The drawers he wore were baggy and dirty and he did indeed look like some sad and ill used serf or worse" (APH 77).

This image of human vulnerability emblematized in Blevins is an image McCarthy conjures in other places too. Riding along the path, the boys encounter a vision of small birds impaled after a gale on the thorns of a tree.

> Bye and bye they passed a stand of roadside choalla against which small birds had been driven by the storm and there impaled. Gray nameless birds espaliered in attitudes of stillborn flight or hanging loosely in their feathers. Some of them were still alive and they twisted on their spines as the horses passed and raised their heads and cried out but the horsemen rode on. (APH 73)

Attention to such scenes presents life as fragile, imbued with tragedy. Such scenes of loss and vulnerability and suffering underscore the need for an ethics that happens not in the remove of a church for the reward in an afterlife, but in mundane daily scenes that present quiet moments where an extension of ethical responsibility happens very often without acclaim or notice.

The sacrament that enacts this extended responsibility happens in these kinds of moments in scenes involving the sharing of food. Where the Judeo-Christian tradition locates 'goodness' in the avoidance of sin, McCarthy's material instead of metaphysical vision locates 'goodness' not in an act of avoidance but active extension of care or concern with others. Sharing food acknowledges a bond. Sharing food constitutes a sacrifice, instead of a gain. This is a key rehearsal:

> He sat at a scrubbed wooden table with two other young men and they ate very well on baked squash and onion soup and tortillas and beans. They boys were younger then he and they eyed him furtively and waited for him to speak as the oldest but he did not and so they ate in silence. They fed his horse and at nightfall he was put to bed on an iron cot with a shuck tick at the rear of the house. He'd spoken to no one other than to say thank you. He thought he'd been mistaken for someone else. (C160)

In the scene, Billy is a stranger. He thinks the generosity of the people must stem from a mistaken identity. Perhaps he is mistaken as a missing relative. Of course, he isn't. When he rides away, he feels rich. He was "riding like a young squire for all his rags. Carrying in his belly the gift of the meal he'd received which both sustained him and laid claim upon him. For the sharing of bread is not such a simple thing nor is its acknowledgment. Whatever thanks be given, however spoke or written down" (C161).

In a different moment, Billy crosses the borderline at Douglas, Arizona. Still poor and reliant on others, Billy asks the guard at the border station if he can spare a half dollar. The guard, a man named John Gilchrist, a name that obviously references Christ, "stood a moment" and then, "he reached into his pocket… Here you go" (C 162). The emphasis in this scene lies on ethical transactions that happen in the mundane, in the earthly or material realm. Chapter 3 showed McCarthy's depiction of the body as matter. From this, an ethical philosophy extends logically in consideration of these material enmeshments, which is to say that a conception of ethics moves from a focus on obedience or conformity to authority to an active involvement in existential contacts and encounters.

In a scene from *All the Pretty Horses*, Cole and Rawlins have to decide if they will ride with Blevins. To ride with the boy puts them at risk. Knowing the danger, Rawlins asks, "What the hell would we want you with us for?" (APH 45). Blevins searches for an answer and settles on the idea of appealing to a common national identity. "Cause I'm an American," he states (APH 45). Rawlins counters with the argument that to ride together requires responsibility for each other. "I aint takin no responsibility for him," Rawlins declares in frustration to the demand (APH 69).

The stranger is the most trying obligation because the line on why one should care for the other is never entirely settled, and the proffered help, if it comes, is never clear in terms of impact. Often the charitable want to see the results of their generosity, yet demanding that there be a result as a predicate to giving diminishes the ethics of an act. For the extent of his poverty, the orphan can only reciprocate generosity in limited ways of return. Riding with Blevins significantly reduces the freedom of the two other riders. Rawlins sees his relation to Blevins as a threat. He moves to establish distance by stating to Cole that, "Ever dumb thing I ever done in my life there was a decision I made before that got me into it. It was never the dumb thing. It was always some choice I'd made before it. You understand what I'm sayin?" (APH 79).

I wish here to situate notions of ethics in the context of ecology. The reader saw in the scene with the wolf in the trap that the decision to free the animal happened from an unclear locus. In other words, the decision to journey with the wolf seems to take Billy as surprise as much as anyone else. The trapping scene does not present decision as a decisive personal achievement as much as a process of thinking from stages of relation and through the influences of other beings and forms within the scene. Decision, like agency, is a relational event. This understanding reframes the concept of choice entirely.

The Western notion of free will obviously prizes choice as a measure of freedom. When Rawlins speaks he is trying to locate his relationship to Blevins within the

framework of choice or volitional contact. It doesn't fit in this way. In fact very soon after Rawlins expresses his trepidation with the idea of continuing to ride with Blevins, Cole articulates a vision of event that iterates the Butterfly Effect. "Way the world is," he states. "Somebody can wake up and sneeze somewhere in Arkansas or some damn place and before you're done there's wars and ruination and all hell. You don't know what's goin to happen" (APH 92). The Butterfly Effect references a view of event that has the force from a butterfly's wings of significant enough force to initiate changes in atmospheric pressure so as to generate a tornado. As a facet of chaos theory, this rendition of agency in a joined world illustrates the force of 'least things' to produce complex and far reaching consequences. While events have always played out according to such patternizations, this telling of agency seems like a dynamism particularly suited to explaining events that happen today. This is due to the fact that transactions on Wall Street play out on most decisively on Main Street and that decisions in corporate boardrooms create consequences most pronouncedly in suburbs and forests and schools and government. The pattern in these movements dislodges explanatory paradigms in the West that arrange things neatly by foreclosing movements. The Butterfly Effect shows the porosity between nature and culture for a dynamic movement. Further, the concept dislodges moral certainty for a view of the variability depending upon any contextual frame.

The context of relation in ecology expands in a scale that is exponential to the possibilities of interconnection. Garrett Hardin underscored this idea when he noted, "You cannot do only one thing." In a way that illuminates the degrees of possible connection, Levinas described "the sheer fact of being" as constraining in the sense that this fact posits life within "a field of forces, like a heavy atmosphere, belonging to no one, universal" (60). The expansion of ethics as a basis of my own project moves to incorporate animals and things into ethical significance, that is, "into the heavy

atmosphere of existence." The sense of responsibility for Blevins is very much catalyzed by the face-to-face exchanges between riders, with my use of the term face intentionally recalling Levinas, who found the face to be an agent for summons. Yet the strict expectation of a literal face translates poorly in an age where so many ethical contacts do not happen at a face-to-face level. Global economies, for example, put people and animals and objects in stages of profound interrelation as a matter of daily business, but seeing all the beings and entities present in these moments is extremely difficult. Technologies that link humans in a nearly unbroken connection with media very typically obscure the face of the other or present the face in a one-dimensional cast. Large institutions of all types benefit from making actors imperceptible. All of this is to say, then, that the face must not be interpreted literally but as an assemblage of actors.

I diverge from Levinas' privileging of the face, then, with the goal of incorporating his valuable insights into ecological contexts. Collin Davis notes in his study of Levinas that the face merely encapsulates an ethical problem or prompt in the sense that "it is something that is not available to vision but described as if it were, signaling an encounter which is not an event and an experience which does not occur in the consciousness of any subject" (*Levinas* 46). From this reading, the face becomes a term for a problem in ethics that has embodied beings encoded within. Davis argues that the face prompts one to move outside ego to see others.

For Levinas to be relevant, however, to the kinds of ethical obligations that happen now from distant lands from diverse human others and from the animals and objects that constitute flesh and materiality of the world, we must move away from an orthodoxy of strict humanness and a strict interpretation of face. Keeping in mind the projections articulated in Welzer's account of climate change, the most difficult and urgent ethical summons in the twenty-first century will be to beings outside familiar circles, beyond known bodies or cultures or religions or languages. This is to say that the

most urgent summons will be inhered even in the challenge of recognizing matter as a "least thing" of importance. Requiring all of these ethical problems to manifest a face limits the dimensions of an ethical sense.

In the course of the narrative, things go poorly for Blevins. He is ultimately killed after being imprisoned. McCarthy presents Blevins' death clearly: he is transported in a truck to a remote location, taken from the truck, and shot. Cole and Rawlins are also imprisoned for their association with the boy. Both of the characters, in turn, are nearly killed while serving time. Though McCarthy presents to readers' view the scene where Blevins dies, it is difficult as I have noted to decide exactly who or what is to blame for his death. As Levinas declared, the "heavy atmosphere" of existence, dense with so many crossed lines from so many forceful actors, complicates vision. In fact, the impetus really moves from singular culpability to broader interpretations of agency where actors participate together to create events through scenes of common life. This vision is consistent with McCarthy's portrayal of consequence in that he disavows clear lines of cause and effect. In every event, a host of actors converge, a host of lines of force and will and power assimilate and compete. Clear assignations of culpability or innocence become difficult distinctions to make with any degree of certainty from the crosshatch of relations.

In a narrative pattern where lines connect seemingly distant lives, a boy from San Angelo, Texas links to a girl in Mexico and, through her, to a woman, one of the most vibrant characters in the three books. Duena Alfonsa is "both grandaunt and godmother to the girl" (APH 132). In a scene featuring Alfonsa, readers are presented with a lengthy discussion of different theories of agency. The importance of agency as an extrapolative feature of ontology and as a concept of ethics constitutes the importance of force as a way to conceptualize event. A sense of agency underpins relational conceptions in that a sense of force or will adjusts notions of connection. Alfonsa explains to Cole that her

father “had a great sense of the connectedness of things” (APH 230). Her father “claimed that the responsibility for a decision could never be abandoned to a blind agency but could only be relegated to human decisions more and more remote from their consequences” (APH 230). She states:

> The example he gave was of a tossed coin that was at one time a slug in a mint and of a coiner who took that slug from the tray and placed it in the die in one or two ways and from whose act all else followed, cara y cruz. No matter through whatever turnings nor how many of them. Till our turn comes at last and our turn passes. . . .It’s a foolish argument. But that anonymous small person at his work bench has remained with me. I think if it were fate that ruled our houses it could perhaps be flattered or reasoned with. But the coiner cannot. Peering with his poor eyes through dingy glasses at the blind tablets of metal before him. Making his selection. Perhaps hesitating a moment. While the fates of what unknown worlds to come hang in the balance. My father must have seen in this parable the accessibility of the origins of things, but I see nothing of the kind. For me the world has always been more of a puppet show. But when one looks behind the curtain and traces the strings upward he finds they terminate in the hands of yet other puppets, themselves with their own strings which trace upward in turn, and so on. In my own life I saw these strings whose origins were endless enact the deaths of great men in violence and madness. Enact the ruin of a nation. (APH 231)

Agency in joinery emphasizes the exertions of many different beings and forms. Seeing these energies on the page from diverse bodies and entities provokes a greater sensitivity to a range of actors that cohere together to generate impacts concussive in effect. The strings described by Alfonsa are not strings held by some kind of puppet-master, but are instead strings that might be imagined as latticed across the horizontal field of existence so that actions of material and corporeal force reverberate in multiple directions, in even distant corners. A way of detecting interconnection lies in detecting the spread of consequence after all.

CHAPTER 5

READING LITERARY ECOLOGIES

Ruins have been a recurrent presence in this project, not merely because they figure so prominently in McCarthy's fiction, but because, according to my claim, they illustrate a tragic propensity in the modern project toward ruin. Operative philosophies in the American West as dramatized in McCarthy's Western trilogy may be said to end in his searing portrayal of a desolate postapocalyptic world in the later novel *The Road*. This is because the ascendant ethical philosophy in one historical frame remains operative through to another. This operative paradigm is one that construes the world as bifurcated so that perceived zones of society and nature are disconnected from one another, so that people are disassociated from one another, so that animal beings and material entities are held beyond a realm of concern. The dynamism in this arrangement is toward distance, which is a way of saying that the ethics that issue from a bifurcated lens install a sense of disassociation and remove instead of proximity or attachment. This positionality allows so many entities to be perceived as unrelated to the life of self through a distortive optic. The realm of concern in such a view extends importance around self-referential points of family, friends, neighbors, and nation, or within fellowships of religious or political affiliations. Yet so many are left out. This kind of hewing of ethical obligation within closed circles that centralize the self amounts to a communitarian or circumscribed ethics, one that privileges the local, provisional, and

national character of communities, but makes little inclusive room for nonhumans and even humans who are perceived as too distant or too different to be affiliated.

In a work like *The Road*, however, the consequences of a bifurcated lens are obvious: operative ethical frameworks did not expand sufficiently to safeguard the necessary conditions for existence, as only a few unlucky survivors wander about in a most desolate waste. My claim has been that there is a tacit line of thought circuiting through these modernistic philosophies that animate in the early America West and continuing through to futural scenes of global collapse, where both nature and society are thoroughly undone as dramatized in *The Road*. This observation should not even seem so radical given that the ascendant paradigm of Judeo-Christian theology, a paradigm that I have explicated as indicative of Western philosophy's more general orientation toward binaries, works explicitly toward apocalyptic demise. It is, after all, a doctrinal end. A work like *The Road* or any of the numerous creative works that have in recent years attempted to capture this kind of planetary ending merely rehearse what is an entrenched outlook concerning an expected demise.[1] The great number of works centered in this portrayal indicate unsettledness in the collective consciousness concerning ways of living that cannot be sustained, so there must be a collapse. Of course ruin on this scale is disconcerting in any context, but it seems to me especially destabilizing in the setting of higher education where students go to build a future. I will work in this chapter to translate my project very specifically to the sphere of education.

Throughout, I have focused weighted attention on a revised ethics that initiates from a practice of literacy which forefronts ecological principles of interconnection. According to such an orientation, the distance asserted through binaries and borders and bifurcations is collapsed and the limited inclusions of so many masses of beings and

[1] A quick survey of recent film titles displays the commonness of this storyline: *Waterworld*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, *I Am Legend*, *The Road*, *Wall-E*, *This Is the End*, *Contagion*, *Snowpiercer*, and on the list goes.

forms emerge in a recalibrated radius that redefines notions of far and near. In this recalibrated intimacy distinctions between nature and culture, between attendant categories of animals and humans and life and matter erode. Instead, what opens to critical view is a vast crosshatch of relationality. To get at these interactions so as to understand implicative relations, I have worked to show that the adoption and advancement of a narrowly drawn field of ethical obligation, one that premises in a belief of subdivided domains where transactions across bodies are held not to translate broadly but to remain oddly contained within narrow channels and within linear timelines, is clearly in collapse now through exposures of accelerated ecological ruin. Of course, throughout this project ecology has meant an imbroglio of nature-culture, socio-environment hybridity. Toward a reiteration of the shape of these subdivided mentalities, I have highlighted the portrayal of human others in McCarthy's trilogy who emerge from the 'other' side of borders that have allowed so much disassociation, whether these borders be based on national territorializations (where so many are made alien), on class lines (where so many are exploitable), or religious affiliations (where so many are transgressors). In other words, the West is a region to return to so as to understand a larger trajectory of Western thinking.

Borderlines constructing human alterity have, of course, long been examined in literary studies and critical theory. What is unique to the moment of study announced here is a movement to recognize these lines of exclusion as extending in a ruinous way even beyond human difference to a vast neglect and indifference toward animal beings and forms of materiality. This movement of critical attention happens in the midst of a profound, threatening ecological crisis. It happens from a place of massive extinctions and from the awareness that both animals and matter have long been regarded as only brute, inert, and lacking, as unworthy of critical focus. This relegation in a time of such unprecedented dyings becomes culpable. So posthuman scholarship moves generally to

include nonhuman actors as participants in the webbed structures of networks and assemblages. And this new cosmology reframes everything, including the human and the human condition, and, by extension, the humanities. At the end of *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler writes, "If the humanities have a future as cultural criticism, and cultural criticism has a task at the present moment, it is no doubt to return us to the human where we do not expect to find it, in its frailty and at the limits of its capacity to make sense" (151). Rosi Braidotti in *The Posthuman* argues that technologies such as genetically modified food, neurologically controlled prosthetics, and advanced robotics have splintered the concept of a unified human subject. She sees the new humanities, a "neo-humanism," as a direction of thought that advances from the progress obtained in postcolonial and race studies. Braidotti emphasizes a new way of doing education in the humanities by fostering a critical creativity where humans think "about who and what we are in the process of becoming" (12). Additionally, thinkers in rhetorical theory such as Marilyn Cooper, Margaret Syverson, and Jennifer Edbauer Rice have (re)placed the human within conglomerations that have many nonhumans as active agents in the creation of discourse and text. Clayton Pierce and Taylor Webb have examined issues of educational democracy within the framework of more-than-human assemblages. My work situates specifically within an effort to advance a different way of understanding through a different engagement with text for a different kind of literacy. My project joins a larger group effort, but it also branches in a different, unique direction by developing a particular practice of reading from a pedagogy that centralizes the formation of the collective.

This centralized recognition of multiple bodies and forms generates certain cognitive turns of mind and certain affective registers, which may ultimately reinvigorate the study of English as a way of making sense of ecological realities. In a chapter on knowledge from literature in a book entitled *The Uses of Literature*, Rita Felski notes

that research from sociologists of knowledge argue that "cognition is not a passive recording or imprinting on the psyche but an active selecting, ordering, and shaping of material, a means of making intelligible" (84). This idea seems to capture the co-constituting relationship between author and reader in text. Anna Hickey-Moody notes that, "literature, sound, and dance are creative media that prompt affective responses and generate affectus." ("Little War Machines: Posthuman Pedagogy and its Media" 274). In this defining of affectus, Hickey-Moody directs attention to the "subjective change" that comes from exposures to art and that serve as a "vector of pedagogy" (274). I am drawn to this way of thinking and experiencing text because it resembles the vibrancy of multiple players. The reader, author, text, teacher, classroom, institutions all crowd upon the scenes of the "literacy event," to recall Shirley Bryce-Heath's definition, to relationally construct a sense of meaning. Of course, the meaning is never stable. This highlights the possibility of encounter in and through text. It highlights the activity in learning from text.

Students encounter a plethora of informational items today in living and in the classroom, but making sense cognitively and making meaning affectively of these items must come, in my view, from a particularly cultivated practice. Learners (both teachers and students) need ways of assembling pieces together to gain a fuller portrait of the real. I see this assembling happening within the encounter with literary text so that the page becomes larger in formation so as to overspill the boundary between real life and 'book learning.' Yet, I also see this assembling happening through text so that learning becomes attentive to the relational interactions that constitute any one event. An example of the disconnection that may occur between informational points and a sense of meaning can be consulted in the issue of climate change. In this one immense phenomenon, the gap between scientific knowledge and public perception indicates a gulf of miscommunication. To see evidence of this gap between 'matters of fact' and

'matters of concern,' we need look only at the commonplace way that climate change is spoken of as a matter of belief, where someone might say, "I do not believe in global warming." If only this lack of belief made the difference.

My project joins the larger posthuman initiatives to extend critical attention toward nonhuman entities from the basis of a failed history, a history now articulated in increasingly urgent and massively scaled ecological issues. The thinker Joanna Bourke in her book *What It Means to be Human* argues that the mindsets that propagate racism, sexism, and classism according to a view of ontological hierarchies have diminished nonhuman bodies in a bid to elevate chosen human ones. This kind of valuation, one that leverages through an oppositional oppression, premises value upon a select body from the basis of a falsely construed divide. As an example Bourke illustrates that women have traditionally been conceived as inferior based on an oppositional defining to males. She writes that this formation defines women as "what they are only through men." In a historical review, she shows that science has tended to perpetuate this hierarchical arrangement, which is, as I have clearly argued, synonymous with a Christian outlook, one that very obviously traffics in a view of human supremacy. By connecting the reasoning found in racial, sexual, and gender chauvinisms with reasoning that separates the human from the more-than-human world, and by also showing the complicity of this in a history of 'objective' science, Bourke complicates the question of what it means to be human. Rather than providing any easy answer about where the line should be drawn to demarcate one being from another being, given that all beings interrelate, she notes that distinctions become like "the inner and outer layers of a Möbius strip." These layers are not as barriers but interstices. From this view, the impetus moves with the force of a sea change from a preoccupation with line drawing toward an active and recursive deliberation upon ways of living more justly within a fragile, common world.

By applying theoretical insights from Latour and Bennett toward the development of a formation of reading that initiates a practice of thinking about the collective, I have hoped ultimately to align learning in English classrooms with the development of a more humane and expansive ethics. Toward this end, I have assembled literary or textual ecologies for a view of how increased perception and appreciation of these constellations enmesh the human. Attention to these various bodies and forms may contribute to a reappraised view of ethics and justice in off-page ecologies. The view of ethics that emerges from a constellation of actors in conjunction breaks the tradition of foreclosures that have been conventional in both Christian and Cartesian outlooks.

In Chapter 2, for example, I worked to show the extent to which nonhuman animals and humans intertwine existentially as co-constituting actors in a bound field. The move of one actor, whether the boy or the wolf, was observed to impact many others, so that the life world pulsed in a kind of choreography of exchanged movements. More than implying that two or more beings actively, consciously, or deliberately sway in steps of accord, a kind of intended dance, this rhythm of coexistence implies instead that movement initiates ripples of counter or concussive movement, and that this happens regardless of any conscious attention toward creating movement. In the wake of these forces from multiple, diverse agents, bodies come into contact and existential space is understood as, very often, frictional. The choreography of colliding bodies and forms may be called a dance, as in the expression of Donna Haraway, but it is not necessarily a harmonious movement. It may look more mosh pit than waltz.

Of course, according to McCarthy's dramatizations, friction animates relations all the time. My first chapter elaborated on the fallen church scene that had a heretic and priest at odds. The terms "heretic" and "priest" were seen as symptoms within a larger endemic outlook that orders identities according to binary terms. In placing the reader

within ruins, however, McCarthy highlights the inadequacy of these terms and the inadequacy of the outlooks that are sustained through them. In his dramatizations, the dance of relationality often occurs as an encounter or point of contact with far reaching ramifications. In this span, assorted ethical dimensions and questions arise. This is to say that where bodies and forms collide ethical deliberations follow. The ethical questions I have raised, and it is fair to say that my project raises more questions than it answers, stem from an awareness of ceaseless gatherings and encounters. Yet because this is a pedagogical project, I am far more interested in questions than answers. I am far more interested in structuring a classroom setting where learners — myself included — dwell in places of deep, unsettled question. This is to see the mission of the university as facilitative of learners who are humble, not always certain, not always quick to move, to own, or to consume. Thus, I have argued that an ethics that articulates and practices from a place of harmony is too easy an ethics to be of much contemporary good. Such ethics require no radical extensions outside self-referential frames. The measure of ethics today comes instead in the capacity to move beyond limited inclusions so that taxing and onerous inclusions are not avoided but centralized.

All of this is to argue that an easy ethics made in the mold of binaries presents an inadequate model for an ecologically understood world because in the most quotidian of existential moments humans interact with diverse, other humans and with nonhuman beings and forms. The old ethic that worked to make relations clean and orderly collapses in the context of these kinds of ceaseless interactions. Chapter 2 highlighted one encounter where the reader was pressed to consider relational ethics from the vantage of nonidentifying sameness, to draw upon Adorno's language. This challenge moved ethical concern outside conventional frames of belonging to a context of historically contested relations between humans and wolves. Such a framing challenged even the ethos within environmentalism that has cuddly creatures captured in language

or image to propel ethical concern. This stratagem works in alignment with a commodifying tendency. Accordingly, other creatures that are less enticing, and other places that are less 'wild,' evade a sense of concern. Environmentalism in this cast draws borders around sites and around life forms, but leaves so many outside any inclusion. In this way, the aestheticization of nature through representations of beauty and unsettledness perpetuates a practice of thinking that has nature removed, as found only in designated places, with designated animals serving as symbols. This relegation through provisional selection sustains the very orientations of mind that destroy the environment and degrade social settings deemed distant, poor, or blighted.

As I have shown, McCarthy's trilogy has been working to break the bifurcated lens that excludes difficult, different, distant others from significance. His animals are not cuddly or pleasant or utilizable. The dog he fashions at the close of *The Crossing* is an "arthritic and illjoined thing" that looked so "scarred and broken that it might have been patched up out of parts of dogs by demented vivisectionists" (C423). His rancher protagonists find themselves positioned to recursively encounter contested others, whether in the figure of the wolf or the broken dog or a pack of dogs that have turned to hunting and eating calves or even to vulnerable human others. Through these dramatizations, the reader finds deliberate attention to ethical questions that initiate relations even outside a sense of volition. This move of mind, from a technique of literary narrative, challenges conventions of thought and perhaps even ultimately of deed.

Chapter 3 further complicated an already complex terrain of human-animal relationality by examining the vibrancy of matter. In an almost default relegation of the Western mind as constructed by that exemplary thinker of borders, Descartes, the domains of life and matter have been framed as disjointed from one another. Yet in forms of intrusion where matter infiltrates the life field, say, for example, in a trespass

that has pollutants and toxins invading the body, the façade of a bifurcated world, one where life and matter are disjoined, collapses. In a further falling, barriers meant to divide "outside" from "inside" topple. In this way when the body is trespassed, humans are made aware of the vibrancy of matter and the porosity of borders so that the anxiety of experiencing pollutants in an airway, for example, magnify in severity from the sense of a philosophical lineage as also contaminated. When McCarthy shows the decay of a corpse, a vision he impresses upon the reader's mind, the reader is positioned to witness the human body as a material form. The image of death and decay presents an inverse way into recognizing the body as corporeal. This view, then, presents a way to imagine the agency of matter as a co-constitutive force. Jane Bennett notes that to see this agency is to begin a process of recognition that finds material things forceful in every common scene of everyday existence.

So, Chapter 3 presented a radically recalibrated view of matter and agency that opened an explanatory framework for understanding how events happen through complex conglomerations rather than individual lines of free human will. Ultimately this reading of animal and matter leads to questions of ethics, for if humans are not actors alone then humans are not the only actors influencing the trajectory of events. This recognition repositions human life to a position of intersection within vast force fields, or, to draw on a more established image, as enmeshed thoroughly within a web of ecology.

My fourth chapter explored McCarthy's representations of ethical obligations within a joined, common world. As Butler alluded in her statement concerning the future of the humanities, the places that will elicit a perceptive view into humanity will be the places where so much of Western tradition expels humanity from the basis of apartness. Yet joinery, as a mesh of nature and culture, becomes a conceptual lens for examining ethics between human and animal, between humans and materiality, and

between humans and humans. Those held outside circles of belonging according to nebulously drawn borders reemerge now in positions of proximity, just as so many animals and entities come also to bearing. This infiltration (re)presents the human for study in the humanities. This is an interesting development as such a rediscovery of the human seems ironic given the charges that have been leveled against posthumanism. One of these charges is the easy claim that posthumanism dethrones the human. While he is not a critic of posthumanism, Timothy Morton defines the posthumanistic wave of thinking as one of the big revolutions in human thought through time.[2] Of course, I see this inherent capacity within posthuman theory to be a favorable description as it potentially moves humans away from imperial subjectivities. Some go further, however, by charging that posthumanism is antihumanist.[3] Yet, if, as Latour argues, 'we have never been modern' then humans have likewise 'never been human' given the prevailing method of defining through dichotomous or oppositional manners. It is my view that humans seen as seamed alongside so many others in a vast collective may produce a new coexistent ethic.

The summative force of these chapters, then, has been toward a focus on relational ethics, which not only seem to be a highly advantageous classroom practice for the way that ethics leave learning in a reflexively open state, in a state that allows for

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[2] Morton notes that the revolutions of Copernicus, Marx, Freud, Derrida, and Darwin humiliate the human by wounding "our narcissistic sense of importance" (*The Ecological Thought* 118).

[3] Levi Bryant relays a criticism of posthumanism when he writes in his blog *Larval Subjects* that a friend of his recently protested, "What is the point of posthumanism, if the analysis is still conducted by humans?" This argument from the friend is also a point of criticism entertained by Bennett in *Vibrant Matter* who acknowledges the same limitation. The question captures the limits of human understanding. The animal, the materiality cannot clearly or indisputably tell us what it is like to be joined alongside humans in coexistent frames. Yet I find this to be a criticism of posthumanism that actually accents the kind of intelligence created by literature, a kind of literate capacity for thinking about the fictional as unknowable but still worth thinking about. In other words, we cannot know with certainty the position of any other being, if we can even know with certainty our own positionality. Still, this lack of absolute knowledge shouldn't diminish the critical and creative attempt to try for a fuller realization. My own position is that we try to understand, to extend, to think outside the default world of our own lives, but that we still remain cautious, humble, reflexive in the face of continual learning, of change. We can do little more than this, but this is still more than we have been doing by staying locked within human superiority.

critical reappraisals, but also a practice made in the acute awareness of the nature-culture imbroglio. In the sobering book *Climate Wars*, Harald Welzer argues that climate change will so disrupt distribution and deplete provisions that people will increasingly resort to violence just to eat, to drink, to live. Welzer argues that wars of the twenty-first century will directly and indirectly connect back to the earth's altered climate. Crop failures and increased food prices, depletions of fresh water, along with increasing privatization of water, are all commonplace issues today that characterize the way that nature and culture indelibly entangle. Decreasing fresh water supplies link to drier conditions and depleted aquifers, but these are all "natural" realities thoroughly crosshatched with "social-political-economic" practices. As such, there are no pure categories. So issues cannot adhere to the placements made for them. Further the realities of water, food, and space shortages will translate to other problems that include countless numbers of displaced humans and threatened animal and plant life. Human refugees displaced from climate change will mark a key ethical concern though the old framework of national borders will serve poorly to articulate any ethos of obligation. Concern for climate change refugees will hinge on the capacity for a developed ethics that does not exclude ethical mattering on the basis of national-political-economic lines, but that sees such lines as nebulous and even antiquated markers. A vital ethical sense might, in other words, become discernable from the basis of one's individual and one's collective capacities to disassemble barriers that foreclose more expansive, immersive levels of concern. All of this is to argue that in this age, one paradoxically defined by both growing scarcities and growing human populations, the volatile mixture of accelerated need coupled with the demands of more and more people show the way that students must be trained to think through obligations that extend uncomfortably beyond the ordained parameters of Western tradition.

I wish to underscore, however, that these dire projections of a world upset by climate change only reveal in accelerated and amplified shape a more constant, perhaps previously more subtle happening of interactions on a round planet. In Chapter 2, I noted that the scene on the plain where Billy encounters the wolf represents a key moment of contact between beings, but it is nonetheless only a dramatic moment in a process of existence that occurs ceaselessly, whether willed or not. The ontological reframing of the human body, noted in the science of DNA, which shows the nonhuman presence even in the genetic structuration of the human form, represents in a scientific idiom this very collusion. So too climate change will show the way that events in one realm happen across the planet in other realms, and even yet this motion will reveal a perpetual pattern that Westerners have been poorly trained, socialized as we are in dualistic ideologies, to see, to understand, and to respond meaningfully to. The demands that will accompany the loss of life through violence and extinction with the growth of human numbers, the displacements that will accompany increasing privatization, these will become issues to serve as screens for reassessing the conceits of the old West. Freedom, free will, and individualism clearly do not adhere to the realities of ecological issues. And, in this same way, the recurrent presence of the orphan, the old, and the needy in McCarthy's trilogy present figures before the reader that emblematize the shifting demands of contemporary ethical obligations. These figures stage, I wish to assert, as developmental grounds for what needs to be an even deeper obligation, one that must register the animal and entity as significant. From the place, then, of what is a proper posthuman ethics, there is indeed a constricted sense of absolute freedom, free will, and autonomy.

Teaching in this way will undoubtedly impart a burden to the learner, but learning of ecological issues and dilemmas often installs a sense of implication. This sense is highlighted in my approach through a recalibration of agency away from

singular human agents, which allowed for issues to contain in the misdeeds of a few, to vast networks. To see this change we may look at the issue of elephant poaching. Once seen as a story of human greed, it is reframed now to expand as an indictment on ways of living that implicate more than the poachers themselves. Thus, poaching no longer becomes an issue to fix "over there" but becomes an issue to fix "right here." Seeing the possible extinction of elephants through economic contexts that define all life as forms of biocapital extends an implicative net widely, as widely as neoliberalism spans. In this way, ecological issues evade a sense that one being or one thing is solely or exclusively responsible. These issues also resist resolution from the acts of any singular being or organization or movement, as well. Students can, therefore, feel uncomfortably bound within the world from this learning. It is, in fact, a disorienting way of thinking. It might be a kind of secular metaphysics even where what is small nonetheless occupies a vast existential space, occupies with both a force and with a vulnerability to force. I will articulate in the closing section of this chapter some ideas on the affective registers arrived at through this way of thinking, but for now I want to reference Latour's argument in *Pandora's Hope*. Here, he argues that the more nonhumans are brought into the collective the more humane the collective will be (*Reassembling the Social* 46). The dynamism of this ethical extensionality seems to hinge on the idea that expanding one's sense of ethical responsibility even to those most difficult to include creates thought processes that produce orientations toward interrelations and this may produce a kind of caution of movement that hasn't been prioritized. From this realization Latour warns against the tendency to purify our thinking by artificially separating agents out or by trying to locate single actors as causal forces when events occur from distributed agencies.

In this same way, it has been crucial in my project to associate a redefining of agency as a central element toward recalibrating thinking patterns away from the closed,

contained, and narrow. An ecological agency posits the power of even small things, including small living or material things, but also small things as in actions that happen in a concussive pattern. Latour provides an analogy that is especially helpful in learning to read agency from the literary page. He notes that an actor in existential space is like an actor on stage in the production of a play: "To use the word 'actor' means that it's never clear who and what is acting when we act since an actor on stage is never alone in acting" (*Reassembling the Social* 46). So many people whether on stage, backstage, or off-stage must be involved in the production of a play. Human actors include, of course, the actual actors but also the lighting and sound technicians, the playwright, and members of the audience. Similarly to watch the rolling names on the end credits on a film is to become aware of the tremendous number of people involved in getting the film to screen, even as so many of these people lack any easy, manifest presence in the film itself. If we think as well of all the crucial nonhuman entities that must participate behind any single endeavor, filmmaking or otherwise, the rolling credits become lengthier still. This analogy of stage or film production applies to all the hidden players that must assemble behind political acts or military campaigns or even day-to-day, quotidian exchanges within settings of work and play. In a key passage from "The Agency of Assemblages and the North American Blackout," Bennett notes the numerous tally of agents that assemble to produce a power outage. Such an event comes as a disruption from the conjunctive force of agents assembled. This conjunctive meeting is to see the mosh pit of force that comes potentially through in any joining.[4] One can

[4] Bennett quotes a newspaper article in the *International Herald Tribune* that recorded the strangeness of this assembled event in August 2003: "on the day after the blackout" the paper reported, "the vast but shadowy web of transmission lines, power generating plants and substations known as the grid" fluttered. The term "fluttered" is used as a reference to a heart somewhere within this vast grid. In the moment before the blackout, the heart, a kind of collective organ, was made unsteady in its palpitations. All of this is vague for a newspaper meant to deliver the news. Yet the journalist notes that a full understanding of what went wrong evades even the experts, for the grid is on a dimension beyond "full understanding." We read: "[the grid]

think as well of the number of agents assembled in hospitals or courtrooms or classrooms, and how complex these quotidian places become suddenly when we consider the actors embedded within the seams and behind the scenes. How like wilderness even domestic, city spaces of hospitals and classrooms and political arenas become for the densities of activities and for the multiplicities of bodies and forms that move through and make events happen.

Consider for a moment the densities of actors involved in the process of writing and reading and teaching. Margaret Syverson in *The Wealth of Reality* argues that pens, paper, computers, books, telephones, fax machines, photocopiers, printing presses, and other natural or human constructed features" combine to generate text (5). One person signs off as the author of the text, but so many forces assemble to make a book occur. One reader thinks of him or herself as the subject responding to the flat textual object. In this convention, the author and the reader are separate agents, separable in space. Yet a new thinking, one that comes through a lens that shows the multiplicity of actors assembled in any reading moment, reveals instead the roster of forces, technologies, beings, and objects that cohere in the event of comprehension to influence the consequence of encounter and interpretative slant. This view of multiple actors revises the dimensions of the reading act in powerful ways. Louise Rosenblatt's famous work with reader response theory is noted for articulating the relationship between writer and reader, both of whom are seen to work together to formulate a text via a series of transactions. Rosenblatt considered the act of reading to hinge on this exchange between the inner world of the reader, a world that surfaces and is made analytical through the provocations of text, and the script or signs and symbols put in print that expand and reorient the inner world through this encounter with a textual object. In the

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lives and occasionally dies by its own mysterious rules" (qtd. in Bennett "The Agency of Assemblages").

collision, inner experiences are brought into tension with outer realities. Reading becomes, then, a way of connecting internal depths of experience and emotion with literary re-descriptions, to use Paul Ricoeur's term, to generate a different state of thinking. This is a pedagogical pattern through reading. We may imagine that the reader is affectively involved from the basis of his or her own inner world while also cognitively challenged from the basis of realities introduced by the text. This says much for the way that inner and outer realities converge in textual encounters. It speaks too to the importance of tension to generate a learning that is, by its nature, discomfiting and immersive. Later I will write a bit more on future research that I hope moves in a direction of analysis toward this paradoxical state of literary engagement; one that is simultaneously critical and immersive. This is a place for attention, especially recently as a growing chorus of thinkers work to move the reading experience away from a training in critique, when that critique happens only in the vein of a kind of hermeneutics of suspicion, toward more. Yet, moving reading into a place solely outside of critique's force diminishes literature's rupturing potential, so the challenge is steep.

Here, however, I wish to return to the roster of actors that assemble to mediate the textual experience. In addition to the energies brought by writers and readers, text also emerges from constitutive influences of teachers and curriculums, of institutions and governments, of policies and politics. In addition to print technologies, exposures to blogs and criticism, to media and guides, to film and other artworks open or narrow the experience depending on the quality and type of actors. Yet seeing the ways that these various actors contribute to the activity of reading focuses on the collective that has beings and forces and policies and technologies in conglomerate. All of these "actors" as forces contribute importantly. Uncovering their vibrancy leads to different interpretative possibilities, for we may begin to see the way that literacy happens as a conjunctive formation. So, I want to claim that assembling the collective in this way of recognizing

the role of all these agential forces captures reading as a practice of literacy that happens within enmeshed formations.

My project has focused chiefly on imagining a way of reading that works to project an image of joinery, but it might just as well see the process of reading as an example of joinery. Learning through this lens becomes, then, more than a singular achievement. It becomes an achievement of the collective. The dimensions of this thinking highlight the vital importance of equitable funding paradigms for schools. One may even imagine that the condition of poverty serves as a condemnation of the collective. This view would challenge the favored discourse by conservatives who articulate poverty as a failure of individual character. Walter Benjamin was getting at this very idea, I believe, when he noted that great cultural achievements "owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries" (256). Benjamin's statement of course opens to view those thinkers working within, perhaps, similar disciplines or within similar problems, but his statement may be taken divergently as a call to consider even other hidden forces. Today, someone like Stuart Kauffman examines ideas and discoveries within broad thinking spaces, kinds of collective spaces where ideas happen in adjacencies of relation within a commons of thought.[5] Roland Barthes initiated the death of the author, which moved reading away from a focus on the author's own particular views or biography or context. This move puts a spin on the lost presence of one to gain a view into the common world that meets in a work. I see thinking in this revised way, where ideas are not singularly owned, where text is an accomplishment of multiple actors, where reading becomes even a way of locating ghosted publics, as a way

[5] Kauffman has a long affiliation with the Santa Fe Institute, which is also notably a place that Cormac McCarthy visits.

to advance attention toward common ground through interconnective relations. Of course this kind of articulation looks to future scholarship in this vein.

The first step, however, is the articulation of a reading practice that moves the textual experience of readers to an awareness of these more-than-human vibrancies. Like assembling actors in a play or film, like seeing the multitudes of human and nonhuman presences in public buildings and institutions, I have moved to assemble various actors in text to initiate a sense of living with, which is a sense that provokes a revised ontology, agency, and ethics. Very often these actors hide or have obscured presences, but my claim is that bringing them into bearing distributes a sense of broad significance so that hierarchies dismantle and actions can be seen as broadly impactful. Seeing these agents initiates a sense of joined relations, and this is the basis potentially for a different ethical framework, one that works against the borders of old, that corrects the short-term and myopic orientations that have domains divided so as to rationalize violations in one realm for the benefit of another. It is a way, in other words, of glimpsing the collective in the densities of on-page casts or rosters or ensembles. From a pedagogical standpoint, students who are versed in this kind of perception for this potential kind of valuation may be more likely to consider the hidden others in frames of 'real' life. And, crucially, I see this way of education as essential to a planet that is trying to figure out what sustainability means beyond merely recycling or turning off the lights in the house.

A New Practice

So the combined efforts of these chapters have been toward developing a different epistemological basis of knowledge for ways of thinking ecologically. I have written extensively at this point of the untenable divisions made from binaries, borders, and bifurcations. Now I will show how such bifurcated divides fragment understandings

and result in practices of literacy through reading that cannot develop student understandings toward complex, heterogeneous, and dynamic relations within existential joineries. All of this is to say that pedagogical orientations that maintain the divides between humans and the rest of existence exacerbate problems of comprehension both for on-page texts and off-page realities. Ultimately these failed ways of seeing and thinking translate to limitations in ethical response, for we cannot be ethically responsible to that which registers as insignificant.

So, my project to articulate an ecocentric literacy is more broadly an educational project to reframe values and orientations. It is meant to take Orr's statement seriously, when he notes that "The crisis we face is first and foremost one of mind, perception, and values; hence, it is a challenge to those institutions presuming to shape minds, perceptions, and values" (27). The ambition of a project that addresses values and orientations proposes that English teachers in particular and teachers generally reimagine the reasons to read today given the unique conditions of this historical moment. These conditions, I argue, make demands that haven't been imperative before. Specifically, the demand is toward ways of reading that translate to ways of living within an ecologically joined planet. Hubert Zapf argues that literature does four essential things: (1) it "provides a medium for the concrete explication of ethical issues" that might otherwise remain at a "merely systematic-theoretical level;" (2) illustrates the way that ethics come through the human subject, a subject that is not merely a "cognitive ego" but a "bodily self implicated in multiple interrelationships;" (3) stages enactments of "dialogical interdependences between self and other;" and (4) illustrates ethics as a contrary force to "moral ideologies" so that thinking becomes "resistant to easy interpretation and appropriation" ("Literary Ecology and the Ethics of Texts" 853).

With these characteristics of literate thinking in mind, I move to place the reader within a metaphoric space of joinery that makes just relations a process of deliberative

thinking. If reading cannot be made to translate to ways of thinking about ways of living then the value of English education must be framed, as it so often has been framed, as a critical set of writing and reading skills that allow students to move successfully into ascendant job markets. That so many job markets are under corporate paradigm means, of course, that students leave school reading literature well, assuming that literature is being taught well, only to enter into job settings that degrade their intelligence through tedious daily work that is so one-dimensional, so meaninglessly bureaucratic that the memory of literature, if it ever attained a vibrancy, must be as a kind of hoax.[6] My portrayal of the world of work owes much to David Foster's depiction of life in a cubicle in his novel *The Pale King*, but it also comes from talking to students who hope to resist this kind of absurd boredom.

Moving away from an education as credentials and credentials as a means to money and buying power (re)asserts an almost romantic view of education as a way to live in defiance of that which is deadening. An education made to increase earning power is a bankrupt notion today. There is no sustainability in this. This kind of educational practice manufactures imperial mindsets. These mindsets rest in a certainty that a divided world has built-in buffers against ricocheting consequences, so that what is done to "nature" can present no significant "social" ramification or that what is done to another neighborhood, in say predatory loan practices, remains consequential only within that contained singular region. In his work *Education in the Age of Biocapitalism: Optimizing Educational Life for a Flat World*, Clayton Pierce notes that biocapitalism in education "treats educational life as a calculable and regulatory field of

[6] In the work *Why Literature: The Value of Literary Reading and What it Means for Teaching*, Cristina Vischer Bruns examines the gap between English teachers' stated reasons as to why literature matters and the transmission of this mattering to student learners. This isn't to suppose that teaching involves a direct transmission, but it is to argue that teaching composes classrooms that open or close experiences of meaningfulness. English pedagogies that focus on strategies for teaching without getting underneath to consider the knowledge that is worth the effort of conveyance shortchange potential learning.

economic control and extractive value" (42). Pierce maps this course toward defining life and living in the exclusiveness of monetized metrics as a most destructive way. He argues that this approach "normalize[s] human capital narratives and understandings of education so much so that it has become the language everyone must speak when offering their solutions for educational reform" (43). Pierce's insight captures the way that solutions to education propose within the very language and thinking that generate the problems.

In the sense that philosophical bifurcations animate spaces of belief and practice, I wish to draw corollaries between the fallen church in the work *The Crossing* and the contemporary classroom. As I have written, the fallen church becomes a site of ruin even beyond physical dilapidation. The penultimate ruin lies in its inability to sponsor a non-discriminatory ethic. The ethical incoherence that allows some to matter and not others marks a deeper ruin than the mere physical disrepair. This is gleaned in the portrayal of limitations from ascendant ethical frameworks that apportion belonging to some but withhold it from so many others and that, in the withholding, miss so many of those most crucially in need. When the priest moves from a position of orthodoxy as contained within binary formations, he assembles a view of a different cosmology. This new view of joinery provokes a new ethic that has the man responding to the other differently by the time Billy comes wandering into town. This move of inclusion outside the orientations that are preformulated in tradition marks a parallel point for contemporary educational landscapes, which also skew understandings along points of divide so that a fuller portrait of life in the crossing is missed. One of Latour's most noteworthy essays entitled "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern" maps the terrain of education by looking at the contours of contemporary theory and teaching and learning in terms of two dominant encampments, both of which polarize

understandings of the world away from a 'middle kingdom,' a space for Latour where everything happens.

The first encampment centers in the constructivist position that emphasizes linguistic or semiotic structures as the basis of reality. This approach is predominant in literary fields with their centralization of language as the basis of reality. The other encampment centers in the naturalistic position that locates objective reality in nature, and this domain is held as a realm removed from culture and from human discourse and language. From this split lens, there are hard and soft sciences, subjective and objective fields. And, while these simplistic descriptions of a divided terrain certainly caricaturize the critical landscape, the kernel representation holds true at its core. The epistemological orientations dominant today situate students within an either/or approach, one that selects nature or selects culture as an object of study. In this formulation, science and the humanities become incompatible. The humanities are seen to explore the human condition without any pesky interference from nature or from nonhumans. Science, on the other hand, occupies itself with natural spaces and the attendant nonhuman beings and forms within that terrain. From this arrangement, learners find themselves contained within a particular way of study and thought that poorly translates across to other ways of thinking. Experts speak to other experts in the same field. Both of these encamped formations miss the interrelations that happen across the divides. It is important to note that these peculiar encampments conform neatly to placements sponsored in the modern constitution, which as Latour has shown must cordon ways of thinking and educational approaches.

From the bifurcated tradition, the view of realms as disconnected fosters a narrow outlook so that issues are not approached with a sense of sufficient scale. This leads, I want to suggest, to ways of discourse and ways of intended solution that fail to articulate or remedy issues because the full complexity cannot emerge into view. An

example of the missed dimensions can certainly be found in climate change. Yet even beyond this, the split lens distorts. Seeing the crisis of the humanities fully is significant to my work, as I am advocating for a reimagined way of study within the humanities. The typical narrative of crisis, however, wants to dislodge value from the humanities altogether. So where I argue that the humanities present humans as too focused on humanism apart from the rest of the vibrant world, the issue of crisis comes from a desire to further narrow the already limited view on sustaining systems so that value measures in exclusively economic terms. This means that the issue is very commonly written about or discussed in partial, truncated exposures. Critics charge that the humanities have lost relevancy in this different, technological age. And, they are right to assert the need for radical reappraisals. They are right to assert that the age is different, that technology constitutes a profound force. But the direction in which they wish to mold the humanities and education more generally is toward a furthering of the paradigms that are responsible, at core, for ways of thinking and ways of living that cannot be sustained. In an editorial for *The Washington Post*, Edward Conard expresses a dominant frame of thought when he derides the humanities for being unable to produce the kinds of high-tech jobs, jobs aligned with STEM-related fields, necessary to keep the U.S. economically ascendant. Conard writes, "Thirty years ago, America could afford to misallocate a large share of its talent and still grow faster than the rest of the world. Not anymore; much of the world has caught up." To read this language closely is to see a perfect emblem of the "capital narratives and understandings of education" that Pierce describes as paradigmatic of biocapital formations. Conard subsumes student learning and student lives by extension within what is perceived as an economic power play among nations. The worldview underwriting this kind of argument is one that sees the U.S. in competition with other nations so that students must be turned to workers in technocratic or entrepreneurial professions that then elevate the national ranking. And

so, from this outlook, the humanities fare poorly. The lack of profitable jobs for graduates emphasize as proof the failure of the humanities to contain or transmit value. There is no discussion about the kinds of work available to students today, and what, if any, options these students have if they desire to work meaningful jobs instead of merely profitable ones, or how the cost of education forecloses options for learning and professional life. On an even deeper level, there is no discussion pertaining to the gradations of pay that define some types of work as valuable and relegate other types as worth-less.

From a proper lens, one that sees issues in the humanities as an optical zoom on ways of learning in modernistic paradigms, with assignations of contrived value from dominant economic paradigms, biocapitalism emerges as a way of conceptualizing the ends of education. This direction of thought from a lens that frames education within related and not split domains projects "crisis" beyond the humanities to fields championed by thinkers like Conard, so that math, science, engineering, and technology are framed by a metrics of monetary valuation. From this view one might see that the study of science becomes twisted to support an economization of the life world so that research becomes not about shared advances but about turning profits. This arc toward ever increasing profits distorts a field like geology toward becoming a corporate training ground for oil and gas industries. The neoliberal paradigm that economizes all life and living doesn't just value learning in some fields and absolve value in others. Rather it distorts the learning within all fields to sponsor extractive paradigms by a way of thinking that fragments the world in a series of false divides.

In a revised way of seeing that works to capture an interconnective vision, the crisis of the humanities underscores the crisis of many varied fields, of different knowledge and idioms, and of professions that align with service in the public sector.

Teaching, as one such profession, is embattled from the dominance of market logic.[7] The market degrades public expenditures and services as too costly. Routinely, there are right-wing calls to cutoff public funding for health care, education, transportation, parks, etc. In the neoliberal paradigm, the commons belong to no one, which is what Margaret Thatcher must have meant when she said that there is no such thing as society, only individuals. And so we see, of course, a massive acceleration of private and charter schools in very recent years. We see increasing costs in education that price a degree out of the realm of possibility for many students. Of course a full accounting of all the details of these trends exceeds the purview of my project here. Yet, while my project is not designed to articulate in detail these kinds of sea changes, it does mean to intervene at the microlevel of value orientation through a way of engaging text so as to sponsor a kind of ecological thinking, one that, in my view, aligns very neatly with ethics as a thinking paradigm that centers in justice and relational questions. As I have stated, extractive economies flourish from a mode of thought that fails to draw connections across subjects, domains, and issues. In this failure, scale is minimized, actors are concealed, ramifications are contained, and time is expressed both as impermanent and short-term. We need, then, a way of reading that corrects these perceptions.

As an intervention, I imagine a lens for the literary or textual page that assembles a view to the interconnections. The development of the lens is meant as a tool for a conceptual reframing that captures, at least more fully, the massive dimensions and intersections that otherwise present as singular, isolate details. I want to argue that issues today come to learners in this scalar dimension, a symptom of the scalar intensities inhered in modernity. From this lens, the crisis of the humanities presents ultimately as an issue of sustainability. At their best the humanities present ways of

[7] Dana Goldstein in her book entitled *The Teacher Wars: A History of America's Most Embattled Profession* charts a history of teaching in this country showing the failures of most educational reforms. Goldstein connects assessment movements in this country to a growing distrust of teachers, a view that sees teachers as problems in education.

thinking and ways of feeling that may short-circuit imperialistic paradigms. This is the public value of the humanities, to refer to the title of Peter Brooks' book *The Humanities and Public Life*. So the overt or veiled question that issues from a narrative of crisis, a question that asks 'why read today?' is really a question directed at disabling a mode of thought that could challenge the orthodoxy of instrumentalization sponsored from neoliberal ideology. This lens heightens the capacity for critical challenge from the basis of literate thinking. It is my claim that from a large enough optic, the question of earning power becomes displaced by the question of sustainable relations.

In the excellent work *Earth in Mind*, David Orr argues that normative discussions of education devote so much attention to talking about the problems *in* education that the problems *of* education evade any substantive focus (4). For Orr, the problems *of* education involve learning in ways that equip "people merely to be more effective vandals of the earth" (4). Orr notes that the "modern curriculum" (11), a fragmented architecture that separates and demarcates along artificial lines so that learners struggle to think in whole systems, to find connections, to ask big questions, and to separate the trivial from the important creates imperialistic approaches (23). These mindsets should mark the true targets of green campus campaigns, for recycling does nothing without an alteration in thinking that decreases a sense of want for items unneeded. To get at this place of created wants we need go through a lineage of philosophy. We need to go through the American West, through campaigns of animal extirpation, through human genocides. It is my claim that the pressures toward manufacturing new wants, toward creating living conditions that exacerbate social disassociations, so that people feel alone and lack meaningful interactions and so spend their time and energy in what could be called trivial pursuits, are as definitive stratagems in an arsenal that perpetuates consumerist habits by undermining collective spheres where concern could turn toward the more than individual.

I have argued that the centripetal force of ecological life toward points of collision and gathering cannot be interpreted or understood from the traditional ground of split, separate, disconnected realities. In literary readings and practices of literacy, the split lens registers the human apart from the rest of the existential world. Interpretative practices and pedagogies of reading sustain this divide by keeping a study of the human focused on a version of the human who is strangely apart from the collective. This failure not only generates a less comprehensive understanding of reality, but also fails to generate any sufficiently scaled ethic of concern. This is to say that students exist within educational settings that staunch rather than disrupt or unsettle these modes of thinking and living.

Concern as an affect is an important focus in Latour's essay "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" He makes a link between the ways of thinking and understanding and the ways of arriving (or not arriving as the case may be) at a point of affective investment or engagement or perhaps, as I will claim, what David Foster Wallace would call sincerity. I will focus on the affective registers from a way of reading through this lens later in this chapter, as I will argue for ways of learning that reengage the heart as well as the mind. For now, with the bifurcated terrain of education and thought as context, I propose a lens on text and literary works that emulate an ecocentric view of existence. This lens is to compose the text in a pattern of lived dynamism, so that the classroom experience produces learning that has meaning for living, so that the classroom experience becomes a way of constructing life outside the dictates of the economic terms that are so ascendant today. In this project, then, is a gambit that literary learning can not only be made more translatable to real world experiences but can be made as a way to alter or disrupt normative ways of experience. While my project has focused on literature and the works of Cormac McCarthy particularly, the lens I articulate is viable for more than literary readings. In fact, to read even a newspaper well

one should be versed in a way of reading that crosses divides and borders to assemble a portrait of connective relations between actors, regions, and domains. Without such, news items present as so many points, types of dots to recall the pointillist analogy from Chapter 1, without any coherent image to incorporate the dots on the canvas into meaning.

So, before getting to the contours of the lens and the kinds of learning that might happen from this lens I want to highlight a story from *The New York Times* that illustrates the shape stories take on a joined planet. In an article entitled "Growing Clamor About Inequalities of Climate Crisis," readers are presented with a complex tale that involves social, political, economic, and natural dimensions as they play out across global geographies. The article, which calls on the efforts of five reporters, begins by highlighting the desperation of some nations gathered at a climate change conference of the United Nations. At the conference, Ronald Jumeau, a representative of Seychelle, a nation of islands, explains the seriousness of global warming for his nation by stating that: "We have reached a stage where we cannot adapt anymore." Despite best efforts toward buffering effects, the position of the islands mean that they are now assailed by massive storms and threatened by rising tides. Jumeau explains that other consequences related to "creeping desertification, salinization and erosion" produce in tandem "financial losses and even territorial issues that the modern world has never had to face." He declares, finally, "This is new. This is like, 'The Martians are landing!' What do you do?'" From Jumeau's address, the reader is transported to the reaction of a U.S. envoy with the State Department, Todd D. Stern, who hears the question as a relay but responds without concern. In reply, we read, he "bluntly told a gathering at Chatham House in London last month that large scale resources from the world's richest nations would not be forthcoming" to help nations most susceptible. Stern is aware that the question comes to him as a proxy for a nation because the world's richest nations are the

world's most culpable nations in terms of starting and sustaining planetary warming. Still, Stern advises that "appeals to rectify the injustice of climate change will backfire" as "lectures about compensation, reparations and the like will produce nothing but antipathy among developed country policy makers and their publics."

In the final section of the story, a story that is remarkable for its telling as a single narrative across dimensions of time and space, the reader is transported to Africa. Here a Kenyan farmer, a man named Justus Lavi, waits for rains that might salvage his withering crops, except that the rains never come. In another final scene, the reader goes to Somalia where a different farmer's crops have suffered too much rain. And so, the reader is presented with a strange paradoxical kind of event: one farmer loses everything to flooding, another loses everything to drought, and both lose everything collectively in an event that is massive but subsumed within a common name — climate change.

All told, the reader encounters in one site a multitude of encrypted other nations and geographies. The reader encounters in one life many contingent lives. Lavi doesn't know Stern, and Stern has no specific knowledge of Lavi though he speaks callously about the "publics" that Lavi exists within. Of course, Stern occupies those same publics. Their lives intersect, and a narrative made toward the interconnective attempts to show these intersections as a pattern of existence, as an encoded ethical demand. Additionally, the reader is presented with a sense of time that has the present moment emergent from accumulated transactions, so that to understand the present requires a look backward. In its sprawling form, the narrative shatters a bifurcated lens. The story cannot be interpreted in the meaningfulness of its dimensions from the old lens, for how could readers see the relational configurations that emerge in *one* narrative; that has strangers linked across time and space, across geographies and nations; that has economies intersected with policies of political and social dimension; that has the local

situated within the global; and that has nature and culture so complexly crosshatched, without a concerted effort by the writers to do what I articulate as a pedagogical method for teaching texts to open in this same way to the spectrum of hidden others?

The pattern of imbrication that emerges in this kind of narrative or from this kind of interpretative focus, I want to argue, forefronts ethical questions of relationality. The lives of the farmers in the story are over-determined by the decisions made in corporate and political settings far removed. Still these decisions play out in the fields where the success or failure of plants in the warming ground and under the hot sun translate to the capacity for sustenance of the farmers and communities, who are left to watch the sky and hope, in one scene, for the appearance of clouds or, in another scene, for the disappearance of clouds and the cessation of rains. It is my argument that this pattern of convergence that generates this style of complex writing demands readers who possess a way of comprehending entangled realities. So, the lens I propose is made to do as Orr advises when he argues that "Now more than ever . . . we need people who think broadly and who understand systems, connections, patterns, and root causes" (23).

New Lens

The lens I imagine as a textual device for an ecological thinking is as a cracked glass. In fact, I imagine the cracks issuing from the long pressure to compose the word and the world according to the bifurcated divides of a modern constitution. From the pressures of this tradition, the lens shatters and transposes on the page a web of intersected lines, lines made in a sprawling configuration that resemble both a cracked pane and a web. From this optic, the story of countless people like Justus Lavi, people positioned to inherit the costs on a way of life they themselves do not enjoy, emerge into view. The lens acts as a heuristic device to connect people, regions, events. From this optic, a cognitive habit may develop that assembles intersected realities to see how

decisions playing out in, say, Washington D.C. transpire in consequence in Africa, but not first without going through the coal country of West Virginia or through the oil conglomerate of Cushing, Oklahoma or through China or India. This kind of global mapping of thought to understand events of local dimension is performed in *The New York Times* article by the journalists as they construct a view into reality that can only be constructed from tracing interconnected spaces and actors. Again, according to this interconnective sense, the way of joinery, it is not that nothing matters. It is that everything, every least thing, matters profoundly. It is not that some small things can escape out of view, out of a radius of concern. Instead it is that we must think about the smallest things, as we live in a world where small things exert tremendous force. This statement echoes, in fact, McCarthy's own iteration of the Butterfly Effect, where even the flapping wings of an insect initiate tornados.

The development of this lens means to assert the common lack of an ecological literacy. Brian Street proposes that literacy be viewed as a practice of thinking as much as a skill relating to numbers or language. He writes in "What's New in New Literacy Studies" that "literacy is a social practice, not simply a technical or neutral skill" (77). In this way, literacy embeds within "socially constructed epistemological principles" (77). However, this means as well that practices of literacy relate directly to "ways of thinking about and doing reading and writing in cultural contexts" (79). It follows that if this cultural context becomes an ecological context, as it must be, then ways of thinking about value from reading and writing will shift. My work is toward imaging this shift, for the failure on a way of thinking in a traditionally enclosed way lies in its ability to permit only partial tellings of what are, really, larger narratives. To see that all stories are ultimately truncated within expansive, never-ending narratives open ways of thinking beyond the inhered dimensions. It is, then, not a strain to imagine that we read off-page even to gather the vaster confluence of beings and events and forms that must

circulate around and through those depicted on page. For example, Chapter 2 brought a multiplicity of agents into the scene of encounter between the boy and the wolf. This may have seemed like added effort if readers think of the important actors as only those literally contained within the scene. But this is a view that would not be substantiated by literary critics from even a traditional approach. Commonly, critics would point out of scene to the presence of the father, to the presence of a ranching ethos as presences relevant to the scene of encounter. My efforts to expand the listing of included presences derive merely from the same critical impulse to place relevant others within context. I merely see the context of relevance being expanded to encompass a range of actors within the collective that must surround individual beings.

To assemble an ecological view, which requires a view to crosshatched domains and convergent actors, it becomes important to increase the vantage, increase the actors present, increase the range of followed consequences. It is especially important to see how events influence marginalized and minoritized bodies so that these *others* move from the fringe toward the center of caring. This fuller, deeper, more complex telling, a telling that has the reader adding dimensions to the narrative as a co-creator in the story, is a telling that opens dimensions of complexity so that ethical questions become a central focus. This view allows for Stern's comments at Chatham House in London, for example, to be contextualized in a framework that incorporates farmers in Africa. This view is not contrived, a kind of false literary approach, but it is finally a way of thinking that captures the real reach in an ecological world. Again, it is my claim that the patterns inhered in that specific story of climate change are really representative of the patterns we will need practice recognizing for the frequency of the stories that emerge in this shape.

A cracked lens on the textual page trains a way of thinking that has the reader assembling a view toward the collective. Assembling the collective means moving away

from not only standardized approaches to reading but away from that which has been easily evaluated and articulated. This will trouble, no doubt, the massive trend toward assessments in learning. Yet this trend standardizes thinking through standardizations of mass, repetitive testing. Learning must instead move toward the analytically complex, the critically creative. I meant to illustrate the addition of complexity into a simplified narrative in my example concerning *The Washington Post* article on the crisis of the humanities. By adding into Conard's typical narrative of questioned relevancy the dimensionality of neoliberal paradigms of value and a brief articulation of the ways that this model aims to restructure higher education, the issue of singular crisis became more complex. The crisis spreads across the campus and even beyond. In this radiant pattern, thinking must move to grasp global dimensions. It is from the basis of the global view that the collective emerges into frame, finally.

John Dewey's work is famous for imagining a public. His 1927 book *The Public and Its Problems*, a work that reads like it were written yesterday for the acuity of insights, portrays the public as an assemblage of human bodies joined together from a physics not reducible to choice. Bennett notes that Dewey has a perception of the public that importantly branches beyond a volitional gathering, and this begins a project for becoming proximate with bodies and forms we do not choose to be intimate with and yet are intimate with. Of course, Dewey never conceived of the public as inclusive of the nonhuman. This is a radicalness born from a time of ecological collapse. In fact, in Frank Margonis' essay "John Dewey, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Alain Locke: A Case Study in White Ignorance and Intellectual Segregation," Dewey is shown to make an even more egregious omission. Margonis notes that though Dewey opposed racism, his opposition "stayed safely within the parameters of white racial solidarity" (176). These parameters allowed for the convenience of being "antiracist" while still avoiding any interrogation of

the privileges, and, thus, the responsibilities of white supremacy.[8] In reference to another important thinker, Judith Butler notes that that the ethicist Levinas failed to include all humans into his ethical framework, even though he called for an ethical philosophy that would make each person responsible for the other. Butler notes that Levinas contradictorily "affirmed forms of nationalism, especially Israeli nationalism, and also held to the notion that only within a Judeo-Christian tradition were ethical relations possible ("Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation" 139). She writes, "In some ways, he gave us the very principle that he betrayed" (140). Despite the failures of fathering philosophers to remain faithful to their own philosophical articulations, I find in both Dewey and Levinas important premises. It is important too to note that philosophy becomes property of the commons once it is set loose, and so the public may take ideas and advance them in divergent directions. In this way, Dewey's initial gesture toward the public as a commons becomes a highly important concept today, as ecological problems reveal a public shaped beyond borders. To look at the shape of ecological problems is to see a public that must include nonhuman forms and bodies. Whether in quakes and storms, riots and bankruptcies, oil dependencies and wars, public dimensions are revealed as transnationally vast and ontologically open.

To return to my intervention, I want to highlight that the cracked lens generates an image of intersected lines. Thinking through this lens as a kind of existential metaphor shifts the focus to hidden or encrypted other sites, lives, and realities that interlock through the particular. If learners, for example, begin to see how a coal plant in West Virginia connects to a drought-ridden farm in Africa then a fuller view of the cross-patterns of existence emerges. Ecology, as I have stated, compresses distance, and so our thinking becomes ecocentrically tuned from this capacity to move across the globe. This

[8] In his essay "John Dewey's Racialized Visions of the Student and Classroom Community," Margonis argues that Dewey's operative conception of students as Euro-American discredits the applicability of his philosophies for inclusively centered classrooms today.

composition of relations becomes a way of thinking about what one does even in quotidian moments. Of course, illuminating these connective realities may not be enough to stop oppression, exploitation, injustice. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that these connective realities are often hid from view by routines in business and politics. For example, buying an item of clothing in a mall is designed to be a purchase that conceals the conditions of the sweatshop where the item was most likely manufactured. The conditions of production, distribution, consumption, and even waste are thoroughly effaced in the anesthetizing experience of mall shopping. Likewise, a menu item in a restaurant is prepared and presented in a way that obscures realities of industrial farming. In the ambiance of the restaurant, in the packaging of the food, there are no signs of the unpalatable realities that pertain to animal mistreatment, antibiotics, fertilizers, pesticides, etc. There are no windows into the lives of migrant farm workers or into matters of public health. In this way, I mean to claim that realities are hidden from view even though it cannot be claimed that knowledge itself may be enough to produce a change in realities.

From a pedagogical standpoint, these interconnective realities are important to uncover because students deserve the fullest exposure to the fullest reality that can be made, even if this exposure elicits, in turn, no radical transformation. I appreciate Latour's reconstruction of the public despite the potential that an expanded public may not necessarily become more just. This is to say that the debates that issue from a networked formation may not induce a more just relationality in the end, and, yet, it is impossible to imagine that a fuller ethic emerges without this expanded formation. My project of course underscores the potentiality for a new ethic by articulating a practice of reading that centralizes ethical questions from a place of joined relations. Yet "ethics" are unpredictable. They come through long and slow deliberations. It is morality that feigns certitude from the basis of a black and white world, where goodness is achieved

from obedience. So, the process of expanding inclusions within the collective doesn't guarantee absolute justice, but it does assert a process that is more organic and more full in consideration of all those involved.

Earlier I mentioned the aestheticization of nature as a way of concealing hidden social dimensions through a kind of green wash.[9] In fact it is important to note that traditional environmental education has very typically been framed to reify nature. In Richard Kahn's book *Critical Pedagogy, Ecoliteracy, and Planetary Crisis*, he provides an example of environmental education in Minnesota's Zoo School. Here, students attend school on zoo grounds. Kahn shows that the focus within the school has been "coopted by corporate state forces and morphed into a progressively-styled, touchy-feely method for achieving higher scores on standardized tests. . . "(9). This critique blasts environmental education for entrenching the divides that keep discussions of environmental destruction and corporate modes of business as separate. A corollary can be found, I believe, in the way that ecocriticism, as a field of literary scholarship, has tended to privilege wilderness and, in so doing, has compelled attention away from messy, contested, and difficult problems in social or cultural realms. Dana Phillips in *The Truth of Ecology* argues that ecocriticism's initial resistance to theory indicated this rejection of the social. He writes, "I submit that the choice between theory and nature is a false one, since neither comes to us with its pristine character intact" (40). McCarthy's works are seldom used in nature writing courses, as he fails to represent nature in traditional form. Kahn makes a valuable statement when he asserts that meaningful change will only come through ways of "more robustly link[ing] forms of environmental

[9] Examples of green washing occur when corporations or politicians seem to advance an environmentally friendly business model or policy but really the practice or policy entails further destruction. For example, George W. Bush's Clean Air Initiative actually diminished controls on airline pollution. In the 2008 presidential election, candidates routinely invoked clean coal as a responsible way to meet energy demands. Unfortunately, coal is inherently dirty.

literacy to the need for varieties of social and cultural literacy"(11). My project situates directly within this kind of recommendation.

By jettisoning the borders between nature and culture, ways of learning and ways of thinking become more complex, more critical. Bordered domains permit, as we have seen, one area to be carved away from another. The zoo may be carved away from a critical study of human domination (Bassin) or away from corporate financing, a move that Kahn sees as an example of "green wash." This thinking through bifurcation allows the formation of escape hatches, as places of exclusive access to "nature" or "culture." For example, Utah is a state where yellow lawn signs proclaim: "Protect Wild Utah." The signs from the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance signal community support for the protection and preservation of Utah's iconic red rock country. While protecting these lands is laudable, the problem comes in the framing of the problem. The place in need of protection according to the placards is carved as separate from a 'societal Utah.' Yet, it is fairly easy to imagine that without protecting social structures so that people can work quality jobs, access good schools, afford health care, take vacations, eat quality food, landscapes will succumb just like schools, hospitals, and town centers to exploitative, chronically rootless corporations. This is the story of oil, gas, and fracking operations. In places like North Dakota and Pinedale, Wyoming, the oil boom has marred social and community relations every bit as much as land and air and water. My use of the term ecology comes from an effort to dismantle 'natural' sites or 'cultural' settings as pure spaces, apart. For example, while Mount Everest is routinely regarded as one of the world's most daunting climbs, it also signifies a great trash heap. It is now a mountain place thoroughly littered with discarded sleeping bags, oxygen canisters, plastics, propane stoves, and even human corpses – the bodies of climbers who never made it down. Similarly, the rainforests of the Amazon represent beauty and tremendous biodiversity, but they are also synonymous with corporate greed and incompetence.

Jackson Hole, Wyoming sits at the southern end of a valley made by the Teton Range, but it is not deep enough into 'nature' to escape the imprint of searing economic disparities. Here, luxury real estate markets cater to the world's wealthiest buyers but foreclose options for working class people to live within the town where they work. This makes Jackson one of the countless tourist centers that rely on workers to sustain hotel and restaurant industries while pricing the same workers out of residency. In an illustrative headline story the billionaire heiress to the Walton fortune, Christy Walton, listed her Jackson home for an asking price of over $12 million. The kind of wealth portrayed in this story contrasts vividly with the financial lack of, say, a Wal-Mart employee. So, even in this nature lover's paradise, infiltrative social-economic-political issues conspire to occlude the notion of purified domains.

In fact, according to my argument, it is these privileged grounds that become most representative of the failed divides meant to keep bordered realities segregated. In *Risk Society*, Beck reminds readers of the limitations of old bulwarks of money, education, and power to insulate against new pollutions, toxins, and inequities. He forecasts a now commonly experienced reality where social issues cast their shadows across natural terrains, so, as in the town of Jackson, the economic geography of high highs and low lows correlate to the geographical mountain range of steep summits and low-sweeping valleys. Visits to zoos, aquariums, and national parks result not in the sense of escaping the social so as to enter into nature, but as an experience in seeing the collision of both of these — a collision that was always real but that is especially pronounced now in a time of accelerated risk. As Cronon notes in his essay "The Trouble of Wilderness," the borders that aspire to segregate domains like nature and culture have only ever held in the interiors of the mind, kinds of imaginary projections of a culturally sponsored ideal.

Lens Contours

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries artists were famous for utilizing a tinted lens on a mirror called the Claude glass. This convex shaped mirror was held up to a scene in "nature" so that the artist could paint the scene in a slant of view and in a tint of color that anesthetized the scene. In his book *The Claude Glass*, Arnaud Maillet states that the glass is an object "inseparable from modernity" (152). Maillet's book argues that vision encodes not only the subjectivities of the viewer onto the object in sight but encodes the practices and politics of the times unto the object as well. He highlights the work of Jonathan Crary who made a famous study of instruments of vision, including the stereoscope and the camera obscura, to understand how these "optical devices" provide a lens to read the intersections of philosophy, science, and aesthetics (*Techniques of the Observer* 8). Crary found that each material object is "embedded in a much larger assemblage of events and powers" (8). I reference the Claude glass as an example approach within a reigning tendency to make nature picturesque, that is to isolate it from the chaos of the social. The Claude glass stands as a material object manufactured from the basis of a paradigmatic Western philosophy. Such a lens leaves more out of view than it includes. I highlight Crary's works to underscore his point that an optical lens is more than a glass. It is a composite object that holds within a historical record, philosophy, economy, and politic.

With this in mind, the lens I propose has contours to elicit six intercoded dimensions that work, collectively, to reformat thinking toward the dimension of the collective. First, the lens incorporates a range of actors who or that have been previously excluded from attention. The optic on the lens is imagined as flat to render a radically egalitarian or horizontal ontology. By seeing existence arrayed along a flat line, readers are less likely to obscure the existence of nonhumans for the primacy of humans. Additionally, nonhumans are not given interpretative attention for the sake of

elucidating a sense of a particular authorial representation, as much as they are given attention as actors in scene. Flat ontologies highlight relations, and this becomes a key analytical ground, especially for moving the reading experience to deliberations of an ethical cast.

Second, a flat ontology extends agential force to nonhuman forms so that humans remain powerful actors but perpetual co-actors in a vast collective. With this view, fates connect through complicated channels, and intentions are not enough of a force to determine the effects that radiate through a joined field. This agential account that includes the nonhuman and that includes congregational forms of force moves toward a concern for the ways that one actor's force results in consequences beyond the sphere or span of a single life. This important movement away from single beings as singularly forceful dislodges the formation of aloneness that can propel a sense of nonobligation or circumscribed responsibility. How important this view of agency becomes as a divergent outlook especially in the setting of the Western and in the space of the West. The American character has tended always to favor the freedom of the lone figure. This is the conceit embodied in the cowboy. Yet this framing perpetuates the very emptiness of relations it means to detect by looking outward. In other words, the lone figure becomes a colonizing figure for aloneness permits a lack of responsibility. Divergently, a congregational agency resituates the human in relational densities at all times.

Third, the concept of distance is wholly undone. In the contemporary moment, actions slide along a valence that frames the local within the global and the global within the local. The optical contour that collapses distance works also to zoom in within a particular event or being or entity then to pan out to capture the broader dimensions within the translations. This has the single thing always held within the vastness of the collective. McCarthy highlights this optical sweep when Billy's father stands on the floor of the plain and is then depicted as contained within an immense collective. More than

an aesthetic decision, this technique positions readers to see in the single, small thing or quotidian moment the vastness of the field that will absorb the consequences. An analytical lens that can ask students to imagine what they cannot see or deduce from patterns of observation in other locales ramifications fosters an intelligence that is creative even in its analytical depth. Of course this kind of vision translates to the 'real world' to better understand how transactions in a boardroom make externalities of so many hidden others.

Fourth, the lens does not equate size with power. McCarthy notes that "least things" can turn the trajectory of the world. This was an insight that Darwin was keen on expressing, as in his statement explaining that a grain of sand turns the balance of any contest. An analytical lens made to the intensities and amplifications of modernity must grapple with scale of significance beyond index of size. This is because in a world of ecological considerations, humans are vulnerable to the smallest plastic, the least residue, a most granular of toxin.[10] Likewise, the smallest being holds a place of

[10] A phenomenon playing out in the Great Lakes illustrates the force of objects or matter, and shows this force to be irregular with different intensities and scales of consequence over time. An article entitled "Scientists Turn Their Gaze Toward Tiny Threats to Great Lakes" from *The New York Times* reports on "tiny plastic beads" initially produced for use in facial scrubs or toothpastes but that are now bypassing detection in water treatment facilities and ending up in the Great Lakes. From there, they end up in fish and aquatic life that feed accidently on their microforms. In turn, they end up in humans who dine on fish and fowl from the region. In tracing through networks we see the configuration of interconnections. Just as poisoned bait for wolves killed many more other creatures than wolves, the plastics found in fish work through more than networks of fish. Without a view to the transversal of borders this issue cannot be realized in full scale. Here is an example of an inorganic substance crossing the border to reside within a range of organic beings. Yet the lifespan of plastics versus birds, fish, or humans is widely disparate. Plastics always win. Plastic continues to exert a presence even after so many other beings are gone. Things do not stay as we made them. The story of microplastics illustrates the self-mutating capacity of objects to alter their consequence from any human blueprint. Even tiny things morph and assume significant consequence. Even the smallest, most elemental things, the most granular of particles matter. The initial function of the microplastic beads as an abrasive cleanser does not determine the range of manifestations over time given their traveling capacity. The sense of collapsed distance comes when we realize that these tiny particles were discarded, washed down drains and now they show up in a most unlikely place: human bodies. We see in this return an ecological physics assisted through the network formation of water pipes, twisted networks spread under cities, through suburbs, tracing through creeks, rivers, and even great lakes.

belonging in an ecologically webbed world. From a lens tuned to the power of least things, the demise of frogs or bees or coral reefs, things that haven't been viewed as big enough to constitute a matter of concern, become instead enmeshed alongside humans in an interconnected fabric.

Time is the fifth refracted dimension. Many geologists today argue that we exist currently within a geological epoch called the Anthropocene. The term popularized by Paul Crutzen refers to a span of time where human activity becomes the decisive force governing earth's systems. To consider the contemporary moment within a framework of cosmic time means that social-political-economic dimensions imprint the natural. Add to this geological time a realization that materialities or what Timothy Morton calls hyperobjects exist beyond any comprehensible index of human time and the scale revises clockworks to a long-range view. Hyperobjects are materialities and objects that dwarf human power by existing forcefully for many, many thousands of years. Morton cites plutonium and Styrofoam as example entities that "exist on almost unthinkable timescales" (*The Ecological Thought* 19). This is so far into the future that it is not really possible to think of in a more than abstract way, and yet humans still assemble this chemical agent. These kinds of ruminations encode daily life with a vast, even planetary significance

The sixth feature of this analytic lies in its centrality toward ethical thought. It is probably apparent that every contour of the lens refracts in a way to provoke deep, unsettling ethical questions. Taken together the five other features of the lens render a tremendously complex portrait of existence in a coexistent field. Ethics as a process of thought concerning justice happen in the space of these relational complexities. They happen in a spatial dimension where distance is collapsed, where nonhumans have agential force, where time is nonlinear. Ethics emerge because the reader is pressed to think about actions and events as relational transactions.

With the use of this lens as an optic that refracts in the direction of these features, reading should be translatable to real issues. I imagine a classroom setting that gives students the option of pursuing lines of connection initiated in text to off-text dimensions. Then, too, because this pedagogical angle is made to discuss works of text as mechanisms for ways of living, the classroom should open to discussions of finding, and to the questions that come from ways of thinking interconnectively. The range of hermeneutical accounts that could connect through joinery is immense. I see the process unfolding through a reading of the text that examines the relational interactions going on inside the narrative for the dimensions of application that can be gleaned outside the narrative. Then, too, I see the way of discussing a work in class and writing about that work as way also into the crosscut spaces. Besides the proliferate actors in any scene, there should be a sense of proliferate interpretative possibilities. Just as multiple others in ecology sustain a flourishing of the collective, multiple interpretative views and articulations sustain a flourishing of mind, a kind of ecology of thought.

Literary Ecologies

In McCarthy's work *Cities of the Plain* there is an important scene where a character under an interstate pass tells Billy that every story hinges upon a question. He states, "This story like all stories has its beginnings in a question." Billy is incredulous and retorts, "Every story is not about a question." The man follows persistently with the claim, "Where all is known no narrative is possible" (277). This statement about narrative is a statement that corresponds to teaching as well. Teaching should be an activity that prompts questions as much as it generates answers. Pedagogical experiences should be designed to challenge assumptions so that learners leave classrooms feeling humbled, contemplative, reflective. Profound learning, in my view, opposes the dominant characterization that emerges in assessment rubrics to define

learning in degrees of "proficiency" or "mastery." To me this has always seemed like language to appease overseeing officials who worry about the economic expenditure of college and so want definitive proof of a delivered product, one that can be turned into income or profit. The kind of learning I advocate, however, turns in the complexity of relations so that thinking becomes centered in ways of living not just ways of acquiring a lifestyle. I see the focus on relations through engagements with text as disrupting a sense of "mastery" by dislodging settled, certain outlooks.

By thinking through different placements in the collective, thinking through different ways that consequences spread, thinking of interdependence, the learner is positioned to reflect critically. Morton notes that interdependence dissolves "the barriers between 'over here' and 'over there,' and more fundamentally, the metaphysical illusion of rigid, narrow boundaries between inside and outside" (*The Ecological Thought* 61). This mode of study tends to unsettle arrogance rather than stoke it. Such a paradigm of learning moves university education away from the formula that has students entering into higher education so as to leave emboldened by the extent of their learning and by pursuits of wealth and power and prestige. These fostered outlooks propagate the very problems of schooling that a deeper, more meaningful learning might diminish or even eradicate. Orr notes in his work *Earth in Mind* that "the results of work by people with BA's, BS's, LLB's, MBA's, and PhD's" is very often environmentally destructive. The paradox of this insight is stinging. At some basic level the production of subjectivities through higher education inculcates learners in ways of living that cannot be sustained. The paradox vision, then, is of an ascendant mode of education that undermines healthy and just ways of living on a shared planet.

As an intervention, my pedagogical approach trains in on the textual places that initiate complicated ethical questions from the basis of coexistent living. These places in text, where a rancher boy meets a wolf or where strangers rely on the sustaining

kindness of other strangers or where an old man lies abandoned in a dark back room, these places demand a form of contemplation that is ethical in cast because the answers to the problems presented are not easy or definitive. They beg for discussion. They require sustained thinking. They are organically pedagogical. As a dynamic inherent in the text the reader is made to engage the dilemmas of the page that involve characters in scene but that also involve the reader. This dialectic between character and reader dispossesses firm identities for floating identifications. In these various scenes, the summons from a boy or a wolf, from a stranger, or from an old man is toward an extension of ethical concern, so that difficult others move into spaces of belonging. It is important to zoom in on these textual locations because they provoke not only a heightened interest within learners, meaning that learners want to understand that which presents as a problem, but they carry the most value for off-page thinking in terms of training perceptions, values, and orientations toward beings and forms within the collective that are difficult to acknowledge or to see as significant.

In his essay "The Ethics of Reading," Charles Larmore defines ethics as a discipline of thought "concerned with two distinct though interrelated questions: how we ought to live in order to live well, and how we are to treat one another and perhaps other living things as well" (*The Humanities and Public Life* 49).[11] These two relational questions find emphasis in the literary work, as novels make compelling "sociograms" to use Latour's term for the model terrains that become illustrative of relational interactions. In the compressed and highly stylized pages of a literary work readers may map the interconnections that radiate through the page. This becomes an important space to train ways of seeing that extend beyond literary engagements. For example, it has been my thesis that in times of ruin learners are uniquely positioned to detect

[11] Larmore justly credits J. Hillis Miller with articulating an "ethics of reading" that locates ethical questions from the basis of literary engagements.

tension, contradiction, and irony. This is because established codes very often appear as inadequate and faulty.[12] Issues that might be easily resolved according to a binary outlook require a process of renewed thinking. It is in this way that the processual nature of ethics, a nature that has ethical thinking always unfinished, means that views or positions alter in time and that critical learning remains pliable to these transformations. I have worked to apply this way of thinking from a way of reading because I see literature as providing a textual frame that allows readers to think through theories or ideological slants without committing to them. In other words, the fictional realm provides a stage for thinking different and difficult thoughts. To the charge that fictional events are only made up events, I would suggest that the point or the accent of emphasis lies on an active thinking even if that thinking be in the realm of fictional worlds. Imaginative thought, creativity, day dreaming, these are all conditions of mind that elicit valuable insights but that come in a kind of remove from the "real." Additionally, while readers encounter other lives through text, they also encounter their own perspectives and assumptions in the refractive glare of the page. This is a way of saying that books read readers in a way that readers read books.

A pedagogy that has students reading through an optic of joinery asks learners to enter into scenes to assemble a collective view but also to see their own place within the collective. This place situates their own lives, but it also arranges other lives in relation. The journey into this conceptual space provides no preassigned entry or exit point.

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[12] Kahn points to the irony, the contradiction of George W. Bush pronouncing as ideologically prolife. From this stance, he opposed euthanasia and stem cell research. Kahn remarks that Bush was a fitting figurehead for the "contemporary politics of mass extinction, global poverty, and ecological catastrophe" (*Critical Pedagogy, Ecoliteracy, and Planeary Crisis* 135). I am reminded of Eileen Egan's seamless garment argument that presents a consistent life ethic. Egan proposed that if killing is wrong, it is always wrong. Under this high ethic, Christians could not oppose abortion while favoring capital punishment. An analysis of Bush's policies and professed beliefs reveal these kinds of contradictions. Additionally, Connolly notes the contradiction concerning same-sex marriage. He finds hope in the millions of people who have reflected and rethought their own views. He writes of such "uncanny situations" that they invite though about "whether the current constitution of [one's] conscience has become part of the problem" (130).

Rather, learners may enter into a place of interconnection at any different point. To assemble the forms, beings, places, histories, and philosophies that are missing in the direct telling is to create the page alongside the author. It is to read the page for a kind of relational experience that matches the experiences of living. I see the meanings within the text opening to the multiplicities of experience and interest brought by readers. So, this articulation of a reading pedagogy ultimately sees the interpretative work that begins when the words of an author engage a reader as continuing through a longer process of mutual where reader and character, reader and author, reader and class, reader and teacher work to approach the text in a way that draws meaning from its form. This is to see books as a kind of emergent force from the invested energies of readers.

If we imagine joinery as a mass of lines with nodes indicating points of intersection then we can imagine that each node constitutes a place of potential connection, a site to dwell for a moment, to assemble the actors in relational orbit. A nodal place within a constellation of moving forces inside *The Crossing* emerges when Billy encounters the wolf. This point marks a nodal contact, as a place where two beings encounter each other. I read this scene in Chapter 2 to see all the forms and bodies present. In the text, the reader enters into the nodal site to uncover the relational tensions. Violence looms. Readers are torn. Earlier in my close reading of this scene, I noted the zoom in on the father as a single being and the pan outward through the expanse of the collective. This narrative aperture positions a single being as important uniquely while still enmeshed within a collective. From this optical effect, the centralized question, in fact the question that emerges in McCarthy's depiction, is a question of ethics: What is the space between a being and other beings, a being and the world?

> Crouched in the broken shadow with the sun at his back and holding the trap at eyelevel against the morning sky he looked to be truing some older, some subtler instruments. Astrolobe or sextant. Like a man bent at

> fixing himself someway in the world. Bent on trying by arc or chord the space between his being and the world that was. If there be such a space. If it be knowable. (C 22)

So, the lens that is overt in McCarthy can be assembled on any textual page to explicate the questions that Larmore raises as central to ethical deliberations: How should we live in relational states? I centralize the value of this lens because I want to generate thinking that comes in an angle of ethical thought.

My move to reorient the English classroom toward these kinds of meaning generated discussions, the kinds of writings that would initiate from these nodal places challenges the standardized approaches that have constructed learning as neatly measurable and even accomplished within clear start and stop points. Again, this kind of formulaic approach seems like not only a willful distortion on the real trajectory of learning, but a distortion created from economic pressures. To draw on the line of thought I have been developing since Chapter 1, it may be said that these standardized formulations characterize morality in the sense that moral codes privilege authority by asserting a view of 'goodness' that is set or fixed. Ethics, on the other hand, defies the formulaic outcome through a process that is open, dialogical. In fact, it bears noting that thinking ethically does not guarantee an ethical outcome. Rather what is guaranteed is only a complex, difficult kind of thinking. My project has therefore avoided statements of answer to ethical questions. The point is in the discussion. The point is in the inclusion of many voices and many, many interests. One of the appeals to generate an ethics of reading stems from the perception that the activities which engage literature come as too standardized, too certain in their way of eliciting a type of safe answer. This presents, I want to underscore, a parallel point to the type of moral goodness described as orthodox. Learning that is scripted assimilates students into existing ways and structures and these must be challenged.

So, while there is a high degree of comfort in morality, as it issues from tradition and from encircled contexts of familiarity, it is nonetheless a poorly designed approach to adopt in the midst of ruin. This is to say that ruin happens as a disruptive force. Ruins are the earthquake that brings down established physical and philosophical structures. Ruin is climate change; ruin is hyperobjects. In these terrains, the guideposts meant to illuminate the way out of ruin come from the traditions that compel the problem. This produces a condition where the solution to the problem may be seen as a return to the old ways. Ruins very often incite an invigorated conservatism, and, do we not see that in this country during these times? In the example of climate change there has been a concerted effort to pronounce the evidences of ruin, the incontestable evidences, as only the stuff of a hoax. William Connolly notes that "systematic morality is dangerous: it too readily projects crude, blunt responses to complex, shifting situations" (*The Fragility of Things* 126). Seeing that learners exist in a moment that has no guiding, sustaining framework, as the problems are of a scale and of a type that challenge all of tradition, is to see that what we need is not to cling to the old but initiate a way into a new cosmological vision.

As a counterpoint to morality, ethics happen outside comfort zones. Ethics happen in the space that has relinquished certainty. The accent isn't on following a set course, but thinking about the course set upon with an interrogative force. The direction for interrogation aims toward self, toward family, friends, community, and nation. This turn of the critical eye must be cultivated because it is a difficult turn to make, yet, when the critique is only outward, the enemy becomes too simply that which is different, a figure of "wire and crepe." Morton notes that, "Seeing yourself from another point of view is the beginning of ethics and politics" (*The Ecological Thought* 14). The relinquishment of certainty does not mean that anything goes, which is a familiar charge against those who challenge tradition. Yet, the advocacy in this project has been toward

ways of seeing and thinking that find significance in everything. It is in seeing that everything, every act and every move, needs to be critically considered because the dimensions of consequence do not contain around intent, and, so, one life is always impinging other lives.

These aspects of learning achieved through literature and through the investments of readers establish a potential in education to be transformative. I imagine transformative learning as not centered so much in the accumulation of new knowledge, as, say, deposits within an account to recall Paulo Freire's famous analogy of a banking model of education, but as a way of learning that challenges normative ideas. This conception of teaching imagines the dynamic classroom instead as scripted. It pulls out the appeal of the classroom as a rare space that encourages discussions about issues that matter. It renders the classroom as yet another space where money takes control. To reinvigorate the classroom generally and the English classroom particularly, students are positioned to take the text in directions of their own interests. This move is meant to generate an ecocentric thinking but it has the added benefit of undermining an authoritarian system that would promote a continuation of the status-quo. Freire provided an articulation of students caught within this method of schooling as mere depositories for "receiving, filing, and storing" information (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*). He noted that this approach produced students lacking in critical consciousness so that they reenact the world as it is and not as it might be. In fact, the hegemony of such schooling can close critical questioning and creativity, can silence voices of dissent. Freire writes:

> The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of the world. The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them. (73)

This assault on critical thinking must stand as an especially negative attribute in a time of ecological collapse, when innovative minds are most needed to help reimagine what can be after what has been for so long shows as ruinous.

With Freire's ideas in mind, I want to propose that the site of the contemporary classroom is in many ways a corollary space to the collapsed church in McCarthy's fiction. Both structures have meant to compose the world simplistically in support of an orthodox view. The reader saw in McCarthy's depiction of the wrecked church that its dogmatic order could not accommodate a truly ethical encounter between diverse beings with diverse beliefs. This failure characterized the space, as I have noted, as a site of profound ruin. By abandoning membership in the church, the former cleric developed a more inclusive ethic, even as the new ethical terms complicated his life in demanding ways. He was forced from the cognitive space that had the world ordered in the neat arrangement of binaries into a much more unpredictable cognitive space. He explains both the seduction of such an old paradigm and the attendant risk that comes when one turns away from the entrenched order:

> What we seek is a 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 must extend claims until we lose all definition. Until we must be swallowed up at last by the very void to which we wished to stand opposed. (C 153)

This passage conveys the power of binary formulations as border-making boundaries that contain the hand but also incite violence. Binaries contain by defining the other in a physics of estrangement from self, which is an inadequate and oppressive calibration. It is one, however, that centralizes the ego's own position. It frees the self from intrusive, complex realisms that come in an encounter with the 'other' made outside the binary lines. This is to say that binary terms incite violence by constructing an adversary who is "worthy" based on the ways that this other can be made powerless before the descriptive

terms or even absent from view by the terms that are supposed to signify but instead only occlude. This formulation that presents as a way to understand the world casts the identity of others in a manner made for easy withdrawals. Without such clarity it is feasible that such distance may be more difficult to attain, and, even when attained, it might become a little less enjoyable as a reprieve for the falsity of the encounter with the other produces a sense of "flailing" through demons that are only "wire and crepe" instead of flesh and bone. With the dissolution of binaries, the absence of such encoding potentially positions the self to meet others, broadly defined others, human and nonhuman, without the crutch of preassignations determining the relationship in advance.

Of course, as the former cleric states the loss of the binary terms makes for an onerous responsibility, as suddenly "everything is necessary." Without the clear boundaries, the cleric is left with joinery: "Nothing can be dispensed with. Nothing despised. Because the seams are hid from you, you see." This is an affectively demanding place. Can we care about everything? If we say that we cannot, then do we not end back where we began, at the place of making borders around some and leaving so many others out of belonging? This border assembly marks a supreme anthropocentric desire, but it is not a longing supported by the flows and convergences of ecology. So in a bid to move outside the limits of anthropocentrism in structures of belief, in the walls of schools, can we imagine a different alternative in an affective stance that is not "swallowed up" by the range of things to consider ethically but is instead engaged as within a state of *attachment*, even to and with the very beings and things that emerge in ruin from behind collapsing distortive philosophies and show themselves to be forceful, present, rogue. These are the other bodies and forms that we have not wanted to admit. And, so, the moment is marked by both a cognitive and affective strain.

It seems that this expanded care makes sense, however, if the increase in concern propels conditions of mutual flourishing. This, we might imagine, would have human lives existing ultimately in less burdened states as living might become more sustainable for the collective. The affective weight of added concerns may even be said to be revelatory of an ethical potential, which is to sense that the view of existence as coexistence produces an inhered awareness as to our ethical capabilities. This sense of being weighted by being bound to so many may generate a sense that feels not only caught but also supported by the vast multiplicity and immensity of sustaining strands. This may seem a lame attempt to put a shine on what is admittedly a stinging cosmological view, but whether it is a more stinging cosmology than the one erected in a view of binaries, where some lives and things matter and others don't, is a matter for discussion, a matter for classroom debate. Before leaving the subject, it is important to note that love and attachment to other beings and things commonly produce a sense of restricted freedom, of weighted obligation. It seems, therefore, that the responsibility of being in the world demands being a part of the world.

Affect

Much has been written in recent years concerning the limits of the hermeneutics of suspicion or negative aesthetics. In his essay "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" Latour argues that the humanities have produced tools of theory and practice that leave students feeling withdrawn and detached. Latour charges that the humanities "have lost the hearts of their fellow citizens" and have had to "retreat year after year, entrenching themselves always further in the narrow barracks left to them by more and more stingy deans" (164). He closes with the claim that "The Zeus of Critique" rules still, but rules "to be sure, but over a desert" (164). This statement asserts that ascendant critical approaches to literature have vacated the reading experience of compelling value or

meaning. Students may be able to emulate a critical stance or voice, but they experience in this view too little connection with the literature they read. Rita Felski agrees with the spirit of Latour's assessment. She notes in her book *Uses of Literature* that while the "hermeneutics of suspicion" is still dominant these techniques have produced readers who engage texts from a point of distance that is obtained in the preformulation of an expected textual encounter from the basis of a critical prescription. Felski gets at this idea when she notes that readers are able to parrot critical talk. It becomes a kind of literacy of the trade. "We know only too well the well-oiled machine of ideology critique," Felski writes, "the x-ray gaze of symptomatic reading, the smoothly rehearsed moves that add up to a hermeneutics of suspicion" (1). To what extent this way of thinking and learning that comes from a series of rote expectations is open to inquiry. As it relates to the reading experience of literature, the portrayal casts engagement from the standpoint of a detached affect, a kind of affective numbness from a too scripted encounter.

A different type of engagement was articulated by David Foster Wallace in his famous essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction." In this work, Wallace boldly predicted that the next "rebels" in American life might be those who avoid irony, the antidote of postmodernism, and instead read and speak and act with sincerity. He writes:

> The next real literary 'rebels' in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat the plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Dead on the page. Too sincere. (81)

For Wallace, these "new rebels" would relinquish the facial smirk, a gesture that signals nothing if not wry detachment, for a face of conviction that holds "plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions" in careful reverence. Since Wallace's articulation others

have joined his call and advocated a readerly engagement, a new critical approach that captures the way literature works to affectively embroil the reader. Wallace's articulation suggests that the reading experience happens differently than it is represented in criticism and theory. This view does not necessarily undermine criticism and theory, but it does point to a different kind of engagement in the actual moments of immersive reading. Does this mean that immersive reading is not critical? Critical connotes skepticism, but Wallace seems to be highlighting a mood beyond skepticism in the realm of cynicism. Skepticism seems like a positive mindset, but cynicism seems preformatted and unthinking. The distinction between cynicism and skepticism offers a way to discern the important differences in conviction and sincerity and comfort and ease. While it might be assumed that sincerity comes from a place of uncritical, undemanding thought, I see Wallace invoking a kind of sincerity that is highly difficult to achieve, difficult especially in settings that are rushed, distracted, and imbued by a competitive edge that tends to generate an uneasy edginess. In other words, this might be too easy a position of interaction in the academy, too easy a point to generate in a classroom where everyone is bent on making it big.

Of course, these ideas will deserve a fuller development in future work, but I reference this push from Wallace and others because I want to align my project within an effort to reappraise the reading experiences with attention not just to the critically validated approaches as they currently present, but to the encounters that are less public, to the times when a book in the hands of a reader established an affective experience of decreased aloneness. Student experiences with text can serve to generate more than cognitive gains; they can open students to felt experiences that are important in an education of the heart. Even though the heart is a nebulous place, it is important to highlight in this age, when we do interrelate, when we are pressed into new ethical modes of relationality. As Latour writes, "Give me one matter of concern and I will show

you the whole earth and heavens that have to be gathered to hold it firmly in place" (171). The essay that offers this insight comes as a reference to the role of the critic in today's world. Latour argues that the proper role for the contemporary critic is to offer "the participants arenas in which to gather" ("Why Has Critique Run of Out of Steam" 71). For teachers interested in opening the dimensions of engagement with a text, we may well move away from the orthodoxies of tradition that bifurcate the world, whether the world of criticism, teaching, reading, or philosophy, for a reading and thinking practice that assembles the world in light of the poignancies that inhere in moments of common life.

It seems crucial, then, to articulate the difference between negative emotion, in the sense of detachment, and dark emotion stemming from a dark ecology. Melancholia is not a sign of disinterest as much as it is the showing of affective weight from ethical formations of thought. We must, in other words, distinguish a despair of the depressive sort with an affect that shows proper weightedness given the stakes involved in the moment. Given that ethical thinking works through a process of disorientation, in that the expected truths come through as questionable claims, the affect that adheres around this thinking and teaching is one of humility, even melancholy. Earlier I referenced Morton's idea of "dark ecology" as the melancholic affect issued through encounters with the "strange stranger," or the Other who falls outside belonging. The darkness of this encounter is not just in the aperture of the being as an intimate, a state that could, we might imagine, be solved by a flight away from or even a violent negation of the being in question. Instead, the darkness lies in the recognition of the other as linked and necessary in an ontologically flat world, where, as McCarthy notes, "everything is necessary." Morton writes that interconnections of this radical sort are not warming, cordial. "There is intimacy," he explains, "but not predictable, warm, fuzziness" (*The Ecological Thought* 31). This terrain of contested belongings, of owned or disavowed

territories not only consults a record from history of distance achieved through conceptualizations of inferiority but confronts contested belongings as spaces populated densely and as places of concern given that resources are scarce. Confronting this history and thinking in this space provokes melancholia, and yet I see this depressive affect stemming from a practice of engagement as a sign not of disenchantment but of attachment.

For a teacher in an English department, it is fairly common to hear students remark upon the depressive nature of literary works. In a textual world where a character's life hinges on acts of intention or coincidence, of triviality or significance, the potential for tragedy is clear. What we read on-page, in black and white, are fictional lives illustrated in cosmic dimension: a missed train forfeits a chance at love, a right turn on a freeway ends in a crash, the attainment of love happens from a most incidental encounter. A sense of melancholia centers, then, not from a positive or negative attribute or ramification, but from the sense that at any one moment so many lives enfold, so many possible occurrences may steer a life in an unanticipated direction. Joinery accelerates this sense of vulnerability, of fragility. McCarthy's former cleric announces, in a passage I have returned to time and again, that one day in a most "casual gesture" in a "movement of divesture" one being wreaks a havoc on an unknown though ancillary soul so that "that soul is forever changed, forever wrenched about in the road it was intended upon and set instead upon a road heretofore unknown to it" (C158). And in a most crucial scene from *All The Pretty Horses*, Alejandra's aunt pronounces that fate does not happen according to some "blind agency" but rather "human decisions more and more remote from their consequences" (230). The evoked image is of a blind, bent, old coiner who is "peering with his poor eyes through dingy glasses at the blind tablets of metal before him." This coiner makes his selection and perhaps he hesitates momentarily. All the while, McCarthy writes, "the fates of what unknown worlds to

come hang in the balance" (231). The sense of tragedy lies in an awareness of least things mattering so much, so that even in what could be called positive or uplifting scenes, the alignments that happen might have tilted ever so slightly to alter everything. The sensation of this registers the tragic possibility of precarious life as ever present.

When students talk of the depressiveness of literature what they articulate is a sudden, weighted knowledge of the contingency of lives and events, a contingency that is made even more real through a lens of joinery. We might recall McCarthy's line from *The Road* where in that terrible ruin "the frailty of everything [was] revealed at last" (28). Being attuned to this frailty unnerves readers, yet, at the same time, learners want to access the coming together moments where something is at stake. This is to claim that they want experiences that unnerve if this sense stems from the real meaningfulness of living coexistent lives. Effective teaching then might tune the textual encounter to impart an experience of complex interconnected realities. Reading in this deliberate, cultivated way may open the ethically consequential to view. My claim, then, supposes that the way we read and the meanings we seek from reading ultimately compose a vision of the world. That vision in this time must be toward the wonders and complexities of living in a roundly connected world.

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