Some criticism has arisen in recent years which recognizes the importance of the environment in Cormac McCarthy’s work. According to Georg Guillemin “. . . all three novels [of The Border Trilogy] are pastoral tales in their own right, they form, taken together, an overarching structure” which Guillemin believes is “composed of the three pastoral motifs defined by Marx (escape into the pastoral realm, immersion into pastoral harmony, and return to urban civilization)” (109). I am not sure Marx would have recognized what he thought of as a pastoral in these works. There is nothing that provides an escape from tension in any conventional sense, and certainly not in the most complex middle novel, The Crossing. Guillemin also sees Mexico as an “ecopastoral ideal” in The Crossing “an older and darker Arcadia” (110). One could certainly disagree with both of these interpretations, but his criticism does recognize the environment as more than a background for the cowboy romance. The natural world is also more than a passive ‘Arcadia’ in this novel. Nature is a character, interacting with the young cowboy Billy Parham, and providing a disregarded voice of reason. Cormac McCarthy does not have many strong women characters in his novels, and in fact there is only one significant human female character in The Crossing (and you do not hear her speak). However, the feminine is present and active throughout the novel, in forms which challenge the binaries of male/female, natural/human. Examined through the
lens of older myths about the world, the novel (and one could argue, the whole border trilogy) provide an ecofeminist criticism of the National Myth, by criticizing the overwhelmingly masculine and romantic world of the cowboy.

There are, of course, some problems with this point of view. One is that McCarthy is not typically seen as a feminist writer. His novels are almost always about men in a masculine world, and, as mentioned earlier, he does not generally include women as central characters. He could be read, if not as a misogynist writer, then as one who is less interested in the problems of women than men. However, I argue that his dystopian novels are troubled critiques of the masculine myths and a pointed acknowledgement that they no longer hold up. By showing that the traditional western masculinities are not (and perhaps never were) valid, McCarthy is arguing for a new myth and a new form of masculinity. This dystopian view of masculinity open up the novel to a feminist reading, especially if one also acknowledges his unconventional feminine characters and tropes, including his use of nature. Although representing nature as feminine risks essentializing the natural world as a site of male control and thus perpetuating the National Myth (the nation’s anecdote about itself) of power and dominion, one could argue that McCarthy avoids that by reaching beyond the myths of western civilization to older, more complex myths of the earth and the feminine, including the Aztec myths that were ancient when the Spanish arrived in the New World, such as that of Coatlicue.

The myths of Kali, Spider Woman, and Coatlicue are examples from different parts of the world of what Deborah Slicer, following Vandana Shiva, calls
a “feminine principle” which is not exclusively or essentially either male or female (55). This principle can clearly be seen in the novel in the form of the *gente de la tierra*, the people who live and work on the land. Slicer and Shiva argue that those who make their living within and from nature are more closely bound to nature regardless of gender. Their bodies and the material nature around them are dominated by and resist the control of their overlords. McCarthy acknowledges “the material as player” whether it is those bodies, the wolf’s body, Boyd’s, or the land but does not limit the material which could contain the feminine (Slicer 61). He avoids essentializing by not locating femininity in a female human body, or in any one site at all.

In the United States, the cowboy has always been identified in some ways with the idea of knighthood. The Western genre has been understood as a romantic form, which, according to Susan Kollin in her article “Genre and the Geographies of Violence: Cormac McCarthy and the Contemporary Western,” “upholds—with varying degrees of success—the codes and conventions of the form,” including “its Anglo male protagonist, and the national project…” (560). The cowboy romance is in fact, especially in McCarthy’s hands, strongly reminiscent of the British medieval romance, which is all about masculinity and nation building (*Empire of Magic* 128-129). The first female character we meet is the wolf. She has crossed the border from Mexico searching for the pack and for food. She understands the reality of her situation, as McCarthy makes clear:

She ate and rested and ate again. She ate till her belly dragged and she did
not go back. She would not return to a kill. She would not cross a road or a rail line in the daylight. She would not cross under a wire fence twice in the same place. These were the new protocols. Strictures that had not existed before. Now they did. (*The Crossing* 25)

McCarthy’s introduction of a female protagonist in the form of a wolf is a challenge to the conventions of a highly codified romance form and a self-conscious effort to illustrate the problems inherent in the National Myth and its ideals, including the traditional ways in which Western society looks at nature. Not only is the wolf female, but she is intelligent and well able to learn the new rules which govern her life.

Billy Parham, a young cowboy from a ranch in New Mexico, is also trying to learn his protocols. When he traps the she-wolf he decides to return her to Mexico, partly because he feels guilty, but also because, like the bachelor knights in medieval romance, he is looking for adventure in the exotic, which according to Heng is “aggressively gendered” as female (159). The vexed nature of the relationship between Billy and the she-wolf reinforces the deconstruction of the Western by emphasizing the inadequacy of the masculine ideals of the Western to fulfill the roles normally assigned to men. Billy lacks the instincts that would help him survive in the new protocol of the modern West, and seems to lack the ability to learn from the behavior of the wolf, or from any of the feminine figures and tropes within the novel.
In order to underline the contrast between masculine and feminine, McCarthy introduces an indigenous figure of archetypal or ultra-masculinity. In *The Crossing* that character is the “Indian” whom Billy and Boyd Parham find in the woods near their ranch. The man blames the boys for spooking the animals, but he is really hunting a very different prey (9). He frightens the boys into giving him food and then follows them. Like a good predator, he waits for a vulnerable time. After Billy takes the she-wolf to Mexico, the “Indian” and his gang stake out the Parham house and stage a Western version of the home invasion. The sheriff tells Billy:

> First thing they done was they caught the dog and cut its throat. Then they set and waited to see would anybody come out. They waited there long enough that one of em went to take a leak. They waited to see that everybody was asleep again after the dog quit barkin and all. (167)

These men are truly wild, unconstrained and uncaring. Although our national myth associates the masculine with the ideal of civilization and humanity, there is not much that is civilized by this unrestrained masculinity. The she-wolf, who should be the beast who devours, and is often in the Western myth equated with evil, cares about her pack, her pups, and eventually even about Billy.

> The wolf has come from Mexico “not because the game was gone but because the wolves were and she needed them,” but when she arrived at the Parham ranch “she had eaten little but carrion for two weeks and she wore a haunted look and she’d found no trace of wolves at all” (25). The she-wolf needs her pack
because she is a part of what could be thought of as a shared energy or consciousness. Jane Caputi figures this consciousness as energy and names it *Necessity* (8). Necessity is a part of an older myth which predates the conscious ego or “I” and which encompasses male and female, life and death. McCarthy shows that he recognizes that myth, when he describes the wolf’s eyes:

>. . .as she lowered her head to drink the reflection of her eyes came up in the dark water like some other self of wolf that did inhere in the earth or wait in every secret place even to such waterholes as this that the wolf would always be corroborate to herself and never wholly abandoned in the world. (79)

Billy’s decision to return her is an impulsive one, a sort of love at first sight. However Billy is, “[l]ike a man entrusted with the keeping of something which he hardly knew the use of” (79). He promises to return her to her own kind. This promise will not be kept. Instead his love is expressed as form of possession, a need to break the wolf much as he would break a horse, or in a mirror image of human male/female relationships. For McCarthy, breaking horses entails a “rendering of their fluid and collective selves into that condition of separate and helpless paralysis” (*All the Pretty Horses* 105). Billy’s roping and dragging of the wolf entails that sort of domination. She becomes aware that she, a herd animal like the horses, is alone. When they cross into Mexico, an alguacil in a village takes the wolf as contraband and her solitude ends in disaster. She is put in a dog-fighting ring. Billy had treated her as a slightly vicious dog and now the Mexican men do
the same. The wolf trusts him when he tries to save her, leaning against his leg and waiting to be led away, but Billy is not allowed to take her. In the end, he kills the she-wolf to spare her more suffering and buries her in her mountain home. Her little wolves die within her. Unable to understand the wolf or to learn her paradigms, he is useless as a natural male protector for the wolf, the world, and for his own family. He returns home to find his parents dead, his brother and his horses gone.

The “Indian” hunter and his allies were able to kill Billy’s parents because he had taken the only rifle; they were unarmed. The incident precipitates another crossing of the border, to retrieve the horses. In this section, Billy’s encounters with femininity begin with his brother Boyd, who is traumatized by the attack on their ranch, especially because the hunters called him by name. He tells Billy that they called for him “[l]ike we was friends” (173). The implication is that the boy, only fourteen and small for his age, might have been raped. Boyd, linked to the feminine in a number of ways, is a voice of reason, and Billy tells him that he is “worse than Mama.” Boyd warns his brother of danger and shows his worry concern about Billy’s decision-making ability just as their mother had (41). Boyd also has intuition. He has dreams of fires on dry lakes, and knows when animals have died. When the boys go on the quixotic quest to retrieve the family’s horses, it is much more Billy’s quest than Boyd’s. The boys acquire a much more conventionally feminine figure in the silent girl. She is being held by roadside wanderers, dangerous men who tell Billy, “…if they were old enough to bleed they were old enough to butcher” (209). Both the boys help her escape, but she shares a bond
with Boyd that Billy does not understand. When Billy asks her, “[s]abías que él tenía una gemela?...Que murió cuando cinco años? She said that she did not know that Boyd had once had a twin sister or that she died but that it was not important for now he had another” (323). Her answer hearkens back to the older and more primary feminine consciousness, by invoking a shared intuition much like twins, manifesting one consciousness in two bodies. McCarthy weaves an oppositional myth throughout the novel. This myth of a goddess evokes neither/both the masculine and feminine and resides in lived experiences close to the land rather than in some transcendental ideal is found throughout the novel.

The mythological nature of McCarthy’s novel is reinforced by the presence of several goddess “guides.” Sometimes they are female, sometimes male, and sometimes either dual or multiple in form. One such figure is the apostate priest in the town which had been destroyed by an earthquake. The old priest tells Billy the story of his struggle with a man who grew up orphaned because his parents died in the Mexican War and who had then lost his young son in the quake. The priest comes to see that the man knows “. . . that he was indeed elect and that the God of the universe was yet more terrible than men reckoned. He could not be eluded nor yet set aside nor circumscribed about and it was true that He did indeed contain all else within Him even to the reasoning of the heretic. . .” (157). The priest comes to know through the old man that “[a]ll is telling” or everything is the story, the myth (155). The story is about all men being one, within a god’s tale, but Billy does not understand it. The gods/goddesses keep trying to reach out to him and make him aware that “. . . every man’s path is every other’s” but Billy cannot make the
connections to the consequences of his actions, even when he returns to his empty, violated house.

Another “goddess” is the primadonna, the opera singer that the boys see in the *ejido*. She is sort of a Nietzschean figure in that she makes real the people on stage. She is an artist and associated with creativity. Billy sees her naked in the river, washing her thigh length hair as “[s]he bent and caught her falling hair in her arms and held it and she passed one hand over the surface of the water as if to bless it and as he watched he saw that the world which had always been before him everywhere had been veiled from his sight” (220). Before she sees him and walks away “[s]he turned and he thought she might sing to the sun” (220). Billy is offered a glimpse of her divinity. Like the older myths, the primadonna is goddess of life and death, embodying sexuality and fertility but also capable of shooting an injured mule to release him from his pain. The character she plays in the opera “Pagliacci” is killed because the clown “sabe tu secreto” that “en este mundo la máscara es la que es verdadera” (229). She gives the boys a prophecy similar to the priest’s when she tells him that “the shape of the road is the road…[a]nd every voyage begun upon it will be completed” (230). She warns them that brothers have difficulty traveling together. The boys do have trouble. Boyd is shot trying to recover the horses, and when he recovers he joins the girl, his psychological twin, fighting for the people. Billy, the outsider, the cowboy figure unable to see the myth, once again returns home alone.

The third “goddess” or oracle is the fortune teller that Billy meets on his third journey across the border. He has failed in his attempt to join the army and
fight in WWII, and he, like the wolf, feels the need for family connections. The fortuneteller is one of many people who show him kindness. When she reads his palm she tells him that she sees “dos hermanos. . . Uno que vive, uno que ha muerto” (369). Billy asks “Cuál es cual?” (369). (Two brothers, one lives, one has died . . . Which is which?) Billy is being made aware that his physical life may not be a true life at all, because he is not fully living it.

The last goddess image is embodied in the “gente de la tierra.” The people of the earth in Mexico and in the United States help the boys on their journeys. The farm workers save Boyd’s life when he is shot, and both a curandera and a doctor work together, with respect for each other, to heal him. The people have their own law, which is set in contrast to the laws of the rich and powerful. The doctor and the curandera both die for their role in helping the boys, but the people still adopt Boyd as their hero. When he and the girl are killed, they are celebrated in corridos on both sides of the border.

Billy’s last encounter is with a dog, misshapen and ugly, like some harbinger of evil. The dog is a diminished domesticated (and damaged) version of the wild wolf at the beginning. However, Billy’s anger at the dog really reveals the mistreatment of his own soul. Billy witnesses the first nuclear test in New Mexico, and then goes out into the “alien dark” and looks for the dog (425). He realizes that his question about the two brothers, ‘Which is which?’ has been answered. Boyd is still alive, in Billy’s soul and in the collective soul of the people’s songs. Billy, however, is as lost as one of the apostate priest’s elect and “. . . he bowed his head and held his face in his hands and wept” (426). Billy is beginning to learn the
lessons which his ‘election’ is trying to teach him, when he realizes that there is a “right and godmade sun” and that it is ‘for all and without distinction’ (427). The masculine cowboy myths in which Billy believes have utterly failed. McCarthy understands the reality of the old goddess myths. It is only the patriarchal interpretation of Western civilization that casts goddesses and gods, the female and male principles, as binaries. McCarthy understands that these older myths, based on lived experiences encompassing the complexity of life and death, masculine and feminine, nature and human as one intertwined nature. McCarthy makes clear through his use of goddesses and prophecies, and through his refusal to essentialize the feminine, that the sunrise for all includes wolves, men, women and the entire world alike.
Works Cited


