

The Multispecies City in McCarthy's *Suttree* and Duiker's *Thirteen Cents*

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Abstract

“First-wave” ecocriticism focused on “nature writing” attuned to supposedly human-free wildness and its healing beauty. The presence of non-human life in cities was largely ignored. Now, numerous branches of interdisciplinary thought endeavour to transcend the culture/nature dichotomy, to recognise non-human agency, and to call for a more equitable formulation of urban “communities of conviviality.” Though cross-species interdependencies necessarily occur, attitudes vary according to multiple variables of class and education, socialisation and economic opportunity. Is such beneficent conviviality not a luxury permitted only to the cushioned and the safe? What happens to human-nature relations in urban areas or strata of poverty and precarity? The article compares two novels concerned with impoverished urban communities: Cormac McCarthy’s *Suttree* (1979) set in 1950s Knoxville, Tennessee, and K. Sello Duiker’s *Thirteen Cents* (2000), set in Cape Town. It attempts a reading sensitive to the intimate interfusion of material and imaginative manifestations of multiple species simultaneously.

Keywords: Sello Duiker; Cormac McCarthy; multispecies; urban ecocriticism

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Introduction

In 2017 a University of Cape Town master's student, Anna Ferreira, submitted a photographic portfolio entitled *Ripple Affect*. In an opening "Thought," she quotes Lorraine Thorne and Sarah Whatmore: "The futures of earth creatures (including humans) lie not in fortifying the utopian space or time of a pristine wilderness, but ... where the everyday worlds of people, plants and animals are already in the process of being mixed up." Ferreira's arresting images focus on Cape Town's Waterfront, where boats, piers, hotels and repurposed factories provide adaptive purchase for sundry non-human creatures, from mosses and seals to pigeons and gulls. The backdrop of the iconic Table Mountain is reflected in those waters, too—a more distant, if not exactly pristine, manifestation of "nature."

Across the globe, another non-human adaptation to a harbour environment persists: a diminished colony of Little Penguins within the industrialised precincts of Manly, Sydney. Thom van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose (2012) take this colony as a case study to suggest that not only do non-human inhabitants adapt more or less effectively to urbanisation: they play a genuinely agentive role in forming those landscapes, a "storied" and "story-ing" role that decentres the conventional view that only humans command narrative and creativity. Through attentiveness to non-human narratives and "philopatris" (love of home ground), Van Dooren and Rose hope we might develop an enhanced "ethics of conviviality" that will pull up human urbanisation somewhere short of ecocide. They conclude: "An ethics of conviviality puts the burden back on humans: to find multiple, life enhancing ways of sharing and co-producing meaningful and enduring multispecies cities" (19).

It would seem almost a redundancy to point out that we have always lived in a multispecies world. Yet urban dwellers in particular often lose sight of the fact that it "is the living world that sculpted all our faculties ... in a constitutive weaving with other life forms" (Morizot 2020, 235), and created the very foundations (soil, atmosphere, water) of our existence. As Van Dooren and Rose assert, "it seems fair to say that the inclusivity imagined for many contemporary cities—under banners like 'multiculturalism' and 'cosmopolitanism'—is limited to human diversity in its many forms" (2012, 17). This is changing in a number of interrelated fields, especially anthropology and philosophy. For example, Robert Mugerauer (2010) writes, from the perspective of urban planning, about the need to transcend established epistemologies that have dichotomised "nature" and "culture" and have methodologically pursued "generalities and predictables" (31). Drawing on phenomenology, Clifford Geertz-inspired "thick description," and actor network theory, Mugerauer advocates a refined theory of "realms where both human and other-than-human organisms in interactive relationships with their environments generate spheres of meaning" or "lifeworlds" (31). He suggests the power of stories in particularising these relationships, though he does not explore fictional literature as such.

Analogous phases, limitations and developments have characterised ecocriticism. “First-wave” ecocriticism focused on “nature writing” attuned to conservation philosophy, supposedly human-free wildness, and its healing beauty. Accordingly, as Michael Bennett and David Teague pointed out in *The Nature of Cities* (1999), the presence of non-human life in cities was long ignored. Since then, urban-located ecocritical work has advanced considerably, as have Critical Animal and Plant Studies. Numerous branches of related interdisciplinary thought endeavour to blur or transcend the culture/nature, city/country, self/other dichotomies: posthumanism, biohumanism, Donna Haraway’s “natureculture,” and many other such iterations. Neel Ahuja usefully broaches a specifically postcolonial and transnational perspective on multispecies study: “By tracing the circulation of nonhuman species as both figures and materialized bodies within the circuits of imperial biopower, species critique helps scholars reevaluate ‘minority’ discourses and enrich histories” (2009, 556). Importantly, Ahuja here highlights the imaginative as well as material nonhuman presence (they are arguably inseparable), and implies that the biological can no longer be excluded from study of imperial (or perhaps any form of) power. Among such historically marginalised “minority discourses” are those of the urban poor and of the non-human. This article probes the conjunction of the two.

Usage of the term “multispecies” is dominated by the biological sciences, and there seems as yet little in the way of explicitly *multispecies* attention to literary works, nor much theorisation of what that might look like, though hundreds of ecocritical interventions of sundry kinds have laid fertile grounds. A 2016 overview of multispecies studies included “ethnography, etho-ethnology, anthropology of life, ... extinction studies, and more-than-human geographies” (Van Dooren, Kirksey, and Münster 2016, 5). Literature is notably absent. To focus momentarily on Southern African studies, several postcolonial ecocritical studies, such as Caminero-Santangelo’s *Different Shades of Green* (2014), aim to reconfigure human-nature relations, primarily from an environmental justice angle. Critical Animal Studies, notably pursued by Wendy Woodward in *The Animal Gaze* (2008), and Critical Plant Studies, recently opened up by Woodward and Erika Lemmer (see *JLS* 35[4]), propose various breaches of the human-nature divide. More broadly, Tina Steiner’s study of a range of African fictions, *Convivial Worlds* (2021), explores various dimensions of “conviviality,” working towards everyday iterations of *ubuntu*-like “alternative humanisms” (4), but she does not delve into the non-human realm. Louise Viljoen’s recent article on South African “dystopian ecologies”—also a comparison, of two futuristic Cape Town-set novels—appositely evokes an ecocriticism that recognises “the entanglement of the social with the environmental, the specifics of the locality, its colonial history, its cultural and linguistic diversity [while] highlighting ... the enduring inequality between different classes and races and the increasing vulnerability of people, animals and plants” (2021, 23). These criteria are as applicable to *Suttree* as to *Thirteen Cents*. None of these studies, however useful, quite reach into the “multispecies” nature of life and fictional depictions. Vera Coleman (2017) offers a more relevant model, exploring South American fictions that “imagine the human itself as a product of multispecies

interactions through evolutionary time” and “multispecies relationships unfolding in three telescoping dimensions—corporealities, companions and communities” (i). Like Viljoen, Coleman is concerned to place such ecologically aware work in the context of present-day species extinctions and anthropogenic climate change. Neither aspect is an explicit concern of either *Suttree* or *Thirteen Cents*, though the wreckage of the former’s milieu can certainly be read as a prelude, and the latter’s ending as a kind of compacted premonitory vision of both.

Coleman wishes to cast encounters “between individuals of different species as hopeful figurations of human-nonhuman flourishing beyond the Anthropocene” (i), echoing the idealism of Van Dooren and Rose’s call for a “more equitable” deployment of urban “conviviality.” The core issue is “flourishing with awkward creatures” as we find ourselves in a space involving “friction, conflict and misrecognition within togetherness,” a “space between togetherness and distance, ... engagement and indifference [and d]isagreement and heterogeneity” (Ginn, Beisel, and Barua 2014, 116). The novels explored here delineate just such a space especially vividly. Cross-species interdependencies necessarily occur, whether or not we (or literary characters) are aware of them, affecting everything from CO₂ distribution to our digestive tracts. However, attitudes vary radically according to multiple compulsions of class and education, socialisation and economic opportunity. Is such conviviality not a luxury permitted only to the wealthy and the cushioned? What happens to multispecies conviviality in urban areas or strata of extreme poverty? To begin probing this question, I compare two novels concerned with impoverished urban communities: Cormac McCarthy’s *Suttree* (1979) set in 1950s Knoxville, Tennessee, and K. Sello Duiker’s *Thirteen Cents* (2000), set in South Africa’s Cape Town.

A Preliminary Comparison

K. Sello Duiker’s short and disturbing novel *Thirteen Cents* is set (one presumes) in the mid to late 1990s—fluid and uncertain though somewhat hopeful years following the fall of formal apartheid. It is narrated by Azure,¹ a nearly thirteen-year-old orphan trapped in impoverishment, tenuous dependencies and violence, active mostly in Sea Point. This “most desirable location,” to lift a phrase used by Karen Press in her cycle of Sea Point poems (1998, 39), feels a long way from the classic (or stereotyped), dense shacklands of, say, Khayelitsha. Nevertheless, beggars haunt intersections, the homeless inhabit shacks close by near the harbour or Salt River, and behind the facades gangsters run prostitution rings and protection rackets. Azure is subject to a foul-mouthed “Coloured” gangster, Gerald, who dominates him with a manipulative combination of protectiveness and brutality, along with more adult minions and a coterie of prostitutes. Azure does exercise some independence. Already marked as strange by his blue eyes set in dark skin, he roams the streets begging, earning some money by performing sexual favours for rich white gay men. He feels he is on the cusp of manhood, continually

¹ Pronounced “Az-oo-ray,” he insists; but also a reference to his blue eyes.

trying to convince himself he is “getting stronger,” but harbouring deep resentments that culminate in a final, hallucinatory vision of the city’s wholesale destruction.

Suttree (1979) is the most humane and beautiful of Cormac McCarthy’s novels, set in an impoverished riverside precinct of early 1950s Knoxville known as McAnally Flats. Its primary focaliser is Cornelius Suttree, just out of the workhouse and trying to re-settle in his old neighbourhood, based in a collapsing houseboat on the grossly polluted river. Like Azure, he spends a lot of the story just walking about or conversing. He fleetingly connects with former drinking mates and sundry other struggling itinerants, fishing a little for money. Against his better judgement, he helps out an unhinged if ingenious youth named Gene Harrogate (a secondary focaliser). This relationship is in some ways a mirror-image of that between Azure and Gerald. In the end, Suttree is forced to move away as the Flats are bulldozed in favour of a new motorway.

There are some important differences between the works. These include the time difference in both setting and publication dates—though this is not especially relevant here. *Suttree* is the more substantial novel, both in length and density of language. The adult, college-educated Suttree often takes studious note of his surroundings, as does the implied author. The first-person narrator Azure, by contrast, is a barely educated child, with a suitably rather naive voice and simpler language: his delineation of non-human species tends to be sketchy and uninformed. Unlike Suttree, whose attitude is grittily realistic and dispassionate, Azure habitually invests other creatures—especially pigeons and gulls—with unusual anthropomorphic significance. Another difference involves food—an ever-present, foundational aspect of our multispecies life-network and a cipher for the prevalent ecological economy. On the McAnally Flats some people can and do attempt self-sufficiency, fishing, growing melons, tomatoes or corn, raising chickens or goats. These are not options available or taken up by Duiker’s Capetonian gangsters and destitutes: they live off fast food or discarded scraps. “Feed me,” is a mantra Azure repeatedly projects onto other creatures.

Nonetheless, the two novels present a number of intriguing if inadvertent parallels. Both centre on impecunious protagonists barely subsisting on the fringe or underbelly of their respective cities’ richer centres. Their habitual precincts are both more porous and racially diverse than the stereotyped and racialised “ghetto,” either the apartheid-enforced black “township” or the decayed American inner city. Both are littoral zones, abutting the Atlantic Ocean and Tennessee River respectively, both overshadowed by pigeon-haunted motorways or viaducts, iconic of fast-paced, unfeeling industrialisation. Both protagonists are traumatised by family loss or abandonment, are victimised yet canny survivors who might be termed “picaresque,” having “a particular potency as a marginal literary figure” who “depends on quick-witted improvisation coupled to expedient parasitism” (Nixon 2011, 56). Both temporarily venture via the sex economy into the well-off quarters, Azure with the occasional “client,” Suttree under the aegis of an alluringly successful but ultimately neglectful prostitute. Both milieux are drug-ridden—in Suttree’s case mostly alcohol (beer, whiskey, or lethal home-brews), in

Azure's mostly dagga, leavened with glue, "buttons," or cocaine—all plant-based of course—with associated derangements, health issues, brawls and lawlessness. Their societies are similarly underwritten by an historic racial consciousness, including the near-complete extirpation of indigenous peoples under colonialism (Suttree encounters an "Indian" turtle-catcher; Azure discovers precolonial rock art²). Both protagonists make significant forays away from the city into adjoining mountains, each with quasi-spiritual and phantasmagoric effects. Both stories end with familiar precincts being bulldozed. For neither Azure nor Suttree is anything really resolved.

Most importantly here, both novels present an unavoidably multispecies world, as two exemplary passages indicate.

The grass becomes softer and doesn't crackle when you walk on it. It just makes a soft shushing sound. I walk out of the trees till I get on the cricket field. The grass is green and short. There are no school children. I walk around the field and start to hear the city. Taxis hoot, dogs bark and in the distance the big boats burp like whales. I walk down a steep slide of dried grass. I climb down into a ditch that continues for a while. I come across a dead cat—there are flies and maggots all over its eyes and mouth. (Duiker 2000, 159)

[Harrogate] made his way by alleys and small streets to the lights at Henley Street where he'd earlier spied a church lawn. Here he found himself a nest among the curried clumps of phlox and boxwood and curled up like a dog. ... He watched insects rise and wheel there. A hunting bat cut through the cone of light and sucked them scattering. (McCarthy 1979, 102)

Both works have already attracted ecocritics. Criticism of *Thirteen Cents* is now extensive, understandably dominated by questions of poverty, post-apartheid social justice, racial trauma, nascent sexuality, youth violence, and queerness. At least two critics, however, have offered ecocritical slants. Anthony Vital lays out some essential principles for an urban ecocriticism in African contexts, and of "rethinking the social as the ecosocial" (2016, 169). He presents a useful overview of the novel's ecology, but includes little detail. Crucially, he cautions that any literary text, even as it is tied to and illuminates the materiality of its social and historical moment, "distorts and omits, as well as reveals" (171). Like Vital, Michael D'Itri critiques readings that fail to distinguish adequately between character and author, or to seriously entertain "the notion that Azure's growth and development might be problematized by Duiker himself" (2020, 4). D'Itri devotes more space to other species' role, but ventures little beyond selected encounters with rats and pigeons as (he argues) instances of Duiker's underpinning critique of postcolonial "hybridity."³

² It hardly needs stating that terms such as "Indian" and "Bushman/San," which I invoke later, are politically controversial today, while remaining current in some quarters.

³ D'Itri pursues a complex engagement with Homi Bhabha's notions of hybridity in both racial and human-animal spheres, too intricate to unpack here. D'Itri's central point seems to be that Azure's

McCarthy's novels have likewise attracted some ecocritical scrutiny, concentrated mostly on *The Road*. A chapter on *Suttree* in Paul Quick's PhD dissertation on McCarthy's Appalachian novels provides the most useful discussion yet of ecological aspects of Knoxville's spaces and activities, its multi-layered condition of pollution, the communitarian life on the Flats, and the role of that American demigod, the automobile (2004, 158–204). Quick perhaps exaggerates *Suttree*'s role as an eco-friendly rebel against dominant "Cartesian" thinking, and uses too broad a conception of "environmentalist" as a characterisation of *Suttree*'s awareness of and dependence upon nonhuman life. *Suttree* is intricately observant but he is no Deep Ecological campaigner. Apart from fish and a discussion of the goat-herder character, Quick himself pays scant attention to the details of other plant, insect, or animal lives.

A more detailed analysis will help further illuminate the main question: what happens to human-nature/multispecies relations in conditions of urban poverty?

Thirteen Cents

Azure's knowledge of many things is sketchy and jejune, including his descriptions of non-human life. His awareness of plants, for example, tends to be confined to an undifferentiated "bush" or "tree," though he does occasionally note a rough species such as a "palm" (2000, 42) or "blue-gum" (18). Yet he is not insensitive to trees as meaningful presences, imagining them as having their own sensitivities and stories: "I can hear trees sighing with relief. They are thirsty. They have been thirsty for a while" (159). During one habitual retreat into "the Gardens" (presumably the Company's Garden alongside Parliament), he looks

at the tree's branches. They are reaching out to the sky, the sun. Feed me, they plead. Trees are beautiful. They are dancers. They are graceful. And they have quiet spirits. If you sit quietly long enough, you can actually hear a leaf fall. That's how trees speak. They drop things. They lose things all the time, so that others may find them. They know how to give, trees. (80)

All this expresses an ethic of succour and generosity sorely missing from Azure's human life. The image is echoed during an extended episode in which Azure performs sexual acts for a man named Lebowitz in the latter's luxurious white flat. Lebowitz puts on music, the "Winter" section of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. Though surely remote from Azure's experience (he is used to Tupac), Lebowitz encourages him to imagine the scene avowedly portrayed: "Can you see the trees without leaves?" Azure inwardly responds: "Trees. I know trees" (111). Interestingly, Azure connects Lebowitz with "one of those trees that grow straight and tall and have needles" and "are always green"—pines, one deduces (115). Later, up on the mountain, he makes himself a bed of needles from "the Lebowitz tree" (129). There is, arguably, a half-articulated sense

self-contradictions reveal the author's critique of a hybridity that erases difference, and that allegedly thus remains beholden to colonial discourse. I suspect there are simpler explanations.

of alien plant species as an extension of white, colonial and privileged life. Perhaps this explains the phantasmagoric and anthropomorphic violence in Azure's collection of firewood on the mountain: he vengefully imagines branches he gathers as "arms, legs, bodies, birds, elephants, monsters" (130). A "branch like an arm ... was begging for destruction" (129); his campfire presages the wholesale destruction he finally envisages engulfing the city.

Birds also play a prominent role in Azure's real and mental life, centrally a contrast between pigeons and seagulls. Pigeons are despised as (the popular saw has it) winged rats. Although they are "stupid" (64), he is suspicious of them and their "beady eyes" (69); he thinks of them as "thugs or ugly politicians" (26), alternatively craven minions, and associates them with the feeling of being constantly under surveillance. Gerald's sidekick Vincent says to him at one point: "'You see that bird over there?. ... He can hear us ...'. The pigeon watches us" (74). When he sees a pigeon flying around Gerald's shack, he thinks: "The work of evil will never stop" (25). That Gerald has somehow spelled the pigeons into being his spies is possibly a manipulative idea deliberately planted in Azure's impressionable mind in order to control him. On a more than symbolic level, Azure is right to fear being turned into a pigeon: Gerald's power dynamic depends on making others feel stupid and powerless. He asserts: "Pigeons, people, they are all the same. At the end of the day they are just rats" (35). This is allied to his oft-repeated mantra: adults are "full of shit" or "crazy" (35). Azure must look elsewhere for a countervailing symbol of strength and independence.

When the client Lebowitz plays his recording of Vivaldi, Azure follows the piano: "The softest notes seem to fly. Rising and falling like a seagull flying" (114). When he is fellating another client, he hears "seagulls screeching violently, swooping over the sea as waves come crashing down. They are giving you their salt," he tells himself; "Eat it, be strong" (67). Seagulls offer Azure that compensatory vision of beauty, resilience, and initiative. When Gerald incarcerates him on the roof of a building, Azure watches the birds:

ugly fat pigeons, flying around me endlessly ... And the men pigeons are always trying to screw the women pigeons. They bully them and hop on their backs. They are not very nice to look at, the men pigeons. They look fat and have this heavy throat that just hangs like an extra piece of meat. (63)

The bullying and misogynistic aspects of Azure's own life are reflected here: his imagination crafts a certain continuity with a non-human story. Then Azure himself evinces some of that cruelty and disdain, practically all he has ever known. He waits for the pigeons to gather, then he chases them:

They make a nice sound when they fly away. ... [Then] a strange thing happens. Seagulls fly by. They make a lot of noise and terrorise the pigeons. ... I laugh when one seagull attacks a man pigeon. It isn't much of a fight. With its strong beak the seagull rips off some of the pigeon's feathers before the pigeon flies away. ... They are

beautiful, seagulls. They have white feathers that they look after and you never see a seagull that looks battered with dirty wings like some pigeons. Seagulls have pride, they always wash at sea with cold water. Like me. ... They're not stupid like pigeons. Pigeons are stupid because they let themselves get used. Where did anyone see a seagull being used as a messenger bird? Never. (63–4)

Later on the rooftop he watches seagulls.

They stand there like statues till one of them opens his wings and drops onto the warm roof. It's a man seagull. You can tell from the way he walks. ... He waddles towards me and stands there about a kick away. Then he shits there and flies back to the others. Without thinking I walk over and put my finger into the mess. I scribble a cross on the door with it. They start crowing and flapping their wings. Then I walk to the mess and piss in it. ... They all fly towards the puddle in a mad rush and put their feet in it and then they all fly away except for the man seagull. He stands guard on the edge of the roof. I smile and close my eyes. I'm getting stronger. (68)

At the most fundamental level, the scatological, Azure crosses the species boundary, mixing his substance with theirs, in a kind of unconscious and spontaneous ritual. They seem to respond in kind. Azure signals his presence with a cross on the door: perhaps an assertion of individual presence, or a kind of “Keep Out” sign, or the beginning of art, foreshadowing the finger-drawn cave paintings he discovers on the mountain. It signifies his growing obsession with “growing stronger.” To imagine flying like a seagull is to leave behind not just Gerald and gangsterism but the wider society that has demeaned and marginalised him.

Mammal life also comes to articulate the spiral of destruction into which Azure falls—or rises. Dogs and cats appear fleetingly, always negatively. Beyond the wariness lies a palpable desire to be like them in certain aspects; indeed, some young white would-be hoods characterise Azure and his companions as “urban cats. Survivors, man ... survival of the fittest” (28). This is both like and unlike rats, which have a more constant, equally Darwinian presence throughout the novel. Rats represent the meanest form of life, a form Azure despises but feels he is constantly on the verge of becoming, “chang[ing] shape” and being made to do “ugly things in sewers and in the dark” (5–6). This “therianthropic” dimension manifests strongly on the mountain where Azure, plotting destruction, does become “like a rat, crawling over everything” (125). Then he cooks and eats rats: the flesh tastes of urine but paradoxically contributes to his becoming “stronger” (125).

The fantasy element—the collaboration of the imaginative and the corporeal—in this “therianthropy” recurs. First Azure acquires a T-shirt emblazoned with a lion, with which he begins to identify, a symbol of noble power to counterbalance the denigration of “becoming-rat.” Vincent instructs Azure that “there's only room for one predator at a time. Like in that movie *Jurassic Park*. ... T-rex was king of the dinosaurs. He was like a lion. He killed them all” (74). According to Vincent, “so now T-rex, he's Gerald”

(78). Gerald is later found dead, his body mysteriously rent, as if by a lion. While it is impossible for him to have been killed by either Azure or a real lion, Azure in his head takes some sort of credit for it. This can be read as “magical realism,” as Sam Radithlalo (2005) suggests, or as a psychosomatic way of extending the violence represented by Gerald to an apocalyptic level. Azure on the mountain meets (or dreams of) a mysterious woman named Saartjie who, critics agree, evokes the notoriously exploited Khoi captive, Saartje Baartman. Azure’s Saartjie confusingly claims that T-rex is her father, made by “Mantis,” the trickster-god of “Bushman” lore. Together they “see” (imagine? conjure?) “T-rex stomping over cars and tearing apart buildings, chewing people but they can’t scream because their lips are sewn together with wire” (Duiker 2000, 146). When Azure feels his skin is becoming like a lizard’s (143) and later acquiring “scales” (156), it seems he may himself be “becoming T-rex,” or imagining he is. It is perhaps moot whether or when merely childish imagining, riffing off popular culture, mutates into incipient mental derangement, or dreams, or hallucinations fuelled by dagga and tik. Perhaps all of them in variable proportions.

The final cataclysm is accompanied by a welter of other real, dreamt, or imagined animals. On Azure’s first visit to the massif of the mountain he observes “animals with lots of hair that look like big cats [with] small tails and are fat”—he does not know to name them dassies (127). There are birds that seem to him “guardians of the mountain” (127). He feels he moves like a “small buck” (129). On meeting Saartjie, the level of identifying with animals escalates into the monstrously hallucinatory: he perceives a welter of therianthropic metamorphoses, including even a non-African one:

I see a grey wolf running in the moonlight. ... I move with the speed of the wolf. It runs to the edge of a cliff and becomes a big bird that spreads itself across the sky. It holds a rat in its mouth. The bird flies to its nest and feeds its babies. They tear up the meat. (133)

On his second and final mountain sojourn, he discovers in a cave some “strange markings”:

Someone drew stick people and they carry spears and run towards a cow. But the cow is drawn really well. I can see its horns and its tail. ... When I close my eyes I see animals running at a furious speed. I see rhinos, wild cows with big horns, elephants and even lions. They seem to be running away from something. I even see a swarm of birds that make a dark cloud in the sky. The earth comes alive with the sound of those running animals. ... The hairs on my back stand upright. Like a snake, that sensation crawls up my spine and erupts in my head. (187–8)

D’Itri mystifyingly calls these paintings “anthropologically Orientalist” (2020, 14), but the conjunction with “Mantis” and “Saartjie” implies an autochthonous, Bushman provenance. Azure can’t name them as such, but Duiker surely intends a connection with classic shamanistic trance-dance: Azure bleeds from the nose in a fashion often depicted in Bushman ritual. However, it leads not to an oft-romanticised vision of

ecological reintegration, nor a return to some putative pre-colonial idyll, rather the opposite: an expansion of Azure's latent violence and vengefulness into a vision of the obliteration of the entire city by a tidal wave and a rain of fireballs.

This denouement has puzzled and divided critics. Tšehloane (2022) considers it a meditation on post-apartheid utopianism and its limitations; D'Itri a "state of madness" (1). Vital argues that, since Azure has "a need for a nature 'outside' the city ... that connects him with a precolonial culture" divorced from neoliberal economies, the tidal wave is in some sense nature's revenge on "global capitalism" (2016, 179). Such is the construction of the episode, however, that there "is no consciousness outside the boy's that can be turned to for guidance" or resolution (176). Since, as D'Itri points out, the destruction appears to eliminate the good along with the bad, possibility along with the past, it can hardly be read as the satisfying apotheosis of some revolutionary impulse, nor more narrowly as a vision of revenge upon his immediate oppressors, nor as a hopeful reconnection with autochthony. It envisages an Armageddon which, were it for real, would leave Azure nowhere. However one reads it, it is a multispecies event: people and animals, from bats to lizards, are depicted as conjoined in hapless flight. For all the imagined shape-shifting, however, the human-nonhuman relations are hardly "convivial"; they appear more psychologically exploitative than empathetically respected.

Suttree

Both these novels might be regarded as premonitory responses to Rob Nixon's question for writer-activists: "How do we bring home—and bring emotionally to life—threats that take time to wreak their havoc, threats that never materialize in one spectacular, explosive, cinematic scene?" (2011, 14). On *Suttree*'s McAnally Flats, layered with car wrecks, trash, weeds and the bones of the dead, a kind of cumulative apocalypse would seem to have happened already. Yet multispecies life persists. Dozens of intricate descriptions deserve analysis, but just one extended passage from the opening pages must serve to illustrate McCarthy's textured style.

Old stone walls unplumbed by weathers, lodged in their striae fossil bones, limestone scarabs rucked in the floor of this once inland sea. Thin dark trees through yon iron palings where the dead keep their own small metropolis ... the deathware stained with carrion. ... Past these corrugated warehouse walls down little sandy streets where blownout autos sulk on pedestals of cinderblock. Through warrens of sumac and pokeweed and withered honeysuckle giving onto the scored clay banks of the railway. Grey vines coiled leftward in this northern hemisphere, what winds them shapes the dogwhelk's shell. Weeds sprouted from cinder and brick. A steamshovel reared in solitary abandonment against the night sky. Cross here. By frogtrails and fishplates where engines cough like lions in the dark of the yard ... past smoking oblique shacks and china dogs and painted tires where dirty flowers grow. (1979, 3)

Primordial fossils lie alongside the recent dead. Vines and shells (and everything else, it is implied) obey the same implacable laws of nature. Even the machinery partakes, through metaphor, of the animal. All is subject to a “slow cataclysm of neglect” (3), what Nixon has popularised as “slow violence.” In this heavily polluted “encampment of the damned,” only “ruder forms survive” (3). Suttree himself seems almost indestructible, though some critics have suggested that the novel’s main theme is Suttree’s attempt to reconcile himself to the “mathematical certainty” of his own death (295). Which is another way of saying, his animality. Death itself is early figured as a “hunter with hounds” (5), the image repeated in the novel’s closing lines: as Suttree leaves, he recalls a dream of that “hunter” and his tireless hounds, “slaverous and wild and their eyes crazed with ravening for souls in this world. Fly them” (471).

In this rich manner Suttree (and/or McCarthy) pays constant and intimate attention to multispecies presences in their material forms, from fish to flies, mushrooms to grasses, as well as to their imaginative appearances. There are the many uses of simile (“like lions,” in the passage above). A woman’s toes are “like clusters of dark mice” (108); youths behave like horses (269); Harrogate is known as the “city mouse” (263). Suttree himself, like Azure, is likened to a “dog at large” (246). Other metaphors are so embedded in common usage that their animal origins are almost forgotten (“fishplates”). Alongside works of popular art (“china dogs”), these apparently passing instances accumulate to constitute substantive dimensions of a culture, of its eco-imaginary. As with the lion depicted on Azure’s T-shirt, such depictions, amplified by interpretation and identification, can have palpable behavioural effects. A vivid example in *Suttree* is actually embodied—tattoos on a woman’s skin. Her arm bears a “slaverous and blueblack panther” (75), another part a peacock. A hound is “chasing a rabbit down her belly towards her crotch” (75), suggesting both primordial sexuality and death. Even closer to the magical, Suttree encounters an ancient woman, a black crone feared as a witch. At a seance or divination, she spills from a pouch “toad and bird bones ... a joint from a snake’s spine ... a bat’s skull with needleteeth agrin” (281). Despite his scepticism, she raises Suttree’s neck hairs.

In some instances McCarthy melds human and animal even more organically: “Suttree looked towards the river and tested the air with his nose in a gesture of some earlier antecedent” (447). An instinctual animality lives within him. Occasionally Suttree seems on the verge of according the non-human a “storied” consciousness, as when “he fell to studying the variety of moths pressed to the glass ... Supplicants of light” (89). One is patterned like a “robber’s mask,” another has a “wizened face not unlike a monkey’s.” Suttree bends “to see him better. What do you want?” (89). (They do not reply.) This sense of being at some level integral to and in communication with the non-human occurs most intensely during Suttree’s venture into the forested mountains of North Carolina. While his “wilderness” episode parallels Azure’s in some ways, Suttree’s occurs around the middle of the novel and has none of the other’s dramatised finality. Inadequately clad and provisioned, Suttree drives himself to the point of hallucinatory starvation. He experiences a rare apprehension of “incredible loveliness”:

Old distaff Celt's blood in some back chamber of his brain moved him to discourse with the birches, with the oaks. ... Everything had fallen from him. He scarce could tell where his being ended or the world began ... (286)

For Suttree this hardly acts as a life-changing epiphany. He doesn't care. It is too close to hunger- or mushroom-induced derangement, in which he sees "with a madman's clarity the perishability of his flesh" (287). The lovely Thoreau-like vision is ephemeral; Suttree cannot survive "in Nature," however beautiful. Much of multispecies nature proves downright inimical to humans, the more so to those living in marginal precarity.

Hence most of the animals in *Suttree* are depicted as either untamed or victimised. The odd character has a companionable cat, dog, or gaggle of goats; it is important to note that attitudes are far from uniform. Still, caring is rare compared to normalised negligent violence. It is not so much *cruelty*, as that implies a certain deliberate malice. Harrogate comes closest: he once deliberately sits "chop[ping] ants in two" (144), at another point says: "Boy I bet if I had a gun I'd kill everything up here" (321). But mostly the violence is shorn of emotion. Suttree casually tosses a stone at a tethered goat, without any obvious provocation or intent. He does free a dog stuck in a neighbour's slops-barrel, where the neighbour is inclined just to leave it, but Suttree evinces no apparent solicitude for the liberated hound. He kills and guts his catches of fish in complete detachment, scarcely more emotionally engaged than the chat depicted taking a midge, or the shrike impaling a frog on a thorn. Moreover, Suttree is in near-equal competition with some other animals: he slings mud and stones to beat off a defiant cat angling to steal one of his fish.

Though a forgivable survival strategy, Suttree's fishing can be placed on a spectrum of monetised exploitations of animals. He hawks his fish around a local informal market, a "lazaret of comestibles and flora and maimed humanity" (67). There is "bloodstained sawdust," a pink calf's head, "cambreled hams blueflocked with mold" (67)—all objectively grotesque, but Suttree himself expresses no disgust. The slaughter of a turtle is described in excruciating but entirely dispassionate detail. The loopy Harrogate, hoping to earn a bounty, schemes to poison bats with strychnine and try to pass them off as rabid. Such subsistence killings are set alongside large-scale commercialised enterprises. From across the river, Suttree can hear the screams of both pigs and saws from a slaughterhouse. Though the factory spews much of the river's pollution, Suttree passes no judgement, and he and his mates eat the processed pork without qualm.

Nevertheless, human lives remain as precarious as others': human corpses in the river appear animal, remains "no more men than were the ruins of any other thing once living" (295). Moreover, other lives can remain stubbornly independent and threatening, as Harrogate experiences in the city's symbolic "underworld" of sewers and tunnels:

He feared in the lightless depths great rats, beveltoothed and bare of tail, spiders hairy or naked or lightly downed or partly bald, rope-shaped reptiles, their fangs, their

tuningfork tongues. Their memberless economy of design. Bats hung in clusters like dark and furry fruit ... (262)

This is the very opposite of a community of multispecies “conviviality.” Paradoxically, it is this darker realm of life that seems most likely to survive, while the above-ground living mesh of the McAnally Flats is at the end of the novel being razed in favour of sterile motorway concrete. Yet for all its grim and predatory cycles, its impoverishment of emotional engagement with non-human creatures, its characters driven to crazed idiosyncrasy by marginalisation, McCarthy has presented so dense and intimate a portrait of this multispecies community, even its rubbish so lingeringly described, that its demolition evokes, for this reader at least, a palpable sadness. Arguably, McCarthy (like Duiker) is encouraging the reader to valorise precisely the ethics the protagonists don’t.

Conclusion

Donna Haraway advocates: “All that is unhuman is not un-kind, outside kinship, outside the order of signification, excluded from trading in signs and wonders” (Van Dooren and Rose 2012, 1). Formulations like this downplay the predatory struggle of Darwin’s “entangled bank,” of hierarchical dangers and destructive interactions, in favour of symbioses, mutualisms, partnerships, and possibilities for an “interspecies diplomacy of interdependences” (Morizot 2020, 195). It’s beautiful thinking, but the two novels examined here offer an unpromising riposte. The rhetorics of biodiversity preservation, wilderness conservation, animal rights, or companionable cross-species conviviality find little purchase, least of all with the central characters. Azure cares as little for the lizards clinging to him for shelter in his final cataclysm as Suttree does for the catfish suffocating in the bottom of his skiff. Suttree’s intimate observations do not generate much empathetic action. Even Azure’s connection with the seagulls is arguably little more than self-serving projection and anthropomorphism. Yet the inclusion of alternative attitudes does indicate the *authors’* awareness that ethical choices are being made and presented for the reader’s consideration. In both cases, I think, identification with the protagonist potentially wrestles with aspects of their behaviour—a satisfying complexity that eludes preachiness.

To underline Anthony Vital’s point cited earlier: hints in both texts of differentials between protagonist and implied author warn the alert reader against any simplistic interpretation. These are individual works of fiction about strongly delineated individual characters, not sociological studies of generalisable applicability, even if both are avowedly grounded in their authors’ own experiences. They suggest if anything that attitudes towards the non-human among the urban poor are as variable as in any other putative community, whatever the economic constraints and cultural tendencies. A different range of urban literature will likely highlight quite different configurations. Finally, both Suttree’s and Azure’s attitudes seem to me entirely comprehensible, even defensible in comparison to that of many richer urban dwellers, whose luxury affords them effective ignorance, even fear, of the natural world they nevertheless depend on,

and a casual indifference to the exploitation and destruction of which they are disproportionately the beneficiaries.

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