The Unnaming of Aliass

Karin Bolender

Published by Punctum Books

Bolender, Karin.
The Unnaming of Aliass.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/80768

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2762994
Dear friend now in the dusty clockless hours of the town when
the streets lie black and steaming in the wake of the watertrucks
and now when the drunk and homeless have washed up in the
lee of walls in alleys or abandoned lots and cats go forth high-
shouldered and lean in the grim perimeters about, now in these
sootblackened brick or cobbled corridors where lightwire shadows
make a gothic harp of cellar doors no soul shall walk save you
— Cormac McCarthy, Suttree

... And then in time the ringing hoofbeats on rainy as-
phalt and the flickering warped window reflections of a
certain unnamed beast of burden, known to some (and
unknown to everyone) as Aliass.

One surreal and humid morning in the early fall of a
former millennium, I made a little literary pilgrimage to
an unfamiliar Southern city in search of a ghostly hero, or
at least faint traces of the fictive protagonist I loved most
in the world, Cormac McCarthy’s Suttree. Youthful pas-
son for the viscous, swirling-dark prose of McCarthy’s
Tennessee novels beckoned me on this quixotic quest to
Knoxville, as if to another realm. And though I did not
exactly find Suttree that morning, something else of sig-
nificance transpired. Having never been to Knoxville, or

much of anywhere in Tennessee, nevertheless I knew the place deeply, in the eerie familiarity of every dank odor and leafy climbing tendril, in the faded colors of warming bricks in the morning sun of the Old City and the slow dirty brown river, and the rust-stained bolted iron spans and cooing pigeons and plastic whiskey bottle relics under the Gay Street Bridge. And strangely, that September morning in 1999, the hazy streets seemed frozen in the ’50s setting of the novel. Dust lay thick in the windows of empty department stores, and not a living soul was in sight. As if I had walked onto the abandoned stage set of a movie that could not exist, because how can any vision or memory or dream made solely of word music become visible, tactile, almost habitable like this?

This, I guess, was the main question or quest that brought me to Knoxville that day. More than the reflections of its human protagonist, a thick sense of bodies-in-places is what animates and haunts this particular fiction, and in a way I suppose that’s what I was looking for. This visceral thickness is what made me fall so deeply in love with Suttree, as a young hungry reader haunted by the flow of hidden, tangled histories and rhythms of ever-changing places – places, both familiar and unknown, that seem to hold us together in nets of memories and experiences lived among others, feeding our lives and longings.

At the end of the street, I came up short on the sidewalk in front of a door with the words “McCarthy and McCarthy, Attorneys at Law” stenciled on the glass upper half in blocky, black-outlined gold letters, like the entrance to an old detective agency. Just then as I stood gawking on the sidewalk, a handsome, gray-haired gentleman with eerily pale blue eyes emerged from the door, peeling a banana. In that awkward moment, the man looked at me quizzically as I stood gape-jawed like an idiot in his immediate path, that 8 o’clock of a weekday morning. I managed to stammer, “Uh, excuse me, sir, could you tell
me if this ‘McCarthy and McCarthy’ is at all related to the author, Cormac McCarthy?” At which the man smiled faintly and said, “Yes, in fact. I am his brother.”

I stuttered that I had come because I loved *Suttree.* After a moment’s pause, the handsome gentleman invited me to accompany him along the short walk back to his office building a few blocks away, and said along the way he could point out some of the sites from Knoxville’s Old City that figure in the novel. We departed on an intense little walking tour of about five blocks, unexpected for both of us and pocked with silences, as we each walked in our own ways with awed wonder and respect that we shared, without saying as much, at the way one writer’s singular prose could so richly invoke and haunt a place with distinct ghosts of human (be)longing; how a material place of any kind could be so uniquely and indelibly remade in human imagination in skeins of words and syntax; and the old mystery of how language can or cannot claim to hold certain human places and who we are or might become in them: diverse lives and becomings with others, tracks and traces of loves and losses and slow vanishings.

At the end of the walk across the Old City that morning, the gentleman and I parted on the sidewalk opposite the blocky midcentury office building where he worked. With slight embarrassment, I had admitted along the walk that my dream was to write something like *Suttree,* even as we both recognized I might as well say I hoped

---

2 Among the obfuscate, Faulkner-infused Tennessee novels that McCarthy wrote in the 1970s, *Suttree* arguably stands as the masterpiece. After that, McCarthy went West, following the bloody tracks of rapacious and horrifying Westward conquest. Most readers know the singular American author for his Border Trilogy, a series of Westerns written to worldwide acclaim in the ’80s and ’90s. As Dennis McCarthy told me on our walk that day, the Tennessee novels all got writ in a time of relative anonymity for their author, and Cormac McCarthy mourned that era now that the critics were sitting “like buzzards on his shoulders” as he wrote.
to turn into a unicorn someday. But as we parted, Dennis McCarthy said a thing — most likely out of kindness, tinged with slight bemusement at the unexpected appearance of a literary pilgrim quite literally in the path of his ordinary walk to work that morning. As we shook hands and said goodbye, he asked my name, and to my answer he replied: “Well, maybe I will hear it again in twenty years.”

~×~×~×~

More than two decades have passed since that chance encounter with Dennis McCarthy of a Knoxville morning. At the time, in the flame of youthful creative passions, I took those parting words as a challenge — maybe even a kind of benediction, given the unlikely circumstances. But what becomes of literary dreams when an aspiring author gets struck (struck dumb, even) with an urgent sense of responsibility and passion for untold stories that unfold otherwise, in wordless ecologies and timeplace registers?

However moved I was (and still am… sigh) by the incantatory modernist ululations of William Faulkner’s *Absalom Absalom!* and McCarthy’s Tennessee novels and *Blood Meridian* and *The Crossing* (not to mention Beckett’s *Unnamable* and others), I found that newfangled pressures and responsibilities confronted what Stephen Muecke calls the “conditions for writing,” fictive or otherwise, in the early twenty-first century. In his fictocritical manifesto, “The Fall,” Muecke writes: “Faced with masses of ways of knowing things coming from all points of the compass, the contemporary writer asks what now can legitimate his or her point of view, and then tends not just to add to existing views of the world, but traces a path
[...] showing how we got to this position, and what is at stake.”

What seemed to be at stake, in this case, was a sense of authority gutshot by worn-out, broke-ass, outdated American middle school textbook ways of thinking about Biology, History, Geography, Language Arts, Earth Science, and Social Studies – embedded as these subjects were in my early education with primarily unarticulated but no less “taught” ideas and grammars of gender, race, and species. At stake, as well, was the integrity of an imaginative practice that needed urgently to throw off human/animal hierarchies grounded in denials of others’ emotional and social complexities – denials that ring false in the experience of anyone who lives with other social mammals (not to mention legions of others who affect our lives and environments directly all the time). What began to seem essential was to trace new paths, as Muecke says, to mobilize ears, hands, and tongues to listen and move past exclusive or downright erroneous texts, maps, and habits of thought that ignore or deny

3 Stephen Muecke, “The Fall,” in Joe in the Andamans (Sydney: LCP, 2008), 5. Deborah Bird Rose and Libby Robin elaborate the significance of Muecke’s fictocritical methodologies for broader environmental humanities work: “[Muecke] provokes us to decentre (not abandon) Cartesian rationality in favour of a more inclusive set of logics. Connections are non-linear (as well as linear), and representation thus requires non-linear forms. It may be that narrative is the method through which the reason of connectivity will find its most powerful voice. This method offers the profound possibility of telling stories that communicate, invoke, and invigorate connections.” Deborah Bird Rose and Libby Robin, “Ecological Humanities in Action: An Invitation,” Australian Humanities Review 31–32 (2004).

4 I like to think things have changed in the US primary education since my days there, but my hopes may be in vain, if fairly recent flaps over Texas textbooks, in which slaves coming across the Middle Passage were referred to as “workers,” are anything to go by. Ellen Bresler Rockmore, “How Texas Teaches History,” New York Times, October 21, 2015, http://nytimes.com/2015/10/22/opinion/how-texas-teaches-history.html.
Fig. 1. Aliass outside the Museum of Science and Energy in Oak Ridge, Tennessee in July 2002. Photograph by the artist.
the vital interweaves of beastly bodies and embodied stories that make up all the places we claim to care for and call home. And the light that led the way in this quest was the welter of lively possibilities that bloomed from the beautiful crack of the American Spotted Ass.

Identifications, nominations, trademarks, patrilineal claims, and classifications may all be unavoidable in US Western lives and dealings – those that hope to "make a living," at least. Yet deepest down, somewhere beyond what is even possible to say, the stories of bodies-in-places I set out with Aliass to inhabit, honor, and immerse in can never be claimed by a lone human author’s brand. Instead, they must be woven through outward wanderings and cyclical returns that track cracks and fissures discovered in and amplified by the sensitive, fleshly presence of one so-called “ass,” along with vast herds of nameless and familiar others who comprise timeplaces we pass through. Meanwhile, as we see plastic trash humans have carelessly tossed years ago tangled in the guts of dead fledgling albatrosses and beached whales oceans away, we begin to grasp that no soul shall walk (or listen, or think) alone – not on Planet Earth, anyway. In light of all this, the name I want to make is not mine but hers.

But then it ain’t really hers, either.