

**Approaches to Teaching  
the Works of  
Cormac McCarthy**

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Edited by  
*Stacey Peebles*  
and  
*Benjamin West*

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## The City and the Landfill: Teaching Waste, Toxicity, and Southern Environmental History in *Suttree*

Benjamin Mangrum

The Tennessee River flows southwest from Knoxville to Chattanooga and then turns in a long loop to join up with the Ohio River in western Kentucky. The river features prominently as both a setting and a mythic force in *Suttree*, Cormac McCarthy's last Tennessee novel. The protagonist, Cornelius Suttree, often simply called Sut, lives on a houseboat on the river and finds companionship mostly among the residents of a nearby Knoxville slum named McAnally Flats.<sup>1</sup> In addition to providing a livelihood for many characters, the river also functions as a conduit for distributing urban waste throughout the Tennessee River valley and the South more generally. In the novel's italicized prologue, the river "*flows in a sluggish ooze toward southern seas, running down out of the rainflattened corn and petty crops and riverloam gardens of upcountry landkeepers, grating along like bonedust, afreight with the past, dreams dispersed in the water somehow, nothing ever lost*" (4). The novel presents the Tennessee River as a multiple and ambiguous natural signifier: the river is a source of plenty that makes the soil fertile for those who own or work the land, even as it distributes detritus and pollution.

Readers of McCarthy will not be surprised to find the river's mythic resonances bound up with an insistent attention to the "ugly facts" of southern history, as Dana Phillips describes the representational matrix of *Blood Meridian*. The presence of the Tennessee River in *Suttree* alludes to the novel's many precedents in southern and modernist fiction.<sup>2</sup> Much like the river, the novel is "*afreight with the past*" (4), preserving rather than washing away whatever has gone into it. Suttree, for instance, fails to escape the legacy of his affluent southern family. And although many characters hope that the waters will relieve them of moral and commercial pollution, the river instead bears testament to the permanence of whatever has been left behind.

A later moment in the novel returns to these regional and metaphysical themes. In a characteristic use of free indirect discourse, the narration recounts Suttree's observations of the "swollen river" after the water level begins to rise from heavy rains:

Bearing along garbage and rafted trash, bottles of suncured glass wherein corollas of mauve and gold lie exploded, orangepeels ambered with age. A dead sow pink and bloated and jars and crates and shapes of wood washed into rigid homologues of viscera and empty oilcans locked in eyes of dishing slime where the spectra wink guiltily.

One day a dead baby. Bloated, pulpy rotted eyes in a bulbous skull and little rags of flesh trailing in the water like tissuepaper. (306)

Suttree, who has also lost a child, finds that human life has become like dross in the wasteland he inhabits. After seeing the dead infant in the current, Suttree immediately oars "his way lightly through the rain among these curiosas" and "fe[els] little more than yet another artifact leached out of the earth and washed along, draining down out of the city" (306). In the literal waste of the river, he finds bleak tokens of the human condition. And in a potent description of the role of waterways during the expansion of southern urban centers, this passage also suggests how the Tennessee River becomes the city's fluid landfill. Given the markers of class that are present in this and other scenes, the river becomes a receptacle for the city's lower classes as well as for toxic waste. Refuse becomes a category that flows freely between class and ecology, socioeconomic inequality and commercial production (see McCoy 85–99).

Yet even as the novel's industrial waste, class divisions, and existential nausea are dressed in the garb of a contaminated nature, the novel also presents the semblance of a remedy by looking to the natural world. Whenever Suttree is fishing, for example, he is often "in concert" with nature, as Louis H. Palmer III writes, and thus seemingly reinvigorates "the Romantic belief in the essential innocence and purity of nature, contrasted with the depravity of humans" (173–74). On the other hand, when Suttree wanders in the mountains, he imagines that if he were "to come to himself in this obscure wood he'd be neither mended nor made whole but rather set mindless to dodder drooling" with the doppelgänger that haunts him throughout the novel (McCarthy, *Suttree* 287). Suttree often confronts the image or phantom of his dead twin while alone in seemingly pastoral landscapes. If nature functions as a remedy for the ills of the modern world, it also serves as a theater of terrible specters.<sup>3</sup>

The next section of this essay addresses specific environmental issues that teachers might raise during course meetings and includes potential supplemental readings. The final section discusses assignments that aid students' reflections on the novel, including student-generated lesson plans for prompting discussion of *Suttree* in relation to McCarthy's more commonly assigned apocalyptic novel *The Road*, and that give students the opportunity to write for nonacademic audiences.

### *Southern Environmental History in Suttree*

The desolate scenes of waste, polluted waterways, scatological imagery, and dying mussel beds in *Suttree* offer opportunities for teachers to discuss the environmental degradation of the American South in the twentieth century. The following discusses a few of the novel's environmental concerns that teachers might consider.

### History of the Tennessee Valley Authority

Created in 1933, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) fundamentally reshaped the environmental terrain throughout much of the American South by constructing

massive irrigation and hydroelectric power systems. The TVA was part of President Roosevelt's assemblage of New Deal programs, but it also became a touchstone for organized labor and political conflict beginning in the late 1930s, a role that culminated during the 1950s with the trials of fifteen white-collar TVA employees for their alleged communist activities (Purcell). McCarthy's father was a senior lawyer for the TVA, and his obligations to the federal agency brought the family to Knoxville around 1934 (Luce, *Reading* 19, 21–22). Given these historical events and the importance of the Tennessee River to the TVA, to McCarthy's life, and to *Suttree*, instructors should at least mention this federal agency when teaching the novel.

William Prather's work on *Suttree* offers a model for criticism that explores the historical and environmental background of a literary text. Drawing out the importance of Knoxville to southern environmental history, Prather connects Suttree's observations about displacement with "the history of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) and its influence on the lives of people living along the Tennessee River" (40). As Prather's essay shows, the lives of characters who inhabit the river and its environs reflect the destructive imprint of the TVA's damming projects and environmental engineering. Prather's analysis also draws from one of the seminal environmental histories of the Tennessee Valley, Donald Davidson's two-volume study *The Tennessee: Rivers of America*, which shaped how many in the valley understood themselves in the postwar era.

In addition to Prather's essay and Davidson's study, teachers might also consult Christopher J. Manganiello's *Southern Water, Southern Power* for a sense of the competing political and environmental interests at work in TVA projects. This additional reading would provide more political context for class discussions of the TVA and the river that runs through Knoxville. Chapter 3 of Manganiello's monograph (69–91) is an accessible and engaging account of the emergence of a "New Deal big dam consensus" throughout the South (69). Knoxville does not feature prominently in this study, but Manganiello does briefly mention the many sources of the Tennessee River valley's water pollution that were discovered in the late 1930s (153). While Prather's essay models a scholarly argument about *Suttree*, Manganiello's account would allow an instructor to situate *Suttree* within the region's environmental history.

### Mussel Beds and Ecosystem Decline

Commercial mussel fishing in North America began in the mid-1800s. Those who fished for mussels used the shells for buttons and also hoped to find freshwater pearls. The mussel population in North America has been in slow decline as a result of market demand for these items (Anthony and Downing). The exploitation of mussel beds was first documented through research conducted by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service in 1956–57 in a lower part of the Tennessee River near Pickwick Dam. Later published in a 1960 report by George D. Scruggs, the research traces the effects of the brail fishing method on mussel populations in the

mainstream reservoirs of the Tennessee River. This fishing method exacerbated challenges created by the century-long exploitation of mussel fauna. Brailing appears to have first been used on a broader scale (i.e., to service markets rather than individuals and families) around 1942. (I have displayed a short *YouTube* video depicting mussel brailing to help students visualize this practice ["Brailing"].) Scruggs's report gives some context to this method of fishing, which is used in McCarthy's novel, and its effects on mussel beds. The report also illustrates how federal authority perceived mussel fauna at mid-century.

Commercial fishing for mussel species in the Tennessee River (most commonly, *Pleurobema cordatum* and *Fusconaia eburnus*) had effects on the species' population and on the wider river ecosystem. However, brailing for commercial markets wasn't the only challenge to the ecosystem. There is also a demonstrable relation between the status of mussel populations and the impoundment of the Tennessee River through reservoirs and damming projects, first during the 1920s, then later, and to a greater extent, by the TVA. Most impoundments on the Tennessee River are below Knoxville, but the TVA built Fort Loudoun Dam on the river above the city in the early 1940s. Wendell R. Haag's 2009 essay is an excellent source to assign to students to facilitate class discussion of the issue of impoundment alongside Suttree's experience in a mussel camp (see also Bates). While many species continued to exist under the altered conditions of the multiple impoundments of the Tennessee River and its tributaries, Haag cites the extinction of at least one species of mussel, *Epioblasma personata*, during the 1920s and 1930s as a result of impoundment (119).

Suttree's experience with mussel brailing occupies a relatively short section of the novel (McCarthy, *Suttree* 306–63). However, the episode provides an occasion for instructors to introduce important ideas in environmental studies, including resource commercialization, the environmental costs of federal technocratic planning, and the Anthropocene. Also, the decimation of mussel beds in *Suttree* seems to anticipate the enigmatic and potentially Romantic vision of trout beds that concludes *The Road*: "Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly" (McCarthy, *Road* 286). If an instructor were to pair these novels, such a comparison would convey the recurring sense in McCarthy's novels of environmental loss—that is, the mourning of what "once" was, or of what one "could see," before the effects of human activity despoiled American waterways.

### Industrialization, Landfills, and Urban Effluence

*Suttree*'s prose form very often mimics its urban and natural settings, as well as the existential condition of its characters. Knoxville, for example, is "constructed on no known paradigm, a mongrel architecture reading back through the works of man in a brief delineation of the aberrant and disordered and mad" (3). The almost picaresque style of *Suttree* follows closely this architectural madness, as

no known narrative center comes into view across the novel. Yet this mimicry between the city's architecture, the novel's prose form, and Suttree's existential displacement has decisive links to the effects of industrialization and concentrated toxic waste. In terms of Knoxville's history, instructors can consider the case study of David Witherspoon Inc., which managed contaminated scrap metal on behalf of the Atomic Energy Commission beginning in 1948. The corporation disposed of the contaminated metals (some containing radioisotopes) in an economically depressed neighborhood of South Knoxville. The disposal occurred on three landfills, and during the late 1990s the Office of Environmental Restoration and Waste Management (part of the Department of Energy) began to assess remedial action for the "past, present, and potential future releases of hazardous substances" (*Remedial Investigation*).

The public health consequences of having industrial production and toxic landfills near residential areas are well-known and are often amplified by class and racial disparities. As a way to link up McCarthy's novel with recent work in ecocriticism, teachers might introduce Heather Houser's idea of "ecosickness," or the affective and somatic damage caused by chemical exposure and toxic ecosystems. *Suttree*, like much of the other contemporary fiction that Houser analyzes, "shows the conceptual and material dissolutions of the body-environment boundary through sickness and thus alters environmental perception and politics" (3). Sickness in *Suttree* is widely distributed, but students may rightly query whether illness stands in for the human condition or is differentiated among characters. Robert Bullard's now-classic 1990 study *Dumping in Dixie* was one of the first scholarly studies to identify the racial dimensions of the siting of landfills and the importing of garbage into the American South. In a more recent essay, Bullard explains related racial disparities in environmental and public health: "Urban air quality is a major concern to people of color since they are disproportionately concentrated in the nation's polluted environments. According to National Argonne Laboratory researchers, 57 percent of whites, 65 percent of African Americans, and 80 percent of Hispanics live in 437 counties with substandard air quality" ("Confronting Environmental Racism" 92).

Moments in *Suttree* attend to the racial dimensions of environmental hazards. For example, one of the novel's Black characters, Ab Jones, lives not far from Suttree's houseboat. When Suttree visits Ab, he finds "boards in the reeking gloom splotched with a greenish phosphorescence, a sinister mold that glowed faintly" (112). The toxic, perhaps even radioactive, material lining the home of Ab Jones may stand in contrast to the more subtle forms of pollution that surround the lives of the novel's White characters. Introducing this aspect of the novel in the first or second course meeting on the book would give students an opportunity to evaluate *Suttree's* attention to the well-documented history of environmental racism in the South, including whether the novel grapples adequately with that history.

In addition to the environmental and human costs of landfills, the novel also explores the links between urban expansion and industrialization. The develop-

ment of urban metropolises in the American South generally lagged behind the rate of growth in most northern cities. However, cities began to expand in the region after the Civil War, and by 1920, there were several larger metropolitan cities in the South. The expansion of urban centers changed the South's economic character. As Donald E. Davis explains, "The growth of southern cities ensured that industrialization and heavy manufacturing would prevail across the southern landscape, including large areas of the Lower South that had historically resisted such development" (159). In short, urban development was closely tied to the rise of industrial capitalism in the region.

*Suttree* often explores this link between industrial capitalism and urban development. For example, the novel's opening sets as a prominent feature of its backdrop a looming image of industrial production: "Factory walls of old dark brick, tracks of a spur line grown with weeds, a course of foul blue drainage where dark filaments of nameless dross sway in the current" (4). Later, as the novel follows the wanderings of Harrogate, it presents the following scene: "A row of black fisherman sat along the ties where the tracks crossed the creek, their legs dangling above the oozing sewage" (99). Harrogate calls out to the fishermen, who do not answer him. After walking further, Harrogate then "studied the landscape beyond. A patch of gray corn by the riverside, rigid and brittle. A vision of bleak pastoral that at length turned him back toward the city again" (99). As this passage suggests, the waste inside the city and the wasteland of formerly pastoral landscape beyond it reflect the totalizing costs of development. In fact, one of the complexities of *Suttree* is that the loss of the pastoral leads almost everyone except for Suttree to turn "back toward the city again." The urban wasteland appears to be the only recourse for so many characters because the landscape "beyond" has been decimated. In such moments, there appears to be no divide between country and city or garden and machine. Vistas of blighted nature recur in *Suttree*, as if such landscapes were the last bleak remainder of urban industrialism.

In one course on contemporary literature and southern environmental history in which students read *The Road*, not *Suttree*, I assigned the entirety of Paul S. Sutter and Christopher J. Manganiello's *Environmental History and the American South: A Reader*. This volume's essays model an impressive range of environmental histories and in my course supported readings of contemporary fiction by writers like Janisse Ray, Ernest Gaines, Ron Rash, and Jesmyn Ward in addition to McCarthy's *The Road*. The volume only indirectly addresses issues pertinent to the Knoxville of *Suttree*. Still, the contributions by Mart Stewart and Craig E. Colton raise ideas that are helpful for thinking about the concept of nature and its presence in the built environment of Knoxville. Although *Suttree* depicts 1950s Knoxville as having abundant refuse and polluted waterways, the current advertising for tourism in Knoxville draws heavily on the city's outdoor appeal. Colton's essay is especially helpful on this front. Referring to a different urban context, Colton writes that the ostensibly natural spaces that have been recreated in southern cities "are shaped to resemble

pre-urbanized environments, that function in an urban setting as part of an evolving concept of parks and open spaces, and that stand as concrete evidence of public attitudes and environmental policies" (433).

### **Assignments and In-Class Activities**

The assignments and in-class activities discussed below can enrich students' reflections on *Suttree* and give students the opportunity to think creatively and to write for nonacademic audiences.

#### **Student-Generated Lesson Plans**

Students can be asked to generate lesson plans either in every class session or retrospectively, after completing *Suttree*. Both versions of this in-class assignment invite students to imagine themselves in critical and scholarly roles. In the retrospective version, students imagine thematic problems, creative assignments, and even alternative course syllabi that would offer different modes for analyzing the novel. My prompt for this assignment typically resembles the following: "How might you teach *Suttree*? What is essential for analyzing the book as a text that engages with the southern literary tradition and the region's environmental history?" Students might answer this question by creating a one-page syllabus, designing an assignment, or sketching an arc of lesson plans for teaching the novel. The retrospective iteration of this activity offers the instructor a chance to reflect on students' ongoing questions and interests and to consider what was left out of course sessions and what questions were inadequately addressed. The assignment also prompts students to internalize the course discussions. They imagine themselves as instructors who name the key terms and issues to be discussed in the class.

During my time as a visiting professor at Davidson College, I asked students in several courses to do both versions of this activity in response to *Suttree* and *The Road*. Rather than teaching *Suttree* as a product of southern literary history, one senior English major proposed that the novel be taught as a culminating text in a course on American masculinities. This student suggests that the course examine the character Ishmael in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Ben Franklin and then move to the artist Jackson Pollock and the character Holden Caulfield in J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. *Suttree*, this student proposes, stands in a long line of books about the American cult of masculinity. Another student proposed to situate the book in a course on narrative omissions. This sophomore explains that she might teach what is *not* in the novel. For example, she notes that Suttree's son isn't mentioned after the funeral scene. Why? These patterns of narrative omission might lead a class to think about McCarthy's lacunae at the level of both form and plot. How do these lacunae function narratively? What do they signify formally and philosophically?

Two junior English majors proposed daily discussion activities that would center on the philosophical debates staged by McCarthy's writing. For instance,

these students envisioned in-class debates in which participants would take on the role of Suttree's father or the man's wife in *The Road*. The man and woman in *The Road* discuss the value of life in a dying world and whether it is ethical to keep their son alive when he can only expect suffering. The two students imagined that such debates would take approximately fifteen minutes of class time and would serve as opportunities for exploring the characters' ways of viewing the world.

Students also made practical suggestions in their lesson plans to help future students navigate *Suttree*. For instance, one student suggests creating a character list that students could access through *Google Docs* or a similar shared platform and that they would update at the start of each class or between classes. Finally, students' retrospective lesson plans regularly affirmed that close reading specific passages prepared them for the next night's readings. Close reading in class increased their engagement with the novel out of class.

#### **Creative Assignments**

After a semester of thinking critically about environmental writing, students often embrace opportunities to contribute to this body of work through their own creative projects. For example, in one sophomore-level course I offered on American environmental writing, students encountered fiction by McCarthy alongside ecopoetry, nonfiction essays, philosophical treatises by naturalists, and an eco-horror film. Several students chose to write narratives that draw on McCarthy's use of gothic and apocalyptic tropes. These narratives grew out of in-class discussion of the two genres.<sup>4</sup> I've found that this assignment works best when students present synopses or selections of their creative work to the class before completing and submitting the work to the professor for evaluation.

#### **Digital Platforms and Writing for Nonclassroom Audiences**

In one version of the course on southern environmental literature, I used the popular digital platform *Medium* to offer students an opportunity to write for nonacademic audiences. *Medium* is a free publishing community that allows users to collect articles under what the site calls a Publication, which functions much like a blog. As the administrator of a class Publication, an instructor can easily track the readership of posts in the Publication and can view the anonymized analytics data for each essay. Conveying this information to students can help them see how their writing finds readers outside the classroom. Here's a portion of the description for this assignment:

Using essays published in *The Atlantic* and *Conservation Magazine* as a model, each student will research a topic of cultural, political, or environmental importance to the American South and write an article about it. The article may focus on an issue from the region's past or a present-day problem. Your article should present an argument or focused appraisal of

the chosen problem. While you are not expected to write your article in academic prose, your writing should still be formal and persuasive. You must conduct research using legitimate sources and submit a bibliography (with a minimum of six sources) to the professor in addition to posting your work to our publication on *Medium*. Your bibliography may include assigned readings from the course that are relevant to your topic.

To help students with this assignment, I provided a list of suggested topics. Students wrote their articles on such topics as environmental challenges to Native communities in North Carolina, a history of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, the racial inequalities of mass transit in Charlotte, and, more closely related to *Suttree*, the environmental challenges pertaining to brownfields.

These creative, nonacademic, and digital assignments ask students to inhabit the texts they read and the academic work they produce. Much like the image of Suttree sitting in a forest and finding himself unable to “tell where his being ended or the world began” (286), McCarthy’s fiction asks us to reflect on the boundaries of our habitations. Creative and nonacademic assignments are a fitting answer to that request.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>As Inge notes, Suttree’s nickname alludes to one of “the most popular humorous characters in nineteenth century Southern fiction,” that is, “George Washington Harris’s Sut Lovingood, a Tennessee prankster and hell-raiser who enlivened the hills of Knoxville with his high-spirited antics and often catastrophic happenings” (17).

<sup>2</sup>See Vescio; O’Gorman; and Cant 104–06.

<sup>3</sup>Instructors may assign the potent criticisms of the Romantic view of nature by Cronon and by Morton.

<sup>4</sup>Instructors might point students who are interested in apocalyptic fiction to Buell.

## “Freeze This Frame”: McCarthy on Page and Screen

Mark Steven

“The ugly fact,” Cormac McCarthy once confessed, “is books are made out of books” (“Cormac McCarthy’s Venomous Fiction”). But McCarthy’s books derive their aesthetic resources from cinema as well as from other books. The truth of this claim can be seen in the fact that several of his novels began their life as screenplays as well as in McCarthy’s prose, which, as John Cant phrases it, “reflects the visual style that classical narrative cinema employs to disguise its own mythic forms” (218). Between these observations, and notwithstanding the realization that the novels are rife with citations and allusions to films, another “ugly fact” insists on itself: McCarthy’s books have always been engaged in a mutually transformative dialogue with cinema, to such an extent that any serious consideration of McCarthy’s literary oeuvre necessitates an engagement with cinema, or what McCarthy once described as “the fourcornered reality of making a film” (qtd. in Crews 304). Dedicated McCarthy scholarship has only recently attuned itself to this necessity. As Stacey Peebles has demonstrated, McCarthy’s “novels are really only half the story,” and rather than living out a cliché as the reclusive luddite behind an old typewriter, McCarthy “has routinely welcomed others into his creative projects and, just as routinely, has demonstrated a keen interest in writing directly for film and theatre as well as a desire to see how filmmakers would bring his writing to the screen” (*Cormac 2*). If all of this is true, and McCarthy is an author whose work must be understood on both page and screen, then instructors will have to modify their teaching practices accordingly. To that end, I want to situate McCarthy in a tradition of cinematically engaged writing in order to introduce the kind of thinking required for this revised approach to his work, and then to offer three practicable suggestions for teaching McCarthy’s literary output in relation to cinema.

### *Before McCarthy: An Introduction to Cinematic Modernism*

After a trip to a picture house in the early 1920s, Virginia Woolf speculates in one of her essays that “[a]ll the famous novels of the world, with their well-known characters and their famous scenes, only asked, it seemed, to be put on the films.” “What could be easier,” she asks, “and simpler? The cinema fell upon its prey with immense rapacity, and to the moment largely subsists upon the body of its unfortunate victim” (173). If, for the working novelist, cinema arrived as a threat of lycanthropic proportions, then to the philosopher-critic it presented new possibilities for humankind by fundamentally transforming lived experience. For Walter Benjamin in the mid-1930s, the advent of cinema meant the widespread development of an “optical unconscious,” a new mode of