

## ***Crossing Gendered Borders: Transsexualism in Suttree***

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Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree* opens in 1951, the same year a former GI named George Jorgensen was undergoing sex-change surgery in Denmark to become Christine Jorgensen. An ocean away, in an impoverished area of Knoxville, Tennessee, known as McAnally Flats, dwells a population of disaffected folk representing a gamut of sexual persuasions, preferences, and predilections. Among these is a transgendered individual who, like Jorgensen, seeks to live as the gender opposite to his birth sex: Trippin Through The Dew, the "queen of Front Street" (111).

As startling as a Las Vegas chorine in Howard Clevenger's drab, ill-stocked store, Trippin first appears as a focus of color, royally perched atop a "drink cooler" in a "purple shirt with bloused sleeves [and] striped fuchsia trousers" topped off with "a gold leather motorcycle belt." Trippin completes her purple ensemble with "matching homedyed tennis shoes" (110). Her wardrobe shows creativity and resourcefulness. In winter she acquires a salvage-store muskrat coat and dyes it purple. Trippin is alert to street-found fashion, making cufflinks for a taffeta blouse from bicycle reflectors (412). Trippin and her colorful wardrobe—described by McCarthy as "fool's silks" (110) and "harlequin evening wear" (467)—belie the maxim that Suttree's father put down in a letter to his son: "There is nothing occurring in the streets" (14).

Trippin and Suttree get along well together—and not just because color blind (20) Suttree is unable to get the peacock-in-living-color impact of Trippin's outfits. Generally tolerant of others, Suttree does show some uneasiness with Trippin's transgenderism. Their friendship forces Suttree—and writer McCarthy—to confront the fiction and fluidity of gender. When Trippin mentions seeing Sweet Evenin Breeze, a transgendered friend from out of town, Suttree asks who is older: "You or her. Him. It" (412). Suttree's confusion and discomfort are further seen in his habit of calling Trippin solely by her male name: John (also the name of Suttree's maternal uncle).

McCarthy, too, struggles with Trippin's gender. Careful to employ 1950s terminology in referring to Trippin as an "androgyn" (110) and an "invert" (111, 412), McCarthy makes linguistic gender slips, twice referring to Trippin with female pronouns and over a dozen times with male pronouns. Additional discomfort with those who resist or defy a strict gender

dichotomy is revealed when McCarthy refers to gay men who frequent the corner booth at the Huddle bar as “a group of dubious gender” (72).

Trippin overlooks Suttree’s verbal slips. One reason for this may be that Trippin is attracted to him, evident in the welcoming greeting of “Hi sweetie” (110) as Suttree enters Clevenger’s and in the sassy comment of “Ooh that’s a pretty thing” (112) as Suttree exits the store. She is not alone in her observation and appreciation of the protagonist. Even within the “cool and dark” interior of the Huddle, the eyes of homosexuals turn from “soulful” to “hot” (72) when they spy Suttree.

Trippin, though, does not pine after Suttree. She has other—possibly more intimate—friends, such as James Herndon (a.k.a. Sweet Evenin Breeze) who lives in Lexington, Kentucky (Dupree). Like Suttree, Trippin is able to leave McAnally Flats and return as she pleases. Importantly, her connection with Sweet Evenin Breeze indicates she has a support network. This may help explain how Trippin is able to survive in McAnally Flats. She doesn’t appear to be worried, telling an apprehensive Suttree, “Sheeit. I aint goin to die” (412).

Although Trippin and Suttree are both survivors, a stronger link exists between them, a connection deeper than either may realize. Throughout the text, Suttree is haunted by a doppelganger whose existence stems from his stillborn twin brother. Both have a “mauve halfmoon” birthmark on their temples (14). Tripping is another double of Suttree. Both individuals are, to echo Suttree’s self-description, “congenitally disaffected” (128), and both staunchly resist societal conformity. Here is their common ground.

With silky blouses, makeup, a “vespine” waist (110), and “thin and fragrant” arms (412), Trippin questions and flaunts society’s assumptions of how a man should dress and behave. Suttree’s abandonment of his wife and child, his seven-month incarceration, and his decision to live in a houseboat tethered on the Tennessee River flaunt society’s assumptions of how someone with his familial social standing and college education ought to behave. Whereas Trippin chafes against and resists normative masculinity and the inflexible male gender role that 1950s society would impose, Suttree chafes against and resists the respectability and expected social role his father and others would impose on him.

Trippin is the last person to encounter Suttree in McAnally Flats, and their connection remains strong. Physically, they are similar; both are rail thin, Suttree having lost twenty pounds to his bout with typhoid fever. A concerned Trippin tells him, “Sweetie you have just fell off to skin and bones” (468). Mentally they are on the same wavelength of doing what they must to live with their mutual dysphorias. Emotionally, during this parting conversation, they are on honest and respectful—almost endearing—terms. Like a blithe couple, “[t]hey stood there holding hands in the middle of the

little street” (468).

Suttree survives and leaves McAnally Flats; Trippin thrives and remains there. She tells him, “Honey I’m always here. They cant do without me” (467). Like McAnally Flats, McCarthy’s novel can not do without Trippin Through The Dew, a character who helps further define, illuminate, and enrich both the book and its protagonist.

#### **WORKS CITED**

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