

## **URBAN SPACES AS CARCERAL SITES: VOILENCE AND AGENCY IN SELLO DUICKER'S THIRTEEN CENTS**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the constitutive personality of urban spaces in Sello Duiker's *Thirteen Cents* and discovers that urban centers/cities have become increasingly sites of physical and psychological incarceration from where the agencies of the dispossessed and marginalized are abrogated. The protagonist and people like him in the novel are denied their essential humanity by their habitation of indeterminate and non-defensible social spaces and have their social contract with the social system redacted. They are exploited, imprisoned, raped, and traded as chattels. This study uses urban theory, specifying the postulates of Max Weber, Le Corbusier (Charles-Edouard Jeanneret-Gris), David Harvey, Frederick Jameson, and Mike Davis to illustrate the tragic impulses that percolate around Azure's search for a place of his own, which ultimately takes him to the mountain, the place of his apotheosis. In the mountain, a historicization of black troubles pin-points the origin of racial profiling and scapegoating, thus regaining his agency through his transmogrification as T-rex. The capacity to wreak vengeance on those who had usurped his agency and traded on his weakness, homelessness, and innocence is born out of his divesting himself of the entire panoply of the historical baggage his society had heaped on him and taking on the will to change the confines by which he must live by dint of his potential and action.

### **Introduction**

Humans exist within social systems that are created to uphold the quest for the best life. From clime to clime, the quest is paramount and central to human development and advancement. Every development, every stride, every new corner, every conquest of space and water, is to ensure that humans can experience the best possible life in their home. Every facet of human society—social, cultural, political, and economic – is geared toward ensuring that humans have access to a good life; from birth to death, each step of human socialization ensures that the hold humans have on life is not tenuous but viable, vital, beautiful, and profitable.

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Sadly, in spite of human efforts, sometimes, horrific ordeals and tragic outpourings dog their every step; deeply distressing experiences, severe and lasting emotional shock, serious injury, severe mental/emotional stress, death of a loved one, and natural calamities such as fires, floods, earthquakes, and wars are some of the set-ups that imperil the processes of human well-being. Beyond these are natural biological experiences that leave the individual incapable of normatively functioning, thus upsetting the normative identities that are influential in traditional social systems.

The social system became an especially definitive entity from the Industrial Revolution when urban areas were created and designated as towns and cities. The movement of people from rural areas to the newly created urban centers created a new sphere of experience for humans as a result of the establishment of industries and industry-supported institutions. As these centers grew and multiplied, human experiences evolved from the communal to the individual. As these evolutions occurred, so did human sociology, economics, and architecture, thus giving rise to theories revolving around urban life.

These theories, collectively referred to as urban theory, reflect on the impact of industrialization, fragmentation and consumption, and globalization and inequality on the human experience and psyche. Max Weber sees the city as “a settlement the inhabitants of which live primarily off trade and commerce rather than agriculture” (1216) and “the fully developed urban community..... has never existed without at least partial autonomy in administration and law”(1226); Le Corbusier who sees the city as “a dying thing because it is not geometrical... the result of a century of industrial anarchy” (5) and “the streets are too narrow, the building too crowded, the air too foul”(23); David Harvey who sees “the postmodern city (as) a fragmented, ephemeral, and disposable landscape, mirroring the instability of global capital “(147) and “urban spaces are increasingly commodified, designed for consumption rather than lived experience “(66) and “gentrification is the frontier or capital moving back into the city - displacing the poor for the sake of rent gaps (89); Fredric Jameson who observes that, “Postmodern urbanism mirrors the schizophrenia of late capitalism – fragmented, depthless, and perpetually shifting “(27); Mike Davis who declares that “the cities of the future, rather than being made out of glass and steel as envisioned by earlier generations of urbanists, are instead largely constructed out of crude brick, straw, recycled plastic cement blocks, and scrap wood “(19) and “instead of cities of light soaring toward heaven, much of the twenty-first-century urban world squats in squalor, surrounded by pollution, excrement, and decay “ (22); and T. S. Eliot In ‘The Waste Land’, depicts the city as, “Unreal City/ Under the brown fog of winter dawn/ A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,/ I had not thought death had undone so many/...And each man fixed his eyes before his feet,” (1986), and in ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ he describes the city thus “Let us go then, you and I/ When the evening is spread out against the sky/ Like a patient etherized upon a table/ Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets” (1972). All of them illustrate the city as soulless, alienating, decayed, empty, fragmented, lifeless, oppressive, dehumanizing, and joyless. Thus, the city/urban center as an idea has received wide attention from scholars who have conceived it from intrinsic and extrinsic propensities and have thus delineated its essential qualities.

From Weber, Le Corbusier, Harvey, Jameson, and Davis, what is apparent is the evolution of the city from a place which is distinguished as not just a mere settlement but a place with political and economic peculiarities; a place with efficiency, order, and technological progress; a Marxian assessment of urban transformation showing capitalism as responsible for shifts in architecture, cultures, and political economy; and the unhindered and haphazard growth of informal settlements, inequality, and urban violence, respectively. What is evident is that human development has occasioned the development of cities not necessarily in a linear progressive route, but, in some countries, that development has been warped by economic, social, or political considerations and disparities.

Urban theory, as an interdisciplinary body of knowledge, studies the social, political, economic, and spatial alignments in cities and explores how human behavior, power relations, and historical processes determine the structure, function, and shape of urban environments. Urban theory uses sociology, political economy, geography, architecture, and cultural studies to examine urban development, social/spatial inequality, power, life in the city, globalization, and urbanization. Therefore, what we glean from a conception of the city include concentrated population/urban density, social and economic activities, political and cultural influence, and diverse and complex infrastructural designs; it is a dynamic and evolving entity whose contribution to human development is significant.

Sello Duiker's *Thirteen Cent* exposes the forces that revolve around an individual's life in an urban center. The protagonist in the novel, Azure, a twelve-going-on-thirteen-year-old homeless boy, is constrained by his special circumstances to roam the streets of Cape Town, experiencing inequalities, while being excluded from a real urban life, surviving, as it were, being degraded and exploited. It is an exploration of the degrees of abjection that an individual may be forced to endure without breaking their spirit and will to live. Azure is depicted as virtually a vagrant, a drifter, rootless, and essentially incapable of any commitment to place, and this is so because of forces outside his control. This wandering opens him up to the vagaries of human-inflicted trauma and the elements. He is exploited, degraded, and excluded from the profits of his society because of a myriad of factors: he is black, poor, uneducated, and lives in the street. Beyond this are the vestiges of the apartheid regime's exclusive excluded spatial planning that created zones of wealth and extreme poverty. Azure is not allowed the capacity to map his position as everything, even his name, is taken away from him (Jameson 44). He has no father, no mother, and no family of any sort. He is tossed to and fro by every wind that roils through the streets. Sewell et al. posits that "the family is the principal source of socialization and protection against racism for many blacks" (154) and Azure is exempted from that protection because he is homeless and had not been part of any form of socialization that instructed him on the fine points of safety in the social system. Every facet of his society is skewed to eviscerate his agency because as a street child navigating the streets of Cape Town, his plight is heightened as he interacts with the city's informal and frequently violent economy. He is, by the force of his habitation of informal spaces, faced with the work of surviving outside formal social, economic, and political structures. Azure often discovers that "the city doesn't care about you. You must make it care. Or you must make it fear you." (23). He also discovers that the street is harmful and that money is everything:

I've learned something from Allen, that is money is everything. It's everything because you can get a house and call the shots. When you're dressed properly grown-ups give you a bit of respect. But as long as I'm me and have no home and wear tattered clothes Allen will never give me proper clothes because that would mean I can look like him. And no one who knows Allen looks like him. He makes sure of that. Even if it means he strips you himself.... He always gives me clothes that are just about to fall apart, so that I'm always dependent on him.... It's the only way I can be safe on the streets. There are too many monsters out there. (10)

Azure is dependent on 'monsters' like Allen and Gerald, both of whom are gangsters who have the run of the town, for survival. He pays Allen protection money to stay safe. According to Mike Davis, "slums are increasingly managed through a 'carceral architecture of walls, checkpoints, and armed patrols'" (121). Azure is incarcerated within a psychological and physical prison that constrains and determines his life. He, like Bafana and Vincent, has been "actively erased... from central neighborhoods, relegating them to declining suburbs or neglected urban corridors where services vanish and policing intensifies" (Florida 87). The operative verbs here include: 'erased', 'relegating', 'declining', 'neglected', 'vanish' and 'policing', and these are the realities that they have to contend with daily.

Azure exists within a mental incarceration as if he is, in Eliot's words in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock's "like a patient etherized upon a table" (1972). This suggests an oppressive inertia, emptiness, and lifelessness that reinforce an instinctual awareness of his places, of his fear, the extent of his natural flight, and the curtailment of his agency. In carceral sites, 'Inmates' are holed up in either physical or mental prisons, echoing the Foucaultian "panopticon prison design" where inmates' every action is scrutinized carefully, or in the words of Foucault, "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility" (*Discipline and...* 201) not for good but to ensure that the inmate is perpetually marked for attack and control. Allen has evolved into a powerful entity; he is one of the 'guards' of the panopticon. He is empowered by his position in a higher range of power, and Foucault opines that power... 'excludes', it 'represses', it 'censors'... "(194). In an insightful moment, Azure tells us the following, "I know what it means to be scared, to always be on the lookout... The streets are not safe. They are roads to hell, made of tar... There are things that watch us when we sleep. Terrifying things" (47) He is conscious of Cape Town's "insidious intent" (Eliot 'The Love...' 1972) and of being watched by Gerald (another gang leader with even worse temperament than Allen) and his pigeons or rats, "I walk toward town and, all the time praying that Gerald and his rats won't see me" (21). Upon all the fear and anguish of being watched and sought for to do him harm, his conversation with Vincent, a co-traveler and street kid like him, reveals an intriguing and tragic trajectory to his experiences:

You must be the blackest person

You have to be more black ... like more black than all of us. You must watch what you wear.... So now they look at your blue eyes and your shoes and they think blue eyes ... he's trying to be white... That's why people have beat you up all your life. They think you're not black enough. (24)

His eyes became the determinant of his color and in a nation just turning the corner from an apartheid regime, color is everything. A shade from the right color, depending on where you are in the city/town, will determine your safety. Are you black? Are you white? How white are you? Are your eyes black? Is your hair curly or slick? These questions determine your safety in the spaces within the city. Vincent tutors him on the color prism in a racialised population and enhances his awareness of the reason behind the violence that is so apparent in Cape Town, which violence is not unconnected with the "crisis and explosion consequent to industrialization... as well as the urban revolution" (Perrone 437) noticed in many cities in the twenty-first century.

Allen is described as nearly white, which fuels his anger and animosity toward Azure and the less fortunate like him: "He's another bastard who thinks he's white...? I know he looks white, but if you look closely, you can see some colored blood. He hates it, and that's why he's so fucked up. I mean, imagine being nearly white but not quite." (p. 25). Allen's place in the color spectrum, not being completely white, frustrates him and turns him into a monster: "It's that white thing. It just eats him up that he's not all white. Why do you think he's always so well dressed?" (25) Gerald and Allen emblemize social/racial hierarchies and power dynamics latent in urban environments, especially where the law is not effective: power brokers like Allen and Gerald assert power and refuse the capacity of the protagonist and his class to assert autonomy.

Azure's blue eyes and Allen's not-completely white characteristics introduce the question of identity as a crux in the novel's matrix of social engineering. Azure searches for acceptance and a place he can call his own. He searches for a meal he could eat in peace. However, his blue eyes betray him; the white pedophiles at Sea Pont and other beaches where he frequents see him as a victim who can be sodomized for a penny. His fellow black people see him as not black enough and thus ostracize and victimize him, "remember how my eyes used to get me in trouble at school?" (25). On the other hand, Allen is perhaps 90% white, but the 10% of non-white blood in his veins taint his color, making him virulently violent toward anyone weaker than him. Gerald orchestrates the bruising, beating, and breaking of Azure's spirit:

For three days they don't open the room. I shit in a toilet bowl they left in the room for me. My bed is just a sponge. For three nights I listen to my wound, my bruises. For three nights I feel my body healing... I'm getting stronger, I tell myself, even though my stomach grumbles. When I start to feel weak, I sing. Made-up songs that have nothing to do with words, just nonsense sounds that keep writing themselves in my head... I'm getting stronger, I tell myself again.... Destroy, the music plays in my head. (33)

As he remains incarcerated in Gerald's prison, a feeling of shame and helplessness evolves into strength and a return of agency; every constitutive feeling of rejection, abjection, commodification, or even social unbeingness evaporates into a desire to 'destroy', 'destroy'. His imprisonment equates to a restraint placed on him by forces beyond his control. This restraint is a metaphor of the wider socio-economic limitations that constrain the poor and marginalized's agency. It is an example of the pervasive violence and the physical and psychological trauma that inundate the poor in the social system. Gangs, a corrupt police force, and domestic abuse are endemic, thus proving a direct threat to the protagonist.

In his mind, he commandeers unwholesome experiences and converts them into a revolution: "Then I turn off the light and destroy the room with half-circles of fire. A volcano rages in my head as I do this... grownups, this is how they teach me to be strong. I take in their light and destroy them with fire" (33). The carceral site designed for him becomes the place of rebirth where his agency becomes a potential retributive force in the mold of the usually dormant earth receiving agency in Nnedi Okoroafor's *Who Fears Death* where, "the sand beneath them shifted, and the men screamed as the earth opened up and swallowed them whole" (131). Trapped in circles of violence, Azure finds release in an intuitive interiorization within which he is shorn of every form of oppressive restriction, and he becomes the fire that consumes his oppressors. Even in his detention, he reinvents himself as an avenger who has to do what the social system refuses to do. He wonders at why the system is so complacent and tweaked to weaken the poor, "And where are the police?" Why are they never around when you need them? Why do they speak with people like Gerald? Why are they only interested in the big guy with the BMW who gets his car stolen in the dark? Why are they so scared of the night? Why don't they ever come out at night when you need them the most?" (39). At his darkest moment, when he hits the bottom of the pit, he lifts his hands up hoping for release, hoping that the system would release him from the vortex of dehumanization, but to no avail.

His companions are pigeons and seagulls, nonhuman entities, who illustrate the conflictual relationships in human relationships. The pigeons' curiosity and powerlessness serve as impetus for attacks from the more powerful seagulls, who delight in 'bombing' the pigeons at the slightest opportunity. Azure's redacted agency makes it difficult for him to sympathize with the weak and victimized pigeons. Thus, he admires the seagulls and despises them. He likens himself to the seagulls and delights in chasing them because the pigeons, like the police, are subject to being used by the rich and powerful to their own ends. He begins to pity the pigeons who he sees as "not strong like the seagulls: some of them have one leg and bad rashes" (39). These are symbolic of the state of the social system: the social system stands on one leg and is full of rashes that imperil its health. The masses of the people are shunted onto the path to destruction with the overlords wielding strong instruments of destruction and control.

Gerald takes everything away from Azure. Nothing is too sacred. Even his memory! He attempts and partially succeeds in erasing Azure's memory of his mother's love and a history of compassion that he carries as the only static in his life:

I think of my mother and feel confused. No. she loved me, I tell myself. And I loved her, no matter what Gerald says. He's just like Allen. He wants to control me. I look around and realize that there are no stupid pigeons watching me, only hidden cameras. You're never completely on your own, I say. (65)

Commodified, exploited, and ultimately re-christened 'Blue' by Gerald, Azure discovers that he is just a ware in life's marketplace. The street is a battlefield, and vigilance is the watchword. His body became a site of violence: everyone, his father, Allen, Gerald, even in school, everyone sought to 'moer' him, do him violence. He finally gets a 'railway track' on his face, even as Vincent had his own; a 'railway track' is the scar tissue from stitches after a sharp or blunt trauma to the body. This is the ultimate form of violence, leaving a visible mark of violence on him. The cast will be taken off his ankle, his crutches will be abandoned but the 'rail way track' on his face will become a permanent fixture of his personality and character. Every "ceremony of innocence" (Yeats 1700) to which Azure may have felt entitled is drowned, and he is thrust into a well of experiences that weigh more than his 12 years. His oppressors are not satisfied with depriving him of life's essentials. They must leave a permanent identifying mark on him that will always announce him as owned. That mark is equivalent to the prison number inmates wear to identify and mark them as inmates of a sanctioned and carceral site. Gerald makes him understand that he and others like him are valueless and thus disposable; everything, even life, is deemed disposable. Gerald is part of the "regime of racialized surveillance and control practices ... that governs poverty and enforces White supremacy" (Simes et al., 225), which restricts and imposes a sense of worthlessness on the protagonist and his class.

He is denied his right to the city; he is shunted according to the whims of 'monsters' like Allen and Gerald; he is a pawn on the chessboard in a neo-liberal and post-apartheid cityscape. His struggles are emblematic of the violent consequence of being excluded from the social system's profit.

His contumacy and resultant altercation with Gerald about wearing an orange dress (orange is Gerald's exclusive color), sets in motion a process that begins with Gerald sawing off the cast over his ankle and ultimately setting him free. The cast was a restriction put on him by Gerald and his acolytes and represented a weight that he must carry as an indication of his serfhood. Unwittingly, Gerald casts off the cast and began Azure's return of agency. From here on, he begins to walk away from everything, divesting himself of all excrescences as he reaches out toward the mountain; he is a plant reaching out from the soil toward a source of light for he knows that light is life. He is the beast in Yeats' 'The Second Coming, "and what rough beast, its hour come round at last/slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?" (1700). As he ventures toward the mountain, he approaches his apotheosis, his own second coming, and the awakened flames in him speak, "destroy, destroy" (75). In his pursuit of an epiphany, he eviscerates all his limitations and when he sees the sun he sees "destruction. Total destruction" (75). The sun feeds his strength and levitates him up the mountain. The mountain becomes a "juridical form" (Foucault *Society*...58) where he can exact vengeance on the society that had burned him; he ceases to be Azure on the mountain, and he becomes the son of T-Rex, an entity beyond human with unearthly capacities. His mother had birthed and christened him Azure. His social status had christened him homeless and street child. The mountain had created him as the son of T-Rex.

When the physical refuses to produce what he wants, Azure traipses into a stream of consciousness that invests him with the power to execute his desires. On the mountain, he experiences a new sermon that speaks to his life's trauma:

He meets a woman who looks like she lived a very long time ago. She is short and her bum is big, but she has the lightest smile I've ever seen.

She wears only a leather tong, and her long breasts are like fruit, like fat pears....."What's your name?" I ask her. She begins to sob. "Saartjie", she says and stops crying (87).

His meeting with Saartjie is an upwelling of a history of slavery, savagery, exploitation, and degradation piled on blacks by a systematic patriarchy that is as universal and eternal as life itself. Azure, by this, historicizes black

shame and angst and the abjection of suffering found in black history; Saartjie is the objectification of that suffering.

She reveals his ancestry: he is the son of T-rex, the great dinosaur whose retribution below the mountain destroys everything in its path. In the same stream, he sees Gerald with his lips sealed and his agency withdrawn. Gerald is ultimately eaten by T-rex. Azure's dream sequence is a psychological trajectory taken by his mind to assuage his flagging spirit and to come to terms with his life's great tragedy. Saartjie, T-rex, the eagle, Mantis, the meggots, all emblemize a history of the world's cagey dealings with blacks. In the dream, we see Saartjie's babies being fed to T-rex, who unknowingly eats his children. The systems of urban society are geared to eat the poor of the population; the rules, laws, and development matrices, all good in their postulations, end up eating the poor masses of the people. The tears of the dispossessed are grist for the mill of capitalism as Mantis tells us, "I drink her tears" (94); no matter what the masses of the people do, no matter how hard working they are and no matter how good the law seems, the common man is usually dispossessed, beaten down, and consumed on the alters of capitalism, class, and race. The lords of the manor will always drink the tears of the Azures.

Gerald and Allen, both monsters, tried imposing a new narrative, even with a new name, on him, thus echoing Frederick Jameson's postulate that "the city is no longer a palimpsest of historical layers but a blank surface for capitalist reinvention" (125). Both Allen and Gerald, fearing Azure's will to power and agency, must break his spirit by visiting him with great violence and annihilating his identity to impose a new identity on him. However, both are consumed in their violence when Azure inhabits the mountain and returns as T-rex to destroy them and assert his agency.

## Conclusion

*Thirteen Cents* is set in Cape Town, South Africa, principally in slum areas that skirt the town. Sello Duiker creates Azure, also known as Blue, a twelve, almost thirteen-year-old homeless black kid with an extraordinary pair of blue eyes. He is an almost precocious, mature-for-thirteen-year-old child with a fluid identity. Male, though mostly used sexually as female by predatory rich white men who are outwardly heteronormal but actually closet bisexual, his identity is shaped by his environment and the forces of that environment.

He is in the midst of great turf wars and a victim of power dynamics with Allen, Gerald, and the police in the mix. He is victimized by all three power brokers; he is brutalized, raped, and imprisoned at various times by these individuals. Their treatment of Azure depicts the dehumanizing nature of urban spaces and their capacity to limit the agency of individuals. As he escapes into the mountain, he regains a measure of his agency as he reaches an apotheosis that empowers him to transform into the son of T-rex who wreaks vengeance on both Allen and Gerald and the community of destruction that had emasculated him. He therefore becomes an "active agent (who) forges (his) world through struggle and confrontation with inherited and current processes that ... create "fields of possible and potential actions." (Wilson and Jonas 2). His four-day sojourn on the mountain where he met Saartjie, a historical figure of South African descent, enhances his potential to restore his agency and propel him into resistance mode.

The novel critiques the complex of socio-economic and cultural activities that divest the city's capacity as an agency for growth and development and turn it into carceral sites from where violence and agency jostle for the upper hand. The violence is not so much about Azure's sexuality as it is about his place in the lowest rung of the urban ladder. He is not a homosexual; he is a victim of assault. He is the equivalent of child soldiers who are conscripted into same-sex activities as a rite of passage in Fukunaga's *Beasts of No Nation* movie. Azure is a victim of war-time trauma; he is on the battle front fighting for his survival, and the generals and captains initiate him into a sexuality that is at best an assault (Munroe 126). There is no intimacy, there is no love, it is mercantile, and it is trade by barter.

Azure's sexuality is a conscripted sexuality occasioned by hunger, privation, and lack of desire; he has no agency and thus cannot feel desire or sexual satisfaction. His sexuality is a commodity purchased by wealthy white patrons who cannot even feel comfortable in his company; they forcefully take what they want from him because he has been weakened by abject poverty. His sexuality is a product of neoliberal capitalism in South Africa, which is still under the influence of apartheid, even after a popular democracy is established. The policies of the government relating to employment, education, infrastructure, etc., are culpable in Azure's tragedy as we see him bemoan the lack of government response and the culpability of government agencies and agents in his dehumanization. In *Planet of Slums*, Mike Davis observes that "the IMF and World Bank's structural adjustment programs have systematically destroyed the urban social contract between the poor and the state (45), thus impoverishing nations and making it virtually impossible for them to provide adequate social services to cater for the Azure's of this world."

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