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Walking through Post-Apartheid Wastelands: A Postcolonial Ecocritical Reading of Lauren Beukes's *Zoo City*

Abstract: In the last two decades, planetary issues at the time of the Anthropocene, such as global warming, pollution, the slow violence of rampant capitalism, and the anthropocentric disregard for non-human animals have been increasingly tackled in science fiction narratives emerging from the 'peripheries' of the former Western Empire. As they guide us through alternative or futuristic wastelands, these postcolonial stories interrogate and re-imagine what it means to be human, or non-human, in a world of persisting inequalities and exploitation, inviting us to reconsider our ethical accountability to the Other(s). This article focuses on one of South Africa's most prominent voices in contemporary speculative fiction: Lauren Beukes, who, in her post-apartheid dystopian novel *Zoo City* (2010), skilfully intertwines postcolonial and ecocritical concerns. Interrogating 'the politics of waste' from both a socio-economic and ecological perspective, I analyse how the text brings to the fore the conjoined 'wastification' of the urban environment and its stricken residents, while spurring critical thought on the relationship between humans and non-human animals. In so doing, I argue that *Zoo City* simultaneously enacts a re-visioning of the concept of dystopia itself, thus falling under the rubric of Jessica Langer's 'anti-dystopia'.

Keywords: Postcolonial Science Fiction. Anti-Dystopia. Ecocriticism. Waste. Human-Animal Relationship.

1. *Introduction*

In the last two decades, the science fiction canon seems to have discovered and brought under its fold a plethora of narratives coming from the Empire's former 'peripheries'. These postcolonial stories are radically reconfiguring the boundaries and conceptual frameworks of a genre that has often been historically aligned with colonialism and the imperial projects of the Western world.[1] What the seemingly irreconcilable realms of postcolonial literature and science fiction appear to have in common is a mutual concern for the Other – human, alien, cyborg – and the ethics of Otherness; what changes, however, is the perspective that comes to be endorsed, as the colonial gaze is now reversed. Privileging the point of view of the *alien*-ated Other, postcolonial writers simultaneously appropriate and redirect the estranging devices of the SF genre, so as "to reimagine themselves and their world, to 'set the record straight' by dismantling the stereotypes that science fiction in part has helped to support, and in essence 'strike back' at the empire".[2] Questioning the ideological underpinnings of both the genre and the socio-historical world from which the genre itself has emerged, postcolo-

[1] E.D. Smith, *Globalization, Utopia and Postcolonial Science Fiction: New Maps of Hope*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 5.

[2] E. Hoagland and R. Sarwal (eds), *Science Fiction, Imperialism and the Third World: Essays on Postcolonial Literature and Film*, Jefferson, NC, and London, McFarland & Company, 2010, p. 6.

nial science fiction provides an alternative critical framework to interrogate the continuation of contemporary *neo*-colonial structures. While doing so, it variously engages with the figure of the Stranger, or the Other, in its many guises, interrogating what it means to be different in a world predominantly defined by globalisation and onrushing turbo-capitalism.

These encounters with alterity are often played out against the background of ecological waste-worlds, addressing an engagement with environmental concerns at the time of the Anthropocene.[3] Planetary issues such as global warming, pollution, the escalating waste crisis, the overexploitation of natural resources and disregard for non-human animals are indeed tackled in SF narratives coming from all corners of the former Empire, including South Africa. Despite being associated, in the minds of many, with images of charismatic megafauna in pristine parks and iconic landscapes, this country has been facing a very different reality. As Roos observes,

> [o]ngoing reports on the growing danger of acid water dumping, park rangers involved in poaching and xenophobic violence in the face of dwindling services and resources abound. It is also meaningful that in current South African (English and Afrikaans) literature the representation of the environment leans demonstrably towards dystopia and images of destruction.[4]

The new millennium has indeed witnessed the efflorescence of ecologically-orientated dystopian works such as Jane Rosenthal's *Souvenir* (2004), Jenny Robson's *Savannah 2116 AD* (2004), Lauren Beukes's *Moxyland* (2008) and *Zoo City* (2010), Henrietta Rose-Innes's *Nineveh* (2011), Nick Wood's short stories "Thirstlands" (2008) and "Of Hearts and Monkeys" (2010), as well as Neil Blomkamp's Oscar-nominated film *District 9* (2009). Using common SF tropes of ecological catastrophe, human destruction and invasion, these texts share "not only the representation of a futuristic or alternative South African landscape, but also the expression of an entanglement between self, other, and environment".[5] As they guide us through post-apartheid landscapes of waste, they interrogate and re-imagine what it means to be human, or non-human, in a world of persisting inequalities and exploitation, thus inviting us to reconsider our ethical accountability.

In this article, I focus on Lauren Beukes's dystopian novel *Zoo City* (2010) as one of the most significant examples of this type of writing, reflecting what Anthony Vital has identified as "a new kind of concern for the environment emerging in the post-colonial era, one attuned to histories of unequal development and varieties of discrimination".[6] Internationally renowned as the winner of the 2011 Arthur C. Clarke Award for the "Best Science Fiction Novel of the Year", *Zoo City* is also a telling example of the power and challenges inherent in creative representation, showing how the SF genre can be adapted and transformed to narrate the Anthropocene in a postcolonial context.

The first section of this article provides a theoretical background that looks at the intersections between the critical fields of Postcolonialism and Ecocriticism. A second analytical

[3] E. STEENKAMP, "Future Ecologies, Current Crisis: Ecological Concern in South African Speculative Fiction", in G. CANAVAN and K.S. ROBINSON (eds), *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction*, Middletown, Wesleyan U.P., 2014, p. 145.

[4] H. ROOS, "'The War of the Worlds': Relocating the Boundaries between the Human and the NonHuman", *Journal of Literary Studies*, 27 (4), 2011, p. 52.

[5] E. STEENKAMP, "Future Ecologies, Current Crisis", p. 155.

[6] A. VITAL, "Towards an African Ecocriticism: Postcolonialism, Ecology and *Life & Times of Michael K*", *Research in African Literatures*, 39 (1), 2008, p. 90.

section will focus on Beukes's text and emphasise how environmental drawbacks are here inextricably entangled with socio-political and economic issues affecting South Africa, as well as with a radical re-thinking of the relationship between human and non-human animals.

2. *Intersecting Postcolonialism and Ecocriticism*

Navigating the imbrication of the environmental, social and political is a central focus of postcolonial Ecocriticism, a recently emerging and interdisciplinary field which stresses the need to bring together postcolonial and ecological insights as a means of challenging ongoing imperialist practices of social and environmental exploitation. As Alonso and Traseira explain, "postcolonial studies address environmental matters not only as a paramount problem in contemporary times, but as an ideology which is inherent in the imperial past of the Western world as well as in the historical dependence of the colonial past of European societies".[7] Along similar lines, Graham Huggan points out that the critical lens of postcolonial Ecocriticism recognises "the inseparability of current crises of ecological mismanagement from historical legacies of imperialistic exploitation and authoritarian abuse".[8] This means, in other words, that "environmental issues cannot be separated from questions of social justice and human rights".[9]

One of the most prominent voices in the discussion of possible and fruitful collaborations between Ecocriticism and Postcolonial Studies is undoubtedly Rob Nixon. In his well-known study, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), he resorts to the concept of "slow violence" to describe "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all".[10] It is the unspectacular but "incremental and accretive"[11] violence wrought by climate change, deforestation, toxic drift and other environmental catastrophes that, while rapidly ignored by a rampant capitalism, exacerbates the conditions of the poor in the Global South. Conjugating the discourses of ecologism, anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism, Nixon thus calls attention to the environmental conditions of the disempowered and the displaced in the post-imperial world, where neo-colonial and capitalist forces continue to exploit both the environment and its inhabitants.

As he launches the possibility of postcolonial ecologies, he is nevertheless aware that "within literary studies, such crossover work was long inhibited by a widespread assumption that the subjects and methodologies of the two fields were divergent".[12] He outlines four main discrepancies that seemed to arise – and still arise – between Postcolonialism and Ecocriticism:

[7] M. Alonso Alonso and M.J. Cabarcos Traseira, "A Legacy of Waste: Reflections on Literature and the Environment", *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 55 (2), 2019, p. 51.

[8] G. Huggan, "Greening Postcolonialism: Ecocritical Perspectives", *Modern Fiction Studies*, 50 (3), 2004, p. 702.

[9] *Ibidem*, p. 704.

[10] R. Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Cambridge, MA, and London, Harvard U.P., 2011, p. 6.

[11] *Ibidem*.

[12] *Ibidem*, p. 234.

First, postcolonialists tended to foreground hybridity and cross-culturation. Ecocritics, on the other hand, historically were drawn more to discourses of purity: virgin wilderness and the preservation of 'uncorrupted' last great places. Second, postcolonial writing and criticism was largely concerned with displacement, while environmental literary studies tended to give priority to the literature of place. Third, and relatedly, postcolonial studies tended to favour the cosmopolitan and the transnational. Postcolonialists were typically critical of nationalism, whereas the canons of environmental literature and criticism developed within a national (and often nationalistic) American framework. Fourth, postcolonialism devoted considerable attention to excavating or reimagining the marginalized past: history from below and border histories, often along transnational axes of migrant memory. By contrast, within much environmental literature and criticism, something different happened to history. It was often repressed or subordinated to the pursuit of the timeless, solitary moments of communion with nature.[13]

Broadly speaking, postcolonialists see the tendency towards individualism and 'mysticism' of many deep ecologists as the sign of a retreat from real political engagement, if not a downright complicity in the construction of colonialist discourses based on the tropes of 'virgin landscapes' and 'wilderness'. Deep ecologists, for their part, consider Postcolonialism as inherently human-centered and anthropocentric, primarily concerned with social and racial justice.[14] From a postcolonial perspective, plans of ecological intervention based on tenets of 'botanical restoration' and 'conservation' – such as the construction of national parks – are indeed controversial, as they often clash with problems of indigenous displacement and dispossession, inextricably tied to histories of anti-colonial struggles, forced removals and, as is the case with South Africa, racial segregation.

Quite understandably, a postcolonial take on Ecocriticism aims to move beyond a sheer aesthetics of landscape and botanical research to investigate the role of race and the politics of land use, together with questions of agency. In "Against Authenticity: Global Knowledges and Postcolonial Ecocriticism" (2007), Cara Cilano and Elizabeth DeLoughrey draw particular attention to the fact that Ecocriticism has often until recently privileged the sphere of an idealised racial subject – Western, white, male.[15] They also warn against the danger of adopting a global or universal ecological stance such as those buttressed by deep ecologists, who apparently claim the right to establish what is right or wrong, or most effective, in a 'Third World' context, too. In this perspective, "the nonwestern subject and landscape become the *tabula rasa* upon which to inscribe the agency of the western ecologist",[16] whose measures and strategies are deemed to be universally applicable. Blind to the wide variety of epistemologies that could be addressed to articulate human relationships with the environment, such an approach ends by reinscribing a center-periphery binary, that is to say, a model of naturalised white Western privilege that reminds of old colonial hierarchies.

Within this framework, postcolonial Ecocriticism has therefore emerged as a socially inflected ecocritical approach that is sensitive to the tension between humanistic and ecological concerns and is sceptical of Western liberal universalism.[17] Rather than promoting lyrical

[13] *Ibidem*, p. 236.

[14] G. HUGGAN, "Greening Postcolonialism", p. 702.

[15] C. CILANO and E. DELOUGHREY, "Against Authenticity: Global Knowledges and Postcolonial Ecocriticism", *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 14 (1), 2007, p. 76.

[16] *Ibidem*, p. 71.

[17] In recent years, a series of studies have been published by scholars attempting to bring into dialogue

admiration for the pastoral or indulging in an aesthetic appreciation of the wild, postcolonial ecocritics are more attuned to the socio-historically situated approach of the Environmental Justice movement, which focuses on eco-social issues such as urban poverty, unequal development, maldistribution of resources, land disputes, and environmental racism.[18]

The assessment of the urban space is particularly relevant for postcolonial ecocritics, since, as remarked by Laura White, "the most crucial environmental issues facing the Global South" are "urban poverty, waste management, housing and urban development".[19] This inevitably entails abandoning arguments that rely on "an outmoded definition of 'nature' as wilderness or pastoral – as something that *does not exist* in urban settings",[20] to start focusing on the built environment as well. As ecocritic Anthony Lioi has aptly observed, "despite its desire to affirm Earth, much of ecocritical culture has been dirt-rejecting. In our quest to promote wildness and non-anthropocentric cosmologies, ecocritics have shunned texts and places comprised by matter-out-of-place, the ritual uncleanness of cities, suburbs, and other defiled ecosystems".[21] Such an approach, according to Heather Sullivan, risks contributing to "the dichotomy dividing our material surroundings into a place of 'pure, clean nature' and the dirty human sphere",[22] thus validating and re-affirming that very mode of binary thinking – environment/humanity, nature/culture – that ecocritics (and postcolonial scholars as well) have been trying to dismantle.

Heeding Sullivan's call to approach "the less glamorous and less colorful components of dirt in both the built environment and other landscapes",[23] Simal-González has recently postulated a "Waste Theory" (2019) that intersects the discourses of (material) Ecocriticism, Postcolonialism and Globalisation Studies. Bringing into dialogue Sullivan's 'dirty aesthetics' with Nixon's concept of 'slow violence' and the environmentalism of the poor, he explains that "[w]hat Waste Theory adds to previous ecocritical work is the conviction

the two schools of criticism. See G. HUGGAN and H. TIFFIN, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, London and New York, Routledge, 2010; U.P. MUKHERJEE, *Postcolonial Environments: Nature, Culture, and the Contemporary Indian Novel*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010; L. WRIGHT, *'Wilderness into Civilized Shapes': Reading the Postcolonial Environment*, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2010; E. DELOUGHREY and G. HANDLEY, *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*, Oxford, OUP, 2011; K. CRANE, *Myths of Wilderness in Contemporary Narratives: Environmental Postcolonialism in Australia and Canada*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012; R. BARTOSCH, *EnvironMentality: Ecocriticism and the Event of Postcolonial Fiction*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2013.

[18] In essence, Environmental Justice is premised on the conviction that environmental problems are not simply rooted in anthropocentric attitudes, but rather stem from systems of domination of humans by other humans. Intersecting the discourses of environmentalism and civil rights activism, it strengthens the link between the social inequities faced by poor communities and the uneven distribution of environmental hazards, such as toxic waste dumping or air and water pollution. See D. SCHLOSBERG, *Defining Environmental Justice: Theories, Movements, and Nature*, Oxford, OUP, 2007.

[19] L. WHITE, "Beyond the Eco-flâneur's Footsteps: Perambulatory Narration in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*", quoted in B. STANLEY and W.D. PHILLIPS, "South African Ecocriticism: Landscapes, Animals, and Environmental Justice", in G. GARRARD (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism Online*, Oxford, OUP, 2017, https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935338.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199935338-e-154 (last accessed on 28 August 2020).

[20] B. STANLEY and W.D. PHILLIPS, "South African Ecocriticism".

[21] A. LIOI, "Of Swamp Dragons: Mud, Megalopolis, and a Future for Ecocriticism", quoted in H. SULLIVAN, "Dirt Theory and Material Ecocriticism", *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 19 (3), Summer 2012, p. 516.

[22] H. SULLIVAN, "Dirt Theory and Material Ecocriticism", p. 515.

[23] *Ibidem*.

that toxic environments need to be discussed alongside the toxic configurations of power that transform human beings into literal or figurative waste".[24] As he shifts from the rather neutral concept of 'dirt' to the more anthropogenic connotations and the socio-economic, ideological implications inherent in 'waste', Simal-González invites scholars to investigate the interconnection between the 'wastification' of the environment and the commodification of subalterns, those 'residual' people who take the strain of the current global configurations of power and neo-colonial regimes. As he puts it, "Waste Theory can help critics to expose the intriguing ways in which narratives reflect and critique the 'conjoined ecological and human disposability' […] characteristic of our 'throwaway society'".[25] As we will see, such a critical approach proves particularly useful for the analysis of Beukes's novel.

The considerations so far set out, however, have primarily focused on the relation between humans and the non-human environment, excluding from the latter category the non-human species. In *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2010), Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin point out that any discussion about animals within a postcolonial context needs to start from the interrogation of the anthropocentrism underlying Western Eurocentric thought, considering how anthropocentrism has been historically used to justify forms of colonial oppression premised on the construction of the Other as 'animal', meaning 'primitive', 'inferior', 'other-than-human'.[26] The hierarchisation of life forms resulting from such modes of construction was and remains responsible for colonialist and racist exploitation, as well as for continuing forms of speciesism that reflect humans' failure to situate animals ethically. Accordingly, Huggan and Tiffin explain that

> [i]f the wrongs of colonialism – its legacies of continuing human inequalities, for instance – are to be addressed, still less redressed, then the very category of the *human*, in relation to animals and environment, must also be brought under scrutiny. After all, traditional western constitutions of the human as the 'not-animal' have had major, and often catastrophic, repercussions not just for animals themselves but for all those the West now considers human but were formerly designated, represented and treated as animal. The persistence of such openly discriminatory categorisations invites an endless repetition of the wrongs of the past.[27]

Within this framework, it becomes crucial to disaggregate animality from the negative stereotypes with which it has been associated in colonialist discourse, in a joint effort to rehabilitate the agency of non-human others and restore dignity to debased humans as well. If animals have value, then we cannot oppress other humans *as* animals, since animals have an inherent worth.

In *Zoo City*, as the title suggests, we will see precisely how the author skilfully works upon the concept of the 'Other as animal' that corroborated the colonial enterprise and that allegedly keeps transmuting into new shapes in contemporary South Africa. This dystopian text has both human and non-human characters explore a highly polluted, toxic cityscape in a not-too-distant future. Interrogating "the politics of 'waste'"[28] from both a

[24] B. Simal-González, "'The Waste of the Empire': Neocolonialism and Environmental Justice in Merlinda Bobis's 'The Long Siesta as a Language Primer'", *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 55 (2), 2019, p. 2010.

[25] *Ibidem*.

[26] G. Huggan and H. Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, p. 5.

[27] *Ibidem*, pp. 18-19.

[28] B. Simal-González, "'The Waste of the Empire'", p. 209.

socio-economic and ecological perspective, it powerfully brings to the fore the topical issues of environmental degradation and urban decay, while spurring critical thought on the relationship between human and non-human animals.

3. *Waste and Wasted Humans in Lauren Beukes's* Zoo City

Set in 2011, just a year after its publication, Beukes's novel presents a dark and alternative view of a near-future Johannesburg where a syndrome called "Acquired Aposymbiotic Familiarism" (AAF), or "Zoo Plague", has recently brought about an ontological shift. Humans who have committed a serious crime are in fact paired with an animal familiar (possibly an outward manifestation of their guilt), which bestows on them a magical power called *mashavi*. The people who get 'animalled' are referred to as "zoos" or "aposymbiots", and they all live in the inner-city Johannesburg ghetto of Zoo City (based on real Hillbrow, a neighbourhood most commonly associated with "danger, criminality, marginality, and blackness",[29] as well as with large flows of migrants from the African continent). As long as their animals are alive, zoos are safe from the permanent and terrible threat of "The Undertow", or "shadow self-absorption" (p. 187), a mysterious dark force which is capable of totally disintegrating the animalled.

In this context, the novel recounts the story of a young black woman and ex-convict, Zinzi December, who receives a sloth after getting her brother killed in a drug-related shoot-out. To pay off her debts, she charges people for her magical skill of tracking lost valuables, while using her abilities as a former journalist to write scam emails and ensnare rich foreigners. Because of her supernatural talent, a renowned music producer, Odi Huron, asks her to investigate on the strange disappearance of Songweza, a teenage girl who, together with her twin brother S'bu, is the star of a popular pop duo. As it happens, Odi intends to find Songweza only to sacrifice both twins through a bloody ritual that will magically transfer his animal, a huge albino crocodile, to one of them.

As this brief summary suggests, despite its being awarded the UK's premier prize for science fiction literature, the generic boundaries of Beukes's novel are quite permeable, as they open up to include elements of urban fantasy, the crime novel, noir, and the mystery thriller.[30] In particular, the incorporation of indigenous legends and practices brings elements of Magical Realism into play. Beukes herself has coined the neologism "*muti* [indigenous medicine] noir"[31] to describe her own text, where *muti*, a substance prepared by a traditional healer (*sangoma*), is often used to help Zinzi solve her crimes, but is also connected with the killing of people and animals to harvest their body parts for potent magic (*muti* murders). Moreover, one of the many theories attempting to explain the phenomenon of aposymbiosis is drawn from Penny Miller's *Myths and Legends of Southern Africa*, which is directly quoted in the novel. According to this explanation, animals would be spirits of foreigners who cannot go back to the world of ancestors and are thus diverted by

[29] J. DICKSON, "Reading the (Zoo) City: The Social Realities and Science Fiction of Johannesburg", *The Salon: Imagining Africa's Future Cities*, 7, 2014, p. 67.

[30] S. GRAHAM, "The Entropy of Built Things: Postapartheid Anxiety and the Production of Space in Henrietta Rose-Innes' *Nineveh* and Lauren Beukes' *Zoo City*", *Safundi*, 16 (1), 2015, p. 66.

[31] L. Beukes in G. ANSELL, "Behind All the Monkey Business", *Mail & Guardian Online*, 6 May 2011, http://mg.co.za/article/2011-05-06-behind-all-the-monkey-business (last accessed on 30 August 2020).

a *sangoma* to animal hosts; humans who take possession of such accursed animals become themselves host to the spirit. As we will see, the fact that animalledness is associated with the spirits of foreigners establishes a connection between aposymbiots and the figures of refugees and illegal immigrants that populate the novel.

Zoo City combines science-fictional and spiritual elements into an internally consistent world, in which ancestors and ghosts are able to communicate with humans through emails and text messages, as well as through nature. As a *sangoma* explains to Zinzi, "[t]he spirits find it easier with technology. […] They still like rivers and oceans most of all, but data is like water – the spirits can move through it. That's why you get a prickly feeling around cell phone towers".[32] In this world inhabited by "[g]hosts in the machine" (p. 308), the spiritual, the natural, and the technological appear to be closely intertwined, while the boundaries between nature and culture, living and manufactured, are constantly transgressed[33] through vivid descriptions that bring the material and the natural together: "[g]unfire has become part of the nocturnal soundscape of Zoo City, like cicadas in the countryside" (p. 59); "the car horns [are] like the calls of mechanical ducks" (p. 140); "the traffic hums and buzzes. Fat drops of rain spatter like grease" (p. 212). As Graham observes, in *Zoo City* "urban infrastructure has become coexistent with nature, incorporating the spiritual and material worlds into the architecture of human social […] existence".[34]

This alternative Johannesburg is riddled with images of environmental degradation and urban decay, with "plastic bags hung on trees like Christmas decorations" (p. 159) and "the choke of stewing garbage and black mold floating up the stairwell" (p. 4) of crumbling buildings. Significantly, the novel opens with a reference to "morning light the sulfur color of the mine dumps" (p. 3), thus introducing the most iconic image of this urban landscape, i.e., the repulsive sites of abandoned gold mines. Zinzi's description eloquently speaks to the environmental impact and legacies of the mining activity:

> I drive out south to where the last of the mine dumps are – sulphur-colored artificial hills, laid to waste by the ravages of weather and reprocessing, shored up with scrubby grass and eucalyptus trees. Ugly valleys have been gouged out and trucked away by the ton to sift out the last scraps of gold the mining companies missed the first time round. Maybe it's appropriate that *eGoli*, place of gold, should be self-cannibalizing. (p. 296)

The novel's portrayal of the city draws on the actual history and identity of Johannesburg, long known as the 'City of Gold' (or *eGoli*, in the Zulu language). The abandoned mineshafts look at its industrial past, when the colonial Empire exploited its vast riches of diamonds ("Johannesburg's Wild West days", p. 41). The environmental challenges embedded in a landscape polluted by mine waste and new sites of extraction speak to contemporary preoccupations in South Africa about acid-mine drainage and poisonous water.[35]

Everything in Beukes's cityscape seems to be decaying into "gritty yellow dust" (p.

[32] EAD., *Zoo City*, New York, Boston and London, Little, Brown and Company, (2010) 2016, p. 198. All further references are to this edition; page numbers are given parenthetically in the text.

[33] H. ROOS, "'The War of the Worlds'", p. 61.

[34] B. SMITH, "SF, Infrastructure, and the Anthropocene: Reading *Moxyland* and *Zoo City*", *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, 3 (3), 2016, p. 352.

[35] N. HOAD, "Dystopian Futures, Apartheid, and Postapartheid Allegories: Contemporary Imaginings of Johannesburg", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 36 (2), 2016, p. 295.

296), from the natural environment ("dusty yellow grasslands", p. 176; "the dusty scrub of the riverbank", p. 355) to objects ("to keep the dust off my clothes", p. 4; "the dusty beige of the wall", p. 15; "dusty high heels", p. 355) and people: "[E]ddies of dust whip and spiral around us. […] There is dust embedded in every hollow and fold of her body, banked up against her lower eyelids like unshed tears, encrusted in the bloody gashes over her arms and legs and stomach and head" (p. 297).[36] Throughout the text, bodies are represented as fully immersed in the permeating materiality of what Sullivan calls "the small-scale earth-forms of dirt, dust, and sand",[37] thus pointing to a further crossing of the boundaries between culture and nature, non-human and human matter. Sullivan's insights regarding a material environmental immersion are worth mentioning here:

> [W]e live on Earth […] and are surrounded by dust. This dust emerges from our bodies, the particulate matter of air pollution, the stuff in buildings, and the desiccated landscapes of a warming world. Dirty nature is always with us as part of ongoing interactions among all kinds of material agents. […] there is no ultimate boundary between us and nature. We are enmeshed within dirt in its many forms.[38]

The darker side to the dissolution of body/environment boundaries, however, is that "dirt and dust can be highly toxic or radioactive, and thus can impose a destructively agentic influence onto most of the living things they contact".[39] In *Zoo City*, explicit reference is indeed made to sicknesses caused by pollution, such as asbestos-related lung disease or reactions to the black mold (p. 137).

As we follow Zinzi through her investigations to find Songweza or to track lost valuables, the novel maps a material mesh of dirt, bodies and things, especially when the protagonist descends from the city surface into the subterranean world of sewage systems, underground rails and derelict mine tunnels. Walking through the repugnant stormwater drains, she finds herself "shin-deep in shit […]. Not actual shit, at least, […] but years of musty rainwater and trash and rot and dead rats and used condoms make up their own signature fragrance" (p. 14). Later on, when she is chased by a bunch of young criminals living in the tunnels, she is pervaded by "the smell of smoke, and sweat and urine. […] My sneakers squelch in the rivulet of rotten mud" (p. 216). Throughout the text, the constant occurrence of the scatological trope contributes to providing a material depiction of a degraded and godforsaken place. As the author herself explained, "I wanted the journey of my story to be vested in more corporeal things. Forget the soul, I wanted the sparking nerves, the guts, the pounding heart of the cityscape".[40]

As well as vertically, Beukes's journey allows us to explore the urban landscape horizontally, as Zinzi moves across different suburban areas that vary in terms of economic and

[36] Interestingly enough, the colour yellow – connoting gold and pollution, and thus the very essence of *eGoli* – does not merely figure in images that describe a toxic or arid environment, but is also used recursively to single out various objects ("the yellowwood table", p. 86; "the milky yellow liquid", p. 204; "the sagging nicotine-yellow couch", p. 263; "the sunshine-yellow satin robe […] drenched in blood", p. 327). It is also associated with people's physical traits, as emblematised by the haunting image of Yellow Man, a young "yellow-eyed" criminal that chases Zinzi in the storm drains of the city (pp. 213-20).

[37] H. SULLIVAN, "Dirt Theory and Material Ecocriticism", p. 516.

[38] *Ibidem*, p. 515

[39] *Ibidem*, p. 516.

[40] L. BEUKES, "Inner City: An Essay by Lauren Beukes", in EAD., *Zoo City*, p. 363.

social privilege. The festering slums of the inner city – built to keep the poor and 'undesirables' in – are juxtaposed with the gated communities of the rich, which are "fortified like privatized citadels" (p. 100). The erection of walls and barriers to separate the wealthy from the obscenely poor is a telling representation of what Dickson calls "the new spaces of an economic apartheid"[41] and reminds us of Rob Nixon's considerations on the global spreading of gated communities:

> Neoliberalism's proliferating walls concretize a short-term psychology of denial: the delusion that we can survive long term in a world whose resources are increasingly unshared. The wall, read in terms of neoliberalism and environmental slow violence, materializes temporal as well as spatial denial through a literal concretizing of out of sight out of mind.[42]

In the neo-colonial realm of *Zoo City*, the dictum 'out of sight out of mind' is a fitting catchphrase for a world in which global-capitalist and consumeristic forces are completely ravaging the environment and widening the gap between the haves and the have-nots. While the government spends funds on "nuclear submarines or official pocket-lining" (p. 151) and a consumeristic culture turns even Steve Biko into a brand (p. 148), the inhabitants of the inner-city ghetto live in sordid conditions with water scarcity and a shortage on power supplies, throwing their rubbish out the window.

Corrupted by sex, drugs, alcohol, and crime, Zoo City is inhabited by disaffected outsiders, such as refugees, prostitutes, addicts, street children and, above all, 'animalled' criminals: "[m]urderers, rapists, junkies. Scum of the earth. In China they execute zoos on principle. Because nothing says guilty like a spirit critter at your side" (p. 375). Dangerous and un-needed, the zoos are relegated to a decrepit house development that basically functions as dumping ground for all those who are 'expelled' from society and literally kept 'out of sight'.[43] Condemned to a life of destitution and struggling to survive, they are deprived of police protection and simply left to kill one another ("the cops and ambulances are slow to respond to 'incidents' in Zoo City – if they respond at all", p. 140). When a bear gets killed by *tsosis* during the night and The Undertow comes to pulverise the human, the story is totally ignored by newspaper reports.

In the economy of the novel, then, Zoo City is strikingly framed as a garbage dump – a South African version of Samuel Delany's "Junk City"[44] –, while its residents acquire the traits of waste itself. Throughout the story, they are treated as second-class citizens and literally stigmatised as "scum" or "things", as the following comment by an Internet user amply testifies to:

[41] J. DICKSON, "Reading the (Zoo) City", p. 73.

[42] R. NIXON, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, p. 20.

[43] In this perspective, a parallel is also drawn in the text with old colonialist attitudes that tended to discard the 'social trash' of European societies by flushing it down to the colonies. When Zinzi visits a rehabilitation centre for addicts, she is told that "[a] lot of them are from the UK. It's a last resort for the families – that old attitude of 'send the troublemakers to the colonies!'" (p. 182).

[44] Delany describes the postmodern "Junk City" as a dysfunctional city in utter collapse, conveying "a very different image from Brave New World. Junk City begins, of course, as a working-class suburban phenomenon. Think of the car with half its motor and three wheels gone which has been sitting out in the yard beside that doorless refrigerator for the last four years" (S.R. DELANY, "On Triton and Other Matters", *Science Fiction Studies*, 17 [3], 1990, http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/interviews/delany52interview.htm [last accessed on 29 August 2020]).

[A]pos aren't human. It's right there in the name. Zoos. Animalled. Aposymbiots. Whatever PC term is flavor of the week. As in not human. As in short for 'apocalypse'. […] God is merciful, but only to actual, genuine, REAL LIFE human beings. Apos are criminals. They're scum. They're not even animals. They're just things. (p. 78)

The processes of *othering* and dehumanisation to which the animalled are constantly subjected are all too closely reminiscent of colonial and apartheid history. Explicit reference is indeed made to the need for "a pass system for zoos" (p. 33) and to potential practices of segregation ironically built on the difference between animal species ("Herbivores and carnivores all mixed up together. We should probably segregate", p. 89). The lingering violence from decades of institutionalised racism is further and most powerfully symbolised by Odi's albino crocodile, which the music producer keeps hidden in an underwater cavern directly connected to his swimming pool. As some critics have already noticed, the massive size and whiteness of this animal is a sardonic wink at one of the staunchest supporters of apartheid, Pieter Willem Botha, who was famously nicknamed 'Die Groot Krokodil' (or, 'The Big Crocodile').[45] The myriad of dismembered bodies and skeletons that Zinzi ultimately discovers in Odi's secret bunker falls heavily on a country that is still coping with a violent past and with apartheid's socio-economic and environmental legacy.

Zoo City, however, does not just pivot on a retrospective allegory of apartheid. It is also, and most importantly, a *post*-apartheid story reflecting on urgent contemporary issues in South Africa, such as the spread of HIV-AIDS (echoing in the acronym AAF – Acquired Aposymbiotic Familiarism), the intensification of xenophobia and the refugee crisis.[46] In 2008, South Africa was indeed rattled by a nationwide outbreak of xenophobic violence against immigrants from other African countries (derogatorily named *makwerekwere*), as if the presence of 'strangers' would further imperil access to resources. The horror of these black-on-black attacks has perceivingly inspired Beukes's novel, whose Zoo City is full of 'animalled' refugees from across the African continent. Concern about their condition finds an outlet via the figure of Zinzi's lover, Benoît, an animalled refugee who has run away from the atrocities of the Congo War after being separated from his (presumably dead) wife and children. Confirming real Hillbrow's reputation as a famous transit point for thousands of migrants, Beukes's novel and its ostracised animalled speak to how the discourse of colonialism, premised on an 'us vs. them' rhetoric, feeds into a neo-colonial perspective of violence, exploitation and forms of inequalities exacerbated by fear.

Besides functioning as a metaphor for humans and various forms of discrimination, the zoo as literary sign is associated with a wide range of more strictly ecological discourses. One of the many theories attempting to explain the sudden appearance of the animalled, the Toxic Reincarnation Theory, explicitly links aposymbiosis to a disruption in the spiritual realm caused by global warming, pollution and BPA from plastic leaching into the environment (p. 183). According to others, the phenomenon could have been equally triggered by chemical waste and radiations, resulting from the fallout of Pakistan's nuclear tests (p. 75) or the Chernobyl disaster (p. 282). While bringing to the fore fundamental issues at the time of the Anthropocene, such allegorical readings do not exhaust, however, the po-

[45] C. STOBIE, "Dystopian Dreams from South Africa: Lauren Beukes's *Moxyland* and *Zoo City*", *African Identities*, 10 (4), 2012, p. 77; N. HOAD, "Dystopian Futures, Apartheid, and Postapartheid Allegories", p. 301.

[46] See N. HOAD, "Dystopian Futures, Apartheid, and Postapartheid Allegories". For further insights into the link between aposymbiosis and HIV-AIDS in particular, see S. GRAHAM, "The Entropy of Built Things", p. 74.

tential inherent in Beukes's trope of aposymbiosis, which most evidently resides in the very coexistence and imbrication of human and non-human lives. As Smith aptly observes, it is important to avoid "metaphorising the notion of the aposymbiot in a way that evacuates the human-animal relationship of its ecological significance",[47] as such a mode of reading fails to recognise that non-humans themselves are implicated in the concerns of the text.

In the world of ecology, the term 'aposymbiosis' describes a form of symbiosis in which two species live independently but with their life cycles affecting one another. In *Zoo City*, the animalled and their animal familiars share a telepathic connection and they are both emotionally and physically linked: when Zinzi gets drunk, Sloth becomes tipsy himself, and when she is injured, Sloth suffers from the same pain. Although the reverse does not happen ("[o]ur connection is one-way. I can't feel his pain, but it's bad enough to see it in his face", p. 316), humans experience unbearable physical pain if they are separated from their animal companions ("[c]rack cravings have nothing on being away from your animal", p. 147). The connection between humans and non-humans is so strong that when the animal dies, the human immediately passes away, too; animals, by contrast, can outlive their humans for a while, although "they're never quite the same" (p. 349). Significantly, then, in Beukes's imaginary world the well-being of the animal and that of the human are shown to be mutually dependent.

In the novel, however, a caring and non-exploitative model of behaviour towards animals exists side by side with violent and abusive relationships. For instance, a young criminal living in the storm drains, emblematically named 'Nasty', has chopped a porcupine's leg to sell it to the black market for *muti* (p. 98). In a series of interviews of animalled prisoners around the world, a man from Pakistan describes the way animals are used as a means of social control:[48] "They keep our animals in cages in another part of the prison. We don't see them. When they want to torture us, they out them in the back of a car and drive away to Keti Bandar. The pain is unbearable, you scream, you vomit, and you say anything" (p. 98). *Zoo City* thus proceeds to single out different forms of human/animal relationships, denouncing humans' exploitative thrust in favour of mutual and reciprocal relationships that are best exemplified through Zinzi and her Sloth. In Steenkamp's words, "this imaginative coupling suggests the kind of sympathetic experience that challenges the perceived divide between humans and animals that allows for the domination of the latter by the former".[49] Through its imaginative inter-species connections, the novel showcases the vitality and agency of non-human animals and emphasises how they are always implicated in human lives and experiences. In this perspective, as Smith points out, *Zoo City* is not merely "a speculative account of urban life, but […] a *speculative multispecies ethnography*, an analysis of what happens when human and nonhuman lives are understood as entwined".[50]

At the same time, the unsettling of the boundaries between humans and non-humans calls attention to the predicament and ethics of humanness.[51] As previously mentioned (par. 2), the story of racism in the colonial world was imbricated into discourses of species-

[47] B. Smith, "SF, Infrastructure, and the Anthropocene", p. 350.

[48] *Ibidem*.

[49] E. Steenkamp, "Familiar Animals: The Question of Human-Animal Relationships in Lauren Beukes's *Zoo City*", in S. Oppermann (ed.), *New International Voices in Ecocriticism*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2015, p. 182.

[50] B. Smith, "SF, Infrastructure, and the Anthropocene", pp. 350-51.

[51] J. Dickson, "Reading the (Zoo) City", p. 76.

ism: Beukes's novel is precisely built on the trope of the 'Other as animal' that was used for racial vilification and abuse, and that remains prominent in neo-colonial regimes, where it re-emerges in the form of xenophobic violence. The equivalence is highlighted in the text when Zinzi comments that "[ap]parently we attracted vermin because we were vermin" (p. 62). In this perspective, the need to rehabilitate the animal should be seen as going hand in hand with a radical rethinking of the very category of the human. Drawing on Huggan and Tiffin's considerations, the point is not to prioritise non-human concerns over human issues, but rather to show that, "while there is still the 'ethical acceptability' […] of the killing of non-human others – that is, anyone represented and designated as non-human [in Beukes's novel, the 'animalled'] – [human] abuses will continue […] there is no political purchase in such issues being addressed by a 'first-things-first' approach. They must proceed together".[52] The corporeal, psychic, emotional and ethical bond that links the animalled to their animal familiars allows Beukes to construct a new model of relational and intersubjective identity, opening up the possibility for a revised, empathic relationship with alterity, in its many guises.

Ultimately, then, Beukes's re-imagined Johannesburg is represented as a dystopian underworld where spaces of connection, intimacy, and solidarity – as well as unexpected visions of decadent beauty (p. 140) – manage to come into view. Rather than sensationalising poverty and crime, the text looks at subjectivities that are much more complex, vital and hybrid than it might be gathered at first sight. See, for instance, the following passage:

> People who would happily speed through Zoo City during the day won't detour here at night, not even to avoid police roadblocks. They're too scared, but that's precisely when Zoo City is at its most sociable. From 6 p.m., when the day-jobbers start getting back from whatever work they've been able to pick up, apartment doors are flung open. Kids chase each other down the corridors. People take their animals out for fresh air or a friendly sniff of each other's bums. The smell of cooking – mostly food, but also meth – temporarily drowns out the stench of rot, the urine in the stairwells. The crack whores emerge from the dingy apartments to chat and smoke cigarettes on the fire escape, and catcall the commuters heading to the taxi rank on the street below. (p. 136)

Born out of marginalisation, the dark and dangerous waste-world of Zoo City is a radically *inclusive* and *open* space, a microcosm of subalternity offering a critical vantage point from which to read and judge the socio-spatial dispensations of democracy and globalisation in post-apartheid South Africa.

In this perspective, the novel can be said to bring about a re-visioning of the concept of dystopia itself and fall under the rubric of what Jessica Langer has recently labelled 'anti-dystopia'.[53] Indeed, her analysis of some postcolonial SF narratives characterised by urban settings provides a useful critical lens to read the peculiar configurations of power emerging in Beukes's novel. In essence, her main argument is that what makes these cities dystopic is not simply the social, physical and moral deterioration of their broken residents, but rather the processes of expulsion and confinement that have made those very dystopian worlds possible. As she explains:

[52] G. HUGGAN and H. TIFFIN, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, pp. 137-38. The novel's ironic wordplay on the "Animalled rights movement" (p. 79) can be seen to point in the direction of such a conjuncture.

[53] J. LANGER, "The Shapes of Dystopia: Boundaries, Hybridity and the Politics of Power", in E. HOAGLAND and R. SARWAL (eds), *Science Fiction, Imperialism and the Third World: Essays on Postcolonial Literature and Film*, Jefferson, NC, and London, McFarland & Company, 2010, pp. 171-87.

Beneath the surface dystopianism of the violence and cacophony of these metropolitan spaces lies a positive hybridity and the potential for subversion of [neo-]colonial norms: the violence and cacophony are caused by the position the colonizer or the powerful has put the inhabitants in, not by the inhabitants themselves. The dystopic elements in these texts are produced by power differentials, not by inherent differences between powerful and powerless.[54]

In *Zoo City*, this is compellingly linked to the discovery that Odi Huron himself is a zoo and that his glamorous, wealthy world is actually pervaded by rottenness and decay: in his house, significantly built by an architect of the British Empire, "[l]ethargic dust motes swirl in sunlight that has managed to penetrate the choke of ivy and leaded glass" (p. 86) and "a skin of rotting leaves cloy[s] the surface" of the swimming pool, whose mosaic tiles "are chipped, the lapis-lazuli blue faded to a dull glaucoma" (p. 88). By the same token, his crocodile is described as "sickly white" (p. 333), while the gated communities to which he belongs are inhabited by "*festering* middle class paranoia" (p. 97; emphasis added). Invalidating the common binary classifications of colonial thought, which tended to associate 'filth' with the powerless and disenfranchised, dirt is here likewise connected with the cast-offs and the privileged middle class.

Coming close to L.T. Sargent's conceptualisation of 'critical dystopia',[55] Langer defines anti-dystopia "not as a mirror image of dystopia, nor a direct contradiction, but rather a generic tendency that uses the tool of dystopia recursively, to complicate and question both the form itself, with its Manichean character, and the zero-world to which the form and its use refer".[56] Relativising the utopia/dystopia dichotomy, whose either/or construction, she suggests, reminds us of the building of colonial power ("the center, the utopian included, and the periphery, the utopian excluded/dystopian included"[57]), anti-dystopia becomes a space of internal contradiction, contamination and heterogeneity. Within this framework, *Zoo City* can be assessed as an anti-dystopian text, insofar as it falls both *within* and *outside* the utopia/dystopia construct; weaving a web of varied and interrelated discourses, it conjures up a world where toxic environments equal toxic configurations of power relations, while simultaneously complicating any simplistic categorisation of victim and victimiser (zoos *are*, after all, criminals).

Despite the horror and utter desolation of the world described, which inexorably leads up to the gruesome murder of the pop star duo and the near-death of Benoît in Odi's underground lake, the novel closes on a slightly positive note. Instead of slipping back to a life of drugs, alcohol and random sex, as she once did (pp. 271-76), Zinzi ultimately decides to traverse the continent from South Africa to the Democratic Republic of Congo in order to track down, and hopefully reunite, Benoît's missing family. Her comment that this journey "is going to be the best thing I've done with my miserable life" (p. 358) suggests an acceptance of responsibility and thus seems to reflect a prospect of change, or, at least, an attempt to resist dehumanisation.

[54] *Ibidem*, 173.

[55] Thomas Moylan succinctly defines it as "a textual mutation that self-reflexively takes on the present system and offers not only astute critiques of the order of things but also explorations of the appositional spaces and possibilities from which the next round of political activism can derive imaginative sustenance and inspiration" (T. MOYLAN, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*, Boulder, Westview Press, 2000, p. xv). For a reading of *Zoo City* through the lens of critical dystopia, see C. STOBIE, "Dystopian Dreams from South Africa".

[56] J. LANGER, "The Shapes of Dystopia", pp. 185-86.

[57] *Ibidem*, p. 186.

4. *Conclusion*

By means of its 'animalled' characters, *Zoo City* cleverly intertwines human and environmental concerns, transgressing and confounding the boundaries between nature and culture, clean and unclean, human and non-human, spiritual and technological, national and foreign, local and global. Connecting ecocritical issues with human-rights discourses, this postcolonial SF text shows how, in Steenkamp's words, "[h]eeding the call to responsibility for our human others and being sensitive to the agency of non-human others […] is not mutually exclusive".[58] Through its view of humans and non-humans entangled in the same ecological devastation, the novel provides an alternative, renewed configuration of the human subject as a non-unitary, *transversal* entity, fully immersed in a network of material, spiritual and non-human relations.

This questioning and expanding of the frontiers of the human goes hand in hand with, and is made possible by, a simultaneous broadening of the frontiers of the text and a radical experimentation in genre practice. The fact that *Zoo City* adopts the perspective of a young black woman is particularly relevant, as it challenges the general tendency of Western science fiction to represent the human as predominantly white and male.[59] This is further achieved by incorporating subaltern spiritualities into the text; as Stobie aptly remarks, Beukes skilfully resorts to "polivocality, magical realism and her original fusion, *muti* noir, to expand her novel beyond narrowly Western, androcentric models. Traditional African belief systems are given respectful credence and symbolic power".[60] Rather than dealing with an invented or unmoored magic, the text opens up a space for a non-dominant spiritualism within traditional science fiction narrative: in so doing, Beukes acknowledges indigenous worldviews and learning modes and gives them value by placing them firmly in the future. At the same time, however, she emphasises the necessity to properly draw on this kind of spirituality, which should recoil from an amoral use of both science and technology (i.e., Zinzi's illegal participation in Internet scams) and the spiritual sphere itself (i.e., the practice of *muti* murders).

Thanks to her innovative blend of magic, mystery and crime, Beukes deploys and profoundly re-shapes the genre of science fiction to explore issues of inclusion, eco-social justice and empathy towards otherness. As the author herself acknowledges, "the reason why science-fiction is important is because it gives you a distorting lens that makes reality clearer. It's inventive, it's surprising, it's imaginative, and it allows us to talk about the big issues and who we are in the world and where we are right now".[61] Her nightmarish fantasy of a future Johannesburg is a formally daring attempt to provide a critical perspective on the 'new' South Africa, holding up a mirror to the real-life perpetuation of structural discriminations and injustices. In so doing, the novel traces a *continuum* between the colonial history of oppression and the failed promises of the post-democratic government, using the trope of waste – in a literal and figurative sense – to denounce the *in*humanity of a 'dirty' system.

[58] E. Steenkamp, "Familiar Animals", p. 184.

[59] J. Dickson, "Reading the (Zoo) City", p. 68.

[60] C. Stobie, "Dystopian Dreams from South Africa", p. 379.

[61] L. Beukes, "Lauren Beukes's Speech for the Arthur C. Clark Awards 2012", https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1S0MsIrT3ZM (last accessed on 28 August 2020).

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