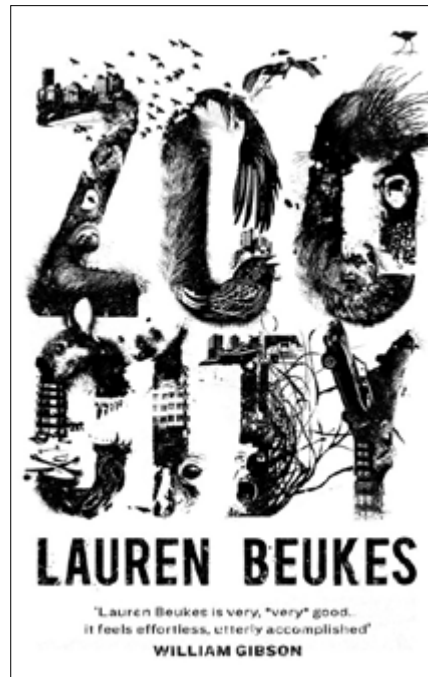


## READING THE (ZOO) CITY: THE SOCIAL REALITIES AND SCIENCE FICTION OF JOHANNESBURG

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South African author Lauren Beukes turned heads when her book *Zoo City* (2010), a fantastical mystery/crime-drama set in a re-imagined present-day Johannesburg, became the first novel from Africa to win the prestigious Arthur C. Clark award for best science fiction novel of the year.<sup>1</sup> Both the locale of Beukes's story and its privileging of a perspective from the inner-city margins of post-apartheid society, aligns *Zoo City* with the nascent genre of postcolonial science fiction. While the circumstances of Beukes's heroine, Zinzi—a young black woman, journalist-turned-hustler, recovering addict, ex-convict, living with *Zoo* stigma—allow for the narrative's critical perspective on the “New South Africa,” Johannesburg as the quintessential post-apartheid city is as important a character in *Zoo City* as its protagonist. Moreover, the inner-city neighborhood of Hillbrow, which the book's title more specifically signifies, is a space that has become closely associated with danger, criminality, marginality, and blackness. Yet Hillbrow is re-cast by Beukes as the center of *Zoo City*'s universe, and as such is revealed to be a pulsing cosmopolitan center of movement and activity at the heart Johannesburg's imagination. In fact, so central is the re-imagining of city-ness in Beukes's novel, offering an arresting and compelling angle of attention to Johannesburg and the subjectivities of its inhabitants, that I argue it warrants consideration within the growing canon of works on African urbanism.



Zoo City Cover. Courtesy of Joey Hi-Fi

In their introduction to *The Elusive Metropolis*, Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall (2008) describe the particularities, contradictions, and challenges that African cities pose to “the global city” paradigm that “has dominated the study of the urban form” (1). This paradigm, the author-editors explain, has both largely pathologized cities in Africa and the global south with “the metanarrative of urbanization, modernization, and crisis” (5), and has failed to consider that truly global cities are “composed not only of flows of money, skills, knowledge, security, machinery, and technology, but also of ideas, people, images and imaginaries” (3). In addition to Mbembe and Nuttall, scholars like Jane Guyer, Filip de Boeck, Rem Koolhaas, and AbdouMalik Simone (6), have taken up theorizing the African city

as wholly modern in its own right, inherently interconnected to global modes of production, extraction, and circulation, and, however elusive in form, as the very site where new vocabularies of city-ness are being re-born (32).

As I hope to demonstrate, Beukes's techniques of writing Johannesburg speak to the works of these scholars, and in turn their works offer insightful ways to read *Zoo City*. But furthermore, Beukes's innovative mixing of genres, which combine elements of cyberpunk, neo-Noir, fantasy, and magical realism, permit the kind of multivalent possibilities for representing modes of African urbanity that are simultaneously technological, mystical, cosmopolitan, futurist, and persistently haunted by both the occult and the past. Below I explore how the genre of science fiction, broadly conceived, wields through its mechanisms of “cognitive estrangement” (à la Darko Suvin) the ability to open up “gaps” for theorization foreclosed by ethnographic realism. Such gaps carry the potential for new ways of thinking, writing, and theorizing the city.

To this end, I first consider *Zoo City* as a postcolonial, or “ex-centric” narrative and present the case made for science fiction as a method of critical social theory. I then outline the ways in which Beukes writes Johannesburg through her literary subjects and its significance to ethnography on South African urbanism. From there I consider how the fantastical elements of *Zoo City*—namely that of “Aposymbiosis” (or *Zoo*), “shavi,” and the story's alternate timeline—do the kind of critical work suggested by Mbembe and Nuttall. But rather than go as far as to suggest “new vocabularies” for the metropolis, though the potential is certainly there, I posit that science fiction as social theory has the ability to provoke new insights into vocabularies of the present.

## ZOO CITY AS POSTCOLONIAL SCIENCE FICTION AND THE IMPORTANCE OF “EX-CENTRIC” STORIES

As Eric Smith (2012) points out in his recent work, *Globalization, Utopia, and Postcolonial Science Fiction*, the years of the new millennium have witnessed “the phenomenal efflorescence” of science/speculative fiction (SF) narratives coming from outside the hegemonic centers of Euro-America that “address the exigencies of postcoloniality and globalization” (5). This new emergence of SF stories from what Jean Comaroff, following Homi Bhabha, has called “ex-centric” spaces is particularly welcomed by science fiction studies for which the imperialistic parentage of the genre had begged debates as to whether SF could stand outside of its own western paradigm (Csicery-Ronay 2002; Rieder 2008; Smith 2012). In this regard, the similar histories (and later deconstruction) of science fiction as a genre and the discipline of anthropology—and their relationships to the colonial project—become noteworthy. As John Rieder explains, “the anachronistic structures of anthropological difference” through which “colonialism made space into time” by purporting an evolutionary model of cultural development was a key feature linking “emergent science fiction to colonialism” (6).

Anthropological theories implicated in the colonial ideologies of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century have been thoroughly critiqued by the discipline’s later practitioners (See Boonzaier and Sharp). Meanwhile, the imaginative centers of popular SF narratives of the same era remained largely Euro-centric and shared in this earlier anthropological imagination of Otherness cited by Rieder. While some of the “classical” SF canon promoted a positive appraisal of alien otherness, the subjects of radical alterity—the alien or the android—only

gained acceptance when they proved to be “more human than human.” In such narratives, Vivian Sobchack (2000) explains, the positioning of aliens as “just like us,” rather than suggesting “aliens *are* us,” maintained alien-ness as difference and celebrated a new (or renewed) western liberal humanism rather than posing a challenge to it (138). This critical historicizing of SF also aligns with literary criticism’s rebuke of the genre’s tendency to code “humanness” as predominantly white and male, and position “us” firmly in Europe and America. The desire or terror of encountering radical alterity, in opposition to which humanness becomes understood, always came from exotic elsewhere. Rieder (2008) further argues:

It is as if science fiction itself were a kind of palimpsest, bearing the persistent traces of a stubbornly visible colonial scenario beneath its fantastic script. Or, to change the metaphor, it is as if science fiction were polarized by the energies of the colonial field of discourse, like a piece of iron magnetized by its proximity to a powerful electrical field. Both of these metaphors are ways of saying that science fiction exposes something that colonialism imposes. However... colonialism is not simply the reality that science fiction mystifies.... It is part of the genre’s texture, a persistent, important component of its displaced references to history, its engagement in ideological production, and its construction of the possible and the imaginable. (15)

As if proving a further step of this entanglement between SF and colonial history, from the new millennium then enters the more promising sub-genre of “postcolonial science fiction” that has only begun to be

theorized with consolidation and rigor (See Hopkinson and Mehan 2004; Rieder 2008; Langer 2011; Smith 2012; Campbell and Hall 2013). Rather than purport a move away from the problematics of colonialism, this postcolonial turn in SF brings persistent tropes to the surface in the spirit of critique. The best description may be Nalo Hopkinson’s sign-off in her introduction to one of the first edited anthologies dedicated to the nascent genre, *So Long Been Dreaming*. Hopkinson describes postcolonial SF as,

...stories that take the meme of colonizing the natives and, from the experience of the colonizee, critique it, pervert it, fuck with it, with irony, with anger, with humor, and also, with love and respect for the genre of science fiction that makes it possible to think about new ways of doing things. (Hopkinson and Mehan 2004, 9)

Just as postcolonial theory has taken to task the history of western imperialism and the hegemonic narratives that claim to be universal by re-versing their logics and revealing the politics of knowledge that sustained them, so postcolonial SF usurps the tools of cognitive estrangement wielded by Western imaginaries and re-directs them. Here a kind of double estrangement is achieved. The perspective of the alien and the android, as metaphors for the colonized, alien-ated Other are privileged, and what is revealed is not “we are all human” but rather “we are [all] aliens” (Sobchack 2000, 138), and moreover, we are all postcolonial aliens.

In this way, “postcolonial” SF and “ex-centric” SF often connote the same thing, the aim of which Jean Comaroff (2009) has described as “the instructive disorientation that comes of looking at our own world from... a place beyond the traditional heartland of

Euro-America” (33). Both qualifiers of “postcolonial” and “ex-centric” can therefore also describe places within the (non-)traditional margins of Euro-America. They both invoke spaces outside the political boundaries of the West that remain within the imagination of Empire, as well as the growing spaces within Western boundaries that are perpetually without. The two terms can also be applied to works of afrofuturism, like that of Samuel Delaney and Octavia Butler, tracing back to the 1970s in the United States. Whatever their purview, postcoloniality and ex-centricity offer productive elsewhere not because they stand outside of the West, but because their perspectives come from spaces and subjects historically erased from, yet simultaneously constitutive of, Western narratives.

*Zoo City* is therefore both an ex-centric story and a postcolonial narrative. It is contextually grounded in a city outside of Euro-America, and moreover within Hillbrow: a ghettoized “ex-centric” space at the heart of Johannesburg and a well-known stopover for migrants hailing from other ex-centric spaces. As stated above, this also makes Hillbrow a thoroughly cosmopolitan center, one in which new claims to urbanity are being made by subjects previously relegated to the townships at the peripheries of the city or ostensibly “ruralized” under apartheid’s infamous redistribution of people onto a colonial landscape. And also, significantly, by those dis-located from outside of the “New South Africa.” The major and minor characters that inhabit *Zoo City* are these postcolonial subjects whose perspectives and positionality navigate the story. They include hustlers, foreigners, refugees, recovering addicts, sex-workers, criminals, and street hawkers. The protagonist’s path introduces the reader to city subjects outside of Hillbrow as well—to journalists, social workers, hipsters, clubbers, record producers, *sangomas*,

shack-dwellers-turned-pop-stars, and notably, more criminals—more postcolonial, post-apartheid subjects inhabiting and moving between different city spaces and their various margins, re-writing the apartheid city as they do so. True to postcolonial form, *Zoo City* is therefore a story characterized by hybridity and movement, its ex-centricity revealed in its South African urban context of creativity, mobility, and multiplicity, and of global interconnection rather than provincial isolation.

### WRITING THE (ZOO) CITY: CHARACTERS AS INFRASTRUCTURE

*The bar is situated on the second floor of what used to be a shopping arcade back when this part of town was cosmopolitan central, with its glitzy hotels and restaurants and outdoor cafes and malls packed to the skylights with premium luxury goods. Even Zoo City has a Former Life. There was big talk about comebacks and gentrification a few years ago, which led to months of eviction raids by the Red Ants, with their red helmets and sledgehammers and bullhorns, and bright-eyed landlords buoyed up on the property boom bricking up the lower storeys of buildings. But the squatters always found a way back in. We’re an enterprising bunch. And it helps to have a certain reputation.* (Beukes 51)

The recent history of inner-city Johannesburg is one of white evacuation and transient infiltration. As Simone (2008) points out, “roughly 90 percent of Johannesburg’s inner-city residents were not living there ten years ago” (72). Its cosmopolitan design had been intended solely for the ruling white minority, but

through the late 1980s and ‘90s as the apartheid system of governance moved from climactic crisis to its tenuous dismantling, most of its white inhabitants fled to gated suburbs at the city’s peripheries, leaving the inner-city available to former township residents, migrant laborers, and foreign nationals looking for work, effectively reversing apartheid logics of race and space (72-83). The neighborhood of Hillbrow has been described in both fiction and social science research as a place for economic opportunity, however irregular, informal, and fraught, as in Ziman’s 2008 film *Jerusalem*; for cheap accommodation while following pursuits elsewhere in the city, as in Mpe’s seminal *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001); and for escape—from the law, from family, and from the past. Zinzi’s motivations fit most easily into this final category.

*It was inevitable I’d end up in Zoo City. Although I didn’t realize that until after the fifth rental agency had sneered over their clipboards at Sloth and told me they didn’t have anything available in the suburbs—had I tried Hillbrow?* (60-1)

Throughout the novel, Beukes reveals the details of Zinzi’s sordid past to the reader: her drug addiction, her manipulation of her friends, family, and co-workers, her prison time, and the guilt she carries for the death of her brother. It is this death in Zinzi’s past that earned her the animal partner and the identifier of *Zoo*. The fantastic elements of *Zoo City* are discussed further below, suffice to say that in this alternative present imagined by Beukes, a syndrome or pathology has developed in recent history: those responsible for the death of another person—possibly as the manifestation of their guilt—develop a symbiotic relationship with an animal, the severing of which is fatal. This



Hillbrow, Johannesburg, Gauteng, ZA. 'A Visit to Constitution Hill'. Flickr: Axel Bührmann

post-humanist syndrome acts as a new form of stigma in Beukes's novel. "Aposymbiosis" also operates as a flexible metaphor. At different points in the narrative it can reference HIV/AIDS, suggest social burdens with hidden potentials for empowerment, signify criminality, and unsettle boundaries of "humanness" altogether. While Zinzi's move to Hillbrow is an attempt to escape her past, and save herself, it is the stigmatization of her *Zoo* status that makes Hillbrow the inevitable destination for her escape. Hillbrow, in reality and in fiction, has likewise been marked by its criminality.

*Elysium Heights* [in Hillbrow] wasn't the obvious choice of location for *Starting Over*. There were other, nicer blocks I looked at. But when *Elysium's* security guard agreed to show me the vacant apartment on the sixth floor when I asked him, there was something comforting about the barbed wire and the broken windows, the way all the buildings connected via officially constructed walkways or improvised bridges

*to form one sprawling ghetto warren. It reminded me reassuringly of prison. Only here, the doors open when you want them to.* (61)

In "Literary City," Sarah Nuttall (2008) explores the representation of Johannesburg in fiction, particularly those written during the transition years between the late 1980s and early 2000s. Her questions offer productive entry points from which to consider *Zoo City*. For example: "What might a Johannesburg text be? How does Johannesburg emerge as an ideal and a form in contemporary literatures of the city? What literary 'infrastructures' are giving the city imaginary shape? Which vocabularies of separations and connectedness surface—and recede?" (195). Beukes offers her own experiences and methods for writing a re-imagined Johannesburg that is anchored to reality in ways that address some of these questions.

**Beukes:** I'm interested in all the possibilities of cities, the clash of cultures and economics—particularly in cities like Johannesburg, which is often seen as the New York of Africa, for its electric energy and ambition and pace, but also because it's tough to break. As Kgebetli Moele (2006) said in *Room 207*, which I paraphrased for *Zoo City*, it's the city of dreams—and nightmares.

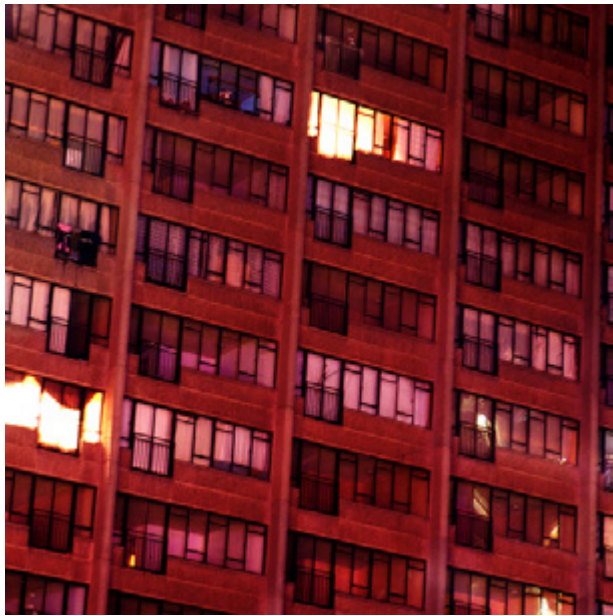
I'm interested in psychogeography, the layers of history, how places are constructed and for what intentions and how those change, that cities improvise themselves. I try to make it as real as possible—especially when playing with the fantastic, you need to anchor it with real details. I do research trips, walk around and talk to people. It's something I learned from being a journalist

for *Colors* magazine, where the photographer and I always had an open brief around a particular theme and we would just go wherever it took us.

In researching cities, I have specific ideas in mind about certain periods of history or a location I want to use... but I also allow room to play, to adventure and see what emerges. It's intuitive and it gives me a great excuse to wander around and talk to people and indulge my curiosity. (*pers. comm.*, Dec. 1, 2013)

Keeping in mind Nuttall's inquiry into literary representations of the city and Beukes's fieldwork/informant based methodology for writing a realistic yet fantastic Johannesburg, I propose to include Simone's theorization of "people as infrastructure" toward reading the written city. It is through Zinzi and the secondary characters in Beukes's book that the reader comes to know this alternative, yet grounded Johannesburg. The narratives of these research-informed characters mirror the tenuous alliances fostered between marginalized city-dwellers that character-ize Simone's essay on the inner-city.

Indeed, many of Beukes's characters fit into and across the tropes of African subjects identified by Nuttall in fiction on Johannesburg. Especially relevant here are the figures of the *sapeur*, the migrant worker, the illegal immigrant, and the hustler. For example, a central subject to Zinzi's experience in *Zoo City* is her love interest, Benoît—a Congolese refugee, animalled with a mongoose from his child-soldier past, working a series of jobs across the city. "Elias [the name on his uniform] was just the guy he filled in for when Elias was sick. The rest of the time, Benoît hustled. Odd jobs, man-on-the-side-of-the-road stuff, bouncer, labourer,



Close-up building image. 'Hillbrow'. Flickr: André S Clements Attribution 2.0 Generic (CC BY 2.0)

fixer, entrepreneur, as long as it was legal, or mostly legal” (65). D’Nice on the other hand is a charmless hustler with interests that extend to the most destructive ends of the shadow economy, and with little regard for solidarity. “D’Nice is the opposite of nice... if you ask him, D’Nice will tell you his talent is scavenging information... He lifts it off the street and flips it for cash to whoever is paying” (56). In fact D’Nice acts as a kind of counter to Benoît’s persona as a scrappy but tragic slum-dweller. Benoît is charming, but aloof, with a resilient sense of ethics. Contrastingly, D’Nice is “one of those guys with his fingers gravy-deep in all kinds of dodgy pies.” His ventures include counterfeiting ID documents, informing on his friends, buying sputum from TB sufferers to sell to those seeking government grants, and we are left to imagine what else. “[Y]ou’d be stupid to underestimate him” (55).

Vuyo, on the other hand—Zinzi’s “catcherman” for the email scams she drafts who also holds the drug debts that coerce her to write them—straddles subjectivities of the hustler-sapeur. Like the sapeur—a kind of sartorial exhibitionist—described by Nuttall (2008b), Vuyo is also a “figure of spatial transition, operating in the interstices of large cultures, participating in a cult of appearances, especially expensive clothing; a mobile individual...he circulates between countries, pulling off coups in otherwise invisible spaces in and between cities” (199). Vuyo moves skillfully between the shadow spaces and upscale clubs of Johannesburg, his coups and transnational mobility made largely possible through cyberspace. “I like to think of him hanging out in a huge sprawling Internet café adjoining a raucous street market in Accra or Lagos...but the truth is he’s probably in a dingy apartment like this one, maybe even right next door” (Beukes 2010, 39). When Zinzi finally meets her cyber-employer, it’s at The Rand Club, a real world “relic of Johannesburg’s Wild West days, when it was frequented by Cecil John Rhodes and other colonial slumlords” (42). Their meeting involves scamming a naïve American couple who have traveled to South Africa believing they can profit from financially assisting a dethroned “African Princess.”

*I assume it’s Vuyo because he’s the best-dressed guy in here, in a suit and pointy shoes like shiny leather sharks. The patrons pushing the boundaries of their liquid lunch-hour have the same aura of clingy colonial nostalgia as the venue, with its chandeliers and gilded railings, caricatures of famous members, mounted buckheads and faded oil paintings of fox hunts. Vuyo, by comparison, has the air of the fox that’s escaped the painting and double-backed [sic] to raid the*

*kitchen.... Generically handsome with a ruby stud in his ear that hints oh-so-tastefully at danger. All the better to scam the pants off you. (42)*

Zinzi herself is a master-hustler. She deftly utilizes the connections from her “Former Life” in journalism, as a suburbanite, and as an addict, and those she’s fostered since moving to Hillbrow, to enable her movements across the city. She alters her dress, her posture, her way of speaking—or writing when drafting her email scams—and carries her old business cards around to gain access to the spaces, people, and information she needs to get by in her new profession as a kind of magical private investigator: a finder of lost things.

Before continuing, an acknowledgement should be made of the slippages in analysis between the realities of living in Hillbrow and their representations in fiction. While social scientists have given ethnographic attention to the methods of survival at societies’ margins through what Simone describes as the “conjunction of heterogeneous activities” (71), many of which are admittedly deleterious, crime as depicted in fiction has in many ways produced a vocabulary for either appraising or condemning its actors as either resilient or amoral. Closely linked to this portrayal of crime and criminals is the representation of the State. Jean and John Comaroff (2004; 2006) have written extensively on perceptions of crime and disorder in post-apartheid South Africa, as well as on crime’s depictions in fiction. Crime fiction in the United States, for example, especially during the transitional years of The Great Depression, was imagined and mass mediated through subjects like the private-eye—narratives in which the tenuous moral economy and extralegal actors produced popular antiheroes. Comaroff and Comaroff (2004) continue,

... the outlaw embodies, often in deeply racialized guise, a displaced discourse about desire and impossibility, one as characteristic of the neo-liberal moment in South Africa as it was of the Depression-era U.S. Here, too, the state is regarded with ambivalence, roughly in proportion to its alleged failure to secure the well being of its citizens. Here too, violence speaks elegiacally of a very general angst about the anomic implosion of the established order of things. (807)

Without thoroughly investigating a comparison of the social realities of American cities in the 1930s to Johannesburg post-apartheid, given the private investigator protagonist and neo-Noir elements of *Zoo City*, it is not surprising to see characters courting a precarious line between chaos and order, shadow and spectacle. Furthermore, Beukes presents these characters, and the flexible in/formality of their maneuvers to make do in the city, in recognizably moral terms. While the heroes, antiheroes, and clear-cut villains are more or less revealed in the end, their means of re-working city spaces in search of “regularity and provisionality,” toward righteous, ambivalent, or nefarious means, prove similar to one another (Simone 2008, 69). Moreover Beukes’s heroes, anti-heroes, and villains are nearly all “animalled,” or “Zoo.” Nevertheless, as both ethnographers and Beukes herself has pointed out in a piece on “Writing the Other,” ethically portraying Johannesburg’s gendered, racialized, and increasingly vulnerable under-classes, requires research, imagination, and care.

There are several other characters whose storylines and personas illustrate Simone’s attention to the resilience, inventiveness, and precarious alliances of marginalized city-dwellers and their “attempts to derive

maximal outcomes from a minimal set of elements” (71). These characters as infrastructure represent innovative if largely invisible modes of economic transaction in Johannesburg in which new zones of racial and class belonging and exclusion are forged as well as traversed, both hardened and made malleable, through connections fostered between people across physical and virtual spaces. Informal, shadow, and occult economies are therefore prevailing themes in *Zoo City* as barter, favors, crime, and magic represent available means by which urban slum-dwellers re-work the city in order to get by, or even become enterprising. More than innovative survivalists, however, what emerges through Beukes’s characters is also a striving for a new kind of ethical city-subject. One that tries to distinguish itself from other ways of being-in-the-city while under similarly constraining circumstances, as in the explicit distinction between Benoît’s resilient charm and D’Nice’s insidious ingenuity, and even more directly in Zinzi’s search for redemption. Made clearer below is how the ever-present animals of *Zoo City*, as extensions of their human subjects, unsettle notions of indivisible personhood by reference to magic and the occult, pulling the notion of characters as infrastructure even further into invisible realms of connection. At the same time, these animal-partners also point to old and new modes of dehumanizing subjection enacted through the more material infrastructures of Johannesburg.

#### **CARTOGRAPHIES OF THE RE-IMAGINED CITY**

Beukes’s characters—as infrastructure—also map the literary city of Johannesburg through their movements in the narrative. Zinzi’s imagined, mobile vantages thus character-ize the novel’s urban spaces. While some spatial impressions are given in the excerpts above, those I wish to focus on here include the gated community,

the city-suburb, and the invisible spaces beneath the city. In doing so, I take another cue from Sarah Nuttall (2008b) and “explore the imaginary infrastructures that surface” in Beukes’s novel, “producing writerly, metropolitan maps” (200).

Distinct to Beukes’s first person narration (through Zinzi) of Johannesburg’s suburban spaces are their descriptions as penetrable and cosmopolitan, yet characterized by architectures, technologies, and social modes of would-be separation and exclusion. The examples given below distinguish between the gated community, the city-suburb, and Newtown—an aptly named recently gentrified space edging on the inner-city—and suggest a difference in their physical and psychological distance from the city’s center.

**The Gated Community:** *The car pulls away, a little more vigorously than required, under the boom, over a speed bump and into the rotten heart of leafy suburbia. The suburbs are overshadowed with oaks and jacarandas and elms... the grassy verges on the pavement are more manicured than a porn star’s topiary, running up to ten-metre-high walls topped with electric fencing. Anything could happen behind those walls and you wouldn’t know a thing. Maybe that’s the point. (80)*

*There used to be shortcuts you could take through the suburbs, but they’ve closed them off, illegally: gated communities fortified like privatized citadels. Not so much keeping the world out as keeping the festering middle-class paranoia in. (97)*

Descriptions of gated communities as vulgar and pathological, as “rotten, festering paranoia,” emphasize their exclusionary practices as both undesirable to the

city as a whole as well as socially suspect. Contrary to the flexibility, improvisation, and openness—however risky—that characterize Hillbrow, the gated communities represented in *Zoo City* become the enclaves of the most nefarious deeds, occult and otherwise. The character most closely identified with this space and its representation is Odysseus Huron, himself an aging, bloated, secretive music producer striving to stay relevant by exploiting the fresh faces and sounds of teen-pop duo, the Radebe twins. Zinzi describes his estate:

*The pool is an enormous old-fashioned square, with mosaic tiles and a classical water feature of two maidens pouring out a jug of water. But the tiles are chipped, the lapis-lazuli blue faded to a dull glaucoma. The brackish water is a vile green, a skin of rotting leaves cloying the surface. Lichen has crept over the two maidens. Moss clogs the folds of their robes and the crooks of their elbows, blanking out their features like a beauty mask gone wild. Like someone ate their faces. (85-6)*

The prose here is riddled with foreshadowing. As we learn, beneath the pool lies Odysseus’s dungeon-like bunker where his occult solutions to his own Former Life problems precipitate the story’s narrative climax. More than a hint at later plot points, however, the gated community represents—through the odious Odysseus—the new spaces of an economic apartheid trying to tap into the elusive streams of neoliberal capital from behind security walls. Rather than a place of escape or even reclusion, the gated community is portrayed as a stagnant and rotting imposition, as congesting the flows that otherwise connect the more open spaces of the city by trying to consume its energy while remaining apart.

In contrast, the city-suburb and Newtown are sites of movement and spectacle in which belonging is guarded with social sanction rather than security gates. The city-suburbs are spaces of hyphenation between center and periphery, while Zinzi’s reflections on Newtown illustrate a slightly different commitment to city-ness. Both are expressed as transitional spaces of exhibition used by emerging new city-subjects, and both are tinged with Zinzi’s characteristic cynicism.

**The City-Suburb:** *I get the taxi to drop me off in Rosebank and find the nearest payphone. It’s an anachronism that the mall even has a working payphone, but I guess it caters to the traders at the African market and teens who have run out of airtime. Or the dubiously agenda’d, like me.... [W]e end up meeting under the fluorescent lights of the local Kauai, attracting the rapt attention of a cluster of well-pierced teens sitting around a plastic table loaded down with bile-green smoothies. While other passersby, the black-diamond hipsters and mall rats and suits, spare me only sliding glances reserved for people in wheelchairs and burn victims... (126-7)*

**Newtown:** *Vuyo insists on meeting me at Kaldi’s coffee shop in Newtown, the funkified art, theatre, design and fashion capital of the inner city. They burned this neighborhood down in the early 1900s to prevent the spread of bubonic plague, and it occurs to me that they should consider doing it again, to purge the blight of well-meaning hipsters desperately trying to paint it rainbow... I squeeze between the tables packed with actors, dancers, trendy new media folk, BEE venture capitalists in suits with no ties,*



‘Chilling Day in Newtown’. Flickr: Henti Smith. Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.0 Generic (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

*and capitalist wannabes (also in suits, but with ties) who have the ambition but not the office space, and come to use Kaldi’s free Wi-Fi. (183)*

Beukes’s impressions of Johannesburg resemble Nuttall’s commentary in other literature on the city. Referencing Hayden (2003), Nuttall describes what I have called the city-suburb as “what used to be thought of as the noncentral city parts of the metropolis, but which is becoming an increasingly dominant urban cultural landscape in Johannesburg.” *Zoo City* also “name-drops, as does the celebrity culture of the suburbs” and is “written in the spirit of the new journalism, echoing Hunter Thompson in which ‘resemblance to real life figures is entirely intentional’” (Nuttall 2008b, 208). The place names in the excerpts above are real, and they identify space much like the stereotyped personas that Zinzi describes inhabiting them; they are sites of visible surfaces, carefully stylized to project ways of being and belonging to a burgeoning, but tenuous middle-class, no longer identified by whiteness, but often built on a form of bluffing. They are spaces for meeting and talking and to be seen. Zinzi’s stigmatized

status made visible by the sloth on her back highlights this importance of appearances by emphasizing her own exclusion.

The cynicism that colors Zinzi's narration of the spaces described above stems from her "Former Life" experiences (before becoming animalled/Zoo) as a suburbanite and an "outrageously expensive indie boutique kinda girl" (8), giving her an intimate knowledge of a different way-of-being in the city. This knowledge gives her a kind of power to "see through the bullshit," as the saying goes, of those very appearances. We are given to understand her as a transient subject herself, lost or living in moments of purgatory between drug addiction, her "Former Life," and an attempt at personal redemption. Redemption that she hopes to find in her search for one of the missing Radebe twins across the spaces of the city, and later, when her search turns to finding Benoit's estranged family, outside of South Africa. Zinzi's postcolonial subjectivity, her personal history, and her own hopes for the future, tint the representation of the city through her experiences of transitional belonging and exclusion, offering a commentary on the marginalized, urban subject of Johannesburg in social reality.

Zinzi's search also takes her underneath the city, however, and to its outskirts. The more invisible infrastructures of Johannesburg become the sites of escape and disposal, and a reflection on the city's past and other forgotten things.

**The Drains:** *It's not like I'm the world authority on Joburg's storm drains, but I've been down here enough times looking for lost things to know the basic lie of the land. This is all unfamiliar. The tunnels are a scramble of pitch-black termite holes, some of them narrowing away to nothing,*

*like whoever was digging them got bored and wandered off. The original gold diggings maybe, when Johannesburg was still just a bunch of hairy prospectors scrabbling in the dirt. (212)*

**The Mines:** *I drive out south to where the last of the mine dumps are—sulfur-coloured artificial hills, laid waste by the ravages of weather and reprocessing, shored up with scrubby grass and eucalyptus trees. Ugly valleys have been gouged out and tricked away by the ton to sift out the last scraps of gold the mining companies missed the first time around. Maybe it's appropriate that eGoli, place of gold, should be self-cannibalising. (288)*

Zinzi's descriptions of the drains give the city a depth of character that contrasts to the street-level impressions of Johannesburg, while the mine dumps reflect on the ecological erasures created by the industrial origins of urbanism. Here, narratives of the past—of the abandoned mining infrastructures that gave rise to the city and the new wastelands of extraction that serve as dumping grounds for bodies made expendable via the historical, material, and social infrastructures of Johannesburg—come to surface in Zinzi's search. These are spaces where Zinzi looks for lost things. They are invisible spaces written into literary being as Zinzi's "shavi"—her magical talent—permits, or rather coerces her to explore.

Lastly, in contrast to the cynicism and suspicion that Zinzi conveys for the gated community, the city-suburb, and trendy Newtown, or her unease in the city's underbelly, it is back in Hillbrow where the otherwise ugliness of urban decay and struggle reveals the possibility for beauty.

**Hillbrow:** *Benoit ducks under a laundry line, sheets and dresses and shirts flapping like tethered kites. Everything takes on a muted quality fifteen floors up. The traffic is reduced to a flow and stutter, the car horns like the calls of mechanical ducks. The skyline is in crisp focus, the city graded in rusts and coppers by the sinking sun that has streaked the wispy clouds the colour of blood. It's the dust in the air that makes the Highveld sunsets so spectacular, the fine yellow mineral deposits kicked up from the mine dumps, the carbon-dioxide choke of the traffic. Who says bad things can't be beautiful? (136)*

Here it is the precarious alliances between the marginalized subjects of Hillbrow that tint the scene with optimism. Zinzi's reflections on the sociality of Hillbrow conjure a cityscape simultaneously characterized by social degradation and vitality, one that is misunderstood by Johannesburg's (less) other(ed) literary city-subjects.

*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 pm, 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 their dingy apartments to chat and smoke cigarettes*



*on the fire-escape, and catcall the commuters heading to the taxi rank on the street below.* (132)

In contrast to the suburbs and the inner-peripheries of the city's center, Zinzi character-izes Hillbrow as a space of more genuine transformation: from ugliness into beauty, through connection rather than separation, and for solidarity through exclusion. As Zinzi explains above, Hillbrow is a social prison with open doors.

### MINDING THE GAP

I turn now to the possibilities of thinking about urbanism with science fiction. By drawing attention to the imaginary elements that unmoor *Zoo City's* narrative from realism, I explore the potentials that science fiction carries for approaching the social realities of the post-apartheid city. Nuttall's (2008a) reworking of Foucault's "stylizing the self" offers a method for appraising the fantastical elements that Beukes uses to fashion her novel. Nuttall draws on ideas of translation and "gap"—"between one meaning or text and another"—in describing how advertising, public images, texts, and the ways people dress and stylize their bodies while moving through the city remaps and reworks the surface of city spaces (93). For thinking through *Zoo City*, we might work with the "the gap" as a space of critical potential created with the cognitive estrangement between actuality and fantasy.

In particular, the role of "Aposymbiosis"—the syndrome or pathology that is the primary element of estrangement in Beukes's novel—warrants further commentary. Added to this re-imagined world is also the existence of magic, or "shavi," as the extrasensory abilities that accompany the acquiring of Aposymbiosis.

While these fantastical elements of *Zoo City* can stand at different moments in the narrative for different metaphors, I argue, as others have (Stobie 2012), that the flexible signifier of *Zoo-ness* stands most strongly for criminality and criminalization. Although slippage persists between these two notions—the former suggests a way of being in the city, while the later is a social marking imposed from elsewhere—both gesture to events of the past that are carried into the present, and that have implications for the future.

Through Aposymbiosis and shavi, Beukes builds a world where criminality is represented as an animal partner, as visible and sentient baggage that one carries around and must nurture—as Zinzi does, carrying her sloth on her back throughout the story. Yet being marked and consequently stigmatized as *Zoo*, or "animalled," also carries a hidden gift. To have been pushed by circumstances into taking on the darker sides of the informal economy, to have caused the death of another, or to have willfully murdered, is portrayed here as an existence that comes with a unique power and perspective on the world. This power, or magic, held by the "animalled"—a word that suggests subjection from above—goes beyond the kind of "militant pessimism" of the dispossessed that, according to Tom Moylan, fosters a "focused anger" and "radical hope" characteristic to critical dystopias (qtd. in Stobie 2012, 370), though such a perspective certainly permeates the story. Rather this power is articulated as a unique extra sensory "talent" held by each animalled person. Zinzi can trace invisible threads linking people to their lost things, and things to lost people. D'Nice's shavi is his ability to usurp "moments of happiness, absorbing them haphazardly like a sponge," what Zinzi calls "a seratonin vampire" (56). Benoît's shavi works by "dampening other people's. He's the static to [the] ambient

noise, the fuzzy snow that cancels out other frequencies" (67).

No clear cause or definition is given for Aposymbiosis and this resistance to demystification allows it to speak to a range of metaphors that emerge alongside criminality. Beukes conveys this ambiguity surrounding *Zoo-ness* by including short chapters within the novel that offer divergent perspectives, voiced in different registers, around the appearance and character of Aposymbiosis. These interjecting chapters are as varied as a psychiatric recommendation for "Aposymbiot individuals who exhibit psychic trauma" from their delusions (Chapter 18), a journalistic excerpt of interviews with imprisoned *Zoos* around the world (Chapter 10), and a documentary film synopsis about "Patient Zero" of the global "ontological Shift" that came with the millennial emergence of "Acquired Aposymbiotic Familiarism" (Chapter 8). This persistent openness and multivocal ambiguity allows for various forms of social marking and stigma—the psychological, the sociological, and the pathological—to surface at different moments in the narrative, drawing out multiple layers of meaning entangled with criminal identification.

In addition to these descriptions of *Zoo-ness*, its visibility, necessitated by the need to keep one's animal close at all times, foregrounds different referents over others as Zinzi moves across the city. The metaphor that predominates is contingent on the "character" of the space being occupied. For example, while some buildings "have a policy," other spaces, like the city-suburban streets with their emphasis on appearances, turn *Zoo-ness* into a curiosity: "the Goth kids have no shame. They're practically staking me out. I raise one hand, busted-celebrity-mode, acknowledging, yes, it really is me, now please leave me alone..." (127). While stigma is "re-mixed" here with youth counter-culture,

what also surfaces in these moments of spatial contingency are specters of the apartheid-past in the city's present.

While arbitrary categories of race and ethnicity were strictly codified and spatially designated under apartheid, the nineties brought a theoretical freedom of self-definition and movement across city-spaces that has nevertheless remained policed by old categories of race and new categories of class. As Nuttall (2008a) points out, however, the re-mixing of both nostalgic and nascent material culture, as technologies of race and class, can be seen to continuously reopen gaps of desire. This occurs alongside the neoliberal emphasis placed on identity and consumerism showcased on the streets of Johannesburg (113-115). In this way, the possibilities for understanding the past's *presence* through the articulations of newness as difference, illustrates yet another advantage of the flexibility of Aposymbiosis as estranged signifier. Alongside the troubled past of the city rests the weight of Zinzi's own criminal back-story, personified in the sloth that hangs from her neck. The possibility for redemption through transformation, a central theme throughout the novel, can therefore be read not just as Zinzi's narrative, but also as the city's.

What significance then lies in the presence of animals as partners in the city? The possibilities are manifold, as other SF authors have demonstrated. Most notably perhaps is Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968), in which a religious morality has developed around the empathetic connection to animals, most of which are nearly extinct. In Dick's novel, mechanical animals, or animal *replicants* have been developed for companionship while human *replicants* are used for labor in off-world colonies. Dick questions conventional notions of humanness, empathy, and emotion through human-animal-android relations

and distinctions. A more recent example of fiction that takes its context from South Africa is J.M Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999), in which dogs appear as a symbol through which questions of humanness, redemption, and new forms of relation after apartheid are explored. This unsettling of animal-human distinctions also gestures to modes of racial dehumanization—and indeed criminalization—imposed under apartheid and perhaps re-emerging in recent trends of xenophobia, as discussed further below. Animals therefore have a wide-ranging precedence as literary signs that provoke attention to the boundaries and ethics of humanness. One of Beukes's interventions in *Zoo City* is to bring this symbolism into conversation with African traditional religions.

Animals are closely associated with an invisible world of spirits and ancestors in African cosmologies, and Beukes draws on their identification as common witch-familiars, and their byproducts as powerful elements used in *muti*, when framing them as flexible signifiers in *Zoo City*. Perhaps the most provocative tangential chapter not mentioned above is taken from (the real) Penny Miller's *Myths and Legends of Southern Africa*, which Beukes states in her acknowledgements, “haunted my childhood with its wonderful stories and distinctly disturbing illustrations” (353). The excerpt reads,

*The mashave are spirits of foreigners, or of wanderers who died far away from their families and clans and did not receive a proper burial. Owing to this, they were never “called home”, but continued to roam restlessly through the bush. Homeless spirits like these are feared because they are always on the watch for a living host in whom to reside; as the spirit of*

*a wonderer cannot go back to the land of his ancestors, it seeks the body of one who is willing to harbour him.... Some mashave-possessed individuals are even believed to confer skills in such improbable things as football, horse-racing or attaining good examination marks! (201-2)*

Beukes's invocation of Miller's descriptions of *mashave*, re-articulated as “shavi” by the animalled of *Zoo City*, associates Aposymbiosis with “the spirits of foreigners” and implies a close connection of the *Zoo* signifier to the intensification of xenophobia in South Africa, typified by the rash of violence in 2008.

The recurrent criminalization and stigmatization of foreign Africans and the shadow economies that such-marked and impoverished subjects participate in to “make do” in the city were significant social realities at the time the Beukes's writing that repeatedly surface in her narrative. Indeed, the very question of belonging in the city is provoked by the curious presence of wild animals in urban spaces, suggesting perhaps, a sense of feral danger and possibility. It is through these empathic animal-human attachments, however, that conviviality with shifting Otherness becomes possible in Beukes's Johannesburg. And if we also appraise these animal-partners as Miller's *mashave*, the displaced spirits of South Africa's troubled past that many believe act as important social agents in the alliances forged in world the living, then the conviviality of the past with the present also becomes imaginable. Returning with these ideas to the text, it is Benoit's story as a child-soldier-turned-refugee and his centrality to the book's climax that further confirm the entanglement of criminalization, social exclusion, and redemption in the novel. His character also creates the opportunity for Zinzi to realize her own redemption as she leaves Johannesburg to

find his family—a mission she hopes will be, “the best thing I’ve done with my miserable life.”

### CONCLUSION: HOW ESTRANGEMENT AND SCIENCE FICTION WORK IN THE CITY

While the flexibility of Aposymbiosis and shavi as estranged signifiers open up numerous gaps for theorizing the grounded city of Johannesburg, how can taking science fiction seriously contribute to the innovative methodologies undertaken by scholars like Nuttall, Mbembe, and Simone? As Jean Comaroff (2009) explains, estrangement as a method of deploying alienation toward enlightenment is not new. “The Russian Formalists referred to it as ‘defamiliarization’; the dramatist, Bertold Brecht, Frederick Jameson reminds us, called it the ‘estrangement effect.’” It relates as well to “the kind of unsettling discrepancy that W.E.B. Du Bois dubbed ‘double consciousness,’ and that Edward Said saw as the positive effect of exile” (32). Darko Suvin’s concept of cognitive estrangement as the combining of the cognitive, scientific rigor of describing “the real world” with an imaginary universe is also critical to this genealogy (qtd. in Renault 1980, 114). It is in the gap between the imaginary and the real that Suvin sees the potential for political critique (117).

The problem with Suvin’s description of cognitive estrangement, according to Renault, is its invocation of “the real world.” If estrangement simply created a gap-to-be-filled between the reality (the referent) of criminality and the fantasy (the estranged signifier) of *Zoo*, then adding a SF element to Simone’s “people as infrastructure” should simply produce new insights into “the real” city. “The reality” of this process is, of course, more complicated and thus returns us to the shared history of anthropology, science fiction, and Rieder’s palimpsest of colonial logics that postcolonial SF works

to reveal. For ethnography, itself a rigorous mode of creative non-fiction, cannot escape its own need to estrange reality in order to make it legible. And not just to an audience of outsiders, but at all. Simone acknowledges this dilemma in his ending of *For the City Yet to Come* (2004) by citing Francois Woukoache’s film *Fragments of Life* (1999), in which a couple in a taxi are unable to move or speak as they witness the disparate stories taking place in the city. The couple remains paralyzed in their seats as if by some burdensome knowledge that cannot be conveyed in its totality, provoking Simone to ask, “what in the end can be said about the urban forces at work” (243) and, moreover, what language do we need to speak of it?

The work of ethnography and of science fiction in trying to re-present the city and its subjects are more similar than they are distinct. This is not to say that ethnography is closer to fantasy than reality, but rather that the fantastic of science fiction also deploys an anthropological imagination. What the estranging elements of SF accomplish is a “fiction twice removed” (Renault 1980, 117). It takes our representations of the world, rather than the world as it exists, and unsettles them. Its critical work lies not in its ability to move us toward better vocabularies for understanding the social realities of cities “on the ground,” or cities “yet to come,” but rather to make us think with vocabularies that do not exist. The cognitive leap that such an exercise requires—one that SF readers are particularly willing to make—provokes us to mine for meaning in the socio-cultural context of the work’s production. Aposymbiosis becomes criminality, HIV/AIDS, stigma, trauma, racialism, foreignness, and ancestral spirits, while shavi becomes agency, power, and a weapon of the poor. Flexing these concepts of “real world” sociality toward the gap created with estrangement, so as

to make the story legible, dislocates these elements of social reality both from the starkness of their impact on material experience and from the regularity of their use that renders them mundane. Beukes has described this characteristic of her writing as a method to “short-circuit issue fatigue” (Pagan 2013).

**Beukes:** The world is often unbearable, from child refugees in Syria being raped to stabbings at Walmart over cheap TVs. We have to filter it out to be able to live our lives or maybe vent our outrage on Twitter and move on. The big issues are overwhelming and seemingly unsolvable. What fiction does is allow you an in through a personal perspective. You step into someone’s head, someone’s life and there have been several studies about how fiction creates empathy.

Science fiction allows you to push that even further. It’s allegorical and kinda sneaky. *Zoo City* is not about real-life criminals, like say, Sifiso Mzobe’s award-winning realist carjacker novel, *Young Blood* (2010), it’s about an ex-con turned email scammer with a magical sloth, but we can both talk about the context of society and poverty and trying to find redemption.

Science fiction allows for twisty thought experiments, what ifs, pushed to the limits, but to work it still has to carry a story. You have to be invested in the characters. You have to care. (*pers. comm., Dec. 1, 2013*)

The work of estrangement then, which remains dependent on the context of its imagining for the story “to work,” never removes us from the social reality and

materiality being signified, but rather punctuates it with difference that demands “cognitive work” on the part of the reader. The gaps created between the world and fantasy are productive precisely because they resist foreclosure or simple substitution. In *Zoo City*, this allows Beukes to re-imagine a Johannesburg in which the “hardened,” “bland realities” of life in the contemporary city are given renewed emphasis through a “presentist logic,” a term I borrow from Melly’s (2013) ethnographic critique of road-works in Dakar, as a contrast to the futurism so often associated with science fiction. What then surfaces in the estrangements of *Zoo City* are “vocabularies of separations and connectedness” (Nuttall 2008b, 195) that do not take the referents of their signifiers as given. In this way, *Zoo City* allows for the kind of openness and contingency for theorizing about the ideas, people, images, and imaginaries that characterize the African metropolis while punctuating the unspeakable and unknowable—that elusive shadow created by ethnographic realism—with the fantastic.

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#### ENDNOTES

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