

# Dystopian Futures, Apartheid, and Postapartheid Allegories

## *Contemporary Imaginings of Johannesburg*

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In this essay I focus on Lauren Beukes's *Zoo City* (2010) as national political allegory, in the multiple ways it reworks versions of South African and more particularly Johannesburg history and social life. This national political allegory confounds itself at many points—the histories of capitalism and apartheid in South Africa have significant transnational determinants and environmental legacies, to name two of the most obvious factors that move the allegories I find outside the frame of the nation. Genres of speculative fiction can be useful in rendering visible these overdetermined histories and geographies.

The essay is divided into four sections. The first section speculates on the promises and pitfalls of allegorical modes of reading this particular novel. The second section contextualizes the novel in relation to the recent outbursts of xenophobic/Afrophobic violence in South Africa. In the third section, the novel is analyzed in terms of the long history of cultural representations of Johannesburg, and finally I consider the novel's engagement with contemporaneous debates about the term *Afropolitan*. Throughout I argue that these four frames invoke a necessity for revived modes of allegorical reading and writing in an age of transnationalism through a kind of forensic restoration of extratextual historical figuration and reference.

### Summary, or, A Monkey on Your Back

Those who have not read Beukes's *Zoo City* may need a summary. In the recent past, segments of the global population got “animalled.” In this ontological shift, an animal—a mongoose, a sloth, a marabou stork, a tapir—gets attached to an individual, as a mark of criminality, sin, shame, stigma. It is not clear how the animals get to be with their specific person, but the animalled emerge as a specific class of humans, mostly called *zoos*, in the novel. A *zoo* is a person with AAF (acquired aposymbiotic familiarism). Should the human harm or attempt to get rid of his/her animal, a mysterious dark force called the Undertow will destroy the human. In this framework, the novel recounts, in the first person, how Zinzi

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December and her sloth come to leave Johannesburg/Zoo City. She used to be a fashion journalist before she shot her brother, Thando. Along with the animal, the zoo may acquire a magical gift; Zinzi's form of magic is the ability to locate lost objects. No longer employable, because of her status as a zoo, Zinzi hustles hard, running a small business finding lost objects and impersonating wealthy African refugees in e-mail scams to pay off her debts. She is hired by Odysseus Huron, a leading Johannesburg music producer, to locate Songweza Radebe.<sup>1</sup> She and her twin brother, S'busiso, constitute the duo iJusi, the recent winners of the Coca-Cola Starmakerz auditions. After a torturous journey through the underground tunnels of Johannesburg, among other travails, Zinzi witnesses the twins being murdered by Huron's lackeys in a bizarre ritual in which Huron attempts to transfer or "respawn" his animal to S'busiso. The novel ends with Zinzi deciding to leave for the Congo to help her boyfriend, Benoît, find his missing wife and children. The action of the novel takes place in 2011, just after the present of its writing.

#### Impossible Allegories: *Zoo City* as Palimpsest

In a widely influential and widely critiqued 1986 essay, Fredric Jameson argued: "All third-world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call national allegories, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel."<sup>2</sup> The most contentious word in that powerfully generative sentence is the prescriptive *all*.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, I think the Jamesonian impulse to attach novels to their conditions of production and reception in an era of multinational capitalism, even as periodizing descriptions have shifted from "Third World" to "transnational or globalized," remains valuable. This impulse may be especially valuable for novels in the genres of speculative fiction, which, while

apparently antirealist in their central representational conceits, "attach to life," often but not always through shifting and complicated allegories. As Virginia Woolf writes, "fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so slightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners."<sup>4</sup>

Much more recently, in "The Affective Turn in Contemporary Literature" (2014), Nancy Armstrong has written:

I see such anomalous protagonists as . . . Lauren Beukes's Zinzi December rising to challenge capitalism's buoyant appropriation of biological evolution as they confront us with forms of human life so innovative as to make it next to impossible for us to recognize ourselves in them. In view of their international popularity, the absolute singularity of the protagonists currently being fashioned indicates nothing short of a sea change in the traditional subject of fiction, thus in what György Lukács calls the novel's biographical form.<sup>5</sup>

While I, too, think that Zinzi December is absolutely singular—how many former lifestyle journalists turned private eye with a magical skill, who cannot shake her companion sloth, can there be?—I also think Zinzi December can be read as figuring, maybe even embodying, an ongoing crisis in the production and reproduction of everyday life in the globalized, postapartheid world of contemporary South Africa and Johannesburg. Zinzi's biography is potentially and impossibly national and civic, and we need strong and speculative allegorical modes of reading to get there. *Zoo City* may give us the paradox of a national allegory for an era of transnationalism in that the novel allegorizes, among other things, HIV/AIDS, environmental disaster, and South Africa's relation to the rest of the continent, as well as the country's political past and present.

Beukes's *Zoo City* both offers and refuses a range of allegorical readings of contemporary life in the place of its setting—Johannesburg. Most compellingly, the novel has been read as a neolib-

1. Generally, *Zoo City* has considerable fun with names, in this case a pop star named Songweza, with the last name Radebe that echoes the last name of one of South Africa's greatest jazz singers, Dolly Rathebe.

2. Jameson, "Third-World Literature," 69.

3. Aijaz Ahmad offered one of the first and most compelling critiques of Jameson's theoretical claim: "So, I said to myself: 'All? . . . necessarily?' It felt odd. Matters got much more curious, however. For the farther I read the more I realized, with no little chagrin that the man whom I had for so long, so affectionately,

even through from a physical distance, taken as a comrade, was, in his own opinion, my civilizational Other. It was not a good feeling" (Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric," 4).

4. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 41.

5. Armstrong, "Affective Turn," 442.

eral environmental disaster allegory by Henriette Roos through the lens of ecocriticism: “In the city that has become known as the ‘City of Gold,’ the financial capital of Africa, widespread ecological devastation is taking place—to such an extent that a ravaged surface now mirrors the deep excavations and myriads of mine tunnels underneath. It is a world where horrific secrets are hidden in the gated enclaves of the rich, while the masses consisting of refugees, addicts and ‘animalled’ criminals struggle to survive in the festering slums.”<sup>6</sup> *Zoo City* observes some of the protocols of what Heather Houser has recently termed “ecosickness fiction,” which “shows the conceptual and material dissolutions of the body-environment boundary through sickness and thus alters environmental perception and politics.”<sup>7</sup> Anxieties about acid-mine drainage are prevalent in the novel and in contemporaneous newspaper accounts: “But today, after 120 years of mining, the gold is disappearing, hundreds of mine shafts have been abandoned, and Johannesburg is facing a nightmare of biblical proportions: a vast tide of poisonous water rising inexorably toward the foundations of the city itself.”<sup>8</sup> Such a scenario powerfully echoes one of the earliest environmental disaster novels—Richard Jefferies’s *After London, or, Wild England* (1885). While these environmental concerns powerfully underpin both the milieu and the action of the novel, they are not my focus here.

Within emerging allegories of disease and being, the ontology of this ontological shift is equally uncertain for much of the novel. There may have been an environmental cause: “Other theories postulated that the outbreak of the animal phenomenon in Afghanistan was a result of the fallout of Pakistan’s nuclear tests in the neighboring Chagai Hills in 1998.”<sup>9</sup> Yet there are many other possible explanations. Zinzi tells the readers about the Neo-Adventists:

They said the animals were the physical manifestation of our sin. Only marginally less awful than the theory that the animals are *zvidhoma* or witches’ familiars, which would qualify us for torture and burning in some rural backwaters. The Adventists’ sermons were torture enough, going on and on about the animals being punishment that we were going to have to carry around, like the guy in *Pilgrim’s Progress* lugging around his sack of guilt. Apparently we attracted vermin because we were vermin, the lowest of the low. (51–52)<sup>10</sup>

Animality is a trope that signifies more than just a range of religious and environmental discourses. As Achille Mbembe has elaborated, attributions of animality were central to colonial sovereignty and remain prominent in postcolonial regimes of impunity: “Such unconditionality and impunity can be explained by what long constituted the *credo* of power in the colony. This requires distinguishing two traditions, each according a central image to an image of the colonized that made of the native the prototype of the animal.”<sup>11</sup> Mbembe argues that what he calls a Hegelian tradition produces the native as animal in that the native is constituted by a bundle of drives, not capacities. The native as animal, belonging to the sphere of objects, could be utilized and killed with impunity. This version of colonial animality exists alongside a divergent but related tradition of producing the native as animal: “In the Bergsonian tradition of colonialism, familiarity and domestication thus became the dominant tropes of servitude. Through the relation of domestication, the master/mistress leads the beast to an experience such that, at the end of the day, the animal while remaining what he she was—that is, something other than a human being—nevertheless actually entered into the world for his/her master/mistress.”<sup>12</sup>

While it would require some finessing to produce the central conceit of the novel as a dis-

6. Roos, “‘War of the Worlds,’” 52.

7. Houser, *Ecosickness*, 3.

8. York, “Poisonous Water Rising.”

9. Beukes, *Zoo City*, 62. Hereafter page numbers for this work appear in the text.

10. In recent years, a field of inquiry called animal humanities has emerged to pose the questions of human-animal relations across a range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary formations. I can imagine a useful animal-humanities take on *Zoo City*, and while the novel broaches the question of the species-being of its animals, its primary interest in the animals is how they

mark the zoos. For starters, see the various essays in DeMello, *Teaching the Animal*.

11. Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 26.

12. *Ibid.*, 27.

placed colonial allegory of sorts, the animalled in the novel bear both features of Mbembe's characterization. The animalled and their companion animals willy-nilly participate in a complicated set of concept metaphors in imagining the human in more generalized colonial and postcolonial contexts. While there are important national, gender, and class differences within the grouping of those afflicted with animals, the community of the animalled within *Zoo City* is strongly associated with the companion animals. Some of the human characters, such as Maltese and Marabou, are referred to simply by the names of their animals, and the treatment of the animalled by the other inhabitants of *Zoo City* sometimes suggests "animalledness" as a strong vector of dehumanization. The relationship of the animals to their humans reads more like Mbembe's version of the Bergsonian tradition of troping animality in colonial and postcolonial sovereignty. In key ways, *Zoo City* simply literalizes the figurative and tropic versions of animality that have structured a colonial social imaginary. Animal autonomy is largely unimaginable in the world of the novel.

In contrast to the religious explanations for animalledness, which the novel both renders explicit and then debunks, readers are also offered a pseudoscientific one, presented through an excerpt from "Get Real: The Online Documentary Database." The use of the form of an online documentary database as the means of presenting this pseudoscientific explanation reveals the narrative's desire to distance itself from such an explanation and to index the transnational determinants of contemporary South African life. The film in this online documentary database is called "The Warlord and the Penguin: The Untold Story of Dehqan Baiyat (2003)." It has a user rating of 7/10, and in the summary of the film and in the comments section, animalledness emerges as something of an HIV/AIDS allegory. Baiyat is called "Patient Zero": "This documentary tracks the life and death of Dehqan Baiyat. Descended from an Iranian clan that once fought against Genghis Khan, he be-

came known, incorrectly, as Patient Zero for what was then called the Zoo Plague and, later, AAF or Acquired Aposymbiotic Familiarism" (61). Baiyat is explicitly compared with "Gaetan Dugas, the Canadian flight attendant alleged to have been at the centre of the spread of HIV, in the U.S." (62).<sup>13</sup> The acronym form *AAF*, as well as the first word *acquired*, makes the AIDS analogy almost irresistible.

The database summary denounces these comparisons. Being animalled is not quite a disease or a moral punishment, but the stigma the animalled face in their everyday lives further suggests the seduction of thinking about animalledness as an allegory for HIV/AIDS, particularly in a South African context. South Africa saw an AIDS denialism scandal in the early 2000s and had one of the largest populations affected by the pandemic in the first decade of the twenty-first century.<sup>14</sup> Of course, the allegory will break at any number of points: AAF is not sexually transmitted, and no treatment or prevention programs appear in the novel. That said, the Hegelian version of the animal in Mbembe's argument mentioned earlier finds expression in long-standing discursive formations of race and sex/sexuality, which emerged as powerful factors in the controversial initial responses of the South African government to HIV/AIDS. Former South African president Thabo Mbeki made the link between imputations of animality along the lines of race and sex/sexuality in the context of the South African HIV/AIDS pandemic and his own AIDS denialism heartbreakingly clear in the inaugural Z. K. Matthews Memorial Lecture at the University of Fort Hare in the Eastern Cape in 2001:

And thus does it happen that others who consider themselves to be our leaders take to the streets carrying their placards, to demand that because we are germ carriers, and human beings of a lower order that cannot subject its passions to reason, we must perforce adopt strange opinions, to save a depraved and diseased people from perishing from self-inflicted disease.

Convinced that we are but natural-born, promiscuous carriers of germs, unique in the world, they proclaim that our continent is doomed to an

13. See also Shilts, *And the Band Played On*, 147.

14. The literature on South Africa's HIV/AIDS pandemic and the AIDS denialism of the Mbeki presidency is vast and growing. See Gevisser, *Legacy of Liberation*, 276–97.

inevitable mortal end because of our unconquerable devotion to the sin of lust.<sup>15</sup>

President Mbeki here characterizes scientists and intellectuals who maintain that HIV causes AIDS as unwitting participants in a history of racism that sees Africans as creatures of appetite, as “human beings of a lower order that cannot subject its passions to reason,” “natural-born, promiscuous carriers of germs” with an “unconquerable devotion to the sin of lust.” In short, Africans are seen as diseased animals who sin, eerily paralleling many of the vectors—disease, sin, animality—that are used to discriminate against the zoos in *Zoo City*.

The database film summary tells us: “Now, it’s believed that cases of the animalled may date back to as early as the mid-80s, based on anthropological reports coming out of New Guinea, Mali and the Philippines. The earliest recorded case, uncovered in retrospect, was that of notorious Australian thug, Kevin Warren, who was gunned down by police during an aborted bank heist in Brisbane with his ‘pet’ wallaby in 1986” (62). This account of animalledness reads not dissimilarly to many current popular accounts of the history of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and appears almost as a parody of them. For example, in 2010, the year of the novel’s publication, *National Geographic* produced the following paragraph on the origin of AIDS:

The AIDS pandemic in humans originated at least three decades earlier than previously thought, and it may have been triggered by rapid urbanization in west-central Africa during the early 20th century, according to an international team of researchers. A better understanding of the conditions that helped fuel the pandemic could be key in controlling the disease and preventing future outbreaks of other emerging viruses. “Rapid urbanization was the turning point that allowed the pandemic to start,” said Michael Worobey, an evolutionary biologist at the University of Arizona, Tucson, and lead author of the study. “We as human beings made some changes that took a virus that could not exist on its own and turned it into a successful epidemic,” he added. Until now

it was thought that HIV-1 Group M, the strain of HIV that causes the most infections worldwide, originated in 1930 in Cameroon. Epidemic levels of AIDS and HIV-1 infections started appearing in Leopoldville, Belgian Congo (now Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo), around 1960. Findings from the new study, however, suggest that the virus most likely started circulating among humans in sub-Saharan Africa sometime between 1884 and 1924.<sup>16</sup>

The imagined history of animalledness thus satirically echoes the popular pseudoscientific accounts of the history of HIV/AIDS. The deployment of various media forms and genres as forms of information delivery and narrative framing is not limited to imaginary online databases. The novel also contains book excerpts with strong real-world echoes. Chapter 10 of the novel consists entirely of excerpts from “*Caged: Animalled behind Bars. Photography and Interviews by Steve Deacon, HarperCollins, 2008*” (83), in a mild satire of the liberal benevolence of giving voice to marginalized groups, not unlike Stephanie Nolen’s *28: Stories of AIDS in Africa* or Emma Guest’s *Children of AIDS: Africa’s Orphan Crisis*. This invocation of certain key neoliberal documentary forms reliant on a notion of testimony both contrasts and anchors the fantastical elements of the novel. The novel’s embrace and refusal of current documentary and testimonial representational conventions confounds readers’ temporal expectations. Much of the novel reads as futurism/fantasy/science fiction, but in *Zoo City* the dystopian future is here; it has already happened and is ongoing.

The use of fabricated epi- or intertexts may encourage reading for allegory. Beukes herself has described her first novel, *Moxyland*, as “an allegory for a corporate apartheid state.”<sup>17</sup> *Zoo City* is considerably more complicated. The doubled temporality of the novel opens up multiple allegorical possibilities. The mise-en-scène of *Zoo City* is distinctly that of the postapartheid present, explicitly in the plethora of dates attached to the e-mails in the e-mail scams, the online databases, and other

15. Address by President Thabo Mbeki at the Inaugural ZK Matthews Memorial Lecture, October 12, 2001, Nelson Mandela Centre of Memory, [www.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/031vo3445/041vo4206/051vo430](http://www.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/031vo3445/041vo4206/051vo430)

2/061vo4303/071vo4304.htm. For an analysis of this speech, see Hoad, *African Intimacies*, 101–2.

16. Avasthi, “HIV/AIDS Emerged as Early as 1880s.”

17. Sarah Lotz, “Interview with Lauren Beukes,” in Beukes, *Zoo City*, n.p.

metatexts that punctuate the novel. Such forms themselves were nonexistent in the apartheid era. Similarly, many of the institutions the novel depicts (private security firms and such, one of the few sectors where it is possible for zoos to find employment) and the urban landscape of Johannesburg that it describes locate the novel clearly in the postapartheid present. For example,

Makhaza's Place is already vibey at three in the afternoon. This is a reflection of the lack of recreational facilities in the area. Although Mak's popularity in a neighbourhood packed with bars and churches can be ascribed to two things: the Lagos-style chicken, and the view. 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 had a Former Life. (42)

The aside that "Even Zoo City had a Former Life" satirically rendered apartheid-era Johannesburg as a kind of equivalent for what the characters throughout the novel refer to as Former Life, that is, their lives before their animals arrived. Readers are subtly asked to juxtapose a Eurocentric and consumer-driven version of inner-city Johannesburg's cosmopolitanism—luxury goods and glitzy hotels—with an Afropolitan version (more on that later) that includes Mak's Lagos-style chicken. Ironically positioned as features of apartheid-era Johannesburg, "luxury goods and glitzy hotels" have persisted into the postapartheid era, as even a cursory visit to Sandton City reveals. The differences between Former Life and what I could half-jokingly call Current Life, while pivotal to the trajectories of key characters in the novel, frequently become attenuated by the continuities in wider social and economic inequalities, and practices of exclusion that seem a feature of Johannesburg/Zoo City in both its former and current lives.

Former Life is not just a site of nostalgia; it provides difficult continuities. The movement of the animalled is restricted in public space, for example, when Zinzi calls her former boss and lover, Giovanni Conti:

"Zinzi? Holy Crapola. Where are you?"  
"Downstairs. Can I come up?"

"No. Wait. I'll come down. Meet me at Reputation. It's the hotel bar across the road."

"I think they have a policy," I say, leaving it hanging.

"Oh, Oh right," he says.

Which is how we 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. (111)

The difficulties that the animalled and the unanimalled have in meeting socially cannot help but echo apartheid-era spatial and social relations. The eruption of the language of apartheid throughout marks a similar kind of haunting. Marabou tells Zinzi of how her stork became legless:

"She had a run in with another animal. She came off worse. It wasn't a dogfight, if that's what you are thinking."

"I wasn't. I'm surprised it does not happen more often. Herbivores and carnivores all mixed up together. We should probably segregate." (73)

The joke here—and there are many biting jokes in *Zoo City*—is that Maltese is Marabou's friend, so "it wasn't a dog fight," and as a meat-scavenging bird, a marabou stork is not exactly a herbivore. Zinzi's deeply ironic and throwaway line that "we should probably segregate" can only resonate painfully in postapartheid South Africa, where mandatory segregation has ostensibly been confined to the past, though "I think they have a policy" marks a continuation in the practices of segregation and exclusion. If in Zoo City's Former Life segregation was mandated and enforced through the law, in Zoo City's Current Life inequality, along with so much else, has become privatized. There are many such invocations of the apartheid past as offering strategies for dealing with the animalled or zoos. The crime writer in the *Daily Truth*, who occasionally offers glib commentary on some of the events that the novel documents from Zinzi's perspective, offers this suggestion after an armed robbery in Killarney Mall: "The *tsotsis* hit the jewellery store and emptied the tills at Checkers before clearing out while mall security twiddled their thumbs. Okay, maybe understandable when witnesses report that the gangster had a lion with them. Makes me wonder if we do

not need a pass system for zoos after all" (27). This invocation of apartheid-era South Africa's dompas system, or what was euphemistically called influx control, marks the zoos as potentially the modern-day equivalent of black South Africans under apartheid.

The invocation of South Africa's apartheid past is not limited to references to segregation and parallels between that past and the postapartheid present of *Zoo City*. The name of the narrator of *Zoo City*, Zinzi December, struck many resonances with this reader. Zinzi December as a name has both auditory and patronymic affiliations with Dulcie September, a South African political activist shot five times in the back outside the African National Congress's offices in Paris, while she was opening the office after collecting the mail on March 29, 1988.<sup>18</sup> The present of Johannesburg/Zoo City represented in *Zoo City* is haunted by so many pasts.

#### Xenophobia

On the lips of those who had gathered  
to loot and kill were freedom songs  
composed during the struggle against  
Apartheid.  
—Jonny Steinberg, "South Africa's  
Xenophobic Eruption"

While features of life under the political dispensation of apartheid persist in both *Zoo City* and contemporary South Africa, and it is tempting to read the novel, at least partially, as an apartheid allegory unevenly projected into a postapartheid present, the strongest political allegory that the novel can be argued to work through is the recent and continuing outbursts of violence directed against refugees and immigrants from other countries in Africa. While the animalled come from everywhere, the depiction of Zinzi's Congolese boyfriend, Benoît, almost seems to require such a reading.

It may not be an exaggeration to claim that contemporary urban life in South Africa can be characterized as exhibiting a crisis in hospitality

of long duration, that inhabitants of a city like Johannesburg struggle to live the relationships of kin and stranger, native and foreigner, friend and enemy. New and old social imaginaries compete in making sense of both feelings and rhetorics of belonging and estrangement. At the novel's conclusion, when Zinzi heads for the Congo, something like what Elspeth Probyn has termed "outside belonging" may emerge. Probyn writes: "As a theoretical term and as a lived reality, I pose the term *outside belonging* against certain categorical tendencies and the rush to place differences as absolute."<sup>19</sup> The ending of the novel marks either the necessity of Zinzi leaving Zoo City or an acknowledgment that Zoo City may be everywhere. Despite intracommunal tensions among the zoos, they can be seen to represent something like "outside(r) belonging," and in Zinzi's final move she moves even further outside national belonging.<sup>20</sup>

In May 2008, riots broke out in Alexandra, a densely populated neighborhood of some four hundred thousand people adjacent to some of the wealthiest suburbs of Johannesburg. Alexandra has a complicated history, but as a black freehold "township," it was one of the few places within the metropolitan area of Johannesburg where black South Africans could own property both prior to and during the apartheid era.<sup>21</sup> The 2008 violence quickly spread to periurban settlements around Johannesburg and to the inner city itself, then to Durban and Cape Town. The violence was directed at refugees and immigrants from elsewhere in the continent: Zimbabweans, Mozambicans, Congolese, Somalis. While the causes and the consequences of the riots remain contested, many commentators noted that these riots marked the first instances of mass violence since the first democratic elections of 1994 and, as such, may mark the end of an era of constitutional triumphalism and reconciliation.<sup>22</sup>

Speaking of Benoît, Zinzi's Congolese boyfriend, who appears in the novel as something like

18. Newman, "Who Is Dulcie September?"

19. Probyn, *Outside Belongings*, 9.

20. See Bethlehem, "Scratching the Surface," for a powerful account of how "metonymies of contagion shift into metonymies of convivi-

ality" in *Zoo City's* struggles to imagine the experience of home.

21. For a lucid history of land tenure in Alexandra, see Ngawko Raboshakga, "Housing in Alexandra: Transforming the Legacy of Decades of an Oppressive Housing Scheme," *New York*

*Law School Review* draft paper, accessed March 1, 2015, [www.nylslawreview.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2014/11/Raboshakga-2.pdf](http://www.nylslawreview.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2014/11/Raboshakga-2.pdf).

22. Steinberg, "South Africa's Xenophobic Eruption."

a typical migrant fleeing the violence of his war-torn country for a distinctly ironically rendered “rainbow nation,” Beukes commented:

It was inspired by the shame and horror of the xenophobic attacks in 2008, my visit to the Central Methodist Church (which had all the ravages of a refugee camp trapped in a building) and interviews I did with Rwandan refugees for an Italian documentary I was involved in a few years ago.

The tensions around refugees in South Africa are nowhere near resolved and we have already seen outbreaks of new violence, albeit on a smaller scale. It is horrific that people fleeing war and rape and famine and genocide, and giving up everything they know, should be treated this way.<sup>23</sup>

It may be that the author herself wants this particular political allegory to acquire interpretive authority over the many other possible allegories this essay has suggested. The opening of the novel confirms the centrality of the im/migrant experience as an informing historical context for the novel:

Morning light the sulphur colour of the mine dumps seeps across Johannesburg’s skyline and sears through my window. My own personal bat signal. Or a reminder that I really need to get curtains.

Shielding my eyes—morning has broken and there’s no picking up the pieces—I yank back the sheet and peel out of bed. Benoît does not as much stir, with only his calloused feet sticking out from under the duvet like knots of driftwood. Feet like that, they tell a story. They say he walked all the way from Kinshasa with his Mongoose strapped to his chest. (1)

The novel’s opening two paragraphs thus begin with a mention of the most iconic aspects of Johannesburg, the skyline and the mine dumps, and end with the feet of a Congolese refugee. The metaphor of driftwood is not simply descriptive but tells us quickly about Benoît’s arrival in Johannesburg. While Zinzi’s arch, world-weary and sometimes

tender voice dominates the novel, “feet like that, they tell a story” too.

The full story only came out later, and then only in snapshots, images caught in a strobe. The last time he saw his family, they were running into the forest, like ghosts between the trees. Then the FDLR beat him to the ground with their rifle butts, poured paraffin over him and set him alight.

That was over five years ago. He’d sent messages to his extended family, friends, aid organizations, refugee camps, scoured the community websites, the cryptic refugee Facebook groups that use nicknames and birth orders and job descriptions as clues—never any photographs of faces—to help families find each other without cueing in their persecutors. No dice. His wife and his three little children had vanished. Presumed dead. Lost without a trace. (56)

Can “the full story” ever come out? Benoît’s story emerges in “snapshots, images caught in a strobe”; its full horror is not really tellable, not even by his feet. Readers feel the limits of the testimonial or documentary realism in the face of trauma that can be literally unspeakable. Even in the imagining of remedy, there must be recourse to the circuitous and coded: “never any photographs of faces,” instead the “cryptic refugee Facebook” pages. The above passage is indeed one of the most explicitly testimonial moments in the novel, and we still see the impossibility of realism. I belabor this point, because, ironically, it might only be through elaborate figural conceits like animalledness, sliding into allegory, that the trauma of history can be felt, its self-shattering impossibility engaged and rendered somewhat bearable.

Neill Blomkamp’s 2009 film *District 9* is in many ways an apt companion piece to *Zoo City* in the sense that it uses the conventions of speculative fiction along the human/animal divide to allegorize aspects of South African everyday life and their deep historical determinants.<sup>24</sup> The aliens, called “prawns” in the film, respond to the long histories of migrancy to Johannesburg, in both the

23. Sarah Lotz, “Interview with Lauren Beukes,” in Beukes, *Zoo City*, n.p.

24. For a comparative analysis of *Zoo City* and *District 9*, see Timothy Wright, “Mutant City: On Partial Transformations in Three Johannesburg Narratives,” seminar talk, May 21, 2015, Wits Institute for Social and Economic

Research, University of the Witwatersrand, [wiser.wits.ac.za/event/mutant-city-partial-transformations-three-johannesburg-narratives](http://wiser.wits.ac.za/event/mutant-city-partial-transformations-three-johannesburg-narratives).

apartheid and postapartheid eras, but in the film's scandalous depiction of Nigerians, it participates in a climate of xenophobia rather than critiquing it.<sup>25</sup>

### Joburg Sis or Civic Allegory

Traffic in Joburg is like the democratic process. Every time you think it's going to get moving and take you somewhere, you hit another jam. There used to be shortcuts you could take through the suburbs, but they have closed them off, illegally: gated communities fortified like privatised citadels. Not so much keeping the world out as keeping the festering middle-class paranoia in.

—Lauren Beukes, *Zoo City*

As the title suggests, it is Johannesburg itself, in the incoherence of that phrase, that is the central protagonist of the novel. The cityscape of *Zoo City* is recognizably Johannesburg in its full plenitude of dystopian juxtapositions. Zinzi moves between her residence in Hillbrow through the wealthy white northern suburbs, and while the block of flats she lives in has the satirical name Elysium Heights, the more fantastical elements of the novel are grounded by real and familiar place names, such as Killarney and Rosebank, and extant places and venues, like the Rand Club.

*Zoo City* thus participates in a long and varied representational history of the city, recently and brilliantly assembled and analyzed by Loren Kruger. Joburg, Jobai, Johazardburg, Soul City, Egoli—the nicknames, usually more affectionate than phobic, hint at the sustainedly antinomian figurations of the city. Alan Paton, a notable hater of the city, noted that “all roads lead to Johannesburg.”<sup>26</sup> Phaswane Mpe in his *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* rendered the city as hospitable and terrifying, a place endlessly extending its welcome and betraying that embrace. The title of Mark Gevisser's 2014 memoir, *Lost and Found in Johannesburg*, echoes that constitutive ambivalence. The list of literary representations that invoke such polarities is too long, but Kruger offers a useful summation:

In the edgy city of Johannesburg, any claim of rights or even of new perspectives comes up against a history of refusal of such claims under the aegis of both official policy and customary behavior during segregation and apartheid, and against the hard facts of violent exclusion as well as habitual marginalization of unwanted others in the present, when more than 17 percent of the population has no visible income in the city that contributes 17 percent of the entire country's GDP (Burdett and Sudjic, 2007, 198)—facts that suggest anything other than enchantment.<sup>27</sup>

In its depiction of the Herbert Baker house where Odi Huron lives and dies, *Zoo City* provides an encapsulating spatial crystallization, metaphor, parable, allegory (the right term eludes me) of the city. Herbert Baker was arguably the most significant designer of public architecture in the British Empire of the early twentieth century. He designed, among other edifices, the Union Buildings in Pretoria, Parliament House in Delhi, State House in Mombasa, and several houses on the Parktown and Westcliff Ridges in Johannesburg. Odi—short for Odysseus—lives in one. A leading music producer, he is also a zoo, and his animal is a huge and voracious white crocodile. Crocodiles are indigenous to Africa and are symbolically redolent, but the size and the whiteness of this crocodile recall the last National Party president of South Africa before F. W. de Klerk: P. W. Botha, whose nickname was *Die Groot Krokodil*—the big Crocodile—was a diehard defender of apartheid and opponent of the democratic transition.<sup>28</sup> A secret underground lake lurks under the house connected with the network of disused mining tunnels where the acid mining drainage is rising and threatening to destroy the city. Here is how Mandlakazi Mabusu, intrepid crime writer for the *Daily Truth*, reports on the novel's denouement:

The Daily Truth 30 March 2011

POLICE FILE

Crime watch with Mandlakazi Mabusu

The day the music died

25. The distinctly derogatory representations of Nigerians in the film led to the film's banning in Nigeria, but they more happily led Nnedi Okorafor to write *Lagoon*, a wonderful novel

about what happens when aliens land for the first time in Lagos that allegorizes the great drama of that other defining first encounter—colonialism and its devastating legacies.

26. Paton, *Cry*, 52.

27. Kruger, *Imagining the Edgy City*, 7.

28. See Oliver, “Few Tears.”

They said the music industry had teeth—but who knew they meant literally! Legendary music producer got himself chowed last night by his secret animal, a *moerse* white Crocodile after slaughtering twin teen pop sensation in a gruesome *muti* murder! Turns out the man behind some of the biggest talent in this country was also a big time *tsotsi*, running drugs, killing homeless zoos for *muti*, feeding others to his Crocodile and cultivating talent only so he could slice them open! Some 20 bodies so far have been recovered from a secret underground lake. . . . Police have seized all assets, but I hear there is a *moerse* sum of money missing from his account. Just goes to show you never know who's a zoo. (305)

Huron confirms that zoos can be victimizers as well as victims, but as a palimpsestic figure of historical allegories of multiple temporalities, he embodies many of the contradictions of Johannesburg as *Zoo City*. The place where he commits murder is a house built by an architect of the British Empire. His house is connected to the environmental devastation facing the city. His “animal” references one of the staunchest defenders of the old apartheid regime. His victims include celebrated youthful black South African pop stars, who came to Johannesburg in search of fame and fortune. There is little chance of restitution because a *moerse* (South African slang for very big or numerous) sum of money is already missing. The mythological reference of his first name perhaps indicates that he, too, was never quite at home in *Zoo City*. Odi Huron’s place of abode and his animal concretize a kind of “savagely cosmopolitanism” that underwrites the imperial history of places like Johannesburg.<sup>29</sup> Huron attempts to transfer or respawn his crocodile to S’busiso, by forcing him to murder his twin sister in a scene that almost begs to be read as national allegory. The following allegorical speculations are possible: Huron represents Anglo South African cultural capital—Herbert Baker was, after all, a kind of “court architect” for Cecil Rhodes.<sup>30</sup> Huron wishes to transfer his

historical complicity with apartheid represented by the white crocodile to S’busiso. S’busiso may represent the fortunate few black South Africans who have prospered economically in the postapartheid era. The price for this burden/inheritance is the murder of his twin sister. The allegories will never map entirely, but strictly realist modes of reading are clearly not sufficient for making sense of respawning a white crocodile onto a young pop star in an underground lair in a wealthy Johannesburg suburb. What alternatives to such impossible dialectics of belonging and estrangement, foreigner and kin, victim and victimizer may the novel present?

### Afropolitanism

While *Afropolitan* is not a word that *Zoo City* engages, in certain key ways Zinzi December emblemizes, if not quite embodies, some of the key debates around the term.<sup>31</sup> Arguably, the term was first coined by Taiye Selasi in the 2005 article “Bye-Bye Babar.” Selasi offers the following provisional definition/description: “We are Afropolitans: not citizens, but Africans of the world.” While Selasi’s version of the Afropolitan is celebratory and is acknowledged as self-congratulatory, Beukes’s novel attempts to imagine an insurgent Afropolitanism that does not need London nightclubs to get started and must risk an Afropessimism in its depictions of Africans suffering a lack rather than a surfeit of citizenship options.

The term *Afropolitan* had a moment in often boosterist versions of “Johannesburg: A World-class African City,” a notorious advertising campaign, and it occurs across a range of genres of writing and media venues and spaces. In the run-up to the 2010 World Cup, it became a term used to promote tourism in the city and to help reconfigure the dystopian branding of the violent and crime-ridden city in what loosely could be called the global imagination.<sup>32</sup> There is an *Afropolitan Magazine* based in Johannesburg; the term ap-

29. “Savagely cosmopolitan” is how Jean Comaroff describes the determinants of South Africa’s HIV/AIDS pandemic: “The pandemic is savagely cosmopolitan, making blatant the existence of dynamic, translocal intimacies across received lines of segregation, difference, and propriety” (Comaroff, “Beyond Bare Life,” 198).

30. Cecil John Rhodes was the most important British imperialist in Southern Africa, founder of the colony of Rhodesia, and prime minister of the Cape Colony from 1890 to 1896.

31. For a pithy, cogent, and lucid discussion of these debates, see Bady, “Afropolitan.”

32. Flak, “Joburg’s Gold Rush Vibe.”

pears on the city's own website, and generally I think the term is deployed in a deeply classed but antixenophobic fashion. When African foreigners/migrants are hailed as Afropolitan, they are figured as stylish, part of "the cosmopolitan central" claims of the city, adding to its cultural, culinary, and consumer options. There are many resistances to Selasi's rendition of the Afropolitan. In a recent interview, Nigerian/South African novelist Yewande Omotoso said:

A friend of mine reviewed *Ghana Must Go* (2013) by Taiye Selasi and then sent the review to me. She described Selasi's characters as Afropolitans, referring to the author's famous article "Bye-Bye, Babar or What Is an Afropolitan?" (2005). My immediate reaction was, "I'm not Afropolitan." But my friend insisted, "Yewande, you are Afropolitan." I understand cosmopolitanism, but I don't identify with the West. I feel I can be African and have the views and experiences that I've had, but it doesn't take me away from being on the continent. Being an Afropolitan to me sounds as if you are supposed to be a mediator between the West and Africa because you have travelled and lived overseas. I have no torn allegiances and I have no current interest of ever living in America or the UK. I want to live here. I'm of the continent.<sup>33</sup>

The inaugural Selasian version of the Afropolitan sits uneasily with the figure of the African as refugee, or internally displaced person, or the economic migrant, though it may precisely be a hegemonic figure of the abjected, perpetually victimized African that the glamorous, worldly Selasian Afropolitan seeks to contest and displace. Increasingly, the register of the Afropolitan is uncertain. Selasi refers to Afropolitans, worldly Africans; she does not deploy the term *Afropolitanism*, which in its Johannesburg variant appears as a boosterist civic claim. Omotoso invokes pan-Africanism to distance herself from the term. Revealingly, Selasi's essay is first republished by the Stevenson Art Gallery in Cape Town, suggesting that it is precisely the glamorous, worldly Afropolitan that South Africa wishes to claim and/or incorporate.<sup>34</sup> There has been a claim that the April 2015 attacks on African foreigners in South Africa need to be

seen as Afrophobic, not simply xenophobic, as white foreigners have not been targeted.<sup>35</sup> These attacks constitute the failure of the South African embrace of the Afropolitan in all its variants. *Zoo City* may anticipate this failure. Early on in the novel, Zinzi reads the signs:

I am held up by the signage in Go-Go-Go Travel, or more specifically the list of specials.

The place names are a list of well-worn exotica: Zanzibar. Paris. Bali. Amazing Deals. Airport taxes not included.

These are places that do not feature: Harare. Yamoussoukro. Kinshasa. These are places that require alternative travel arrangements.

Border official bribes not included. (57)

Zinzi notes the places excluded from the itineraries of the old "cosmopolitan central," adding the circuits of travel for the poor and displaced who have come to Johannesburg and to which "Go-Go-Go Travel" will not take you. It is however, in a humble object that I can most effectively bring the continental and transcontinental, the refugee and the cosmopolitan versions of the Afropolitan into conversation. Early in the novel, Zinzi notes:

I pause to buy a nutritious breakfast, aka a skyf [a joint] from a Zimbabwean vendor rigging up the scaffolding of a pavement stall. While he lays out his crate of suckers and snacks and single smokes, his wife unpacks a trove of cheap clothing and disposable electronics from two large amaShangaan, the red-and-blue-checked bags that are ubiquitous round here. It's like they hand them out with the application for refugee status. Here's your temporary ID, here's your asylum papers, and here, don't forget your complimentary crappy woven plastic suitcase. (6–7)

The bags that *Zoo City* calls amaShangaan are visible all over Africa. I suspect that in Johannesburg they are called amaShangaan because the Shangaan people who mostly inhabit the north-east border of South Africa with Mozambique and Zimbabwe themselves have been coming to the city for generations, first as migrant laborers to the mines and then as refugees from the South Afri-

33. Fasselt, "I'm Not Afropolitan."

34. Bady, "Afropolitan."

35. See Tshabalala, "Why Black South Africans Are Attacking."

can-funded civil war in Mozambique that began almost immediately after Mozambique achieved independence in 1975 and ended with the first multiparty democratic elections in both South Africa and Mozambique in 1994. The amaShangaan are called “Ghana Must Go” bags in Nigeria, and *Ghana Must Go* is the title of Taiye Selasi’s 2013 novel. Shangaans, within vernacular stereotypes in Johannesburg, are known as country rubes, fond of bright colors—*shangaan* is casually deployed as a synonym for “tacky” in matters of style but with powerful *muti* (medicine). That the bags should be so strongly associated with the Shangaan is not surprising. Alternately, in a wildly speculative moment, the homonymic similarities between Ghana and Shangaan make me ponder another migrant etymology: that the amaShangaan is the indigenized Ghana Must Go bag for South Africa, though of course the bags, made in China, are found all over the world.

In 2007, the fashionable Paris-based luggage maker Louis Vuitton premiered Ghana Must Go bags on the runway, immediately recognizable from their distinctive blue and red checkered pattern, in a version of dubiously tasteful “refugee chic.”<sup>36</sup> Those bags could mark the appropriative underside, undertow, if you will, of the Afropolitan, but I look forward to knock-offs being sold in Lagos and Johannesburg, and I suspect the “real” Louis Vuittons lack the carrying capacity, durability, and resilience of the “real” amaShangaan/Ghana Must Go bags.

Caught in the unfolding scandal of the discovery of the murders by her former employer, Odi Huron, Zinzi December must pack her own amaShangaan and get out of Dodge:

There was nothing I could do there.

Eight days to Kigali if I keep to the tar, and don’t hit any potholes or roadblocks I can’t bribe my way out of.

Day one: Johannesburg to Harare

Day two: Harare to Lusaka

Day three: Lusaka to Mbeya

Day four: Mbeya to Dar es Saalam

Day five: Dar es to Nairobi

Day six: Nairobi to Jinja

Day seven: Cross into southern Uganda

Day eight: Mbasa to Kigali.

The place names sound like new worlds. I have only ever travelled to Europe. On a skiing holiday with my parents when I was eleven, when Thando broke his leg, not on the slopes but slipping on an icy pavement. On a working holiday to London when I was eighteen, which lasted a month before I decided to hell with living in a shitty apartment and working in a bar and returned to the creature comforts of my parents’ Craighall house with the pool and the gardener and the char lady who made my bed. Before I met Gio, before I killed my brother, before Sloth.

I have an *amaShangaan* bag full of fake cash. I have a bundle of photographs. I have print-outs of emails from a UN aid worker. I have Benoît’s family’s names and ID numbers and application papers for asylum in South Africa.

What I do not have is permission to leave the country in the wake of a multiple homicide/serial killer investigation.

Celvie. Armand. Ginelle. Celestin. It’s going to be awkward. It’s going to be the best thing I’ve done with my miserable life.

And after that? Maybe I’ll get lost for a while. (309)

In her description of her comfortable former life travels—a European skiing trip, a truncated working holiday in London, and a return to the comforts of bourgeois life in Craighall Park—Zinzi produces a typical upper-middle-class white South African biography and version of the good life that are now available to the newish South African black elite, but not to the now animalled Zinzi. Instead, “the place names sound like new worlds” in a version of something, following Omotoso, that could be called continental or African Afropolitanism. It is plausible that this itinerary also functions as a remapping of much older dark continent projections of African identity and hints at the long history of varying kinds of South African ambivalence about its Africanness.

That final sentences of the novel—“And after that? Maybe I’ll get lost for a while”—offers a solu-

36. Hunt, “Immigrants Have Bags of Ambition.”

tion of sorts, that South Africa and Johannesburg constitute impossible histories and places for any certainties of belonging, but it gets double-edged quickly when one remembers that Zinzi's magical gift is the ability to locate "lost" things. The "getting lost" also resonates with the (many) explorers who "got lost" in Africa in the process of exploration and discovery, even though Zinzi shares no identity variables with such explorers. Yet the novel reveals that the past will not go away, will not be forgotten, or transcended or resolved, despite huge public efforts like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the weird collective amnesia of so many white South Africans. I remember a friend in Johannesburg saying to me around 1998, "It is impossible to find a white South African these days who actually supported apartheid." Zinzi imagines her trajectory as embarking on another kind of Afropolitan journey, neither a homecoming nor a pilgrimage, a different kind of mission from many of those who have gone to the Congo in search of lost people before.

The allegories this essay has attempted to trace break in the time and space of an "after that," in the form of a question; I am left with a kind of allegory of allegorical reading, which is itself a search for "lost things." My desire is to restore some of the contexts of *Zoo City* and *Zoo City*, a "fiction, imaginative work that is," to the novel, to work out who and what the animalled may represent, and how Former Life persists in Current Life in histories and lived experiences that are marked powerfully by both rupture and repetition in contracting and expanding geographies of belonging ■■■■.

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