

SF, Infrastructure, and the Anthropocene: Reading *Moxyland* and *Zoo City*

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This essay probes the relationship between nature and infrastructure in Moxyland (2008) and Zoo City (2010), SF novels by the South African writer Lauren Beukes. I show, in one vein, how “nature” and “infrastructure” are not at all opposed in the way that ecocriticism and urban studies often suggest; in these speculative fictions, nature and infrastructure coincide, such that “nature” becomes coextensive with everyday life in these texts. At the same time, the essay uses Moxyland and Zoo City to explore a problem I take to be fundamental to literary and environmental studies in Africa, namely the place of African texts and contexts in the rapidly growing body of work on the Anthropocene, humanity’s new geologic age. Not only do these novels suggest yoking discourse on the Anthropocene to the new materialisms of scholars such as Jane Bennett or Bruno Latour, but the manner in which they do so can help us think about how to make the concept accessible to literary form.

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In *Moxyland* (2008), Lauren Beukes develops an account of Cape Town defined less by its famous scenery than by futuristic information technology run amok. Indeed, as her characters navigate life in an apartheid-inspired corporate wasteland, they do so in a context in which almost every aspect of the world in which they live is saturated by technological infrastructure of various kinds, be it nanotechnology that remakes bodies from the inside out or all-encompassing surveillance systems that turn twenty-first-century smart phones into powerful tools of social control. Her subsequent *Zoo City* (2010) is similarly interested in the infrastructure of its urban environments, though the novel’s Johannesburg is presented in a somewhat different key—its world is certainly awash in technology, but technology here is as much spiritual as it is material, and the novel asks us to think of not just people as infrastructure, to borrow Abdoumalig Simone’s influential phrase, but a wide range of nonhuman animals too.¹ Set after what the novel obliquely refers to as “the ontological shift”—the realization, in essence, that

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1 Abdoumalig Simone, “People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg,” *Public Culture* 16.3 (2004): 407–29.

the supernatural is real and that matter has an agency all its own—the world of *Zoo City* is one in which divination becomes a kind of science unto itself, while those living with what the novel terms “Acquired Aposymbiotic Familiarism,” or “AAF,” have companion animals with which they share an intimate and irrevocable tie.²

Moxyland and *Zoo City* thus examine not only the place of infrastructure in speculative accounts of urban life, but the consequences of human domination over the world of nature as well. In the scholarship on these novels, however, critics have paid much closer attention to Beukes’s interest in the architecture of places such as Cape Town and Johannesburg than they have to the ways in which infrastructure intersects with ecology in her two South African texts.³ As a consequence, we have yet to come to terms with the relationship between nature and urban infrastructure in the novels in question, an oversight that has important consequences not only for our understanding of *Moxyland* and *Zoo City*, but for how we understand the place of African speculative fiction in the growing scholarship on the Anthropocene, humanity’s new geologic age.

This essay brings scholarship on Beukes’s speculative urbanism into conversation with some concepts in ecocriticism in order to show how, in both *Moxyland* and *Zoo City*, “nature” and “infrastructure” are not at all opposed in the way that both ecocriticism and urban studies often suggest; while the fields writ large tend to regard the infrastructure of human civilization as entirely other to the nature on which it works, in Beukes’s futuristic urban environments, nature and infrastructure coincide such that “nature” broadly construed becomes coextensive with everyday life in these texts. At the same time, the paper uses *Moxyland* and *Zoo City* to explore a problem I take to be fundamental to literary and environmental studies in Africa, namely the place of African texts and contexts in the emerging discourse on the Anthropocene, the time in which human beings emerge as a global geologic force.⁴ Not only do these novels suggest yoking discourse on the Anthropocene to the new materialisms of scholars such as Jane Bennett or Bruno Latour, but the manner in which they do so can help us think about how to make the concept accessible to literary form. Although the Anthropocene and its constituent processes are frequently described as what

2 Lauren Beukes, *Zoo City* (New York: Random House, 2010), 61.

3 See, for instance, Jessica Dickson, “Reading the (Zoo) City: The Social Realities and Science Fiction of Johannesburg,” *The Salon: Imagining Africa’s Future Cities* 7 (2014): 67–78; Louise Bethlehem, “Lauren Beukes Post-Apartheid Dystopia: Inhabiting *Moxyland*,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 50.5 (2014): 522–34; Phoenix Alexander, “Spectacles of Dystopia: Lauren Beukes and the Geopolitics of Digital Space,” *Safundi* 16.2 (2015): 156–72; and Shane Graham, “The Entropy of Built Things: Postapartheid Anxiety and the Production of Space in Henrietta Rose-Innes’ *Nineveh* and Lauren Beukes’ *Zoo City*,” *Safundi* 16.1 (2015): 64–77.

4 On the Anthropocene as a stratigraphic concept, see Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, and John R. McNeill, “The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?” *Ambio* 36.8 (2007): 614–21. For important accounts of the Anthropocene in postcolonial studies, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change,” *New Literary History* 43.1 (2012): 1–18 and Ian Baucom, “History 4°: Postcolonial Method and Anthropocene Time,” *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 1.1 (2014): 123–42. Matthew Omelsky gestures toward the notion of the “African Anthropocene” in an article on what he terms “postcrisis African science fiction,” though the importance of yoking “Africa” and “the Anthropocene” together is left unexplored. See Matthew Omelsky, “After the End Times: Postcrisis African Science Fiction,” *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Inquiry* 1.1 (2014): 33–49.

Timothy Morton terms “hyperobjects,” and thus resistant to representation, Beukes’s account of nature-as-infrastructure enables her to embed the anxieties of global ecological crisis in the life-worlds of each of these texts.⁵ Reading *Moxyland* and *Zoo City* together thus suggests not only Beukes’s profound investment in the ecology of her speculative South African cityscapes, but also the importance of African speculative fiction in considering one of the key problems facing the humanities in a time of global ecological crisis—how to imagine what we know.

Nature, Infrastructure, and the Anthropocene

As mentioned previously, *Moxyland* and *Zoo City* represent worlds in which urban infrastructure has overwhelmed anything resembling “nature” in the text. *Moxyland* begins, for instance, with a character named Kendra getting what amounts to a nanotechnology makeover; a recent art school dropout, she and a group of fellow “art punks” have been chosen to endorse a new line of biotech products, these much more revolutionary than the last.⁶ As we learn, in the novel nanotechnology is not merely technically viable but commercially successful on a massive scale, forming a key part of even beauty creams and other cosmetics sold at malls and pharmacies all over its futuristic version of Cape Town (5). What Kendra gets, however, goes much further than the rather simple treatments available to the public at large. As the doctor administering the shot explains, “The average nano in your average anti-aging moisturizer acts only on the subdermal level. Mine, on the other hand, is going all the way” (5). As we learn, “all the way” in this context means a complete genetic renovation, the result of “three million designer robotic microbes” (5) coursing through Kendra’s veins in order to shield her from the effects of foreign bacteria, viral attacks, and age. Optimized health is not the whole of the deal, however, as there is also more to her relationship with the pharmaceutical company than initially meets the eye. As the novel makes clear, although the nanotechnology is meant in part to optimize her health, it also has another important effect, namely turning her skin into a living, glow-in-the-dark billboard for a company called Ghost, one of the leading soft drink manufacturers in this dystopian South African future (5).

The opening pages of *Moxyland* thus present the reader with a world in which technology has invaded even the cellular infrastructure of human life, optimizing bodies for the purposes of better health and more profitable forms of media saturation. This highly saturated techno-scape isn’t exactly the version of the Anthropocene advocated by geophysicists such as Will Steffen, Paul Crutzen, and John McNeill, who see the Anthropocene as defined chiefly by humanity’s having emerged as a force for climate change on a global scale.⁷ The concept, however, is nonetheless relevant to

5 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013). For other versions of this argument, see Dale Jamieson, *Reason in a Dark Time: Why the Struggle Against Climate Change Failed—and What It Means for Our Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Catherine Brace and Hillary Geoghegan, “Human Geographies of Climate Change: Landscape, Temporality, and Lay Knowledges,” *Progress in Human Geography* 35.3 (2010): 284–302; Greg Garrard, Gary Handwerk, and Sabine Wilke, “Introduction: ‘Imagining Anew’: Challenges of Representing the Anthropocene,” *Environmental Humanities* 5 (2014): 149–53.

6 Lauren Beukes, *Moxyland* (Auckland Park, South Africa: Jacana Media, 2008), 4.

7 See Steffen et al., *Anthropocene*.

understanding the narrative at issue here. There is, first of all, a suggestion of global climate crisis in the acknowledgement that the so-called “Rural”—a vast space beyond the hyper-developed world of Cape Town to which those judged as social miscreants are consigned—is defined by megadroughts, catastrophic pandemics, and other ecological disasters.⁸ But the sheer pervasiveness of infrastructure in the world of *Moxyland* is relevant as well; while the Rural is the space of those forced to endure the harsh aftereffects of human meddling with the environment, “nature” in the space of the city is so thoroughly saturated by human technology as to be entirely within its control. If the novel’s portrait of Cape Town is, according to Louise Bethlehem, “a skein of intersecting planes, flows, circuits and skins: organic and manufactured, digital and analogue, visible and invisible,” it is, in part, because of the way the bodies of the people who move through it have become a part of the mediatized biosphere that is such a key preoccupation of the text.⁹ The constant play of “organic and manufactured, digital and analogue, visible and invisible” that defines the novel’s cityscape, however, also bespeaks a world in which technology has so invaded the lifeworld of the text as to make bodies and cells into part of the infrastructure undergirding the novel’s account of everyday life.

For *Moxyland*, in other words, the Anthropocene is represented not only as a function of global climate change, the effects of which are felt most fully by those consigned to the aforementioned “Rural.” It also emerges out of the human manipulation of nature on both macro and micro scales, blending “natural” and “artificial” substances to produce the hybrid, urban form of nature at issue here. There is no exact parallel to this level of technological innovation in *Zoo City*, at least not exactly, though the concept of the Anthropocene is no less relevant to our understanding of the city it represents. We should consider, first of all, the geography of the novel, and particularly the way it elides almost entirely the representation of a space beyond the vast metropolis that its characters call home. As with Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001), the novel’s portrait of Zoo City, a decrepit housing development in Hillbrow, does reflect the actual neighborhood’s reputation as a transit point for migrants all across Africa—the main character’s boyfriend, Benoit, is a Congolese émigré, just one of many people originating elsewhere in Africa who inhabit the once well-to-do neighborhood.¹⁰ But unlike the world of *Moxyland*, where Beukes’s futuristic Cape Town is always juxtaposed against the aforementioned “Rural,” there is for all intents and purposes no outside to the power that *Zoo City*’s Johannesburg represents. The novel is full of flora and fauna, charismatic and otherwise, but where it

8 Beukes, *Moxyland*, 29, 110.

9 Bethlehem, “Inhabiting *Moxyland*,” 527.

10 On Mpe’s novel, see Neville Hoad, *African Intimacies: Race, Homosexuality, and Globalization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 113–26 and Hilary Dannenberg, “Narrating the Postcolonial Metropolis in Anglophone African Fiction: Chris Abani’s *GraceLand* and Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 48.1 (2012): 39–50. On the links between *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* and the broader cultural archive of the neighborhood, see Loren Kruger, *Imagining the Edgy City: Writing, Performing and Building Johannesburg* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 168–84. Hillbrow is also a key site for Simone in “People as Infrastructure.” On race and immigration in Hillbrow more generally, see Alan Morris, “Race Relations and Racism in a Racially Diverse Inner City Neighbourhood: A Case Study of Hillbrow, Johannesburg,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 25. 4 (1999): 667–94.

appears, it is only ever in the city in which the novel's characters live. Chief among the novel's creaturely lives is that of Sloth, the animal to which Zinzi, the novel's protagonist, becomes paired after her involvement in the untimely death of her brother—though not well understood, AAF seems to be acquired in response to having committed serious crimes—but he is hardly the only animal familiar worth mentioning here. As the name of the housing development in which she lives suggests, she is not the only aposymbiot in the neighborhood. The novel abounds in aposymbiots and their animal familiars, ranging from a tiny Maltese to penguins, crocodiles, lions, a cobra, a butterfly, and even an ill-fated bear gunned down by tsotsis on the streets of Hillbrow—but there is no Kruger Park, for instance, no sense of a wild expanse beyond the city that such creatures might call home.¹¹

In one sense, Beukes's portrait of Zoo City thus redoubles the themes of migrancy and displacement with which Hillbrow is so often associated in South African cultural production. As in Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, Ivan Vladislavić's *The Restless Supermarket* (2001), Kgebetli Moele's *Room 207* (2006), and Ralph Ziman's 2008 film *Gangster's Paradise: Jerusalem, Zoo City's Hillbrow* is full of humans displaced from across the continent and indeed all over the world, but the neighborhood is also full of animals displaced from their ostensibly proper place in nature.¹² At the same time, the doubled forms of displacement at issue here also create a world in which all of nature appears to have been incorporated into the vast metropolis in which the novel is set—as in the Anthropocene, although there may be spaces beyond the bounds of human habitation, there is no longer any conceivable outside to the power that the human species represents.¹³ The extent to which “nature,” broadly construed, has been incorporated into the infrastructure of human existence in *Zoo City* is not, however, simply a function of the way so many forms of nonhuman life have been integrated into the space of Beukes's speculative Johannesburg. It stems from the way those animals come to form a key part of the infrastructure of human life as well. The simple fact that a great number of characters live their daily lives with their animal familiars is certainly relevant here, but so is the extent of the relationship that aposymbiots have with them. As one of Beukes's many generic interpositions explains—one section consists entirely of testimonials on the part of aposymbiot prisoners on the nature of

11 Beukes, *Zoo*, 207.

12 The displacement in question is not merely metaphorical. As one prisoner explains after receiving a tapir as his companion animal, “The guards said she was still covered in jungle mud when they found her,” suggesting that animals are literally transported from the wild to the city in which they are forced to live. See Beukes, *Zoo*, 81.

13 The claim made here is somewhat different than that made by Fredric Jameson according to which there is, in the postmodern period, no longer any outside to capital. The globalization of capital may presage the end of nature as it is being discussed in this essay, though it is not entirely contiguous with it—as Chakrabarty suggests, the globalization of capital is a key driver of global climate change, but the problem, strictly speaking, is carbon as a form of energy, not capital as a form of social organization. Allowing that late capital is, in essence, the point at which the Anthropocene becomes legible, it still allows for an investment in rural retreat, even if in a highly commoditized form; what we find in *Moxyland* and *Zoo City* are worlds in which human agency has so saturated the natural world as to make even the fantasy of rural retreat impossible to sustain. See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 2012), 48–49. For another argument on the irreducibility of capital and climate change, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Climate and Capital: On Conjoined Histories,” *Critical Inquiry* 41 (Autumn 2014): 1–23.

their relationship to their animals—the relationship is intimate indeed. In one sense, of course, the animals serve as valuable companions to people who might otherwise lack them. As one prisoner says of his Tapir, “I love her. They let me look after her good, take her on walks around the yard. She’s a stupid-looking creature and she’s dopey as shit, but when the guys here see her at my side, they remember what happened to Deke. They remember not to fuck with Carter” (95). The prisoner named Carter thus owns the stigma otherwise attached to animals at large, turning it into a defense mechanism in an otherwise dangerous prison environment. As the narratives also suggest, however, animals have an importance that goes well beyond their social function—the connection in question is in some ways metaphysical as well. As a man named Zia Khadim explains, the link between humans and animals is so sensitive that his jailers use it as a means of getting what they want: “They keep our animals in cages in another part of the prison,” he says. “We don’t see them. When they want to torture us, they put them in the back of a car and drive away to Keti Bandar. The pain is unbearable, you scream, you vomit and you say anything” (95). As much as the tie in question can thus be used as a means of social control, however, a final testimonial from an American prisoner suggests the potential power of the relationship in question as well. “I got a Butterfly,” he explains:

Keep it in a matchbox. I oughta be pissed off, man. You can guess what it’s like being in here with a Butterfly. Except for the stuff it lets me do. . . . See, when I go to sleep every night, I wake up as someone else. For the time I’m asleep, I live the day of someone else on the other side of the world. Man, I’ve been kids in Africa and India, I was once this old Chinese woman. Mostly, I’m poor, but sometimes I get lucky and I’m rich. . . . What I’m saying is, I can’t hate the butterfly. Butterfly breaks me out of here every night. (96)

In *Zoo City*, in other words, the Anthropocene is defined not only by the incorporation of animal life into the space of the city, but by complex forms of human–animal entanglement; humans afflicted with aposymbiotic animal familiarism not only live with their animals, but must treat their animals as a form of infrastructure, navigating their lives in light of the agency of the animals to which they are tied. This account is significant, in one sense, in that it complicates Jessica Dickson’s suggestion that *Zoo City* constitutes a speculative ethnography of life in Johannesburg. For her argument, the critical work of SF as represented in these novels “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.”¹⁴ Thus does the aposymbiot figure at the heart of *Zoo City* come to stand in for such varied concepts as “criminality, HIV/AIDS, stigma, trauma, racialism, foreignness, and ancestral spirits,”⁽⁷⁷⁾ all of which form a key part of actually existing Johannesburg at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Such a reading is no doubt correct, but it also relies on metaphorizing the notion of the aposymbiot in a way that evacuates the human–animal relationship of its ecological significance. Taking Beukes’s representation of these figures at face value, on the other hand, enables us to read *Zoo City* not merely as a speculative account of urban life, but

14 See Dickson, “Reading the (*Zoo*) City,” 77.

as a *speculative multispecies ethnography*, an analysis of what happens when human and nonhuman lives are understood as entwined in the ways under examination here.¹⁵ Beukes's speculative Anthropocene is, however, also important in that the entanglement that defines it goes beyond even the instances of interspecies subjectivity previously examined—if Beukes draws on the conventions of both SF and urban fantasy in weaving together human and animal life in the city, she is also deeply invested in showing how the spiritual practices particular to southern Africa come to inhabit the novel's social and technological landscape.¹⁶ Consider, for instance, the strange set of emails that Zinzi receives in response to the 419 scam she runs on behalf of a gang to whom she owes a great deal of money. The first is merely cryptic, the seemingly nonsensical response of someone confused by the nature of the scam, except for the fact that it has no link or return address that would tie it to someone else on the Internet: “When you eat, you are eating things from planes. The plastic forks, they leave a mark on you” (38). But as the messages persist, Zinzi develops a theory that connects them to the strange disappearance of a series of homeless people with AAF; the cryptic messages turn out to coincide with the disappearance of a trio of aposymbiots who have recently vanished from the streets (287). It is, at the beginning, merely a hunch, but one that turns out to be strangely prescient—the “ghost in the machine” (248) she mentions shortly after receiving the second message is no mere turn of phrase, but instead a means of describing the way in which spiritual and material technology inhabit each other in the world the novel presents.

For *Zoo City*, in other words, the dead do not simply die and become so much decaying matter. Instead, they are transformed into a realm that, although not exactly material, nonetheless coincides with that of the technological infrastructure that defines the city in question. This reading is strengthened by what transpires when Zinzi, contracted by associates of a shadowy South African record producer to locate a performer who has suddenly gone missing, is asked to consult a local sangoma as to where the missing girl might be. The man, however, is no “traditional” healer, as if the world of *Zoo City* could sustain any clear divisions between “tradition” and “modernity,” but in reality a former actuary turned diviner, a life trajectory that turns out to be relevant to understand the way he understands his practice. “My *dlozi* has told me about you,” he says as she walks in, referring to his contact with the spirit world. As the narrator continues, “He waggles his brand new iPhone,” to which Zinzi responds by saying that she wasn't aware the ancestors corresponded by text message. As the sangoma retorts: “No, he calls me. The spirits find it easier with technology. It's not so clogged as human minds. ... They still like rivers and oceans most of all, but data is like water—the spirits can move through it. That's why you get a prickly feeling

15 On the concept of “multi-species ethnography,” see S. Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich, “The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography,” *Cultural Anthropology* 25.4 (2010): 545–76.

16 Animal familiars are a key aspect of fantasy literature and witchcraft lore in South Africa and around the world. The relationship between humans and their familiars in *Zoo City* is especially resonant with that charted by Phillip Pullman in *The Golden Compass* (1995), though Beukes has key progenitors in the urban fantasy literature of Iona Andrews, Kevin Herne, and Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman's *Good Omens* (1990). On animal familiars in the South African occult, see Isak Niehaus, “Witches of the Transvaal Lowveld and Their Familiars: Conceptions of Duality, Power and Desire,” *Cahiers d'études Africains* 35.138 (1995): 513–540 and Jean and John Comaroff, “Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from South Africa,” *American Ethnologist* 26.2 (1999): 279–303.

around cellphone towers” (191). And a few pages later, in response to a cynical Zinzi’s questioning as to the nature of his elaborate performance, he presses the relationship between the “technology” of the material world and that of the spiritual realm even further. With respect to the practice of bone-throwing, as he says, “It’s not so different, the statistical analysis, the number-crunching. It’s just the same with the bones” (193). In one sense, these statements make clear the extent to which the networked world of *Moxyland* is in *Zoo City* superseded by the occult economies that form such an important part of Zinzi’s narrative; though on the surface the techno-fetishism of *Moxyland*’s hypermodernity could not be more different than the “traditional” practices the sangoma invokes. Beukes describes the magical practice of *Zoo City* as merely another version of *Moxyland*’s hyper-networked cityscape, its infrastructure of algorithms and code transposed into a world of animal familiars and bones. At the same time, the sangoma’s declarations about the means by which he corresponds with the spiritual universe are also the moment at which the full extent of the relationship between nature and infrastructure, the material and the spiritual, become entirely clear. In one sense, infrastructure as represented by cell phone networks becomes not an alternative to nature but another version of it, with the ancestors speaking through data just as they used to speak through water. But just as infrastructure becomes coextensive with nature, so too does the spiritual come to inhabit the material world; if the spirits can transmit their messages to the living through cell phone towers just as easily as water, it is because in the world the novel presents there is no fundamental difference between the two. The universe of *Zoo City*, though recognizably contiguous with our own, is also one in which the conceptual hierarchies that otherwise define the life we take for granted have come undone. Infrastructure inhabits and becomes part of nature, while the spiritual world exists on the same plane as does the material world we call home.

Nature as Infrastructure: Intimacy in the Anthropocene

The futures these novels imagine are therefore ones in which urban infrastructure has become entirely coexistent with nature, incorporating the spiritual and material worlds into the architecture of human social and biological existence. This account is important, in one sense, in that it also upends the SF trope according to which, in the words of Ursula Heise, “Science fiction that casts the present as an inadvertent future often highlights some kind of loss.”¹⁷ The examples that Heise goes on to cite in defense of the claim—Bill McKibben’s *Eaarth*, the novels of William Gibson, and fictions by Joseph Cornell—all articulate a longing for natures less embedded in the social and technological infrastructure of human life. Beukes’s AfroSF, though, casts the incorporation of nature into the infrastructure of everyday life as the absolute foundation of the worlds she represents; the point is not about articulating nostalgia for a pastoral nature that has come undone, but instead about looking toward a future that is always already defined by the complex hybrids that define the novels under examination here. The intimacy that defines these speculative futures, however, is also important for how it helps us to consider the place of African texts and contexts in scholarship on the Anthropocene, a discourse from which sub-Saharan Africa has

17 Ursula Heise, “Introduction: The Invention of Eco-Futures,” *Ecozone* 3.2 (2012), 4.

been largely excluded to this point. As I show following, reading *Moxyland* and *Zoo City* suggests, in one vein, yoking scholarship on the Anthropocene to the new materialist perspectives of scholars such as Jane Bennett or Bruno Latour; in the Anthropocene these novels represent, reimagining the human means not only thinking “of human agency on multiple and incommensurable scales at once,” as Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued, but coming to terms with the myriad ways in which human agency is enmeshed and in fact constituted by a the agency of nonhuman entities as well.¹⁸ But I also argue that the deeply ambivalent means by which *Moxyland* and *Zoo City* bring these two perspectives together speaks to another key problem at issue here, namely that of how to represent the Anthropocene in ways accessible to literary form. Though its constituent processes exist as hyperobjects, and are thus widely distributed in both space and time, Beukes’s account of nature-as-infrastructure enables her to narrate the Anthropocene in terms that are fleshy, terrifying, and grotesque. Thus while the African continent has long been regarded, in the words of Achille Mbembe and Sara Nuttall, as a place “the study of which does not contribute anything to the knowledge of the world or of the human condition,” these novels’ speculative cityscapes invert the relationship Mbembe and Nuttall describe, making Cape Town and Johannesburg into places from which to imagine the future in a time of climate crisis.¹⁹

The way these novels link discourse on the Anthropocene to perspectives in new materialism emerges largely from the ways the thorough saturation of human life by various kinds of infrastructure complicates the nature of agency and subjectivity in these novels, both for better and for worse. In *Moxyland*, for instance, the nanotech that remakes Kendra’s body into a walking advertisement acts as a vaccine against the cancer that slowly killed her father, while *Moxyland*, the alternate reality game through which other characters interact with a shadowy anarchist known only as “skyward*,” serves as a medium for, among other things, the crafting of intricate hybrid subjectivities.²⁰ Although most characters live as other versions of human beings, a subculture exists in which humans cultivate online lives in the guise of coyotes who lurk in the shadows of online civilization (32). In *Zoo City*, the saturation of human life by various kinds of infrastructure is similarly linked to new capacities and powers, though the new capacities in question here have less to do with technology per se than with the way the spirit world has come to pervade the material reality of the text. In addition to companion animals, aposymbiots acquire a unique *shavi*, as it’s known, or a special spiritual power. Zinzi’s gift is, for instance, a peculiar ability to sense the relationship between people and their objects. Thus when she is not running 419 scams, she has a side business helping people locate lost objects; in *Zoo City*, matter is not only vibrant, or agential, but its being opens up new avenues for economic gain.²¹ As Zinzi explains, “Object *muti* is easy, particularly when it’s

18 See Chakrabarty, “Postcolonial Studies,” 1.

19 Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall, “Writing the World from an African Metropolis,” *Public Culture* 16.3 (2004): 351.

20 Beukes, *Moxyland*, 25.

21 As Bennett explains, her chief interest in *Vibrant Matter* lies in exploring how political problems might be approached differently if we think about material systems having agencies of their own. *Zoo City* suggests that not only does a world of vibrant matter open a host of new ethical and political possibilities,

based on a simple binary. Locked or unlocked. Lost or found. Objects want to have a purpose.”²² Zinzi’s unique *shavi* is also in addition to the benefits she gains from having such an intimate relationship with the sloth to which she is attached. At numerous points in the novel, he actively manipulates her in ways that help her navigate the straits in which she finds herself. In some instances, the help is rather minor, such as when Sloth aids Zinzi in dealing with a woman upset by her questions about the disappearance of Songweza. “For the second time in an hour,” we read, “I’ve managed to make someone cry. At Sloth’s urging, I go over and put an arm around her, awkwardly” (122). But Sloth’s assistance is also about much more than helping Zinzi be more human and humane, important though such interactions are for understanding subjectivity in the text. Pursued by associates of Odysseus “Odious” Huron, the record producer who hires her to find the lost Songweza, Zinzi finds herself caught in a maze of Johannesburg storm drains, and Sloth’s powers of perception take over her own: “Sloth guides me through the dark, squeezing my shoulders like handlebars” (212). That he nearly gets her run over by the Gau-Train is less important than the fact that his ability to sense its coming before Zinzi can enable them to escape the tunnel with their lives. This is in addition to a later moment when Sloth helps Zinzi win a fight; when her own fists are insufficient, Sloth is there to offer his unexpectedly vicious set of teeth and claws (272).

The incorporation of nature into the infrastructure of everyday life thus enables new possibilities for social and biological existence, and new forms of interspecies subjectivity as well. In this sense, the worlds Beukes describes in *Moxyland* and *Zoo City* share a great deal with those envisaged by Bennett and other new materialists when they link regimes of material entanglement to more optimized and ethical forms of life; being inhabited by robotic microbes better Kendra’s overall health and well-being, Zinzi’s receptivity to the agency of objects enables her to make a living, and her relationship to Sloth gives her sensory and affective capacities she would not otherwise have. At the same time, however, these novels suggest that the project of reimagining human life in the midst of the myriad agencies that define this accelerated Anthropocene is not as simple as the foregoing account might suggest. Although the characters who populate *Moxyland* and *Zoo City* certainly gain from the material entanglements through which they live, these speculative worlds have their drawbacks as well. Beukes is, for instance, acutely aware of the varied ways in which the biotechnology that defines the world of *Moxyland* opens on to increasingly pervasive and pernicious forms of social control. The world the novel presents may be one in which everyday illnesses are defeated by legions of designer robotic microbes for those fortunate enough to access the technology, but it’s also one of profound social inequality. The distinction between the hyper-networked Cape Town in which the novel is set and the aforementioned “Rural” is especially important in this regard. Although the space of the city is for all intents and purposes that of an advanced technological future, the “Rural”—the novel’s version of apartheid South Africa’s

but a wide range of new economic possibilities as well. See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 9–12.

22 In other words, Zinzi’s description of “Object muti” provides yet another example of how the technofuturism of *Moxyland* is in *Zoo City* transposed into a world of spiritual practices that are no less sophisticated than the material technologies they displace. See Beukes, *Zoo*, 116.

infamous reserves—is utterly disconnected, a zone of abandonment to which those who run afoul of the novel’s corporate overlords are consigned.²³ That is not to say, however, that Cape Town itself, with all its technological sophistication, is without its problems. Life may be mediated entirely by smart phones and aided by medicalized nanotechnology, but as the novel makes clear, the cost of being networked in the way that full citizenship demands is that the phone is simultaneously a powerful tool of social control; not only does it allow individuals to be tracked, but each phone is possessed of a powerful “defuser” that lets the authorities stun anyone who poses a risk to what they regard as the public good.²⁴ The phones in question are in addition to the numerous other tools of social control that define the world of *Moxyland*, two of which are especially worth mentioning here. Human beings, for instance, turn out not to be the only creatures subject to nano-technological modification; in an allusion to the apartheid state’s reliance on dogs as a tool of intimidation, here the police possess genetically enhanced creatures called “aitos,” dogs injected with nanotechnology that make them exceptionally intelligent and susceptible to human command while at the same time capable of running wildly out of control.²⁵ But even viruses are subject to manipulation for the purposes of policing the novel’s bleak corporate landscape. When a virtual reality game in which a character named Tendeka is involved goes out of control, police spread a genetically enhanced version of the Marburg virus as a means of subduing the crowd. Supposedly altered so as to be non-transmittable—a vaccine available at local police stations also easily treats the disease—those exposed have forty-eight hours to report for injections or risk the particularly miserable death that results (170).²⁶

In *Moxyland*, the same technology that enables bodies to be modified on command and humans to live as animals in other worlds thus enables the novel’s corporate overlords to exhibit increasingly pernicious forms of social control. For Beukes, in other words, accounting for the myriad agencies in which her characters are enmeshed is hardly a liberatory gesture in and of itself—totalitarianism remains a real possibility in the new materialist universe being envisaged here. The ambivalence in

23 As mentioned in the first section, the “Rural” in *Moxyland* is represented as a futuristic version of apartheid’s reserves, though in the novel the Rural is less a source of surplus labor than it is a repository of surplus humanity. The penalty for running afoul of Cape Town’s corporate masters—one is kicked off the network that runs life in the city and consigned to the world beyond—therefore recalls the means by which black laborers who transgressed the rules of South Africa’s urban areas could be consigned to the country’s rural bantustans. But it also suggests the extent to which the regime of biopolitical control that orders *Moxyland*’s dystopian future remains a fundamental part of its capitalist order. For Beukes, in other words, apartheid is no aberration of an advanced capitalist society but rather a fundamental part of it, a possibility that remains inherent in its form. In this sense, both *Moxyland* and *Zoo City* enable a critique of the new materialist position according to which coming to terms with the agency of things is itself a political act—a world of agential matter is in these novels entirely consonant with endlessly proliferating regimes of totalitarian control.

24 Beukes, *Moxyland*, 16–17.

25 *Ibid.*, 101–02.

26 It’s not only the authorities who wield the power of life and death in the novel. When Kendra, for instance, decides that she’d rather not continue to be a walking billboard for Ghost soft drinks, she runs into the problem that the patented nanotechnology has bound itself to her system, making her biological existence into the property of the biotech company leading the research—instead of being disconnected, Kendra is executed by the doctor overseeing her care. See Beukes, *Moxyland*, 231–33.

question is even more pronounced in *Zoo City*, a novel in which the intimacy in question has even more serious consequences for those who inhabit its world. Zinzi's ability to sense the relationships between people and their objects, for instance, cannot simply be turned off. Her everyday interactions are awash in her supersensory awareness of relations between people and various forms of matter, at least when dealing with people who have actually lost objects—even more debilitating, because more terrifying, are the rare encounters with people who have lost nothing at all. As she explains with respect to a character named “the Maltese”—his animal is a little white dog—“[He] is blank. Some rare people are. They're either pathologically meticulous or they don't care about anything. But it still creeps me out. The last person I encountered with no lost things at all was the cleaning lady at Elysium. She threw herself down an open elevator shaft.”²⁷ But the ambivalence that defines this version of the Anthropocene comes out most fully when we consider the relationship between Zinzi and her sloth, not to mention the many aposymbiots around whom she lives and the animals to which they are tied. For instance, Zinzi and the animal share an affective connection that means that her experience registers in his mind, though not the other way around; when Zinzi orders yet another drink at a Hillbrow bar, Sloth tries to swipe it away to avoid becoming too inebriated himself, and when she suffers injury, he is debilitated by her pain (220, 184). Animals, moreover, cannot outlive their people for long, and humans cannot survive without their animals at all. As we learn, what follows the death of a zoo's animal is a phenomenon ominously called “the Undertow” (157–58)—a gathering darkness that comes for zoos who have lost their animals to pulverize them out of existence. Though not fully understood, the novel offers a number of possible explanations: to some it is simply proof of the damnable souls of those marked as aposymbiots, a sort of real-world manifestation of the grim reaper variously termed “Hell's Undertow” or “The Black Judgment” by those who view it in religious terms (181). To the more philosophically minded, however, it is “a quantum manifestation of non-existence, a psychic equivalent of dark matter that . . . serves as a counterpoint to, and bedrock for, the principle of existence” (181). Indeed, according to this perspective, the Undertow is merely a part of “the fabric of the physical universe” (182) such that “were intelligent life to be found elsewhere in the universe, it would be impossible to imagine a society without some form of the Undertow” (182). Whatever the precise nature of the phenomenon, however, its consequences are clear—the tie between human and animal in this context is such that without the animal, the human simply ceases to be.

Thus while “nature” in Beukes's work seems in one vein to have been entirely incorporated into the technological infrastructure that defines her fictional worlds, nature-as-infrastructure is always more complicated than the techno-utopian strain of her work might suggest. In *Moxyland*, the same technologies that overwhelm the forces of nature are used to turn nature against those who would oppose the project of corporate rule, while in *Zoo City*, supernaturally enhanced existence comes along with the perpetual threat of death. This ambivalence is important, in one sense, in that it is fundamental to the way we understand the form of each narrative, especially in light of the tendency of Beukes's novels to devolve into what might be regarded as so much

27 Beukes, *Zoo*, 23.

B-movie horror. Consider, for instance, the bizarre ending of *Zoo City*, which comes when Zinzi eventually connects the disappearance of Songweza to a shadowy record producer who also happens to head up a smuggling ring that deals in the extremely valuable body parts of aposymbiots. The events themselves are narrated in page after page of absurdity and gore, an episode that stretches even the credulous reader's willingness to suspend his or her disbelief in the novel's speculative world. Zinzi navigates a pool full of dead bodies and Odysseus Huron's giant crocodile—a surprise insofar as no one seems to have known that Huron was a Zoo—only to witness Songweza and her brother S'Bu subjected to an occult ceremony meant to free Huron from the animal to which he has been attached and reassign it to S'Bu. The ceremony works, though Songweza and S'Bu are immediately killed by Huron and his associates, an act for which Huron's former crocodilian familiar retaliates by attacking and killing Huron as he prepares to abandon his underground lair. A closing excerpt from a fictional Johannesburg tabloid called *The Daily Truth* summarizes the events in appropriately salacious terms:

They said the music industry had teeth—but who knew they meant literally! Legendary music producer Odysseus “Odious” Huron got himself chowed last night by his secret animal, a *moerse* white Crocodile after slaughtering twin teen pop sensation iJusi in a gruesome *muti* murder! Turns out the man behind some of the finest talent in this country was also a bigtime *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, including a woman's skeleton that police refuse to comment on, but let's just say my sources on the inside say the investigation into Lily Nobomvu's fatal car-crash is being re-opened! *Yoh!* (344)

Zoo City's narrative about human–animal hybrids thus ends with a cacophony of sensational tabloid exploitation, the dismembering of bodies that happens in the final scenes coming along with the collapse of the narrative as well. A similar dynamic defines aspects of *Moxyland* too, though here the narrative collapse of nature and bodies into one another is given even more literal representation. The story of a famous new installation by Khanyi Nkosi, a popular young Cape Town artist, is especially important in this regard. The installation itself is noteworthy for the way it blends nature and technology into a biomechanical hybrid. Titled “*Woof & Tweet*,” the “thing,” as the novel describes it, looks “like something dead turned inside out and mangled, half-collapsed in on itself with spines and ridges and fleshy strings and some kind of built in speakers,” its function being to remediate the ambient noise of the room through its bizarre assemblage of body parts and speakers.²⁸ What happens to it is even more significant, however, for the way it crystallizes the tensions inherent in its form. As the gallery observes the fleshy monstrosity it's invaded by a group of panga-wielding anarchists who are at first taken to be part of the show—“Oh god! Performance art. How gauche,” (135) responds one attendee. As it turns out, however, the masked men with pangas are not part of the show but in fact members of an anarchist group intent on destroying it. After threatening to murder an audience

28 Ibid., 127.

member, they turn their weapons on the “thing” (136) itself, hacking it to pieces in a gruesome protest against what one of them terms “corporate art” (135). “The bright sprays of blood make it real,” we read, “spattering the walls, people’s faces, my prints, as the blades thwack down again and again. The police sirens in the distance are echoed and distorted as *Woof & Tweet* finally collapses in on itself, rattling with wet smacking sounds” (137). The willful destruction of Khanyi Nkosi’s fleshy “thing” pales in comparison, however, to the fate that befalls Tendeka, one of the aforementioned panga-wielding anarchists who refuses to believe that the police have really exposed him to the Marburg virus, and thus fails to go to a government treatment center within the allotted period of time. As his friend explains in recalling his unfortunate end, “At first I laugh, cos I can’t help it. Because it’s so overboard gruesome, total B-grade horror, and so badly done, it starts oozing out in thick dark runnels, and then it’s pouring out, gushing, and I try to pull my hand away, and he won’t fucking let go. It’s like someone turned on a liquidizer inside him” (234). The novel ends with Tendeka’s friend Toby atop a Cape Town skyscraper, awash in his friend’s viscera, as the reader contemplates the suggestion that the sexual relationship between Tendeka and the technologically enhanced Kendra means an apocalyptic supervirus may well be about to bring this fictional version of the future to an end.

The profound ambivalence that marks Beukes’s representation of the Anthropocene is therefore embedded in the formal and aesthetic architecture of each of these texts. Although the novels themselves are messy assemblages that barely hold together, the bodies of their characters are also complex hybrids of “natural” and “artificial” technologies seemingly ready to fall apart. All of this might be read as Beukes’s tendency toward writing indulgent trash—Beukes’s literary aesthetic, in these novels and elsewhere, revels in the popular and the profane, the better to capture the subcultures at the heart of the urban spaces about which she writes.²⁹ But the way the intimacy in question always culminates in such chaos is nonetheless important for the discussion underway here. In one sense, to be sure, this irruption of chaos merely repeats a longstanding sci-fi trope according to which human meddling in the workings of nature threatens to spiral out of control, and that’s no doubt part of the narratives that Beukes is crafting in these texts; horror has always been caught up in how we narrate the boundaries between nature and culture, and there is no reason to think that horror in Anthropocene should be any different. At the same time, though, the sheer force of the violence that always seems to erupt in these narratives has another meaning as well, one that speaks to the problem of making the Anthropocene accessible to literary form. As critics interested in the concept never fail to note, one of the key problems the concept poses to literature is that of representation. As hyperobjects, Morton’s “nonlocal” and yet strangely “viscous” things, the Anthropocene’s underlying processes are often too abstract for the realist novel to apprehend.³⁰ In reimagining nature as a form of infrastructure to which our lives are intimately tied, however, Beukes’s speculative fiction renders the processes

29 Both *The Shining Girls* (2014) and *Broken Monsters* (2015), set in Chicago and Detroit respectively, are defined by the same dynamic.

30 The philosopher Dale Jamieson makes a similar argument when he writes, “The scale of a problem like climate change can be crippling” to our long-held modes of representation and cognition.” See Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 15 and Jamieson, *Reason*, 103.

driving the Anthropocene in acutely visceral terms. “Nature” is no mere abstraction here but instead embedded in the technological, biological, and even spiritual lifeworlds of each of these texts. The reason this aspect of her work speaks to the broader problem of Africa in the discourse on the Anthropocene is that Beukes, as this essay has shown, is thoroughly indebted not only to the techno-futurist archive of conventional sci-fi novels such as William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984) and the urban fantasy canon of writers such as Kevin Herne and Nalini Singh, but to the animism that animates a wide range of southern African cosmologies as well. In weaving techno-futurism and urban fantasy together with local forms of ritual and belief, Beukes constructs the outlines of not merely a technologically enhanced future, but one in which the human domination of nature coexists alongside figures of the human enmeshed in a wide range of agencies, be they spiritual material and otherwise. In other words, in narrating the Anthropocene in such intimate and terrifying terms, she points not only to the importance of her own work in thinking through the place of human life in this strange new terrain, but also to the salience of the broader archive on which she draws to the problems under examination here. As Mbembe and Nuttall suggest, “Africa” has long been coded in both popular and academic discourse as everything that the “global” is not, a place that does not, properly speaking, belong to what the rest of us experience as the world. In narrating their cityscapes as central to our collective planetary future, however, *Moxyland* and *Zoo City* suggest not only the central of ecological questions to the worlds they represent, but also the importance of African speculative fiction in reimagining what it means to be human in our age.