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Participating in Genres: *Zoo City* as a Science Fiction

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Abstract

In the mode of speculative fiction, Lauren Beukes' *Zoo City*(2010)[1] starts with the premise of 'what if' but leaps into a whirlpool of other genres and grips the reader in the mode of a thriller or a crime fiction, provoking questions about race, gender, poverty, city and above all the question of being human. However, even while it participates in several genres,[2] the novel defies any particular labeling as far as its form, theme, content, approach or characterization is concerned. Therefore, for this articlethough I concentrate on its description as a science fiction, I argue that the manner in which elements of myth and folklore are adopted, in the novel, push the boundaries of this genre.What I seek by thisis to uncover how the crossing of generic lines is propelled by the need to thematize realities of Africa that are not transparently available—realities that cannot be contained within the lines and limits that have been established for it.

Keywords: science fiction, Africa, genre, traditional belief

Introduction

Many writers from Africa have deployed elements of orature, folklore and myths in innovative ways, which has defied the normative frameworks of genres. Lauren Beukes' *Zoo City* (2010) is one such novel that defies any particular labelling as far as its form, theme, content or

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[1] It won the 2011 Arthur C. Clarke Award for best science fiction and the 2010 Kitschies Red Tentacle for best novel.

[2] The concept of participating in genres is borrowed from Derrida: " Every text participates in one or several genres" (65)

approach to characterization is concerned. This article attempts to systematically analyse how *Zoo City* firstly participates in several genres like science fiction, urban noir and crime fiction, never really slipping into just one category. While concentrating on the way the novel pushes the boundaries of what is a science fiction, this article argues that such a defiance is possible through the presence of the "animalled"— a human attached to the animal; the animal being the form that the spirit of the dead assumes— a concept based on the Shona belief of *mashavi*, which means spirits. Set in post- apartheid South Africa, this parallel universe provides space to not only experiment with the form of science fiction but also expose the social condition prevalent in the contemporary Johannesburg.

Zoo City as a Science Fiction?

Zoo City, given the fluidity of its plot and narrative, has been variously labelled as science fiction, thriller, dystopian fiction, fable or allegory.[3] In Beukes' own words:

> *Zoo City* is a *muti*[4] noir that ties together technology and ideas of traditional African magic. It's about the burden of the past, guilt and redemption, magical spirit animals inspired by myth that may be the devil on your back or the guardian angel on your shoulder or the spirits of your ancestors manifested in furry form, about inner city slums and refugees and what society does with — and to — our outcasts. *Zoo City* is set *right now* in the dilapidated slums of Johannesburg. ("Clarkesworld")

On one level, the novel resurrects the politics and the question of genre that African writers have been dealing with at various levels. The plethora of themes— modernity versus tradition, the burden of chronicling the past and the present, the West and the indignity of Africa—that Beukes points out in the above quote is a fusion of the different problematic with which writers of African fiction have been grappling. Beukes seems to have innovated a mode of narration, which does not confine to a particular label in order to creatively work with these problematics. She interweaves and presents them as contraries that exist together. This mode relies heavily on "magical spirit animals inspired by myth that may be the devil on your back or the guardian angel on your shoulder or the spirits of your ancestors manifested in furry form".

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[3]Elise Clocte describes the novel as speculative fiction. Jessica Dickson calls it a mixing of genres like cyberpunk, neo-Noir, fantasy and magical realism. Bloggers rave about it as an urban fantasy, dystopian novel, sci-fi-fantasy, alternate history, thriller, and social commentary.

[4] "*Muti*", from the isiZulu word for "tree," is also the word for traditional medicine. In darker forms, *muti* incorporates human body parts, and news media in South Africa frequently report on "muti killings" or people purportedly murdered to harvest their body parts" (Graham 66).

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The "animalled," which is a different mode of being human in the novel, is a refurbishing of the concept of human from the oral tradition of Africa.

Zoo City set in the city of Johannesburg, seems like a parallel universe due to the presence of the "animalled." The animalled, in the novel, also known as aposymbiots, or zoo people, are humans attached to animals. These animals are *mashavi*, which mean spirits in Shona. In Shona tradition, there are a variety of spirits like the angry spirits, *ngozi* (who are spirits of murdered people or those who were made to suffer while they were alive) or the alien spirits, *mashavi*. *Mashavi* are spirits of strangers, who are not Shona, but died among the Shona. Though these are evil spirits, they are spirits, which bring a "talent of evil" (Gelfand 5). The individual possessed with this spirit becomes possessed by several of the talents of a traditional medicine man.

Zoo City innovates upon this belief in the spirits, particularly the mashavi and ngozi. Beukes takes the concept of these spirits and gives it a manifest presence. In the novel, they are the spirits of murdered people. They take the form of animals and are attached to particular individuals, who perpetrated the crime on them. As Lance Harris in his review of the book mentions, "it offers some theories and hints about the mashavi phenomenon, but lets you make your own mind up about what it all means". As the narrative works its way, one realizes that the animal (the spirit of the dead) and the human (the being of the living) become one unit. Beukes also seems to rework the idea of possession and the ill effects of rejecting the spirit. Thus, the past is not left behind; it lives on in the present. The "crime" of murder does not get resolved here through some simple-minded retribution. Instead, we find that it is something that one lives with and takes account of—through the presence of the mashavi-animal—everyday, till the very end. The animal (mashavi-spirit-past-the one upon whom the crime is perpetrated) and the human (the one who perpetrates the crime) are so bound together that any separation results in excruciating physical pain to them and the death of one result in the death of the other. The protagonist, Zinzi-Sloth, is an animalled. Zinzi, the human is symbiotically attached to Sloth, the animal, which is the embodiment of the spirit of her brother whom she murdered accidentally. They are almost like one being. However, Zinzi-Sloth is not the only animalled in the novel. There are others, and they are all considered outcasts.

A prominent way of describing *Zoo City* has been as science fiction, which is interesting, considering the fact that the story does not revolve around any particular technology that the genre "science" fiction might evoke. According to Adam Roberts, "the core of SF genre is formed by stories of journeying through space and time of imaginary technology and narrative utopias" (qtd. in Maurits 4). Here the journeying is through a different time and

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space, though the story is "set right now in the dilapidated slums of Johannesburg" (Beukes, "Interview"). This is possible through the introduction of the animalled in the story who journeys across the city and presents Johannesburg through the animalled. The animalled brings in the paradigm shift and the ghostly is the "technology" in this science fiction. Though the idea of the animalled has been borrowed from Shona tradition, this appropriation is not new to African literature. One of science fiction writers from Africa, Nnedi Okorafor, even as shares in her blogpost that "African Science Fiction is still Alien,"[5] points towards what makes African science fiction different by quoting Zimbabwean writer Ivor Hartmann :

> Most speculative fiction, be it fantasy, scifi, or horror, is firmly rooted in cultural mythologies. It's not something we can ever get away from because they form the archetypal base for all speculative stories. This is why I think African writers are already changing the face of literature and beyond, because our intricately diverse and complex mythologies are for the most part unwritten and therefore bring forth a relatively new and fresh perspective. (Okorafor, "Nnedi's Wahala Zone Blog")

The idea of the animalled, though it seems to have originated from Shona mythology, is interpreted differently, mutating into the ghostly in the sense that it accommodates various elements which get intertwined without any sign of borders and marked differences. When Beukes says that the novel has, "magical spirit animals inspired by myth that may be the devil on your back or the guardian angel on your shoulder or the spirits of your ancestors manifested in furry form," she is already positing the spirit animals, ancestors, guardian angel, and devil in one single paradigm. The animalled allows the different "complex mythologies" to come together as "technology"[6] which is put into use as a means of livelihood. Each animal led has a gift, an ability or "technology," which helps them to survive in the world where the animalled are outcasts. For Zinzi the ability to find things is a "gift" that she gets when Sloth attaches himself to her. The other animalled have their own set of talents that come with their animals. Zinzi -Sloth is hired on the case of missing persons, which leads to the ravelling of the serial murders of the animalled, due to their ability to find lost things. The animal (in the animalled) can also sense the emotion and thought process of the human and they function together almost like a cyborg. If we go by the idea of cyborg, the animal spirit becomes the technological part of the animalled. The human and the animal are in symbiotic relationship. The animal spirit is

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[5]DilmanDila in "Is Science Fiction Really Alien to Africa?" (2015) argues that science fiction has always been part of the stories from Africa, and it need not echo the Western notion of science fiction.
[6] Greg Tate in an interview with Mark Dery argues that Amos Tutuola uses Yoruba mythology in the manner of science fiction (Dery 208), and quotes Jerome Rothenbug's "technologies of sacred" (210) as a term for such usage.

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also a powerful tool in *muti* or traditional medicine. The antagonist, Odi Huron, orders the killing of the human in the animalled to obtain their animals. Thus, the animal serves as technology in several respects albeit not in the way technology might perhaps be conceived.

The animalled also becomes a mode to create a parallel realm that addresses the present issues of contemporary African cities. It has its way of evoking the different inheritances, pasts, presents, and futures of the city. The point I would like to emphasize is how the presence of the animalled provides a parallel universe, where issues of poverty, violence, and racial discrimination of the post- apartheid city of Johannesburg come alive along with the signs of hope and reconciliation of the past. Though none of these issues are directly addressed, it is revealed through the animalled and their proximity with the non-animalled. The ghettoization of the animalled in a Hillbrow like Zoo City becomes an opportune setting to draw how that space is knit with communal well-being, but at the same time is viewed with suspicion and concern by the non-animalled outsiders. The animal is a sign of shame and guilt to the non-animalled. However, to the animalled, the animal is the only true companion and solace for the sordid past that cannot be revealed to the rest of the world. The secret of the past is between the human and the animal, and they negotiate their lives in the present world with the help of each other.

The novel also attempts a different interpretation of the presence of the past through the animalled. Sheree Thomas, editor of *Dark Matter,*[7] remarks on the role of African writers in the field of science fiction, "We're putting black lives into the future, and adding some of our interpretations of our past" (qtd. in "Black Writers Bring a Different Perspective to Sci-fi"). There have been several initiatives in African studies to talk about afro-future,[8] in an attempt to shake the image of Africa as stagnant in time. The animalled in the story does something similar. It breaks the afro-pessimist view of Africa as being stagnant with no idea of "progress" and drowning in poverty and violence. As mentioned in the earlier paragraph, it re-imagines the city-scape to portray what it means to live with the past in the future.

Conclusion

This article, thus, shows how the novel plays with the idea of science fiction by deploying the tropes from myth and traditional beliefs. This in turn allows a re-examination of the life in

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[7]An anthology series of science fiction and fantasy by the African diaspora.

[8] The Preface of Journal of African Literature Association formulates the idea of African futureS with the capital 'S' to signify the possibilities of several futures, and a future which is "always arriving and yet to arrive at the same time" (Arndt 3)

MichNyawalo in "Afro-futurism and the Aesthetics of Hope," poses the question, how to depict "a region of theworld that is said to exist outside of time itself?" (211).

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African cities—its contemporary condition. The second result of the "complex mythologies"that seems to emerge ishow it questions the idea of time and poses argument against a linear chronological time. Past and future seems to be present in the now.Thus, the novel participates inthe genre ofscience fiction and then pushes the boundaries of the genre to comment on life, death, time, and existence in the world.

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