

## OF ANIMALS AND OTHERS: LIFE, HISTORIES, AND THE ANTHROPOCENE IN JOHANNESBURG SCIENCE FICTION

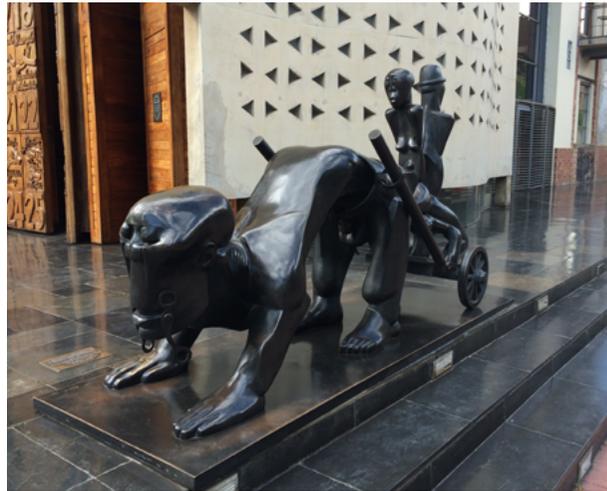
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*Paul Clarke considers representations of the environment in the film *District 9* and the novel *Zoo City* in order to think through the emergent intimacies and mobilities offered by the Anthropocene.*

### INTRODUCTION: POTENTIALITIES, INTIMACIES AND FLUIDITIES

On the walk up from Queens Road in Hillbrow into the heritage precinct of Constitution Hill, there is a curious statue titled “History.” Sculpted by Dumile Feni in black burnished metal, the statue is of four entangled figures. Two, a man and a woman, are seated back-to-back on what seems to be the bench of a cart. Upon closer inspection, the bench reveals itself to be a prostrated ‘man-body-thing’, his head peering through the seated man’s legs. All three have angular bodies and faces turned slightly inward; their torsos are armless and emaciated by the sculptor’s hand. It is difficult to tell whether the eyes of the seated figures, shrunken as they are, are unable to see or simply unperturbed by their human bench – or by the other body pulling the cart. I say ‘body’ because the pulling figure, which is attached to the cart at its waist by a precise yoke, is of an uncertain species. His – his nakedness indicates he is male – face is undeniably human, but everything is out of proportion. His hands have become feet-like, his arms legs, and his legs like trunks. A swollen knee has dropped into the ankle. He has an oversized head, dumb face and unseeing eyes.



“History” by Dumile Feni (1987, cast in bronze in 2003)

This composite body – part man, part ungulate – is pure force. He is not a glorious or triumphant blending of human and animal in the line with an Assyrian lamassu; it is grotesque, exceeding both the animal and the human, — an unnerving rendering of life captured for its muscular capacity.

Set just up the hill from the notorious Number Four prison, Feni’s piece cannot be seen simply as an abstract meditation on the relationship between the animal and human. Rather, as the title indicates, it is a history of sorts – a reflection on treatment of black life in Johannesburg. A city that owes its existence and form to the subterranean Witwatersrand basin, the richest concentration of gold in the world, and to the subterranean black migrant mine workers who extracted the gold. Under the mine’s vicious racial labor regime, these workers were regarded as units of muscular power to be used up and disposed of when no longer useful (Mbembe 2004). As “History” embodies, they served as the early city’s beasts of burden, made to hammer and haul the gold ore

from depths of the earth for the enrichment of the Randlords. This economic configuration of black life depended on two notions of race thinking of the times: 1) white life was fundamentally different from black life, and 2) that difference was premised on the notion that black life lacked or exceeded the elements of “proper” white life in part due to its proximity to animal life. Although race and the construction of blackness/whiteness are historically complex and decidedly protean concepts, Jean and John Comaroff (2007) in their genealogy of colonial racism in Africa trace this imagined proximity as an important element of race thinking to the period of Johannesburg’s founding. Originating in a wide-ranging nineteenth century European philosophical project, this construction of black life emerged from anthropological and natural scientific forays into questions of the human that took Africa and African life as its object. The Comaroffs summarize this project thus:

In investigating the savage, the West set up a mirror in which it might find a tangible, if inverted self-image. Non-Europeans filled out the nether reaches of the scale of being, providing the contrast against which cultivated man might distinguish himself. On this scale, moreover, the African was assigned a particularly base position: he marked the point at which humanity gave way to animality. (35)

Coded in performances as disparate as human zoos, phrenology, and adventure fiction, this understanding of black life as proximate to animal life would coalesce around the support of the already existing idea that white life was naturally dominant over black life, a

commitment that would beget the situation of the Rand and the city that would follow.

However to my mind, this philo-economic configuration of white from/over black life was built on top of another philo-economic distinction on life, that of human life from/over animal life. Far predating the former, this distinction of human life from/over animal life has been evidenced in Western philosophical thought for at least two thousand years from thinkers like Aristotle and Descartes. Following Jacques Derrida's *On the Animal That Therefore I Am*, Michael Shapiro (2014) cogently points out that this division of the human and the animal created the conditions of possibility for a vast instrumentalization and destruction of animal life for the sustenance and expansion of human life. As such, Shapiro's intervention reminds us that there is another history latent in Feni's "History," that of the capture and orientation of animal lives for the reproduction of human life. Just as racial distinctions and capture of life provided the conditions of possibility for circuits of life, death, and production on the Rand, we can glimpse resonant configurations of biological capture and circuiting in contemporary factory farming and the ongoing ivory trade.

In reading these histories of capture, division and reproduction together in Feni's sculpture, we can see that these intertwined bifurcations of life – white from/over black and human from/over animal – although not equivalent, resonate with each other. Indeed, their often-fatal methods of bio-extraction and their capacity for environmental alteration and degradation enable us to identify them as violences that provide the foundation for the city of Johannesburg as well as the local symptoms of what many natural and social are calling the Anthropocene

– that epoch wherein human activity constitutes a geological force. That is, without their capacity to capture and direct mineral, muscular, metabolic, and imaginative energies, it is unlikely that humans could have been able to become geological forces on the scale necessary to build the city nor by extension set into motion the alterations to the region's atmospheric, geologic, hydrological, and seismic equilibrium that has accompanied the city's growth.

And yet recently in a curious reversal, Anthropocenic changes by virtue of their ability to displace enormous volumes of matter and energy have also inaugurated new intimacies and fluidities between categories once thought to be discrete thus interrupting the very distinctions through which they were set in motion. Vividly captured in Lindsay Bremner's (2014) examination of "the vibrant alchemy" of the Johannesburg's acidic and radioactive mine dumps and those marginalized residents who live around them, I argue that these emerging intimacies and fluidities can also be glimpsed in biological and social contexts within the recent works of science fiction originating from the city. Through a reading of Neill Blomkamp's mockumentary-style science fiction film *District 9* (2009) and Lauren Beukes's novel *Zoo City* (2010), I engage how Blomkamp and Beukes stage biological and social processes of "becoming-alien" and "becoming-animal" and connect these processes to narratives of environmental degradation in Johannesburg. Within this connection, I would like to suggest that we are able to see not only how Anthropocenic changes are destabilizing those racial and species-based bifurcations of life, but in doing so, how the works of science fiction propose new ethical modes of encountering difference. I conclude by highlighting

the value of these sorts of ethical praxes both in the problematics of this post-apartheid moment and in light of the realization of the Anthropocene wherein the figure of the human has once again become a locus of hope even as it supersedes the other lives and histories of the planet in new and deadly ways.

#### **SCIENCE FICTION AND THE ENCOUNTER WITH DIFFERENCE**

As mentioned above, *District 9* and *Zoo City* are firmly grounded in the genre of science fiction. Not surprisingly the artistic tradition of the genre inflects their works and must necessarily inform our understanding of them. Within the science fiction genre, it is common if not entirely expected that narratives be set in a radical 'elsewhere', Through the narrative, the reader is commonly transported to known and unknown planets and universes as well as other Earths which are made exotic by extreme environs or the passage of time. In the rare cases when the science fiction artist provides a familiar place for the setting of the narrative, that place is often made unrecognizable – as with Ridley Scott's dark and rainy Los Angeles in his 1982 film *Bladerunner*. As John Rieder (2008) argues in his book on *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*, this creation of other worlds in other times is fundamentally embedded in science fiction's historical emergence during the height of European imperialism. Heavily influenced by and participant to the ideas of racial difference that circulated in Europe at the time, Rieder illuminates how science fiction's exotic settings not only served to glorify the colonial project through a staging of heroic and improbable deeds, but also re-imagined the project by re-staging the colonial encounter with difference. Depending on the author's politics, this re-staging of the colonial encounter had

the ability to either edify the author and reader's sense of self as Orson Scott Card does with *Ender's Game* or to trouble it as Philip K. Dick does with the seminal *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

Given its artistic usefulness and its long history, it is notable that both *District 9* and *Zoo City* eschew this trope and set their works of science fiction in contemporary Johannesburg. Certainly, there is something to be said for writing back against the genre's historically one-sided conversation with what was the colonial periphery; but more than that, Beukes and Blomkamp center their works of science fiction in post-apartheid Johannesburg simply because they did not need to journey away in order to engage that problematic at the heart of the genre. With all its post-apartheid racial and national divisions and instabilities, Johannesburg is a fruitful setting in which to encounter difference through moments of alien-nation and animalization. As such, Beukes and Blomkamp map new inter-species of difference on top of existing differences in the city. This mapping process allows their narratives of "becoming-alien" and "becoming-animal" to function allegorically, but as we will see, the narratives in their depth and progression open themselves up to horizons of meaning beyond allegory.

#### **DISTRICT 9: BECOMING-ALIEN**

In Neill Blomkamp's *District 9*, new difference arrives in the form of a failed alien invasion of Earth precipitated by environmental collapse of their home planet. Sent from the Andromeda galaxy to prospect other galaxies for energy and natural resources like water, the alien's massive disc of a spaceship began to falter as it entered the Earth's atmosphere. Soon its life support systems failed and the broken vessel,

abandoned by their home planet, is halted and left hovering over Johannesburg packed with sick and dying aliens. Through a series of interweaving governmental, NGO, and multi-national interventions, the surviving aliens are transported to earth and placed in a militarized camp for intergalactic refugees called "District 9." A direct and material reference to South Africa's spatial history of the township, the setting of District 9, shot in the informal settlement of Chiawelo, locates the aliens at the lowest position the city's existing racial-spatial order. Marooned in the settlement and largely without means of supporting themselves, the aliens survive on a combination of humanitarian rations and scavenging and quickly find themselves on object of contempt of human residents who have nicknamed them "prawns" for their "bottom feeding" nature. In the opening moments of the film, we see that this contempt was mobilized in the form of violent protests carried out by their black human neighbors who want them evicted in a manner which, according to Blomkamp, was purposely reminiscent of recent xenophobic attacks. At the opening of the film, the South African government, bowing to this pressure, has contracted a multi-national corporation, aptly named Multi-National United (MNU), to carry out a forced removal of the aliens from District 9 to a new refugee-style camp some 200 km outside the city. The arrival of "prawns" then heralds new inter-species interaction founded by the catastrophic environmental collapse in the aliens' home planet. However, the potential of this inter-species interaction is quickly foreclosed and systematized through synergetic xenophobic, military, and humanitarian forces which not only recapitulate the old spatial orders of life in the city, but re-orient it from distinctions on race or nationality towards one on species.

This spatial and biological reification of species-difference and the life-giving and death-dealing contests it entails are troubled (at least for a time) by the trajectory of the film's protagonist Wikus van der Merwe. We meet Wikus, an enthusiastic, bumbling, and bigoted MNU bureaucrat, when he is given charge over the militarized removal of the aliens from District 9. During a search of an alien's shack for weapons (MNU is using the evictions as a subterfuge for seizing alien weapons technology), Wikus is sprayed with an inky black liquid that rapidly begins to transform his body from human to "prawn." News of his transformation quickly spreads and he becomes the subject of a massive televised manhunt carried out by MNU who want his genetic material for their experiments with alien weaponry. Hearing MNU's propaganda that his transformation is a result of "pornographic activity" with an alien, Wikus's wife Tania ends their marriage over the phone. Now on the run, family-less, and homeless (and species-less for he is not completely alien yet), Wikus is forced to flee his suburban life to District 9, the only place "where no one would think to look for him," where he longs for his wife and his former body. While foreclosing his previous life, Wikus's transformation necessitates a new fluid mode of living while opening him up to new and unexpected intimacies. While in District 9, he forms a shaky alliance with an alien named Christopher Johnson and his young son, who are planning to return to the home planet to retrieve help for the aliens left in the city. Upon learning that alien technology on the home planet could reverse his transformation, Wikus agrees to help Christopher obtain the technology necessary to depart from Earth.

Through Wikus's body and movements, Blomkamp enacts a Deleuzian (1987) "becoming-animal" or more

precisely a “becoming-alien” against the backdrop of an inhospitable Johannesburg.<sup>1</sup> Through the inky liquid and his alliance with Christopher Johnson, biologically, affectively, and socially, Wikus meets and crosses the borderline between species through contagion and through an odd sort of friendship. Without a doubt, this is a forcible and exceptionally painful “becoming-alien,” but it nevertheless allows Wikus to traverse the regimes of dividing life in the divided city even as these divisions continue to inflict suffering on him and the rest of the aliens.

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Disappointingly however, Blomkamp’s narrative constructs Wikus’s “becoming-alien” into one that turns his body into an object of immense destructive power. Wikus’s emerging balance of human and alien genetics makes him the only “human” alive who is able to effectively operate alien weaponry and as such becomes the subject of two sets of cannibalistic desires. His former employer MNU wishes to “strip him down to nothing,” while a group of Nigerian gangsters want to eat him alive as a both way of harvesting his genomic power. This centering modes of vivisection could comment on a common if undernoted practice of dealing with “uncertain” otherness as Arjun Appadurai (1998) argues in his examination of contemporary acts of ethnic violence. However, it also causes the narrative to devolve from its examination of corporeal fluidity into a confused bloodbath. Now a sort of human/alien super weapon,

Wikus spends the rest of the film violently navigating these voracious appetites with Christopher Johnson in tow, dealing death to MNU employees and the gangsters alike as he rumbles through District 9. And then seemingly out of nowhere he becomes a tragic-savior hero, sacrificing himself for the greater good of “the prawns,” a narrative choice made more inscrutable by the fact that he only moments before rejected any kinship with the aliens and had attempted to abandon them in a spectacular display of self-interest.

This formulation of Wikus’s transformation as begetting gratuitous violence and a flimsy moment of self-sacrifice severely curtails the ethical possibilities latent in his transformed once-fluid biology and sociality by replacing intimacy and fluidity with violence and a forced reciprocity. Perhaps, this unfortunate turn is the mockumentary’s way of underscoring that a character as hapless and inherently flawed as Wikus could never have sufficiently met the ethical challenge his transformation raises. But by the close of the *District 9*, the viewer is sadly left without any alternative models that could meet such a challenge. In the final scene, we find a fully transformed Wikus isolated in District 9 and crafting a flower made of scavenged metal for his distant wife. Having successfully helped Christopher Johnson and his son on their trip to their home planet, the final hope for Wikus and the viewer is that Christopher will return to Johannesburg, retrieve and repatriate the remaining aliens, and reverse Wikus’s transformation in the process. Despite Wikus’s vivid and visceral “becoming-alien” and the fluidities and intimacies it espouses, in the film’s refusal to move on from Wikus we are left to conclude that in the world of *District 9* difference and

transformation are things that at best can be deported and reversed through a process where that which ‘became’ alien returns to ‘being’ human.

### ZOO CITY: BECOMING-ANIMAL

The narrative of inadequacy in the face of difference and transformation that we see in *District 9* is avoided by Lauren Beukes in her 2010 science fiction novel *Zoo City*. Set in contemporary Johannesburg, Beukes introduces her protagonist and narrator Zinzi December as a “zoo,” a human who has become bonded to a magical animal in the manner of a witch and their familiar. We learn that zoos like Zinzi and her sloth familiar, descriptively named Sloth, have been isolated to the inner-city neighborhood of Hillbrow. In a manner which resonates with *District 9*’s mapping of species-difference onto existing racial and national differences, Hillbrow has become known as “Zoo City” as it is the only place where zoos who are considered non-humans are permitted to live.

Like *District 9*, *Zoo City* performs a “becoming-animal” in the bonding of Zinzi and Sloth and links that process both to an emotional pain or guilt and, as Henriette Roos (2011) usefully points out, to an aesthetic of nature in the city out of balance. This bonding process, which in the book is called “animalling” or “being animalled,” occurs as a result of having caused the death of another human being. Appearing shortly after the death, the animal is a sort of living penance which must be kept close at all times. If a zoo’s animal is killed, the zoo themselves will die, disintegrated by a black cloud of “psychic black matter,” known as “the Undertow.” Interestingly, this dissolving force is experienced by everyone in sight of the dying zoo as a supernatural

thunderstorm. Zinzi describes the experience of an impending “Undertow:”

The air pressure dips, like before a storm. A keening sound wells up soft and low, as if it’s always been there, just outside the range of human hearing. It swells to howling. And then the shadows start to drop from trees, like raindrops after a storm. The darkness pools and gathers and then seethes. (208)

The fact that aposymbiosis, the scientific name for the global phenomenon behind “the Undertow” and “animalling,” manifests as a vengeful force of nature does not seem to be a coincidence. Although theories on why aposymbiosis has emerged vary widely, the one that is “most now” – as Zinzi put it is – is grounded in environmental degradation. Called “Toxic Reincarnation theory,” Zinzi explains that “animalling” is caused by “[g]lobal warming, pollution, toxins, BPA from plastics leaching into the environment. [They have] disrupted the spiritual realm or whatever you want to call it” (154).

This trope of environmental degradation inaugurates new intimacies and fluidities across biological difference that parallels those in *District 9*. But significantly, *Zoo City*’s “becoming-animal” provides a much more optimistic look on the possibilities of transformed life. Unlike Wikus’s “becoming-alien” which causes a fundamental disavowal of the change and weaponizes his body, Zinzi has a loving and productive relationship with Sloth. They feel each other’s emotions, thoughts, and pains, and like all zoos and their animals share a magical talent, called a *shavi*, which in their case is the ability to feel and trace people’s lost objects. This

more optimistic model at the process of “becoming-animal” leads *Zoo City* on a different path than *District 9*. When we meet Zinzi and Sloth in Hillbrow at the beginning of the novel, Zinzi is heavily in debt to a crime syndicate and barely making ends meet by operating 419 email schemes and reuniting people’s with their lost items for small fees. In the opening pages of the novel, Zinzi is contracted by a shady white music mogul, Odysseus “Odi” Huron, to search for one of his missing artists, a teen pop-star named Songweza Radebe, a task that if completed would pay her ticket out of debt. Set on this life-altering mission, Zinzi is quickly out of Hillbrow traversing the greater city in her search for Song. Like Wikus’s transformation, Zinzi’s “becoming-animal” allows her to break the spatial order of the city. As she traces the thread-like connections between Song and her lost items, Zinzi travels the city from end to end. Although she is subject to “sliding glances reserved for people in wheelchairs and burn victims” and a vague threat she and Sloth may be killed to provide materials for *muti*. As Jessica Dickson (2014) highlights in her examination of the novel, Zinzi is able to move freely from Hillbrow to a gated community in Fourways to the sewers under Braamfontein to the cafes of Rosebank and to the mine dumps in the south and finally back to the inner city and Ponte Tower. Charting Johannesburg’s fractured and often securitized layers, Zinzi and Sloth are fundamentally bodies in motion and flux, transgressing the forms of immobility and capture in the city.

While Wikus is a man hunted, isolated, and longing for past life, Zinzi is a determined hunter, moving and working for the future. In the course of the novel, we learn that Zinzi was a former drug addict who acquired Sloth by accidentally killing

her brother in a series of mistakes precipitated by her addiction. Through her travels, Zinzi carries that past with her form of guilt and her animal, but in striving to escape her debt she is fundamentally movement- and future-oriented. Through this magical mobility and disposition, Beukes is able to re-map the inhospitable city and construct a relationship with the past that although heavy, equips the city dweller with the tools needed to hustle beyond it and escape the self-sacrificing melancholy of *District 9*’s Wikus. Not all characters in *Zoo City* are able to cope with the fact of “being animalled.” Odi Huron, Zinzi’s employer, is revealed to be himself a reluctant zoo. In a gruesome climax, he arranges the bloody murder of Song as part of a *muti* ritual to break the bond between his white crocodile and him before Zinzi and Sloth can stop him. Beukes’ outlook on the implications of “being animalled” is by no means rosy, but her sympathy and the reader’s is clearly fixed on Zinzi, who unlike her employer, is able to live with the past in the present. Blomkamp and Beukes’s distinct orientations toward the past and future can be traced in their disparate aesthetic representations of their “becoming-otherwise.” Whereas in *Zoo City*’s transformation begins in tragedy and produces (in Zinzi’s case at least) a cooperative assemblage of human and animal, the dominant narrative in *District 9* is that transformation is itself the tragedy, marked by excruciating pain, violence, and a deep melancholy for life pre-transformation.

At the close of *Zoo City*, we find Zinzi at the border of South Africa and Zimbabwe pretending to be a Zimbabwean named Tatenda Murapata. With Sloth in tow, she is on her way from Johannesburg to Kigali to retrieve her boyfriend’s long-lost wife and daughters, whom he thought had died during their

escape from the conflict in the DRC. Having originally felt threatened by the existence of her boyfriend's wife early in the novel, she comments optimistically to the reader, "[i]t's going to be awkward. It's going to be the best thing I've done with my miserable life" (309). Through this open-ended ending *Zoo City* espouses a preference for movement across divisions and borders which parallels the configuration of its "becoming-animal." Whereas *District 9* leaves the viewer with a moment of segregation, melancholy, and hope having narrowed to anticipation of removal and reversal of difference, *Zoo City* proposes an ethics that is comfortable with transformation, movement, and play and one that joyfully journeys out of the city to adopt difference, even when transformation is laden with pain and the difference is awkward.

#### THE FUTURE OF THE ANTHROPOCENE: A THIRD HISTORY

In his book "Atrocity, Securitization, and Exuberant Lines of Flight," Michael Shapiro (2014) points out that the French political thinker Georges Bataille imagined that humans are discrete from animals not through a matter of nature as Aristotle and Descartes had believed but rather that humans had made themselves discrete from animals through an act of art, namely the ancient art emblazoned in the caves of Lascaux. With such a schematic in mind, we imagine in *District 9* and *Zoo City* how that originary artistic act of bifurcating human life from/over animal life is being disturbed, if only temporarily. Through their poetic explorations of "becoming-alien" and "becoming-animal," the city of Johannesburg becomes no longer the sole abode of humans, but a place of animals and others, re-mixing and revising old but still deadly racial and national distinctions on life

through embodied practices that in their most radical forms are always already in the process of becoming.

Curiously, both pieces link their new fluidities and intimacies to themes of environmental degradation in admittedly distancing and tentative ways. To be sure, one could use these equivocal moves to dismiss the significance of the theme altogether. But perhaps more than marking them as an unimportant footnotes, it evidences the fact that the widespread realization of the reality of Anthropocenic changes continues to exist on the horizon of apprehension. Regardless of their hesitation, Blomkamp and Beukes in blurring the distinction between human and non-human life refer to the contemporary moment of what scholars are calling the Anthropocene wherein as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) in his essay "The Climate of History" argues "the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history" is collapsing. To those who believe that science fiction anticipates futures, this reference to the Anthropocene may not be surprising at all.

["\[Through\] poetic explorations of "becoming-alien" and "becoming-animal," the city of Johannesburg becomes no longer the sole abode of humans, but a place of animals and others, re-mixing and revising old but still deadly racial and national distinctions on life through embodied practices that in their most radical forms are always already in the process of becoming".](#)

But if we are going to be able reckon with the momentum of the Anthropocene without flattening or re-inscribing the deadly distinctions that provided its conditions of possibility, we must take seriously these Anthropocenically-inflected ethical modes of

encountering difference. Perhaps in conversation with these sorts of ethics, Chakrabarty's history, and the futurism of science fiction, we can sculpt another history (or another future) onto Dumile Feni's "History" sculpture. This third history would pull from its two undergirding histories – of "proper" white life from/over black and of human from/over animal -- in a manner reminiscent of Zinzi's bodily, spatial, and temporal play. It would be a history that would engage with that "grotesque" human/animal/thing body not as reduced or lacking, but as espousing a productive plasticity of life. Fundamentally, it would regard these borders on life, whether figured epidermally, spatially, temporally, scientifically, or philosophically, not as mechanisms of capture for the vast circuiting of life and death, but as a places of potential and capacity for fluidities and intimacies in a shared world and shared city that are quickly becoming otherworldly.

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 I would like to thank Sam O. Opondo for his generosity in sharing his ideas and his forthcoming paper "Biocolonial and Racial Entanglements, Community and Superfluity in the Name of Humanity" (in *Journal of Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*) to which this paper owes its inspiration, Achille Mbembe and Joshua Walker whose course, "Cities of the Anthropocene: the case of Johannesburg," produced this piece, and Yannick van den Berg and Timothy Wright for their comments.
- 2 In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari amalgamated the concept of "becoming-animal" through a juxtaposition of natural science, literature, political theory, and ethnography of animism and witchcraft. In my deployment of it, "becoming-animal" is an open-ended process wherein the human and the animal

become materially and definitionally altered through their contact with the other in a manner that explodes the ability to distinguish the two. By creating a moment of definitional incoherence, “becoming-animal” is also a mode exiting the discursive policing involved in capture and division.

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