

NATURE AND/AS THING(S) IN THE EMERGENT LITERARY CITY

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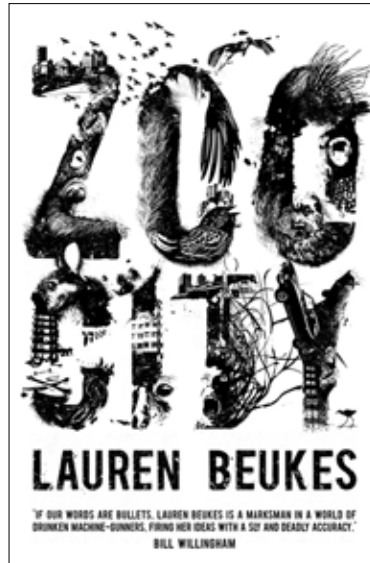
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In this essay, Meg Samuelson parses four local novels published during the past two years that inscribe nature and/as things while producing or refusing various visions of the future. She starts with three that compose the urban feral, before turning to a fourth that zooms in on city things, particularly cars. Her attention to the urban is motivated by the demographic shifts noted by Mike Davis and others, and the consequent importance of bringing questions of nature into the city.

I want to attend particularly to how these novels animate the ways in which nature and culture, to quote Bruno Latour, ‘get churned up’, while performing what Timothy Morton terms ‘ecological thinking’, which abandons the idea of Nature ‘over yonder ... a reified thing in the distance’ in favor of recognizing and thinking through ‘interconnectedness’. At the same time, I’m approaching proximate, immanent things via Bill Brown’s ‘thing theory’ and Jane Bennett’s conception of ‘vibrant matter’.

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Lauren Beukes’s *Zoo City* sets the scene with an inverted opening image: the morning light, so often cast as metaphoric vehicle, is here conveyed by the sulphur colour of mine dumps and received as it bounces off Ponte tower. The nature-culture binary



The book cover of *Zoo City* by Lauren Beukes

and its attendant organizations is immediately destabilized, as this reflected ray illuminates protagonist-narrator Zinzi, a woman with a sloth draped over her shoulder and a talent for finding lost things - she is able to see and trace the ‘taunt lines of connection’ unspooling between people and their things (a way of perceiving what Elizabeth Grosz in her Deleuzian study describes as ‘the nonliving tentacles that extend themselves into the living ... to enable the living to draw out the virtualities of the nonliving’).

Both talent and animal attached themselves to her after her (unintentional) implication in her brother’s murder. Along with others who have been similarly animalled, Zinzi lives in the eponymous ‘Zoo City’, otherwise known as Hillbrow, in which various human-nonhuman assemblages (generators and short-wired electricity points; refugees and other criminalized humans; a mongoose, a sloth, a

sparrow; a sagging mattress, a laptop and a communal litter box, etc) nest in a condemned apartment block described as an ‘urban warren’.

The phenomena of the zoos, the animalled or apocryphals remains deliberately opaque, and may or may not be symptomatic of the end of nature. What is apparent is the interconnection and interdependence of human and nonhuman in these collectivities. We are somewhere between Donna Haraway’s ‘companion species’ and Gilles Deleuze’s ‘becoming-animal’, while being brought into encounters with ‘vibrant matter’.

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Zinaid Meeran’s even more bizarre novel *Tanuki Ichiban* opens more fully into the de-territorialized flows of the becoming-animal as it harnesses literature to ‘investigate identity as fluid and fragmented’ while elaborating the unfolding of the Anthropocene Age. Set in Cape Town approximately a quarter century from now (one of the characters drives a vintage Tata Eita 2010), the story develops against a backdrop of energy wars, geopolitical shifts and melting ice caps as Meeran, advancing a ‘post-identity vision of South Africa’, explodes metaphors into potent proximities and perspectival intersections while the narrative flows around the acts of feeding and fucking, intra- and inter-species.

Among the dazzling cast of characters are hunters and smugglers of endangered species for extreme cuisine; ecologists and animal rights campaigners; raw food and nature-identical flavor capitalists; foragers of mushrooms, oysters, and discarded greens in the mountain, harbor and urban refuge heaps; a man who after eating shark roe is partially chomped

by bronze whalers only to be fitted with a new-fangled uniwheel such that, scooting up and down the beach, he simultaneously recalls the cyborg from *Alien* and a Tasmanian devil at the Johannesburg Zoo; and Lahnee-O, an orangutan who attains human status to avoid euthanasia. We are surrounded by Latour's hybrids and Haraway's cyborgs. So scrambled are the codes that when Corsicana, a human who 'had never considered dating outside of her species' until meeting Lahnee-O, this 'felluh with that soulful mischief she had searched for in man after man', watches him rubbing his feet together, the gesture reminds her of that made by a past (also human) boyfriend while 'tucking into a KFC Streetwise Five and intent on a boxset of Thundercats'.

In all this fervent consumption, we witness humans 'becoming undone', to use Grosz's phrase; in the eating encounter, says Bennett, we come to recognise that all bodies are 'but temporary congealments of a materiality that is a process of becoming, is hustle and flow punctuated by sedimentation and substance'.

At one point readers enter the situation of one of the last ten polar bears during his final hours - nosing around the edges of an ice cap in search of rotting seal carcasses before sharing with him the realization that he is stranded on a barren, shrinking berg, which launches a desperate swim into nothingness that concludes when a trawler draws alongside with the 'yipping chirping cries of the two-legged predator'; the 'water around him grew warm from his blood, but only momentarily'. Cut to the 'clink, glitter, clatter and chirrup of the dinner party' in Cape Town where he is devoured.

The approach is antithetical to that of utilitarian Jeremy Bentham, as elaborated by Jacques Derrida,

who asks: 'does the animal suffer?' Rather, it aims for the effect Deleuze finds in Francis Bacon's painting: 'Bacon does not say, "Pity the beasts", but rather that every man who suffers is a piece of meat. Meat is the common zone of man and the beast'; this is not 'resemblance' but 'deep identity, a zone of indiscernibility more profound than any sentimental identification... This is the reality of becoming'.

In tune also with Haraway, the novel viscerally creates the understanding 'that it is a misstep to separate the world into those who may be killed and those who may not and a misstep to pretend to live outside killing'. Certainly, there is no space of innocence, no outside, in Meeran's narrative world: green corporations and oil-guzzlers are presented as equally fascist and, in a telling juxtaposition, the shiny happy breed of people frequenting Rip Roaring Good raw foods, slip 'organic Kenyan tenderstem and KwaZulu watercress into their space-age designer shopping baskets' less than a kilometer away from bin-pickers scavenging litter.

Mediating between the two is the 'billionaire science of nature-identical flavor' food developed in the corporate campus of Global Flavour. In this 'make-shift Eden' in which 'nature-identical is the new natural', 'biochemists frittered about with beakers and petri dishes extracting the flavour of pomegranate from a polymer found only in recycled plastic milk cartons, before applying it to the contents of three silos - solid, liquid and gel - produced out of the grain that now, post climate change, grows abundantly in the Karoo. The vision is resonant with those of Ted Nordhaus and Latour in their recent writings on Post-environmentalism and the Anthropocene.

Shaping satire into a mode for writing the end of nature and the post-human and shunning the

apocalyptic register, the novel emphasizes the interconnection of Morton's ecological thought rather than the separation between nature and society that the apocalyptic response produces. At the same time, in its shocking effects and affects it produces what Rita Felski describes as 'a somatic register of response' that deprived me of my conventional (vegetarian!) pleasure of reading while eating. With rising nausea, I found myself 'ripped from aesthetic reflection' and thrust into 'the realm of the abject, floored by the sheer physicality of [my] reactions, newly conscious of being stranded on the perilous border of nature and culture'.

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In *Nineveh*, Henrietta Rose-Innes also shuns the apocalyptic register to render instead the porosity of and interconnection between organisms, while making the skin contract with her creepy crawly things. This narrative world is filled with things out of place, pushing against and through the boundaries that consolidate identity and privilege.

Katya Grubbs's task as 'painless pest relocater' is to restore things to 'their proper zones'. Appointed to rid the immaculately sterile Nineveh (a luxury development that poses as a possible future Cape Town) from the goggas that swarm in through its elaborate fortifications, she begins to question her vocation of 'Putting the wild back in the wild, keeping the tame tame. Policing borders'. This 'Great Divide' between humans and nonhumans, notes Latour, defines another: that between the moderns and premoderns. Significantly, Katya stumbles upon the remnants of the 16th century Bitter Almond hedge that divided the peninsular in order 'to keep the Khoisan out of

the old Dutch settlement’.

Along with the ‘teeming wilderness that lies beyond the white retaining wall’ of Nineveh is a shack settlement that similarly pushes against its borders. Katya realizes that the luxury apartments under construction are being disassembled that, ‘[t]his place is not as impermeable as she had thought. There are channels, trade routes’: ‘[b]eetles in, building materials out. Its boundaries breached, the materials of this urban hubris are recommissioned and reassembled: ‘as the substance of Nineveh unravels, the swamp winds it up like yarn into a ball. Knitting new patterns, weaving Nineveh into the shacks and the city beyond’.

After her return to everyday urban life following Nineveh’s collapse, Katya is left with the apprehension that: ‘Everything’s in motion, changed and changing. There is no way to keep the shape of things. One house falls, another rises. Throw a worn brick away and someone downstream will pick it up and lay it next to others in ... a new wall – which sooner or later will fall into ruin, giving the spiders a place to anchor their own silken architecture. Even human skin, Katya has read, is porous and infested, every second letting microscopic creatures in and out. Our own bodies are menageries’. Earlier she had found such an in-between state (‘not wild, but not civilised either’) in parking lots where she let ‘her fingertips glide over the sleek flanks of the cars – metallic shells so like the carapaces of giant beetles’.

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In Sifiso Mzobe’s *Young Blood* (set in Durban, particularly Umlazi township), these sleek surfaces

disrupt the teleology of a ‘my life in crime’ narrative that charts Siphó’s descent from school drop-out to car-thief and accessory to murder only to conclude with him making good.

Mzobe’s cars display what Bennett calls ‘thing-power’, the subject-object binary repeatedly collapsing as I am immersed in the erotics of driving: the flirtatious play between car and driver, the caress of tyre on tarmac... As reviewer Wamuwi Mbaó notes, ‘The cars are almost characters; ... under Mzobe’s pen [their] life-enlarging potential ... comes alive’. In the potent assemblage of car-driver, he certainly captures something profound about how we live with things. Objects, says Brown, are what we ‘look *through*’ to see ‘what they disclose about *us*’; the opacity of the thing, in contrast, ‘names less an object than a particular object-subject relation’.

Not translucent, the cars with and to which Siphó relates are also not the distorting mirrors Paul Gilroy bemoans when he demystifies their place as ‘ur commodity’ in black culture. Returning crisp, clear reflections of Siphó off their surfaces they also write on others: ‘a few handbrake turns will turn the streets to pages, with tyres as black-inked pens’, he boasts. When, soon after, attention is drawn to tattooed skin - ‘everything written on this body tells a story’ - we start to see what Sarah Nuttall in another context describes as ‘the manipulation of surfaces as a means to scramble the categories of person or thing’.

Of course it is all too easy - and inviting - to demystify the carbon-fueled commodity culture cars embody. But this would mean piercing through their glistening carapaces and denying their palpable pull as actants (even Gilroy acknowledges their dynamic, agentive force). As Bennett points out as she turns

from the hermeneutics of suspicion: ‘what demystification uncovers is always something human’ while it ‘screen[s] from view the vitality of matter’.

It’s telling that ultimately, though Siphó turns away from crime and fast things (as the moral imperatives of the genre dictate), he maintains his attachment to cars: training as a motor mechanic who will compose, fix, recycle and reassemble them in a process earlier shown to activate the assemblage of man and machine when the scene of disassembling a car is described as: ‘shoulders locked, muscles strained, bolts and nuts popped’.

And who knows what prospects - if not futures - await him and cars: maybe he’ll convert petrol guzzlers into the hybrids that zoot across the smooth surfaces of *Tanuki Ichiban*? What we can be sure of is that, as Gilroy rather grudgingly notes of the practice of customizing cars, he will be ‘opening up those commodities to ongoing work, ... making them a process rather than a closed artefact’.