Introduction

In 2010, when Lauren Beukes’ *Zoo City*\(^1\) was published, Johannesburg’s city authorities were promoting the continent’s premiere and most prosperous Afropolis as a ‘World Class City in Africa’. The epithet coincided with an international campaign to promote South Africa as a country where the impossible was perfectly possible. In particular, this referred to the country’s capacity to host the Soccer World Cup in 2010, and in general it referred to South Africa’s peaceful transition from apartheid to a fully functioning democracy during the 1990s.

In parts of South Africa, simmering tensions between unemployed black South Africans and the hundreds of thousands of foreign economic and political migrants and refugees exploded. In horrific xenophobic attacks during 2009, violence against Africans from the rest of the continent was justified as though South Africans were one species and other Africans another. These attacks were often based on visible distinctions such as facial structure, skin colour, and the placement of smallpox vaccination scars which differed depending on whether colonial authorities who introduced smallpox vaccina-

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\(^1\) Lauren Beukes, *Zoo City* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2010). The British edition was published by Angry Robot in Nottingham in 2010. In 2011 *Zoo City* won the Arthur C. Clarke Prize for Science Fiction while the cover for the British and South African editions of the novel, designed by Joey Hi-Fi (aka Dale Halvorsen), won the 2010 BSFA Award for the best art work.
tions were British, French, or Portuguese. While inter-ethnic tension certainly existed in pre-colonial times, colonialism and apartheid’s race-based ideologies served to entrench these attitudes even further. In a post-apartheid transitional period, these differences bubbled to the surface in equally crude visual registers.

This essay considers Zoo City’s alternative reading of Johannesburg – a reading that imposes itself on the readings of the metropolis that the city authorities so hoped for during 2010. The novel is set in a near-future 2011 and provides a view counter to the often self-congratulatory perspective presented to tourists by the city’s establishment. The novel writes back to empire, apartheid, and the present regime. It brings the wildlife experience, so effectively promoted by tourism agencies, into the very heart of the city, and, in so doing, the author also comments on default notions of Africa and its much-vaunted ‘wilderness safaris’, the city, and the occult. Beukes creates a world that is both intimately familiar to Jo’burgers and quite defamiliarizing at the same time. As speculative fiction, Zoo City falls firmly into the new and dynamic genre of post-national fantasy – a genre that is obtaining increasing currency in former colonial territories such as India, Africa, and South American nations.

In both postcolonial and speculative fiction, the vision of the future is central to how the Other will be embodied in time, place, and space. Raja and Nandi maintain:

> The connection between science fiction and postcolonial studies is almost natural: both these fields are deeply concerned with questions of temporality, space, and existence. Central also to both these fields of study are the questions of the “other” – human, machine, cyborg – and the nature of multiple narratives of history and utopias and dystopias of the future.

In Lauren Beukes’ novel, another dimension of the future is added to the binaries of utopia and dystopia and the notion of good versus evil with the introduction of a zootopia.

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