

Imagined Identity and Human Rights in the Post-pandemic World of Lauren Beukes's *Afterland*

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Abstract

The article concerns itself with representative readers' responses to *Afterland* by Lauren Beukes. In line with Beukes's reputation, the novel has received acclaim. However, other readers have noted lacunae and negative representations that can fruitfully be viewed from the perspective of a hermeneutics of suspicion, which allows for an analysis of the affective sensibility of a text, and a human rights framework, which emphasises all humans' right to equality and freedom from prejudice. The world of *Afterland*, featuring the aftermath of the death of most people with prostates, offers an opportunity for dramatically reconceptualised gender roles and behaviours, and the possibility for readers to experience the effects of transportation into a narrative and the alleviation of out-group anxiety. Such processes allow for prejudice reduction and an increase in empathy. Through a close reading of sections of the novel, and by focusing particularly on the instance of transgender, I note that the novel fails to figure transgender rights as human rights through its representations and lacunae. Other representations of gender, sexuality and, to some extent, race are also at variance with the need for increased vigilance about the rights of marginalised and at-risk individuals during a pandemic.

Opsomming

Die artikel is gemoeid met verteenwoordigende lesers se reaksies op *Afterland*, deur Lauren Beukes. In ooreenstemming met Beukes se reputasie is die roman met toejuiging begroet. Ander lesers het egter leemtes en negatiewe voorstellings opgemerk, wat met sukses beskou kan word vanuit die perspektief van 'n hermeneutiek van agterdog, wat 'n ontleding van die affektiewe ontvanklikheid van 'n teks moontlik maak; sowel as 'n menseregteraaamwerk,

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wat klem lê op die reg van alle mense tot gelykheid en vryheid van vooroordeel. Die wêreld van *Afterland*, wat gekenmerk word deur die nadraai van die dood van die meeste mense wat 'n prostaat het, bied 'n geleentheid vir dramaties gerekonseptualiseerde geslagsrolle en -gedrag, en die moontlikheid vir lesers om die uitwerkings van transportasie in 'n verhaal in en die verligting van buitengroep-angs te ervaar. Sodanige prosesse maak vermindering van vooroordele en 'n toename in empatie moontlik. Deur gedeeltes van die roman deeglik deur te lees en veral op die geval van transgender te fokus, merk ek op dat die roman nie daarin slaag om transgender-regte as menseregte uit te beeld deur sy voorstellings en leemtes nie. Ander voorstellings van gender, seksualiteit en, in 'n mate, ras, is ook strydig met die behoefte aan verhoogde waaksaamheid oor die regte van gemarginaliseerdes en individue wat in gevaar verkeer tydens 'n pandemie.

Keywords: Lauren Beukes; hermeneutics of suspicion; human rights; *Afterland*; gender roles; transgender; pandemic

Introduction: Selected 2020 Women-authored Novels Featuring Pandemics

The *donnée* for this article occurred early into the Covid-19 pandemic, when numerous pieces appeared in the media describing widespread consumption of material about pandemics: films, television series, novels and short stories. I was particularly intrigued by responses to novels about pandemics, as novels have scale and depth allowing for reader identification and imaginative entry into different situations. Novels generally take a considerable time to publish, and as a result, few examples dealing with Covid-19 appeared between the start of this pandemic and the end of 2020. One exception is Ali Smith's *Summer*, the conclusion of her seasons tetralogy. Novels dealing with other pandemics, and published in 2020, include Maggie O'Farrell's *Hamnet*, about the death from bubonic plague of Shakespeare's twin son, and Emma Donoghue's *The Pull of the Stars*, a narrative about the effects of the First World War and the 1918 flu epidemic. These three novels have all been praised by reviewers who use their personal reactions to experiencing the Covid-19 pandemic in order to analyse the authors' sensitive treatments of precarity, relationality and human rights in times of pandemics. A representative critic, Caryn James (2020), comments that both *The Pull of the Stars* and *Hamnet*

use a pandemic as a lens on society at a moment of crisis. Extrapolating from history or from science, they highlight issues of public health, government responsibility and class divisions, and with a novelist's eye consider how those forces affect individuals. High drama flows from the way pandemics threaten the most basic human needs, health and family.

The South African author Lauren Beukes deals with similar themes in her latest speculative fiction, *Afterland* (2020a), which was published following a five-year

writing period. The novel is set in the United States of America (USA) between the years 2020 and 2023, and details the effects of a global viral pandemic in which some 99% of people with prostates swiftly die of cancer. The plot concerns a mother, Cole, who has escaped with her son, Miles, aged 12, from a government incarceration centre housing the rare male survivors of the pandemic and their closest relatives. They are quarantined for their own safety and for medical experiments to discern why they are immune. A new law prohibits procreation until a vaccine is developed. Cole's sister Billie, the villain of the piece, is trying to track her sister and nephew down for him to be used in a black market scheme of harvesting his sperm. Cole dresses Miles as a girl and renames him Mila to escape detection, and they set off across the USA in hopes of returning to their home in South Africa. The three characters share the narration.

In the body of my article, I note Beukes's handling of an imaginary pandemic in *Afterland*. I refer to typical areas in which some readers praise the novel, then move to a consideration of human rights issues that can be seen as troubling representations or lacunae, which serve to reinforce conservative viewpoints rather than challenging them. In this act of literary criticism, I employ the technique of a hermeneutics of suspicion, which reads against the grain of the author's intention and tracks the relationship between language usage and lived experiences. I examine Beukes's treatment of gender, in particular transgender, also mentioning some representations of sexuality and race in the novel, and conclude that there are problematic instances that violate conceptions of human rights to marginal and at-risk individuals, whose vulnerability is exacerbated during a pandemic.

Afterland and Reader Reception of an Imagined Gender Pandemic

A key quotation from the novel shows one of the parallels between the *Afterland* pandemic and Covid-19: "You can't imagine how much the world can change in six months. You just can't" (Beukes 2020a, 35). Beukes's novel offers a thought-experiment about the after-effects of a brutal pandemic that alters gender dynamics, highlighting the importance of home, intimate family connections, survival and resilience. As is well known, Lauren Beukes is an internationally renowned novelist who has won the prestigious Arthur C. Clarke award for science fiction, and *Afterland* has received acclaim from reviewers across a range of countries (for instance Karam 2020). The plot, the characters and the depiction of a cult of neon-clad nuns who belong to the Church of All Sorrows, and who believe that men's demise is due to women's sins, all receive praise. Some of the comments from South African readers about the novel include the words "prescient," "thrilling," "believable" and "page-turner," and one reader says: "Lauren Beukes is a national treasure" (Hess 2020). Yet there are also readers, from South Africa and the USA, who have raised problematic elements of the novel, such as its emphasis on biology, gender essentialism and its treatment of lesbians and transgender people.

In a Facebook online launch of *Afterland*, Lauren Beukes was asked by a reader whether it was difficult to handle nuance in the meaning of gender in the novel when the subject

matter is represented as biologically binary (Venter-Rausch 2020). The author's response was to deflect the question for academics to answer, although she noted that she "wanted to play with ideas of gender" (Beukes 2020b). She expands in an interview that patriarchy remains in place in the novel despite the disappearance of most people with prostates; her changes to gender dynamics consist of making the adolescent boy a commodified sex object, instead of the familiar script involving girls, and making women characters' capacity for violence, self-interest and evil as great as men's. She further itemises all the experts she consulted during the writing of the novel (Moonsamy 2020), although expertise on gender is a notable omission.

Judith Butler's scholarship on concepts such as gender performativity, the connections between norms of heterosexuality and violence, an affirmation of the place of transgender in feminist theory, and analyses of precarity, grievability, ethics and human rights is instructive here. She argues that feminism is a crucial part of progressive alliances of solidarity and resistance to human rights abuses "precisely because feminist critique destabilizes those institutions that depend on the reproduction of inequality and injustice, and it criticizes those institutions and practices that inflict violence on women and gender minorities" (Butler 2016, 20). She also stresses the importance of the struggle to "question so-called common norms by asking whose lives were *never* included in these norms" (21), and asks to what extent such exclusions are a result of masculinist norms or racial privilege. A setting such as the radically shifted gender relations found in *Afterland* could enable a fresh look at social norms and omissions. Butler notes in this regard that when a

field of norms breaks open, even provisionally, we see that the animating aims of a regulatory discourse, as it is enacted bodily, give rise to consequences that are not always foreseen, making room for ways of living gender that challenge prevailing norms of recognition. Thus we can plainly see the emergence of transgender, genderqueer, butch, femme, and hyperbolic or dissident modes of masculinity and femininity, and even zones of gendered life that are opposed to all categorical distinctions such as these. (Butler 2015, 31–32)

In *Afterland*, however, norms remain largely unchanged, except for one simple flipping of the narrative of gender exploitation.

Afterland and Human Rights

This novel is of particular interest for those specialising in representations of gender, sexuality and race in South African literature from a human rights perspective. In fiction, the human rights of marginalised or traditionally oppressed groups can be seen both as representations and as lacunae or absences, a detailed investigation of the significance of which is typical of the methodology of a hermeneutics of suspicion. While a novel about a pandemic can reconfigure the shape of the world, it can also unthinkingly offer traditional patterns of basic identity categories, such as gender, which have undergone significant shifts in conceptualisation recently. In other words, readers

can be offered the opportunity to imagine a new world order, but also subliminally imbibe reactionary concepts that entrench rather than challenge or question a conservative status quo.

The literary critical technique of a hermeneutics of suspicion is an appropriate methodology for an analysis of a novelist's treatment of identity, gender and sexuality. The term, originally proposed by Paul Ricoeur, was developed in literary studies by Rita Felski and others as a reading practice "performed against the grain" (Felski 2011, 222) in order to shine a light on latent or concealed meanings in literary texts and to reveal "not just a cognitive exercise but an orientation [...], a distinct sensibility or disposition whose parameters exceed the specifics of its intellectual content" (219). This approach of textual critique enables an act of interpretation that pays attention to readerly affect and the intersubjectivity involved in following the connections between language and lived experiences.

Representations of Transgender in *Afterland*

First, I turn my attention to the ways in which *Afterland* represents gender in an imagined world where it is a central and deadly concern, but also potentially offers new thresholds of possibility. Here I rely largely on the blog written by Ana Mardoll, who is a transgender man. Mardoll criticises the authorial choices made in *Afterland* on gender essentialism, an emphasis on biology, and a surprising lack of portrayals of LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex) people or, in the few instances where these are mentioned, their negative portrayal.

It is important when discussing matters of transgender, as the influential gender theorist Jack Halberstam notes, to pay attention to an emic perspective in which trans people self-represent and refuse to be "the object of knowledge" (Halberstam 2018, 88). For this reason, Mardoll's comments are to be considered with serious attention, and are noted by other readers (see comments to Murad 2020). A large number of other trans commentators found an ill-considered tweet by Beukes to be offensive towards transgender; she later deleted it, apologising for the offence caused and her ignorance (Beukes 2020c). The incident led to a heated debate on the Twitter thread about perceived transphobia and the representations in the novel, as well as ripostes by trans-exclusionary respondents.

The concept of transgender is only raised a few times in the novel and always problematically. There is one reference to transgender women, mentioned in a flippant post by a now-dead gay man on the virus as it was developing: "You just need to have that Y chromosome. Sorry, trans sisters, peace out ☹ It's the equal opportunity fuck-you we've been promised since the dawn of the first mitochondrial collision" (Beukes 2020a, 193). This argument suggests that almost all transgender women are dead. However, in a context such as the setting of the novel where access to hormones is common, the oestrogen taken by transgender women would lead to changes in the prostate protecting them from developing prostate cancer, as revealed in a recent study

in the Netherlands, which concluded “trans women receiving hormone treatment showed a 5-fold decrease in prostate cancer risk compared with the general male population of similar age” (de Nie et al. 2020, e3298). We are also told that in *Afterland*’s USA there are 1 000 000 cis-male survivors. Now in the real world there are some 1.4 million self-identified transgender adults in the USA (Flores et al. 2016), so in the novel’s setting there could have been a considerable number of transgender men, but we do not get to see any. There is a reference to a neon nun, Generosity, who comes out to Miles as having previously wanted to transition. She says: “I was lucky. I found the Church before I could save up for surgery. I was so close to mutilating the body God had made me. As it was, I poisoned myself with hormones” (Beukes 2020a, 301). Mardoll (2020) comments about this representation:

[T]he author chose this framing, this approach. She chose this to be what we see of transgender masculinity, the one voice we have for trans men. Our only trans male voice in this novel about a gender plague that kills cis [non-trans] men is a self-hating detransitioner who calls hormones “poison”, surgery “mutilation”, and who says we can’t escape the gender we’re assigned at birth. This isn’t an accident. This is trans-exclusion and transphobia, boiled down into the page and premise.

A later scene set in a sex club describes drag kings’ performance and the question arises: why are there no transgender men acting as entertainers? Their absence in the novel constitutes a notable lacuna. The only exception occurs in a passage beginning with a passing question posed to Miles: “are you a real boy, or are you looking for a blue fairy to make you into one?” (Beukes 2020a, 356). The reference here is to the Disney version of Pinocchio; as Mardoll comments, this implies “that trans boys are fake wooden imitations seeking a magical cure to make us ‘real’” (Mardoll 2020). This question is followed up by: “you’d be our first biological specimen passing through. We had Felix, but he’s trans. Needed to get away from the rich bitch who paid for his dick” (Beukes 2020a, 356). As Mardoll observes, the two transgender males in the novel are portrayed as a self-hating detransitioner and an offstage victim, both of whose genitals are disclosed.

The changed world of *Afterland* offered an opportunity to imagine the transformative potential of transgender, in line with Halberstam’s vision that conceiving of trans bodies differently,

not simply as trans bodies that provide an image of the nonnormative against which normative bodies can be discerned, but as bodies that are fragmentary and internally contradictory, bodies that remap gender and its relations to race, place, class, and sexuality, bodies that are in pain or that represent a play of surfaces, bodies that sound different than they look, bodies that represent palimpsestic relations to identity—means finding different visual, aural, and haptic codes through which to figure the experience of being in a body. (2018, 89)

Unfortunately, the methodology of a hermeneutics of suspicion informed by the perceptions of transgender theory and readers' responses shows that the familiar hegemonic codes of gender, their relations to other vectors of identity, and the experience of being embodied are endorsed in the novel.

The slogan "Trans rights are human rights" has become commonplace with regard to transgender rights. However, this flattens complexities such as geographic context or "the complexity of Indigenous genders beyond the male/female binary" (Everhart 2020). Transgender people are subject to a range of social, health and legal problems at any time. Even before the pandemic, factors such as job discrimination, violence and family rejection led to isolation and homelessness among transgender people, as well as suicide, and these have worsened during the pandemic (Comstock and Miller 2020). Gen Eickers (2020) itemises how global pandemics are (also) a transgender rights issue by pointing to instances of discrimination in healthcare services for this demographic as these are viewed as non-essential, thus rendering transgender people's health and mental health an invisible issue. Nonetheless, there are positive shifts in public perceptions about transgender rights; for instance, a survey of 17 105 adults in 23 countries, which included the USA and South Africa, reveals that the majority of respondents supported important transgender rights (Flores, Brown, and Park 2016).

Pertinent research from the field of psychology shows that current anti-transgender attitudes denying "dignity and justice" in various societies are reflected and reinforced by negative portrayals of transgender individuals (Broockman and Kalla 2016; Lee and Kwan 2014). Conversely, positive portrayals are influential, and due to the mediatory effects of transportation and the reduction of intergroup anxiety, exposure to fictional texts featuring transgender characters is associated with lower transnegativity. The concept of transportation includes cognitive processing, but it mainly ameliorates the effects of various forms of prejudice by emotional means. Readers' immersion in texts containing characters who challenge stereotypes results in prejudice reduction (Johnson 2013) by increasing empathy (Bal and Veltkamp 2013), and results in the likelihood of prosocial behaviour (Johnson 2012). Intergroup anxiety refers to the emotions experienced by individuals either engaging or visualising engaging in intergroup interactions. As Ligia Orellana, Peter Totterdell and Aarti Iyer (2020, 2) note, "fiction can reduce intergroup anxiety, functioning as a 'safe haven' that allows individuals to explore intergroup encounters that they may find threatening otherwise." Complex portrayals of transgender and other minority characters involve readers in emotional engagement that renders possible positive attitudinal and behavioural changes.

The emotional engagement with Generosity, the detransitioned neon nun character in *Afterland*, is, however, unlike the positive complexity discussed in the literature of psychology and sexuality. She gives the impressionable young boy, Miles, who she erroneously concludes is a girl wanting to be a boy, a cautionary tale about her life:

“I was four when I started putting on my brothers’ clothes. I insisted everyone call me a different name. When puberty hit me, I started binding my breasts. It felt like my body was betraying me, like it belonged to someone else. I thought if I willed it, I could force the world to see me as I saw myself, as a boy.” Miles feels like the conversation has veered wildly off course. He keeps his face blank to cover his confusion. “But it’s wrong, Mila. I see that now. We carry Eve’s sins, and we can’t escape that by wishing we were different. We have to learn to ignore the voice of Satan in our hearts, and listen to God. He has made us women, and we must accept our suffering. For that is His will.” (Beukes 2020a, 301)

As this is the only representation of the point of view of a (formerly) transgender character who plays a significant role in the novel, this speech depicting denial of one’s identity on the grounds of religious myth comes across as normative, although in fact detransitioning is rare. The most common reason for detransitioning is dissatisfaction with surgeries, health issues, or inability to cope with transphobic pressure (Hall 2019), and a 50-year-long Swedish study found only a 2.2% rate of this phenomenon (Dhejne et al. 2014). Moral panics created by the media about inaccurately generalised detransitioning narratives, “intentionally or not, fuel misconceptions and stir up anti-trans sentiment” (Knox 2019). Furthermore, conservative leaders of some churches, ranging from Catholics to evangelicals, engage in anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQI propaganda in a quest to promote “traditional values,” and Generosity’s speech chimes with this line of discourse. Many readers of *Afterland* would themselves be religious, and despite the extreme version promulgated by the church in the book, such readers could find themselves swayed into agreement by references to “Eve’s sins,” “Satan” and women’s suffering being God’s will. This speech quoted above segues immediately into the previously quoted one mentioning Generosity’s gratitude for escaping gender-affirming surgery, as this would have been “mutilating the body God [...] made,” and that she views taking hormones as having “poisoned” herself (Beukes 2020a, 301). This conclusion to Generosity’s set piece provides further persuasive power to her gender-essentialist trans-negative rhetoric, and in the absence of any countervailing views it becomes the attitude promoted by the novel.

The depictions and failures of depiction of transgender in the novel are distressing to transgender readers, and function to reinforce negative associations in the minds of cisgender readers. This feeds into prejudice about transgender and denies the opportunity for emotional engagement allowing for the processes of transportation or empathy, or the alleviation of intergroup anxiety. While Halberstam (2018, 136) argues that trans bodies are “a site for invention, imagination, fabulous projection,” as they “represent the art of becoming, the necessity of imagining, and the fleshly insistence of transitivity,” and the basic premise of *Afterland* had the potential for such literary experimentation, Beukes’s stated purpose of wanting to “play with ideas of gender” (Beukes 2020b) has been unsuccessful in the novel.

Other Representations of Gender in the Novel

Other representations of gender that may be overlooked when focusing on *Afterland*'s rollicking plotline concern naming, clothing, the construction of gender and sex fantasies, all of which have a bearing on human rights issues. It is noteworthy that the two sisters have traditionally masculine names, Cole (short for Nicole) and Billie (short for Wilhelmina), which makes it surprising that Cole is so obsessed with renaming Miles Mila, despite his unhappiness. Her contortions are clearly seen in the following passage:

Mila clambers up and pads over on her giant bare feet, which have grown since last week, she swears, and nudges in under Cole's arm. "Oof", she complains, as Mila's bony shoulder thunks into the side of her boob. But she loves the weight of her, the warm *boy* smell (it's true) of his skin (*her* skin) and the oil in her hair. (Beukes 2020a, 147)

A 12-year-old boy who exudes a specifically "boy smell" is a curiously biologically essentialist concept, as is the author's insistence that Cole needs to "correct" his gender-specific name and pronouns even in her private thoughts. Despite this, she also continues to address him with masculine terms, "tiger" and "buddy," which he later points out he finds offensive as such terms elide his own identity and impose his mother's naming practices in violation of his autonomy.

As part of this presentation of Miles as feminine, Cole dresses him in ultra-femme apparel: a pink shirt with "bedazzled studs," along with "sparkly barrettes" (9). A family group consisting of two women and two girls in a diner are shown in heavily gendered clothing:

In the booth opposite, there's a couple with two little girls, eight-ish, in baby doll dresses and Shirley Temple curls, as if they're fresh off the stage at the local kid beauty pageant. The moms, in lumberjack plaid and big black boots, keep making vague friendly intimations in their direction—a smile, a nod, to acknowledge they're in the same gang. Last of the reproducers. (38)

The disjuncture between the clothing aesthetics of the adults and the children is perplexing. If the women are dressed in clothing coded as butch lesbian style, why are the girls dressed like the epitome of hyper-femininity? If no boys are to be seen, one might imagine a range of clothing options for girls rather than stereotyped mini beauty queens. In both instances of adults choosing exaggeratedly gendered clothing for children, the agency of the children appears to be ignored.

Behaviour is also represented inconsistently in the novel. Cole informs Miles that he needs to "practise being a girl," although she notes that even she sometimes doesn't "know how to be a girl" (14). Cole's villainous sister Billie thinks that "gender is a construct apparently" (129), but the constructedness and fluidity of gender, particularly in the gender-pandemic-changed world of the novel, are not convincingly shown.

Further discomfort faces readers with regard to a number of depictions of Miles's erections. The most egregious of these instances occurs in the context of Billie's discussion of her plan to use Miles to sell his semen on the black market, and features his self-disgust at his own surge of sexual excitement:

He shouldn't have said anything. He's mortified. Why did she ask him that? About sex and jerking off and *sperm*. It's so disgusting.

And a little exciting too.

Wasn't it?

Nope. Nope. Nope. That's just his dumb brain and his dumb body responding and it could have been a zombie with half its head missing and brains oozing out, talking to him about jerking off, and his penis would have responded like an idiot puppy. He folds his legs, aggressively squeezing them together, trying to quash ... the reaction. Just the word "penis" makes the blood go rushing in, like, didya mention my name? Didya call me? I'm here! Pat me. This sucks so much.

The word "suck". Stop it. Just stop it. Think of whales dying. *Dad*. He remembers [... an] overheard conversation in the gym, a joke about milkmen and milk boys. His face burns. *Dad, I wish you were here*. It's wrong to have a semi while Mom and Billie are fighting in the bathroom. It's gross, disgusting. (168–69)

This scenario figuring Miles as a victim of sexual exploitation is uncomfortable reading, while placing the reader in the position of a voyeur observing Miles's response of excitement is deeply disturbing.

The scenes showing the fantasy life of adults are also discomfiting, an effect which is exacerbated by occurring again through Miles's point of view, as the corruption of an innocent child as a witness at a sex-club. He is appalled and confused by various sights: of queer-coded women whom he regards as "perverts" because of their attire; of a video of strangely selected male pinups, including the notorious Mapplethorpe image of a bullwhip; of a troupe of women entertainers dressed like "stripper plumbers" (355), with attendant *double entendres*; as well as by overt, belaboured penis and vulva references. Miles's reaction uses the same word as in his response to his aunt Billie's discussion with him about harvesting his sperm: "Gross. Gross-gross-gross" (355). In these two episodes both Billie and the author place Miles in a similar position of feeling sickened and corrupted by an adult sexualised environment which he is ill-equipped to handle.

Non-heterosexual Sexuality in *Afterland* and the Real World

The portrayals of non-heterosexual sexuality are examined here through the lens of a hermeneutics of suspicion regarding the human rights of people with minority sexualities. The only explicit references in the novel to gay men occur in the blog post with the sardonic comment: "Sorry, trans sisters, peace out" (193), quoted previously.

The entire blog is written in a campy, sassy, wisecracking style that evokes stereotypes of gay men's communications, and the blogger's final wish facing death to be able to "download all the porn" (197; emphasis in original) from the internet on to his computer likewise reinforces stereotypes about gay men's hypersexuality.

The novel contains two overt references to lesbians. In one, in their youth Billie and Cole enacted "Jerry Springer scenarios to get a reaction for kicks" (53). These were: arguing about one stealing the other's baby daddy, "pretending to be lesbian lovers" (53), or pretending to arrest the other for shoplifting. In other words, lesbianism is portrayed in line with the other topics as controversial, publicly shocking and sensationalist. The other reference to lesbians is raised by an old woman who invites Cole and Miles to dinner and tells them that "a lesbian couple and their kids" (158) often eat with her, although in the novel's setting it would be unnecessary to employ the adjective. In both cases referring to lesbians, then, the suggestion is that it is an aberrant sexuality.

There are two references to bisexuality in the novel and both are disconcerting to readers. A jarring discussion occurs between Cole and a stranger she follows into the toilet of a diner, intending to rob her. The woman tells her that she is with her companion who is celebrating her 50th birthday. She continues: "We had a suicide pact, you know. If we hit forty, and we were still single. Or we'd get married to each other. See how well that turned out!" In this speech, death and same-sex marriage are equated, and the last comment implies that the relationship is an unhappy one. The staggering non sequitur that follows is:

"Do you even *like* eating pussy?"

"I think it's an acquired taste," Cole manages, and then Mila bursts into the bathroom, clutching their backpack. (41)

This unexpected, crudely expressed question seems designed to shock readers and arouse disgust at one particular sexual activity, which here typifies intimate connections between women. The novel avoids an exploration of the ramifications of a demographically altered world deprived of most people with prostates, the vast majority of whom are men, by treating bisexuality as either repugnant or to be repressed.

A potential moment of bisexual attraction occurs between Cole and a character named Bhavana at a commune in Salt Lake City. Bhavana says:

"You need any help, tech support, or, really, anything, let me know." She brushes her hand as Cole reaches for the mouse. She flushes and jolts her hand back. Even though it was an accident. She's sure it was an accident.

"Oh. Um, thank you. I mean, I think I'm okay here." When was the last time someone, an adult, touched her? With tenderness. (116)

Previously Miles had thought Cole was flirting with Bhavana, illustrating a palpable attraction between them, but Cole's conscience, projected in the voice of her dead husband, Devon, says, "*Don't let me stop you,*" breaking the mood. Cole reprimands him mentally for being a "pervert" (116). Having the image of a male onlooker voyeuristically triangulating this subtle approach is unsettling both for Cole and for readers.

These two instances of inklings of bisexuality can be read as representations of heteronormativity that align poorly with reports about non-heterosexual practices and attractions, shifting patterns of behaviour in same-sex settings, and the power of social approval. A survey by Gary J. Gates (2011) notes that about 19 million Americans (8.2%) stated that they had engaged in same-sex behaviour, while 25.6 million Americans (11%) acknowledged same-sex attractions. In addition, a 2016 female-only survey found that 7% of American adult women identify as gay or bisexual, while in all of the eight countries surveyed, 10% reported having had sexual experiences with other women, and 18% reported having had same-sex attractions (Ifo 2017). Various reports about sexuality show that graphs of non-heterosexual identities, behaviour and attractions rise over time as social acceptance increases. Further, women's sexuality falls more into a paradigm of sexual fluidity than men's (Diamond 2008, 2012). This term refers to flexibility in sexual responsiveness according to changing situations, including relationships or wider social contexts (Diamond 2016). Situational bisexuality similarly refers to same-sex connections made in single-sex environments such as convents or prisons. Another example would be where the proportion of men declines, such as during a war. This forms the backdrop of a transformative love experience represented between two women in Emma Donoghue's *The Pull of the Stars*, alluded to previously. The body of research sketched above, collectively considered, suggests that three years after the disappearance of most men, women would have adjusted their mindsets, attractions, sexual behaviours and relationships, with more sexual fluidity and altered family patterns. However, lesbianism, bisexuality and sexual fluidity are portrayed in *Afterland*, just as the treatment of transgender, as aberrant and distasteful, contrary to the principle of human rights for minority sexualities, which is particularly pressing during the context of a pandemic. The United Nations Human Rights Office issued a statement by experts on 17 May 2020 (OHCHR 2020a) that outlined challenges generally faced by LGBT persons and called on governments to consider their concerns and strive to construct new realities of freedom, equality and solidarity during the Covid-19 pandemic. The aforementioned negative image also forecloses the possibility of readers harnessing the positive effects of transportation or the alleviation of outgroup anxiety towards transgender.

Representations of Race in the Novel

A further important problematic area when considering human rights, both for state authorities and literary critics, is the representation of race. On the one hand, it must be observed that Beukes sensitively raises points about racism in the context of the United

States, indirectly referencing the Black Lives Matter movement and illustrating the difficulties of preparing a child for growing up in a racially unequal, threatening environment: Cole hopes to return with Miles to South Africa in order to escape “the slow gutting of democracy, trigger-happy cops, and the terror of raising a black son in America” (Beukes 2020a, 30). On the other hand, a consideration of some parts of the novel through the perspective of a hermeneutics of suspicion reveals some problematic or insensitive issues about race. As Mardoll (2020) notes, Beukes describes Miles, whose father was an African American and whose mother is white, as having a skin tone of “coffee with too much cream” (Beukes 2020a, 8). Mardoll (2020) warns against using terms related to consumable items for skin colour, as this suggests the power associated with consumption; in addition, they point out that using such terms for people of colour is particularly offensive, an effect that is amplified by the use of foodstuffs associated with colonialism, such as chocolate and, I may add, coffee. Mardoll (2020) also comments on the tone of self-congratulation implied by the word “dutifully” when Cole fixes “sparkly barrettes” into Miles’s “afro curls,” remembering “the workshop she dutifully attended when he was a toddler—White Moms: Black Hair” (Beukes 2020a, 9). Mardoll (2020) also expresses their opinion that Cole’s dead husband is included to provide a “gimmick” separating her point of view from those of other characters, making him appear as “a prop instead of a person”; however, this is also a staple representation in narratives of people mourning their lost spouses. A more valid objection they raise relates to the portrayal of Keletso as one of the two “magical Black best friends” (Mardoll 2020) (whom Cole has had no contact with for years), who exist solely to serve Cole and bail her out financially, thus enabling her to escape from the USA to South Africa, although Keletso goes deeply into debt herself to achieve this. This provides an unfortunate reminder of the exploitation of Black people by whites, especially given the racially inflected history of human rights in South Africa.

On 22 June 2020 the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner issued a communiqué on the urgent need to counter racialised human rights abuses during the pandemic:

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and magnified racial discrimination and inequalities on a wide scale. [...] While the focus in the midst of the pandemic crisis has been on the right to health and access to health services, other key issues including human rights, inequality and development must also be front and centre particularly in the recovery period ahead. (OHCHR 2020b)

Mindfulness to the consequences of representations of race is necessary in terms of working against material discrimination and in reading fictional accounts of race.

Conclusion

Afterland offers many positive features to readers, and allows for a fruitful consideration of similarities to and differences from the Covid-19 pandemic, although it was written before this virus changed the world. However, I have argued that in light of principles

of human rights as applied to identities subject to discrimination and inequality, the novel fails to capitalise on the progressive possibilities inherent in its premise, instead representing gender, sexuality and, to a degree, race problematically. I have highlighted some aspects where representations or lacunae reinforce stereotypes rather than challenge conservative elements of the existing status quo, devoting particular attention to trans-visibility, trans-negativity and the need for trans-normalisation, and relating this focus to other types of troubling representations in the novel. As Halberstam (2018, 135) notes, “the way to address persistent problems of racism, sexism, and homophobia is to see that discrimination does not only impact the people toward whom it is directed, it affects everyone.” In the midst of a pandemic, the provision of human rights to marginal and at-risk groups is vital. For readers of speculative fiction about pandemics, paying attention to ways in which such groups are represented has a bearing on social attitudes, and observing and analysing negative portrayals serves a corrective function of comparing fiction with real-life oppression and imagining ways of broadening horizons in considering the viewpoints of the most vulnerable.

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