

“Policing Borders”: Extermination and Relocation of Insects in Three South African Texts

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Summary

Borders between states are spaces of aggression and anxiety about ownership, inclusion, exclusion and group identity, and they are often reinforced by shows of force that can yield to violence. Apartheid in South Africa was primarily and explicitly an attempt at controlling who could occupy space. The erection and maintenance of borders within the country, between spaces, became more aggressive and rigid as the era progressed and it became apparent that the Nationalist dream of racially pure spaces was not going to be feasible. Since the transition to democracy in 1994, borders have remained contested since different areas have continued to be apportioned, albeit informally, for different racial groups. Confident assertions of white supremacy yield to anxiety and even paranoia when owners feel that their borders are not secure. In this article, I explore the use of monstrous insect imagery in three post-transitional South African texts – *The Ugly NooNoo* (Buckland & Kani, 1994); *District 9* (dir. Blomkamp, 2009) and *Nineveh* (Rose-Innes, 2011). In each of these texts, insects serve as metaphors for aggressive border-crossing by racial others, who are figured as undesirable and myriad.

Opsomming

Daar kan aangevoer word dat die grense tussen state kan funksioneer as ruimtes van aggressie en angs rondom eienaarskap, insluiting, uitsluiting en groepsidentiteit. Grense word dikwels versterk deur magsvertoon wat op geweld kan uitloop. In Suid-Afrika was apartheid hoofsaaklik en eksplisiet gemoeid met die poging om te bepaal wie welke areas kon bewoon. Die oprigting en onderhoud van grense tussen verskillende areas van die land het deur die loop van die era aggressief toegeneem, en dit het duidelik geword dat die nasionalistiese droom van rassige suiwer areas nie haalbaar was nie. Sedert die oorgang na 'n demokratiese bestel in 1994 bly grense betwis, aangesien verskillende areas steeds toegewys word vir afsonderlike ras-groepe – al geskied dit op informele wyse. Selfversekerde aannames oor wit oppermag het angs en selfs paranoia tot gevolg wanneer eienaars voel dat hulle grense onveilig is. In hierdie artikel ondersoek ek die gebruik van beelde van monsteraagtige insekte in drie post-oorgang Suid-Afrikaanse tekste, naamlik *The Ugly NooNoo* (Buckland & Kani, 1994), *District 9* (reg. Blomkamp, 2009) en *Nineveh* (Rose-Innes, 2011). In elkeen van hierdie tekste dien insekte as metafore vir aggressiewe grensoorskryding deur die rassige ander, wat as ongewens en talloos voorgestel word.

Introduction

This article explores the use of insect imagery in three post-transitional South African texts¹ – *The Ugly Noonoo* (Buckland 1994); *District 9* (dir. Blomkamp 2009) and *Nineveh* (Rose-Innes 2011). These works all feature the collapse of borders between human and nonhuman spaces, leading to an invasion of the human space by insects. The title is drawn from Henrietta Rose-Innes’s 2011 novel, *Nineveh*, where the narrator, Katya Grubbs, describes her work as a pest remover as “[p]utting the wild back in the wild, keeping the tame tame. Policing borders” (2011: 19). Katya realises that the business of keeping spaces “pure” means making sure that borders hold steady: those who are meant to stay inside them stay inside, while those who are meant to stay outside are repelled. This preoccupation with borderlands – liminal zones between territories – is typical of whiteness, which (as I will explain) is frequently prone to fears of invasion.

In each of the selected texts, swarming insects, who far outnumber human beings, are used as metaphors for “die swart gevaar” (“the black danger”), feared by South African whiteness both before and, ironically, after the transition to democracy in 1994. Apartheid was primarily and explicitly an attempt at controlling who could occupy particular spaces. White people were allowed to occupy prime space in the country; black people were not. The erection and maintenance of borders within the country, between spaces, became more aggressive and rigid as the era progressed and it became apparent that the Nationalist dream of racially pure spaces was not going to be feasible.

Since the country’s transition to democracy in 1994, spaces have remained hotly contested. The legacy of apartheid is still felt and lived in different spaces that are inhabited, albeit informally, by different racial groups. White landowners continue to fret about the susceptibility of their borders to invaders. These anxieties are often expressed in the monsterisation of others, who are perceived as would-be invaders. Richard Alan Northover has perceptively outlined the tendency of white colonisers to reduce black others to non-human status by using animal metaphors to describe them (2019: 111-113). Insects combine their biological difference from human bodies with overwhelming numbers, making them particularly apt for this purpose. They outnumber human beings by a factor of 2 billion to one (Jones 2010), and this creatively speaking, intensifies human fear.

Ownership of territory is always a dangerous and contested matter. As Rebecca Solnit reminds us:

1. I use the word “text” rather loosely in this article to refer to works of signification, whether these be written, printed or visual. According to this understanding, Buckland’s *The Ugly Noonoo* is a text in performance, while *District 9* is a visual text.

That thing we call a place is the intersection of many changing forces passing through, whirling around, mixing, dissolving, and exploding in a fixed location. To write about a place is to acknowledge that phenomena often treated separately – ecology, democracy, culture, storytelling, urban design, individual life histories and collective endeavours – coexist. (2018: 1)

The forces that coalesce and intersect in places are antagonistic, multifarious, diverse, competitive and conflictual. The borders of these places are zones of aggression and anxiety about ownership, inclusion, exclusion and group identity. Anxiety leads occupants to reinforce borders with shows of force that can easily yield to violence. When borders fail, others who were intended to stay out come in, resulting in contagion. This trope appears in all of the texts selected for analysis in this article.

Insects in South African Literature

Investigations of insects in South African culture fall under the general rubric of animal studies. This is a well-established field, with Wendy Woodward's volume, *The Animal Gaze: Animal Subjectivities in Southern African Narratives* (2008), and the edited volume *Indigenous Creatures, Native Knowledges and the Arts: Animal Studies in Modern Worlds* (Woodward & MacHugh (2017) making important contributions, alongside thoughtful work by Dan Wylie on the (im)possibility of a genuinely transcultural ecocriticism (2007). Recent work has included F. Fiona Moolla's edited volume, *Natures of Africa: Ecocriticism and Animal Studies in Contemporary Cultural Forms* (2016) and Richard Alan Northover's article, "Animal Studies, Decoloniality, and San Rock Art and Myth" (2019). One concern in South African animal studies is the possibility of a regionally specific approach to relationships between human and nonhuman beings. As Woodward notes, many South African animal studies draw on North American ecocriticism (2003: 291). This is, in itself, a substantial body of theory and criticism, featuring critics such as Greta Gaard (2017), Patrick D. Murphy (2009) and the *ISLE* (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment) group, which has convened numerous conferences and established an academic journal. Titles of scholarly books in North American ecocriticism are too numerous to list here, but are exemplified by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's edited volume, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996). Woodward and Wylie both wonder, albeit from different philosophical starting points, how South African ecocriticism can do away with its dependency on models from the Global North. For Woodward, indigenous shamanism, practised in many South African cultures, holds a partial answer, as it "depends on an entirely egalitarian relationship between the shaman and aspects of nature, particularly animals" (2008: 54), which can guide Southern African thinking about relationships with the environment. By contrast, Wylie

finds that romantic notions of the San’s unity with nature are based on assumptions and generalisations that probably do not stand up to rigorous interrogation. He supports Julia Martin’s plea for “[a]n ecologically aware practice which ‘foregrounds regional priorities while at the same time acknowledging their non-universal, non-absolute status’ (Martin 1999: 37) and argues that deriving a unitary idea of South African eco-criticism is, in all likelihood, a chimera (2007: 267).

Nevertheless, insects play an important role in South African relations with nonhuman nature. For example, the mantis is a prominent avatar of the divine in San rock art, which also celebrates bees as sources of food (Northover 2019: 120). Alex la Guma’s chronicle of the depraved conditions inflicted on the inhabitants of Cape Town’s District Six features insects in a much less sanguine light. In *A Walk in the Night*, La Guma portrays the beach walker, Joe: “He just seemed to have happened, appearing in the District like a cockroach emerging through a floorboard” (La Guma 1962: 8). Joe’s connection to nonhuman nature is emphasised in the simile, which also evokes his personal decay and habit of sustaining himself on natural detritus. Cockroaches appear later in the novella when the central protagonist is heading home to his tenement:

In the dark corners and the unseen crannies, in the fetid heat and slippery dampness the insects and vermin, maggots and slugs, ’roaches in shiny armor, spiders like tiny grey monsters carrying death under their minute feet or in the suckers, or rats with dusty black eyes with disease under the claws or in the fur, moved mysteriously. (1962: 32)

La Guma equates insects with vermin, poverty and decay (both moral and physical). They are also, as William Carpenter notes, “metaphors of struggling life” (1991: 81). They are natural survivors who find sustenance in the waste of a human world that is run down and broken almost beyond repair. Insects are often portrayed in popular culture as the repositories of all that human beings, with their easily punctured soft skins, archetypally fear. They are armoured with chitinous exoskeletons; their compound eyes give the impression of 360 omnivision, which, when enlarged, gives them the appearance of Bug-Eyed Monsters or BEMs (cf. Lee 2012). Their jointed legs look machinic and they do not possess voices, making them incapable of oral communication. Insects are much smaller than humans, but they outnumber us by an estimated 1.4 billion to one (Worrall 2017), so that horror films of army ants and swarming bees are not far from the truth when they depict humans as defenceless against the sheer weight of numbers.

Insects in South African Whiteness Studies

Because of their physical differences from human beings and their capacity to inspire fear, insects are particularly evocative symbols of racial alterity. The typical response to these creatures is to destroy them, as Ursula K. Le Guin remarked in her 1975 essay, “American SF and the Other”:

The question involved here is the question of The Other – the being who is different from yourself. This being can be different from you in its sex; or in its annual income; or in its way of speaking and dressing and doing things; or in the color of its skin, or the number of its legs and heads. In other words, there is the sexual Alien, and the social Alien, and the cultural Alien and finally the racial Alien. (1993: 93)

Although Le Guin was not writing explicitly about racism in American society, her account of difference among others/aliens points to the intersection of axes of alienness, including race. The unnamed reader interpellated by her essay is, we can assume, the normative white, middle-class American citizen. She goes on to say succinctly that “the only good alien is a dead alien – whether he is an Aldebaranian Mantis-Man or a German dentist” (1993: 94). Le Guin’s words summarise the way most speculative fiction depicts insects as aliens: as only fit for extermination. Destroying alien insects, and especially a plague of them, showcases the (necessarily male) hero’s superior qualities such as physical prowess, aggression and resilience under pressure. Le Guin’s speculative fiction, like that of Orson Scott Card, is premised on the conviction that communicating with others/aliens, no matter how challenging, is the only response that makes ethical and practical sense.² Nevertheless, this is not the route that is followed by all texts in South African culture, as La Guma’s “insects and vermin” (1962: 32) reveals. Most human characters in South African culture adopt the same approach as La Guma: insects are to be shunned and exterminated if possible. There is a striking similarity between this response and the “final solution” of Hitler’s Nazism, as well as the murderous racial hatred of South African apartheid. It is at this point, when extermination is revealed as unworkable, that whiteness begins to scrutinise itself in an attempt to undo white supremacy and combat racism. This is where critical whiteness studies assumes centre stage.

Critical whiteness studies and decolonial scholarship highlight the fact that whiteness is equated with normative humanity, so that any person who does

2. Le Guin’s classic novels, *The Word for World is Forest* (1972) and *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) powerfully argue, using the science-fiction strategies of defamiliarisation and estrangement, for mutually respectful relationships between humans and nonhuman others. Card’s *Ender* series, covering eighteen publications, espouses a similar ethic by showing how abhorred “alien” others possess needs similar to humans’.

not fit into the mould of whiteness is automatically defined as non-human (cf. Quijano 2007). Furthermore, there is an ideological and discursive sleight-of-hand concealing this move, so that “many whites do not consciously think about the profound effect being white has on their lives” (Martin, Krizek, Nakayama & Bradford 1996: 125): they invisibilise their racial identities and privilege to the point where they do not even notice these features of their identity. Critical whiteness studies has accordingly focused on the necessity to make whiteness visible as a first step in undermining its hegemony (Steyn 2010: xxvi). This involves identifying and exposing the discursive mechanisms sustaining racial privilege. Ever since the late eighteenth century, the cultural and political construction of whiteness has been a matter of distinction, of creating and maintaining borders between a privileged white identity and all other identities (Steyn 2001: 5). Asserting an inherent and essential difference between the bodies and minds of white people and those who are “not white” has taken diverse forms in South Africa, ranging from a triumphalist belief in superior Afrikaner genetics during the apartheid era to increasingly shrill paranoia in the dying years of apartheid and the transitional period. It also has uncanny resonances with the establishment of a separatist state-within-a-state (Orania).

As early as 1993, Paul Gilroy explained the agonistic binarism that marks discourses of race:

At present, [black and white people] remain locked symbiotically in an antagonistic relationship marked by the symbolism of colours which adds to the conspicuous cultural power of their central Manichean dynamic – black and white. These colours support a special rhetoric that has grown to be associated with nationality and national belonging as well as the languages of “race” and ethnic identity. (1993:1-2)

Importantly, Gilroy points to the centrality of rhetoric, representation and symbolism in creating and maintaining distinctions between races. The binary opposition between “black” and “white” as colours and symbols comes to create, as well as describe, a conflictual situation in which whiteness is seen as prototypical and the deficit model of blackness is still in place.

The legislative edifice of apartheid was a device of spatial management, dividing the country’s spaces along racial lines. The racialisation of space is a well-documented phenomenon in contemporary sociality, and becoming more widespread as the global migrant crisis intensifies. British-Australian theorist Sara Ahmed’s article, “The Phenomenology of Whiteness”, describes whiteness as more than an identity, an ideology or a politics. For her, whiteness is intimately connected to the way people occupy space. She writes:

To be orientated, to feel at home in the world, is also to feel a certain comfort The word “comfort” suggests well-being and satisfaction, but it can also suggest an ease and easiness. Comfort is about an encounter between more

than one body, which is the promise of a “sinking” feeling White bodies are comfortable *as they inhabit spaces that extend their space*. (2007: 158, original emphasis)

Ahmed’s analysis of whiteness as an orientation chimes well with my focus on the way “white” space is inhabited and its borders fearfully protected in *The Ugly Noonoo*, *District 9* and *Nineveh*. The comfort that Ahmed mentions is maintained through social interaction with other white people. Its opposite – discomfort – is implicitly located in encounters with other bodies, which are not white, and do not allow the white subject to “sink” away from awareness of their own privilege and normativity. The need to “*inhabit spaces that extend [white] space[s]*” also, by implication, explains the exclusivity associated with whiteness; a desire to shut out Others, legitimated by the need for spatial purity, but underpinned by paranoia.

Since whiteness is not biologically given, but socially and economically constructed, Leon de Kock maintains that “the term ‘whiteness’ as a sign should be seen as a trace and not an essence” (2010: 15). De Kock’s reliance on Derridean deconstruction is evident in his use of the word “trace”, which betrays his conviction that whiteness contains the traces of its own binary opposite. For him, the opposite of whiteness is “wildness”, which he glosses as “the attributes assigned to blackness” (2010: 16). This enables him to argue that “whiteness in southern Africa has always been constitutively formed in a dialectical tension with wildness” (2010: 17). De Kock’s approach has numerous uses for my analysis of the representation of insects as figures for the porosity of borders around white spaces. First, it has the advantage of highlighting the insects as *wild* animals, which do not conform to norms of organised and predictable social behaviour. Second, De Kock’s Derridean analysis of the dialectical relationship between whiteness and wildness as mutually constitutive helps to illuminate how some humans can become wild insects (*District 9*) and how some wild insects can become human (*The Ugly Noonoo*). However, the whiteness/wildness binary does not account for the social organisation of insects, which has been known in South Africa since *The Soul of the White Ant* (Marais 1937). It also does not address the role of appearance – what Linda Martin Alcoff calls “visible identities” (2005) – in racist discourse. Accordingly, my analysis will use some features of De Kock’s argument in order to highlight the ways in which the boundaries around “white” spaces are porous, susceptible to invasion, and how insect Others take on attractive qualities.

***The Ugly Noonoo* (1994)**

Andrew Buckland’s one-man play, *The Ugly Noonoo* (Buckland & Kani 1994), focuses on the infestation of insects known as “Parktown prawns” which inhabited the Northern suburbs of Johannesburg during the late 1980s

and are still occasionally seen in the region. These insects, who belong to the cricket family, have the impressive Latin name of *Saltatoria ensifera gryllacridoidia stenopelmatidae maxentius henicus monstrosus* (Buckland 1994: 143). They are not prawns, but are related to king crickets or wētā, which are indigenous to New Zealand (Byrne 2015), and terrified the human inhabitants of Parktown and its surrounds by three qualities. First, they are impervious to most insecticides used in the country, and especially to Doom (used to kill ants, mosquitoes and smaller bugs); second, they have a habit of jumping at humans if alarmed; and third, they defecate when confronted with aggressive behaviour. Parktown prawns have nearly been eradicated from Johannesburg due to a population explosion amongst Hadedā ibises, who possess long beaks that can penetrate the ground and appear to have eaten most of the Parktown prawns in Johannesburg.

The Ugly Noonoo imagines humans as subjects, and insects as others, then reverses the power dynamic, placing the insects in the role of subjects. There are two human characters, both captured by the insects and incarcerated in large glass jars beneath the ground. They are both called “Hennie”, a play on the Parktown prawns’ Latin name. The first Hennie is swallowed by a hole in his lawn that feels strangely like human flesh, and attracts him irresistibly before pulling him underground. This has uncanny resonances with the “sinking feeling” that Ahmed associates with encounters between white bodies (2007: 158); but Buckland reverses the situation so that the human being, who had been used to being “on top” of the lawn and the evolutionary chain, is now subjected to a literal reversal of fortune. Hennie’s arm and foot, against his conscious wishes but apparently obeying an unconscious drive to bring him into closer contact with the despised insect Other, pull him through the lawn/flesh and into a cave below. There he is inferiorised by all the processes of othering that apartheid law exerted upon black bodies: detention without trial; no contact with his captors; and no provisions to eat or drink. Hennie’s experience of being “swallowed” by the lawn/flesh is the opposite of Ahmed’s mutually reinforcing whiteness: it is an unplanned, forced encounter with the subterranean subaltern, but it is one that is, in a neat acknowledgement of the coloniser’s desire for proximity with the colonised, brought about by a white person’s embodied desire.

The second Hennie tells the first that he was approached by a Parktown Prawn from the CCC (or Creatures Community Congress). Their motto is “Down with Species Dominance, and Forward with Equality of Creatures!” (Buckland 1994: 150): an obvious satire on both humans’ terror of Parktown prawns, and the racist rhetoric that dominated Nationalist discourse. The prawn approaches him politely in order to recruit him as a member of the CCC, only to be met with terror and aggression as Hennie kills him. Hennie

cannot understand the insects' language,³ in much the same way as colonisers did not bother to learn to understand the languages spoken by the colonised. The Parktown prawn is followed by a flood of other insects from the political right of the insect community, spouting racist and territorial rhetoric:

KOMMANDANT HENNIE MONSTER: And as our forefathers have done, so must the fruit of our loins do and so must we now FIGHT!! for the fatherland which we claim as ours. Ours by right of our superiority! We have the strength, the courage, the will, the numbers and the LEGS! to take this country for our own! Let the humans live in the deserts to which we shall drive them! We shall live and rule here for a thousand years! Down with humans! (Buckland 1994: 151)

The title "Kommandant", along with Hennie Monster's rhetoric of racial superiority and the extermination of others, are highly reminiscent of militant Afrikaner nationalism. This frequently called on all right-minded young men to defend their "fatherland" against a variety of threats, including *die swart gevaar* and *Communism* (the Creatures Community Congress is an obvious reference to the African National Congress's multi-racial philosophy and the socialist leanings of the South African Communist Party).

Territorialism pervades *The Ugly Noonoo*, with both human Hennies and Kommandant Hennie Monster expressing their determination to keep their spaces free from contamination by invaders and aliens. The prawn representative of the CCC is not obsessed with protecting his space, but his inclusive approach costs him his life due to humans' and insects' mutual incomprehensibility. The other human, Meredith, is a paragon of inter-species tolerance and understanding: she knows insect semaphorics and is able to understand what Polly (the first prawn's daughter) is trying to tell her. However, Meredith and her kindly dog, Sebastian, are unable to prevent Polly from being poisoned to death by Senhor Anthony Penis from Animals Without Beauty (AWB), formerly of the Supervised Annihilation of the People (SAP). The organisation "Animals without Beauty" recalls both the animal rights activist movement, Beauty Without Cruelty, and the "Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging" (AWB), an ultra-racist movement within Afrikaner politics, aimed at exterminating black people. Senhor Anthony Penis's initials match those of his former organisation (Supervised Annihilation of the People) and both can be rendered as SAP, also the acronym for the South African Police, who, under apartheid, were responsible for rounding up suspected traitors and inflicting terrible deaths on them. Anthony's surname reminds the audience that the mentality of killing all enemies in order to rid oneself of opposition is hypermasculine. Anthony poisons other species

3. Marcus Byrne explains (2015) that Parktown prawns cannot make a noise as smaller crickets do, but they do rub their legs together and defecate as a way of communicating and attracting mates.

because he has been told by Kommandant Hennie Monster that ants are the superior species – in exactly the same way as the Kommandant announced to the Parktown prawns that *they* are the superior species – and will one day rule the earth. The Kommandant’s use of the same rhetoric for two different species betrays his pragmatism in recycling the same rhetoric in order to recruit not one, but two different kinds of animals to his cause of species dominance. The final antagonist to confront Meredith, Sebastian and Polly’s brother Pyro is Foul Mouth Eddy, a chicken whose cry is “fuck fuck fuckoff!”. Eddy is also a recruit of Hennie Monster and he delivers Meredith over to a wave of Parktown prawns, who carry her off into an uncertain future, leaving Sebastian (who has lost his eyes) and Pyro (who has lost three of his six legs) to search the suburbs for her.

The Ugly Noonoo won several dramatic and literary awards for its use of satire and humour to expose the rhetorical and other excesses of the apartheid regime.⁴ These awards, however, did not pay attention to the play’s innovative use of space. The opening scene has the first human Hennie mowing his lawn and then falling through it into the subterranean domain of the prawns. At the end of the play, Pyro the prawn remarks that “we heard a rumour that all humans were being kept in bottles underground. But I don’t believe that” (Buckland 1994: 161). The play’s closing vision of the world above ground being taken over by Parktown prawns and other animals, whose marching training is so precise that “I cannot tell if the marchers have two feet or six” (Buckland 1994: 152), holds up a dire warning to people who wish to reserve space exclusively for the use of one group or race. The Creatures Community Congress, including its human member (Meredith), are powerless against the desire to dominate space that unites ultra-right factions of Parktown prawns, ants and even homicidal chickens. These ranks of speciesists, who mow down humans and dogs by sheer weight of numbers, caricature the worst nightmares of paranoid white South Africans in the dying years of apartheid: being crushed by a faceless mob of indistinguishable, hostile aliens.

***District 9* (2009): The Return of the Prawn**

Neill Blomkamp’s film, *District 9* (2009), produced by Peter Jackson, takes up the image of the Parktown prawn⁵ to explore white responses to otherness

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4. These awards were: the Vita Award for Best Production in the Transvaal (Gauteng); the Vita Award for Best Production in the Cape (Western Cape); Vita Award for Best Actor; the Stuart Leith Award for Best Actor; and the Fleur du Cap Award for Best Indigenous Script (Buckland 1994: 143).
 5. As previously discussed, Buckland popularised the image of the Parktown prawn in the South African cultural imaginary. It has also featured in Louis Greenberg’s short story, “Prawn Apocalypse” (2014).

through the well-known metaphor of an alien invasion. As in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, there is no explanation for the sudden change of circumstances: the aliens simply appear in a spaceship that hangs above Johannesburg, stranded in the Earth's atmosphere through a mechanical fault. The human inhabitants of the planet have their space transformed from familiar and comfortable (cf. Ahmed 2007: 158) to strange and menacing when the aliens arrive, uninvited and presumed hostile. After twenty years of the spaceship's hanging immobile in the Earth's atmosphere, the humans approach it and evacuate the aliens, who are in poor physical shape. They have tentacles in the middle of their faces; jointed bodies; and individually coloured exoskeletons. They are named "prawns," apparently in reference to their similarity to ocean-going prawns, but the terror, xenophobia and paranoia they inspire in human beings is remarkably similar to that evoked by Parktown prawns. The resonances between the aliens and insects are reinforced when we learn that most of the aliens rescued from the ship are "workers" and not "leadership class".

The central character, Wikus van der Merwe (Sharlto Copley), is an Afrikaans Everyman. Thanks to his marriage to the boss's daughter, Wikus is promoted to chief of Multi-National United's project to remove 1.8 million aliens from District 9, close to the centre of Johannesburg, to a specially built "alien settlement" 200 km outside the city. The name of the alien district both invokes anonymity (suggesting that the aliens are mere faceless numbers) and consciously recalls the destruction of District Six in Cape Town by the Nationalist government, which began in 1966 and continued for two decades (South African History Archive 2010):⁶ an example of eugenics through planning and regulating urban space. MNU, who are clearly analogous to the South African Nationalist government, rationalise that removing the prawns to a distant location will neutralise their ability to cause any problems among the human population and thereby restore urban South African space to its previous capacity to provide familiarity and comfort. In a bureaucratic operation strongly reminiscent of apartheid "forced removals", which removed 3.5 million people by force between 1950 and 1982 (South African History Online), the aliens are forced to sign "agreements" to being evicted, with no awareness on the part of humans that their physiology does not allow them to write.

Blomkamp, like Buckland, provides dual perspectives on the resettlement. The film sets up an analogy between the alien settlement and the townships that surround Johannesburg, leading the viewer through familiar scenes of black children playing with toys fashioned out of rubbish, and portraying the prawns' homes as cobbled together from waste building materials. As Li

6. District Six has been memorialised in literature, including the play *David Kramer & Taliep Petersen's District Six* (Kramer et al 2007); a collection of short stories entitled *Waiting for Leila* (Dangor 1981) and a novel, ironically entitled *Buckingham Palace: District Six* (Rive 1986).

Pernegger and Susanna Godehart succinctly note: “townships represent the ‘exclusion by design’ of large portions of the South African citizenry” (2007: 6), emphasising their role in the racialisation of space in South Africa. Loren Kruger’s *Imagining the Edgy City: Writing, Performing, and Building Johannesburg* identifies Johannesburg as a zone of intense anxiety about borders and edges:

The shifting boundary between kin and stranger, native and foreign, us and them, invites critical reflection on the aspirations towards civility and cosmopolitanism in the present-day city’s aspirations to remedy a long history of exclusion while still policing economic and political borders. (2013: 6)

Kruger aptly describes Johannesburg as hesitating ambivalently between “remedy[ing] a long history of exclusion”, when the white supremacist government steadfastly refused to share space with people of any other races, and still “policing ... borders”. This ambivalence is also evident in *District 9*’s revisionist science fiction. Ian-Malcolm Rijdsdijk discerns white nostalgia for apartheid as the motor for the film’s portrayal of Wikus’s increasing hybridity and final expulsion from human society (2018: 155), but I read it as the expression of ambivalent fascination with hybrid identities, leading (via some regrettable masculinist fantasies of violence) to the understanding that humans and aliens alike are irremediably hybrid.

Blomkamp reverses the science fiction trope of wicked aliens and virtuous human beings, demonstrating that the aliens are caring and scientifically advanced, while humans are transparently bigoted and paranoid. For example, in a poignant shot with no humans in view, the camera focuses on the strangely humanoid-named Christopher Johnson’s recognisably human eyes as he, his child (the only alien child in the film) and a friend search through a rubbish dump for missing components to repair their ship and enable them to return home. This scene leads the viewer through prejudice, which initially perceives the aliens as ugly and unsanitary, and finally to the realisation that they are searching logically and systematically through the objects muddled together in the dump. It also undoes the prejudice toward aliens as desiring to occupy space that is demarcated for non-alien (aka white) use. The “orientation” that Ahmed speaks of as a constituent part of whiteness is, for the aliens, transmuted into alienation: a “pointing towards” being lost, rather than an orientation towards comfort and familiarity. They have been severed from their home through mechanical failure and want nothing more than to leave District 9 and Earth behind.

If white bodies in *District 9*, as in Ahmed’s account, jealously guard the borders of the space they inhabit as a “space that extends their space” (2007: 158), a kind of extended body/self, the borders of the individual physical body are policed with equal vigour in order to keep out contamination. Mocke Jansen van Veuren notes this in *District 9* and goes as far as to claim that “Neill Blomkamp’s *District 9* ... is a story about bodies, most of which do

not fare well in the course of the film” (2012: 571). While the film arguably is about more than bodies, it certainly takes on Gothic overtones as Wikus van der Merwe starts to develop features of prawn physiology after coming into contact with alien fuel. After this incident, Wikus becomes the ultimate pariah in white society: his “visible identity” (Alcoff 2005), is a hybrid of two species or races. Michael Valdez Moses reflects perceptively that, despite its overtly revisionist agenda, “a troubling note of racism sounds throughout the film” (2010: 158). While Valdez Moses sees this most clearly in the stereotyping of the prawns as “the shiftless, violent, and degenerate urban African lumpen-proletariat” (2010: 158), I am more interested in the racism directed against the human/alien hybrid that Wikus van der Merwe becomes. His new position in racialised South African society is similar to that of Coloured people, who are marginalised and shamed because of their hybridity. Being of “hybrid” anatomy and skin colour is taken as a signifier of miscegenation, that is to say of tainted racial purity, as Zoë Wicomb discusses in her celebrated essay “Shame and Identity: the Case of the Coloured in South Africa” (1998). Exploring the case of Saartjie Baartman, the coloured woman who was exhibited in France as an example of “coloured” physiology for Europeans to stare at, Wicomb writes:

Miscegenation, the origins of which lie within a discourse of “race”, concupiscence, and degeneracy, continues to be bound up with shame, a pervasive shame exploited in apartheid’s strategy of the naming of a Coloured race, and recurring in the current attempts by coloureds to establish brownness as a pure category, which is to say a denial of shame. (1998: 92)

District 9 shows how whiteness closes ranks against Wikus as soon as he shows physical signs of racial hybridity. While the hospital attempts to saw off his arm after it has metamorphosed into a claw, the aliens are equally suspicious of his arrival among them. Wikus is exiled from white society, but not accepted by the prawns either, until he forges an alliance with their scientist, Christopher Johnson. He can never return; a return to Johannesburg’s leafy suburbs would signify a biological and practical community of interests between South Africans and their alien visitors, and between whiteness and other racial groups. The end of the film shows the aliens in a desperate bid to escape assimilation by repairing their spaceship, while Wikus is seen mournfully making roses out of scrap metal for his wife and visibly longing to return to his segregated white space. In a spatially racialised South Africa, there can be no porous leaking of one group into the other, no “assimilation” or hybridisation as prescribed by the CEO of Multi-National United.

***Nineveh* (2001)**

Henrietta Rose-Innes's *Nineveh* (2001) takes its title from the biblical story of the prophet Jonah, who tried to avoid taking a message from God to the city of Nineveh and was swallowed by a whale to teach him to obey his calling. By referring to the biblical story, Rose-Innes implies that her novel also contains ethical overtones of the struggle between “good” and “evil”. The novel features two pest controllers, father and daughter Len and Katya Grubbs, whose approach to pest control is radically different. Len demonstrates a fairly standard masculinised approach to pests by exterminating them, while Katya adopts a more traditionally “feminine” approach of humanely relocating them. Katya's strategy resonates with discourses about preserving the landscape and its biodiversity. Nevertheless, there are racial overtones to her work, especially when she describes it succinctly as “Putting the wild back in the wild, keeping the tame tame. Policing borders” (2001: 19). The stratification of space into “wild” and “tame” (according to raced and classed selves and others) evokes De Kock's deconstruction of the “whiteness/wildness” opposition in South African letters (2010). This is evident in Katya's removal of an infestation of caterpillars from a tree so that the owner of the garden can show off a garden that is “clean” of any contaminants. This is an allusion to whiteness's obsession with keeping their own spaces “clean” and free of any invading racial Others. Katya astutely observes, as she reports completing her task to her employer, that Mrs Brand “is ashamed of her caterpillar problem. The creatures have swarmed overnight, disgusting her; she cannot allow them to perform their congregation in sight of her fastidious guests” (2001: 13). Here, as in *The Ugly Noonoo*, the insects become a problem because of their numbers: Katya is called in to remove the infestation because it has grown out of proportion.

On the surface, *Nineveh*'s plot focuses on Katya's assignment to the eponymous housing development outside the city centre, where she has been employed to remove a plague of mysterious *goggas* (the word has similar repugnant connotations to the “monstrous verminous bug” which is used to describe the transformed Gregor Samsa in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*.⁷) This plague has been read as symbolising the threat of foreign immigrants (Graham 2014: 70), but, in my view, it can also be read as an allegory for white anxieties about the porosity of their spatial borders to unwanted intruders (cf. Williams 2018: 421).

Nineveh is a walled enclave where all living creatures besides humans have been assiduously locked outside. On her first morning in the estate, Katya notices that “[t]here is no other greenery” besides a few milkwood trees, although “beyond *Nineveh*'s perimeter, everything is insistently alive and pushing to enter” (2001: 62). The lack of non-human life inside the estate

7. See Kafka (2015) and Gooderich (2015).

makes it an extreme example of apartheid-style spatial planning. The logical extreme of making whites comfortable, Rose-Innes suggests, is to banish all non-human forms of life. Inside Nineveh, everything has been arranged to provide the “sinking feeling” of ease described by Ahmed and reinforced by the knowledge that all non-human beings have been eliminated. But, as Katya realises, the result is not comfort at all: instead, it is eerie and unnatural. Katya’s approach to pest control, as well as her reaction to Nineveh’s clinical interior spaces – “as sterile as a swabbed-out surgery” (Rose-Innes 2001: 63) – affirm the need for biodiversity as the novel’s guiding ethic.

The bugs that Katya has been employed to remove do not appear throughout most of the novel. Much like the unidentified animal in Bright Blue’s iconic song “Weeping”,⁸ they are more powerful in their absence than in their presence, in rumour than in actuality. They are said to come to Nineveh with the rain, which will turn the mud surrounding the estate into a fecund swamp giving birth to biological life and diversity. While Katya is waiting for them to arrive, her father returns to the scene, claiming that she has usurped his job, and catalysing the novel’s family drama as a conflict between the practices and ethics of father and daughter. Len’s return signals both a Freudian return of what Katya has repressed – her original Oedipal drama and wound – and a breach of Nineveh’s boundaries by the burgeoning, insistent natural life outside the estate. Len’s physicality is obtrusive: his body threatens to burst out of his daughter’s pest-removal uniform and his appetite creates disorder in Katya’s clinically tidy kitchen. His presence reminds Katya, and the reader, of the irreducibility of the corporeal.

In the novel’s penultimate chapter, when the swarm of beetles arrives, Katya realises that her father has been smuggling building materials out of the estate, and insect larvae in, both with a capitalist motive. A near-final scene shows the reader the bugs at last:

The windows are masked, not with cloth, but with a fabric far finer and more rare: the thousand upon thousand twitching bodies of beetles, jewelled, swarming, flicking their wings, coating the room like crystals of amethyst inside a geode. (2001: 186)

In this description, the bugs are not so much threatening as beautiful in their condition of being alive, and they wrap Katya in their shimmering bodies as they “smoothly lap her wrists, covering her in iridescent scales” (2001: 174), making her part of the swarm. However, it is not long until Katya is overcome with aversion and leaps up, swatting the beetles in an attempt to free herself from them (2001: 174). Joan-Mari Barendse aptly interprets this scene as demonstrating that, while Katya theoretically believes that the human and

8. Part of the song (which was a powerful anti-apartheid cultural protest) reads:
Behind his house, a secret place
Was the shadow of the demon he could never face (Bright Blue 2019)

insect worlds are one, in practice she would prefer their alien multiplicity contained (2018: 74). Len and Nineveh’s owner, Mr Brand, are both revealed to be self-serving capitalists who cannot appreciate Others, whether these are racial or insect. Katya has learned from Len to leave behind an insect or two after she completes removing an infestation, thus guaranteeing her future employment. However, she has also learned that “you can’t keep things in their proper places” (2001: 207) and she takes up residence in her exterminator’s van, on the margins of the city. In this way Katya blurs the boundaries between economic classes and between human and animal in a way that neatly mirrors the bugs’ infestation of a “human-only” estate.

Conclusion

The urge to protect territory and keep it free from invaders is an archetypal feature of human nature, derived from the primal separation of self from non-self. All three of the texts I have explored here reveal whiteness’s concern with keeping spaces racially pure and free of taint by contaminating otherness. This approach, however, tends to falter when attempts to expunge undesirable others only reinforce the dependence of the self on those designated as enemies. Buckland’s *The Ugly Noonoo* demonstrates allegorically that humans’ hatred for Parktown prawns (read, racial Others) is premised on assumptions that the Others are disorganised, slothful and primitive. The ease with which the prawns capture two human Hennies, and the mirroring effect of having “Kommandant Hennie” sharing their name, suggests slyly that whiteness may have more in common with its Others than it first assumed. Similarly, *District 9*, despite its racist overtones, reveals that despised spaces, occupied by planetary, racial or species Others, can hold considerable affective and scientific value. Finally, *Nineveh*’s focus on policing and maintaining borders only ends up reinforcing their porousness. The Creatures Community Congress in *The Ugly Noonoo*, the transformed Wikus van der Merwe in *District 9* and Katya Grubbs in *Nineveh* all espouse an ethics of borders that are porous and open to the other, rather than rigidly enforced through both discursive and material means.

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