"The War of the Worlds": Relocating the Boundaries between the Human and the Non-Human[1]

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Summary

In two recent South African novels, universal questions on the relationship between humans and nature are discussed by foregrounding the regional angle. At the same time a wide range of environmental issues informs the narratives. While no easy solution for an endangered ecosystem is offered by either of the two texts, the bold ideas mooted contribute to the manifold dimensions of the ecological discourse. Witchcraft and political corruption have as much impact on the environment as aposymbiosis and urban decay. Deon Meyer's *Blood Safari* (2009) is an eco-thriller, set in the world-famous Kruger National Park. The narrative recounts the conflict between preservation and extinction, in a context of conflict between Western developers of tourism destinations and golf estates, land claims by indigenous communities, and violence between radical ecologists and traditional healers as well as international traffickers of animal body parts. *Zoo City* (2010) is the second novel written by Lauren Beukes and has been described as a combination of crime and magic, an urban thriller presenting a dark and dystopic view of Johannesburg in 2011. This narrative reports on widespread ecological devastation in the city widely known as the "City of Gold", the financial capital of Africa; a ravaged surface swamped by refugees from all over Africa, which now mirrors the deep excavations and myriads of mine tunnels below.

A comparative reading of the two texts exposes the huge anomalies between the interests of first- and third-world cultures within the same country. *Blood Safari* articulates the more conventional ways of managing these divergent views while *Zoo City* presents a scenario where a community consisting of refugees and "animalled" criminals is shunned yet exploited by the pop culture of the "normal", though disintegrating, society.

Opsomming

Twee romans wat onlangs in Suid-Afrika verskyn het, ondersoek die universele kwessies betreffende die verhouding tussen mens en omgewing deur op die regionale belange te fokus. Hoewel geen oplossings vir die bedreigde ekosisteem

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aangebied word nie, vorm die prikkelende temas 'n bydrae tot die multidimensionele aard van die hedendaagse ekologiese diskoers. Deon Meyer se *Onsigbaar* (vertaal in 2009 as *Blood Safari)* en die tweede roman van Lauren Beukes, *Zoo City (*2010), is respektiewelik geplaas in die Kruger Nasionale Wildtuin waar die bewaringsplanne van 'n eerste- en 'n derdewêreldse kultuur in botsing kom, en in die geval van Beukes se werk, in 'n vervalle Johannesburg waar misdaad en magie die omgewing kenmerk. 'n Vergelykende lesing van die twee tekste openbaar die reuse gaping tussen opponerende kulture wat in dieselfde land saam bestaan. In *Onsigbaar* word hierdie teenstellings op 'n meer konvensionele manier bestuur; in *Zoo City* is 'n wêreld geskep waar ook die grense tussen menslik en niemenslik binne 'n omgewing wat disintegreer, vervaag.

1 Introduction

In the early stages of a new decade marked by the Gulf of Mexico Oil Spill, flood ravages from Brazil to Pakistan and Australia, and then the catastrophe that struck Japan, the dynamics between environment, humans and texts could offer a very topical issue for literary analysis. Barely a single news bulletin passes nowadays without mentioning the ever-increasing unease about our relationship with nature and our awareness of a volatile environment. In South Africa, especially, the malevolent character of humans interacting with nature dominates current media reports. The South African vulture has been identified as the "big loser of the World Cup 2010" (Jackson 2010). A joint statement by Birdlife SA, Birdlife International and the British Royal Society for the Protection of Birds branded believers in "muti magic" as those contributing to the extinction of the species because they were convinced that they could correctly predict the soccer results if they smoked dried vulture products. An editorial of barely a month later, titled "War of the game parks" (*Pretoria News*, 2 August 2010), sparked an avalanche of ever-increasing gruesome reports on the horrific and systematic poaching of rhinos in South Africa, a heinous crime of which the full picture is only now gradually but relentlessly being revealed. Environmental concern is no simple matter and has no final conclusion, not even in so-called sophisticated societies. During the past ten years one of the recurring criticisms in readers' letters to the venerable *National Geographic Magazine* has been that levelled against its insistence on warning against unsustainable growth, ecological degradation and looming natural disasters. But those dissenting voices have lately been very silent. The May 2010 special issue on managing dwindling water resources seems especially relevant to this essay. That specific issue demonstrates how literature can become a part of a warning system, as the key article is written by Barbara Kingsolver, eco-activist and international author with blockbuster status.

Section 24 of the South African Constitution refers to the so-called "third generation rights" in striving towards a constructive ecological culture and environmental ethics:

> Everybody has the right: to an environment that is not harmful to their health or well-being; and to have the environment protected, for the benefit of present and future generations, through reasonable legislative and other measures that (i) prevent pollution and ecological deterioration, (ii) promote conservation; and (iii) secure ecologically sustainable development and use of natural resources while advancing justifiable economic and social development.
>
> (in Lemmer 2007: 226)

These idealistic and even somewhat arrogant statements are contextualised by a popular (but misguided) perception of South Africa as a country of vast open spaces, successful preservation zones and pristine wilderness areas. The reality is very different. Ongoing reports on the growing danger of acid water dumping, park rangers involved in poaching and xenophobic violence in the face of dwindling services and resources abound. It is also meaningful that in current South African (Afrikaans and English) literature the representation of the environment leans demonstrably towards dystopia and images of destruction.

This article explores, in analysing two recent South African novels, how literature reflects on universal questions about the relationship between humans and nature by foregrounding the (bio)regional angle. At the same time a wide range of environmental issues informs the narratives. While no easy solution for an endangered ecosystem is offered by either of the two texts, the bold ideas mooted contribute to the manifold dimensions of the ecological discourse. Witchcraft and political corruption have as much impact on the environment as aposymbiosis and urban decay.

Deon Meyer's *Blood Safari* (2007) is an eco-thriller set in the Kruger National Park. The narrative recounts the conflict between preservation and extinction, referring to old political conflicts, land claims by indigenous communities, and violence between radical ecologists and traditional healers as well as international traffickers in animal body parts. With reference to the newspaper article mentioned in the introductory paragraph, it is interesting that the killing of protected vultures is the origin of the deadly strife between the animal rehabilitation centre and the surrounding black community that this novel depicts.

Zoo City (2010) is Lauren Beukes's second novel and has been described as a combination of crime and magic, an urban thriller presenting a dark and dystopic view of the Johannesburg of 2011. In the city that has become known as the "City of Gold", the financial capital of Africa, widespread ecological devastation is taking place – to such an extent that a ravaged surface now mirrors the deep excavations and myriads of mine tunnels underneath. It is a world where horrific secrets are hidden in the gated enclaves of the rich while the masses consisting of refugees, addicts and "animalled" criminals struggle to survive in the festering slums.

A comparative reading of the two texts – both representing non-canonised genres – exposes the huge anomalies between the interests of first- and third-world cultures within the same country. *Blood Safari* articulates the more conventional ways of managing these divergent views, while *Zoo City* presents a scenario where the boundaries between human and non-human have not so much merged, as collapsed, been renegotiated and then redrawn.

2 Ecocriticism and Environmental Literature

2.1 The Theoretical Paradigm

This reading takes place within the broad study field of **Ecocriticism,** an approach to literary analysis that makes readers aware of how language and literature embody values and attitudes which may eventually have far-reaching ecological effects. Ecocriticism is an umbrella term that often obscures the inherent conflicts between various ecological theories, of which the most apparent differences may be those between anthropocentric theories and deep ecology. The members of the first group aim for economic progress and sustainable development, prioritising the values of an industrial and/or capitalist world, and are often human- and male-centred. **Deep ecology** (linked to the Gaia hypothesis),[2] on the other hand, is based on the ancient respect for the intrinsic value of animals and not for how **they** can be of use to **us**.

Although this field of study has been widely explored since the early 1980s in especially the Anglo-American cultures, a valid question still seems to be: what does the eco-critic do differently or more specifically? A general response, in addition to what has been stated at the beginning of this paragraph, is that eco-critics explore an extensive interdisciplinary field of research and are interested in genres and texts not traditionally seen as part of the literary canon. More specifically, one could refer to Buell's (1995: 6-8) criteria for environmental literature, of which I regard the following two as very meaningful:

1. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation.
2. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text.

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2. The word Gaia has come to symbolise "Earth Mother" or "Living Earth". The Gaia concept evolved from the thoughts of 18th-century geologists who used the term "superorganism" in reference to Earth. Currently James Lovelock is most directly linked to this theory that tampering with Earth's own environmental balancing mechanisms places the planet at grave risk. Global warming and ozone depletion are indications of this risk.

Glotfelty proposes the following set of identifying questions:

> What is the function of "place" and "space" as narrative elements? What are the metaphoric structures of these texts?
>
> (1996: xix)

Patrick Murphy (2000: 1) designed a "taxonomy" of environmental texts, by means of which he identified the characteristic modes and genres as those of wilderness defence, the destruction of agrarian life, the debating of political and ethical values, cultural conservation and the depiction of utopias, dystopias and fabulations. He also states that transformational themes are present in all environmental texts.

2.2 Relocating the Boundaries

If one could regard the theories mentioned above as the cornerstone of an approach only recently fully established in academic programmes, it is noteworthy that changes to and expansion of the existing paradigm have already occurred. In a special issue of the *Journal of Literary Studies/ Tydskrif vir literatuurwetenskap* on ecocriticism and environmental literature, one such instance of relocating the boundaries seems especially interesting, namely Svend Erik Larsen's "'To See Things for the First Time': Before and After Ecocriticism" (2007: 341-373). In his essay Larsen refers to one of the significant censures against ecocriticism, namely its Western and particularly Anglo-American slant. In motivating this disapproval he argues persuasively: "Nature is not a Western phenomenon, neither in its materiality nor in its multiple and culturally diverse definitions and practices that interact with the Westernized ideas and practices in a global perspective" (p. 344). Larsen therefore offers a new definition for "ecocriticism"; one that does not refer to specific texts or critical intentions, but to "the general cultural process [in which] literature and criticism are involved ... it allows for the inclusion of ... concern with nature in other cultures and literatures and historical epochs ... often left out of the ecocriticism of Western modernity". He proposes an enhanced definition which can be paraphrased as:

> Ecocriticism deals with the way literature contributes to the articulation, interpretation and transformation of the boundary between nature and culture or, even broader, the boundary between the non-human and the human.
>
> (Larson 2007: 345)

With this description Larsen introduces the concept of the **boundary**. He argues that humans are very seldom directly confronted with nature; they rather grapple with the changeable boundaries between nature and culture. As nature is too vast to be grasped in its entirety, our encounter with it is

filtered through many cultural and historical variations of experiences, each of which can be described as a **boundary marker**. More comprehensive markers can, for instance, be the wilderness, cultural landmarks and parks, non-recyclable waste, ecological degradation and nuclear plants but also sexuality, aging and disease. However, not all these experiences are on a grand scale; in the minutiae of our everyday lives we have just as many and poignant experiences of boundary markers: getting lost, covering plants with frost sheets, concealing body odours, colouring one's hair!

So-called "nature writing", literature of nature or nature-oriented literature (as this kind of text is labelled by Murphy (2001)) often foregrounds the representation of external environments in terms of wilderness, landscapes, waste sites and so on, preferably in the tradition of realism or romanticism. But this focus tends to understate the actual cultural diversification of the nature experience that extends far beyond the particular modern pre-occupation with landscapes and wilderness as separate natural entities. Cultural complexity consists of diachronic relations between new and traditional views and of synchronic relations between competing contemporary views. Like experiences of nature, interpretations of nature are always in the plural (p. 346). We could decide to regard a much broader spectrum of diverse entities as boundary markers. From this perspective they all deal, like countless others, with the nature-culture boundary, but not necessarily referring directly to the natural environment (p. 345).

One of the functions of environmental literature is to make the tedious, everyday micro-experiences of the nature-culture boundary more visible and assign them a broader and maybe global perspective to which the reader can relate. These (often trivial) markers have a larger potential to serve the ultimate goals of ecocriticism, namely to foster a growing awareness of our collective denial of a shared responsibility for the relocation of the boundary between culture and nature (p. 345). *How* and *why* certain boundaries are foregrounded in certain contexts is the core problem to be investigated.

In keeping with the views of Glotfelty (1996), Larsen also emphasises the function of space and place in environmental literature.

> The concept of place has always brought together reference to physical surroundings and to human interaction with the environment, including social structure, rhetoric, linguistics, philosophy and ethics. For obvious reasons it is a core concept in ecocriticism.
>
> (Larson 2007: 349)

He distinguishes specifically between: **Nature as Place** (= *domos*), which refers to the home or place of origin; here a balance between humans and nature is possible. Nature is first of all associated with order, not environment. Place in this sense is a site where the boundary markers of the natural limits of human changes and movements are experienced as being under human control. Nature is viewed as an ordered system of places (p. 352).

Nature as space implies to Larsen that the confrontation with the boundary between nature and culture becomes an individual project with an infinite number of changing positions available to the perceiver. Boundary markers are perceived as fundamentally changeable on human conditions, and the place of humans is liable to expansion. Consequently, the significance of the "proper" place of things is diminished and tends to disappear (p. 354).

Larsen also refers to the writings of Mary Louise Pratt on travel literature, and, specifically, her notion of a "**contact zone**": the space where encounters between otherwise historically and geographically separate peoples occur. Here their trajectories intersect and involve clashes and conflicts, also with regard to experiences and interpretations of nature. Pratt, on her part, also refers to Fernando Ortiz's concept of **transculturation** to describe the processes taking place in a contact zone. Ortiz had specifically explored how, through transculturation, natural resources are used in a colonial context; a reference which, according to Larsen, deserves to be developed in the context of ecocriticism (p. 356).

In concluding his argument, Larsen defines ecocriticism anew as a global field of study with the focus on the troubled struggle in our societies and our individual lives of understanding and moving the boundary between culture and nature.

Although not mentioned in Larsen's article, one may recognise in it some meaningful links with Edward Soja's writings on reasserting the role of space in developing social theory. When speculating about the relationship of the regional with the urban and with the future of cities and communities, Soja wrote:

> Prophecy now involves a geographical rather than a historical projection; it is space and not time that hides consequences from us. To prophesy today it is only necessary to know men as they are throughout the world in all their inequality.
>
> (Soja 1989: 22)

Zoo City is set in 2011, a short time away from the book's publication at the beginning of 2010. The frightening nature of this future Johannesburg and all that it symbolises may to some extent still be "foreign" to the traditional reader, not so much because of the time difference (which has already been eliminated) as by our perception that the space described here has not yet become a fully fledged contact zone.

3 Text and Environment

3.1 Text and Intertext

The primary reference in this essay's title is to *The War of the Worlds* (1898), the well-known science fiction (SF) novel by H.G. Wells, which describes the experiences of an unnamed narrator who travels through the suburbs of London as Earth is invaded by Martians. It is one of the very earliest stories that detail a conflict between humankind and an alien race. The plot has been described as an example of "invasion literature" and has evoked a variety of interpretations: amongst others a commentary on evolutionary theory, (British) imperialism and middle-class (Victorian) fears and prejudices. The Martians overcome most of human civilisation; they roam the shattered landscape unhindered; and Red Weed, a Martian vegetation, spreads over the land aggressively overwhelming Earth's ecology. Eventually, however, the Martians and the Red Weed succumb to terrestrial bacteria against which they have no immunity. Society returns to normal and humanity is faced with a new and expanded universe as a result of the invasion.

Though representing the science fiction genre, much of the text (the setting and the premise) was grounded in the scientific and social ideas of the time, describing actual locations and aspects of everyday life and culture. It reflected the increasing feeling of anxiety and insecurity linked to the zeitgeist of the fin de siècle and of international tensions towards the outbreak of the First World War.

Interpretations of the novel were closely aligned to the reigning ideas at that time. The Victorian world of Darwin adulation was clearly reflected, especially the notions of "survival of the fittest", of "natural selection" and the theory that all species were competing to survive in a given environment and that the species which had evolved from the most useful biological adaptations to that environment was most likely to survive and produce offspring also possessing these useful characteristics. This interpretation of Darwinian thought suggested a future human evolution where the superiority of the brain over other organs would be accepted – body parts made superfluous through natural evolution (or as in our future, easily replaced by biotechnology and stem cell implants). But in this novel Wells also attacked the accepted face of imperial aggression and challenged the Victorian notion of a natural order which allowed the Victorians to rule the world because of their superiority over subject races. Interestingly enough, it also challenged Social Darwinism, that is, the abuse of Darwin's theories whereby the position of the rich and the successful is justified as determined by biology and racial superiority.

The discussion of the two South African novels and their representation of the ecological issues are situated within the context of this 19th-century

novel, not in the form of a one-on-one comparison, but with implicit reference to Wells's version of the conflict between the human and the non-human.

3.2 *Zoo City* (Lauren Beukes (2010))

Larsen links his description of "Place" as *domus* – in the sense of a site where the boundary markers of the natural limits of human changes and movements are experienced as being under human control (i.e. "Nature as an ordered system of places" (Larsen 2007: 352)) – directly to the city or to urban spaces.

But in this city, explicitly named Johannesburg, we are introduced to a "zoo" city, one with changeable boundaries between human and non-human or, as Larsen (p. 364) would state, "a social and cultural structure in disarray and all stable and recognized boundaries between culture and nature disappearing". In this narrative *nature as place* is transformed to *nature as space*, and there is thus a move towards the changeable and the global instead of a confirmation of the stability of the regional.

A broad spectrum of boundary markers is present, from the macro-level of environmental collapse visible in the inner city's architecture and infrastructure, to the micro-level of roadside trees serving as storage space or light seeping through curtainless windows. The boundaries demarcate a ghetto that incorporates more or less the existing suburbs Hillbrow and Berea, generally recognised by the reader as slum areas taken over by an underclass of African refugees, convicts and criminals on the run and a whole range of addicts and other homeless people. In the novel almost all of them have been subjected to aposymbiosis: their crimes have been punished by some kind of individual disintegration, temporarily halted by pairing them with an animal that also bestows on them a specific magical talent. Whether this happens automatically or through official/legal intervention, is never explained (Beukes 2010: 25, 51; see especially pp. 60-65, 154). According to the narrator this phenomenon could be linked to the effects of individual incidents of chemical waste and radiation (Chernobyl, Bhopal), as well as to constant warfare and the resulting environmental degradation in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. It happens worldwide; in China these "Apos" are summarily executed, but in this narrative the "animalled" refugees – from specifically the rest of Africa: Angola, Cameroon, Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Rwanda, Zimbabwe – who ended up in Johannesburg, are foregrounded. It is notable that the First World is barely mentioned, apart from vague references to rap music and this only in the last paragraph of the novel. In this final scene the narrator Zinzi compiles a list of African cities, the "new worlds" (p. 309) to which she is travelling, while the Europe she visited as a child represents the "old world" that she is bidding farewell.

The narrative style ranges from the jargon associated with African/ township pop culture (specifically the background of pounding music, the quick repartee and the wit, the almost rapper style of speech) and SF, to the gothic images of magic realism. According to Susan Bassnett (1993) the latter genre is particularly suitable for articulating "contact zones" in colonial societies. In recent literary works this merging of SF and magic realism is being explored in fiction by established authors such as Margaret Attwood and writers as cutting-edge as Jeff Noon. In this type of text the conventional boundaries between human and non-human are increasingly being eliminated by environmental disaster, stem cell research, nanotechnology, fable and magic. Specifically with reference to Beukes's debut novel *Moxyland* (2008), the impact of the cyberpunk style, and the manner in which the avalanche of hightech wizardry paradoxically creates an atmosphere of despondency and therefore a downgrading of ecological activism, are very significant (Roos 2010: 1-21). Perhaps this is one of the main differences between *Zoo City* and *Blood Safari* – the latter concludes with a traditional and fitting happy ending; the former with barely any hope of improving a "miserable life" (Beukes 2010: 309).

Zoo City represents an urban space as a dystopia. There is an almost total destruction of agrarian life with no mention at all of rural farmland; food, even for the animal companions, seems to be either synthetic or scrounged from the city streets. The "perfect green lawns and chorus line of hissing sprinklers" (p. 86) at the gated golf estates only temporarily hide the gruesome massacre of the residents, the ivy-covered walls and large pool of a venerable old mansion actually encloses a crocodile's lair in a derelict house of horrors. The narrative articulates a dismissive acceptance of the recognisably corrupt political and unethical society, and (environmental) degradation is described as an unstoppable process. Humans are responsible for the all-encompassing decay and the ecological crisis, but there is no human accountability. The Johannesburg landscape that has often proudly been proclaimed to be "the biggest man-made forest in the world" (p. 67) is in this book not depicted as a former paradise suddenly turned wasteland, but as part of a steadily worsening and inevitable march towards collapse (p. 255). There is little or no distinction between non-human and most human life forms. In fact, the "official" label in this text for Zinzi, her sloth and others of their kind, are *aposymbiots*, a zoological term referring to a form of symbiosis in which two different species live independently of each other although their life cycles affect one another, usually negatively, and often even fatally. The narrative recounts how, when one of the couple is threatened, hurt or killed the other suffers a similar fate.

The assault on the human body, conventionally regarded as a complete and separate entity, becomes through this coexistence of human and animal perhaps the most vivid example of the blurring and eventual erasure of boundary markers in *Zoo City*. But a multitude of other experiences of the

fading nature-culture boundary exist: the young criminals living in the subterranean sewage tunnels that offer entrance into the hightech Gautrain tunnel, the former glitzy apartment blocks now turned into an SF vision of looming skyways of broken steel surrounded by rubbish dumps but packed with people experiencing differing degrees of desperation and delusion. The underwater cavern in the grand old house is constructed of

> natural rock with man-made features: the speakers pumping out iJusi (pop ballads) ... the bare neon bulb mounted on ... cement outcropping ... the smell of damp and rot ... the many half-eaten bodies covering the base of the pool.
>
> (Beukes 2010: 289)

When Zinzi questions the witchdoctor's use of IT while he is throwing and reading the bones, he assures her that "[t]he spirits find it easier with technology; it's not so clogged as human minds" (p. 167).

This collapse of boundaries, and then on the level of everyday existence, moves the struggle for survival that, in the experience of the average reader, is usually limited to distant times and places, to a contact zone amidst our most immediate lives. Although set in the (near and now already present) future, it is already here in terms of the geological space; it is happening not only in a region adjacent to, but also below, the surface of the leafy suburbs.

Both Glotfelty (1996) and Larsen (2007) emphasise the importance of the metaphoric structure in environmental literature. In tracing the dense, almost congested patterns of images and references, one becomes aware of *Zoo City*'s strangely lyrical tone. A kind of distinguishing rhythm – apart from the many allusions to songs, the characters who move in the world of popular music and the fragments of poetry incorporated into messages and dreams – accompanies the hardboiled dialogue. But it is the imagery articulating the motif of the symbiotic relationship between human and non-human that best characterises the metaphoric structure of this narrative.

Part One, consisting of 25 short chapters (229 pages) and relating the story of Zinzi's life as a finder of lost things and small-time crook/scam artist who is in love with the Congolese Benoît, begins with the image of

> morning light the sulphur colour of mine dumps seeps across Johannesburg's skyline and sears through my window. My own personal bat signal. Or a reminder that I really need to get curtains.
>
> (Beukes 2010: 1)

It ends on page 229 with "the death of hope", a "poison flower that bursts open in an explosion of burning seeds", when Benoît tells her he is returning to the Congo to look for his lost wife and his children. Part Two is a narrative spread over 10 chapters (76 pages) that tells of the gruesome deaths of victims and perpetrators, of Benoît barely surviving the onslaught of two

malevolent Apos and of Zinzi leaving for the Congo in the hope of redeeming her life. The first paragraph echoes that of Part One:

> Yellow light slicing across my pillow like a knife would be the appropriate simile, but it feels more like a mole digging its way into my skull through my right eyeball.
>
> (Beukes 2010: 233)

This patent linking of human and non-human, living and manufactured, exemplifies the imagery. Gunfire is part of the city like "cicadas in the countryside" (p. 49); in the heavy traffic the car horns sound like mechanical ducks (p. 118); the Gautrain rushes through "huge metal ribs lining the tunnel like the belly of a robot whale" (p. 189). Although this kind of simile recalls the not unfamiliar mode of personification, what is distinctive in this instance is the consistent coupling of the human and the non-human to imply an almost self-evident sameness. The mongoose, Benoît's animal, hisses at Zinzi and "[she hisses] back" (p. 1); Benoît "uncocoons" (p. 3) himself from the bed; Zinzi's headache is a "burrowing brain termite" (p. 11); death and self-annihilation is explained as the presence of the Undertow (pp. 4, 7, 24 and many others),[3] the estrangement from a lover is described as "the tectonic plates of whatever we were have shifted out from under us – call it contextual drift" (p. 112). Zinzi experiences danger as if "in this pool suspended over a continental shelf, something is rising, swimming up towards me. Something with teeth" (p. 204). When an Apo dies,

> the air pressure dips, like before a storm. A keening sound wells up soft and low, as if it's always been there, just outside the range of human hearing. It swells to howling. And then the shadows start to drop from trees, like raindrops after a storm. The darkness pools and gathers and then seethes.
>
> (Beukes 2010: 208)

And of someone dying is said: "[I]f eyes are the windows of the soul, these are looking onto Chernobyl" (p. 282).

It is also remarkable that these images support the notion of a generalised spatial context (the sloth, for instance, is indigenous to South America, not Africa, and thus elicits attention from everyone whom Zinzi meets) in contrast to what seems to be the novel's very localised setting. A very interesting analogy can be recognised in the appearance of Animal, a foundling walking on all fours in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007). In this fictional rewriting of the Bhopal catastrophe where a gas leak occurring

3. Undertow: a subsurface flow of water that returns seaward from the shore as a result of wave action. This innocuous image has been used in literature, music, the movies and in electronic games to symbolise unexpected menace and even death.

in December 1984 started the destruction of a city and its people, Animal has "morphed into a posthuman changeling, a creature spawned by chemical autochtony" (Nixon 2009: 450). Almost exactly describing the precarious position of the "animalled" characters of *Zoo City,* Nixon (2009: 452) sees this Indian boy as "a potent compression of disturbing, porous ambiguity, a figure whose leakiness confounds the borders between the human and the nonhuman as well as the borders between the national and the foreign". Sinha himself states that his fictional Indian city was "a synecdoche for a web of poisoned communities spread out across the global South: ... Brazil ... West Africa ... the Phillipines" (Sinha quoted in Nixon 2009: 446). A similar interpretation can be offered for *Zoo City*: what is happening here reflects instances of globalised alienation.

3.3 *Blood Safari* (Deon Meyer (2009), translated from the Afrikaans *Onsigbaar* (2007))

This is the fifth novel by a very popular and successful Afrikaans detective/ crime writer. Although the story describes an adventurous and often perilous journey through far-flung places, a sense of stability and security underpins the plot. Lemmer, a part-time security agent with a tumultuous past, is now happily settled in his small-town sanctuary. Once on a job, he and his protégée Emma travel through well-known South African tourist areas, they live in luxury lodges and have access to all the comforts money can buy. They encounter nature as it is ordered by humans into beach houses, game reserves and rehabilitation centres; even the poaching takes place within the colonial tradition of hunters and conventional hunting in Africa. It is also evident that this narrative unfolds with reference to an Afrikaans literary tradition from the early colonial hunting tales (Roos in van Coller 1998: 28-32) to the exploration of maleness in the more recent works of Strachan and Bakkes (Visagie 2000).[4] The hero is a taciturn, hard-living white male who knows the bush, the animals and the indigenous people, who overcomes all opposition and who returns home to an environment of which he is in full control. The novel clearly belongs to a non-canonised genre, but carries a largely conventional message. The point of view of the Western world prevails; despite some nuanced or politically correct statements (Meyer 2009: end of chapter 14), Western ideas that are foregrounded, there are lessons in wine tasting, planning of golf estates, and

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4. Alexander Strachan, Piet Haasbroek, Piet van Rooyen and the brothers Johan and Christiaan Bakkes have in Afrikaans literature become synonymous with a postmodern exploration of the motif of maleness, hunting and the exploration of the wild. Their stories are set in war areas, game reserves, isolated farms and the wilderness, characterised by a "macho" perspective on violence and sex.

the infrastructure and all technological services are sophisticated. Ecological issues are regarded as manageable problems within the larger, organised social system. The final paragraph (where the whole adventure reaches a satisfactory end) is very revealing. Lemmer is fully aware of the astronomical, geological and fossilised phenomena that are abundant in this particular area of the Karoo – all clear evidence of the insignificance of human endeavours in the face of an immeasurable universe. And yet he jogs contentedly down the main street of the village, noting that his surroundings are "sparkling and clean, people everywhere greeted me .... I was just in time to watch *7de Laan*" (p. 372).[5] This novel fits almost seamlessly into the paradigm mooted in the South African Constitution: the egocentric views about man's rights to a safe and clean environment; nature in the service of man. Even the few warning voices sound the supremacy of man; the poacher turned conservator believes that "[p]eople are not truly capable of conservation, though they make all the right noises. It's just not in our nature .... Nothing can stand in the path of man" (pp. 96-97).

In the run-up to this happy finale, however, Lemmer becomes involved in violence, murder, and financial and political corruption directly linked to environmental issues. A variety of different ecological role players have their part. Lemmer reveals the sins of the former apartheid regime and its allies, now turned big businessmen, and the related crimes of the immoral animal traders (killing elephants and rhinos for tusks and horns). The ecological activists too are involved in the search for Emma's brother and the violent struggle to keep old secrets safe. The justness of their cause is somewhat damaged though, as their main representative, the fugitive Jacobus, is haunted by post-traumatic stress and eventually kills the local sangoma and other tribesmen in his fight against poaching. Radical ecologists, their intolerance and their encroachment upon tribal areas are criticised, and there are also positive experiences with the transformation of former smugglers and the establishment of rehabilitation centres for some threatened species.

However, the perspective in which these events are placed forms part of a slightly patronising attitude in general. Lemmer as the antagonist articulates the scornful opinion that "most green activities are an ecological rearranging of the deck chairs on the Titanic" (p. 81). Emma, totally focused on finding her brother, only becomes aware of the ecological issue when "with the light of assurance shining in her eyes" she advises the lecturers at the rehabilitation centre how to reposition their brand – with reference to her work for Volvo, BMW and Toyota – to increase their income (p. 79). The valid though opposing concerns of both ecologists and indigenous commu-

5. 7de laan – A very popular Afrikaans television soapie in South Africa, having little or no literary merit, yet daily crossing cultural and language barriers.

nities are almost ridiculed when in the closing paragraphs of the book Lemmer mentions reading "a small newspaper report on an inner page, a single column beside a Pick and Pay[6] advertisement. Conservation groups have expressed their concern about the manner and extent of the settlement of the Sibashwa tribe's land claim in the Kruger National Park" (p. 72). The ecological issue is thus reduced to triviality.

When regarding this novel in the context of boundary markers an inconsistent image emerges. Lemmer and his can-do approach to nature as a space controllable on human conditions seems to be advantaged (nature is managed through technology: tracking devices, night sightings, environmental lectures, scientifically grounded reservations) in contrast to nature as the living space of the indigenous people (the narrative articulates a general dismissive view of land claims, a condemnation of poaching, vulture parts used for muti, and associates the hidden paths in the forests with scheming foresters). On the other hand, Lemmer sometimes does misread surfaces, bumps into unexpected barriers, gets surprised or lost or wounded. But these boundaries are not obstacles in absolute terms; he can rely on help from a reasonably organised rural community; the game rangers direct him to secure hiding places and he eventually "rehabilitates" the crazed Jacobus. He even reconciles with a former Mozambican enemy by handing over those responsible for the 1988 death of Samora Machel – the African leader who was killed in an aircraft accident induced by South African armed forces through technological tampering. The presentation of this event – related through Jacobus's point of view in reliving his experiences of that time – is perhaps one of the few scenes in the novel where the boundaries between human and nature are depicted as changeable and complex. A false beacon is used to create a false border line (a historical fact), the mountainous area is changed from pristine wilderness to war zone, Jacobus who has been the hunter of poachers is turned into a hunted animal, and the official protectors become the lethal enemy.

One could describe the concept of place in *Blood Safari* as an almost colonial contact zone: transculturation occurs amidst disciplined rural societies (the black police captain is the spokesman of the tribespeople; local game rangers patrol the countryside). The indigenous communities are more dependent on white people than the other way round and need the support of various whites or professional people of indigenous descent. Their knowledge of the traditional rites is dwindling away and kept alive by external factors, for instance through the lectures in the (much-Westernised) rehabilitation centre. They move on the periphery, are often patronised (security guards and park rangers receive small fees and bribes), they are loyal to Jacobus and aid his sister beyond reason, and even die for or because of them.

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6. A ubiquitous South African supermarket chain

In contrast to *Zoo City* this is a novel making little use of metaphoric language. One of the most telling metaphors perhaps is when in damning praise of Jacobus's activism, he is described as at least not a typical "bunny hugger" (Meyer 2009: 73). The description of landscape and environment functions in support of human activities: to gain knowledge of dangerous hiding places, to motivate planning and to explain success or failure ("My path down the mountain was steep and overgrown – branches, tree roots, spider webs. Here and there were small erosion gullies and rocks that I had to clamber down step by step while the sweat poured down me in rivers" (p. 316)). This is a straightforward, no-nonsense crime novel; the relationship between man and nature exploited to create a plausible background for the action-stacked plot.

4 The War of the Worlds

4.1 *Zoo City* and the Victorians

When deciding upon a title for this essay, the phrase "the war of the worlds" was read as stressing the complex relationship between first- (Western-, developed) and third-world (African, non-developed) communities within one region and specifically referring to ecological issues. As indicated in paragraph 3.1, this "war" is also played out in the intratextual oppositions and connections through which some boundaries between human and non-human are explored. The most obvious, though never explicitly stated, of these significant links are those with the Victorian SF novel *The War of the Worlds*. The widespread, almost pathological fear of and revulsion against those living in Zoo city, the Apos and the refugees so closely associated with them, run through the narrative like an invective chorus (see especially Beukes 2010: 65). The stellar enemies called "aliens" in SF become in this modern novel the object of everyday xenophobia, marked by explicit labelling (the "animalled") or exposed to being hunted for body parts. As in Wells's Victorian novel, this situation is representative of current social conditions. In South Africa the euphoria of the Football World Cup was almost immediately followed by dire warnings of xenophobic violence, a repetition of the murderous aggression against refugees of two years earlier. But this is no regional occurrence; reports on the hounding of boatloads and trucks and planes full of refugees and foreign workers and the merciless expulsion of "gypsies" abound in media reports from Australia to Sweden, from France to Arizona, from Rwanda to Lampedusa. The fear of something disgustingly alien – a Martian, a weed, a family from Somalia – invading "our" space is central to text and life. Social Darwinism, justifying the inequalities between "us" and "them", is as alive today as it was in the 19th century (Beukes 2010: 27).

In an even more literal mode a link between *Zoo City* and the Wells novel is forged by the interaction between recognisable place and metaphoric space, so evident in the unstable boundaries between the city surface and the subterranean world of sewage systems, water pipes and underground rails (Beukes 2010: 85). As was the case in Victorian London, an alternative community exists here, supposedly living rigidly apart from the "normal" people, but in both novels their interests are closely entangled.

4.2 Linking Future and Ancient Beliefs

The section named "bonsela"[7] at the back of the South African edition of *Zoo City* includes interviews with the author, the illustrator and a detailed "Acknowledgement". In the latter Lauren Beukes mentions "books that proved invaluable" (p. 312) to her own writing and then identifies "especially Penny Miller's riveting and sadly out of print *Myths and Legends of Southern Africa* – which haunted my childhood with its wonderful stories and distinctly disturbing illustrations". What Beukes does not state, but what the reader immediately realises when paging through the beautiful 1979 edition of Miller's book, is that a recurring motif, and specifically apparent in the sections on the "Bushmen" and the "Hottentot" stories, even visually links this text with *Zoo City.* The illustrations graphically establish the notion of an aposymbiotic relationship between human and non-human that is central to these legends and folk tales. The San lived with, in and because of animals – their "brothers and sisters" (Miller 1979: 13). Existing paintings of hunting dogs carrying their own bows and arrows, tales of the quarrelsome and mischievous baboons that were once ordinary men and could still converse with the San, and many references to the praying mantis that at will changes into a beggar, a hunter, a god or just a hartebeest testify to this state of affairs (Miller 1979: 16). The Khoi on the other hand, all knew the "nightwalkers"; those sorcerers who had a lifelong connection with certain animals, especially with baboons and owls. These evil ones cared greatly for their companions, and vice versa, and both participated in sacred rituals (Miller 1979: 44). What becomes evident is that the conflict that Zinzi, her "buddy" the sloth and the other Apos experience with the non-zoo'ed, is also a "war" between the modern, Western view of life and the many manifestations of indigenous cultures. From this point of view the "animalling" is not a figment of imagination, a reference to SF or some sort of hallucination. It may be regarded as a form of punishment, but in the final instance, in Africa it is "normal" transmogrification. It is ironic that in one of the so-called scientific articles on aposymbiosis presented as part of the

7. bonsela (also pasella) – a gift, an extra, an unexpected surprise (Zulu and Sotho)

narrative in *Zoo City*, a lexicon of "animalled terms" quotes extensively from Miller's collection of southern African myths (Beukes 2010: 177).

In a 13th-century Hebrew Bible some miniature illustrations of scenes depicting mystic and messianic inspirations represent the righteous with various, sometimes even grotesque, animal heads. As Agamben (2004: 2) states: "The messianic end of history or the completion of the divine *oikonomia* of salvation defines a critical threshold, at which the difference between animal and human, which is so decisive for our culture, threatens to vanish". Until the 19th century which brought the development of the human sciences, the boundaries of man were much more uncertain and fluctuating than was accepted amongst common society. Agamben (2004: 24-317) discusses a number of reputable 17th- and 18th-century taxonomists who portrayed the boundaries between humans, animals and mythological creatures as anything but plain. Moreover, the definition of what and who are human, was based on exclusion, so that "the slave, the barbarian, and the foreigner were ... figures of an animal in human form (Agamben 2004: 37). Clearly the xenophobic issues raised in *Zoo City* are rooted in age-old perceptions.[8]

4.3 Accepting Fiction at Face Value

Blood Safari is written in a realistic style, closely linked to everyday society, and refers so directly to political and economic issues (poaching, corruption, corporate greed, logistic inefficiency) that one easily recognises the daily newspaper reports in the unfolding of the plot. However, there is little reference to matters outside the experiences of an insulated white, privileged Western society, and the narrative tone is self-assured, even staunch. The violence (at some stage of the story corpses are literally strewn around!) is depicted as necessary and even heroic; Good and Evil can be clearly distinguished. This is an egocentric and specifically First World-centred narrative. As has been stated above, although the events take place in late 2006, it is a colonial culture that permeates the fictional world. The setting of bush and veld and the environmental conflicts are in the first instance props, despite the ecological message (Meyer 2009: 62-66).

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8. A related issue is that of the 19th-century pseudoscience of *physiognomy* – the identification of animal-like features in human faces. It also advocated the belief that in specific races the physical attributes and behavourial patterns of certain archetypal animals could be recognised. A recent discussion of the Pretoria artist Frikkie Eksteen's oeuvre focused on this phenomenon and referred to the work of James W. Redfield: *Comparative Physiognomy or Resemblances between Men and Animals* (1866) (Naudé 2011: 9). According to the author of the review, this "morphing" of human into animal comments on a dark and sinister view of current events.

5 Conclusion

Ecocriticism has for some time been inspired by its opposition to the technologically driven exploitation of environment and nature that is based on the applied sciences, and most often concentrates on texts depicting unspoilt or destroyed, wild, pastoral and tamed landscapes. These two South African texts, though firmly placed in a recognisable regional and "developed" context, offer a broadening of the theoretical, historical and textual environmental perspective and thus enter into an active dialogue with more inclusive, even global issues. Both narratives demonstrate the exploration of non-canonical genres. The crime novel adheres to more traditional perspectives on wilderness "management" (game reserves, rehabilitation centres, game rangers) and environment, leaning towards a conventional Western, almost colonial point of view and a stereotypical take on the struggle between first and third world (the white man, strong and efficient and using his technological gadgets, triumphs). We are thus confronted with a simultaneous presence of, on the one hand, contrasting, contradictory or simply blurred conceptualisations of the nature-culture boundary, and on the other, an oversimplification of the very essence of these boundaries (Larsen 2007: 362). Lemmer is the protagonist not only because he is the narrator and most often on stage, but also because he exemplifies most clearly this confusion. Like Zinzi, he is a former killer, now a guardian, although a much more conventional one. Both narrators escape/flee/are freed from the city; both discover new ways of living, one in the sanctuary of a small town, the other in the war-torn, unfamiliar parts of Africa.

But, by placing the immoral, unethical and corrupt behaviour of governments and captains of industry under the spotlight *Blood Safari* demonstrates, even despite itself, how thin, even worn out the line between our notions of "primitive" and "civilised" can be. It also gives an indication of how the local can be shaped by invisible, global webs of interconnected events. *Zoo City,* presenting the reader with a variety of narrative styles and moods, crosses all traditional boundaries by means of its "animalled" characters and the deletion of the differences between the urban and the wild. In the heated pools of the rich and famous lurk the crocodiles and their rotting prey, and when depravity is not limited by class, suburb or region, "who knows who is hiding an animal under their bed?" (Beukes 2010: 304). When Zinzi and her sloth arrive at the porous Beit Bridge Border on their journey from Hillbrow to Kigali, in search of her lover's lost war "widow" and his children, the various manifestations of the nature-culture boundary are concentrated and integrated in this symbiotic non-human couple as an inescapable part of everyone's most intimate and immediate experiences across cultural and social divides. In this narrative boundaries are broken apart and redefined. The overwhelming impact of nature appears as a visible change of bodily behaviour (one is reminded of Sinha's novel where

Animal refuses to have his deformed body surgically improved – "he has seen enough of humanity not to mistake an upright posture for a stance of moral rectitude" (Nixon 2009: 464)), but it is also our ideas about being, about living in this world, that are being challenged and changed.

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