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Noir Affect in Lauren Beukes's *Zoo City*

Abstract: Taking its cue from Christopher Breu and Elizabeth A. Hatmaker's rethinking of noir affect as a descriptor of detective fiction, this paper contributes to the discussion of South African writer Lauren Beukes's *Zoo City* as a narrative that both harnesses and fluidifies the generic conventions of the crime thriller. Pondering Beukes's claim that her story may become the site for the transmutation or transmission of ethically adjusted emotion, the paper resorts to Lauren Berlant's thoughts on detective fiction as a genre condensing the "cruel optimism" of the ordinary, rather than the evental, present to explore the clues of affectional attunement in Lauren Beukes's postapartheid novel.

Keywords: Noir Affect; Crime Fiction; *Muti* Noir; Lauren Beukes; Cruel Optimism.

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*You try to transmute the emotion
into a story that will make other people care.*

(Lauren Beukes)

Acclaimed as one of the postmillennial novels that innovatively tap into the recent *affective turn* in literature,¹ *Zoo City* (2010) by Lauren Beukes mobilises the transnational tropes of today's proliferating world crime fiction² into a self-styled "*muti* noir" mode that summons a distinctively South-African engagement with the sociopolitical significance of crime, with offshoots that loom large in a globalised context. Bending internal genre distinctions between the crime thriller, the whodunit, and detective fiction,³ the category of *muti* noir signals the author's openness to experiment with a dynamic crossover of various other literary forms⁴ and has since been embraced in scholarship as a blanket term for political thrillers that stretch and flex their generic boundaries.⁵ Beukes discussed her strand of capitalist noir⁶ in a 2011 interview in which she also alluded to the potential of her speculative cybercrime fiction to give shape to "structures of feeling"⁷ that are attuned to, but can also radically reimagine, the state of a nation whose postapartheid trajectory has been marked,

as Rita Barnard states, by “many loops and twists,” “stasis and acceleration,” “paralysis and hope.”⁸

While the novel had recently been awarded the 2011 Arthur C. Clarke Award and nominated for several other international prizes,⁹ Beukes's reluctance in the interview quoted above to be niched as a science fiction or fantasy writer betokened her view on the mutability of literary forms that can grant perspective on pressing issues largely related to living in a twenty-first surveillance society still plagued by the legacy of apartheid and its “simmering” spectres, such as political repression, anti-democratic corporatic practices, media manipulation, xenophobic violence, and corruption.¹⁰ In light of the “threat of crime that's always lurking in the background in everyone's lives,” as a present-day all-too-ordinary reflex of apartheid's necropolitics, which summited in “government assassination squads and disappearances and freedom fighters committing their own atrocities,”¹¹ Beukes remoulds the parameters of detective fiction to muster the representational ambitus of a multigeneric anachetype¹² in ways that suggest that beyond the ratiocinative logic driving the detective narrative towards a denouement in which the perpetrator's identity is unveiled, *muti* noir is seen to be capable of shaping a reading practice that activates her audiences' cognitive-affective immersion in issues she feels strongly about.¹³

With its poignant inquiries into the affective registers of South Africa's post-apartheid project to overcome divisionism and achieve reconciliation, allowing the nation “to coalesce, unified by empathy and *ubuntu*, and heal together, curtailing

the devastating trauma of history,”¹⁴ *Zoo City* sieves its appraisal of the messy dynamics of national hope and disillusionment through the postmemorial lens¹⁵ of Zinzi Lelethu December, an *aposymbiot*, i.e. a human who has been *animalled* for her inadvertent involvement in her brother Thando's murder, and whose emotional stasis echoes the precarity of social-bonding mired in the “world-homogenising” structures of technocapitalism, articulated on “relations of hypervigilance, unreliable agency, and dissipated subjectivity.”¹⁶ In *Zoo City*, the wealthy residential areas of the business elites are separated from enclaves of condemned buildings housing destitute people, paperless migrants, and individuals who, like Zinzi, have a criminal past. Documented by film makers and journalists as the Zoo Plague and, later, theorised by psychologists and criminologists as the AAF or Acquired Aposymbiotic Familiarism syndrome, the animalling pandemic is a planetary postanthropocentric mutation affecting murderers since the 1980s by cathecting these presumably affectless individuals to an animal that is not only fully sentient, but also displays augmented empathy towards its human companion. While bestiary-like moralising analogies between animals and the temperamental dispositions of these humans are largely invalidated by the haphazard distribution of penguins to Afghan warlords, or Maltese hounds to gangsters, the Sloth assigned to Zinzi carries the connotation of the slow affectual labour she must do both to manage her personal trauma and to reciprocate empathy. If the emotion of empathy is, as Sara Ahmed shows, a form of orienting oneself towards the other within

networks of subject-object sociality,¹⁷ Zinzi realises that nourishing the emotional connections of such human-animal collectives is a way not just to avoid self-annihilation in the apocalyptic rift known as the Undertow or “shadow-self absorption,”¹⁸ but to function within an “ethical framework” in which “Aposymbiot interaction” can model interhuman relations.¹⁹

Drawing on South African crime fiction’s commitment to investigating questions of social and political inequity,²⁰ this “noirish slum tale filled with African magic”²¹ weighs the ethics of relationality from the viewpoint of a marginalised individual who laterally experiences the burden of guilt and shame for the past, as well as the “cruel optimism,” in Lauren Berlant’s words, of pursuing the ideal of building the nation on empathetic foundations in a fraying twenty-first century “affective environment” in which precarious “bodies and lives are saturated by capitalist forces and rhythms.”²² This is also indicated by Beukes’s Borgesian-style reflections²³ on the potential of her noir form to become a template for the production of an affective imagination premised on the ethics of empathy, as suggested in the statement that is used as a motto to this study: “You try to transmute the emotion into a story that will make other people *care*.”²⁴

In light of Beukes’s claim that her story may become the site for the “transmutation” of ethically inflected emotion,²⁵ it is useful to consider Christopher Breu and Elizabeth A. Hatmaker’s recent rethinking of *noir affect* as a descriptor of contemporary thriller narratives.²⁶ Exploring how the “fractiousness, divisiveness, conflict, and dissension” deemed to saturate such texts binds to the prospect

of resurgent empathy for the other, Breu and Hatmaker speak about the resurgence of noir in terms of a volley of resolutely negative affects “centred on rage (including murderous rage), loss, sadness, shame, guilt, regret, anxiety, humiliation, resentment, resistance and refusal.”²⁷ What is especially relevant to Beukes’s own version of *muti noir*, is what Breu and Hatmaker call a conversion of negative into positive affect, since “noir works in an inverse way to both model empathy with the down-trodden, excluded, and abandoned, and demand that we engage and value the negativity of their affects.”²⁸ This resonates with Beukes’s insistence, in an interview with Caitlin E. Stobie, that “empathy is central to my work, and compassion, and kindness.”²⁹ By catalysing and restructuring the patterns of affective response that the thriller – as a genre inherently predisposed to solicit “intense emotional fusion” from “authorial audiences” and to effectively catalyse emotional connections with the imperilled protagonist³⁰ – has elicited in readers since its inception, Beukes resorts to what Keen describes as “strategic empathising” with the protagonist of her narrative.³¹

Stressing the resurgence of segregation practices likely to widen South Africa’s socio-economic gap, the spread of cybercrime networks that eschew the policing forces, as well as the victimisation of labourers, refugees and immigrants from different continental regions, *Zoo City* subtends the conventions of the detective mode to explore how, in becoming saturated with ordinarily distributed negative affects, the history-imbued present risks remaining trapped in what Berlant labels as cruel optimism’s “affectively stunning double bind: a binding to fantasies that block

the satisfactions they offer, and a binding to the promise of optimism as such that the fantasies have come to represent."³² For individuals caught up in the protracted present of capitalist desire, a present that flattens the multi-layered memorial past and collapses the teleological arc of the future, affect, Berlant shows, traverses subjectivity without becoming definitively stuck in other subjects or objects, and ultimately shapes an impermanent horizon of attachments that are never direct, reciprocal, and enduring, but always convoluted, intransitive, and provisional.³³ Zinzi December herself is tethered to the present in ways that suggest that neither her past, condensing a story of affluence, hipster extravagance, transcontinental travel, consumerist excess, and reckless collusion with the drug underworld, nor her future, as an ex-convict leaving the country without permission "in the wake of a multiple homicide/serial killer investigation,"³⁴ are likely to bolster the fantasy of a self-shaping liberal subjectivity, capable of managing its own destiny in pursuit of either redemption or fulfillment.

While genuine episodes of interhuman empathy punctuate Zinzi's drift into a spiral of waning affect, anomie, and emotional abandon, if one thinks of Thando's sacrificial gesture to protect her from the druglords or her lover Benoît Bocanga's attempts to save her from the crime networks at the cost of his near death, she appears to be settling in the attritional numbness of the everyday, as she engages in transacting hope – of enrichment, charitable compassion, and humanitarian altruism – to countless victims across the world whom she contacts under different aliases via the internet. Zinzi's involvement in the

so-known 419 Nigerian scam – whose depiction is carefully documented, as Beukes acknowledges, based on confessions from both scammers and victims she interviewed as a journalist³⁵ – brings the story close to the real crime genre, considering that this deception tactic, prohibited under section 419 of the Nigerian legal code, is also listed alongside other types of commercial crime, such as money laundering, banking-related fraud, and intellectual property infringement, on the website of the South African Police Service.³⁶

Hope, Adam Potkay reminds us in his cultural history of this future-oriented passion/emotion, is a "double-edged concept": as an Abrahamic theological virtue, it may be valued for its potential to counteract its contrary emotions of sinful fear and despair, while as a political motive, it tends to be the preserve of liberal progressive faith in a "fuzzy" conglomerate of secularised ideals, such as social justice and equality.³⁷ At the same time, Potkay states, despite its overall "positive connotations," there is a parallel strand of thought that sees hope as a passion that is as "at best problematic, something in need of regulation and restraint if not extirpation."³⁸ Through this alternative lens, honed from classical antiquity through the Enlightenment, hope appears suspect because its presumed link to an ethos of betterment and selfless benefaction is diluted by its intransitiveness, since hope belongs to the one who nourishes it, rather than to its referential others,³⁹ by its deceptiveness, since it is capable of "blurring our perception of situations and likely outcomes" and of "compromis[ing] our rational agency," and by its inherent tardiness, since it "blinds us to the enjoyment of the present."⁴⁰

Concluding this “case against hope,” Potkay stresses that its horizon is receding in the contemporary, post-atrocity imagination, so much so that it is consistently attenuated by what it was imagined to serve as an antidote for, fear: thus, “the hope for more life, a better or perfected condition of the individual, the nation, or of the species, in time or eternity” enhances, in effect, our susceptibility “to the negative future-oriented emotion of fear, as well as the negative present-oriented emotion of sorrow or disappointment.”⁴¹

Impersonating a multifaceted dispenser of hope to the gullible customers she lures via email, Zinzi – who takes some pride in reaching the level of “a master builder in the current affairs sympathy scam”⁴² – commodifies an anaesthetic emotion that, on the one hand, saturates the sensorium with antidotes to the disquieting anxieties of the everyday, and, on the other hand, monetises empathy in a transnational economy of simulated affect that many people all too willingly pursue:

There are 2,581 replies waiting. Not a bad hit rate out of the 49,812 that I sent out on Monday, not including the tens of thousands that bounced off spam filters. There are 1,906 “out of office” replies, which at least marks the email addresses as active, 14 irritated missives that range from “fuck you, scamfucks” to “pull the other one”. Add 292 kanji variations, 137 in French, 102 in German, 64 in Arabic, 48 in Spanish and 12 in Urdu, all of which I’ll plug into my translation software later. This leaves six potentials, two responding with cautious interest and the rest with abject

confusion. I forward them all on to Vuyo, who is my catcherman. If people would just read the damn email properly, they would have responded to him directly.⁴³

Posing as an endless series of vulnerable, yet lucrative targets of compassion – from well-off Chechnyan refugees escaping Russian ethnic cleansing to contrite Somali pirates eager to donate their ransom fortunes in exchange for absolution – Zinzi becomes a nodal point in a rhizomatic redistribution of affect that annoys, vexes, confuses, lures, tricks or simply bounces off her addressees, yet fails to trigger either a tidal wave of retributive vengeance or the eradication of the email missive fraud even when she eventually exposes the “ugly little fiction” of the hustling syndicate.⁴⁴ Partly to counter the affective impasse she experiences because of her parents’ disavowal of her manipulative emotional schemes,⁴⁵ partly to numb uncomfortably “bad feelings” like shame or melancholic guilt, and partly to stay alive by paying off her debts to the drug dealing bands, Zinzi agrees to work for the “Company” that sells simulacra of hope. In a world of growing social, political, and economic precarity, she for a while remains instrumental to enforcing cruel optimism’s twofold predicament, which leashes her victims to defeatist fantasies of quick enrichment and charitable service to fellow distressed humans, while also hindering their access to the objects of those illusory aspirations. As Vuyo, her dealer, reminds her in a Skype conversation, Zinzi can spin myriad yarns to embolden the flat affects of her correspondents into simulated life: “UR practically a pro. Ur dealer told us about

all the stories u came with, crying about ur mama with cancer + ur dead granny + being mugged just when u were coming to pay for ur coke.”⁴⁶ However, while enabling hope-oriented affect to arise between subjects, not only do her con narratives amass into a landfill of sedimental resentment, disappointment, and estrangement: they also prime their readers for a breakdown of empathy, care and compassion, distancing even further the prospect of “ethical sociality.”⁴⁷ Selling hope, with its profoundly unsettling effect on the very constitution of empathetically entangled communities, is, in effect, related to the craft of storytelling. In a self-reflexive aside to the implied reader, the narrator confidently assumes that “people want to believe: you just have to feed them plausible constructs.”⁴⁸

Even if Zinzi’s highly elaborate tales could be seen to draw transcontinental awareness to issues that may still be endemic to postcolonial areas, such as child labour, internecine conflict, or the refugee crisis, they also do epistemic violence to the real victims of necropolitical control. Such is the case of Eloria Bangana, a persona Zinzi adopts in one of her email scams. Entitled “A message in a bottle,” the email is presumably sent by a female Congolese teenager whose survival in an orphanage besieged by rebel factions rests on swerving prostitution and “choos[ing] the mines, because I can crawl into tight spaces with my little bucket for sifting and my spade, although mostly I use my fingers. Sometimes my fingers get cracked and bleed from scratching in the dirt.”⁴⁹ Potentially garnering emotional shock, shame, guilt and dismay from Western audiences, the image of the bleeding fingers digging in the mud for the coltan that will then

become an integral component of their cell phone, computer and video technologies, invites assessment – as Sara Ahmed shows in her work on the sociality of emotion – of empathy as an orientational stance towards an object; in other words, emotion may engender cognition, becoming “a way of apprehending the world.”⁵⁰

Despite the *stuplime* irritation⁵¹ some readers who are aware of the cultural references peppering Zinzi’s email may experience,⁵² the topography of mines – the dumping wastelands in the desolate landscape, and even the open shafts of the dilapidated apartment blocks forming Zoo City’s urbanscape – is important because it innervates the spatial imaginary of the novel, creating an atmospheric sensorium that perturbs the senses and steers transversal movements of affect. The opening scene of the novel in which “morning light the sulphur colour of the mine dumps seeps across Johannesburg’s skyline”⁵³ and signals Zinzi’s blurred affectual compass is reiterated with different inflections on two occasions. In the first scene, there is a certain sense of landfill sublimity hovering across the skyline, as she wrests a moment of intimacy with Benoit and orients her pleasurable disposition towards “the dust in the air that makes the Highveld sunsets so spectacular,” with “the fine yellow mineral deposits kicked up from the mine dumps” and “the carbon-dioxide choke of the traffic.”⁵⁴ In the second episode, following Benoit’s discovery of the email fraud scheme, the circulation of affect follows a reverse line, from the dumping ground not just to the discarded body of a scorched unidentified victim she detects nearby, but also to Zinzi herself. This time, “the mine dumps are sulphur-coloured artificial hills,

laid waste by the ravages of weather and reprocessing, shored up with scrubby grass and eucalyptus trees. Ugly valleys have been gouged out and trucked away by the ton to sift out the last scraps of gold the mining companies missed the first time round. Maybe it's appropriate that eGoli, place of gold, should be self-cannibalising.⁵⁵ The mine dump, relic of a carelessly exploitative colonial project, is a fit trope for the remainder of Johannesburg's compressed history as a city founded on the excitement generated by the late Victorian goldrush, as well as on the dull cycles of affectual attrition and environmental exhaustion set into motion by the "slow death" drive of capitalism.⁵⁶

Even the grand narrative of hope entrenched in the philosophy of *ubuntu*, which was projected by the late-twentieth century builders of the South African nation as inextricably tied to the "experience of empathy for the other,"⁵⁷ is here corroded into an affectual correlative of the "attrition of life" in the ground mill of globalisation processes.⁵⁸ It is significant that the scene of such an empathy-pandering transaction, starring Zinzi *qua* Frances, "demure African princess" allegedly abducted by rebels, then placed in a Cote d'Ivoire refugee camp, but now "humble and desperate to reclaim her throne,"⁵⁹ Vuyo, acting the part of the financial director of the Bank of Accra, and the Barbers, their naïve American interlocutors, occurs in the Rand Club, which is

a relic of Johannesburg's Wild West days, when it was frequented by Cecil John Rhodes and other colonial slumlords who would sit around divvying up diamond fields and deciding on

the fate of empires. [...] The patrons pushing the boundaries of their liquid lunch-hour have the same aura of clingy colonial nostalgia as the venue, with its chandeliers and gilded railings, caricatures of famous members, mounted buck-heads and faded oil paintings of fox hunts.⁶⁰

Compacting the violent history of the colony, the scene captures Zinzi's postmemorial investment in the social, economic, and political contingencies of a present that risks pushing into oblivion and nostalgic numbness the atrociousness of the imperial and apartheid regimes. However, it is only when her own collusion in the perpetuation of this legacy of epistemic violence is unmasked by Benoît that her empathet(h)ic emotion is unleashed: "In my chest, the poison flower bursts open, an explosion of burning seeds. I imagine Mr and Mrs Barber experienced something similar whenever they finally realised that the bearer bonds were forged. It is the *death of hope*."⁶¹ Marking the structural divide of the narrative into its two Parts, this eruption of emotional intensity as a mode of bonding with the other also balances the contrast between cybercriminal and murder-investigating sleuth, the two roles Zinzi performs in Beukes's crime story, which stages affective relays between the protagonist as dis-affected detective and the affect-laden objectual world that bears witness to manifold crimes, as well as between the protagonist as apathetic, traumatised culprit and the empathetic animal, locked as they are in a symbiotic relation.

As stated in her 2011 interview, Beukes draws the setting of her *muti noir* – the loop of "right now" in which Johannesburg

seems to be stuck – as an accrual of technological futurity and spiritual ancestrality.⁶² In the purlieu of *Zoo City*, the affective precarity of the present is evidenced by the jarring juxtaposition of the virtual and the material: to give just one example, despite Jo'burg's citizens having access to the latest cybertechnologies, there is still widespread belief in *muti*, the miraculous powers of indigenous medicine. As Zinzi observes, traditional healers like “nyangas and sangomas and faith healers” advertise “their services on posters stuck up on telephone poles and walls”⁶³ and use their cell phones to contact the spirits.

Navigating a diegetic near future whose proximity to the novel's year of publication reinforces the author's contention that the plot could well be staged in the present-day derelict areas of South Africa's capital city,⁶⁴ Beukes's speculative plot, featuring an incrementally activated intuitionist detective, endorses Berlant's view of the present as a time of stagnant crisis, which forecloses the prospect of its fluid inscription in the temporal continuum connecting the sedimented past to a future pregnant with possibility. Zinzi, the Former-Life journalist who is now endowed with a paranormal skill of her own, namely a talent for finding lost things, undergoes a situational shift when she starts conducting her private investigation into a sequence of *muti* murders that place her own survival under threat. These murders – orchestrated by a music magnate, Odysseus Huron, who wishes to escape indictment for another crime he committed in his earlier life – target innocents such as vagrants, transgender dancers, and even his teenage proteges, pop prodigies onto whom he would like to transfer his *shavi*,

as the crocodile's very existence threatens to being him disrepute and to disrupt his enmeshment in his capitalocentric world.

Sensitised to the vulnerability of Huron's victims, Zinzi commits to performing the labour of justice. However, to accomplish that task and to survive Huron's deceit, she would have to sidestep her complacent immersion in ordinary affectual attrition and assume her agential role in setting things aright in a damaged world of human relations. What poses a problem for Zinzi is how to unlock her responsiveness to the suffering of other humans, considering that her *mashavi*, or special power, fosters the circulation of affect between things but bars it from materialising into emotion for other living beings:

The problem with my particular gift, curse, call it what you like, is that everybody's lost something. Stepping out in public is like walking into a tangle of cat's cradles, like someone dished out balls of string at the lunatic asylum and instructed the inmates to tie everything to everything else. On some people, the lost strings are cobwebs, inconsequential wisps that might blow away at any moment. On others, it's like they're dragging steel cables.⁶⁵

For Zinzi, affect is mediated by the networked intensities of the affectual traces of other humans' tangle with the objectual world. From such a tangential position, it becomes difficult to take on a stance of agential centrality and operate as the determining force that turns evil into good and finds order in the chaotic, disruptive scenarios concocted by Huron to deflect

guilt, while the police forces, represented by the ineffectual Inspector Tshabalala, insistently project culpability onto Zinzi, as an improperly disciplined – because she is animalled – repeat offender. In her own words, “the problem with being *mashavi* is that it’s not so much a job as a vocation. You don’t get to choose the ghosts that attach themselves to you. Or the things they bring with them.”⁶⁶ As Berlant explains, in contemporaneity one can no longer envisage “the subject as sovereign agent of history,” mounting heroic defences against the biopolitical forces stacked against the fulfilment of its “fantasies of good life.”⁶⁷ Instead, in the contemporary “affectsphere,” the post-Enlightenment model of sovereign subjectivity, exercising agential and epistemological control, gives way to a model of “lateral agency,” or “agency without intention,” “a mode of coasting consciousness within the ordinary that helps people survive the stress on their sensorium.”⁶⁸ Interventions, insurrections, or any deliberate endeavours to rebut the paralytic logic of capitalist normativity implode in “affective adjustment to material that mediates the ongoing present across the recent, the now, and the next.”⁶⁹ In other words, instead of a temporality of *events*, whose impact is marked by full-blown emotions that can activate “ethical sociality,” the precarious present enfolds serially distributed *situations*, generating minimal emotional perturbation and calibrating toned-down reactions, which pertain to the register of the “ordinary, forgettable, charming, boring, inconsequential, or subtle.”⁷⁰

The novel’s heterochronic slant, which forefronts the onset of the global animaling phenomenon as a paradigmatic

shift overshadowing the epochal end of apartheid in South Africa in the early 1990s, is, as Munro shows, a sign of Beukes’s concern with the present as a time of overlapping crises, some triggered by “moments of epochal change,” others, like environmental degradation or enforced migrancy, unfolding their own slow temporalities.⁷¹ It also points to the imploding confines of public and private time, which renders individuals and communities trapped in a paralytic matrix of irresolvable trauma, whose magnitude is dispersed into ordinary disaffection and for which new modes of affectional resolution need to be detected.

If, as argued by Berlant, “all genres are distinguished by the affective contract they promise,”⁷² Beukes’s *muti* noir is predicated on “transacting affective exchanges” that may not have the potential to perturb the larger order of things, but can foreshadow a horizon of sociality in which “one lives singularly but in a shared way too.”⁷³ To escape the drawn-out duration of the present-as-situation immersed in the “steady hum of livable crisis ordinariness,”⁷⁴ Zinzi needs to articulate a different sense of selfhood, one that is not immune, but open to vulnerability. Vulnerability – along with uncertainty, indeterminacy, and insecurity – becomes the pivot around which the sleuth can build up her steadfast commitment to carrying through her unconventional investigation despite her cynical dismissal by the official investigators’ rigid code of ethics and to risk her life in the scene of carnage where Huron is devoured by his alienated crocodile. It is what enables her deft eschewal of the surveillance apparatus *and* her capacity to envision the victims’ backstories, her intimate

knowledge of the material traces of crime *and* her resurgent openness to interhuman emotion, her contrition for past and present wrongdoings *and* her emergent sense of responsibility and accountability.

As an animalled Apo, Zinzi carries the stigma of visible otherness, in a world in which deviations from normativity are still subjected to the regulatory biopolitical apparatus. Her hyphenated subjectivity is distributed between herself, as the bearer of an intuitionist's intelligence, and Sloth, who is at one point spotted "curl[ing] up in my lap like my own personal scarlet letter,"⁷⁵ yet whose gestural reactions in different situational predicaments add to her emotionally depleted reactivity. Practised on Sloth, the creature whose emotions she cannot sense, but whose facial expressions and bodily gestures and she can intuitively discern, empathy as the effect of shared vulnerability with other people becomes the focus of a seminal episode in the story involving the lost family of Benoît, who photographed every step of his passage from Kinshasa to Joburg, recording the sites of suffering that outline the framework of unbearable ordinariness for hoards of pan-African or global refugees, undocumented travellers whose ordeals remain unacknowledged in the files of official archives.

In this episode, Benoît's own private archive of what Susan Sontag calls the "photography of atrocity"⁷⁶ is disclosed to reveal also "a mix of photos and computer print-outs of photographs, already faded, the paper worn soft with handling and the rigours of cross-continental travel. Benoît, a woman and three children aged two to seven at a guess, posing formally, unsmiling in front of a low wall. Their features are

indistinct. Washed out. They already look like ghosts."⁷⁷ Mustering a reaction that "that yanks my heart into my stomach,"⁷⁸ the images of Celvie, Armand, Ginelle, and Celestin do not convey a sensationalist depiction of suffering and, therefore, are not susceptible "to arouse facile compassion and identification."⁷⁹ While their spectrality alludes not to the familiarity of self-sameness, but to the necessary recognition of their difference, Zinzi's intuitive radar detects an altogether different kind of relationality that she has an ethical duty to safeguard. This is explained in one of the numerous paratexts that are interspersed in Zinzi's account, *Bibliozoologica: An Etymology of Animalled Terms*, as follows:

The *mashave* are spirits of foreigners, or of wanderers who died far away from their families and clans and did not receive a proper burial. Owing to this, they were never "called home", but continued to roam restlessly through the bush. Homeless spirits like these are feared because they are always on the watch for a living host in whom to reside; as the spirit of a wanderer cannot go back to the land of his ancestors, it seeks the body of one who is willing to harbour him.⁸⁰

What unites the lost members of Benoît's family – for whose rescue Zinzi marshals a sense of intentional agential sovereignty⁸¹ on the trans-African journey she undertakes at the end of the narrative – is the condition of vulnerability to which she also willingly concedes as a stateless runaway, for, as she anticipates her encounter of "Celvie. Armand. Ginelle. Celestin," it is becoming clearer that this is "going to

be the best thing I've done with my miserable life. And after that? Maybe I'll get lost for a while."⁸²

In *Zoo City* the investigative clues left for the readers to pick up, match, distinguish, and comprehend exceed the framework of "curiosity, suspense, and surprise," defined by Suzanne Keen as the "core affects of narrativity" keeping readers immersed in the transactional plots of detective fiction,⁸³ and inviting different degrees of empathetic identification with characters that share "our common human experiences, feelings, hopes, and vulnerabilities."⁸⁴ As Nancy Armstrong contends in

her survey of the contemporary novel's extension of "the readership's sensorium beyond the limits of sympathetic identification,"⁸⁵ the promissory empathetic impact of *Zoo City's* noir affect rests not so much, or not only, on detecting "human commonalities,"⁸⁶ as on modulating affectual orientations towards alterity's singularities.

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NOTES

1. See Nancy Armstrong, "The Affective Turn in Contemporary Fiction," in *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 55, no. 3, 2014, pp. 441-465.
2. Jesper Gulddal, Stewart King, and Alistair Rolls (eds.), "Preface," in *The Cambridge Companion to World Crime Fiction*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022, p. xiv.
3. According to Todorov's description of the subgenres of detective fiction, crime thrillers dissolve the "purely geometric architecture" of whodunits, in the sense that the accounts of the murder and the investigation are condensed into a single story and the retrospective timeframe of detection is altered into a prospective one of suspenseful anticipation. See Tzvetan Todorov, "The Typology of Detective Fiction (1966)," in Chris Greer (ed.), *Crime and Media. A Reader*, London and New York, Routledge, 2010, p. 297. In picturing Zinzi December as a journalist-turned-sleuth whose inquiries into a series of ongoing *muti* murders reveal that she is not immune to injury and life-threatening imbroglios, and in sifting through the memory of her own culpability for the murder of her sibling, the novel blends the limits between these inner genre divisions. In Beukes's text, the crumpled

temporalities of the investigations – one conducted by Zinzi in the outside world, the other a process of sieving through the memory of her liability for Thando's death – are largely the effect of the protagonist's inertial re-discovery of compassion for the other.

4. See Richard Bradford's challenging arguments why crime fiction can no longer be disregarded as a "sub-species of mainstream literature," in *Crime Fiction. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 115.
5. See Brenna M. Munro, "Crime Fiction in a Time of AIDS: South African Muti Noir," in Rita Barnard and Andrew van der Vlies (eds.), *South African Writing in Transition*, London and New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, p. 169. The concomitant recourse to and reshaping of the crime fiction form is visible, as Beukesian scholars have noted, in the way the distinctive traits of *muti* noir are knotted into an experimental mesh that accommodates elements of science, dystopian and speculative fiction, of urban fantasy, Gothic or romance. For examples of studies highlighting *Zoo City's* propensity for genre mixing, see, among others: Munro, *op. cit.*, p. 186; Schmidt, Jennifer M., "The Girls Who Don't Die: Subversions of Gender and Genre in Recent Fiction by Lauren Beukes," pp. 31-49, in Jessie Forsyth, Sarah Olutola, and Helen Strauss (eds.), *Contemporary African Mediations of Affect and Access*, London and New York, 2017; and Suzanne Ericson, "Thinking with Crocodiles, Thinking through Humans: Vulnerable, Entangled Selves in Lauren Beukes's *Zoo City*," in *Scrutiny*2, vol. 23, no. 1, 2018, pp. 22-34.
6. In Andrew Pepper's view, capitalist noir is more than a genre performing the conventional labour of crime fiction's conventional critique of the state's crisis of authority in managing its crime control mechanisms. It is "a violent, sometimes gratuitously so, blood-soaked social vision where there is no alternative to capitalism, where no one can articulate or organise effective opposition, and where reader and character are left with little or indeed no hope that the situation will ever be any different," in *Unwilling Executioner Crime Fiction and the State*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 229.
7. In the sense proposed by Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 132), of a nascent affective-experiential social consciousness of the present, qtd. in Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 233-234.
8. Rita Barnard, "Introduction," in Rita Barnard and Andrew van der Vlies (eds.), *South African Writing in Transition*, London and New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, pp. 1-32.
9. Lars Schmeink, "Lauren Beukes, in Anna McFarlane, Graham J. Murphy, and Lars Schmeink (eds.), *Fifty Key Figures in Cyberbunk Culture*, New York and London, Routledge, 2022, p. 24.
10. Jeremy L. C. Jones, "Interview. The Spaces between the Words: A Conversation with Lauren Beukes," in *Clarkesworld. Science Fiction & Fantasy Magazine*, issue 56, May 2011, https://clarkesworldmagazine.com/beukes_interview/, accessed 12 August 2022.
11. *Ibidem*.
12. The enhanced mobility of crime fiction, a genre not long ago considered formulaic and prescriptive, is, as Gulddal, King and Rolls show, visible in the difficulty of taxonomic attempts to keep up with the "fluid, hybrid and mutative" proliferation of granular versions, cf. "Introduction. Criminal Moves: Towards a Theory of Crime Fiction Mobility," in Jesper Gulddal, Stewart King, and Alistair Rolls (eds.), *Criminal Moves. Modes of Mobility in Crime Fiction*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2019, p. 10. This simultaneously entropic and negentropic trajectory of the crime fiction genre, with new forms continuing to branch off an endlessly reassembled rhizome, plies itself to the conceptual framework of the anarchetype, which, in Corin Braga's definition, traces the centrifugal spin of generic experimentation outside the corral of disintegrating "inherited forms and genres," in "Anarchetype: Reading Aesthetic Form after 'Structure'," in Alexandru Matei, Christian Moraru, and Andrei Terian (eds.). *Theory in the "Post" Era: A Vocabulary for the 21st-Century Conceptual Commons*, New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2022, p. 131.

13. See the series of anaphoric statements, in the same interview, emphasising “anger” as the unmitigated emotion she has experienced in relation to “devastating realities and social injustices,” in Jones, *op. cit.*
14. See Mark Libin, *Reading Affect in Post-Apartheid Literature. South Africa's Wounded Feelings*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, p. 2.
15. I rely on Marianne Hirsch's understanding of postmemory as a “delayed” and “indirect” memory of past collective trauma that is culturally transferred to the survivors' descendants, in *Family Frames. Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 13.
16. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2011 p. 9.
17. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2004, p. 12.
18. Beukes, *Zoo City*, p. 191.
19. *Ibidem*, p. 193.
20. See Sam Naidu, “Crime Fiction, South Africa: A Critical Introduction,” *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2013, p. 124.
21. Jones, *op. cit.*
22. Berlant, *op. cit.*, p. 192.
23. See Borges's thoughts on “The Detective Story” as a “fantastic genre of the intellect and not only of the imagination,” in Jorge Louis Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, Eliot Weinberger (ed.), Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine and Eliot Weinberger (trans.), New York, Viking, 1999, p. 495. Beukes's reliance on readers to work through the clues threaded into her text as part of a process she calls “telepathic remix” (Jones, *op. cit.*), the inconclusive ending that privileges heightened affect over cold ratiocination and her side-lining of a realistic aesthetic in favour of what some critics describe as magical realism (Munro, *op. cit.*, p. 185) may well place her crime story in the lineage of metaphysical detective fiction.
24. Jones, *op. cit.*
25. *Ibidem*.
26. Christopher Breu and Elizabeth A. Hatmaker, “Introduction: Dark Passages,” in Breu, Christopher, and Elizabeth A. Hatmaker (eds.), *Noir Affect*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2020. Kindle.
27. *Ibidem*.
28. *Ibidem*.
29. Stobie, Caitlin E., “There are no monsters, it's just us: An interview with Lauren Beukes,” in *Scrutiny2*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2016, p. 49.
30. Suzanne Keen, “Strategic Empathizing: Techniques of Bounded, Ambassadorial, and Broadcast Narrative Empathy,” in *Deutsche Vierteljahrs Schrift*, vol. 82, no. 3. September 2008, p. 488.
31. *Ibidem*, p. 478.
32. Berlant, *op. cit.*, p. 51.
33. *Ibidem*, p. 2.
34. Lauren Beukes, *Zoo City*, Nottingham, Angry Robot, 2010, p. 366.
35. Beukes, *Zoo City*, p. 372.
36. “South African Police Service on Commercial Branch success,” Newsroom, South African Police Service, 8 January 2007, <https://www.gov.za/south-african-police-service-commercial-branch-success#:~:text=Dollars%20scam%29%2C%20the%20Statutes%20and%20Fraud%20Group%20%28419,Service%20is%20committed%20to%20ensuring%20that%20all%20crimes>, accessed 10 August 2022.
37. Adam Potkay, *Hope. A Literary History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022, pp. 4-5.
38. Potkay, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
39. “The hopes we have for others can be the opposite of disinterested or beneficial. They are, emphatically, *our* hopes,” Potkay, *Hope*, p. 3.
40. Potkay, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

41. *Ibidem*, pp. 6, 11.
42. Beukes, *Zoo City*, p. 40.
43. *Ibidem*, p. 41.
44. *Ibidem*, p. 291.
45. "The whole thing is grotesque, yet some perverse part of me is getting off on it. The same way I ticked off points on a scoreboard when my parents actually believed the bullshit I spun them about my car breaking down, about needing help paying the fees for a master's degree in Journalism that I never even registered for," *Ibidem*, p. 49.
46. *Ibidem*, p. 44.
47. *Ibidem*, p. 5.
48. *Ibidem*, p. 40.
49. *Ibidem*, p. 26.
50. Ahmed, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-8.
51. Sianne Ngai defines *stuplimity* as a sort of bathetic counterpart of "the transcendent feeling of the sublime," toned down by the attendant emotions of tedium and ennui, in *Ugly Feelings*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, 2005, p. 11.
52. The would-be dupes are expected to trust their fortunes into the hands of Father Quixote and Sister Mercia, who ostensibly administer the orphanage from which the message is sent, in Beukes, *Zoo City* p. 29.
53. *Ibidem*, p. 7.
54. *Ibidem*, p. 146.
55. *Ibidem*, p. 303.
56. See Berlant's use of Baudrillard's concept of "slow death," *op. cit.*, p. 285.
57. Libin, *Reading Affect*, p. 6.
58. Berlant, *op. cit.*, p. 119.
59. Beukes, *Zoo City*, p. 47.
60. *Ibidem*, p. 45.
61. Emphasis mine, *Ibidem*, p. 274.
62. "*Zoo City* is a muti noir that ties together technology and ideas of traditional African magic. It's about the burden of the past, guilt and redemption, magical spirit animals inspired by myth that may be the devil on your back or the guardian angel on your shoulder or the spirits of your ancestors manifested in furry form, about inner city slums and refugees and what society does with – and to – our outcasts," Jones, *op. cit.*
63. Beukes, *Zoo City*, p. 142.
64. Jones, *op. cit.*
65. Beukes, *Zoo City*, p. 14.
66. *Ibidem*, p. 18.
67. Berlant, *op. cit.*, p. 15.
68. *Ibidem*, p. 18.
69. *Ibidem*, p. 15.
70. *Ibidem*, pp. 5, 278.
71. Munro, *op. cit.*, p. 189.
72. Berlant, *op. cit.*, p. 66.
73. *Ibidem*, pp. 72, 75, 79.
74. *Ibidem*, p. 196.
75. Beukes, *Zoo City*, p. 65.
76. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York, Picador, 2003, p. 84.
77. Beukes, *Zoo City*, p. 244.
78. *Ibidem*, p. 244.
79. Sontag, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-27.

80. Beukes, *Zoo City*, pp. 213-214.

81. See Berlant, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

82. Beukes, *Zoo City*, p. 366.

83. Suzanne Keen, *Narrative Form*, revised and expanded second edition, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 77.

84. Keen, *Narrative Form*, p. 157.

85. Armstrong, *op. cit.*, pp. 491-493.

86. *Ibidem*, p. 464.