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Hydrocolonial Johannesburg

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Johannesburg is a landlocked city, famously the largest human concentration in the southern hemisphere not located on a river. What opportunities does it afford for hydrocolonial analysis, given Isabel Hofmeyr’s anchoring of that term in oceanic studies? How might a hydrocolonial orientation defamiliarize the relations between surface and depths that have shaped influential recent accounts of the city? This article outlines the contours of a “hydrocolonial Johannesburg” through combining Isabel Hofmeyr, Charne Lavery and Sarah Nuttall’s invitation to “read for water” with existing methodologies that read for infrastructure. It sets these strategies to work in the context of Lauren Beukes’ second work of speculative fiction, Zoo City (Beukes, Lauren. 2010. Zoo City. Johannesburg: Jacana Media). The novel propels its readers into a noiresque fantasy world whose spatial coordinates closely reflect the extra-textual city of Johannesburg. Taking my cue from Beukes’ infrastructural allusions, I mobilize her text to provide the struts for my own as I explore the intertextuality of Zoo City with works by William Kentridge and Sarah Gertrude Millin. Alternately foregrounded or barely perceptible until deliberately sought out, water helps to distinguish the various locales of the novel from one another. My essay
Zoo City, Lauren Beukes’ second work of speculative fiction (2010), propels its readers into a zone estranged by ontological fracture, yet one whose spatial coordinates mimic those of its extratextual referent – the city of Johannesburg. Its protagonist, formerly middle-class and former addict Zinzi December, has served time in prison for her complicity in the drug-related murder of her brother. Like other offenders in this fictional world, designated “aposymbiots” or “zoos,” she literally carries the stigma of her guilt with her in the form of an animal familiar, a sloth, to which she is inextricably bound (Beukes 2010, 9, 157). The relentlessly mobile plot of this noiresque text is driven by Zinzi’s quest to find a missing teenage singer. The protagonist’s movement through incommensurate city spaces repeatedly allows her to examine the affordances and exclusions that they generate. Early in the novel, we find her “shin-deep in the shit in the stormwater drains beneath [Johannesburg’s] Killarney Mall” as she wryly catalogues the detritus that has accumulated there: “years of musty rainwater and trash and rot and dead rats and used condoms” (110). Framed in relation to Isabel Hofmeyr, Charne Lavery and Sarah Nuttall’s invitation to “read for water” (this volume), the character’s casual reflections on hydraulic infrastructure and on the subterranean passage of water through it offer an occasion to bring hydropoetics into conversation with methodologies that investigate how postcolonial literary texts and other works of expressive culture “navigate, decode and in some cases re-imagine the infrastructures that organize urban life” (Boehmer and Davies 2015, 395). Such inscriptions, Elleke Boehmer and Dominic Davies contend, “offer a critical purchase on [these] infrastructures and the planned violence that they initiate and facilitate” while foregrounding the power hierarchies and enduring economic inequalities of “cities with strong colonial pasts and postcolonial presents” (397). 1

1 The emphasis on planned violence distinguishes this approach from Nuttall’s (2008) mapping of Johannesburg as a “literary city” with reference to the infrastructures of the

That Zoo City should train its protagonist’s gaze on subterranean urban infrastructure is not surprising. Like Beukes’ debut novel Moxyland (2008), the text welds speculative fiction to the topography of the South African city (Bethlehem 2014, 522). 2 Where Moxyland pivots on the relation between the urban infrastructure sustaining the information economy of a futuristic Cape Town and the necropolitical legacies of
apartheid (Bethlehem 2014; see Mbembe 2003), Zoo City makes salient the visible and invisible scaffolding of quotidian life in postapartheid Johannesburg (Bethlehem 2015, 13–14; Dickson 2014; Graham 2015, 71–75; Hoad 2016; Propst 2017; Sofianos 2013). If the novel approaches the status of “civic allegory” as Neville Hoad suggests (2016, 301), it is also shot through with references to local intertexts. Taking my cue from Beukes’ infrastructural allusions, I mobilize her Johannesburg text to provide the struts for my own as I pursue the novel’s intersections with William Kentridge’s Mine (1991) and with Sarah Gertrude Millin’s much earlier non-fictional accounts of Johannesburg (1927, 1951). A stronger claim also informs my discussion. This intervention wagers that reading for water and for infrastructure simultaneously will reveal Johannesburg to be the arena of properly “hydrocolonial” processes of extraction whose characteristics I proceed to examine below (Bystrom and Hofmeyr 2017; Hofmeyr 2019a, 2019b).

Surface and depth

Much has been written about Johannesburg over the course of the last two decades, with interventions spanning critical geography and urban studies (Beavon 2004; Bremner 2010; Harrison et al. 2010; Murray 2008, 2011), literary and cultural theory (Kruger 2013; Nuttall and Mbembe 2007, 2008), and creative nonfiction and autoethnography (Gevisser 2014; Vladislavić 2006). Johannesburg is the product of contingencies that are geological rather than geographical, as William Kentridge observes (2014, 73). The origins of the city lie in the mining camp established in 1886 following the discovery of gold on the farm, Langlaagte. The Witwatersrand gold reef does not, for the most part, lie close to the surface but is notoriously deep and slanting (Beavon 2004, 4–6). This feature had far-reaching consequences for the mines and for the political economy of the city they engendered (Beavon 2004, 28–30; Harrison and Zack 2012; Van Onselen 1982). The profitability of the mines depended on capital-intensive mechanization and technological advances, including the refinement of explosives, the use of the cyanide-based MacArthur-Forrest process to separate gold from pyritic ore, and the centralized supply of electricity (Beavon 2004, 29–30; Allen 1992, 132–37). “It is at these deeper levels and in the way the world below interacted with the surface and the edges,” Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall argue, “that the origins of the city are to be located” (2008, 16). Mbembe and Nuttall underscore the extent to which “race and human
degradation” were fundamental to “the calculus of capital and dispossession, technology, labour, and the unequal distribution of wealth” that is emblematic of the city (17–18). The emergence of Johannesburg as a “distinctive commercial civilization” was sustained, Mbembe argues, through the indispensability and expendability of black lives, that is to say, their “superfluity” (2008, 39, 38, see also 42–43).

Johannesburg is an inland city that sustains the largest human concentration in the southern hemisphere not located on a river (Turton et al. 2006). What then can be said of hydrocolonialism in the context of what one scholar calls “this dry city” (Manià 2017, 70)? In Isabel Hofmeyr’s recent work, hydrocolonialism references colonization of, on, or by means of water (Bystrom and Hofmeyr 2017; Hofmeyr 2019a, 2019b). The neologism moves fluidly through applications that reveal its provenance in oceanic studies. While the prefix “hydro” is indebted to a “material (or hydro-material) turn” in the field, the stem “colonialism” aligns the term’s critical agendas with those of postcolonialism (Bystrom and Hofmeyr 2017, 3). However, tying hydrocolonial analyses too rigidly to oceanic studies risks prematurely ceding important arenas of intervention, as this essay seeks to demonstrate. Differently framed, a hydrocolonial reading of Johannesburg in literary texts and in visual culture might be expected to plot out representations of water as a natural resource, commodity, human right, agent and imaginary. Adopting such an orientation stands to complement, and perhaps to defamiliarize, the “originary tension virtually built into [Johannesburg’s] morphology and geological structure between the life below the surface, what is above, and the edges,” to evoke Mbembe and Nuttall’s elegant formulation (2008, 18).

Water circulates, and circulates through our cities. It routinely mediates between surface and depth, centre and periphery, by virtue of the banal – and life-sustaining – fact of its conveyance and circulation through the built environment. Water is pumped through underground pipes, consumed above ground, and subjected to sewage management as influent and effluent wastewater. Yet its fluidity incises less-than-fluid divisions into the urban fabric. In Johannesburg as in other colonial cities in Southern Africa, the production of hydraulic infrastructure “was designed to discriminate between white settlers accorded full membership to the polity and Africans for whom the promises of citizenship were deferred or denied,” as Simukai Chigudu argues in a different context (2020, 36–37). Access to water continues to be linked to fundamental questions of human rights, citizenship, governance and spatial justice in the postapartheid city (Baxter and Mtshali 2020; Narsiah 2011).

When speaking of Johannesburg, however, it is also crucial to remember that water cannot be dissociated from mining operations, nor from their
consequences. In the early years of the city, extensive plantations of non-indigenous trees supplied pit-props to the mining industry (Foster 2009, 197). These plantations progressively destabilized the local environment, choking the small rivers arising across the ridge of the Witwatersrand and desiccating the landscape (Turton et al. 2006, 319). Water was integral to the extractive process. An estimated two thousand litres of water were required to mill one ton of gold-bearing reef (319). Below the surface, water was used to limit airborne dust that contributed to the risk of silicosis. However, water also posed a threat. Groundwater seeping into the mines had constantly to be pumped out to avoid flooding. Once the mines stopped working and pumping ceased, acidic water contaminated with heavy metals including uranium gradually accumulated in the underground mine void, eventually decanting to produce what is known as acid mine drainage (McCarthy 2010; 2011, 3, and see discussion below). Groundwater is also affected by contact with the detritus of mining activities. Rainwater interacting chemically with waste rock, exposed reef and abandoned infrastructures produces sulphuric acid (McCarthy 2011, 2). Acid water is implicated in the leaching of uranium that is later deposited as uraniferous dust whose fallout footprint remains to be defined (Turton 2015). Taken together, these anthropogenic processes translate the tension between surface and depth that has long shaped the city of Johannesburg into the register of “ruination,” a term inflected with the racialized violence of imperial and colonial legacies in Ann Laura Stoler’s use of it (2008). As water moves between tiers, sometimes rising from the depths, sometimes sinking into the earth, it generates powerful imaginaries that leak into the written and visual cultural representations of Johannesburg. In what follows, I offer three vignettes of reading across these intersections to trace the flows of water, of power, in the city.

Grassy verges

Zoo City commences as Zinzi wakes from sleep: “Morning light the sulphur colour of the mine dumps seeps across Johannesburg’s skyline and sears through my window,” she relates (Beukes 2010, 1). The character’s opening reflections tie the depiction of Johannesburg to the evocation of its mining past, although she quickly shifts perspective to focus on evidence of its dystopian present. Zinzi’s Hillbrow apartment, a “dank room with its precariously canted floor and intermittent plumbing” (2), is located in a condemned building with a gutted interior (5) and a capricious water supply (“the landlord has shut off the water again,” [59]). The memory of water threads through the narrator’s perception of her distance from her irretrievable middle-class home (“Big garden with a mulberry tree, swimming pool,”
Alternately foregrounded or barely perceptible until deliberately sought out, water helps to distinguish the locales of the novel from one another.

Zinzi’s “freely roving transit” through Johannesburg (Sofanos 2013, 115) takes her to the Sir Herbert Baker stone house owned by the ominous music producer Odysseus Huron, among other places. Beukes’ depiction of the privileged northern suburbs of Johannesburg predictably references the city as urban forest: “The suburbs are overshadowed with oaks and jacarandas and elms. Biggest man-made forest in the world, or so we’re told” (Beukes 2010, 67). If the suburban landscape is verdant and energetically cultivated, Huron’s property is strangely derelict by contrast. Neglect registers as the absence of water (“The rolling lawns flanking the driveway are dry and yellowing, patrolled by a lone ibis, poking around for bugs in the grass” [69]), or as its insalubrity. The “brackish water” of Huron’s swimming pool anticipates its role in the gruesome yet strangely ludic climax of the novel. The pool “is a vile green, a skin of rotting leaves cloying the surface.” Lichen has obliterated the maidens that grace the water feature, “blanking out their features like ... someone ate their faces” (73) – this metaphor of predation will prove proleptic. Well before the novel reaches its climax, however, the neglect that should not ordinarily be associated with Huron’s residence illuminates how the “socio-nature” of Johannesburg has always been linked to the production and occulting of value in the city.3

Jeremy Foster argues that this “socio-nature” reflects a prior metropolitan reckoning with tensions deriving from the city–country binary. As heir to a mid-nineteenth-century urban imaginary that sought to combine registers of moral and physical wholesomeness with a capitalist regard for return on investment, early Johannesburg incorporated within itself “an ameliorative European nature” that was racially coded, Foster argues (2009, 196, emphasis in original). The planting of trees was integral to the transformation of the indigenous environment. Trees introduced a sense of temporality into the landscape, mediating perceptions of history and signposting the city’s modernity as its approximation of European precedents (198–199). Parks and gardens progressively supplemented an evolving tree-filled landscape to reference what Foster calls “the fertile imaginary landscape of ‘home’” (198). But the imprints of Johannesburg’s early mining past cannot be separated from the contrivances of its socio-nature. Foster observes that the plantations that originally served the mines came to represent “a kind of ‘nature’ for the white inhabitants of Johannesburg,” while their trees screened the new residential suburbs to the north from the dust produced by the mines (198; see also Turton et al. 2006, 319). Thanks to the abundant water resources of the Rand and its equally abundant reserves of cheap labour, Johannesburg’s suburbs evolved into “a phantasmagoric natural world” that both concealed and naturalized human intervention (Foster 2009, 198). When Zenzi

3 Socio-nature describes the interplay between nature, technology and design contingent on urban transformations of the environment, where nature is viewed as thoroughly social and constructed. See Foster (2009, 194–195) for an amplification of the arguments of Raymond Williams, Matthew Gandy, Simon Gunn and Alistair Owens in this respect.
quips that the grassy verges of Johannesburg’s northern suburbs are “more manicured than a porn star’s topiary” (Beukes 2010, 68), she plays on the vocabulary of landscape design (“topiary” from the Latin *topiarius* “ornamental gardener”) to denaturalize the suburban setting. Her snarky comparison betrays a form of metalepsis that is not wholly discursive. In rhetoric rather than in narratology (a distinction that I will revisit below), metalepsis constitutes a “compressed chain of metaphorical reading” which ascribes present effect to remote cause (Lanham 1991, 99). Johannesburg’s grassy verges, lawns, golf courses and luxuriant trees obey a metaleptic logic to the extent that visible present effect – cultivation – is substituted for remote cause: the hidden circuitry weaving between colonial- and mining-based transformations of the indigenous landscape and hydraulic subterranean infrastructures that have already *domesticated* water.

**Storm drain and vertical shaft**

Domesticated water – the kind that issues forth when a tap is opened thanks to the all-important property of water in its liquid state to seek its own level – threads its way through *Zoo City* as a thoroughly naturalized affordance of class privilege. At the same time, the novel is unusually attentive to the presence of *degraded* water in the urban fabric. Zinzi’s foray into the stormwater drains beneath the Killarney Mall noted above precedes an extended later sequence during which she is pursued by street-children into the storm drains and maintenance tunnels running below Johannesburg (Beukes 2010, 181–189). Beukes again trains her protagonist’s gaze on underground bodies of water: “The water flows into an alcove, a place for the stormwater to back up before the artery turns the corner,” she records. “The scenery has changed, the modern cement giving way to ancient brickwork here, a Victorian relic from the town’s golden days” (185). As the sequence progresses, Zinzi and Sloth wash up in a “scramble of pitch-black termite holes, some of them narrowing away to nothing, like whoever was digging them got bored and wandered off.” These, Zinzi speculates, are “the original gold-diggings maybe, when Johannesburg was still just a bunch of hairy prospectors scrabbling in the dirt. Maybe we’ll bring home a nugget the size of Sloth’s head” (187–188).

In dialogue with the work of Mbembe and Nuttall surveyed above, I have argued elsewhere that Beukes’ evocation of this hypothetical “nugget” deflects attention away from the deep-level processes of extraction constitutive of Johannesburg (Bethlehem 2015, 13), an argument that I would now like to expand. Although some of the gold-bearing outcrops that enabled the initial discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand lay close to the surface...
(Turton et al. 2006, 316), in the longer term the morphology of the reef proved incompatible with the kind of small-scale artisanal operations that Beukes imagines (Harrison and Zack 2012, 554). Beukes’ glancing reference to “gold-diggings” avoids the vocabulary of depth actually associated with extraction – vertical shafts, incline shafts, levels, reef drives, raises, stops (see McCarthy 2010, 7–8). This historical amnesia, or perhaps aphasia, is telling. Zinzi’s relatively shallow progress through Johannesburg’s underground strata discloses the diachrony of the subterranean built environment while sidestepping its overdetermination by mining. Her route connects stretches of Victorian brickwork to the tunnel serving Johannesburg’s high-speed underground railway, emblematic of its ongoing modernizing aspirations. Significantly, when Zinzi re-emerges on the surface, she does so in the Sandton financial district, as critics have noted (Beukes 2010, 189–190; see Sofianos 2013, 116; Graham 2015, 72). To put this in more abstract terms, the historical links between mining and banking that inform Johannesburg’s present-day capacity to serve as a global financial centre are obliquely rendered as a matter of spatial unfolding rather than causality (Harrison and Zack 2012, 567).

Konstantin Sofianos insightfully points out that this subterranean sequence echoes the pursuit of the Orson Welles character through the canals of Vienna in The Third Man (2013, 116). The intertextual swerve towards the canal or tunnel rather than the mine-shaft distinguishes Beukes’ treatment of subterranean Johannesburg from one of its most influential contemporary depictions: William Kentridge’s Mine (1991). This animated short film, part of the series Kentridge termed “drawings for projection” (1998, 52), involves his hallmark technique of filming the drawing and erasure of charcoal images. The dominant visual conceit of Mine unfolds via metonymy. While taking breakfast in bed, Soho Eckstein, an “allegorical figure of rapacious mining capital” who recurs elsewhere in the series (Dubow and Rosen- garten 2004, 673), depresses a coffee plunger which in turn passes through a serving tray and then through the bed beneath it to become an elevator cage plummeting down a vertical shaft. Its descent exposes various figures and objects fixed in a surreal stratigraphy. Representations of sculpted Ife heads embedded in the rock precede depictions of bodies bathing in communal showers or sleeping entombed in the concrete bunks of stark same-sex mine compounds. As the downward momentum continues, the vertical shaft proliferates to become a succession of horizontal tunnels creating the schematic of a gold mine that is then reworked as a slave ship, thus embedding South Africa within transnational contexts of exploitation (Kentridge 1998, 56; Rothberg 2019, 104–111). At the lowest depths of the mine we encounter the “Real of the labour process,” in David Bunn’s phrase, dominated by images of pneumatic drills boring into the rockface (Bunn 2008, 141). These replace the shovel that earlier lay horizontally across (but also,
given the visual logic of the film, below) the sleeping figure of Soho Eckstein. As the short film progresses, the alternation between descent and ascent foregrounds the extraction and rendering waste of natural and human resources on which Johannesburg is founded – notably, when a crowd of miners disgorged from the ticker-tape machine on Eckstein’s bed is transformed into the substance of a mine dump. Kentridge translates complicity into a stacked series of contiguities, thus rendering Eckstein’s habitation of privilege unhomely, Unheimlich, in the well-known Freudian sense (Freud 2001 [1917]).

Swimming pool and stamp mill

Although Beukes keeps her distance from the reflexes of “vertical thinking” in Kentridge’s phrase (2014, 69), she does not shy away from the link that he establishes between the white home and the Unheimlich. If rock is the medium of this disclosure in Mine, water is its counterpart in Zoo City. In the closing scenes of the novel, Zinzi discovers Huron’s very own familiar, a six-metre-long albino crocodile concealed in a cavern carved into the rock beneath Huron’s swimming pool. “The cavern is maybe twenty metres across. Natural rock with man-made features … the smell of damp and rot is overwhelming. Old vase-water” (Beukes 2010, 288). As Huron tries to displace his monstrous familiar onto his young protégé in a subterranean muti-murder-cum-exorcism that teeters on the brink of parody, Zinzi will have to penetrate the pool’s surface (its insalubrity emphasized through a second reference to the “dense skin of slimy rotting leaves” covering it [288]) in order to rescue her injured lover.

Swimming pools need little elaboration as signifiers of privilege in Johannesburg or elsewhere in southern Africa (Gevisser 2014, 97–98; Gupta 2019). It is no coincidence that Beukes makes her peripatetic plotlines converge on this infrastructure of leisure. In Zoo City the pool as a metonym for white middle-class domesticity has been corrupted; its domesticated water contaminated. Affluence – the word carries a now obsolete meaning of “abounding in” or “copious,” literally “flowing freely” – intersects the effluent of Huron’s own macabre attempt to extract value from bodies that are literally consigned to the underground interface between rock and water. “The rock face curves under. I follow it down and grasp a revoltingly soft hand. The flesh gives way under my grip” (Beukes 2010, 291). When Zinzi compares her descent into the suburban grotto to “swimming into the heart of the Undertow” (288), two sources of horror converge: the unseen menace of tides or currents and the submerged terror of the chthonic.
In *Zoo City* the “Undertow” is represented as a pool of seething and coagulating darkness (208), a zone of non-being that first manifests when offenders are animalled and that recurs at the moment of their death (174–175, 208). Its irruption alters laws of causality, giving rise to ontologically distinct populations – the animalled and the non-animalled – who subsist within a fictive universe comprised of worlds that intersect but that are not co-extensive. The Undertow introduces further possibilities of metalepsis into the text where the term can now be understood in a narratological sense as involving the transgression of the boundaries of the fictional world or of narrative levels (Genette 1980, 235; McHale 1987, 120; Kukkonen 2011). Beukes makes particularly effective use of metalepsis when she infiltrates messages originating beyond the boundaries of Zinzi’s lifeworld into her protagonist’s email feed (Beukes 2010, 30, 248). These, we come to understand, are oblique missives from the animalled victims whom Huron has had killed in order to feed his albino crocodile: “I danced until my feet broke off. Until my shoes turned red with blood. I always wanted to be a girl in a storybook.” Such communications, Zinzi reflects, are “too strange, too poetical to be spam;” instead they call to mind “a ghost in the machine” (248).

One textual system’s ghostly possession by another could just as easily be described as intertextuality. Elsewhere, I have linked Beukes’ playful indigenizing of gothic repertoires to Sarah Gertrude Millin’s evocation of Johannesburg’s mine dumps as “cerement-pale; ghostly … the gold, their life-blood gone from them” (Millin 1927, 77; see Bethlehem 2015, 14–15).8 I culled this metaphor from a longer passage in Millin’s *The South Africans* (1927), a work that Matthew Eatough has described as “part social history, part political treatise, and part ethnographic fantasy” (2013, 407). Bringing Millin’s writing from the mid-1920s back into play to meet what Beukes calls the “self-cannibalizing” tendencies of Johannesburg (with specific reference to its mine-dumps [2010, 255]), serves as a reminder that the mining infrastructures and technologies of the city have accumulated a literary patina over time. Material infrastructures are often rendered animate in Millin’s writing. In the passage below included in the 1951 reedition of the original volume re-titled *The People of South Africa*, personification structures Millin’s representation of the intertwined psychic and political economies of the city:

Johannesburg, as everyone knows, is the heart of the gold industry. Right through Johannesburg City runs the gold reef on whose product is largely based the economic system of the world. The tarnished-silver mine-dumps form part of the skyline of Johannesburg. And, on still nights, in some parts of the town, when the wind is blowing a certain way, it is possible to hear a distant murmur, like the faraway beating of waves against a shore; and that murmur is the crushing, crushing, crushing of the ore by the battery stamps, the whispering end of that

7 The menace of the chthonic can be related to the destabilization of the earth’s surface as a consequence of mining, as Morris documents (2008, 98–103). Kentridge associates this threat with the extraction or pumping out of water from the mining cavities. Water, for Kentridge, thus conveys both aspiration and “a drowning threat – with the removal of the water you could be drowned in the earth itself” (2014, 78). See also Green’s (1997) extraordinary verse novella documenting the 1964 Carletonville sinkhole disaster near Johannesburg: a text that itself compels a reckoning with the *Unheimlich*.

8 Although chiefly remembered for her notorious depictions of so-called miscegenation, Millin also wrote a multi-volume autobiography, biographies of Cecil Rhodes and Jan Smuts and various commentaries on South African society. For a critical reading of her Johannesburg novels, see Jones (2011).
noise in whose immediate presence the ears grow tight and the voice falls dead. But it is a noise no louder in the life of Johannesburg City than the beating of a heart in the body it inhabits. Those battery stamps are the heart of the Rand and as secret. One does not hear their throbbing except when the blare of the living is hushed. (Millin 1951, 69, emphasis in original)

A set of aural tropes establishes distance between Millin’s projected nocturnal listener and the battery stamps that animate the city.9 The beating of the battery stamps is the beating of waves; of a heart. Millin’s figurative language naturalizes large-scale industrial processes that occur above the ground, momentarily occluding their human complement below the surface.

If there is something apotropaic about Millin’s depiction of the interdependence between the white body and its mechanical counterpart, carefully rendered here as a matter of their remoteness from one another, her knowledge of more corrosive dependencies cannot wholly be forestalled. In the first edition of the text, the noise of jackhammers and stamp-mills initiates an anxious reckoning with blackness as the substrate of white privilege:

The monotonous jackhammer clanks, clanks under the ground, and the sweating black body bends to it. And above the ground the thundering stamp-mills are crushing the ore. And gold-dust lies in the folds of stretched corduroy. And a basin of yellow mud of very great value comes out of an oven. And houses are built and fine clothes are bought, and mind and senses regaled. And life is easy for everyone because the black man is sweating there under the ground. And not only under the ground, but above the ground, and within the house and without the house. (Millin 1927, 260)

The ghostly determinism of anaphora – the phrase possessed by the prior iteration of the phrase that has preceded it – informs the causality that Millin constructs. The reified “sweating black body” simultaneously transgresses boundaries (within the house; without the house) and strata (under the ground; above the ground). What surfaces as dread in Millin’s racist elaboration of the uncanny recurs as critique in Beukes. In Zoo City it is white monstrosity, white instrumentalization of the other that floats to the surface of Odysseus Huron’s swimming pool.

**Coda: Inland Sea**

Thus far, I have read Beukes’ evocations of water and of the infrastructures contiguous with them for their overdetermination by social history (colonialism, apartheid). However, the possibility exists that this framing misses more radical opportunities for understanding the forces and temporalities that have shaped hydrocolonial Johannesburg. Recall Millin’s evocation of a
sentient city that murmurs to its inhabitants when the wind blows a certain way, calling to mind the faraway beating of waves against a shore. What is this inland sea that haunts her text, haunts mine? Is there a memory of sea-green layered into the city’s unconscious? Is this sediment of remembrance limned with utopian longings, ones that might find expression in the transformative power of a single line of blue as William Kentridge suggests (Gevisser 2014, 220)? Or is there something else at stake?

Between two- and three-thousand-million years ago, Johannesburg’s phantasmatic inland sea bore concrete form. The gold-reef itself originated here: a consequence of marine cycles; of the “shore line pebble deposits in which gold and other heavy metals became concentrated during the gradual but relentless advance of an encroaching sea front” (Turton et al. 2006, 315). If so, the extractive violence of gold-mining cannot be conceptualized without the originary presence of water. Looking to the deep past, the gold mine mediates between the time of an inland sea and the time of mining capital. There is a principle of “heterochronicity” at work in Johannesburg when approached from this hydrocolonial perspective; a “mixed temporality” of natural and anthropogenic assemblages (Jue 2018, 479). Its forms can no longer be occulted. Acid mine drainage, possessed of all the menace of the revenant, mediates between the time of mining capital and the time of its corrosive afterlife – the now and future Anthropocene.

In Mark Lewis’ photographs of the mine tailings, red and orange tracts of contaminated water that are almost luminescent in their intensity contrast with banks of bleached white sand (Lewis and Zack 2018, 20–21). Traces of heavy metals visibly intertwine in the run-off from a mine dump in one of Jason Larkin’s images, their course legible in abstract expressionist seams of tarnished blue, cyan and rust (2013, n.p.). The palette seems other-worldly, except that it is not. Mark Gevisser neatly captures this tension when he comments that reportage on the acid mine drainage affecting the Witwatersrand “reads like something that Lauren Beukes might write” (2014, 222). Describing a visit to the Tudor Shaft informal settlement located on abandoned mining land outside Kagiso, a “dystopia” in his reckoning, Gevisser reflects on the disastrous compact that the mine-owners made against the environment. “None of this would exist – the city itself would not exist – were it not for these violations against nature,” he observes. “There is no reason for Johannesburg before or beyond them, but now it exists, despite them. This is our inheritance” (218).

What interpretive resources are commensurate with this legacy? What epistemologies are adequate to the ruination that Johannesburg produces as the spectral doubling of the affluence that it generates? A hydrocolonial reading practice that takes urban infrastructures as its point of departure cannot ignore the continuing interplay of capital, structural violence and racialized biopolitics in the history of Johannesburg. At the same time, a
hydrocolonial practice that takes environmental justice as its point of departure cannot disregard how thoroughly water is implicated within this configuration. The neologism hydrocolonialism sustains both sets of critical aspirations. Differently scaled sets of responsibilities are across the synapse between prefix and stem, inducing us to nurture a relational disposition much like the one that Zinzi has learnt from her Sloth.

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