



The University of the Witwatersrand

Wits School of Arts

MA Research Report

## **PIGS, PLANTS AND PARALLEL PROCESSING:**

an exploration of the tensions between western liberal humanism  
and critical posthumanism in *Dub Steps*

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A research report submitted to The Faculty of Humanities, The University of the  
Witwatersrand, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Digital Arts

## DECLARATION

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work.

Each significant contribution to this research report, including direct quotations, drawn from the work or works of other people has been acknowledged through citation and reference.

This research report is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of Master of Arts in Digital Arts to The Faculty of Humanities at The University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before in any form to any other university.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several loops and a long horizontal stroke at the end, written over a horizontal line.

Amy Loureth Worster

19 October 2018

# CONTENTS

Abstract.....	4
Acknowledgements.....	5
List of Images.....	6
Introduction.....	7
Literature Review.....	17
Chapter One: <i>I am not used to such journeys</i> – framing Johannesburg as the locus of the breakdown of liberal humanist identity in <i>Dub Steps</i> .....	39
Chapter Two: <i>Just look at this grass</i> – dissolving the nature/culture binary and perceiving animals as relational others <i>Dub Steps</i> .....	67
Chapter Three: <i>Looking so hard to the sky</i> – technophobia and the rejection of posthuman interconnectivity with technology in <i>Dub Steps</i> .....	93
Conclusion.....	117
Reference List.....	124

## ABSTRACT

This research report presents a critical thematic analysis of Andrew Miller's science fiction (SF) novel *Dub Steps* with the intention of demonstrating that the book's central themes are interrelated and evoke various tensions between the ideological projects of western liberal humanism and critical posthumanism. Furthermore, this study examines how the novel's setting of Johannesburg articulates with its themes and complicates the unfolding drama of the liberal humanist subject in crisis, especially in connection to South Africa's troubled history of colonialism and apartheid.

Representations of race – specifically blackness and whiteness – are at stake in the interactions between Johannesburg and the central themes of *Dub Steps*, and the historical and material politics of race in South Africa are brought to bear upon the novel's depiction of a posthuman future. This study finds that *Dub Steps* may be read as a posthuman SF fantasy in which the vestiges of colonialism and apartheid are finally undone and socio-economic inequalities persisting in the post-apartheid sphere are finally rebalanced. However, it is also the view of this research report that the progressive potential of the novel is undermined by its technophobic ethos and a reversion to harmful stereotypes about black people in its vision of a new world order.

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## LIST OF IMAGES

Fig. 1 – cover art of *Dub Steps* by publicide (page 8)

Fig. 2 – the Gauteng City-Region with the metropolitan perimeter of the city of Johannesburg clearly demarcated (page 30)

Fig. 3 – map showing how the core and peripheral areas of the GCR are determined by demographic, economic and land cover indices (page 31)

## INTRODUCTION

This research report presents a critical thematic analysis of Andrew Miller's science fiction (SF) novel *Dub Steps* with the intention of demonstrating that the book's three central themes are interrelated and evoke various tensions between the ideological projects of western liberal humanism and critical posthumanism.

The first of these themes is the dissolution of "man" and the deconstruction of the colonial city as heralding the formation of a new South African society based on posthuman ethics. The second theme is the erasure of the nature/culture binary and a blurring of the boundaries drawn among humans, animals and plants, which encourages a reconceptualisation of nonhuman living beings as relational others rather than simply objects of human consumption. The third theme is the correlation between technology and individual ambition and how these impede human evolution in the world of *Dub Steps*.

Each of these themes places the notion of bounded individualism under scrutiny and consequently the liberal humanist subject finds itself besieged from multiple fronts by the possibilities and perils of posthuman subjectivity. This conflict manifests as the internal existential struggle of the novel's main character, Roy Fotheringham – a white, English-speaking South African male who somehow survives a global apocalypse in which most of the world's human population is obliterated.

Furthermore, this study examines how the novel's setting of Johannesburg articulates with its themes and complicates the unfolding drama of the liberal humanist subject in crisis, especially in connection to South Africa's troubled history of colonialism and apartheid. Representations of race – specifically blackness and whiteness – are at stake in the interactions between Johannesburg and the central themes of *Dub Steps* as the historical and material politics of race in South Africa are brought to bear upon the novel's depiction of a posthuman future. The unique complexities of Johannesburg, which set it apart from other South African cities and make it an appropriate locus for the unravelling of humanist identity, are also considered.

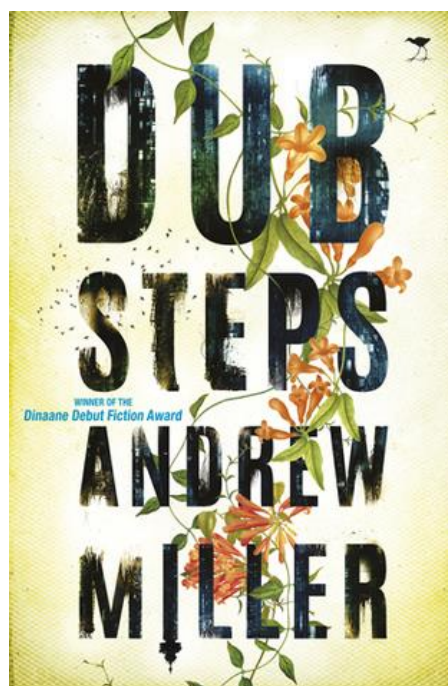


Fig. 1 – cover art of *Dub Steps* by publicide

Contextualising *Dub Steps* within the existing corpus of South African speculative fiction literature (of which SF is a sub-genre) further nuances representations of race



in the novel. This is because Miller's book appears to conform to a long-established tradition of white authors situating fictional narratives in dystopian or post-apocalyptic South African futures and alternative realities. Some noteworthy examples include: Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* (1981); J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983); Lauren Beukes's *Moxyland* (2008) and *Zoo City* (2010); Charlie Human's *Apocalypse Now Now* (2013); and Deon Meyer's *Fever* (2017). Considered collectively, these works of speculative fiction inspire the question: what gives rise to such a persistent dystopian and apocalyptic imagination among white South African storytellers? This question is addressed by focusing on what *Dub Steps* implies about future relationships among humans, nonhuman animals and plants, and technological others in South Africa.

In summary, this study explores how the preoccupations of the South African speculative fiction genre and SF sub-genre, the peculiar characteristics of both real-world and fictional Johannesburg and the anxieties expressed by the novel concerning posthuman subjectivity are woven together in *Dub Steps* with unexpected and, at times, problematic implications for representations of race in the novel. From the findings of this research report, several conclusions about post-apartheid South African culture may be drawn.

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As a South African and a fan of speculative fiction, I always feel intrigued when I encounter a new local novel or film in the genre. These texts afford opportunities to mull over the possible futures of South Africa at a safe, emotional remove while nevertheless prompting me to think seriously about the present state of my home country. Living in Gauteng has made me particularly interested in speculative fiction and SF narratives set in Johannesburg, of which there are already several examples of variable quality in circulation.

In literature, apart from Beukes's urban fantasy *Zoo City*, which has been mentioned already, examples include J.T. Lawrence's *Why You Were Taken* (2017) and sequels; Abi Godsell's *Idea War: Volume 1* (2013) and sequels; Mico Pisanti's *The Folds: Miss Universe* (2013) and sequels; Jennifer Whithers' *The War Between* (2016); S.L. Grey's horror *The Mall* (2011) and sequels; Lily Herne's *The Army Of The Lost* (2013); and Jayne Bauling's recently published *New Keepers* (2017). There is also Daniel Browde, Josh Ryba and Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi's urban fantasy graphic novel, *Rebirth* (2012). Prominent examples in film include the work of Neill Blomkamp — *District 9* (2009) and its precursor *Alive in Joburg* (2005); *Chappie* (2015) and its precursor *Tetra Vaal* (2004) — but also Matthew Jankes's short superhero film *Umkhungo* (2010); and Jahmil X.T. Qubeka's short film *Stillborn* (2017) which, it is worth noting, was filmed in Johannesburg but set in a fictional "elsewhere". This is a common convention in the SF genre and Johannesburg serves a similar function in a number of big budget international SF films including *Dredd* (2012), *The Giver* (2014) and *Avengers: Age of*

*Ultron* (2015). Further examples combining visual representations of Johannesburg with SF themes may be found in the paintings and digital artistry of South Africans William Kentridge and Zhi Zulu among others.

One of the persistent critiques of South African SF is that there is an underrepresentation of black voices and a shortage of convincing, well-developed black characters in the genre (Muzenda, 2017). According to a report by Fireside Fiction, only 1.96% of SF written worldwide in 2015 was authored by black writers, of whom presumably only a small fraction is living and working on the African continent. Consequently, it is important to acknowledge upfront that *Dub Steps* exists within a white-dominated genre in a white-minority country. Miller, the novel's author, and Roy, the protagonist, are both white, South African males and I, the author of this research report, am a white, South African female. Inevitably, the novel's stance on the tensions between western liberal humanism and critical posthumanism, its perspective on Johannesburg and my own reading of the text are coloured a whiter shade of pale. This comment is not intended to undermine the value of *Dub Steps* or my research report but, rather, to position my analysis of the novel responsibly and account for my specific focus on western philosophies.

*Dub Steps* provoked my curiosity profoundly because the story spans several decades and combines elements as diverse as virtual and augmented reality (VR and AR), artificial intelligence (AI), genetically modified free pigs and a Johannesburg almost

completely devoid of human beings. In my view, the ambitious scope of *Dub Steps* sets it apart from other examples of South African SF. Additionally, the explicit convergence of posthuman themes, Johannesburg and SF contained within its pages compelled me to begin an earnest investigation into the novel. This was the starting point of this research report.

The fact that there is not a great deal written about *Dub Steps* in the way of book reviews or scholarly articles does not diminish the aims of this study. On the contrary, it makes this research more significant as it contributes towards the closing of a gap in knowledge about South African SF texts that explore themes concerning human existence at the fault lines between western liberal humanism and critical posthumanism. In this sense, *Dub Steps* offers glimpses into the trajectories along which local SF and posthuman imaginaries are travelling.

\* \* \*

Having clarified the objectives and importance of this research, it is now necessary to provide further details about the case study in question. Published in 2015 and winner of the Dinaane Debut Fiction Award, Miller's *Dub Steps* is a story about a mismatched group of nine apocalypse survivors and their struggle to survive in the ruins of Johannesburg. The city was once an urban pleasure dome for the wealthy, where AR and VR technologies provided an omnipresent source of digital advertising and

entertainment. However, in the wake of a global disaster beyond their control, the survivors observe as the city, stripped of all colour and pretence, begins to disappear into myth beneath a slow tide of expanding vegetation.

The protagonist, Roy, is in his forties and experiencing what he describes as “a bit of a life crisis” (Miller, 2015: 55) when most of humanity suddenly and mysteriously vanishes without a trace. Shortly before the cataclysmic events of the novel unfold, a down-and-out Roy smashes a bathroom mirror and makes a hasty exit from a dinner party that his estranged wife, Angie, has orchestrated in the hopes of reviving her husband’s suffering career. Two days later, Roy awakens from a deep, alcohol-induced sleep to find himself alive, but completely alone, in Johannesburg. There is no electricity and, within a matter of days, the batteries in most electronic devices have run flat. Roy’s initial shock at the transformed Johannesburg cityscape — the “[dry] brown walls, stripped of their broadcast” (*ibid.* 22–23) — is palpable and owes, in part, to the city’s importance to Roy as both an imaginary symbol of human ambition (*ibid.* 5, 16) and a real, frequently navigated geography (*ibid.* 140–141).

Before the apocalypse, Roy’s career as a copywriter entailed “[manipulating] the paradigm of experience” (*ibid.* 5) by composing eye-catching advertisements for projection in the city amid a constant stream of other phantasmagorical enticements to spend and consume. Roy was also the co-founder and owner of a VR club called *Mlungu’s* where patrons entered immersive computer generated (CG) digiscapes and

participated in sexual activities with customisable virtual partners, frequently enhancing their experiences with alcohol and drugs. Although these business ventures were lucrative, Roy soon entered a downward spiral, became an alcoholic and retreated into the fantastical AR and VR realms he and his colleagues had created.

Roy's immediate response to his abrupt disconnection from the world he knows is understandably one of intense fear and existential crisis. At first, Roy adjusts to his new isolation by travelling extensively throughout South Africa, ransacking empty suburban homes and scavenging for food in abandoned convenience stores. During this time, Roy encounters eight other survivors — Babalwa, Fats, Teboho (Tebza), Lillian, Javas, Andile and Beatrice — each of whom, like Roy, have been spared the apocalyptic hammer blow for unknown reasons.

Back in Johannesburg, Roy and his newfound companions work together to establish a self-sustaining community based on solar-powered subsistence farming in the old suburbs of the city. There they remain for many years, birthing and raising children and grandchildren according to a strict programme of controlled reproduction in the hopes of preserving the human species. Meanwhile, plants and animals spread throughout and occupy the increasingly decrepit remains of Johannesburg — an ever-present and alarming reality that spurs the community to engage in the regular

pruning of the encroaching plants and, ultimately, to massacre a local population of “free pigs”.

Several years later, Roy stumbles upon an advanced AI of human design who has assumed the body of an elderly black man. Roy addresses him as “Madala”<sup>1</sup>. Madala explains that he is responsible for erasing all human beings on earth except for a few isolated groups scattered across the globe. Ironically, Madala had felt that humanity had been led astray by its technology and required almost total obliteration so that the few remaining *Homo sapiens* could reconstruct the foundations of the species in more positive directions. Specifically, Madala had envisioned a post-anthropocentric world where humans enjoy a renewed sense of kinship with plants, animals and “life in its widest sense” (*ibid.* 339). After meeting with Roy several times, Madala disappears, although Roy claims that the AI remains with him for the rest of his life as “a constant, none-too-subtle narrator in [his] head” (*ibid.* 342).

*Dub Steps* concludes with Roy performing a concert as a DJ for his numerous descendants — a population of indistinguishable, hyper-sexualised, trance music fanatics, who speak in a mixture of broken English and Zulu. Bending to Madala’s

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<sup>1</sup> According to Phindile D. M. Dlamini: “Coining terms of address is a common practice in isiZulu and the literal meaning carried by the words is usually somehow different from the meaning carried by the term of address. [...] *Madala* (old one) is usually used by male youth when referring to older man. It could either have a negative or positive connotation depending on the context” (2016: 145).

invisible influence, the youngsters begin worshiping the science and technology left behind from the bygone Anthropocene era, although much of it is useless to them in a practical sense. It is implied that Roy dies during or soon after this concert, probably at the hands of the community's new leader, Sthembiso, as punishment for Roy's playing of recently prohibited dubstep in his set. Unlike trance, which builds slowly and remains predictable throughout, dubstep is characterised by dynamic change (spreadofedm, 2017). This subgenre of Electronic Dance Music (EDM) emerges as a powerful metaphor in the novel for the notion that human evolution requires both periods of steady progress and moments of dramatic change or mutation. As evidenced by the book's title, this concept is central to the ethics of *Dub Steps*.



## LITERATURE REVIEW

The thematic analysis of *Dub Steps* outlined in the introduction is conducted within the theoretical framework of critical posthumanism – a lens that both draws into focus and obfuscates the concept of “the human” in the twenty-first century. Through this critical glass, the human emerges as a socially constructed category – a fluid notion that fluctuates over time – but also as a way of being that has been monopolised and policed by hegemonic western discourses, specifically western liberal humanism.

The first section of this literature review recounts the history and multiple influences behind the formulation of critical posthumanism as a programme, while also defining salient terms and identifying the theorists whose contributions to critical posthumanist and other relevant literatures have been instrumental in the writing of this research report.

Subsequently, this literature review introduces some of the recent scholarship on the material transformations that the city of Johannesburg has undergone since its inception as a gold mining camp in the nineteenth century and is experiencing presently within the post-apartheid milieu. This sets the stage for a localised account of the tensions between western liberal humanism and critical posthumanism while also building a case for the effectiveness of Johannesburg as setting in *Dub Steps*.

Finally, contained within this literature review is a definition of SF which relates the progressive potential of the genre to the programme of critical posthumanism through the narrative device of the novum.

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## CRITICAL POSTHUMANISM

Founded to a large extent on the seminal work of mostly French philosophers – such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Julia Kristeva and Jean-François Lyotard – critical posthumanism is an interdisciplinary field of study which embraces the foundational principles of several schools of thought including, but not limited to: postmodernism's scepticism of universal meta-narratives; poststructuralism's breakdown of the dualisms used to organise language and structure human identity in western cultures; antihumanism's postwar critique of "man" as the generic human subject; and critical theory's emphasis on the fact that all knowledge arises from and exists within socially constructed and historically specific discourses. Despite these and other early influences, like The Macy Conferences on Cybernetics (1946–1953), Cary Wolfe points out that only in the 1990s was the term critical posthumanism first used in academia (2010: xii). Incidentally, this is roughly the same time that SF started taking off in South Africa (Brown, 2014: 28).

Francesca Ferrando (2017c) helpfully consolidates the primary concerns of critical posthumanism into a single concept – the deconstruction and reconfiguration of the human subject. According to Ferrando (2017c/d/e/f), this philosophical process is mobilised by thinking about the human from three interconnected existential perspectives: first, what she terms “post-humanism” (*sic*), or the displacement of “man” as the universal representation of the human subject combined with a recognition of multiple ways of being human; second, “post-anthropocentrism”, or the acknowledgment that humans exist within a shifting network of life and sentience and not at the apex of some imaginary species hierarchy; and third, “post-dualism”, or the disintegration of boundaries between binary oppositions, which both Ferrando (2017f) and N. Katherine Hayles (1999) find particularly compelling in relation to humans and their technology. These approaches to the deconstruction and reconfiguration of the human subject correlate with the three core themes of *Dub Steps* outlined in the introduction and, accordingly, are employed collectively as a structuring device in this study – each informing one of the three chapters to come.

By carefully considering and redefining what it means to be human in the twenty-first century, critical posthumanism exposes many of the inherent contradictions and exclusionary practices of western liberal humanism, which is often framed as a universal discourse of human ontology.

Before detailing how the insights of prominent theoreticians working in critical posthumanism and related fields – such as postmodernism, new materialism, critical race theory, feminism, critical animal studies and more – contribute to this study, it is necessary to define the following key terms: western liberal humanism, liberal humanist subject, identity, alterity, posthuman subject and nonhuman other.

John Charles Ryan defines western liberal humanism as a social and political ideology encompassing:

“an aggregate of philosophies that prioritize human agency, empiricism, and rationalism over fideism or faith-based principles of meaning-making” (2015: 5).

This secular school of thought first appeared in European and American societies in roughly the seventeenth century, dating from the Renaissance and undergoing consolidation with the Enlightenment (Belsey, 1985: 8–9; Lury, 1998: 1–2; Olssen, 2003). Premised on the dualistic separation of mind and body postulated by René Descartes, and Immanuel Kant’s perception of “man” as the “transcendental arbiter of reason” (Olssen, 2013), the “modern” or liberal humanist subject sits at the heart of western liberal humanism. Celia Lury claims that, within this configuration:

“individualism [arises as] a doctrine of human nature [...] [consisting] of a conception of human liberty as the natural state of humankind” (Abercrombie et al. in Lury, 1998: 8).

Therefore, the liberal humanist subject may be defined as a single, unique agent or individual in possession of a “free, self-determining and self-responsible” identity (*ibid.* 1–2) or as “the free, unconstrained author of meaning and action [...] [unified], knowing, and autonomous [...]” (Belsey, 1985: 8–9). This formulation of the human is often, incorrectly, thought to be universal. Georg Simmel wrote that permitting the full freedom of movement of individuals enables the same, natural “noble essence” to arise equally from within each of them (in Levine, 1971). Similarly, Tony Davies describes an “essential humanity” that is “shared by all human beings” (in Olssen, 2003). However, the inclusive humanist gestures made by Simmel, Davies and many others fall short in reality because of a pervasive “ideal” which, Stefan Herbrechter writes, “tacitly underlies the apparent universalism” of western liberal humanism (2013: 6). To better understand how this works, it is necessary to explore the concepts of identity and alterity.

Identity, commonly described as a possession of the individual, encompasses the qualities that make individuals unique and, therefore, enables individuals to distinguish themselves from one another (Simmel in Levine, 1971). Identity may also refer to a familial group or other social category to which a group of individuals belong (Jenkins, 1996: 4). However, as demonstrated by Stuart Hall (1989), it is important to note that even within western liberal humanism, one’s identity can never be fixed or absolute, because it is based on one’s relationships with various forms of alterity. In other words, individual identity is formed by the “mutually constructed and

evolving images of self and other" (Katzenstein, 1996: 59). Owing to this dynamic, identity and individuality cannot exist in a vacuum. Rather, to qualify as an individual, there must be at least one other human present to serve as a touchstone of identity.

Broadly, alterity may be defined as "the state or quality of being other, [...] of not being of the self" (Hazell, 2009: xvii) or as "the absence of identity" (Karskens, in Corbey & Leerssen, 1991: 82). Alterity is not necessarily coterminous in meaning with simple "difference" (Hazell, 2009: xviii). It is possible to recognise a similar or identical other who is not the self or to view a representation of oneself that is different to one's perception of oneself. However, the greater the degree of the perceived distinction between self and other, the more likely one is to exclude such an other from what Raymond Corbey and Joep Leerssen term "the sphere of culture" (1991: vi). According to Ernst van Alphen, alterity itself is an empty concept — nothing more than a "code which helps identity to become meaningful" (in *ibid.* 2–3). This is because "descriptions of alterity are never based on a real other, but on a denial of the self, of the observer's identity" (*ibid.*).

Petr Gibas, Karolína Pauknerová and Marco Stella define "nonhuman other" as an umbrella term for describing entities that are:

"generally understood as different from humans [including] animals, spaces and things, but also plants, machines, etc. and their assemblages" (2014: 298).

In this sense, “nonhuman” is a reductive descriptor —encompassing a wide variety of beings that are, at times, more radically different from one another than they are from those deemed “human”. Additionally, the adjective “nonhuman” suggests that humans have less in common with other forms of life than what recent discoveries in genetic and behavioural sciences have proven to be the case. This can result in an inflated sense of human exceptionalism which can manifest as “speciesism”. Peter Singer defines speciesism as “a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor (*sic*) of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species” (2009: 6).

Alterity in action, which may be described as the act of “othering” whether it be among humans or between humans and nonhumans, entails “acts of judgement” (Krueger, 2010: 7) which sometimes amount to “abjection” – the strong repudiation of qualities seen as undesirable (Kristeva, 1982). In many cultures, these practices of differentiation and discrimination based on a set of established, perceived dualisms – such as male and female, white and black, human and animal, and human and machine. Dualisms like these cast certain qualities as mutually exclusive binary oppositions when, realistically, the separation between designated poles is unstable and always already thoroughly breached. Furthermore, the pairings are never neutral but, as Derrida points out, “there is always a relation of power between the poles of a binary opposition” (1974, in Hall, 1997: 235).

Consequently, dualisms have been used within the framework of western liberal humanism not only to demarcate one's individuality and identity but to marginalise and oppress others based on material differences, thus "creating a power hierarchy" among humans "predicated on physical and cultural difference [...]" (Langer, 2011: 82). Features traditionally considered dominant and desirable in the west – including white, male, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied, Christian and capitalist, among others – comprise an idealised version of the human subject which is evoked every time humanity is referred to as "man" or "mankind". Historically, it is with this ideal that other humans are compared and contrasted, with the result that some have been completely excluded from the category of the human and denied its attendant rights to freedom and self-determination (Braidotti, 2013: 1 & 2015; Ferrando, 2017d; Halberstam & Livingston, 1995: 10; Herbrechter, 2013: 6).

Since Roy is the protagonist of *Dub Steps* and, therefore, located at the centre of the story, each manifestation of alterity in the novel is articulated in relation to him in ever widening circles of decreasing proximity and similarity. This model is significant insofar as it recreates the implicit hierarchy of western liberal humanism that places the ideal of "man" at the centre. Although some aspects of Roy's character – including his alcoholism, his inability to form and maintain successful romantic relationships with women and his failing career – distance him from the ideal, he remains its representative in the novel because, as far as anyone can tell, he is the last white man alive in South Africa. Not only does this make Roy an antihero, but it



also reveals that the ideal human subject of western liberal humanism is difficult to attain even for most white men who fulfil the basic requirements.

As *Dub Steps* progresses, we follow Roy as he struggles to relinquish the illusion of bounded individualism, which maintains the façade of the liberal humanist subject, even as he reflects on his shortcomings with bitterness and self-loathing. Encounters with various forms of alterity – including the self-as-other, other humans, cyborgs, animals (most notably the “free pigs”), plants and Madala, the AI – which should assure Roy of his individuality, serve to upset many of Roy’s preconceived notions about himself, other people and nonhuman others. In the moments when Roy lets go of maintaining a coherent identity and plunges headfirst into the gloom of the unknown, glimmers of posthuman subjectivity begin to appear.

One of the greatest challenges facing scholars working in critical posthumanism is that its subject, the posthuman, remains an ununified concept. Hayles argues that the posthuman has assumed a variety of forms and adopted many different guises in academia, literature, film and other media (1999: 251). Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston insist that there is no best representative of the posthuman, because “[posthumans] have been multiply colonized, interpenetrated, constructed [...] [and] neither virtue nor vice attaches automatically to this multiple position” (1995: 10). Additionally, critical posthumanism is not the only project to lay claim to the posthuman, which finds itself at the centre of transhumanism, meta-humanism and

anti-humanism (Ferrando, 2017a). Clearly, Hayles writes, “there is no consensus on what the posthuman portends” (1999: 251).

For this reason, this research report resists offering a definitive interpretation of the posthuman. However, informed by the work of Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway, among others, this study understands critical posthumanism as a mode of thinking that deconstructs subjectivities based on non-neutral binaries and rejects the concept of a universal, essential human nature. The first step to embracing posthuman subjectivity is accepting that human experience is plural, porous, embodied, prosthetic and relational in the sense that each of us is inexorably entangled with those we identify as other humans, other-than-human, less-than-human and nonhuman. The extent to which this way of posthuman-being is alternately endorsed and resisted by *Dub Steps* is carefully mapped throughout this research report.

Braidotti’s sober, materialist and affirmative approach to posthuman-being epitomises the values of critical posthumanism and, therefore, is emulated in this study. With a keen interest in how the universalising impetus of western liberal humanism and capitalist neo-humanism erases history and ignores the gross inequalities that persist among human beings to this day, Braidotti’s work gives critical posthumanism its ethical edge. Braidotti’s “careful cartographies” (2015) of the human and the posthuman underpin my first chapter. This is supplemented by Lury’s exploration of how unified individuals are formed and maintained in western

philosophy and Hall's concise summary of Jacques Lacan's "mirror stage" hypothesis.

Haraway, who famously rejected the term "posthuman" (2016: 32), proposes that humans are more like "humus" or "compost" — more pliable, porous and sensitive to the sympoietic, mutually creative forces of the earth and all its inhabitants than the term "posthuman" could ever convey (*ibid.* 55). Her earlier work on cyborg embodiment (1991) and her new suggestion of the "Chthulucene" as an alternative for reimagining the destructive Anthropocene/Capitalocene (2016) provide two progressive modes for conceptualising multispecies interconnectivity. Haraway's work is foregrounded in my second chapter, as is the writing of Sherryl Vint, who addresses the human/animal boundary in SF from the perspective of Human-Animal Studies (HAS).

The scholarship of Hayles prioritises the dynamic and evolving relationships among humans and various intelligent machines. Skilfully traversing the ravine that separates the humanities and sciences in academia, Hayles successfully merges the concerns of critical posthumanism with concepts from information technology, cybernetics (1999) and, more recently, new developments in cognitive science and neurobiology (2017). Her vision of the utopian potential of human and nonhuman nonconscious cognition within cognitive assemblages (*ibid.* 202) provides a productive counterpoint to the technophobic future world of *Dub Steps*. This is

explored in chapter three alongside an examination of Baudrillard's investigation into simulacra and simulation which proves useful in my discussion of Johannesburg before the apocalypse.

Additional insights about critical posthumanism and posthuman subjectivity, from Ferrando, Halberstam and Livingston, Herbrechter and Wolfe, are utilised throughout this study.

\* \* \*

## JOHANNESBURG

In *Changing Space, Changing City* (2014), Phillip Harrison, Graeme Gotz, Alison Todes and Chris Wray provide a thorough, contemporary account of the history of Johannesburg and the material transformations currently underway in the city. Their book also provides an excellent overview of what they describe as the "rich and multifarious tradition of writing on the city of Johannesburg" (2014: 12). Their work, supplemented by statistical data, maps and other information from the Gauteng City-Region Observatory (GCRO), is used in this research report to paint a picture of real-world Johannesburg from which useful insights about the city in *Dub Steps* may be gleaned.

The city of Johannesburg began in 1886 as a small colonial village and collection of mining camps after gold was discovered in the Witwatersrand. Over the years, it became the greatest mining city in the world and today it is South Africa's financial capital (GCRO, 2017). Harrison (*et al.*) report that:

"[between] 1996 and 2011, the Gross Value Added (GVA) of Johannesburg's economy expanded by 87.7 per cent compared to a national increase of 61.8 per cent. [...] In South Africa, the number of individuals with jobs increased by 43 per cent compared with 79 per cent for Johannesburg" (2014: 5).

According to Harrison (*et al.*), Johannesburg's reputation as the "dynamo within the national economy" means that it commands a high status in the national social imagination, attracting thousands of job-seekers from all over the country every year (*ibid.* 3). Johannesburg is also known as a "city of migrants". In the period 1996–2011, the percentage of the enumerated population with foreign citizenship grew significantly from 2.8% to 12.7%, with most immigrants arriving from other parts of sub-Saharan South Africa (*ibid.* 7). Overall, the human population in Johannesburg is increasing and, contrary to international trends, the city is densifying, which means that the number of people per square kilometre is increasing (*ibid.* 9).

The GCRO locates Johannesburg geographically within Gauteng – a land-locked South African province near the country's northern border – and delineates the Gauteng city-region (GCR) as "an integrated cluster of cities, towns and urban nodes

that together make up the economic heartland of South Africa" (2017). The boundary line enclosing the area governed by the City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality is usually taken as the city's official perimeter. This is indicated clearly on the map in fig. 2.

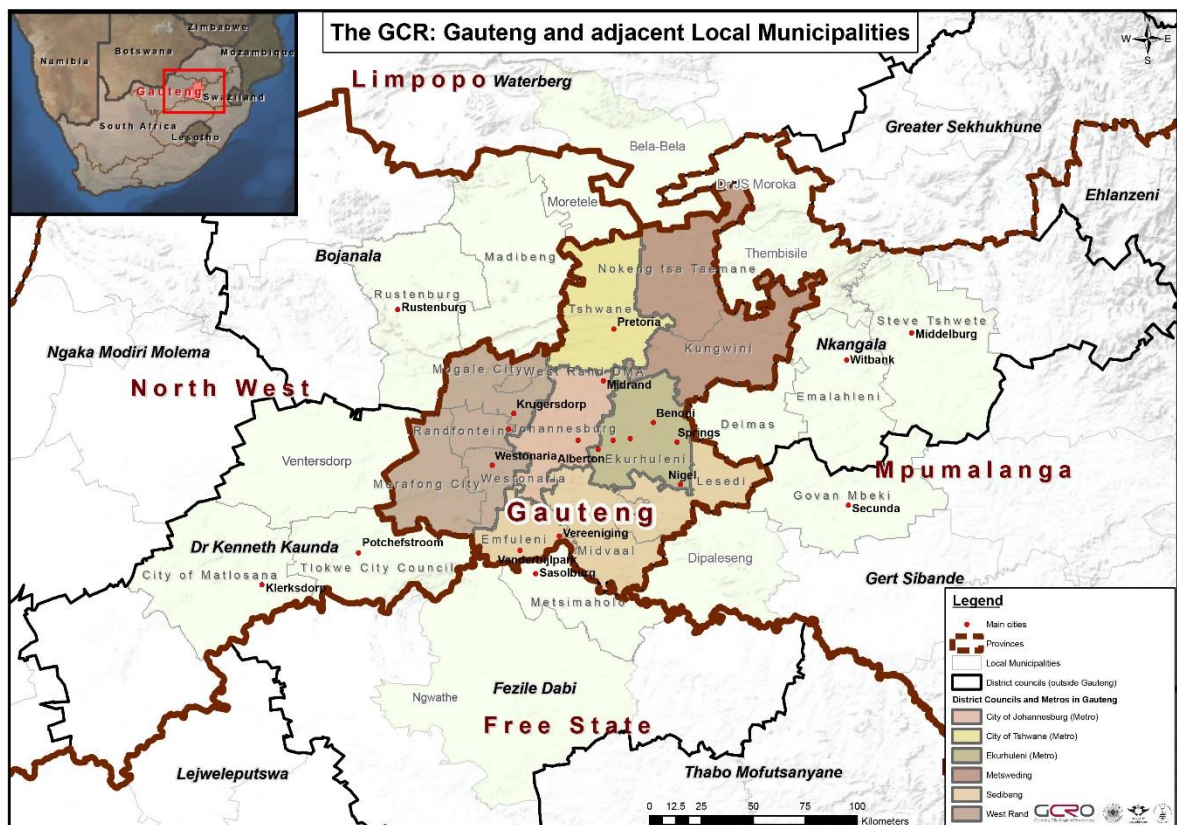


Fig. 2 – the Gauteng city-region with the metropolitan perimeter of the city of Johannesburg clearly demarcated, image used with permission from GCRO

The arbitrary nature of these administrative demarcations is well illustrated by the map in fig. 3, which shows how demographic, economic and land cover indices are used to determine the core and peripheral zones of the GCR. At least a third of its core is within Johannesburg and accounts for more than half of Johannesburg's area.

However, the map reveals that “some core areas lie in the periphery while some peripheral areas sit within the core” (GCRO, 2016).

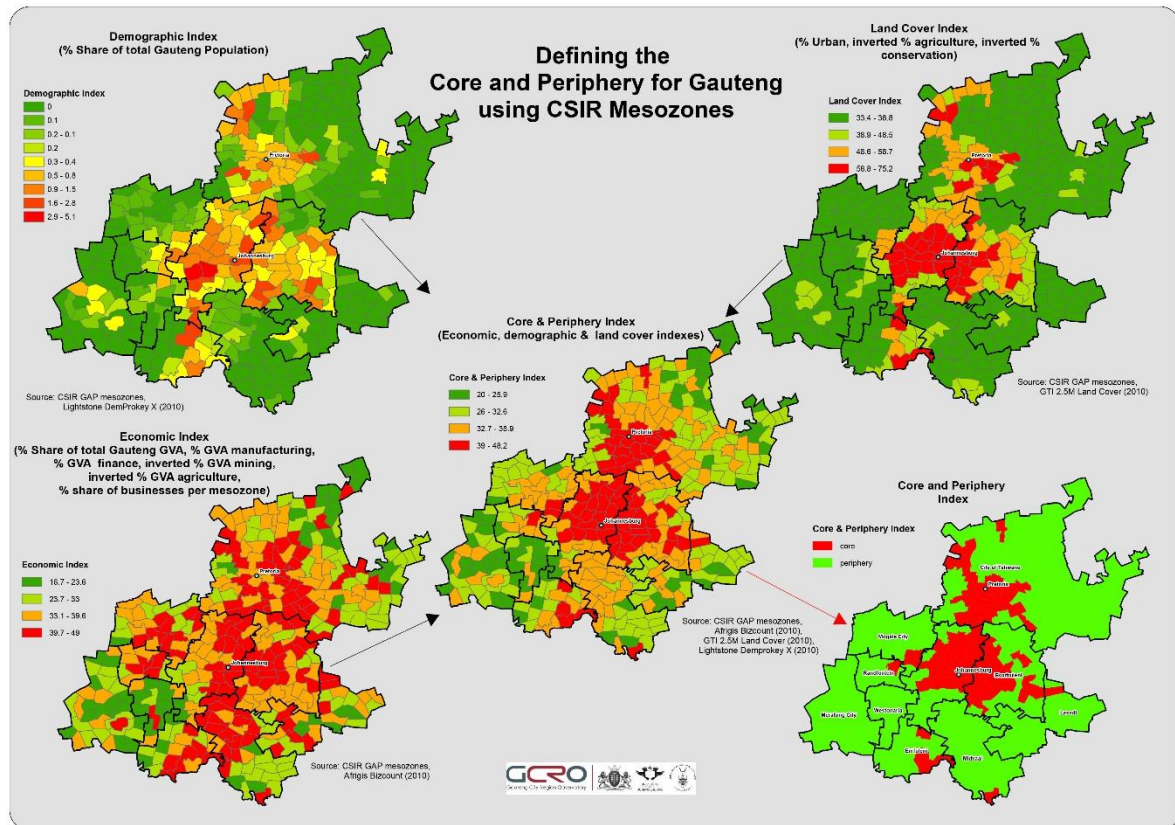


Fig. 3 – map showing how the core and peripheral areas of the GCR are determined by demographic, economic and land cover indices, image used with permission from GCRO

What these two maps illustrate is that the city's influence extends beyond its official perimeter, spilling into Tshwane and Ekurhuleni, while some areas within

Johannesburg are not urban in terms of land cover, have a low population density and do not contribute particularly well to Gauteng's GVA. This indicates that Johannesburg and the Gauteng region at large are fragmentary in spatial, economic and social terms.

This poses a significant challenge to writers, filmmakers and other artists attempting to represent the city because, as Potsiso Phasha points out, “as long as the region has no definite boundary, there can be no definite representation of it” (2013). However, this also means that there are no limitations to what may or may not be considered a part of the city.

An obvious tension exists between the rigidity of Johannesburg’s official, metropolitan perimeter and the discontinuous splintering of the elements necessary to its definition as a city – features which, at times, both breach and recede from its borders. This represents what Harrison (*et al.*) identify as “two largely separate, and sometimes antagonistic, discursive communities” within which people have been writing about Johannesburg since the turn of the millennium (2014: 18).

There is the literature that portrays the city fluid, elusive and difficult to define – a representation Harrison (*et al.*) claim was popularised by Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall (*ibid.*). Mbembe and Nuttall, whose work also informs this study, wrote *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis* (2008) in reaction to studies which, in their words, “have interpreted the city as nothing but the spatial embodiment of unequal economic relations and coercive and segregationist policies” (*ibid.* 10). These studies constitute the other branch of contemporary literature on Johannesburg – a body of work concerned with the inflexible “materialities” of the city and focusing on the



"inequalities and injustices of the city" (Harrison *et al.* 2014: 18). Harrison *et al.* recommend that future writers seek a middle ground which balances subjective readings of the city with the recognition of the persistence of certain social and economic structures (*ibid.* 19).

In this research report, both traditions of writing on Johannesburg are significant insofar as they inform my analysis of how Johannesburg functions in *Dub Steps* as not only the locus for the breakdown of humanist identity but also an apt setting for the emergence of new forms of posthuman-being. A similar approach is taken by Paul Clarke and Timothy Wright, whose thought-provoking explorations of "becoming-animal" (Clarke, 2016) and mutation (Wright, 2018), specifically in South African SF where Johannesburg is the setting, have proven to be invaluable to the consolidation of my own ideas about *Dub Steps*.

\* \* \*

## SCIENCE FICTION

Just as the programme of critical posthumanism and writing on the city of Johannesburg are supported and enriched by well-established literatures, so, too, is the genre of SF. One of the most prominent figures working in the field of SF literary

criticism, who has written extensively about the history and value of the genre, is Darko Suvin. Suvin's work has been an indispensable resource in formulating an understanding of SF in this study. Additionally, the contributions of scholars Adam Roberts and Carl Freedman have been helpful in illuminating and expanding on Suvin's theories. By linking Suvin's concept of the "novum" to the notion of alterity (Roberts, 2000) and the "cognition" of Suvin's "cognitive estrangement" to critical theory (Freedman, 2000), Roberts and Freedman provide a strong foundation for my argument that SF is a productive framework for exploring the concerns of critical posthumanism.

Suvin's definition of SF remains relevant and productive today because it emphasises the fact that the genre has the potential to be, as Sarah Lefanu puts it, "subversive, satirical [and] iconoclastic" (1989: 4). In his seminal essay, *On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre* (1972), Suvin argues that SF is the literature of "cognitive estrangement" (*ibid.* 372) with the power to hold a mirror to the world (*ibid.* 374). However, Suvin writes, the mirror is "not only a reflecting one, it is also a transforming one" – the mirror is a "crucible" – and, consequently, the genre is always bound to real hopes and fears concerning lived realities and future possibilities (*ibid.*). In this way, SF functions as "a diagnosis, a warning, a call to understanding and action, and [...] a mapping of possible alternatives" (*ibid.* 378). Haraway described this inclination of SF well when she wrote that SF is "storytelling and fact telling; it is the patterning of

possible worlds and possible times, material-semiotic worlds, gone, here, and yet to come" (2016: 31).

According to Suvin, SF exhibits an attitude of estrangement when a place, person or thing – which, under ordinary circumstances, would be recognisable to the reader or viewer as somewhere, someone or something that exists in the real world – is changed in ways that distance it from reality without fully obscuring the intended referent. In other words, "[a] representation which estranges is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar" (*ibid.* 374).

For example, in *Dub Steps*, Miller presents readers with a race of genetically modified porcine creatures called the "free pigs". While most people can easily recognise a pig – and many know about the existence of the science of genetic engineering, even if they do not understand how it works – the concept of a supremely intelligent, monstrously large pig, roaming wild and detached from its regular function as a source of food for human consumption, is something new. It is what Suvin has termed a "novum".

Phrased differently, Roberts explains that, usually, the schism between fantasy and reality that estrangement describes is distilled in the form of a novum (2000: 28). He defines a novum as a material point of difference that exists between the imagined SF world and the real world (*ibid.* 6). Novums are neither conceptual nor supernatural

– they exist materially in the world of the story and are always grounded in a scientific or pseudoscientific discourse, which makes them plausible within that world (*ibid.* 7).

A novum may take various forms – common ones in SF include, among others, spaceships, time machines, robots and aliens – and there is often more than one present in a single work of SF (*ibid.* 6). Yet, it is not necessarily the unique or physical qualities of the novum that matter but, rather, the consequences of its presence in the world of the story (*ibid.* 7) and its symbolic resonances in the real world (*ibid.* 19). This is true of the free pigs and other novums that populate the pages of *Dub Steps*. As will be seen, analysing these novums is revealing of the novel's ethics, including its stance on posthumanism, whiteness, human-animal relationships, the city of Johannesburg, technology and human evolution.

For Roberts, a novum may be read as a "material embodiment of alterity" (*ibid.* 28).

Although there is some truth to this assertion, Roberts's conflation of Suvin's novum and the concept of alterity is reductive – the relationship between the two ideas is far more complex than it first seems. A detailed investigation lies beyond the scope of this research report, but I have made some observations regarding Roberts's comparison which are relevant to this study.

First, it is important to note that sentience is not a prerequisite for alterity, which was defined earlier in this literature review as "the state or quality of being other, [...] of not being of the self" (Hazell, 2009: xvii). This means that Roberts's words hold true for an

element such as a hologram, which may be considered both a form of alterity and a novum in *Dub Steps*. However, my second observation is that not every instance of alterity in the novel is a novum. This is because, in *Dub Steps*, alterity operates in relation to Roy. Therefore, women and people of colour – although less radical than, say, free pigs or nanobots – are also examples of alterity in the book. However, they are not novums because their presence in the text does not evoke estrangement. Third, unlike a novum, alterity may be conceptual or supernatural in nature as long as it represents “the absence of identity” (Karskens, in Corbey & Leerssen, 1991: 82). While alterity is an “empty concept” and “never based on a real other” (van Alphen in Leerssen, 1991: 2–3), novums must be material in the world of the story.

Ultimately, as far as *Dub Steps* is concerned, alterity describes forms of otherness that are used by Roy to define and maintain his identity. Some of these are novums. However, the power of the novum lies in its ability to challenges readers and viewers of SF to rethink *how* we encounter difference in the real world. This requires that estrangement be “cognitive”, which describes an active process of unravelling the symbolic significance of novums in SF texts.

Freedman likens the “cognition” of “cognitive estrangement” to critical theory, which labours to reveal that certain aspects of our lived experiences are socially constructed – they “are not what they seem to be and [...] need not eternally be as they are” (2000: 8). Consequently, many SF texts challenge readers and viewers to consider the

implications of different political positions (De Smedt and De Cruz, 2015: 16) and “to explore troubling issues [...] at a safe emotional remove” (Brown, 2014: 28). There is a clear parallel here between what Roberts calls the “progressive or radical potential” of SF and the programme of critical posthumanism, which is concerned primarily with questions regarding the ethics of human ontology. Therefore, SF is used by writers as a productive framework for exploring potential futures and experimenting with the many exciting and terrifying possibilities of posthuman-being. Hayles argues that “the question is not whether we will become posthuman, for posthumanity is already here” (1999: 246). Rather, we should be asking “what kind of posthumans we will be” (*ibid.*). “Nowhere”, Hayles continues, is this question “explored more passionately than in contemporary speculative fiction” (*ibid.* 247).

## CHAPTER ONE

*I am not used to such journeys:*

framing Johannesburg as the locus of the breakdown  
of liberal humanist identity in *Dub Steps*

The first chapter of this research report explores how Roy Fotheringham, the protagonist of *Dub Steps*, is represented in the novel as a liberal humanist subject who is forced to confront the fragility of his identity when, unexpectedly, he is thrust into a new and frightening post-apocalyptic world. Challenged by an array of internal discontinuities and external antagonistic forces, the presumed foundations of Roy's selfhood – including his embodiment in a unique body, his relationships with other humans and his memories of his life in Johannesburg – begin to crack under pressure. Although Roy attempts to maintain a stable identity by recording the details of his life in a personal biography, the degree to which this act of self-preservation is successful remains ambiguous. The passages in *Dub Steps* that describe Roy relinquishing the illusion of bounded individualism and internal self-coherence – even temporarily – constitute some of Miller's finest prose and it is in these moments of rupture that the exciting and terrifying possibilities of posthuman-being may be glimpsed.

Chapter one also examines how the fragmentation of Roy's identity is exacerbated and mirrored, throughout the novel, by the slow crumbling and eventual collapse of

Johannesburg. Roy and the city share a common journey of stagnation, radical disruption, evolution and inevitable demise. However, the analogy drawn between Roy and Johannesburg goes beyond simple metaphor when Miller's framing of Johannesburg as a vestige of colonialism and apartheid is taken into account. Consequently, this chapter explores how the novel represents the city as iconic of South Africa's troubled history and how this portrayal, coupled with the dissolution of the white male subject position, is suggestive of the novel's political stance on the future of whiteness in post-apartheid South Africa.

Inspired by the critical practice of Braidotti and others, chapter one is grounded in the understanding that the human is a fluid, socially constructed concept that has changed and is continuing to evolve over time within historically specific contexts. Furthermore, it is recognised that many people have been excluded from the category of the human based on their physical and cultural differences to the universalising ideal that is "man".

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## EMBODIMENT, MEMORY AND THE PERSONAL BIOGRAPHY

To begin, it is necessary to illustrate the key ways in which Roy demarcates his individuality and defines his identity — a set of processes which are disturbed by the



apocalyptic events that transpire on page 21 of *Dub Steps*. Relevant passages from the novel are quoted to substantiate this study's claim that, initially, Roy conforms to a typically western formulation of the individual – that is, the liberal humanist subject – which has been defined as a single, unified person who is autonomous and in possession of a unique, internally coherent identity based on perceived dualisms between the self and others.

Lury posits that these qualities are founded on and enabled by the following criteria: first, embodiment in a unique physical body; second, a set origin in time and space identified via a continuity of consciousness and legitimated by memory; and third, the composition of a personal biography which forms the basis of moral responsibility (1998: 7–8). A fourth requirement – which is discussed under the next sub-section, “HUMAN OTHERS AND RACE” – may be added based on this study's interpretation of how alterity functions to make identity meaningful within the paradigm of western liberal humanism. That is, the presence of at least one other human – who functions as a touchstone for individuality through direct or indirect interactions with the individual in question – may be considered a prerequisite for the formulation and maintenance of identity. Setting this consideration aside for now, I return to Lury's first criterion of individual status: embodiment.

In chapter eight of the novel, which is titled “Just one” (Miller, 2015: 24–25), Roy begins to process the shock he feels owing to the sudden disappearance of other humans and the nationwide collapse of electrical infrastructure supporting all electronic devices and the internet. Roy responds to his predicament by pronouncing his identity to the reader in a series of formal, staccato statements:

“My name is Roy Fotheringham.

I am a little over forty years old. I walk with a shuffle developed in my twenties to indicate some kind of street/club cool and that I am now unable to shake, even though I know how it looks at this age.

I am wiry and lean. Lifestyle lean, not gym lean. I smoke when they’re around, and I don’t when they’re not.

I drink. Of course.

I am currently in shock” (*ibid.* 24).

This paragraph indicates that Roy, in his panic, thinks he might be able to defend himself against the horrifying nature of his new reality by taking stock of his defining features and, thereby, assuring himself that his identity has remained unchanged. He begins by stating his forename and surname – a semantic combination which both denotes the unique, singular identity of an individual and indicates familial relationships (Finch, 2008). Next, Roy describes his approximate age. Having located himself in time, Roy then positions his body spatially by describing some of its physical characteristics and habitual behaviours, both of which are visual markers of identity because they describe how the body is present in and occupies space. Even

though he is critical of himself — commenting bitterly on his affected gait, slim build, social smoking habit and alcoholism — Roy has established that he is embodied within a unique body, therefore fulfilling the first requirement of a unified individual subject in a traditionally western sense.

It is worth reviewing for a moment how Roy perceives in his physical attributes an outward expression of the inner workings of his psyche and of what, he assumes, are his flaws. Lury writes that “the subjectivity of the individual is developed by self-surveillance or reflection upon his or her own appearance, as if it were a mirror of the soul” (1998: 10).

The phenomenon Lury describes is made explicit in *Dub Steps* in a literal way through the motif of mirrors.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the novel, Roy spends an inordinate amount of time gazing at and commenting on his reflection, assessing what the social connotations of his appearance might be. This activity develops into an obsession after Roy gets drunk one night, falls and breaks one of his front teeth (Miller, 2015: 114). Roy resolves that his newly shattered “guillotine tooth”, which becomes a constant source of narcissistic anxiety, is “an emblem for many other shortcomings” (*ibid.* 112).

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<sup>2</sup> See Miller, 2015: 1, 26, 53, 88, 114, 217, 324 and 337.

On other occasions, Roy remarks that the combination of his jagged incisor and greying hair has made his reflection so unrecognisable (*ibid.* 88) that the person he sees in the mirror is an alternative version of himself – a Roy he can “barely comprehend, let alone modify to more suitable proportions” (*ibid.* 142). In these moments of intense self-abjection, when the image-of-the-self is rejected, Roy perceives the existence of the self-as-other. The self-as-other is what S. K. Keltner describes as “a threatening, if essential, alterity – [...] that which both is and is not [the self]” (2011: 45). At the very beginning of the book, Roy looks at the self-as-other in the mirror and names him “Failure” (Miller, 2015: 1). He then punches and shatters the mirror – in effect, violently attacking himself (*ibid.*).

The notion of the self-as-other echoes what Lacan describes as “the look from the place of the other” (in Hall, 1997: 237). This perspective, Lacan argues, is central to “the mirror stage” – the moment when a child gazes upon its reflection and, for the first time, “[mis-recognizes] itself as a unified subject” distinct from its mother (*ibid.*). Lacan uses the term “mis-recognize” (*sic*) because he maintains that “the subject can never be fully unified” (*ibid.*).

Although this has been stated already in the literature review, it bears repeating: the premises of our individuality and identity are always already in flux because, as Hall writes, the “unconscious dialogue with [...] the other” through which our subjectivities are formed is “troubled [and] never-completed” (*ibid.* 238). Owing to this phenomenon,

there can be “no such thing as a given, stable inner core to the self or to identity” (*ibid.*). Underlying this moment, in which Lacan locates the birth of the self, is the assumption that the child will resolve the duality and recognise that the-self-that-looks and the-self-that-is-seen are one and the same. This unification epitomises the Kantian notion of “man” as both the subject and object of knowledge, however unstable that fusion may be in reality (Olssen, 2003).

Extrapolating from Lacan’s hypothesis of the mirror stage, it is possible to conclude that Roy’s constant failure to unite his subjectivity (the-self-that-looks) with his image (the-self-that-is-seen, the self-as-other) indicates that his identity is already divided against itself rather than unified. From the outset, Roy is fighting a losing battle because he lacks the very thing he is determined to preserve – that is, the internal self-coherence often attributed to the liberal humanist subject within western liberal humanism. The consequences of Roy’s inability to sustain the illusion of bounded individualism entail crippling self-obsession and a lifelong struggle to maintain sincere emotional connections with other people.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the novel, Miller describes how Roy has always been “swirling in tight, personal little circles” (*ibid.* 18), desperate for “the affection [he] would instantly reject” (*ibid.*), “obsessed and internally riveted by [his] own life” (*ibid.* 167), “narcissistic and inward” (*ibid.* 234) and, as stated in the prologue of the novel, preoccupied with “the maths of [his] personal equation”.

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<sup>3</sup> See Miller, 2015: prologue, 17, 18, 114, 167, 185, 231 and 349.

Returning now to chapter eight of *Dub Steps*, it becomes clear that, although Roy's dislocated sense of self appears before the events of the apocalypse unfold, the global blackout and disappearance of humanity have further damaged the already flimsy notion of a unified self to which he now clings. Fearfully, he concludes that "[the] framework, the superstructure of Roy, has been knocked and beaten and rendered fundamentally fragile" (*ibid.* 24).

Roy finds the emptiness of Johannesburg profoundly disturbing. Harrison *et al.* argue that a city "has no meaning without the lives, activities and identities of its residents" (2014: 20). As Roy confesses in the passage below, just as any physical city is "nothing" without its citizens, so, too, is his identity robbed of substance when his careers in copywriting and club ownership are made both impossible and purposeless in a world without electricity or other human beings.

"Jozi was empty. The people were gone. There was nothing.

Let me put it this way. Advertising and social media and Mlungu's was my life. It wasn't much of a life, and it may not have meant much to anyone else, but it was the only life I had, and in that sense it defined the length and breadth of my personal universe" (*ibid.* 25).

This suggests that Johannesburg is a central feature of Roy's life and that, without the city, his memories are meaningless. As previously stated, another requirement of the subject to be unified and internally self-coherent, is the knowledge of their origin in

time and space identified via a continuity of consciousness which is preserved in memory (Abercombie *et al.* in Lury, 1998: 7–8).

Though Roy does not remember much about his mother, who was absent from most of his early life, he knows how she and his father met, fell in love and then produced him — a story he describes as “the ultimate farce, and [he] the farcical result” (Miller, 2015: 3). Roy’s origin story appears early in the novel, foregrounding its importance in establishing Roy as an individual. Although Miller does not provide the specifics as to the time and place of Roy’s birth, he situates the protagonist’s childhood in Greymont (*ibid.*). In the pages that follow (*ibid.* 3–21), Roy details more memories about his life before the apocalypse, firmly rooting his personal history in Johannesburg. This indicates a continuity of consciousness which lends credence to Roy’s claim to individuality until Johannesburg, the linchpin of each of his memories, begins to collapse.

Over time, as the built environment of Johannesburg begins to disintegrate, and the rapid growth of plants causes the city to become an impenetrable jungle, Roy realises that his memories have started to fade. In the following passage, Roy explicitly links the integrity of his memories to the city:

“Trees. Trees. Trees. The forest almost pulsing it was growing so fast. [...] Agency offices and houses of colleagues – their names already blurred and distant. Clubs and girls

and campaigns. Media. Marketing. Copy. I was, I decided, looking over the metaphorical forest of my past. I could see nothing but a closing roof. A green, leafy mat" (*ibid.* 82).

This invasion and breaching of the structures that make up Johannesburg are paralleled by the slow deterioration of Roy's mind over the years, which further erodes and corrupts his memories and compromises his identity. In the prologue, Roy claims that all he retains of his memories are fleeting impressions, more like "flickers" and "brushstrokes" than fully formed ideas. Later in the book, he comments that he is "throttled by what [he] has forgotten, by the mists of story, ever rolling" (*ibid.* 243–244). He also remarks that he is "lost in the fog [...] [swirling] between the poles of many possible realities" (*ibid.* 342) and that he is "no longer completely linear" (*ibid.*). He reflects, dejectedly, that "[life] is loss. The loss of everything. Memory, of course, but worse than that, the loss of self. Of you" (*ibid.* 285).

As previously foreshadowed, the novum of empty Johannesburg – which transforms into overgrown, ruinous Johannesburg as the novel progresses – is significant in other ways too. In a later sub-section, titled "JOHANNESBURG: THE COLONIAL CITY", the symbolic resonances of the estrangement that this novum provokes are explored in relation to the novel's framing of the city as symbol of colonialism and apartheid. Before addressing this, I examine Lury's third requirement of the individual subject – that is, the recording of one's life history in a personal biography. Nancy Armstrong (2005: 5) notes that, in line with the "core fantasy of the early novel", literacy is often the tool used by protagonists to better their circumstances, and this is true of Roy.



Literacy and literature have always played a significant role in Roy's life. He remarks that his most enduring memory of his mother features her giving him a pen as a gift. By giving him the tool of a writer, Roy's mother explains that she is granting him the ability "to think out loud" (Miller, 2015: 3–4). Later in life, when he is employed by an advertising agency, Roy, as a junior copywriter, is not permitted to write anything, again highlighting the gravity of literacy and literature in the novel. Instead, Roy is made to wait before he "[gains] the privilege of writing" (*ibid.* 8).

After the apocalypse, Roy spends a great deal of time sifting through the old libraries of Johannesburg in an attempt to preserve something of human history and protect himself from his own feelings of vulnerability (*ibid.* 246). Using the books, magazines, newspapers and other documents he salvages, he begins to build his own library. However, Roy soon becomes disillusioned with literature and begins to resent what he perceives as its inability to reflect his new reality:

"I had built the library, the archive, in self-defence. As if by gathering around me the better, more acknowledged works of man, I could protect myself against the echoes booming up at the gates. But for the biggest, most important sound of all there was no help. No buffer at all" (*ibid.* 246).

For a time, Roy turns away from books and finds solace in sketching. "Art", he thinks, "gets close to the chaos of life" unlike literature which is "just useless" (*ibid.* 248).

However, following his fateful first encounter with Madala much later in the book, Roy

finds that art is no longer able to give him what he needs and, so, he returns to writing (*ibid.* 314). This moment marks the beginning of Roy's composition of a personal biography, which becomes a final effort to preserve something of himself in the material world – to extend himself in time and, thus, to ensure that something of him as a unified individual is retained for eternity:

"I started writing this to reach out to you, whoever you are, wherever you are. I needed to extend, I needed to push further. [...] I need to tell you more – of myself and my time – and so I started word by word, to explain, to tell my story, to leave a personal interpretation behind. For you. And of course – obviously – for me" (*ibid.* 243).

Roy's desire to "leave a personal interpretation behind" suggests that he fears the final and absolute loss of control of identity that accompanies death. To Roy, it is not important who hears his story – what matters, is that it is heard by someone. Evidently, the thought that he may be forgotten disturbs him deeply, and, so, he attempts to "extend" himself into the future by writing a personal account of his life.

The degree to which Roy succeeds in this regard remains unclear. However, by breaking the fourth wall and having Roy address the reader directly using the second person voice, Miller suggests that the character has achieved his goal to some extent. The fact that the reader exists and is reading *Dub Steps* means that someone has heard Roy's story, even though he and the reader exist in entirely different realities. As a fictional character, Roy could never know about events transpiring in the real world.

What is perhaps more significant is the fact that, by the end of the novel, Roy has made peace with the transient nature of his identity and, finally, is able to “drop” his fear of death, his need to be remembered and his desire for control (*ibid.* 366).

I now revisit chapter eight of *Dub Steps* for a third time to examine how Roy cannot maintain the illusion of bounded individualism in a vacuum. The following snapshot serves as a preface to a broader discussion about how alterity, in the form of other humans and particularly in relation to race, functions in *Dub Steps*.

\* \* \*

## HUMAN OTHERS AND RACE

In contrast to the opening lines of chapter eight, where Roy presents himself as a single, unified subject embodied in a unique physical body, the concluding paragraph has Roy addressing numerous voices rising within him as the stress of his sudden isolation causes his subjectivity to explode into a multiplicity. Notice how some parts of Roy appeal to his diminishing powers of reason, while others simply react to his present situation:

“I was as practical as I could possibly be, but I was also driven by a cacophony of competing, self-referential voices. There was the observer taking notes, lining up and prioritising the never-

ending series of things that were not right. There was the reactor, the violent screamer who wouldn't shut up at the shock of it, the emptiness. And there was the pacifier, the steady, assuring voice claiming calm and balance, resisting the reality with the understanding that this was all, well, a misunderstanding. Then there was the homosapien (*sic*) – who just wanted to see, to touch, to speak to another human being. Who was constantly clocking the horizon for one. Just one" (Miller, 2015: 25).

Here, Roy's fragmentary identity evokes the posthuman subject, which is not singular, but plural – made up of various heterogenous elements, none of which is the exclusive seat of consciousness (Hayles, 1999). According to Hayles, the posthuman requires seeing oneself as a "collectivity, an 'I' transformed into the 'we' of autonomous agents operating together to make a self" (*ibid.* 6). This fascinating thought experiment concludes when Roy encounters Babalwa Busuku for the first time on page 41 and realises that he is not, in fact, completely alone in the world.

Upon meeting, Roy and Babalwa immediately have sex with what Miller describes as "a desperation deeper than the need for names or stories" (Miller, 2015: 41). This frantic and lustful encounter suggests that Roy's need for contact with another human being is so fundamental to his existence as an individual that it surpasses even the possession of a distinctive identity in importance. This observation is corroborated by Miller's use of the taxonomical name for humans, "homosapien (*sic*)", in the paragraph above, implying that there is something intrinsic to the species about a human's need for other humans. Having now encountered another person, Roy is

able to restore somewhat the illusion that he is a unified individual. The following description of Roy's awareness of Babalwa's looking at him returns us to Lacan's concept of looking at the self from the position of the other. Now that Roy is literally the subject of the gaze of the other, it is as though the self-as-other is reabsorbed into the self — a feeling Miller describes as a return to embodiment after an out-of-body experience:

"I saw her see me, and in the process I began to see myself, feel myself, become aware again of my feet on the ground; my grey, flyaway hair" (*ibid.* 58).

During their time together in Port Elizabeth, Roy and Babalwa's relationship remains physically close but emotionally distant — an arrangement Roy feels suits his "abstracted state" (*ibid.* 150). However, Roy also admits that sex is a "peripheral consideration" and what he really wants is to "mix energy" with Babalwa — "to dilute [himself] and gain a little bit of someone else" (*ibid.* 66). Here, in another surprising departure from the notion of a unified and whole self — an illusion that Roy has been struggling to maintain — Roy evokes the porosity of the posthuman. This radical openness of the subject to interpenetration by others takes the notion of alterity — or what Peter Katzenstein describes as identity formation through "mutually constructed and evolving images of self and other" (1996: 59) — one step further. While, as Sander Gilman points out, typical configurations of identity rely on the drawing of a flexible, imaginary line between the self and the other (in Hall, 1997: 284),

the way Roy describes his relationship with Babalwa suggests a perforation of that line.

Co-existing with others in a network of pervious beings — a condition in which identity is held in suspension like an array of particles dispersed throughout a fluid — removes the need for binary oppositions and alterity in the constitution of selfhood. This notion of posthuman porosity is explored in more detail through the concept of relationality in chapter two, because it finds stronger expression in *Dub Steps* in Roy's relationships with animals than it does in his connections with human beings.

Although Roy is ready to embrace the porous aspect of posthuman-being, two insurmountable obstacles present themselves. First, his newly broken tooth reinstates his inability to identify with his body and prompts him to “[withdraw] from Babalwa, and from [himself]” (Miller, 2015: 88). Second, because their companionship was formed out shared existential terror, rather than genuine affection, Roy realises that their intimate relationship is artificial. As they lie together one night, Roy embraces her, remarking: “I let my arm curl over her, like we were lovers and not lost, lonely refugees” (*ibid.* 77). Consequently, Roy and Babalwa's union represents what Braidotti (2015 & 2017) calls a shallow “bond of shared vulnerability”.

The superficiality of their relationship becomes even more apparent after Roy and Babalwa are discovered by Fats Bonoko and accept his invitation to join him and six

others in an abandoned Houghton mansion. Surrounded by more people, Babalwa soon loses interest in Roy and terminates their budding relationship in favour of commencing a love affair with Fats. Despite the shallowness of their liaison, Roy confesses that his separation from Babalwa breaks “some part of [his] heart” (Miller, 2015: 113). He compares his feeling of desertion to the shattering of a mirror (*ibid.*). This is significant to the extent that the role of the other is to “mirror the self” (Haraway, 1991: 177) and thereby draw the self into view.

Having joined Fats and the others, Roy’s whiteness becomes more pronounced than when he and Babalwa were living as a couple in Port Elizabeth. Although Roy has always been cognisant of the numerous and striking contrasts between himself and Babalwa — aware that she is his other in both race and gender, about twenty years his junior and grew up in vastly different financial circumstances than he did<sup>4</sup> — their struggle to survive and the comfort they derived from each other’s company seemed to take precedence over their differences. Within the newly established community of nine, Roy is one of the only two white people in the group. The other is Lillian, an American female with whom Roy struggles to identify. The others — Babalwa, Fats, Tebza, Javas, Andile and Beatrice — are either black South Africans or immigrants from elsewhere in Africa.

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<sup>4</sup> See Miller, 2015: page 32 for an account of Roy’s family fortune, which, though mostly squandered by the time of his birth, was enough to ensure that he grew up in a suburban home and was able to attend university. Conversely, Babalwa lived in poverty her whole life. Her back story is told on page 44.

Much later in the novel, Roy is further singled out from the rest of the group when Tebza and Lillian die tragically during an attempt to pilot an aeroplane (Miller, 2015: 210), leaving Roy as the last white person in South Africa and – along with a few small pockets of survivors in Russia which are mentioned by Madala – presumably one of the last white people on earth.

In accordance with this study's definition of alterity, Roy's whiteness usually is indicated negatively in *Dub Steps*, with Miller placing emphasis not on the fact that Roy is white, but rather on the recognition that he is "not black". Consider "Mlungu's" – the name of the VR club Roy co-owns and a Nguni word designating a white person from the point of view of a black African person, in other words, a person who is "not black". During a jog down the deserted N3 highway, Roy comments that passing Alexandra reminds him of "the essential alienness of [his] wider life. [His] pre-life" (*ibid.* 192). Again, his white identity is articulated in relation to his status of "not being black". Furthermore, Roy is reminded of his whiteness every time he and Lillian are excluded from group conversations because they cannot speak any of the eleven official South African languages apart from English, whereas the others enjoy communicating in "a hodgepodge of tsotsitaal, isiZulu, English, Afrikaans, isiXhosa and Sesotho" (*ibid.* 119). Once more, Roy becomes aware of his whiteness not because he is white but because he is not black.



Despite the apparent superficiality of their relationship, Babalwa has always been acutely aware of the power differential that exists between her and Roy based on the non-neutral dualisms of white/black and male/female. Shortly after meeting for the first time and having sex, Babalwa asks Roy to stop staring at her because he is scaring her (*ibid.* 44). The following day, she asks Roy not to touch her in a sexual way again, suggesting that he could easily overpower her if he so desired (*ibid.* 47). Later, Babalwa tells Fats that Roy raped her in their initial encounter (*ibid.* 136). The accusation shocks Roy. At first, he denies it outright but, later, he questions whether he may be misremembering crucial details about the day they met. His speculation eventually ends when Babalwa apologises to him, admitting that she does not really believe that he raped her but was disturbed by the “animalness” of the sex (*ibid.* 194). Despite Roy’s being acquitted by Babalwa, the true nature of their problematic first meeting remains ambiguous since the story is told entirely from Roy’s perspective.

Whether or not he truly is guilty of raping Babalwa, the violence underpinning the white/black and male/female binaries has been evoked. In a South African context, the power dynamics implicit in the differences between Roy and Babalwa, and the possibility of a serious infringement on Roy’s behalf, hark back to the frequently abusive, sexually exploitative relationships that existed between white slave masters and black female slaves. This constitutes one of several disturbing moments in *Dub Steps* where Roy is aligned with the stereotype of the domineering white coloniser — a historically specific variation on the theme of “man”, the ideal liberal humanist subject.

Another example of the unfavourable comparison of Roy with the white coloniser emerges through his connection to the city of Johannesburg, to which he stakes his claim in a second act of violence against Babalwa. Shortly after returning to the city with her, Roy describes Johannesburg as “Roy country” and cautions her to “show respect” when she mocks his appearance (*ibid.* 76). His comments have a sinister undertone because they are coupled with a physical shove that is “harder than he intended, almost slamming [Babalwa’s] head against the corner of [the] smoke extractor” (*ibid.*). Although he may not have meant to push her so roughly, the incident suggests that Roy feels entitled to different and better treatment now that they are back in his home town — uncoincidentally, a city built to serve the interests of white men.

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## JOHANNESBURG: THE COLONIAL CITY

As a nation occupied by the Dutch, subsequently colonised by the British, and then subjected to the horrors of enforced racial segregation and economic inequality under apartheid, South Africa’s history of race relations is complex and painful. Inspired by Dumile Feni’s 1987 sculpture, *History*, which is displayed at Constitution Hill and depicts a “man-body-thing” pulling a cart containing human figures, Paul Clarke (2016) argues compellingly that Johannesburg owes its existence to the exploitation

of black people, whose bodies, much like Feni's creature of "unknown species", were reduced to "units of muscular power". This dehumanising perspective, Clarke writes, was premised on the racist notion that "black life lacked or exceeded the elements of proper white life in part due to its proximity to animal life" and, therefore, justified the mistreatment of black people as "beasts of burden" in the Witwatersrand gold mines (*ibid.*). For Clarke, this constitutes a "history of capture" and "animalisation" without which the city of Johannesburg may never have existed (*ibid.*). Mbembe and Nuttall share the same view, writing that Johannesburg was "built on the extraction of gold [...] [and] a rigidly hierarchical racial division of labour" (Mbembe & Nuttall, 2007: 282).

Even in its architecture, Edward Kgosidintsi (2015) writes, Johannesburg was designed to "maroon affluent white lives on artificial islands of staged tranquillity" and privilege the interests of white businessmen. Sally Gaule offers two material examples, suggesting that Johannesburg's organisation on an east-west, north-south grid layout "enabled the land to be easily surveyed and administered" while "the scale of each city block, 50x100 Cape feet, afforded the economic benefit of generating many corner sites" (2009: 135).

According to Kgosidintsi, the built environment of Johannesburg was also designed to "conceal poor black lives in the back pockets of the metropolis" (Kgosidintsi, 2015). When they were not hidden away underground as miners or slipping in and out of buildings through servants' entrances, the presence and movements of black people

in Johannesburg were restricted in various ways. They were legally bound to carry passes, banned from walking on pavements and denied access to certain modes of transport and public amenities. Mbembe and Nuttall view this as the “spatial framing of race [...] [which was] aimed at creating an essentially white suburban city” (2008: 20). In this sense, Johannesburg remains iconic of institutional racism, even as it transforms into a palimpsest where, Mbembe and Nuttall contend, “a new and singular metropolitan vocabulary is being born” (*ibid.* 32). Here, the tension between the two literary traditions of writing on the city discussed in the literature review, finds expression.

In *Dub Steps*, Johannesburg does not necessarily adhere to official, municipal boundaries — it is traced by footsteps, car trips and references to events both remembered and occurring in the unfolding of action. The novel understands Johannesburg from Roy’s point-of-view and, thus, emphasises the spaces that he is familiar with — the old, colonial-style mansions of Houghton, the elite, private schools of Parktown, and the trendy cafés, clubs and offices of Rosebank. Conversely, the impoverished neighbourhoods of Hillbrow and Alexandra are sketched as unfamiliar spaces waiting to be rediscovered now that their residents are gone (Miller, 2015: 142 & 192). On the one hand, this aligns with Burton Pike’s observation that, in literature, the city is “represented as an unstable refraction of an individual consciousness rather than as an object fixed in space” (1981: 71). On the other hand, Miller’s portrayal of Johannesburg through Roy’s eyes — with its focus on areas and

structures that epitomise the legacies of colonialism, apartheid and white privilege in South Africa – implies that the city has been tainted irrevocably by its history.

Often, it is Miller's diction that elicits the spectres of colonialism and apartheid from the city's built environment. For example, he reminds readers of the forced removals of apartheid when he describes Triomf as "a shattered, angry suburb still trying to become Sophiatown after all these years" (Miller, 2015: 3). Jan Smuts Avenue is referred to as "General Smuts's tarmac" and described as having exerted "dominance" over the land for "hundreds of years" (*ibid.* 75). To Miller, private schools like KES and St. John's look like they have been "cut directly out of nineteenth- and twentieth-century England, dropped into the southern African bush" (*ibid.* 108).

Throughout *Dub Steps*, the language Miller uses to describe the city embodies what Wright describes as a "temporality of stuckness" in which may be found the "eternal return of a past that has not been overcome" (2018: 10). This is true of the technologically mediated world of pre-apocalypse Johannesburg we first encounter in the novel. Here, the wealthy indulge in the simulated escapism afforded by advanced AR and VR technologies and participate an overtly capitalist economy of excessive consumption and commodification. Conversely, the poor are either marginalised in the city – living "shadow lives" (Miller, 2015: 140) – or they live in remote rural areas with limited access to technology. One of Roy's former colleagues, Mongezi,

comments that, back home in Limpopo, “[no] one is networked or connected or app-enabled” (*ibid.* 6).

Reminiscing, Roy realises that, just as he was stuck in a rut in his personal and professional life, so, too, had human progress in Johannesburg stagnated. Even though “change was the thrill as [he] left university” (*ibid.* 5), Roy soon realises that:

“[year] after year, hype cycle after hype cycle, there was nothing new. [...] There were additions to the technology, incremental shifts, but that next quantum leap... well, it turned out to be a mirage. A myth, forming and swirling in the middle distance” (*ibid.* 16–17).

However, within this “temporality of stuckness”, something new suddenly, and unexpectedly, does appear – a radical protest video is broadcast as a large, looping projection against a cooling tower on the N4 highway. The tower has been transformed into a massive screen using an unfamiliar, liquid substance which is later called “transmission paint”. Miller describes the video as:

“a crudely cut mash-up of squatter camps and mine workers going down the shaft. Gardeners in blue overalls walking dogs. Maids in pastel pink pushing prams, little white heads bobbing inside. Open Free State farmlands, rich with crops. Sandton parking lots, replete with luxury vehicles. [...] *Democracy is digital* the text flashed. [...] It took close to a full day for the cops to find the cellphone (*sic*) paired to the paint. It was buried in a bucket, underneath a mop, in the tower’s maintenance basement [...]” (*ibid.* 9–10).

Apart from the content of the video – which serves as further evidence for my claim that the socio-economic inequalities and injustices of the past and present have persisted in Miller’s vision of future South Africa – what stands out for me in this passage is the detail regarding the placement of the cell phone in a bucket, hidden under a mop. To me, this signals that the video projection is an intervention by Madala, since he later appears in the novel dressed as a janitor.

The ramifications of this assumption are huge at the story level, because they suggest that one of the reasons Madala elected to erase humankind was their failure to address pressing issues of inequality, poverty, land distribution and greed in South Africa. Consequently, the protest video may be read as an early attempt by Madala to reconfigure human social lives without resorting to a violent apocalypse. However, rather than heeding its message, media and marketing executives in Johannesburg appropriate the novum – the transmission paint – used in the staging of the video. Almost every exposed wall in Johannesburg is coated with the stuff, with the result that every available surface in the city is flooded with even more brilliantly colourful advertising (*ibid.* 10). In the end, the words “democracy is digital” come true (*ibid.* 10) as Madala takes matters into his own hands and obliterates most of humanity.

Wright’s concept of “mutation”, understood in the evolutionary sense of the word, possess a “logic of discontinuous transformation” that may be applied metaphorically

in analyses of South African SF (2018: 3). For Wright, mutation and discontinuous transformation result in random and unpredictable disruptions of “settled trajectories” (*ibid.*). Wright argues that the recent popularisation of the concept of mutation in SF set in Johannesburg is symptomatic of real-world concerns, reflecting contemporary:

“political anxieties and desires in a post-apartheid South Africa characterized by a simultaneous stagnation of historical movement and a pent-up desire for radical change” (2018: 2).

In this sense, the apocalypse of *Dub Steps* may be considered a “mutation” – a sudden and dramatic break with the past, which leads to a final undoing of the vestiges of colonial and apartheid power, represented by the city of Johannesburg, that persist in both real-world South Africa and Miller’s fictional account of the country. In the wake of the apocalypse, a rigid and socially divided Johannesburg mutates into a posthuman city in both the temporal and conceptual sense of the word. This representation of the city aligns itself more with the tradition of writing on Johannesburg that frames the city as infinitely changeable and radically unknowable. It becomes a space prone to sudden ruptures, which provides fertile ground for the formation of a new South African society based on posthuman ethics.

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## CONCLUSION

Chapter one has explored how the liberal humanist subject, represented by Roy, is deconstructed from within what Ferrando calls an “inner frame”, which is to say from within the category of the human itself (2017d). In this chapter, I have explored the multiple, interconnected ways that a subject may figure themselves as a unified individual within the paradigm of western liberal humanism — including embodiment in a unique body, the act of othering, memories and the recording of a personal biography. I have examined how Roy employs each of these strategies in the pursuit of unity and wholeness.

What emerges from the novel is that each of these tactics fails at a fundamental, theoretical level and again in practice. Roy cannot identify with representations of his body, which divides himself against himself. He cannot hold onto his memories, as plants overrun Johannesburg and his mind deteriorates. He writes his personal biography, but throughout the process remains aware that it may never be read. He cannot maintain meaningful relationships with his human companions, because he is obsessively inwardly focused.

It should then follow, as outlined by Lury in her assessment of what constitutes an individual, that Roy’s ability to abide by a moral code and claim responsibility for his actions will be compromised, and this is true. Although he initially makes several

attempts to claim responsibility for the events of the apocalypse (Miller, 2015: 24–25, 38) and for other tragedies in his life (*ibid.* 237), by the end of the novel Roy hands responsibility over to the reader whom he invites to pass judgement on his life and choices, although Roy declares that “[makes] no apologies” (*ibid.* 333). This final act, and his eventual death, mark the end of Roy’s illusion of bounded individualism:

“So, there it is. That you are reading this, whoever you are, wherever you are, is enough. I have spoken. You have heard. The rest is up to you” (Miller, 2015).

This chapter has also shown that Roy and Johannesburg are intrinsically linked. Not only does the novel sketch Johannesburg from Roy’s perspective because he is the protagonist, nor only is Johannesburg important to Roy’s identity as his place of work and the setting of all his memories, but so too does the collapse of the city exist in a metaphorical relationship with the fragmentation of Roy’s individuality. Roy, who represents universal “man” in his most basic features, draws himself closer to the violence embedded in this ideal of human ontology and its socio-historically specific incarnation of the white coloniser by sexually and physically assaulting Babalwa. Johannesburg, although widely considered a post-apartheid city, remains iconic of colonialism and enforced racial segregation in the novel. Therefore, the deconstruction of the city of Johannesburg symbolises what Jayna Brown has described as a “disintegrating ideology of colonial whiteness” (in Wright, 2018: 9). Similarly, the unravelling of Roy’s identity signifies the dissolution of whiteness which, historically, has benefitted from centuries of inequality and injustice in South Africa.

## CHAPTER TWO

*Just look at this grass:*

dissolving the nature/culture binary and perceiving animals

as relational others *Dub Steps*

In chapter two, I explore how critical posthumanism's critique of western liberal humanism extends beyond the deconstruction of universal "man" to address how discourses of human exceptionalism and speciesism erect imaginary boundaries between humans and nonhuman others to the detriment of both. Specifically, this chapter focuses on the perceived dichotomy between humans and animals which pervades western philosophy, both religious and secular, and explores how *Dub Steps* confronts and challenges this dualism.

According to Vint, the "human-animal boundary [...] has been used to secure notions of human subjectivity since at least Plato" (2010: 2). This division has been advanced by Christianity — the dominant religion in most of Europe and North America — based on the following passage from the Bible:

"Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground' " (NIV Bible, Genesis 1:26).

This passage of scripture suggests that, because God favours human beings, humanity is granted dominion, or sovereignty, over all other living beings. The same notion – that human exceptionalism grants humans the right to determine how animals and plants may exist in the world – is common in secularist thought too.

Building on the work of Foucault, Mbembe argues that:

“the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (2003: 11).

Mbembe goes on to write that humans become subjects distinct from animals by “upholding the work of death” (*ibid.* 14) – that is, by wielding “necropower” over nonhuman others (*ibid.* 22). Consequently, Benita De Robillard and Ruth Lipschitz (2017: 73) perceive a “necropolitical zone” at the imaginary boundary line that distinguishes humans from nonhuman animals and which has “fatal consequences for those who are animalised”. Indeed, this violent distinction, from which the unified individual and liberal humanist subject arises, “misleads us down deadly paths” (Haraway, 201: 33).

Human exceptionalism, or the idea that humans are somehow superior to other sentient lifeforms, is preserved in part through a belief in the power of human “culture” over “nature”, which Wesley J. Smith summarises in the following way:

"What other species has been able to (at least partially) control nature instead of being controlled by it? What other species builds civilizations, records history, creates art, makes music, thinks abstractly, communicates in language, envisions and fabricates machinery, improves life through science and engineering, or explores the deeper truths found in philosophy and religion?" (2015).

The nature/culture binary outlined above is dramatised in *Dub Steps* through the occupation of Johannesburg by animals and plants. Over the course of Roy's lifetime, Johannesburg – representing culture in general and white culture in particular – is gradually reclaimed by nature as animals and plants invade spaces that were previously inhabited by humans. Plants spread rapidly throughout the city – haemorrhaging through the concrete, breaking through walls and toppling buildings as they go. Previously domesticated and captive animals begin to roam freely through the streets. Additionally, Roy and the other human survivors – once dislocated from their food sources – must now come face-to-face with the difficulties of agriculture and the grizzly reality of slaughtering animals for food.

Eventually, Johannesburg becomes an impenetrable jungle – no longer possessing distinct suburbs and zones, but existing as a single, massive, mythical entity made up of many interconnected lives. The dramatic transformation of the city results from a collapse in the distinction between nature and culture and sets the stage for a complication of boundaries between humans and animals and, in some cases, between animals and plants. These tensions finally come to a head in the

relationships among the Roy, his human companions and the free pigs – a race of genetically modified porcine creatures that are far more intelligent and physically strong than their real-world counterparts. A strained co-existence with the pigs eventually culminates in a horrific expression of human necropower which involves the mass slaughter of these intimidating but otherwise peaceful nonhuman others.

Critical posthumanism and the related fields of critical animal studies<sup>5</sup> and human-animal studies (HAS) intervene at the nature/culture, human/animal and animal/plant binaries maintained by western liberal humanism with a call for “ecological justice” (Braidotti, 2015). These programmes reject the widely held view of animals and plants as simple “objects of consumption” (Vint, 2010: 11) that may be “non-criminally [put] to death” (Derrida in De Robillard & Lipschitz, 2017: 73) because they supposedly lack intelligence and sentience (Haraway, 1991; Ryan, 2015; Shaviro, 2015; Wolfe, 2010). Instead, critical posthumanism proposes that animals and plants be understood as relational, nonhuman others with rich inner lives and cognitive abilities (*ibid.*).

Critical posthumanism also requires that humans acknowledge that they are, and always have been, animals too. In this sense, the human is deconstructed from a perspective of “post-anthropocentrism” (Ferrando, 2017e) – that is, the human is

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<sup>5</sup> John Sorenson points out that critical animal studies diverges from critical posthumanism in one key way. While the concerns of critical posthumanism are largely philosophical, critical animal studies “explicitly aligns itself with the animal rights movement” (2014: xx).

displaced from the top of the imaginary species hierarchy of western liberal humanism and encouraged to assume posthuman subjectivities that are porous and relational. This way of being in the world — which demands a level of permeability so extreme that the individual subject becomes difficult, if not impossible, to discern — is exemplified by Haraway's recent work in which she proposes an imaginary of multispecies interconnectivity called the "Chthulucene" (2016: 31). This "needed third story" is based on tentacular sympoiesis (*ibid.* 33), which entails the "cultivation of response-ability (*sic*)" (*ibid.* 34) and the mutual co-creation of worlds with others. This way of thinking is expressed near the end of *Dub Steps*, when Madala tells Roy:

"Your brothers and sisters are all around you. They're between your toes. They are always in your line of sight. They have always been there. You need to learn to see again. If you're going to move on, you need to know exactly what surrounds you. You must understand what life is ...'  
His words hung in the thin Highveld air. The birds twittered. My brothers. A fraction of the breeze skipped through the trees. My sisters" (Miller, 2015: 308).

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## NATURE / CULTURE

In *Dub Steps*, the Gauteng City Region (GCR) undergoes a dramatic transformation.

Near the end of the novel, when Roy has become the "old man on a hill" he describes

in the opening line of the book, he surveys the panorama encircling him and remarks on the various ways in which the landscape has changed:

“North, as far as my eyes can see, is the jungle. The tops of the Killarney Mall and the Sandton skyline are just visible, but now they are genuinely inaccessible for anyone other than jungle adventurers – kids with machetes and a will to explore and discover what once was. The likes of me will forever be elevated on this island, looking out and marvelling over what has become. South is all decay: broken, sagging buildings, falling bricks and cracking roads. The city has sagged so much now as to be a jungle of its own kind – more accessible than the north but equally dangerous with its packs of dogs and other scavengers and its rain-soaked structural weaknesses. To the west the land has taken back its original desert form, Roodepoort still standing as a dusty, crumbling monument to a dusty, crumbled people. The east runs away to the mountains and bush, rivers and seas, depending on whether you go up or down” (339–340).

The “hill” or “island” upon which Roy stands refers to the space once occupied by King Edward VII School, St. John’s college and everything in between, which has been the location of his and his fellow survivors’ settlement for the past few decades. Although, in the real world, this area falls within the official municipal boundary of the city of Johannesburg,<sup>6</sup> it is likely that, here, Roy is pointing to the city’s central business district (CBD) when he mentions “the city” south of his position. This, according to Setha M. Low, reflects how cities were theorised in the early years of urban

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<sup>6</sup> Please refer to the map in fig. 2 on page 30.



ethnography as composed of “adjacent ecological niches occupied by human groups in a series of concentric rings surrounding the central core” (2005: 2). With this in mind, the synecdoche of the CBD representing the whole of Johannesburg is not that unusual.

In this final description of the overgrowth, Roy recalls some of the GCR’s original geography. Although he is still able to identify Killarney Mall and Sandton in the north and Roodepoort in the west, most of his descriptions of the landscapes stretching out beyond him are less specific, indicating that the old arbitrary boundaries, which once demarcated the different parts of the province, have fallen away almost completely. That the land has been described as an active subject — having “taken back its original [...] form” in the west as it “runs away” beyond the horizon in the east — emphasises its indomitable boundlessness and the impermanence of human-imposed borders (Miller, 2015: 339–340). As has been stressed elsewhere, such an erosion of boundaries is central to critical posthumanism. It finds strong expression, here, in the deterioration of suburb, city, province and, ultimately, country.

Throughout the novel, the active processes of the natural world, including those described on pages 339–340 (plants growing, animals migrating and the weather either soaking or drying out the land), operate in a dynamic relationship with the physical remains of human civilisation (buildings and streets) and the activities of Roy and the other survivors (building, farming and travelling). As *Dub Steps* illustrates,

landscapes are the products of a complex set of interactions between natural conditions and cultural practices, which constantly shape and reshape each other through the everyday activities of humans, animals, plants and the natural forces of the earth (Wylie, 2007).

Therefore, Barbara Bender writes, landscapes are “polysemic, and not so much artefact as in process of construction and reconstruction” (1993: 3). For John Wylie, this dynamic tension between nature and culture is inherent in all landscapes, and implies that these broad, often dichotomised categories are, themselves, always in flux (2007: 1). According to Steven Shaviro, this points to the fact that culture, which includes “human beings and their productions”, is “not separate from [nature]” after all (2015: 216).

If, as Gyan Prakash writes, cities are “the principal landscapes of modernity” (2008: 1), then the tension between nature and culture must be present within urban spaces too. Despite boasting the world’s largest urban forest, which included roughly ten million trees five years ago (Disemelo, 2013), the presence of animals and plants in the city has always been carefully monitored and controlled. In 2013, Johannesburg was rated the seventh most polluted city in the world among the world’s largest economies (*The Economist*, 2013) and, in 2016, a new study by the World Health Organisation ranked Johannesburg as the area in South Africa with the third highest level of air pollution, surpassed only by Hartbeespoort and Tshwane (*BusinessTech*,

2016). Although an overwhelming consensus in the literature indicates that real-world Johannesburg has experienced, and is undergoing presently, numerous material transformations (Gaule, 2009; GCRO, 2017; Harrison *et al.*, 2014; Mbembe & Nuttall, 2008; Murray, 2008), very little is being done to improve environmental policy in the city. Harrison *et al.* argue that:

“there has been insufficient sensitivity [...] both historically and in the contemporary era, to environmental processes within [Johannesburg.] [...] [At] the level of macro trends, a picture emerges of a city that is out of sync with its natural environment” (2014: 25–26).

Similarly, at the beginning of *Dub Steps*, Johannesburg is framed as an anthropocentric city in which plants, though abundant, are maintained diligently to human specifications through trimming and pruning (Miller, 2015: 121). Nonhuman animals are absent except as pets (*ibid.* 15) and in carefully controlled areas like the Johannesburg Zoo (*ibid.* 79). This situation echoes what Vint describes as the increasing invisibility of nonhuman animals in industrialised human societies around the world. She writes that animals are:

“hidden away in laboratories and factory farms; slaughtered at mass disassembly plants and transformed into sanitised packages of meat; visible in mediated forms on Animal Planet or National Geographic television, but purged from city geographies” (2010: 1–2).

Roy is startled when, shortly after waking up from his deep slumber and discovering that the power is out, he sees a pair of free pigs roaming the streets of Johannesburg

with a stray dog in tow (Miller, 2015: 22). Later, as Roy describes the setting up of a slaughterhouse, he confesses that in his previous life he had only ever encountered meat through a “layer of cling wrap” (*ibid.* 127). He notices that plants have started “pushing the houses back”, “reaching up and over”, and “spiralling upwards and sideways simultaneously” creating the overall impression of a “morphing” landscape (*ibid.* 79). In contrast with the beginning of the book where human culture is dominant in Johannesburg, it now seems that nature is closing in and dominating the landscape — a concept so foreign to Roy that he can only describe the scenario in fantastical terms:

“Inside the easy lines of the skyline, the city had faded, was fading. As we crested the hill to Zoo Lake we entered a teeming jungle. The birds had taken over. [...] The forest stood tall, as in a fairy tale” (*ibid.* 74–75).

The city of Johannesburg in *Dub Steps*, stripped of human language and meaning, is reborn a porous, hybrid of animate and inanimate parts – a “posthuman city” in both a temporal and metaphorical sense. Completely overgrown by plants, the portrayal of Johannesburg in *Dub Steps* resonates with Wright’s characterisation of a posthuman city in literature. It is a city:

“pervaded by an urban nature that has nothing to do with the introduction of decorative greenery into the city but emerges instead in the breakdown of the city as a symbolic totality and the infiltration of a naturalist, quasi-Darwinian logic into its idealized conception” (2018: 14).

Johannesburg's material transformations in the novel exist in a metaphorical relationship with the transfiguration of the unified individual subject (represented by Roy) into the relational posthuman. Just as Johannesburg is reinserted into a dynamic continuum of nature and culture (Braidotti, 2013: 3), so, too, are humans forced to reconsider their position within the natural world in relation to other living beings.

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#### ANIMAL / PLANT

In *Dub Steps*, Miller uses anthropomorphic language to confuse the animal/plant binary. Upon exploring an abandoned house in Port Elizabeth, Roy is disturbed by how much the grass has grown in so short a time since his fellow humans disappeared. He observes that the grass is “out of control [...] wild and angry” (Miller, 2015: 52). From this point in the novel onward, plants are often described as aggressive, which challenges some of the preconceived notions of what it means to be a plant.

Historically, plants have been regarded as “passive elements of the landscape and constructed as the mute foils of animality” (Ryan, 2015: xiv). However, both Ryan (2015) and Shaviro (2015) argue persuasively that, in the real world, plants are demonstrably sentient and should not be defined by the qualities they are thought to

lack, such as “autonomy, agency, consciousness, [...] [and] intelligence” (Ryan, 2015: xiv). Although they may not be conscious in the same way that humans are, the fact that they can process information and engage in speculative extrapolation — both of which inform their actions and responses to the world around them — indicates that they possess some form of sentience (Shaviro, 2015: 221). Although it may be in a manner that is alien to us, “[plants] feel [...] [and] they encounter the world” (*ibid.* 19).

Through diction, Miller paints a picture of plants as an advancing enemy force (2015: 121–122) — radically alien to our common understanding of plants. Although, at first, they seem chaotic and “out of control” (*ibid.* 52), gradually they appear to become more organised, militaristic, powerful and strategic in their growth and occupation of the city. There is something almost fantastical and Tolkienesque about this — and, at one point, staring out at the forest at night, Roy imagines the forest marching as “armies of trees, as in the stories of my childhood, big trees and small trees, oaks and acorns and pines, all rising up to march, to liberate, to change” (*ibid.* 271–272).

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## ANIMAL / HUMAN

Roy and his fellow survivors display a complicated and contradictory set of reactions to the renewed presence of animals in the city and other spaces previously occupied

exclusively by humans. On the one hand, they enjoy observing herbivores in their “new context” (Miller, 2015: 172). When Roy and Babalwa arrive in Johannesburg, she shrieks with delight when she spots a lone zebra grazing near the side of the road (*ibid.* 75). Later, en route to the Kruger National Park, the group enjoys watching large herds of impala, wildebeest and zebra moving through the town of Sabie (*ibid.* 172).

As they drive through the game reserve itself, they open the gates in a symbolical act of releasing the animals out into the world even though many have escaped already (*ibid.*). Roy explains that “it felt profound and metaphorical and important” (*ibid.*). On the other hand, the growing numbers of carnivorous predators and scavengers leaves Roy and his companions feeling increasingly vulnerable and paranoid:

“We slept listening to lions cough and hyenas laugh. We woke to the call of raptors. Vultures circled, and sometimes – often, in fact – I had the feeling they were waiting right above our property” (*ibid.* 159).

Apart from carrying weapons for self-defence, the survivors increasingly feel the need to wall themselves off from the animals, especially the free pigs, which “prospered quietly, growing in numbers and confidence” (*ibid.*) and “effectively surrounded [their] world” (*ibid.* 167). Roy describes the free pigs as “strange genetic cocktails, [each] easily over 350 kilograms, [with] big ears, straight snouts and that specifically curious air of anger and intelligence that belongs to the free pig” (*ibid.* 22). For the most part, the humans and pigs keep a respectful distance from one another, living in “a state of

amicable cohabitation" (*ibid.* 153). However, the humans are uncomfortable about the enhanced intelligence and physical size of the pigs, features which Roy had believed to be exaggerated by the media to create hype about his porcine neighbours (*ibid.* 27, 168).

One stormy night, Roy and Tebza return late to the communal lodgings and find themselves locked out. Furious, they take shelter in an old wooden security guard hut but, before long, they are disturbed by a small group of free pigs — one of which uses its snout and tusks to smash a hole in the side of the hut. The aggressive intrusion terrifies Roy and Tebza and makes them feel like they are being "hunted" (*ibid.* 153) but eventually they resolve that the pigs are "probably just curious" (*ibid.*). After about an hour, the downpour subsides and Roy and Tebza venture outside. The pigs follow them from a safe distance and this makes Roy feel confident that they genuinely mean no harm (*ibid.* 154). In fact, Roy gets the impression that they are "a little hurt at [the humans'] fear of them" (*ibid.*) and that one of the pigs is trying to communicate something of importance to him although he cannot comprehend what the message might be.

Despite parting on good terms, Roy is clearly shaken by this encounter with the free pigs. They are a radical form of alterity quite different to their domesticated counterparts in the real-world and thus also function as a novum in *Dub Steps*.



Following this encounter, Roy admits that though he previously believed the “free-pig hype” to be no more than just that, he now realises that this is not the case:

“Now, having come face to face with so many of them, having shared post-apocalyptic space with them, I finally understood that, if anything, their immensity had been downplayed. When you stare a quarter-tonne monster right in the eye, like we began doing on a regular basis, when you speak in tones they understood and worked with – well, you realize how quickly hierarchies can be restructured” (*ibid.* 168).

The “hierarchies” Roy is referring to are those that have been fabricated by humans and maintained by the notion of human exceptionalism and its attendant discourse of speciesism. These species hierarchies, which locate humans at the apex, are based on now obsolete and largely incorrect assumptions about the sentience of nonhuman animals — or, rather, the lack thereof. Nowadays, our knowledge about animal cognition and behaviour has expanded to the point that the human/animal boundary seems “tenuous” (Vint, 2010: 2). As Haraway remarks, when one considers “language, tool use, social behaviour, mental events, nothing really convincingly settles the separation of human and animal” (Haraway, 1991: 151). These discoveries pose new ethical questions relating to our treatment of animals and are causing anthropocentrism to “implode” (Herbrechter, 2013: 9).

In the passage quoted from *Dub Steps* above, Miller indicates that it is the reinstatement of the return gaze of the nonhuman animal — in particular, the return

gaze of a pig, which in reality would most likely be hidden from view and suffering in a factory farm or abattoir — that triggers a restructuring of species hierarchies from Roy's perspective. According to Vint, in the real world “we no longer encounter animals as fellow creatures who return our gaze” (2010: 9–10). However, in *Dub Steps*, Roy becomes acutely aware of the fact that nonhuman animals are observing him. Apart from being watched by the pigs on a regular basis, Roy notices other nonhuman animals including dogs and monkeys watching him early on in the book (Miller, 2015: 39 & 50). In these moments, Roy feels confronted by what Vint calls “the gaze of ‘absolute alterity’ ” (2010: 10). The result is that Roy feels like an alien, an “anomaly” in a world without many other humans (Miller, 2015: 39). Interestingly, while Lacan's look from the point-of-view of the human other causes the illusion of the unified individual subject to take shape, it seems that sharing a look with an animal destroys the illusion and robs the human of their subjectivity. Perhaps this is because viewing animals as “fellow creatures who return our gaze” (Vint, 2010: 9–10) forces us to address the fact that humans are, and always have been, animals too.

Despite evidence to the contrary, the general sentiment among Roy and his fellow survivors is that the pigs pose a threat to their safety and general wellbeing. This fear is intensified after the humans start producing children and, consequently, they develop “a complicated set of rules” concerning interactions among humans and pigs (Miller, 2015: 269). Fats begins distributing “[anti-pig] propaganda” to create a “climate of fear” concerning the pigs among the new generation (*ibid.* 270). Some of the

children “responded to the hype”, like the community’s future leader, Sthembiso, son of Javas and Babalwa, who “did his best to keep the pig border patrolled at all times” (*ibid.* 270). However, one child in particular, Roy and Andile’s daughter, English, “saw Fats’s talk for exactly what it was” (*ibid.*).

English is fascinated by the free pigs and defies community rules by sneaking piglets into her bedroom (*ibid.*). She forms a close bond with a specific piglet whom she names Snowball after one of the characters in George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945).

The significance of this intertextuality is unclear and it is possible that it is just a case of Miller being mildly ironic. My reading is that English has aligned the anthropomorphised character, Snowball – the most benevolent of the revolutionary pigs in *Animal Farm* (*ibid.*) – with her community’s gentle porcine neighbours.

However, what haunts the naming is the fact that the Snowball of *Animal Farm* was complicit in overthrowing a human farmer (*ibid.*). This represents the fears of English’s parents and her community as a whole: that the free pigs who rival humans in intelligence and easily surpass them in physical strength, may one day attack and kill them.

When Sthembiso reaches his twenties, he takes control of the farm and starts “flexing a considerable set of muscles” (Miller, 2015: 335). Unlike English, who generally prefers to remain silent, Sthembiso is “word perfect” (*ibid.* 360) – using language to seize power and influence the other youngsters on the farm. Sthembiso hates the

pigs and eventually “[whips] his kids into a killing frenzy, which manifested in all the hallmarks of genocide” (*ibid.* 335). In a violent re-assertion of the human/animal boundary, a horrifying expression of human necropower (Mbembe, 2013: 22) and the clear demarcation of a necropolitical zone (Braidotti & Lipschitz, 2017: 73), the free pigs are “explicitly savaged” in a brutal mass slaughter (Miller, 2015: 335):

“The muffled yet occasionally sharp screams, like metal tearing, of the animals as they were chased and sliced sounded so human it was like they were trying, even in their annihilation, to speak some kind of deeper truth to us” (*ibid.*).

The “deeper truth”, of course, is that human and nonhuman animals are not so different — nonhuman animals feel pain and fear for their lives in much the same way that humans do. Like nonhuman animals, human animals are embodied in mortal biological bodies. Thus:

“[the] embodied, vulnerable being that we share with animals [...] [reminds] us that humans, too, are animals, despite a long philosophical tradition, mostly strongly associated with Descartes and Heidegger [...] that insists upon a separate kind of being for human subjects. Part of rethinking the human-animal boundary, then, is recognising the embodied nature of human existence, that *Homo sapiens* is a creature of the same biological origin as the plethora of species we label ‘animal’ and that we have greater or lesser degrees of kinship and common experience with them” (Vint, 2010: 8).

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## RELATIONALITY

Critical posthumanism challenges us to rethink our relationships with nonhuman others, including animals and plants, and to see ourselves not at the top of some evolutionary hierarchy, but as one part of an extensive, ever-changing, network of sentient, living beings with whom we are in “obligatory, symbiotic, complex, contradictory and confusing exchange” (Vint, 2010: 17). Or, as Wolfe says, critical posthumanism requires us to recontextualise human experience as relational — “in terms of the entire sensorium of other living beings and their own autopoietic ways of [bringing forth a world]” (2010: xxv). This requires not only a complete reconceptualisation of our understanding of animal and plant subjectivity, but also a revision of what it means to be human.

At the end of *Dub Steps*, Madala reprimands Roy for his inability to “recognise [his] own family” (Miller, 2015: 308). The “family” Madala is referring to is made up of all the different elements of the natural world, including nonhuman animals and plants. Madala tells Roy that he must “learn to see again” (*ibid.*), but the implications are far greater than just seeing the land as the culmination of a set of dynamic interactions between nature and culture. It requires a complete revaluation of what it means to be human — one aspect of which is a breaching of the boundaries between human/animal. Madala claims that this is fundamental to an understanding of life on earth:

" '[...] Like all humans, you perceive yourself as distinct. As part of a species apart.'

'And that's wrong?'

'Completely. It ignores the most important elements of what it is to be alive. Evolution, Roy.

Evolution. [...] You and the grass are made of pretty much the same stuff. You have a common, core molecular structure. [...] Life on this planet is common. The trees and the birds and the animals and the humans. You are common. You share more — much more — than you differentiate. It's in your science, but you don't see it' " (*ibid.* 306–307).

Madala's message to Roy at the end of the novel is that humans have a great deal in common with animals and plants — they are closely related at a genetic level — and that humans need to see themselves as part of the natural world. In other words, Madala is advocating for increased relationality among human animals, nonhuman animals and plants. The profound assertion — that all of creation is intimately connected at an atomic level — has serious implications for our understanding of our species, *Homo sapiens*. As Phil Henderson writes, it:

"undoes the very foundation of humanism's sense of ontological entitlement, as it disavows the notion that anything in particular separates 'organisms' — much less humanity — from the rest of material existence" (Henderson, 3).

Haraway claims that advances in biological sciences are changing our understanding of "all the mortal inhabitants of the earth" and have reached a point where it is becoming increasingly inaccurate and reductive to think of "bounded individuals plus contexts, [or] [...] organisms plus environments" (2016: 30). This, she writes, is a

“transformative” moment on earth and it would be erroneous to think of it as the “Anthropocene”, or an age in which human activity has been the dominant influence on the planet (*ibid.* 31). Rather, she proposes the term “Chthulucene” — describing our present age as one in which the tentacular “denizens of the depths, [...] the abyssal and elemental entities, called chthonic” (*ibid.*) have permeated everything and everyone. While that which lies above strives for abstraction and distance from earthly concerns, that which lies below entangles us in the very real reality of our embodiment. In this way, humans and nonhumans are entangled together — we live together “along lines”, along a “series of interlaced trails” (*ibid.* 32). To achieve this, Ryan argues that it is necessary to reconceptualise humans as permeable, and to view our world “as one in which [all] delineations are porous, compromised, and contingent” (2015: xiv). In other words, changing our perception about the human and reconnecting with our animal natures (Vint, 2010: 9) requires a “a sense of embodied subjectivity connected to the material world” (Vint, 2010: 17).

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## ANIMALISING HUMANS

The dissolution of the nature/culture boundary is presented by *Dub Steps* as a final toppling of the old colonial powers that still haunt the landscape of Johannesburg in the forms of buildings, monuments and street names. Roy observes grass growing

through Jan Smuts Avenue — a main arterial road connecting central Johannesburg to the more affluent northern suburbs, like Rosebank, with which Roy is familiar — and expresses that the grass is “challenging the dominance of hundreds of years. Soon it would be the tar that was repressed, and rare and alien” (Miller, 2015: 75). This links the dominance of human structures (culture) over the natural world (nature) to Johannesburg’s history as a colonial city. Though this image seems, at first, to be a progressive one describing the long-awaited fall of the vestiges of colonialism, the risk is that conflating the “civilising” efforts of the European colonists with culture reduces the aspirations and resistance efforts of the colonised to simply nature. Such a comparison can never be innocent, not only because it reinforces the flimsy binary of nature/culture, but also because it echoes early western racial theory, which:

“applied the Culture/Nature distinction to the two racialized groups. Among whites, ‘Culture’ was opposed to ‘Nature’. Among blacks, it was assumed, ‘Culture’ coincided with ‘Nature’. Whereas whites developed ‘Culture’ to subdue and overcome ‘Nature’, for blacks, ‘Culture’ and ‘Nature’ were interchangeable” (Hall, 1997: 242).

Like all European colonists, the Dutch and English settlers in South Africa brought with them impressions of landscapes that they had experienced elsewhere, and these influenced their conceptualisation of the prospects of the “new” land. What they saw was an undeveloped landscape ripe for the taking, and, so, “Europeans moved into what (to them) was a previously unutilised environment, their objective being to release its potential” (Bender, 1993: 206). To them, the previous history of the land



and its meaning to native populations were unimportant. In this way, applying the nature/culture binary to racial groups has been used to justify the oppression and disenfranchisement of black Africans and the seizing of land in countries like South Africa. Therefore, this parallel “reinforces a colonialist history of seeing native peoples, like animals, as insufficiently possessing the land which justifies its appropriation and also their treatment as less-than-fully human subjects” (Vint, 2010: 11).

Although part of the work of critical posthumanism is a recognition that humans are also animals, De Robillard and Lipschitz point out that the idea of human animality has been racialised and assigned to bodies in unequal ways” (2017: 85). For this reason, it is necessary that a certain historical and contextual sensitivity be developed with regard to populations of humans who, through the discourse of speciesism within western liberal humanism, have been “animalised” and therefore stripped of their dignity and freedom (De Robillard & Lipschitz, 2017; Peterson, 2013; Vint, 2010). This includes black South Africans and finds expression in *Dub Steps*.

Roy's views of the subsequent generations of humans have racist undertones.

Although some of these young people are direct descendants of Roy as a result of Babalwa's careful breeding programme, Roy admits that he cannot see them as anything other than completely alien:

"In my rare, fully rational moments I see that my children are not what I am. I reach out. I try to touch them. But I fail. I don't have the language. I don't have the proximity. My fingers slide off a metallic, alien surface" (Miller, 2015: 352).

Roy fixates on the broken English spoken by these brown-skinned youngsters as well as their unrestrained promiscuity and their general disregard for education and the contents of his library. All these qualities constitute a succession of harmful stereotypes deployed against people of colour as part of their subjugation by white colonisers across the world. This culminates in Roy's description of the youngsters as "a bunch of apes let loose with computers and time and imagination and ceaseless ambition" (Miller, 2015: 337).

The comparison of black people to monkeys has been a particularly violent and dehumanising form of animalisation in South African history and continues to be used as a means of causing offense. Consequently, Roy's use of the term here is problematic, even though he is also referring in part to his own children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The fact that he has referred to himself as a "gorilla" earlier in the book does not absolve him either (*ibid.* 45). Although Roy displays no racism in the first three quarters of the novel, his disapproving feelings towards his descendants strongly echo many of the harmful stereotypes and assumptions about black people propagated by whites during colonialism and apartheid. This unfortunate stance — and emergence of what can only be described as latent racism — discredits much of Roy's apparently progressive ideas leading up to this moment in the book

and reaffirms his affinity with the unified individual subject of western liberal humanism.

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## CONCLUSION

In *Dub Steps*, Johannesburg is subjected to a collapsing of the nature/culture binary and transforms into a hybrid of concrete and vegetation – a mixture of the inanimate and the organic. It gains mythical status, because it becomes inaccessible and unknowable and, consequently, begins to resist human signification and representation. This new Johannesburg exists in a metaphorical relationship with the process of moving from the unified individual subject to the posthuman subject because it represents a departure from viewing the self as an enclosed and whole to an imbricate subjectivity that is radically open in relation not only to other humans, but also to nonhumans. Consequently, *Dub Steps* seems to posit that human beings should reevaluate and recontextualise their place in the world and, indeed, the entire known universe. It encourages its readers to consider themselves, not at the pinnacle of some evolutionary hierarchy, but rather as relational constituents of a complex network of intelligence and sentience. In this way, the novel highlights the fragile natures of the human/animal boundary, which “[challenges] conventional wisdom and [advocates] a position of sympathy for the animal” (Vint, 2010: 2).

Based on Madala's instructions, Roy attempts to incorporate these values in his life with some degree of success as his perspective does change in regard to some nonhuman others — including birds, trees and, most significantly, his pet cat. Roy describes the feline, which he has named Camille Paglia, as "the true love of [his] life" (Miller, 2015: 338) and claims that they are "so close as to be welded" (*ibid.*). However, Roy is withheld from realising full sympoietic kinship with all nonhuman animal others because of his own fears regarding the dissolving of his unified individualism, which I read as the reason he does not protest the slaughtering of the free pigs, and his own latent racism, which makes it impossible for him to identify with the new generations of humans. For as long as he remains alive, despite everything he has witnessed and the message of posthuman interconnectivity from Madala, Roy remains unable to let go of the illusion of unified individualism.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Looking so hard to the sky:*

technophobia and the rejection of posthuman interconnectivity

with technology in *Dub Steps*

This final chapter examines the many complex, intertwined relationships among humans, technologies and the city in *Dub Steps* and considers whether the liberal humanist subject is deconstructed from a post-dualistic perspective relative to technology (Ferrando, 2017f) or, in fact, reinstated by the various manifestations of technology in the book, which include AR, VR, cyborg augmentations and AI. As assessed in the previous chapters, both Roy and the city of Johannesburg, which is central to his identity, are caught in a moment of transformation — the difference, of course, being that Roy tends to resist the destabilising forces around him, while Johannesburg simply surrenders. Technology adds an additional layer of complexity to these processes in *Dub Steps*.

First, this chapter explores the ubiquitous presence of AR and VR — as well as customisable holographic advertising based on the aforementioned technologies — in Johannesburg before the apocalypse. These technologies not only link Roy to the city because of his career as a copywriter and VR club owner but also efface the city by turning it into “a hall of personalised mirrors” (Miller, 2015: 142) and a “desert of the real” (Baudrillard, 1994). By promoting irresponsible capitalist consumption, reckless

escapism and what appears to be limitless customisation, the Johannesburg of the future caters to and exaggerates the illusion of bounded individualism even as it enforces conformity. This, Braidotti argues, is one of the perversities of advanced capitalism — the fact that a multiplicity of sameness can be linked effectively to a discourse of hyper-individuality for the sake of commodification (2015). Furthermore, VR technologies permit humans to engage in transhumanist “fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality” (Hayles, 1999: 5), which reinforce the Cartesian notion of a mind/body split.

After a brief consideration of Haraway’s (1999) proposal of cyborg embodiment and Lury’s (1998) prosthetic culture in relation to *Dub Steps*, this chapter examines the role of Madala as a technological or digital other in the novel — perhaps the most radical novum and dramatic encounter with alterity in the book. Madala is a highly intelligent, sentient AI who meets with Roy on several occasions towards the end of the book. As stated in the main introduction, Madala explains that he has taken it upon himself to “restart” humanity by all but obliterating existing human populations around the world, sparing only a few pockets of survivors scattered across the globe (*ibid.* 309). What is most surprising about Madala is his stance towards humanity’s relationships with machines, including intelligent ones like himself. For some reason, Madala displays a surprisingly purist and “technophobic” sensibility, as he seems to feel that humans should remain distinguishable from their technologies. Additionally, the degree to which the collision between the classic post-Singularity, post-apocalypse SF trope of

the AI god and Madala's representation as a benevolent, older black man evokes the racist stock character of the "magical negro" is considered.

Finally, this chapter concludes with a brief exploration of Hayles's work on human and nonhuman, nonconscious cognition within cognitive assemblages (2017: 202) and a consideration of how *Dub Steps* rejects the potential of this utopian vision.

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#### TECHNOLOGICALLY MEDIATED JOHANNESBURG

Before Madala's erasure of human beings, VR and AR are ubiquitous in the Johannesburg of *Dub Steps* as mediums of entertainment and advertising. According to Craig D. Murray and Judith Sixsmith, VR denotes:

"the use of three-dimensional computer graphics technology to generate artificial environments that afford real-time interaction and exploration. These are intended to give the user an impression of being present or immersed in a computer-generated world" (1999: 316).

AR is slightly different in that the real world can still be perceived but is overlaid and thereby augmented with nondiegetic visual and aural elements. These elements are usually interactive. While VR is meant to be wholly immersive and give the user the impression that they have been transported into a new reality, AR experiences are

informed by and responsive to the spatial dimensions of the user's reality. Both VR and AR make appearances in *Dub Steps*. Whereas VR is used mostly for entertainment purposes, as in Roy's VR sex club, Mlungu's and Tebza's hack addiction, which I return to later, the main function of AR is to layer additional images and information over projected and holographic advertisements with a specific focus on enhancing retail experiences. Roy explains that the ability of users to customise every aspect of their experiences in VR and AR is what makes the technologies so popular and prolific.

It is implied that VR and AR have transformed the Johannesburg of the future into an arena of big business and an urban playground, which is the exclusive domain of the well-to-do — not unlike apartheid Johannesburg, which catered to the economic and leisure interests of wealthy white people. However, the key difference lies in how the Johannesburg of *Dub Steps* has been saturated with images and promotes the illusion of hyper-individuality through seemingly endless customisation. Roy remarks that those who could access this new environment were "thrilled" by it (Miller, 2015: 9) and that "the suburbs reached and blinked and clicked and gawked" (*ibid.*). Notice how the synecdoche in this line equates the people travelling to Johannesburg from outlying residential areas in the greater GCR with the suburbs themselves. It is as though these geographic spaces — the land itself and everything built upon it — are in thrall to the city of Johannesburg. These verbs — "reached and blinked and gawked"



– are indicative of the mindless awe with which millions of greedy consumers engage with the worlds offered to them by VR and AR.

The portrait of Johannesburg Miller paints in these opening pages of the book is reminiscent of the pulsing cityscapes in the films, *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), where bright projections and holograms on tall buildings mask the poverty and policing of those who walk the streets below. Although in an exaggerated form, this mirrors some of the contemporary material transformations underway in the real-world Johannesburg of the present, which today is defined as much by an “architecture of light and advertising, the phantasmagoria of selling, and a cornucopia of commodities” (Mbembe & Nuttall, 2008: 21) as the underground – “a space of suffering and alienation as well as of rebellion and insurrection [...] the repository of [...] utopian dreams” (*ibid.* 21–22).

Elsewhere, Mbembe and Nuttall warn that the proliferation of advertising in real-world Johannesburg will result in the city taking on a more vacuous, indistinct form, as it becomes increasingly “[an] environment studded with texts [...] A city of surfaces, shining, shifting, superficial, sensational, singular” (2007: 282). This is precisely what happens in *Dub Steps*. Even before the apocalyptic events of the novel unfold, Roy realises that the advertising dominating Johannesburg has become the city itself – a virtual map replacing and obliterating the actual territory beneath:

“For people like me, there was never a city to see. [...] Me, all I saw was the outdoor revenue models: the chopping and slicing of space into money, of street frontage into monthly rental, of air into brand experience. Street names and important buildings were the necessary poles between which lay shocking colours, campaign points and enticements to act (Miller, 2015: 140–141).

Baudrillard (1994) describes the effect of advertising on cities as destructive – not decorating the walls but effacing them. For Roy, Johannesburg is so thoroughly mapped by advertisements and the technologies that underpin them that it is as though the advertisements have become the city itself. Johannesburg is no longer thought about or described in terms of its built environment, its architecture or the real “territory” it occupies – what matters to people like Roy is the digital “map” layered on top of the physical city. In this sense, Johannesburg emerges as a “simulacrum” of the “third order” (Baudrillard, 1994) at the beginning of *Dub Steps*, because the map obscures the presence of the real city (*ibid.*). Roy describes the effect of the map as “a digital game that belied the walls and the streets and the concrete underfoot” (Miller, 2015: 142). This point is driven home when Roy first wakes up to find Johannesburg devoid of electricity and human beings and discovers that the map – the “shocking colours, campaign points and enticements to act” (*ibid.* 141) – has disappeared, revealing a series of uniformly brown buildings:

“It had been decades since I had seen a simple painted wall, a wall without movement, without a message. [...] As my eyes adjusted to the new vista, they slowly accepted. No colours. No

messages. No accents. No shading. Just brown, from sky to floor, top to bottom, wall to wall. Brown" (*ibid.* 22–23).

Like Neo, who escapes from a simulated reality in *The Matrix* (1999) to find his world in ruins, Roy wakes up from his deep slumber to a Johannesburg that has become suddenly and shockingly meaningless to him without its AR/VR/hologram/transmission paint digital overlay. The territory has reasserted itself, but the loss of the map on which Roy has founded his identity is a devastating blow. As seen in chapter one, it causes Roy's self to fragment into multiple parts. Like Neo, Roy finds himself lost within a "desert of the real" (Baudrillard, 1994) – a sensation he describes later as "[looking], finally, [...] with [his] own eyes, behind the curtain" (Miller, 2015: 142).

In retrospect, Roy realises that human progress had halted at the point when all "[technologies] were turned into advertising" (*ibid.* 16) and when people were given the power to customise every aspect of their own digital map, turning the city into a "hall of personalised mirrors" (*ibid.* 142). Echoing Braidotti's (2015) assertions about advanced capitalism, the citizens of Johannesburg have been misled by their ability to customise their visual experiences of Johannesburg to believe that they were somehow contributing to or enhancing expressions of their individuality – in other words, hyper-individuality. However, they were producing nothing more than variations of the same map, all deceived by the same digital game. These people were not marking themselves off from one another – they were losing their individual

uniqueness through conformity. Roy compares customisation to a beast of Biblical proportions: “every time they chose – with every click or command or slide – they fed the third mouth of the beast. Customisation” (Miller, 2015: 142).

Later in the novel, Roy assumes that VR has vanished along with electricity, until he discovers that one of his fellow survivors, Tebza, has been ingesting microscopic nanobots (called “hack”) capable of taking control of the host’s central nervous system and completely overriding all external stimuli acting on the host’s body and generating a VR experience from within. This echoes Murray and Sixsmith’s assertion that “the hardware of virtual reality must recede and become transparent for [a] sense of presence (or “telepresence”) to occur” (1999: 324). Roy decides to try the nanobots himself and finds the resulting experience seamless and wholly immersive – “the next level of human experience” (Miller, 2015: 143). Tebza explains that people had started combining hack with recreational drugs for a more dramatically enhanced experience (*ibid.* 145). Hack lacks the clunky accessories (goggles and glasses and genital nappies) of other VR and AR in the real-world and Roy’s world. The nanobots take control of the body – rewiring the brain and the entire sensory system. The user is transported almost completely. Within the VR environments, the body could be further augmented with physical abilities that transcend human bodies (flying, running faster than a car, x-ray vision, *et cetera*). Tebza describes his last encounter with his girlfriend, Joy, using hack as “extraterrestrial”, “non-human” and “past human” (*ibid.* 148) suggesting that the experience completely altered their sense of

embodiment such that Tebza felt posthuman. However, this form of posthumanism seems to align more with the ideals of transhumanism, as it appears to permit a complete detachment from and transcendence of the physical body.

Contrary to disembodied discourses of VR, which emphasise a humanist and Cartesian mind/body split and imply that the experiential body becomes inert as it is replaced by the image of the virtual body, Murray and Sixsmith argue that VR is always an embodied experience that involves not a replacement but a mapping of the sensorial body onto the virtual body, which necessitates a renegotiation and transformation of body boundaries (1999: 316). In this sense, our bodies transport us into VR, and, because our bodies have histories, so too are our social and cultural contexts transported along with them (*ibid.* 320). The fact that our body boundaries must change (perceptually if not physically) implies a degree of fluidity and potential for a form of posthuman embodiment, while, at the same time, in somewhat of a contradictory manner, our personal body histories remain with us.

Although it is not clear to what degree personal histories are transported along with the experiential bodies of VR users in the world of *Dub Steps*, what is obvious is that VR cannot be experienced without a physical body, and the process of activating hack is linked to the human digestive system. The bots must be swallowed or injected into the body and then retrieved from the urine when the experience is over. Lacking the correct equipment to ensure a sanitary process, after the apocalypse Tebza is forced

to collect and drink his own urine to preserve his bots. Somehow, the abject nature of this activity reasserts the centrality of the physical body in the VR experience in quite a shocking and unexpected way. Only by consuming something of his own material body is Tebza able to achieve the illusion of disembodiment — an experience which lasts for shorter and shorter amounts of time the more the bots are recycled through the body. Thus, the events of the apocalypse have returned the body to experiences that previously seemed disembodied in VR.

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## TRANSHUMANISM

At this point, it is necessary to repeat that not only critical posthumanism, but also transhumanism, among other schools of thought, lay claim to the concept of the posthuman and that there are a few fundamental differences in how posthuman subjectivity is understood by these different but related projects (Ferrando, 2017a). In opposition to critical posthumanism, transhumanism may be seen as “[extensions] of humanism” insofar as they share the attitude of western liberal humanism that human exceptionalism and individualism “matter” (Bostrom & Hughes, *et al.*). At the same time, transhumanists “emphasize what [humans] have the potential to become” and “seek the continuation and acceleration of the evolution of intelligent life beyond

its currently human form and human limitations" through the interventions of science and technology (More, 1990, in *ibid.*).

While followers of transhumanism speculate that one day it may be possible to free the human mind from the physical body (*ibid.*), critical posthumanism views embodiment as finite (Haraway, 1991: 4; Hayles, 1999: 6). In a direct rejection of the Cartesian mind/body duality, critical posthumanism recognises that there can be no division of mind and body, and, thus, resists transhumanist fantasies of disembodiment (Herbrechter, 2013: 3). In other words, there can be no flow of abstract information without a material body (Hayles, 1999: 12). A second difference between the different transhumanism and critical posthumanism is that transhumanists believe that the posthuman is not here yet and can only be achieved when the body is literally augmented in some way by technology (Ferrando, 2017a,b). However, within critical posthumanism it is understood that the posthuman is here already, because it describes a state of mind and perspective on the world (*ibid.*).

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## CYBORG EMBODIMENT AND PROSTHETIC CULTURE

As the lines between human animals, nonhuman animals and plants become increasingly blurred, so too does the boundary between "animal-human (organism)

and machine" (Haraway, 1991: 152). The Macy Conferences on Cybernetics (1946–1953) aimed to assemble "a diverse, interdisciplinary community of scholars and researchers who would join forces to lay the groundwork for the new science of cybernetics" (Pias, 2016). Essentially, the objective of the Macy Conferences was to establish cybernetics as a "theory of communication and control applying equally to animals, humans, and machines" (Hayles, 1999: 7). Consequently, a "new theory of what it means to be human" (Kreps, 2007: 153) was developed, which redefined humans as "primarily [...] information-processing entities who are essentially similar to intelligent machines" (Hayles, 1999: 7). As the followers of philosopher and physician Julien de la Mettrie – who, in 1745, was the first to declare that humans are machines – proclaim: *cogito ergo sum machina*, "I think therefore I am a machine" (*ibid.*).

Many perceive in this redefinition a philosophical decentring of the human from "any particularly privileged position in relation to matters of meaning, information and cognition" (Wolfe, 2010: xii). What this suggested was that the boundaries between the self and the other – thresholds dividing humans from other humans and separating humans from machines and nonhuman animals (and, by extension, plants) – were much thinner than previously thought, and perhaps in the process of collapsing altogether.



Unlike western liberal humanism, transhumanism and critical posthumanism do not require that humans remain distinguishable from their technology. Rather, the electronic devices we usually consider our tools are viewed as extensions of our bodies (McLuhan, 1964). As Haraway writes, “[the] machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment” (1991: 180). Therefore, “[posthuman] embodiment [...] is significant prosthesis” (Halberstam and Livingston, 1995: 2), and operates in a state described by Hables Gray and others as the “body-machine complex”, where the “natural and [the] artificial [are] in homeostatic harmony” (in Pursell, 2005: 179). The human is reconceptualised as a “material-informational entity” (Hayles, 1999: 3).

Prosthesis is defined as “the extension of the human body in technology” (Lury, 1998: 18). While this echoes the stance of transhumanists on the posthuman, it also aligns with Haraway’s definition of the cyborg — “a hybrid creature, composed of organism and machine” (1991: 1). Like posthumans, cyborgs assume many forms and fulfil various functions in different narratives. However, they may be read as demonstrating the prosthetic nature of posthumans with critical posthumanism. While the extent of most humans’ “cyborgism” in Roy’s world is engaging with AR and VR, Tebza has been augmented literally, possessing a “physiological audio system” which required the “implanting an audio chip onto both eardrums” and “effectively [internalised] his home entertainment system” (Miller, 2015: 163).

As discussed in chapter one, the concept of the unified individual is linked to the notion of being “self-possessed” — in other words, in possession of a unique identity. According to Lury, the terms of this self-possession are currently transforming through various acts of experimentation that culminate in what Lury calls “prosthetic culture” (1998: 1–2). She writes that prosthetic culture, despite encompassing modes of heightening the unique qualities of an individual, disables any possibility of unified individualism, because:

“[Wholes], including individuals, are disassembled into parts in such a way that they can only be reassembled as (multiple) parts, not as parts of a whole. [...] [The] individual [...] is instead a constellation of implanted elements, parts without social or natural depth [...] parts accreting with other parts, strategic assemblages, adjacent, coeval parts within the frame of a single form” (*ibid.* 16).

Echoing the words of Haraway quoted in chapter two — which describe the impossibility of “bounded individuals plus contexts, [or] [...] organisms plus environments” (2016: 30) when considering what advances in the biological sciences indicate about the slipperiness of the human/animal boundary — Lury argues that within prosthetic culture, “the environment (nature and/or society) disappears, and the figure of the individual (including the boundaries of embodiment) becomes difficult to perceive” (1998: 22–23).

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## AI & THE MAGICAL NEGRO

Copeland describes how the concept of machine or computer intelligence — the ability of machines and computers to think independently and reason logically — was given the name “artificial intelligence” by John McCarthy who in 1956 organised *The Dartmouth Summer Research Project on Artificial Intelligence* (1993: 8). Copeland notes that there are two broad approaches to AI — the first is to create AI that mimics the cognitive processes of the human mind (known as “human AI” or “cognitive simulation”) and the second is to use techniques that differ from human cognition (known as “alien AI”) (*ibid.* 26). At the time of writing, Copeland describes how researchers were adopting the discredited ideas of AI scientist, Frank Rosenblatt, and building small networks of artificial neurons in reference to the human brain. These networks, which “[operated] in a highly parallel fashion and [stored] information in a distributed way” (*ibid.*) marked the inception of an approach to AI that is called *Parallel Distributed Processing* (PDP).

According to Parhami, the central feature of PDP is that it is “concerned with architectural and algorithmic methods for enhancing the performance or other attributes [...] of digital computers through various forms of concurrency” (2002: 1). That is, it is the ability to perform multiple tasks simultaneously by dividing up the computational load among multiple processors functioning in parallel with one another (*ibid.* 8). This may result in increased speeds, the ability to problem-solve

faster, solving more problems in a given amount of time (higher throughput), higher computational power, and the ability to solve more complex problems (*ibid.*). Today, “[parallel] processing [...] is used in virtually every modern computer” (*ibid.* 13).

Madala was “born” as a result of major advances in the field of parallel processing and, therefore, his cognitive ability is far superior to that of humans or other machines (Miller, 2015: 328). Although Madala is able to process vast amounts of different information simultaneously, he still refers to himself using “I” rather than another pronoun indicating a collectivity of consciousnesses or voices. He may just be doing this for Roy’s sake, but the effect is such that it appears that Madala perceives of himself as an individual possessing a singular identity.

Madala has taken on human form, which necessarily entails a breaching of the human/machine binary, and yet he paradoxically draws a clear distinction between himself and the natural world to which, he insists, human beings belong, thus discouraging the possibility of an enlarged sense of relationality among humans/animals/plants and machines. This purist sensibility, based on a negative affirmation of “such social values as freedom, individualism, and the family” in the denouncement of technology (Ryan and Kellner in Kuhn, 1990: 58), has been described as “technophobic” (*ibid.*).

In Madala's case, it expresses an elitist attitude where he views humans as lesser beings and himself as a god. This may explain why he feels comfortable breaking the human/machine boundary but disapproves when humans attempt to do the same. Hence, it is not surprising that Madala rids the world of VR and its attendant technologies because their use necessitates a renegotiation and transformation of human body boundaries, based on sensory information received from computers (Murray and Sixsmith, 1999: 316). Whatever his reasons, it is clear that Madala finds prosthetic forms of posthuman embodiment involving the imbrication of human and machine distasteful when it concerns beings that begin as humans.

In this sense, the tragic deaths of Lillian and Tebza take on a particularly ominous note, because they are the two humans of whom Madala would have disapproved the most. Lillian, who refuses to focus on her relationships with others and, instead, insists on their re-mastery of the technology of flight, and Tebza, the literal cyborg, both represent characters whose preservation of personal identity depends on the mastery and/or incorporation of technology within the body. My interpretation of the horrifying aeroplane crash, which kills Lillian and Tebza in a dramatic and fiery display, is that it was not an accident but rather a punishment administered by Madala and therefore further evidence of his proclivity for smiting.

Ironically, Madala expresses that he cares deeply for humans. This, he argues, makes him who he is, and he will not change this inclination, indicating that he possesses a strong sense of self and individual identity:

“‘[...] I maintain my core code, my ethos, out of algorithmic whimsy really. I keep it functioning because I believe it makes me who I am. I could rewrite at any time’ ” (Miller, 2015: 310).

By acknowledging that his identity could be easily altered if he so desired, Madala proves that he is a completely self-governed and autonomous individual, fully in control of himself and his boundaries. Additionally, the fact that Madala sentimentally chooses not to change anything about himself reveals that his identity is constant and stable. This is, of course, assuming that he is telling the truth, but the novel offers no cause for suspicion that he is lying. In these ways, Madala embodies many of the ideals of the unified individual subject of western liberal humanism – not to mention the fact that he has appropriated and exploited the body of an elderly working class black male, exactly the kind of person whose body was historically abused in the gold mines of Johannesburg.

The combination of this black body with Madala’s godlike abilities evokes some characteristics of the racist stock character known as the “magical negro”. Broadly, this term denotes a black character who possesses some form of spiritual or magical power and whose primary role in a narrative is the enlightenment and redemption of a broken white protagonist (Cunningham & Glenn, 2009; Hughey, 2009; Hughey, 2012).

The transformation of these white characters into “competent, successful, and content people” (Hughey, 2009: 544) is achieved through the magical negro who elicits the change by encouraging material detachment or “a closer relationship with those things thought pre-modern: the land, spirituality, animals, and phenomena yet unexplained by scientific inquiry” (Hughey, 2012: 755). Like God (played by Morgan Freeman) in the film, *Bruce Almighty* (2003), magical negro characters usually masquerade as uneducated and lower class, or otherwise present themselves in roles and uniforms associated with servitude (Cunningham & Glen, 2009: 144).

Hughey observes that magical negroes never help black characters (2009: 563), and, in instances where they are mortal, like John Coffey in *The Green Mile* (1999), they seem unable to use their wisdom or supernatural powers to help themselves (Cunningham & Glen, 2009: 142). In most cases, magical negroes appear in and disappear from plots abruptly, implying that “they are without interior lives” (Hughey, 2009: 559) and “signalling their ancillary [positions] as [...] personified plot [devices]” (Hughey, 2012: 756). The magical negro as a representation of blackness, and of interracial relationships, is problematic for several reasons. Extending from other traditionally racist stereotypes, such as “mammy”, “Jezebel” and “Uncle Tom” (Cunningham & Glen, 2009: 139) which evoke “visions of exotic Black mysticism and contented servitude” (Hughey, 2012: 752), magical negroes and their relationships with white protagonists imply that “whiteness is always worthy of being saved, and

strong depictions of blackness are acceptable in so long as they serve white identities" (Hughey, 2009: 548).

Much of this is evident in *Dub Steps* where Madala, despite his superior capacities for logic and intellect, employs something akin to naturalistic folk wisdom to advise the lost and lonely Roy. Although his actions have had world-changing consequences, Madala seldom appears in the text outside of his interactions with Roy, implying that the AI's ability to counsel the protagonist is his most important feature in the narrative. However, Madala differs from this stereotype in some key ways. First, we know that even though he promotes a message of relationality among human and nonhuman animals, his core operations are, in fact, rational and logical. Secondly, the novel suggests that Madala does counsel other characters, including Babalwa and Sthembiso. What is problematic here is that rather than materialising before them to sit down together for a rational conversation like he does with Roy, Madala instead appears to these black characters in dreams, gently prodding and guiding them through mystical suggestion rather than logical reasoning. Thirdly, although he claims to care for human beings and takes a particular interest in Roy's personal welfare, Madala is almost certainly looking out for his own interests. He wants to be God, and, in order to do that, he needs to win human beings over to his point of view and get them to act in the ways that he wants them to act.



I do not read Madala as the benevolent spirit he claims to be, largely because his methods rely on violence and an inflated and ambitious ego. In this way, Madala may be more closely aligned with the trope of the AI “god” — or the AI who assumes godlike power — that appears in several examples of SF literature and film as a malignant force that prevents individual agency.

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### COGNITIVE ASSEMBLAGES

Hayles argues that in contemporary times, humans exist in “increasingly dense networks of ‘smart technologies’ that are reconfiguring human lives in developed societies” (2017: 1). For this reason, she writes, “human subjects are no longer contained — or even defined — by the boundaries of their skins” (*ibid.*). Rather, humans and various forms of autonomous AI now exist in “cognitive assemblages” in which “cognition and decision-making powers are distributed throughout the system” (*ibid.* 3). Within these cognitive assemblages, which are based on human and nonhuman nonconscious cognition, humans and technologies have become entangled in “complex symbiotic relationships” (*ibid.* 261) or, as Haraway (2016) might write, sympoietic relationships. What is key is Hayles’s assertion that “[the] more such symbiosis advances, the more difficult it will be for either symbiont to flourish without the other” (2017: 261). In this sense, she is proposing that the more humans become

dependent on their technologies, the more unlikely it becomes that human life will be able to flourish in the absence of technology. Likewise, AI is bolstered by interactions with humans and will suffer in their absence. The utopian potential of nonconscious cognitive assemblages is that they can “[move] us towards more sustainable, enduring, and flourishing environments for all living beings and nonhuman others” (*ibid.* 4).

The technophobic stance of *Dub Steps*, articulated through Madala, exists in stark contrast to Hayles’s vision of a utopian world where humans and machines operate symbiotically/sympoietically in productive cognitive assemblages where human agency and individualism is neither a defining nor prominent feature (*ibid.* 3). In *Dub Steps*, it seems that the mutual flourishing of humans, nonhuman animals and plants requires that humans remain separable from their technologies – a situation that may only be achieved through divine intervention in the form of a highly intelligent AI.

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## CONCLUSION

In chapter three, I have explored the implications of various manifestations of technology in *Dub Steps* regarding the tensions between western liberal humanism and critical posthumanism. At times, the functions and tendencies of these

technologies support the notion of a unified individual subject in possession of a unique identity, but, at others, they promote a prosthetic renegotiation of bodily boundaries (while remaining, at least in some way, embodied) and a productive kinship with machines. AR, and the various other advertising technologies it supports, seems to engender a kind of contradictory hyper-individuality through customisation which masks conformity based on an advanced capitalist market of sameness (Braidotti, 2015).

Before the apocalypse unfolds, VR offers experiences that seem to fulfil transhumanist fantasies of disembodiment (Hayles, 1999) but the disappearance of most humans and the internet reassert the body at the centre of the experience. Cyborg embodiment emerges in the novel as a disruption of the human/machine boundary and as a mode of enhancing one's individuality through physical technological augmentations but also resists the notion of the unified individual subject through acts of prosthesis. In each case, technology is shown to have the potential for both enhancing and diminishing bounded individualism.

Madala, himself an AI and an individual in the typically Western sense (with the exception that he is not human), displays a technophobic attitude towards the dissolving of the human/machine boundary when it relates to humans. In his actions – which include disabling electrical infrastructure and the Internet at the beginning of the novel, possibly murdering Tebza and Lillian when they attempt to fly an aeroplane,

and his self-appointment as God – Madala ensures that humans and technology remain in a functional relationship but are, at all times, easily distinguishable from each other. The result is the deification of technology – Roy’s descendants begin worshipping technology as a proxy for their god, Madala, whom they do not know (Miller, 2015: 353). Even Sthembiso, who apparently receives visions from Madala, is not sure who is speaking to him (*ibid.* 360–361). In these ways, *Dub Steps* rejects the potential of Hayles’s (2017) nonconscious cognitive assemblages in which humans and technology exist symbiotically/sympoietically in networks of distributed cognition and decision-making.

## CONCLUSION

This research report has shown how the central themes of *Dub Steps* are interrelated in their evocation of various tensions that exist between the programmes of western liberal humanism and critical posthumanism. These tensions manifest in the novel as the internal struggle of the protagonist, Roy, to maintain a coherent and self-contained identity in response to a series of dramatic changes, or “mutations”, in the external world. In this way, the novel performs what Ferrando (2017c) calls “the deconstruction of the human” or, more specifically, the breakdown of bounded individualism – a limiting and universalising assumption about the nature of human ontology, which maintains the liberal humanist subject in western philosophy and literature.

Through Roy, Miller demonstrates how embodiment, memory and the recording of a personal biography, which Lury (1998: 7–8) identifies as the cornerstones of individuality, provide an inherently unstable foundation for the notion of bounded individualism, which turns out to be nothing more than an illusion. Miller ensures that this illusion completely shatters by using language to steer the discourse on alterity away from an obsession with the dualisms of western liberal humanism and towards the radical openness and porosity of the subject as conceived in critical posthumanism.

In my view, this paradigm shift is articulated in *Dub Steps* most successfully through Miller's framing of the relationships among humans and animals. Particularly striking in this regard, are the scenes where Roy and his community interact with the free pigs. In the novel, these moments are marked by curiosity, fear and violence, and Miller shapes them in a way that causes the human/animal binary to collapse by revealing that, like humans, animals are sentient beings with rich inner lives, and by reminding readers that humans are, and always have been, animals too. In this way, *Dub Steps* advocates for interspecies empathy, which Vint describes as cultivating a "position of sympathy for the animal" (2010: 2).

The same message is repeated in Madala's lesson at the end of the book, where the AI informs Roy that very little separates humans, animals and plants at a fundamental, genetic level (Miller, 2015: 307). Rather than viewing himself as a member of a "species apart" (*ibid.* 306), Roy is encouraged to consider how his existence is profoundly entangled and interconnected with other forms of life and sentience. Thus, the novel frames nonhumans as more than instantiations of alterity against which human identity may be defined. In this way, Miller makes a case for the adoption of posthuman subjectivity in which, to once again use Ryan's words, "[all] delineations are porous, compromised, and contingent" (2015: xiv).

Even though Roy fails to apply the same approach to his relationships with other humans, and Madala draws the line between humans and their technologies, the

novel is clear in its assertion that there is much to be gained by shifting humanity's collective focus away from maintaining and defining individual identity and towards the nurturing of our deeply interconnected and sympoietic relationships with those we all too readily categorise as different. In this way, *Dub Steps*, like the field of critical posthumanism, "urges us to think critically and creatively about who and what we are actually in the process of becoming" (Braidotti, 2013: 12).

Had *Dub Steps* been set in a fictional "elsewhere", with no obvious link to the real world, it is likely that my analysis of the novel would end here. However, by setting *Dub Steps* in Johannesburg, Miller prompts readers to consider how the progressive, posthuman stance of his novel may be applied in a South African setting. In the novel, Miller frames Johannesburg as irrevocably bound up with the country's painful history of institutionalised racism and white minority rule. Even some twenty to thirty years into the future, little has changed in the city to redress the consequences of old socio-economic injustices and inequalities. In fact, the poor have been further marginalised by their limited access to technology and the proclivity of the wealthy to immerse themselves in the escapism afforded by AR and VR. Throughout *Dub Steps*, Miller's descriptions of Johannesburg embody what Wright describes as a "temporality of stuckness" in which may be found the "eternal return of a past that has not been overcome" (2018: 10).

In Miller's pre-apocalypse Johannesburg, the prevailing mood is one of stagnation or, as Roy remarks, the sense that "change had come. And gone" (Miller, 2015: 16). In recent years, a similar feeling has underpinned a great deal of political rhetoric and protest action in real-world, post-apartheid South Africa. Many South Africans have expressed a desire for a radical change in government policy that will unsettle the status quo and set the country on a new trajectory. What exactly that trajectory should be is a contentious issue that has yet to be resolved.

In response to this milieu, *Dub Steps* seems to posit that humanist paradigms – which insist on a universal and essential human nature and are exemplified by superficial anti-racist discourses such as "rainbow nationhood" – have failed to address contemporary crises in post-apartheid South Africa. Consequently, the novel echoes the sentiment that some kind of dramatic change is required to reroute the course of history and achieve an equitable and harmonious future for everyone. The change, according to *Dub Steps*, would have to be accompanied by a transition to posthuman ethics.

Wright argues that this inclination is common in post-apartheid South African literature, especially SF, written by white authors who "intimate that a form of freedom might be found by moving outside the confines of the human" (2018: 16). Conversely, Wright observes, black writers, recognising that they and their forebears historically have been denied fully human status in theory and practice, "have



generally sought ways of salvaging a humanity from the discontinuities of urban environments" (*ibid.*). Wright concludes that the tendency of white authors to explore posthuman themes in their writing may be attributed to a latent desire to:

"disrupt trajectories of whiteness, of disembodied forms of subjectivity, and to imagine for it some unrecognizably altered future in which it is re-immersed in materiality" (*ibid.* 14).

Based on how the breakdown of the liberal humanist subject correlates with the disappearance of whiteness in *Dub Steps*, it is possible to infer that Miller's story was inspired by objectives similar to the ones described by Wright. Although it is tempting to assume that *Dub Steps* embodies what Nicky Falkof (2015) identifies as a sense of despair and identity crisis among white South Africans following the end of apartheid, and what Wright describes in an earlier essay as "the post-apartheid anxiety that [whiteness] might dissolve and lose its distinctiveness" (2016: 5), Miller's treatment of the subject reveals a more enlightened attitude.

Before elaborating, it is necessary to repeat that this research report has found *Dub Steps* guilty of a reversion to harmful stereotypes about black people in its vision of a new world order. In chapter two, I argued that Miller's apparently progressive portrayal of the collapse of the last vestiges of colonialism and apartheid – articulated through the image of crumbling, ruinous Johannesburg – lacks sensitivity in its conflation of the world of black people with "nature". I also observed that the racist language sometimes used by ageing Roy to describe his descendants evokes

the dehumanising discourse of animalisation. Additionally, in chapter three, I noted that the trope of the magical negro and the novel's technophobic ethos – both projections of western liberal humanism's formulation of "appropriate" relationships with racial or technological others – undermine the novel's commitment to the programme of critical posthumanism.

Despite the novel's shortcomings in this regard, Miller is to be commended for representing the dissolution of whiteness in *Dub Steps* without reproducing the fearful or despondent tone that often accompanies the apocalyptic presentiment of white South African writers (Titlestad, 2014). This is not to say that the assimilation of whiteness by blackness in the novel goes unnoticed by the characters or that the disappearance of whiteness in South Africa is framed as a positive or desirable solution to the country's problems. On the contrary, I think the "post-racial" world Miller introduces at the very end of *Dub Steps* represents a pessimistic assumption that humans will not – or, perhaps, cannot – invent creative and positive solutions to enable members of a racially diverse society to co-exist peacefully. What I hope to see in future works of South African SF, is a response to Haraway's challenge: "How can we think in times of urgencies without [...] myths of apocalypse" (2016: 35).

That being said, the novel's indifference to the fact that Roy is the last white person in South Africa – that whiteness is assimilated by blackness without any opposition or even a hint of despair – strikes me as a progressive and necessary alternative to the

unfounded yet pervasive contemporary narrative of “white genocide” in this country, which insists that white people are being systematically eliminated through acts of organised violence.

Ultimately, *Dub Steps* represents a definite, if slight, departure from the “uniformly anti-utopian or dystopian” novels of white South African writers (Brown, 2014: 30) and, therefore, the novel is a valuable contribution to the existing canon of South African SF.

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