For a *Post-Historical Poetics* in the Contemporary African Urban Novel

James Orao
University of Nairobi
Department of Linguistics and Languages
Main Campus, Education Building Rm. 310
P.O. Box 30197 GPO 00100 Nairobi, Kenya
Email: jorao@uonbi.ac.ke

Abstract:

This paper argues that contemporary African literature has exhausted the impetus that the postcolonial condition gave it and that recent iterations of African urban novels have set in motion a new way of looking at and reading African literature that is referred to here as post-historical poetics. That African literature has had a protracted discourse should not take away from this article's propositions of emergent poetics. Indeed, this article is an attempt to suggest a possible alternative reading that would open up a novel avenue, roughly outline such an alternative reading, contribute to the prevailing discourses and champion for sustained dialogues without foreclosing continuing or any further critical possibilities. This paper is aware that the proposition of a post-historical poetics can hardly be discussed exhaustively in such a brief format and thus seeks solely to sketch the approaches to such a reading. By looking at two novels with strong leanings to fantasy and science fiction, the paper seeks to analyse and exemplify those narrative modes and techniques that would make up the suggested post-historical poetics.

Keywords: contemporary African literature; postcolonial literature; post-historical poetic; African urban novel; science-fiction

Introduction: establishing the paradigm shift

The birth of the African novel has been linked to a turning point in African history, namely the peak of the anti-colonial liberation struggles of the African nations in the 1960s with many African states gaining independence. Its main stated aim was to provide a much-needed counter-narrative[1] to "powerful and enduring images of life in colonial Africa" while critically engaging the legacy of imperialism on the continent (Genova 2005, 266). The trend of postcolonial literary studies has also tended to accentuate the primacy of this historical moment in their engagements with the African novel. (see also Ogundele 2002, 125). In this constellation of a historical turning point and emergence of a new genre, the urban space emerged as a site for literature to sound out "the fundamental experience of the colonial encounter" (Kurtz 1998, 7) in all its fascinating and chaotic overlaying, interweaving and swirling ways (8). This urgency and agency of the urban

space in the development of the African novel can be explained thus: With the changing political landscape prior to and immediately after independence, most of the restrictive colonial city segregation ordinances were repealed and movement into the urban areas consequently exploded, setting the urban space as the ideal site where one met the legacies of the recent colonial past. The postcolonial African urban novels, therefore, in their engagement with the colonial past and contest of the postcolonial space in the newly independent states turned to the urban centres as the microcosm of the larger society. The city, as a metaphor and literary trope, has, therefore, been present in the African novel almost right from the beginning. The African urban novel is, therefore, as old as the African novel. It has also been in the cities that most of modern predicaments of Africa and the African subject are centred (Kehinde 2007, 74).

Mirroring the developments in many African states not long after independence, illusions and shattered dreams regarding Pan-Africanism and African nationalism seeped into the literary imagination, (Kurtz 1998, 8) heralding a dystopian tenor in the novels. Big cities, as Freund (2007, 150) notes, became mired in crisis and stood apart as "vectors that triangulated the combined effect of several disastrous circumstances". The African urban novel has narrated this paradigm shift in different ways: Booker (1995, 58) remarks on "a powerfully dystopian turn" in the African novel, with texts from Ngugi, Achebe, Soyinka and others taking on decidely dsytopian overtones. Gaylard (2005, 5) also observes the same paradigm shift in the works of major African writers such as Achebe, Armah and Ngugi moving from the post-colonial realism to mythopoetic experimentation. According to Gaylard, Ngugi shifted from a narrative of socialist realism in *Petals of Blood* (1977) to the allegorical and millenarian *Matigari* (1987), Naguib Mahfouz produced realist fiction and later moved to more experimental works, and Ben Okri has also showed a movement from the prosaic *Flowers and Shadows* (1980) to the phantasmagoric *The Famished Land* (1991) (5). The African novel can thus be said to have been progressing with a view to depicting and interpreting the African condition different from the postcolonial consciousness of its inception.

These observed paradigmatic shifts have found resonance in the contemporary African urban novel, where it has had to bring forth an imagination of the African urban space beyond the *post*-colonial condition as a defining character. The contemporary African city can be looked at as being caught in a constellation beyond the "contradictory logics of an imperial past and postcolonial predicaments" (Demissie 2007, 1) that informed their predecessors immediately after colonialism. A quick look at the emerging titles of African novels leads to the hypothesis that there is a decisive disjunction between the past and the present in the contemporary African urban novel: negotiations between modernity, the postcolonial condition and globalizing cultural attitudes compete for attention with post-historical constellations in a fragile and dynamic arena. The master narrative of the 'imperial past and postcolonial predicaments' is undergoing a literary overhaul, a rewriting and re-figuration to produce works that envision the city in varied states, characters and shades; in a sense, these novels can be described as *post-historical*. The *post-historical poetics* here refers to a literary imagination that seeks new

constellations between aesthetics, history and space; it is a poetics consisting of complicities and resistances: not necessarily rejecting history in totality, but rather operating with as well as beyond history and refusing to be solely defined by historical agencies, and thus presenting the African urban space with decidedly different rules of interaction.

Towards a *post-historical* poetic

There is a conversation in Fiston M. Mujila's novel *Tram 83* (2015) between Lucien, a writer, and Ferdinand Malingeau, a publisher, where, their conversation turns to the literary value of history. The publisher is of the opinion, that concentrating on history and historical figures – which he considers arbitrary and contestable anyway – diverts the writer's attention away from the aesthetic enterprise of literature. According to Malingeau, being true to realism or history leads to a production of essayistic texts "instead of blending genres" (45). Lucien tries to defend himself and the place of literature in "the shaping of history" (ibid.); in "exploring collective memory" (ibid.). The publisher disagrees:

> I'm familiar with that view of things. We've already had enough of squalor, poverty, syphilis, and violence in African literature. Look around us. There are beautiful girls, good-looking men, Brazza Beer, good music. Doesn't all that inspire you? I'm concerned for the future of African literature in general. The main character in the African novel is always single, neurotic, perverse, depressive, childless, homeless, and overburdened with debt. Here, we live, we fuck, we're happy. There needs to be fucking in African literature too! (Mujila 2015, 46)

By dismissing the postcolonial typology of the schizophrenic postcolonial subject and by zeroing in on the 'here' and 'now' as a post-historical dimension, the novel engages in a self-reflexive mode meant to pave way for a new poetics – what will be discussed in this paper as *post-historical poetics*. What is referred to here as the post-historical poetics should not be considered a synonym of *ahistorical*; it is not a cold, frigid and lacking in empathy look at the African urban novel vis-à-vis history. The post-historical poetics is aware of these issues; indeed, one can say it stems from these issues, which is why it tries to present narratives that go beyond the historical agencies. The impetus is on the contemporaneity.

The idea of a post-historical poetics is hardly novel as can be seen in deliberations by Echeruo (1998) and Gikandi (1991) that look beyond the historical agency in African novels. Echeruo (1998) considered Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* under these premises of post-history, where, quoting Gikandi, he says that Achebe seems to be most concerned by

> those forms of narrative which would rewrite [...] history by 'creating a time-less and autonomous version of events so that they can speak to future generations', [as well as] with 'new forms of narration that might have the power to liberate us from the circle of our post-colonial moment'. (Echeruo 1998, 66)

The difference between Echeruo's idea and the idea of post-historical poetics advanced here is that he sees Achebe's novel as having "its attention [...] fixed on the post-colonial instance" and "as primarily about renewal and fulfilment within history" (66); history is, therefore, the discursive anchor for the novel. Post-historical poetics contends that it is problematic to subject the African novel today to the same look that informed the reception of its predecessors and that such an approach would seriously limit the critical understanding of the contemporary authors and the inherent aesthetics of their works.

A post-historical poetic, therefore, posits the following: first, it assumes that the historical agency that served as impetus of postcolonial realism nolonger holds; also in the mix as competing agencies and mediators are national specific and global specific as well as post-national issues. As Parker (2004, as quoted in Snyman 2010, 13) notes "every discourse [...] will exhaust itself as the context of its production shifts and changes; producing new, competing discourses and a fresh set of myths on which to build another narrative". And, secondly, if hitherto history has been looked at as the account of the post-colonial encounter because the colonial experience destroyed the native foundations for nations and peoples, then there is nothing to remember or recall (Echeruo 1998, 68), and as such a fresh perspective is of imperative. A post-historical poetic is this fresh perspective. The African novel of the second half of the last century tended to be over-determined by the reality of the postcolony. As Nuttall (2004), while writing in regard to the South African apartheid past, notes, not everything flows as a consequence of the historical – colonial – trajectory the African continent underwent;

> there are enough configurations in various spheres of contemporary [...] African life to warrant new kinds of explorations, [and] to confine these configurations to a lens of 'difference' embedded squarely in the [(post)colonial] past may miss the complexity and contemporaneity of their formations. (Nuttall 2004, 732)

For example: Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* comments on the political administrative incompetence of the Nigerian government and the quintessential dysfunctional city of Lagos through an eco-critical narration that frames much more profound revelations and narratives; the same goes for Lauren Beukes' *Zoo City* that does not fashion the inherent poverty, segregation and criminality in her novel as narrative critiques of the postcolonial condition in Johannesburg.

The aesthetics of this contemporary African urban novel, thus, relies not so much on postcolonial realism's critical cartography of the postcolonial urban space, on the postcolonial critique of the agency of history, nor on the motley of socially, economically and politically critical themes, but more so, and in a rather self-consiously postmodernist fashion, on the ability to rise beyond these constants of the postcolonial African urban novel; critically rising beyond and subverting them, and at the same time finding ways of rewriting and re-figuring the same. Thus, the juxtaposition of the urban slum against the urban affluence no longer serves to highlight inequality in the African urban setting; because more often than not the characters in these urban novels do move relatively freely between the two, thereby undermining the socio-economic

class borders that the realist urban novel tended to construct. For example: in her guises as a Private Investigator and Journalist – those typological cosmopolitan characters better known for transcending borders in the city's social, economic and political landscape – and in spite of the sloth on her back that singles her out as an *other*, Zinzi December, in Beukes' *Zoo City*, transcends Johannesburg's segregating borders without being instrumentalized as a symbol of critical commentary on the city. The black, white and grey areas of the city are thus marked, not in opposition to each other, but just as a simple cartography of what makes up a modern African city, albeit a post-apocalyptic one.

The post-historical poetic, thus, rejects the stasis of binary structures of 'now'/'then', 'here'/'there' or 'us'/'them' underlying the postcolonial realism. These rejections of historically mediated and as such stagnated construction paradigms are being witnessed in the contemporary cities themselves; the cities are engaged in their own perpetual dances with modernity, modernization and history. The city, according to De Boecke (2002), is a mutation continuously straining to reimagine itself, in effect tirelessly creating a dynamic web of plural meanings and social imaginary significations: "It is a product of a profound mixture between different cultural itineraries and sites. Its content is composite and is generated through crossing various borders and mediating between different opposites." (245) This composite construct, of course, applies equally to the historical agencies; no one historical construct can claim to define the contemporary african city. This inherent mutation and concerted rejection of historical agency can be found in the literary interactions within the contemporary African novel. As Gaylard similarly observes:

> The shifting context of postcolonial Africa requires the skill of metamorphosis, and for the individual and community this means the ability to mutate. The person or creature who can live in and through such heterogeneity is inevitably a shape-shifter or mutant, [...]. (Gaylard 2005, 137)

Indeed, in Okorafor's *Lagoon* and Beukes' *Zoo City*, literal shape-shifting, mutation and metamorphosis form an integral part of both the aesthetic appeal as well as the narrative realization of the post-historical poetics.

Going by the argument that the socio-political conditions that informed the postcolonial literary trends of the late last century have lost relevance and have been revised or replaced by the trends outlined above, it is further assumed that, being products of authors born well into the festering dystopias brought forth by the illusions of the pan-africanist and nationalist dreams that birthed the postcolonial cities as outlined above, these authors' single commonality lies in their alienation from the postcolonial nationalist project. Grzeda (2013, 173) refers to them as "born free", i.e. writers whose works' dystopian impulses stem from the writers disillusionment with their turbulent post-colonial contemporaneity. Being born in the dystopian cities themselves, they have a knowledge of the inner workings of the city that the last generation of writers, themselves 'immigrants' into the city, never possessed. As such, the urban space in these texts is not looked at as a microcosmic representation of the larger postcolonial society; rather, it is a world

in its own; a world that sets its own conditions for interaction and understanding, and as such, it is (almost) a post-history, demanding to be experienced on its own. Its mapping defies – or goes beyond – the socio-economic, political or historical conditions.

The conception of the post-historical poetics here does not imply the end of individual and collective historical experiences in the African urban novel; it underscores the limitation of the historical agency to account for the contemporaneity of the African urban novel today and posits a poetic that mitigates such limitations. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to offer a reading of the contemporary African urban novel that is aware of the shifting parameters of representing the present and thus enabling an interrogation of the city space beyond the postcolony. Both *Lagoon* (Okorafor 2014) and *Zoo City* (Beukes 2010) employ narrative elements and modes that try to keep up with this dynamism: *Lagoon* stages a *peaceful* alien landing in Lagos, thus framing a series of themes through what at first seems like an ecocritical narrative; in fact, further analysis of the novel seems to reject this reading of a framing narrative as no hierarchy can be established to support it. The proposition here is that the contemporary African urban novel operates beyond the post- and neo-colonial constructs and conditions and espouses what Nuttall (2004) has referred to as "the extended idiom" of the city, i.e. "the ways in which urban life becomes the *irreducible product of mixture*, *each urban moment sparking performative improvisations which are unforeseen and unforeseeable*" (741; emphasis added, OJ). Bright also advocates for this discursive freeing of the city to *become*; to be organic:

> Every encounter between city and inhabitant is an event. *A meeting of singularities*, of countless elements in relative motions of speed and slowness, and capacities to affect and be affected. A double becoming in which each body is altered and composed and decomposed, producing something between them that is neither one nor the other, something else entirely that cannot even be thought. (Bright 2007, 419; empasis added, OJ)

This is an advocacy for an encounter between the city and the character unencumbered by historical agency. The encounters as "events" are spontaneous, particular and unhinged from historical agency. It is the postulation of a possibility to encounter the city without having to acknowledge whatever historical footprints there may be; especially where that historical past will assert its agency and insist on instrumentalizing the character to perceived constestations of power constellations.

A post-historical poetic of the urban space

So how would a post-historical poetic of the African urban space look like? The postcolonial realism discourse is involved in a political act; it tries to order and re-order the postcolonial urban space; it is involved in a cartography project that consists of mapping areas of contestation while engaging the historical agencies that brought about the African city as well as the contemporary economic and political power structures. It is thus acting within the real world with the aim of

claiming territories. The city, for postcolonial realism is *as is*: a place; set; irreducible beyond the power structures it is locked in contest with. For the contemporary urban novel, the city is organic; it is alive; it is a character with its own push-pull energy; it interacts with the other characters; it is a mutant; a shape-shifter (Gaylard 2005, 137). As such, it brings forth its own organic components that, in as much as they might be caught in the ongoing power contestations as defined by postcolonial realism, they reject these and act beyond such constraints.

In *Lagoon*, this creation of organic components of the city can be seen, first and foremost, in the staging of the alien landing off the coast of Lagos, and the resulting literal rejuvenation of the aquatic life off Lagos coast. But it is not the alien species who have landed that is significant in this case of the city birthing organisms beyond the postcolonial constellation; the *process of becoming* is as important as *being*. The staging of the alien landing is the staging of the evolution of species and of a new Nigerian world order, all emanating from the singularity of whatever it is that Ayodele is only the avatar. The title "MOOM!" (3) of the prologue which announces the arrival of the aliens, thus, can be read as the big bang moment in this new Nigerian world order. The staging of the alien landing thus frames several spontaneous organic growths out of Lagos at once; organic growths that can be considered narrative modes designed to usher in emergent power constellations: the coming out of "Black Nexus" – the Lagos LGBTQ group (105); the undermining of Father Oke, the Bishop, as a power player in Lagos (123; 235); and not least of all, the healing of the president and the reestablishment of his power.

Also of interest, and perhaps to be read as a subversion of the narrative mode of postcolonial realism, is the fact that when the aliens choose to make contact with the Lagosians, they don't choose people from the fringes of society as is wont in a criticism of the postcolonial condition of the African city: Adaora, "a born and raised Lagosian [...] wearing nicely fitted Jeans and a sensible blouse" (7) is a respected professor of marine biology; Agu is a military man, who "looked like he'd already seen 'plenty plenty pepper'" (9); and Edgar aka Anthony Dey Craze, is a Ghanaian mainstream popular rapper "out for a post-concert stroll" (9); they hardly represent the usual urban flotsam and jetsam that are ordinarily employed for social commentary on the postcolonial city. Individually, these three characters do not mount the staging of the new Nigerian world order mentioned above. It is in their coming together – their being brought together, actually, by unknown forces – and their becoming somebody else that represents the act of the city birthing others beyond the prevalent power structures:

> It was an eerie moment as Adaora and the two strange men arrived at that spot, right before it happened. Exactly three yards from the water at exactly 11.55 p.m., 8 January 2010. Adaora from the east. The bloodied man wearing army fatigues from the west. They ambled in their general directions, eyeing each other as it became clear that their paths would intersect. (*Lagoon*, 7)

These three, thus, portray subjects from different biological make-ups, different evolutionary heritages, different historical, political and familial allegiances, and different social and cultural

structures (Bright 2007, 417): where their locations within the societal power constellation would lead to an inevitable antagonistic figuration, the singularity of the "MOOM"-moment has decreed that they *become* somebody else, as the first stage of the city *becoming* something else; this becoming somebody else moves them beyond their strait-jacketed societal roles: Adaora moves beyond the clutches of her abusive husband; Agu makes a commanding come-back to his abusive military comrades; and Edgar, the outsider in Lagos, is left to orchestrate the birthing of the historical moment when the whole of Lagos and, indeed, Nigeria and beyond would encounter the new historical dispensation. The narrative of Lagos becoming a new city beyond the "infernal cycle" (Moudileno 2006, 38) of precepts of political dictators, power-hungry military and resources-grabbing multinationals presupposes the birth of beings beyond the stifling historical and societal agencies. The sickly president also gets a *system upgrade* in this push to reset history in Lagos.

Writing on the use of science fiction in the African novel, Moudileno (2006) notes that it can be used as a deliberate staging of a revolution to "interrupt the infernal cycle" (38) of history and usher in a new one. Quoting Blachere (2001), she observes that science fiction could function in such a way as to create an apocalyptic moment *to restart a history* whose progress seems to be caught in a loop: "When humans appear incapable of interrupting the infernal cycle on their own, natural forces need to intervene, like a flood or a tidal wave" (Blachere 2001, 62, quoted in Moudileno 2006, 38), or, as in the case of *Lagoon*, an alien landing off the coast of Lagos. This apocalyptic intervention aims at disengaging society from its historical agencies, getting rid of the postcolonial disorderly order, setting in motion a new chaos out of which a new social order should rise. Writing the city anew would require, what Gaylard (2005, 72) has refered to as the art of defamiliarization, i.e. "the production of enchanting newness and surprise through 'de-automatized perception'", which is exactly what framing the events in the city using the alien landing achieves. The post-historical poetic thus relies on a narrative mode that would orchestrate a radical break from the socio-historical conditions of the African urban space and stage the rebirth of the city. Staging the landing of the aliens as a narrative frame is the requisite defamiliarizing literary trope in Okorafor's *Lagoon*.

For *Zoo City*, the defamiliarization of the contemporary urban space and thus the construction of the post-historical poetic occurs, first, through the narrative presentation of a dystopian fantastic cityscape, and secondly, through the figuration of the magical and the fantastic, as well as the peppering of migrants throughout the whole novel. The migrants, in particular, take the wind away from any nationalistic historical discourse; their presence undermines conversations framed by historical power dynamics by contributing towards a narrative of a cosmopolitan urban space, where nationalistic historical contestations have no place. Quoting Manase (2007), Putter (2012, 63) observes that that immigrants by their very nature of not belonging challenge the idea of a historical singular national home or nationhood. So, the "Zimbabwean vendor rigging up the scaffolding of a pavement stall" (6); the grateful Cameroonian for whom Zinzi has located lost keys and who promises her discount on airtime

as bonus (10); the woman named Marabou, with her "Eastern European, Russian maybe, or Serbian" accent (12); or, the Moroccan bouncer who gets murdered by Maltese and Marabou for trying to protect Songweza, are all instances of wrestling the urban narrative away from the historical and nationalist dynamics that would otherwise render them invisible, and consequently the cosmopolitanism of the African urban space with it. The international face they lend the city helps it claim an identity that is informed primarily by the encounters of these other faces and not by the foregone postcolonial power dynamics.

Secondly, by providing a dystopian fantastic urban setup in which political and social structures have all but collapsed, *Zoo City* preconfigures a narrative mode that would disallow any discourse within the postcolonial realism framework. The construction of the post-historical poetic is, therefore, achieved here through the narration of an apolitical, ahistorical and asocial urban space. This narrative mode demonstrates the inadequacy of the political and historical references that hinge the discourse of postcolonial realism as well as their unsuitability to catch up with the emergent urban constellations that anchor this novel. Through the presentation of the "aposymbiots", "zoos" or the "animalled" – as those with animal companions are referred to in the novel – the novel presents an aspect of *othering* that is not defined by the historical postcolonial condition of the African urban dweller; the "aposymbiot" is thus the construction of the new *other* in a society that, through destroyed social and political structures, seems to be looking to transcend the traditional discourses of othering. As Mark and Amira, the two side-kicks of the villainous Odin, remark: "'They'd bring back the quarantine camps if they could.' 'What do you call Zoo City?' I say. 'Just be glad we don't live in India,' Amira says. [...] 'Because who knew there was a caste *below* untouchable?'" (*Zoo City*, p. 85-86). Interestingly, being an "aposymbiot", and, therefore, a societal other is still as a result of external power plays and thus beyond the control of the person: one gets "animalled" after either undergoing a serious personal trauma or after committing a serious offence. Thus, othering is still very much a function of external forces upon an individual, with the difference being that no postcolonial power constellations come into play in this process of othering.

The main narrative function of an "aposymbiot" or a "zoo" and its narrative contribution to the development of the post-historical poetics in this novel is that it presents a disruption of the normal order of society. In its arbitrariness "aposymbiosis" defines the subjects outside of the ordinary social discourses.

With the narrative mode of the fantastic world of the "animalled", *Zoo City* further constructs a dystopian urban space that operates in an ahistorical environment. In Zinzi's movements across Johannesburg – playing at once the Private Detective and the Journalist – searching for the missing teenage popstar Songweza, not once is the city presented against a backdrop of anything of historical significance. What one gets by following Zinzi around is a cityscape like any other – "asymbiosis" being not confined to Zinzi's Johannesburg – but stripped of that historical archive that proved such a fertile ground for postcolonial realism. Criminality –

'ordinary' (49); perpetrated by the "zoos" (28); and against the "zoos" (253; 260; 305); the support groups for the "zoos" (51-52); against Zinzi during her visit to the *sangoma* (179-189) – and homelessness (179ff; 254ff.) among other social urban phenomena of the postcolonial African urban space pepper the novel, but with neither didactic nor social commentary value. The places she visits are not intended to be a cartographic archive that can be read as a postcolonial critique of the contemporary urban condition, neither are they palimpsestic: Makhaza's Place whose "popularity in a neighbourhood packed with bars and churches can be ascribed to two things: the Lagos-style chicken, and the view" (42), Sun City – the prison (49), Midrand (85), Rosebank (110), Auckland Park (129) or Brixton (190). It is noteworthy that her paths within the city avoids any historically laden landmarks that might draw the novel into having to partake in discourses of rewriting power structures in the city as read by (Putter 2012) in *Movement, Memory, Transformation and Transition in the City: Literary Representations of Johannesburg in Post-Apartheid South African Texts.* Indeed, in her guises of the Journalist and Private Detective, Zinzi's forays into these places, if undertaken with any critical lenses, then only in as far as she is searching for the missing Songweza. The seemingly conscious avoidance of the inherently historically discursive palimpsest in viewing the city emphasizes the post-historical poetic that this paper seeks to advocate for. The various discourses on what the narrator calls "Former Life/Lives" (42; 123) are constructed for the advancement of biographies, and nothing further.

Perhaps the most effective narrative mode that has been employed by the two novels in the construction of the post-historical poetic has been in the seemingly anachronistic mixing of folklore, myths and traditional knowledge bases. The anachronism, especially in their seemingly harmonious comingling with the modern – indeed, futuristic – elevates the whole narrative beyond the regular known ontological bases; it gives an inkling of the sheer size, amount and the complexity of reality (Gaylard 2005, 74), discursive constellations as well as the multiplicity of knowledge bases that the contemporary African urban novel borrows from in its engagement with the urban space. Thus, in a true "African postcolonialism" fashion, the novels, through genre hybridity, "hold [...] the voice of hegemonic authority in suspension" (Gaylard 2005, 85) while allowing for a multiplicity and maybe competition of knowledge bases into the narrative. By allowing for narrative modes that recall the myths and folklore of the African societies – alongside the contemporary scientific discourses as seen both in *Lagoon* and *Zoo City* – the novels, in a bid to undermine the discourses that themselves undermined the myths – a counter coup on modernist discourses that dethroned the traditional African lore –, engage in a reanimation of "forgotten mythic or symbolic approach to perception and culture" (Gaylard 2005, 92) so as to defamiliarize the perception of the contemporary African urban space. As Gaylard further notes, the use of myths is to reinforce the "perception that what is important in African culture has survived and will survive confrontation with the West" (92). *Lagoon* recalls the folkloric "*Udide, the narrator, the story weaver, the Great Spider*" (*Lagoon*, 228) and her cousin *Ijele* (291) and Anansi (292), and "Mami Wata [...] the goddess of all marine witches" (235), while *Zoo City*

combines the fantastic "mashavi" and "aposymbiots" with the traditional *muti, nyangas* and the *sangoma* to transcend the narrative realism of Johannesburg.

The whole narrative in *Lagoon* is carried forth by the construction of the preternatural; at its beginning, there is the staging of the alien landing with the incorporation of *Udide* as a narrator towards the end of the novel. While regarded as the mode used in the construction of the post-historical poetic, framing the whole narrative through the supernatural could be looked at as a project to bring together the competing civilizational discourses with the alien landing presenting the view of salvation from outside of the African society, which the appearance of Udide at the end of the novel again undermines, especially when Udide claims ownership, while rejecting 'foreign' narratives, that have brought Lagos into being:

> *I have been spinning these stories in this cave for centuries. I've spun the birth and growth of this great city. Watched through the vibrations that travel through my webs. Lagos. Nigeria. I know it all because I created it all. I have seen people come from across the ocean. I have seen people sell people. I've knitted their stories and watched them knit their own crude webs. They came in boats that creaked a desperate song and brought something I'd never have created. Lagos has fed me. Fast life, fast death. High life, low life. Skyscrapers, shanty towns. Flies, mosquitoes. [...]*
> *I have watched, heard, tasted, touched these new people. Shape-shifters of the third kind. Story weavers of their own time. I respect them.* (*Lagoon*, 291-292; italics in original)

Yet, at the end of the novel one does not read a rejection of one ontology over the other. Indeed, the use of two seemingly antagonistic views of civilization systems and reality can be considered a concurrence with the post-historical poetic's held assumptions for the need to disallow the hegemony of any one single centre or base of knowledge. *Lagoon*, in this case, has gone one further and presented not two inimical ontologies, but rather a complementary relationship between the two. Perhaps by letting Udide tell the tale of the people from across the ocean who sold people – a reference to slave trade and colonialism – the novel presents a picture of Lagos as city capable of surviving external forces and their agendas and capable of rising from colonial subjugation. In addition, it asserts that the arrival of the "shape-shifters of the third kind" (292) – Ayodele and her fellow aliens – will also be survived by Lagos and Lagosians.

In *Zoo City,* the preternatural and thereby the construction of a post-historical poetic relies on the characterization of Zinzi and her *shavi* – "Mashavi – a Southern African word (spec. Shona) used to describe both the preternatural talents conferred by an aposymbiot and the aposymbiot animal itself" (177) – of sensing attachments to lost things. The novel brings together different

constellations of the supernatural to bear in the construction of a not antagonistic relationship between the various world-views surrounding Zinzi and the construction of "definitions of what modern Africa meant" (164): her superstitious mom who "used to insist we covered up the mirrors during storms to avoid drawing the lightning" and who slaughtered goats for the ancestors at various milestones in the family (164) and bookish dad who felt that its such "superstitious rubbish" that was "holding the continent back" (164); Zinzi's foray into the healer's market with

> a grisly *wunderkammer* in every window, hanging in every doorway. Tortoise shells, a wildebeest skull with a broken horn, shrivelled twists of dead animal or plant matter, it's hard to say, and drifts of magic, like a static hum in the air, a harmony to the drone of traffic on the highway above (165);

the difficulty of differentiating between the real and the magical: "My head feels hangover-muzzy, and as I stand up, the world reels away from me for a moment. It's either the incoming storm or the goddamn magic" (166); her interaction with the D&G vest-wearing, iPhone wielding *sangoma* (167):

> 'I didn't know the ancestors were SMSing now.' 'No, he calls me. The spirits find it easier with technology. It's not so clogged as human minds.' [...] 'They still like rivers and oceans most of all, but data is like water – the spirits can move through it. That's why you get a prickly feeling around cellphone towers'. (168)

The sometimes tongue-in-cheek but not outright irreverence of the folklore that Zinzi is confronted with, the cynicism and fear, and, not least of all, a feeling of deference to the forebears brings this previously relegated ontological system to the fore. Channelling the key narrative function of magic and folklore in this novel, Dumisani Ndebele, the *sangoma,* tells Zinzi: "It's not so different, the statistical analysis, the number-crunching. It's just the same with the bones. It's knowing how to read them" (169). It is not a subordination of one system over the other; it is a statement that dissolves discursive categories by rejecting a universal base of knowledge.

This construction of a multiplicity of knowledge bases is also at the core of *Lagoon*, where folklore and mythology successfully stand up to colonial discourse and is ready to meet the landed aliens on an equal footing. The dynamic and transitional nature of the urban space renders it especially useful for the purposes of the construction of a multiplicity of knowledge bases in both novels. The underlying factors in the construction of the fantastic, magical and folklorist narrations in both cases are the "co-existence of a wider scope of contradictory ontologies" and a "propensity to admit a plurality of worlds" (Grzeda 2013, 158); contradictions, which thus allow for liminality and transition, and the same that characterize the urban space. Therefore, to maintain fidelity to the nature of the urban space and not reduce it to an allegory or metaphorical space for postcolonial realism, the competing narratives within the contemporary urban space may be realized in the contemporary urban novel most effectively through a decidedly political intervention in aesthetics and poetics. This involves the framing of the said competing narratives through the presence of fantastic events; it is a narrative beyond realistic representation, but

not in any way failing to tackle the underlying postcolonial issues. The novels combine the contentious narrative strands of postcolonial realism's socio-criticism and postmodernist formal experimentation, syncretism, and meta-fiction (Grzeda 2013, 156). The contemporary African urban space, being the quintessential space of postcolonial realism's binary oppositions – "unevenly developed places where old and new, modern and ancient, the scientific and the magical views of the world co-exist" (Cooper 1998, 216 quoted in Grzeda 2013, 158) – ironically, lends itself more to the ontology of plurality that defines the fantastic and the magical way of looking at the world and to post-historical poetic, than to the postcolony that brought it forth.

A discussion of post-historical poetics, as carried out in this paper, therefore, considers the postcolonial African urban space as a place of illusions and, thus, a perfect place for the staging of the perceived conflicts between magic, fantasy and folklore on the one hand and the west-oriented knowledge bases on the other. Furthermore, if the urban space were the quintessential place for those seeking anonymity and, therefore, protection from politics of belonging, then the urban space as constructed in the post-historical poetics appeals even further to a new breed of citizens: characters – in both novels, these are mainly immigrants and social outcasts (in *Zoo City*) and entitled self-assured young people (in *Lagoon*) – for whom belonging, identity and history are not necessarily constructed on essentialisms. The world according to post-historical poetics in both novels is "fissured, distorted, and made incredible by cultural clash and displacement" (Boehmer 1995, 229 quoted in Holgate 2015, 643). History, therefore, in both cases, is not necessarily erased; it, however, is not the narrative centrepiece, but simply just another strand within a multiplicity of narrative impulses.

Endnotes:

1. As reiterated by Achebe: "Here then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse – to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement. And it is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of that word. ... I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery." (Quoted in Ogundele 2002, 125)

References

Beukes, Lauren. 2010. *Zoo City*. Sunnyside: Jacana Media.

Booker, M. Keith. 1995. "African Literature and the World System: Dystopian Fiction, Collective Experience, and the Postcolonial Condition". *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 26 (4): 58-75.

Bright, David. 2007. "Becoming-City: Thinking and Writing Differently After Deleuze". *Qualitative Inquiry*, Vol 23 (6): 416-422.

Cooper, Brenda. 1998. *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye*. New York: Routledge.

Dannenberg, Hilary. 2012. "Narrating the Postcolonial Metropolis in Anglophone African Fiction: Chris Abani's GraceLand and Phaswane Mpe's Welcome to Our Hillbrow". *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, Vol. 48 (1): 39-50.

De Boeck, Filip. 2002. "Kinshasa: Tales of the "Invisible City" and the Second World". In *Under Siege: Four African Cities Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos*, Edited by Okwui Enwezor, Carlos Basualdo, Ute Meta Bauer, Susanne Ghez, Sarat Maharaj, Mark Nash, and Octavio Zaya (Vol. Documenta11_Platform 4): 243-285. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz.

Demissie, Fassil. 2007. "Imperial legacies and postcolonial predicaments: an introduction". In *Postcolonial African Cities. Imperial Legacies and Postcolonial Predicaments*, edited by Fassil Demissie: 1-10. New York: Routledge.

Demissie, Fassil. ed. 2007. *Postcolonial African Cities. Imperial Legacies and Postcolonial Predicaments*. New York: Routledge.

Echeruo, Michael. J.C. 1998. "Chinua Achebe's Anthills of the Savannah, Post-History and Biblical Example". *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, No. 91, Frontiers of Thought: 66-86.

Freund, Bill. 2007. *The African City. A History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gaylard, Gerald. 2005. *After Colonialism: African Postmodernism and Magical Realism*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

Genova, James. E. 2005. "Africanité and Urbanité. the Place of the Urban in Imagining African Colonial Identity During the Late Colonial Period in French West Africa". In *African Urban Spaces in Historical Perspective*, edited by S. Salm, & T. Falola: 266-286. Rochester: University of Rochester Press.

Grzeda, Paulina. 2013. "Magical Realism: A Narrative of Celebration or Disillusionment? South African Literature in the Transition Period". *ariel: a review of international english literature*, Vol. 44 (1): 153-183.

Holgate, Ben. 2015. "Unsettling narratives: Re-evaluating magical realism as postcolonial discourse through Alexis Wright's Carpentaria and The Swan Book". *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 51 (6): 634-647.

Kehinde, Ayo. 2007. "Narrating the African City from the Diaspora: Lagos as a trope in Ben Okri and Chika Unigwe's short stories". In *Postcolonial African Cities: Imperial Legacies and Postcolonial Predicaments*, edited by Fassil. Demissie: 73-88. New York: Routledge.

Kurtz, John Roger. 1998. *Urban Obsessions Urban Fears. The Postcolonial Kenyan Novel*. Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc.

Moudileno, Lydie. 2006. "Magical Realism: "Arme Miraculeuse" for the African Novel?" *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 37 (1) Textual Ownership in Francophone African Writing: 28-41.

Mujila, Fiston Mwanza. 2015. *Tram 83*. Scribe: Brunswick.

Nuttall, Sarah. 2004. "City Forms and Writing the 'Now' in South Africa". *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 30 (4): 731-748.

Ogundele, Wole. 2002. "Devices of Evasion: The Mythic versus the Historical Imagination in the Postcolonial African Novel". *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 33 (3): 125-139.

Okorafor, Nnnedi. 2014. *Lagoon.* London: Hodder & Stoughton.

Putter, Anne. 2012. "Movement, Memory, Transformation and Transition in the City: Literary Representations of Johannesburg in Post-Apartheid South African Texts". *English Academy Review*, Vol. 29 (2): 58-69.

Snyman, Adalet. 2010. "Complex Urban Identities: An Investigation into the Everyday Lived Realities of Cities as Reflected in Selected Postmodern Texts". MA Thesis. Stellenbosch University.

Yervasi, Carina. 2008. "'Ouaga Saga', Magical Realism, and Postcolonial Politics". *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 39 (4): Positively Popular: African Culture in the Mainstream, 40-57.