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Transatlantic Post-Apocalyptic Fiction: Frank Owen's *South* (2016) and *North* (2018) and Lauren Beukes's *Afterland* (2020)

Mélanie Joseph-Vilain

- 1 In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, dystopian and apocalyptic discourses have thrived, fueled by anxieties about climate change and by new international configurations. These discourses have found their way into fiction, of course, where the subgenres of speculative fiction which explore various kinds of catastrophes and their imagined consequences are now present in so-called “serious” literature. Even if the dystopian and the apocalyptic may differ in their forms and focus, particularly regarding their diverging emphases on order and disorder respectively (Kunkel 2008, 90), they can be defined as different and complementary modalities aiming at representing impending disaster in an uncertain context. The two forms often converge when writers imagine futuristic worlds directly impacted by various kinds of catastrophe ranging from the pandemic, an uncomfortably familiar scenario for contemporary audiences, to natural disasters and extreme forms of climate change.
- 2 Postcolonial literature is no exception, so that Andrew Baldwin's urge to augment “postcolonial methodology such that it better attends to the ways in which the yet-to-come configures colonial imaginaries, both past and present” (2017, 295) seems particularly welcome. Baldwin's reference to the “yet-to-come”¹ invites his readers to envisage how climate change migrants are represented, but the relevance of the notion goes much beyond the context in which Baldwin uses it. The “yet-to-come” implies something never fully reached or conclusive, a paradoxical sense of permanent impermanence and, above all, the existence of a possible future. We may intuitively think that the “yet-to-come” therefore contradicts the irrevocable nature of apocalypse which is, by essence, the absolute end of the world, foreclosing any idea of a

possible future. This is one of the paradoxes I would like to explore in the present article: how can apocalyptic fiction still rely on the “yet-to-come,” and why?

- 3 In this perspective, I intend to compare fictional representations of post-apocalyptic worlds in works by South African authors: Frank Owen's diptych *South* (2016) and *North* (2018), and Lauren Beukes's *Afterland* (2020). Both Owen² and Beukes have chosen to set their fictional representations of a bleak future in the United States of America; yet their main protagonists still retain a connection to South Africa. I would like to interrogate this choice and, more generally, the way in which the three novels articulate transatlantic identities in their imagined versions of the “yet-to-come,” thus “connecting regions of the Atlantic world usually considered as distinct” (Clavaron 198, my translation). The point is to examine the interaction between the writers' generic choices and their spatial choices, so as to understand how the “yet-to-come” becomes a way of staging past and present identities in supposedly post-racial contexts which remain highly conflictual. I would like to show how, by relying on the generic conventions of the post-apocalyptic mode, which is based on radical rupture since apocalypse signifies the end of the world, the authors explore American spaces and show that transatlantic identities are characterized, as Patrick Suter suggests, not only by crossings and relations but, also, by discontinuity and difference (2018, 42). The seemingly radical discontinuity created by catastrophe or by its extreme form, apocalypse,³ which consists in the radical end(ing) of the world, thus becomes a tool to explore identities and counter forms of discontinuity, as well as a strategy to stage social and cultural tensions and offer solutions in the guise of a hybridized “yet-to-come.”
- 4 I will first examine the versions of the apocalypse staged in the three novels, before turning to their specifically American dimension. Finally, I will analyze the reasons why these South African writers have chosen to place South African characters in American versions of the apocalypse. As James Berger suggests, “apocalyptic writing takes us after the end, shows the signs prefiguring the end, the moment of obliteration, and the aftermath. The writer and the reader must be both places at once, imagining the post-apocalyptic world and then paradoxically ‘remembering’ the world as it was, as it is” (1999, 6). The cross-temporality of such fictions, I argue, is used by Owen and Beukes as a tool to explore cross-cultural identities and advocate hybridity as the “yet-to-come.”

The end of the world? Narrating catastrophe

- 5 Owen's diptych and Beukes's novel depict versions of the world where a significant part of humankind has been wiped out from the earth. They can therefore be read in the light of Andrew Tate's definition of apocalyptic narratives as “ruined future” fictions. Tate distinguishes between dystopia, which depicts “a world dominated by technology and excessive consumerism that generates endless leisure for a decadent ruling elite and misery for a vast, starving underclass,” and post-catastrophe, in which earth is “devastated” and “this ‘technofuture’ has failed and life is simply a brutal struggle eked out by the survivors” (2017, 3). *South* and *North* can unambiguously be interpreted as an example of the second kind of apocalyptic fiction: in the two novels, the American continent is repeatedly hit by deadly winds carrying all sorts of viruses which have eradicated most of the population. The reader is thus initially confronted to a

seemingly (post-)apocalyptic world which reverses the features of our society, as suggested by Chad Harbach:

The post-catastrophe novel [...] liberates the violent potential of technology (and its enemy, nature) to create an altered world whose chief characteristic is a bewildering lack of technology. This in turn means a severely winnowed human population, and plenty of hardship and casual brutality. This future doesn't intensify the present moment, it contradicts it: What would happen if we didn't live in an overpopulated, technology-saturated world in which travel by foot is considered eccentric, tacos cost forty-nine cents, and the prerogative to commit violence – despite an amazing profusion of handheld weaponry – lies entirely with the state? (2007)

South and *North* explore these classic motifs of post-catastrophe novels: in the first one, in particular, men and women are reduced to a state of survival where society has shrunk to the immediate environment of the characters and to the places accessible on foot, thus reprising a central motif of apocalyptic fiction in which the future “is frequently defined by a kind of enforced, continual motion”: “apocalyptic landscapes are, in short, normally witnessed by characters at walking pace, but without a joyful spring in the step” (Tate 2017, 83). Owen's characters, in their struggle to find food and shelter, are reduced to being post-catastrophe walkers:

It was as if the entire geography of the continent had changed overnight. With horses you could have ridden the banks of the Yampa clean out of Colorado if you wanted. Not anymore. The universe had shrunk all the way down to the size of a tennis ball. Hiking two days in any direction was about as far as anyone got before the wind got them or their rations ran out. (Owen 2016, 77)

This “walking trope,” which often becomes a form of dissent in the American context (Tate 2017, 84), is combined with a constant emphasis on the body as the only remaining possession of the survivors after the “*tabula rasa* of the epidemic” (Engélibert 2019, 17). In *South*, which takes place only in the part of the United States which is constantly, and repeatedly, hit by the deadly wind, mankind is reduced to a pre-technological state where violence dominates and human beings must rely on, and often become victims of, elemental and environmental forces.⁴

- 6 This seems to partly contrast with Beukes's *Afterland*, in which humankind similarly survives after a deadly epidemic but society remains almost unaltered: the disease has only hit men, and not women, as the reader gradually discovers, with “less than a one percent survival rate” (Beukes 2020, 5). An informative section situated between the two parts of the novel and entitled “Interlude” provides details about the history of HCV (Human Culgoa Virus), the disease which has killed almost all the male population of the world. Survival, in *Afterland*, is first and foremost a matter of gender – and of chance, since a few boys and men have mysteriously survived the pandemic. Apart from this central aspect, the society depicted in the novel does not seem to depart significantly from current American society. The non-apocalyptic dimension of Beukes's speculative version of society is playfully signaled by a metafictional passage in an early chapter when Cole “feels betrayed by all the apocalypses of pop culture that promised abandoned cities ripe for the looting. But then again, they also haven't encountered any shambling undead, small-town utopian havens with dark underbellies, highwaymen, or crazed militias” (33). This catalogue of fictional clichés, some of which can actually be found in *South* and *North*, shows Beukes's intention to deflate, or normalize, apocalypse. In that sense, Beukes's novel articulates the two streaks of apocalyptic fiction identified by Tate, the dystopian and the “post-catastrophe.” The dystopian, in *Afterland*, is staged through the control exercised by

means of the Male Protection Act: the state controls the location of male citizens and also, crucially, reproduction, which is forbidden by the Reprohibition Accord. Beukes thus creates a fictional, and dystopian, exploration of biopolitical control which, Foucault tells us, involves control by the state of the “ratio of births to deaths, the rate of reproduction, the fertility of a population, and so on” (1997, 43). Male bodies become a precious good, so that Miles’s aunt Billie tries (and fails) to sell her nephew to rich women for astronomical sums. The boy and his mother are therefore on the run not only from biopolitical control but also from illegal transactions challenging these forms of control. Consequently, although the main protagonists, young Miles, who passes for a girl as Mila, his mother Cole, and his aunt Billie, enact the post-apocalyptic trope of mobility, they do not *walk* from coast to coast: instead, they drive, away from the secure facility where they had been forced to stay. The novel thus can be seen as an avatar of the American road narrative, defined by Ronald Primeau as “fiction and nonfiction books by Americans who travel by car throughout the country either on a quest or simply to get away” (1996, 1). In *Afterland*, the three fugitives run away separately, so that the coast-to-coast road trip is combined with the motif of the chase to create a dystopian road narrative. Yet, in spite of its apparently dystopian nature, Beukes’s novel retains a number of post-catastrophe aspects, in particular when the fugitives cross “dead towns where there are no other cars around” (2020, 160) or discover the traces of the violence which erupted in the wake of the pandemic, as when they arrive in Miami and discover “chaos and devastation, whole blocks bombed to rubble, an armored truck turtled upside down on the rubble. Buildings have been ripped through the middle, electrical cables and furniture hanging out like guts” (340). This “giant wound in the middle of the city” is, they learn, the result of the “Battle of Miami”: “Attempted police coup of the city during the Die Off” (340). The personification of space through the references to “guts” spilling out or to a “wound” suggests that it is the whole body politic that has been affected by HCV, and not merely the individual bodies of the millions of men who have died. But the apocalypse is incomplete since (slightly) more than half of humankind is still alive: womankind has not only survived, but thrived, and social hierarchies and organization remain relatively unaffected. The situation described in the novel therefore differs from the *tabula rasa* of apocalypse, thus undermining the potentially revelatory dimension of the “end of the world” and raising questions about the “yet-to-come.” Beukes’s novel explores a post-catastrophe society which is both familiar and totally different, turning it into an uncanny version of our world.

- 7 Such a tension between death and apocalypse on the one hand and the continuation of a relative normalcy on the other also underlies *South* and *North*: if the first novel is set in a post-apocalyptic world, the second one retains a number of dystopian features. Once the characters reach the northern part of the country, the reader realizes that north of the border separating the two parts of the country, life has remained almost normal since water contains antivirals which protect the northern population from the deadly viruses sent by Renard’s factories. Owen thus explores various apocalyptic modalities, from catastrophe to dystopia – and to catastrophe again, since the ending challenges the post-catastrophe dimension of the diptych. Indeed, the final chapters of *North* enact the *tabula rasa* motif when young Kurt chooses to spread all the viruses contained in Renard’s factories, effectively wiping out almost all humankind from the surface of the continent. Catastrophe is thus redoubled, and intensified, in what turns

out to be both a post- and a pre-catastrophe narrative leading to apocalypse – that is, the actual end of the world.

- 8 Apocalypse thus underlies both Owen and Beukes's fictional representations of America, which offer variations on its religious, and even messianic, significance. Tate wonders why “so many writers in an ostensibly post-Christian era continually return to biblical eschatology to imagine a coming end” (2017, 3), arguing that “in the West, Judeo-Christianity continues to give shape to narratives of catastrophe and particularly those fictions of destruction that seem to portend the end-of-the-world-as-you-know-it” (11). This eschatological aspect is particularly obvious in Owen's diptych, in which the apocalyptic is gradually converted into the messianic, a typical feature of apocalyptic fictions:

Apocalyptic fictions are immanentist in that regard. The immanence of apocalypse makes it possible to conceive history, to restore history in contemporary presentism by representing an apocalyptic present, that is, by showing that the present is pervaded by its own end, and by turning it into messianic time. (Engélibert 2019, 82, my translation)⁵

South and *North* turn the present into messianic time first by reprising the motif of an “eschatology of disease”: viruses and diseases, Corteel explains, are a “narrative leitmotiv” of apocalyptic fiction, so that “disease discursivity establishes historical discontinuities”⁶ (2016, my translation). Owen's novels confirm Corteel's hypothesis that recent post-apocalyptic discourses emphasize humankind's part in creating and spreading disease, unlike medieval discourses which described disease as resulting from divine intervention: today, “we become the creators of our own disaster and our own survival. [...] Disease seems to evolve, historically, from divine transcendence to an erasure of the nature/culture divide in laboratories”⁷ (Corteel 2016). In *South* and *North*, viruses are sent by factories under the supervision of the evil Renard, literalizing the idea that the apocalypse is the result of men's actions. Divinity, or transcendence, is conspicuously absent from Renard's world.

- 9 In Owen's novels, the figure of the ambiguous preacher and leader is declined through several other characters, both in the *South* and in the *North*. The similarities between these figures are made explicit in *North* when Adams preaches to the members of the Resistance:

Then Adams clambered onto the bench. He shushed the expectant crowd, his hands raised like a Southern preacher, inviting the spirit of God to come on down and baptize his flock. [...] His delivery reminded Dyce of Ed, the fat slave-driver of the Mouth. There was something similar in the meter of the two men's speech, a lilting that seemed to point every sentence toward a grand revelation. (Owen 2018, 132)

The final word, of course, ironically reminds us of the etymological origins of the word “apocalypse” whose “primary valence,” Tate explains, is “derived from the Greek term *apokalypsis* [and] signifies revelation, the uncovering of what was previously hidden” (2017, 12). It might be interpreted as a way, for Owen, to comment indirectly on the apocalyptic nature of the narrative. The similarity between Adams and Renard is signaled later in the novel, when we perceive the man through Ruth's eyes: “All holy-roller on the outside, but every now and again you got a look at the real underneath. She had seen his kind before – in Renard” (Owen 2018, 173).

- 10 This fake – or faked? – holiness is counterbalanced by the gradual transformation of Dyce into a messianic figure who emerges in an Old-Testament world. This messianic dimension is made explicit through a playful comment when Vida, looking at him,

thinks: “Now all the white boys looked like Jesus on the cross” (Owen 2016, 246). Dyce experiences a symbolical descent into hell, or into the tomb, in *The Mouth*, where he literally incorporates the mushrooms that will later save humankind before being symbolically reborn. Besides, at the end of *North*, the young man dies but his body becomes the substrate for the healing mushrooms which he inhaled in *The Mouth* and which carry the possibility to survive the apocalypse for the aptly named Vida and her yet-unborn child. The baby, who is the addressee of the whole narrative, becomes a promise of life and renewal in the yet-to-come world.

- 11 Beukes's *Afterland* also partly recycles messianic motifs, although in a more indirect way, since, as one of the few remaining males in the post-catastrophe world, Miles embodies hope and future potentialities – the “yet-to come”? Importantly, the three novels all equate survival with immunity, which is turned into a form of sacred reward, even if in *North* a scientific explanation for the characters' immunity is provided while the reason for Miles's immunity in *Afterland* remains unknown. Another difference with Owen's diptych lies in Beukes's staging of a female religious community inspired by American Christian groups, the Church of All Sorrows. Cole and Miles join the nuns in Black Hawk so that the second part of the journey, and of the novel, focuses on the way in which they become integrated into the community. Beukes's novel thus combines the apocalyptic with a decidedly satirical vein, as Miles gradually converts to the nuns' worldview, to his mother's dismay.

American apocalypses?

- 12 This satirical dimension does not only show *Afterland*'s generic hybridity. It also points to another major feature of both Beukes's and Owen's novels: although the writers are South African, they have chosen to set their narratives in the United States. This is precisely what I would like to examine now, trying to determine whether the novels stage specifically American (post) catastrophes. First, the three novels are clearly, and repeatedly, anchored in American geography: *South* and *North* start with maps of post-catastrophe Northern America showing the clear divide between the north and the south. In *Afterland*, Beukes also maps her characters' journey in a precise and detailed way: the reader can easily follow them from California to Miami, recognizing the cities and states crossed by Cole and Mila (Salt Lake City, Black Hawk, Santa Fe, Tulsa, Memphis, Atlanta, Miami) and by Billie (San Francisco, Omaha, Des Moines, Chicago, Nashville, Alabama, Georgia, Miami). *Afterland* thus takes us on a journey through America as the protagonists cross the continent from West to East to reach their own frontier, reversing the pattern of coast-to-coast conquest. Like *South* and *North*, Beukes's novel is therefore anchored, through geography, in American culture.
- 13 The very division of Owen's narrative into two novels respectively entitled *South* and *North*, based on a neat division between the two parts of the country, a victorious North and a defeated South, obviously revisits the history of the United States by transposing the Civil War to a different era: the trauma of the war is thus replayed on an apocalyptic mode, even if, paradoxically, the issue of race seems to be downplayed.
- 14 What is more, both Owen and Beukes rely on cultural references to reinforce the Americanness of their novels. In *South*, for instance, the precarious life conditions of the protagonists are often described in terms referring to pioneer identity mediated through western movies; the characters call each other “cowboy,” and from the very

beginning, when Dyce and his brother have to flee, the young man perceives their escape as a way of reenacting old stories: "Being pursued like cowboys in an old-time Western, and all he could think was that he wasn't sick yet. *God darn, boy! You git goin' and don' stop till you hit the Klondike!*" (Owen 2016, 10). This parodic reference initiates a pattern of allusions to western movies which recur regularly throughout the novel. A significant example can be found in chapters 34 and 35, in which Dyce and Vida enter the Narrow Gauge Locomotive Museum and discover the traces of doubly bygone days: "They ate sitting on the edge of the diorama,⁸ chowing down like two old-time cowhands who had found themselves thrown together on the dusty plain" (250). The simile equates the two characters with protagonists from both the history of the United States and its filmic representations, anchoring their journey in American spaces while simultaneously showing that the days of the wild west are long gone. The novels thus constantly oscillate between distance and proximity, indirectly suggesting that the characters' life conditions reenact the early times of the "wild west" – a return to a mythical American past which shows that life was then much harsher than westerns erroneously seem to suggest.

- 15 Beukes similarly relies on a network of intertextual and intermedial allusions to Americanize her novel, a strategy which is reinforced by her systematic recourse to internal focalization, since each chapter is seen from the point of view of one of the members of Miles's family: the boy himself, his mother, his aunt. Since Miles wants to become a film director, he tends to perceive the environment he discovers through the prism of previous filmic or visual representations of this environment, or to notice its Americanness, as when they cross small-town America, whose uniformity strikes him:

Outside the window, the scenery changes and stays the same and changes, through green fields and forests and small towns slipping past, and big ones, and he watches for repeats, glitches in the simulation. Didn't he see that white barn before? Those grain silos look awfully familiar. They have definitely passed that exact strip mall with that exact Outback Steakhouse. (Beukes 2020, 266)

The reference to glitches creates a distance between the focalizer and what he perceives, as if he were watching a video of the places they cross instead of the actual places. It can also be read as a form of metafictional commentary suggesting that Beukes self-consciously recycles fictional and artistic representations of America. This explains, for instance, why Cole interprets people and places through artistic references, for instance while she is still traveling alone with Miles: "She keeps on keeping on, turning down a steep road, following the signs toward Black Hawk, past rickety houses clinging to the hills, in the same sepia tones as the dead grass. Elegiac menace, Cole thinks: Hopper does *The Chainsaw Massacre*" (182). Here, Beukes playfully mixes references to high and low culture to Americanize her narrative and, perhaps, place her novel within an artistic network. Beyond its comic effect, the slightly incongruous juxtaposition of heterogeneous artistic references functions as a self-definitional comment, situating *Afterland* in an artistic network of decidedly American references and anchoring it in an American framework.

Hybridizing the "yet-to-come"

- 16 And yet, Beukes constantly reminds her readers that, like her, the main protagonists of *Afterland* are not American – at least, not entirely, since Miles's father was American, which is the reason why they have unwillingly stayed in the country after his death.

The first chapter of the novel leaves no space for doubt since Cole almost immediately tells Miles that they are going “home,” a “home” unambiguously identified as Johannesburg: “Home. The idea is ridiculous. Thousands of miles, whole oceans and now multiple felonies between them and ever seeing Johannesburg again” (Beukes 2020, 8). In the second chapter, which is seen through Miles’s eyes, the boy thinks that “back home in Johannesburg they did Zulu at school, not stupid French” (11), or perceives a security gate as “one of those quick-slam ones everyone in Johannesburg has but he hasn’t seen much of in America” (14). Unsurprisingly, Billie’s first chapter, the third one in the novel, also mentions South Africa (21) and refers to Americans, in internal focalization, as “Fucking Americans” (23). While Cole drives herself and her son through the first stages of their journey, she thinks back to “her American husband” and to their life together in South Africa:

They’d built a whole life in South Africa, with their friends, and Miles’s friends, and good jobs and a lovely school, and their ramshackle house in Orange Grove with the stained-glass windows and the creaky wooden floors that always tipped them off that Miles was about to bounce into their bed, and the rising damp they battled over every year, and their overgrown garden where their cat Mewella Fitzgerald liked to lurk in the long grass and pounce on your ankles. They’d chosen this home, this life, their people. On purpose.” (27)

The long enumeration brings back her memories and shows her nostalgia for her country, to which she is trying to return. The novel repeatedly suggests that, to the three remaining members of the family, Johannesburg is home while America remains a foreign country. Its focus is therefore quite different from what Berger described in 1999 as “the pervasive post-apocalyptic sensibility of recent American culture” (xix). By relying consistently on the points of view of South African protagonists, Beukes’s version of post-catastrophe America interrogates identities and histories that go beyond the scope of American post-apocalyptic fiction and gestures toward a hybridized, transatlantic “yet-to-come.”

- 17 Surprisingly, despite the seemingly more American identity of Owen’s protagonists, we also discover that Vida, one of the main characters in *South* and *North*, has a South African mother. This explains why the mythical figure of Mami Wata, a water divinity, becomes a recurring reference. This hybrid figure found in African, American and Caribbean folklore (Van Stipriaan 2005), decenters and displaces Owen’s diptych by hybridizing it and by pointing to racial issues which underlie the narrative. Mami Wata becomes a kind of tutelary figure for Vida, who carries an old photocomic with her as a souvenir from her mother, and from South Africa:

Dyce took it. MAMI WATA, blared the cover. *She Exacts Her Awful Revenge on Sinners in the City of Gold!* [...] Dyce turned the pages gently. They were so thin he could see his thumbs through the fibers. Mami Wata looked like one mean lady – half-serpent, half-woman, and no escape for the men who crossed her. (Owen 2016, 240).

A powerful figure – “Beware her evil powers,” Vida ironically warns Dyce – Mami Wata embodies revenge and violence but also, ambiguously, Vida’s love for her mother and, through her, the young woman’s attachment for South Africa. The subsequent allusions to Mami Wata reprise this ambiguity, as when she is mentioned in the scene narrating how Vida kills evil Ester. When Ester dies, Vida thinks that it is “the end of Mami Wata” (Owen 2016, 286). In *North*, Mami Wata is explicitly referred to when the young woman talks about drowning her father and identifies herself with the water divinity: “I’ll drown him. I will. I’ll push him into the water and I’ll hold onto him until there isn’t one fucking bubble left. Mami Wata” (Owen 2018, 300). When Vida manages to drown

him, a few pages later, her ruthlessness is, again, described in relation to Mami Wata: "They scrabbled at each other, she determined to hold him down until he drowned, he just as determined to escape – as he always had. Like Mami Wata she would keep him there, down in the depths of the lake, where he belonged" (333). Importantly, the final reference to Mami Wata occurs when Dyce also drowns, accidentally, and slowly loses consciousness:

It's amazing, Dyce thought. He felt his eyes rolling up in his head. I can see everything now. All the stories are here: the one about the little mermaid, and the one about Mami Wata, and the one Ruth told me about the underwater villages back home, where the herd boys take their cattle up and down the riverbed, and their drowned bells ring. [...] "Mami Wata," murmured Dyce. She had come for him at last. (335)

If these allusions are relatively infrequent, they appear at significant moments in the narrative, when identity is asserted and when lives are taken. They anchor Owen's narrative in a network that is more transnational than the maps of America at the beginning of each of the two novels may imply. These allusions also suggest that even seemingly American motifs may be reread in the light of the author's South African origins: readers are invited to consider the similarities between the two countries,⁹ and to interpret what seems to be a critique of American divisions, epitomized by the wall between the two parts of the country, in the light of South African divisions. In the diptych, family stands metonymically for the nation, which is typical of "contemporary apocalyptic works" which are "all but united in stigmatizing any group larger than the family as oppressive and evil" and which are "stories of love, the strongest of all antipolitical forces, as Hannah Arendt once said" (Kunkel 2008, 94). The novels can be read as a variation on revenge tragedies from which Vida emerges as a lonely figure, literally walking on corpses after having killed her (recently discovered) father and witnessed the deaths of her mother and of her unborn child's father – thus becoming a kind of new Eve, at the dawn of an uncertain future, which shows that, as Engélibert explains, "love is the first form of action" (2019, 227).

- 18 But far from evading political issues, Owen's diptych contradicts Kunkel's criticism of apocalyptic fiction as unpolitical. Indeed, Kunkel argues that futuristic novels promote individuality as "escape from the bad collective" but that it "does not entail real *individuation*," which leads him to accuse these fictions of being "political novels without politics, social novels without society, and romances free of love, amounting, in the end, to 'literature' that isn't" (2008, 97). This sweeping generalization does not apply to Owen's novels, which do not shun political matters, exploring various types of societies on different scales: the family, of course, but also communities like *The Mouth* or *the Resistance*. Far from relying on "the liquidation of character" (Kunkel 97), *South* and *North* stage complex, and sometimes ambiguous, protagonists whose confrontation raises ethical dilemmas, as shown by the example of Felix Callahan, a full-fledged and elusive figure. What is more, the diptych seems to engage with politics in two significant ways: by revisiting the history of America, as previously mentioned but also by transposing the motif of a divided society, which is still central in South African culture, to a different, and not dissimilar, context. The motif of the Wall between the South and the North, for instance, can be interpreted as a fictional variation on apartheid, and on racial and social divisions in general. The apocalyptic ending, and the final catastrophe, might be a deeply political reminder that living in a fractured world may erase our humanity – a humanity which is literally almost completely wiped out from the earth at the end of *North* as a result of Renard's actions.

- 19 Another issue which brings together American and South African politics in Owen's fictional, and apocalyptic, version of the United States, is race. It is certainly no coincidence if Vida's unborn child has a black mother and a white father and can survive thanks to the sacrifice of his white father. This scenario seems to revisit, and partly reverse, the motif of colonization, a historical phenomenon which is explicitly mentioned in the novel when the characters cross the former state capitol, where the Resistance is hiding. Vida notices the frescos painted on the walls, which display scenes from the past:

White pioneers, rosy-cheeked and smiling, plowing the land and holding bushels of wheat, surrounded by the plenty that is industry's godly reward. Even the dogs that peered out from behind the wagons seemed happy. But Vida looked closer. The only people not smiling in the frescos were the Native Americans, offering food to the newcomers for the blankets that would spell their end.

Not a lot different, Vida thought as she shuffled down the hallway. America was built on viral warfare. The seeds of it lay dormant in the history: Renard had just given them a dark, moist place to sprout. And if they did manage to get rid of that fucker, another – worse – one might spring up in his place. What is wrong with us? she wondered. This is just the latest cycle. It's never, ever going to end. (Owen 2018, 197)

It is significant, in that regard, to notice that Vida is the (almost only) survivor since she is no "rosy-cheeked" pioneer but a half-South African, half-American black woman. In her perception of the fresco, the explicit suggestion is that history is a cycle but at the end of the novel the cycle has been broken by the "clean slate" of the final apocalypse and by the identity of the new "Eve," whose personal history and identity seem to guarantee a "yet-to-come" based on hybridization rather than elimination.

- 20 Significantly, *North* ends in almost the same place as Beukes's *Afterland*, on the East Coast of the United States. While in *North* Vida remains safely on firm land, where she "[sits] in the truck as night [falls], with her view of the fading sea," writing to her unborn child "before the restless waves of time [wash] over her memories, to leave her smooth and featureless" (Owen 2018, 374), Beukes's protagonists manage to board a ship which will take them to South Africa, and to a new beginning. I argue that it is no coincidence if these two apocalyptic narratives written by South African writers and set in the United States end with references to the Atlantic Ocean, a symbolical space in the context of colonization and postcolonial literature. Next to this ocean, Vida, true to her newly Eve-like status, is planning on planting a garden from her mother's seeds:

You'll be a garden, Mama, a medicine garden, with *half the plants from home and half from here*. There'll be proteas and baobabs and lucky bean trees growing right here on this dune, and between their stems will be all the useful plants this continent ever produced – goosegrass and alumroot and dogwoods. (Owen 2018, 371; emphasis added)

The plants, "half from home and half from here," suggest that the "yet-to-come" of Vida's new world needs to be hybrid, which may be read in a metatextual, and political, way as a plea for transatlantic cross-pollination. The transatlantic dimension is reinforced by the fact that Renard, Vida's father, has a French name, which may point to a Caribbean, probably Haitian, origin. The "yet-to-come," it is implied, will contain elements from both sides of the Atlantic, suggesting that both American and South African future identities will be hybridized. Vida and her garden embody this transatlantic "yet-to-come."

- 21 As a writer, Lauren Beukes has chosen a similar political and aesthetic transatlantic approach since after her first two novels, set respectively in Cape Town and Johannesburg, she has published three novels set in America. *Afterland* is the first one, though, which stages South African characters and explicitly hybridizes cultural references, pointing to transatlantic identities. In *Afterland*, as in *South* and *North*, the child who embodies the hopeful “yet-to-come” is a child of mixed heritage, the son of a black American father and a white South African mother. In *South*, Vida’s skin color is revealed quite late since in a world where viruses are released on a regular basis, what is fascinating about her skin is not its color but its unblemished quality. Conversely, Beukes specifies her characters’ race in the very first chapter of her novel, when Cole “remembers the workshop she dutifully attended when he was a toddler – White Moms: Black Hair” (Beukes 2020, 5). The reader is thus immediately aware that the messianic figure, Miles, also embodies a hybrid future. Like Owen’s diptych, Beukes’s novel contradicts Kunkel’s criticism of dystopian and apocalyptic fiction as oversimplistic or unpolitical: *Afterland* stages complex characters, as shown by the conflict between Cole and Miles when the boy wants to remain with the nuns and runs away, for instance, or by the love-hate relationship between Cole and Billie. Far from the political escapism pointed out by Kunkel, *Afterland* conveys a political message which can resonate on both sides of the Atlantic, showing that, as Moylan explains, dystopia is grounded in the author’s reality:

Dystopia’s foremost truth lies in its ability to reflect upon the causes of social and ecological evil as systemic. Its very textual machinery invites the creation of alternative worlds in which *the historical spacetime of the author* can be represented in a way that foregrounds the articulation of its economic, political, and cultural dimensions. (2000, xii; emphasis added)

- 22 The transatlantic perspective proposed by these white writers differs greatly, of course, from the “Black Atlantic” famously theorized by Paul Gilroy (1993), in which the Atlantic becomes a symbolical and transnational space for the definition of black identities sharing a common heritage. But it is a strategy to counter, and criticize, the systemic racism of both South African and American societies through apocalyptic narratives. The choice of dystopian or apocalyptic fiction laying emphasis on hybrid characters as figures of hope can thus be read in the light of the writers’ nationality: genre fiction becomes a way of exploring, indirectly, the ghosts of apartheid and of staging identities which go beyond the boundaries of the nation.

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NOTES

1. Baldwin borrows the notion of the "yet-to-come" from Derrida's definition of justice as remaining, and being, "yet, to come, à venir, it has an, it is à-venir, the very dimension of events irreducibly to come" (1992, 27).
2. Frank Owen is in fact the pseudonym used by Diane Awerbuck and Alex Latimer. I shall refer to Frank Owen in the singular in the rest of the article. Some of the arguments about the diptych were first developed at a virtual conference organized by the University of Nîmes and in the article in French resulting from my paper.

3. While both terms refer to disaster, catastrophe has a less extreme meaning than apocalypse, which refers to the end of the world and is often imbued with religious connotations (the end as revelation).
4. Corteel (2016) interestingly suggests that this return to a state of nature and the focus on the capacity of rare, and chosen, individuals to survive may signal a return to the origins of capitalism.
5. "Les fictions de l'apocalypse sont immanentistes en ce sens. L'immanence de l'apocalypse permet de penser l'histoire, de restaurer de l'histoire dans le présentisme contemporain, en figurant un présent apocalyptique, c'est-à-dire en le montrant traversé, pénétré par sa propre fin, en le constituant en temps messianique."
6. "[L]a discursivité malade établit des discontinuités historiques."
7. "Nous devenons les créateurs de notre propre désastre et de notre propre survie. [...] [L]a maladie passerait dans l'histoire d'un statut de transcendance divine à une relation d'effacement entre nature et culture avec le laboratoire."
8. The diorama was described earlier, a description which contributes to anchoring the novel in the "wild wild west": "a diorama of the old west, dusty scrubland and wide open sky – and on a stand in the foreground was a stuffed bison." (Owen 2016, 242)
9. In his "Note on the American Edition" of *Reinventing a Continent*, André Brink points to the numerous similarities, and connections, between the United States and South Africa. He insists, in particular, on the shaping influence of racial tensions in the two countries, and he refers to the United States as South Africa's "startlingly similar sibling in the northern hemisphere" (Brink xiv). Beyond the necessary simplifications caused by the constrained format of the preface, Brink's text sheds light on the reasons why South African writers choose to set their novels in the United States: it might be a strategy to use each country as a (partly distorted) mirror image of the other.

ABSTRACTS

This article compares fictional representations of post-catastrophe worlds in dystopian novels by South African authors Frank Owen and Lauren Beukes, who have chosen to set their fictional representations of a bleak future in the United States of America. The article interrogates this choice and, more generally, the way in which *South*, *North* and *Afterland* articulate the global and the local in their imagined dystopias.

INDEX

Keywords: Lauren Beukes, Frank Owen, dystopia, globalization, South Africa, United States, apocalyptic fiction

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