

## Invasive Species and the Territorial Machine: Shifting Interfaces between Ecology and the Postcolonial

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**Abstract:** This article proposes a rethinking of biological invasion in contemporary South African and Australian literature. It argues that the literary representation of pest proliferation can offer a privileged insight into the intersection between the legacy of settler colonialism and current ecological concerns. Indeed, the question of invasive species can be connected to both unreconciled histories of colonial expansion and pressing biodiversity and conservation issues. This essay adopts Deleuze and Guattari's concept of deterritorialisation in order to explore the description of invasive species in Henrietta Rose-Innes's *Nineveh* and *The Rabbits*, a visual narrative by John Mardsen and Shaun Tan. A reading inspired by the anti-metaphorical value of the concept of deterritorialisation overcomes an anthropocentric view that would reduce animals to mere metaphorical stand-ins for humans. The intimate link between nature and culture posited by Deleuze and Guattari's generalised ecology is conceptualised as a shifting interface between postcolonial and ecocritical agendas in the reading of postcolonial literature from South Africa and Australia.

**Keywords:** Biological invasion, deterritorialisation, postcolonial literature, Henrietta Rose-Innes, John Mardsen, Shaun Tan, Deleuze and Guattari

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As a phenomenon historically linked to colonialism and symbolic of human interactions, species invasion offers valuable insights into the relationship between ecology and imperialism. However, whereas ecolo-

gists have begun to examine colonial history to better understand the roots and dynamics of species invasion, the representation of biological invasion in postcolonial literatures remains, to a large extent, to be investigated. Still, literature is important because it indicates imaginative ways of weaving the question of invasive species into the formation of postcolonial cultural memory.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, literary descriptions of ecology are not just screens representing human colonialism in a naturalised, metamorphosed way. The literary figuration of biological invasiveness is a site where the legacy of colonialism is shown at work on multiple levels or planes, from politics to nature. This essay proposes a reading of literary works that explicitly engage with biological invasion in postcolonial settler contexts in Australia and South Africa. My reflections suggest that biological invasion may be approached in terms of a deterritorialising logic, which functions as a concatenation between ecosystem change, settler colonial history, and the expansion of capitalism. The notions of territory and deterritorialisation are borrowed from the works of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. These concepts offer a non-anthropocentric perspective on postcolonial texts. Furthermore, this essay will demonstrate that the concept of deterritorialisation could prevent ecological concerns from being adopted as an ideological instrument of hegemonic postcolonial nationalism. Through the lens of deterritorialisation, the literary representation of pest invasion becomes a zone of exchange between social and environmental history.

### **I. The Politics of Overabundance**

The glossary compiled by the Convention on Biological Diversity states that Invasive Alien Species (IAS) “means an alien species which becomes established in natural or semi-natural ecosystems or habitat, is an agent of change, and threatens native biological diversity” (“Invasive”). Accordingly, these species may be characterised in two ways: on one hand they “become established” and settle and proliferate in a new milieu; on the other hand, they pose a threat to the richness and variability of living organisms. In *Pest or Guest: The Zoology of Overabundance*, Daniel Lunney and the volume’s other editors redefine invasiveness as a matter of overabundance, a term that they neatly distinguish from the concept

of abundance. While the latter is a more neutral phrase that indicates the distribution of species, overabundance means that an organism is both common and widespread (258–69). Invasive species represent excessiveness and a repetition of the same that threatens the diversity, co-existence, and survival of other organisms in a specific ecosystem. The explanation of invasiveness through the concept of the excessive calls into question the dichotomy between “alien” and “native.”<sup>2</sup> It locates invasive species in a context of accumulation of a single life form and destruction of the natural resources necessary for other organisms rather than species migration followed by a reduction in native diversity. It can be argued that invasive species are not necessarily non-native beings that come from the outside. Instead they are overabundant agents, either native or exotic, that appropriate or devastate the common natural wealth.

Ecological perspectives on biological invasion can be connected to political, historical, and cultural discourses on invasion that are of primary concern in postcolonial contexts. Indeed, at the intersection between postcolonial studies and ecology, it is notable that the trope of invasion has often become a symptom of what Anne Aly and David Walker call “cultural anxiety” in former settler colonial societies (204). As Helen Gilbert demonstrates, invasion narratives have been used as ideological devices—often bordering on racism—in the formation of hegemonic settler nationalism (14). However, from an ecological perspective, representations of *biological* invasion can also be considered in other ways. In some cases, pest invasion is the juncture between social discourse and ecological reality rather than a simple expression of nationalist paranoia. Indeed, a postcolonial ecocritical perspective suggests a more complex scenario for the staging of bio-invasion in postcolonial literature.

Ecologists like Jeffrey McNeely, Harold Mooney, and Richard Hobbs have shown that the problem of invasive species is one of the most pressing contemporary environmental concerns. Mooney and Hobbs’ edited volume *Invasive Species in a Changing World* connects this increasing ecological trend to effects of globalisation such as the breakdown of geographical barriers and biotic and climate change. In his introduction to *The Great Reshuffling* McNeely states that there is a “human dimension”

(8–9) to the problem that needs attention. Following authors such as Alfred Crosby, who is renowned for his classical research on ecological imperialism, McNeely mentions the history of European colonial expansion as one of the main historical causes of biological invasiveness in many regions of the world (8–9). In fact, the link between invasive species and the history of colonisation is deep and intimate, especially in the case of settler colonies such as Australia and South Africa. Tom Griffiths notes that settler colonialism presents a powerful ecological dimension: human colonisation may shift into biological and cultural invasion. During colonial history, introduced species and pathogenic agents were not always an involuntary side effect of colonial expansion but were in many cases a conscious, deliberate act central to the project of imperialism. Griffiths writes:

The arrival of Europeans in Australia actually exploded a capsule of accelerating change; it initiated a process that was much less peaceful and more radical and oppositional than “settlement,” although that term itself had muted dimensions of conquest. Now “settlement” has become re-envisaged as “invasion.” (6)

Postcolonial critics emphasise the re-coding of settler colonialism as wider ecosystem change from a number of perspectives. For instance, in their discussion of postcolonial ecocriticism, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin write:

Once invasion and settlement had been accomplished, or at least once administrative structures had been set up, the environmental impacts of western attitudes to human being-in-the-world were facilitated or reinforced by the deliberate (or accidental) transport of animals, plants and peoples throughout the European empires, instigating widespread ecosystem change under conspicuously unequal power regimes. (*Postcolonial Ecocriticism* 6)

From the perspective of a “postcolonial environmental ethics” such as that elaborated by Huggan and Tiffin, the analysis of biological invasion

is the place where the relation between settler colonialism and ecology acquires new dimensions and takes part in a more general “re-imagining and reconfiguration of both the nature of the human and the place of the human in nature” (Huggan and Tiffin, “Green Postcolonialism” 6). An ecocritical reading should be able to affiliate postcolonial discourse to the portrayal of invasive species as a process of over-accumulation, over-abundance, and threat to biocultural diversity described by ecologists. From an ecocritical perspective, the phenomenon of invasive species can be read alongside a pivotal text in postcolonial studies, Mahmood Mamdani’s “Beyond Settler and Native as Political Identities.” Mamdani writes that the question of settlement is not so much about being “alien” rather than “native” but of being conqueror rather than conquered: “The notion of ‘settler’ distinguished conquerors from immigrants. It was an identity undergirded by a conquest state, a colonial state” (657). Mamdani’s reflections suggest that invasiveness should not be confused with alienness. Invasiveness could be seen instead as a problem of unequal power and vulnerability. It concerns an excessively proliferating and accumulating organism that eliminates the space for survival of other living beings. In the unequal struggle between coloniser and colonised, it is the ability to make the distinction between migrant and conqueror (alien and invasive) that, according to Mamdani, separates radical from conservative anticolonial nationalism: “Radical nationalism would identify settlers with conquerors, whereas conservative nationalism would identify them with all immigrants” (657). Mamdani’s reflection on settler colonialism finds conceptual and historical parallels in the zoology of overabundance proposed by Lunney and the other contributors to *Pest or Guest*. The common theme of conquest may help scholars extend and rethink invasiveness as the replication of what Vandana Shiva calls “monoculture” (*Monocultures* 7). Monocultural invasiveness can be seen as denial of otherness and destruction of biocultural resources and alternatives. The location of the problem of invasive species at the crossroads between ecology and postcolonial studies enables us to connect the destruction of the environment to the material and ideological legacy of European colonialism. It leads us to recognise, with Shiva, that the “protection of biological and cultural diversity is the biggest ecological

and ethical challenge of our times” (“Species Invasion” 33). The dissemination of invasive species during colonial conquest can be seen as part and parcel of the overexpansion of a dominating, self-centred monoculture rather than an untenable dualism of native and alien. For this reason, I want to argue that contemporary opposition to biological invasion should not result in conservative policies patrolling geographical borders, aimed at either a return to pristine wilderness or keeping the human/animal “alien” outside. Instead it should connect the protection of biodiversity to the social struggles of refugees, migrants, minorities, and those whom postcolonial studies terms “subaltern”<sup>3</sup>: the residue of population that is not represented in mainstream political institutions, the non-represented groups crushed and exploited by neoliberal capitalist economy in many postcolonial nation-states.<sup>4</sup> The protection of biodiversity should not be severed from a postcolonial transnational solidarity with the oppressed and the emergence of environmental activism in countries of the global South (Nixon 4). Beyond national feeling, the preservation of biodiversity offers an opportunity to overcome the legacy of colonialism and work toward social justice on a global scale.

In this article, I address the literary representation of invasive species in John Marsden and Shaun Tan’s *The Rabbits* (1998), a visual narrative that proposes a disturbing, dystopian re-narration of Australian colonisation and pest invasion. Next, I focus on *Nineveh* (2011), a novel by emergent South African writer Henrietta Rose-Innes. *Nineveh* depicts insect pest invasion in Cape Town and links the personal and the political in the mapping of postcolonial urban topography. South Africa and Australia share settler colonial history as well as a history of biological invasion. The emerging postcolonial ecocritical discourse must address the relation between literary-cultural forms and ecology; in other words, how should we read the figuration of ecological events in literary works? This question is asked by Ursula Heise in her afterword to the edited collection *Postcolonial Green*: “To what extent are readers invited to consider natural scenarios as tropes for social conditions, and to what extent does the text insist on the literalness of the ecological?” (256). I would like to advance a non-anthropocentric reading that keeps multiple connections and dimensions at work simultaneously. Such reading detects

the zone of overlap, transmission, and borrowing between environment and postcolonial history by keeping them in conversation rather than reducing the one to the other.

From this non-anthropocentric stance, the literary figuration of biological invasion may be read according to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of deterritorialisation. This notion is predicated upon a vision of the environment in which humans and nature partake of a common field of production and consumption. Deterritorialisation is a movement of destabilisation, a flow dismantling territorial boundaries. It is the insertion of a circumscribed territory into a wider field of circulation. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari describe rat invasion in Daniel Mann's film *Willard* as a case of deterritorialisation: the irruption of pest multitude into the domestic space disrupts family loyalties and triggers a process of becoming-animal in the human protagonist (233). The over-expansion of an organism in a region can be read as deterritorialisation because it causes a generalised rearrangement of ecological communities and a collapse of natural barriers. According to Deleuze and Guattari, capitalism deterritorialises, even though its deterritorialising logic is complemented by a re-territorialisation imposed by the apparatuses of the state.<sup>5</sup> As part of the history of capitalist expansion, invasive species operate within a process of deterritorialisation whereby specific ecosystems lose their autonomy and internal genealogical ties. Deterritorialisation tears apart territories and re-attaches their fragments to broader and more abstract spaces of transmission. The process of deterritorialisation locates ecosystem change and postcolonial history on a common "plane of immanence" or "plane of consistency": a continuum of shifting intensities, "the zone of exchange between man and animal in which something of one passes into the other" (Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* 109). In the context of capitalist settler colonialism, deterritorialisation is a loss of territorial margins that pushes societies and environments into the ever-expanding, re-territorialising movement of the capitalist system. Although he does not mention Deleuze and Guattari, Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee recognises an essential aspect of this machinery of dislocation and relocation at the moment of tracing the beginning of eco-materialism in Marx:

The downgrading or devaluing of nature is not just some side effect of the capitalist system. On the contrary, it lies at the heart of its mechanism. Capitalism depends on the dissolution of the ties between the labourer and her or his environment, what Marx calls “the dissolution of the relation to the earth—land and soil. . . .[”] This alienation of the labourer from her or his environmental condition generates the motor of demand that animates the capitalist system. (Mukherjee 66)

Mukherjee underlines the negative aspect of the capitalist “dissolution of the relation to the earth,” yet for Deleuze and Guattari, deterritorialisation has a potentially positive value, especially when considered as the capacity of the earth to exceed any territorial limit or in terms of a revolutionary potential moving against the grain of capitalist re-territorialising measures.<sup>6</sup> Still, from an ecological perspective, it holds true that biological invasion is part of a process of deterritorialisation/reterritorialisation, a whole territorial machine exposing ecosystems to the power of capitalist accumulation. The relative deterritorialisation activated by capitalism corresponds to the dissolution of the labourer’s relation to the earth. Capitalism imposes new forms of territoriality and settlement. From this angle, settler colonies are territorial machines that secure colonised landscapes to the logic of capital. In this context, deterritorialisation indicates, at the same time, capitalist alienation from the land, as well as a capacity to form lines of flight that elude re-territorialising apparatuses of capture. Deterritorialisation is always in tension: even from a conceptual point of view, it is a coupling of incompatibles, a productive contradiction. It is in figures of deterritorialisation that a non-anthropocentric reading of South African and Australian literature can connect ecological change to the formation of postcolonial societies within a global capitalist system.

## II. Deterritorialisation and Biological Invasion

Marsden and Tan’s *The Rabbits* is an assemblage of visual and written material that provides a re-narration of the colonisation of Australia in which animal and human histories are merged. In many ways, the

narrative proposes a counter-history of biocultural invasion. The subject of the story is not the winning coloniser but rather the oppressed, marginalised native. While Marsden, the author of the text, is a highly celebrated but also controversial non-Aboriginal author of narratives for children, this story is written from an Aboriginal point-of-view and intervenes in contemporary postcolonial debate in Australia. *The Rabbits* is a form of writing back that is less concerned with a global audience than the construction of a national memory from the point-of-view of pre-colonial inhabitants. However, Marsden's controversial work also takes part in the current invasion narrative genre in Australia, which characterises the cultural anxiety of settlers concerned with immigration from overpopulated Asia into the empty spaces of Australia. A political issue is at stake in this genre, and Marsden's stories generate different interpretations depending on the context in which they are placed. If read as the transfiguration of settler anxiety, Marsden's story can be understood as racist, positing the enemy as the alien and hence contributing to settler nationalism preoccupied with the arrival of migrants from neighbouring countries.<sup>7</sup> However, I read *The Rabbits* in a context other than that of national identity in Australia. Following Huggan's general approach in *Australian Literature*, I place this visual narrative in a wider, transnational ecocritical discourse in which the representation of invasive species maintains the ability to address ecological questions alongside political ones and, more importantly, in which the rabbits are not immediately transfigured into a metaphor of the human. Furthermore, *The Rabbits* is a critique of settler nationalism rather than a fantasy of alien invasion, in that the colonisers are the ancestors of today's white Australians. In this, it is profoundly different from other invasion stories written by Marsden. My reading emphasises the difference between conquerors and conquered rather than the dichotomy between alien and native. I do not deny, however, that *The Rabbits* can be read in many other ways.

*The Rabbits* is not a hopeful story; it offers a dystopian retrospective account of Australian history. It is related to the introduction of the English rabbit in Australia. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Europeans transported rabbits on ships as a source of food.

Authors such as Brian Coman and Eric Rolls highlight a key moment in 1859 when Thomas Austin imported the animals to Australia for the purpose of providing game for sport hunting, a popular form of entertainment in the colony. Rolls reports that the twenty-four English rabbits introduced by Austin and others near Geelong, Victoria, learned to thrive in the Australian environment over the next twenty years. The rabbits migrated to other regions in New South Wales and South Australia (Rolls 6). By 1869, rabbits were “numbered by the thousands” (Coman 17–18). In the twentieth century, the rabbits have been a plague. They have contributed to the destruction of the bush in many regions of Australia and endangered and almost extinguished the lives of other native species. Coman observes that the rabbit’s success was due to a various reasons, including the resilience and genetic adaptability of the animal, which has prospered despite hostile conditions. Coman suggests that “without doubt, one of the important factors was the development of pastoral activities which changed the nature of the vegetation” (31). The transformation of the bush into pastoral and agricultural land, which favoured the spread of rabbits, was related to the economic regime introduced by colonialism. Alongside rabbit invasion and alteration of the landscape, the methods adopted to fight the expansion of the rabbit during the 1950s and 1980s have threatened the lives of “possums, bandicoots, wombats, kangaroos and wallabies and dozens of species of birds” (Coman 56). Whereas *The Rabbits* is a work of fiction that does not aim to provide historical details, read against the grain of other accounts of colonial history it suggests specific ways of interpreting the ecological and social dimensions of the Australian colonial legacy.

The first notable element of the text is the relationship it draws between nature and politics. This is by no means allegorical, as proposed on the back cover of the book. Allegory, as commonly understood, implies a kind of substitution, the adoption of one term as stand-in for something else. However, the story can be read as something other than a mere allegory of nationalist concerns. Indeed, the story avoids the anthropocentrism whereby nature becomes a mere allegory of social and political issues precisely by showing the rabbit as agent of both ecosys-

tem change and part of a colonial project of Aboriginal dispossession. In this story rabbits are both rabbits *and* colonisers, animals *and* humans, in a way that should not be too hastily literalised. According to Coman, “in what is perhaps the most remarkable colonisation by any introduced mammal anywhere in the world, the rabbit has not just successfully invaded the Australian landscape, it has burrowed into our social history as well” (xiv). Marsden and Tan’s story shows this “burrowing” of the rabbit in both landscape and social history, not by transforming the rabbit into figure but rather by dressing the rabbit as coloniser and keeping the history of the environment in tension and overlap with the history of European colonialism. In the story, the rabbits remain animal whilst adopting and knowing how to manage instruments of war and science. They hold a military force that will crush the natives, with which the reader can identify, in spite of the strength and final success of the conquerors.

As a character in the story, the rabbit cannot be totally explained away by a binary choice: *either* rabbit *or* human coloniser. The animal is *both* rabbit *and* human coloniser, so that ecological reality is connected, in an unstable and incomplete way, to the history of political subjugation. Furthermore, animals are represented in packs, groups, and multitudes. The story presents the point-of-view of the collective, the encounter between species, rather than the individual or family memory. This perspective contrasts with that presented in other rabbit stories such as those included in Jenny Quealy’s remarkable ABC series collection, *Great Australian Rabbit Stories*. In Quealy’s volume, the rabbit is part of a history of co-existence in the Australian frontier zone. However, in Quealy’s stories, political and ecological factors are channelled into family recollection; history is turned into private memory. In *The Rabbits*, the relation between text and image keeps the narrative on a macroscopic level, which is the plane of historical narration rather than individual or familial reminiscence. Packs of rabbits and kangaroos confront each other in a large-scale encounter. The dualism of coloniser and colonised is imposed by the logic of colonisation: the invasive species sets itself against “the rest” of the animals and organisms. As Val Plumwood suggests, a dualist thought is part of a colonial ideology in

which oppression operates in various dimensions simultaneously: race, gender, nature, and class (41–44).

In one passage of *The Rabbits*, the text connects colonialism and biological invasion almost literally: “They brought new food, and they brought other animals. We liked some of the food and we liked some of the animals. But some of the food made us sick and some of the animals scared us” (Marsden and Tan). The illustration that accompanies this sentence is distributed across two entire pages. In one part of the image, nature is subjugated to the rule of industrial production: sheep and cow are turned into objects inserted in a chain of exploitation and mechanisation. Animals become commodities within a partitioned, fenced landscape. On the other side of the image, another scenario counterbalances the first: a spoiled and sterile plane with animal remains and no sign of living beings. The intensive mechanisation and productivity of the “new food, new animals” brings about a correlative devastation of the biome. The rabbits-colonisers operate a radical transformation of the environment. After their arrival, giant walls and apartment blocks cut off the natural continuum; they disconnect and divide elements of the landscape. Invasive species accelerate the ecological destruction of the land and its human re-appropriation through fences and barriers. The overflow of rabbits is linked to the destruction of diversity and a denial of co-existence: “The rabbits spread across the country. No mountain could stop them, no desert, no river” (Marsden and Tan). Marsden and Tan’s account of the proliferation and adaptability of the rabbit in Australia brings to mind Rolls’ description in his canonical work *They All Ran Wild*: “[T]heir complex social system and ability to adjust their breeding to conditions allowed them to colonize and continue to spread” (6).

In *The Rabbits*, the native animals are seen from a distance. They look small, while the rabbits and their constructions are gigantic, suggesting colossal proportions. Yet the counterpart of this grandeur is environmental degradation: “The land is bare and brown and the wind blows empty across the plains” (Marsden and Tan). *The Rabbits* is an almost literal narrative in which colonial history is re-told as ecological destruction. The expansion of monoculture concentrates wealth and empties the dispossessed from any possibility of survival. Indeed, another inter-

esting element of the story is Marsden and Tan's suggestion of a crucial connection through the visual contrasts and indices presented in the drawings but not always registered in the text: ecological invasion in Australia is part of the material expansion of capitalism. Accordingly, the story positions deterritorialisation as a fundamental aspect of capitalism. It displays the introduction of new means of production and the alteration of the landscape so that it can be adapted to the needs of the global circulation of capital. Biological invasion is equated to capitalist deterritorialisation. Massive buildings, oil pipes, roads, and gigantic factories populate and traverse the Australian landscape. Yet a parallel process of reterritorialisation accompanies the deterritorialisation of the ecosystem. The rabbit-colonisers appropriate common natural resources with the help of machines, walls, and wires.

The figures of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation present in *The Rabbits* put the ecological dimension in close contact with socio-political and economic transformations. The visual narrative focuses on the way in which native species have been represented or screened rather than the ideology of colonialism. Marsden and Tan's book can be read in terms of what Huggan and Tiffin call "a broadly materialist understanding of the changing relationship between people, animals and environment" (*Postcolonial Ecocriticism* 12). *The Rabbits* focuses on the production of a new environment through colonisation and the material elements by which native species are threatened. The narrative shows the transformation of the Australian landscape into a battlefield where military and industrial technologies are at work. This resonates with Coman's account of the war against the rabbit. In fact, the deterritorialisation produced by the introduction of rabbits rapidly assumed unmanageable proportions. The attempt to control rabbit invasion transformed the Australian frontier into a war zone in which fencing and wires, explosives, poison, baits, introduced predators, and chemical and biological weapons (among them the renowned myxomatosis and RHD) were among the tactics employed to fight the over-proliferation of rabbits. In spite of the humour and good spirit of Coman and other narrators of rabbit invasion, the Australian landscape during the 1950s and afterward was transformed into a site of struggle and destruc-

tion. As Coman writes, “people began to think of advancing upon the enemy. As in any sort of warfare, the success was achieved by increasing forces on the ground and devising more sophisticated tactics” (169). Deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation are engaged in a war, which is inherent to the expansion of capitalism, so that species invasion is but one aspect of a concatenation of invasive agents. The control of the rabbits led to the introduction of even more invasive and destructive forms and substances, so that what is external to the expansion of biocultural invasiveness is pushed further to the margins or annihilated. Coman reports that today some Aboriginal groups oppose rabbit eradication, having learned to co-exist with the animals and accept them as contributing to land productivity (224). The ecological problem is now located in a broader arena of social struggle, in which Aboriginal communities resist economic and social marginalisation.

What can be learned through a work such as *The Rabbits* is that invasive species successfully colonise territories when other factors are at work, especially human factors such as the introduction of new forms of land management and monocultural agriculture. While some readings of *The Rabbits* locate the story in contemporary fantasies of alien invasion, manipulated by a nationalist agenda, an ecocritical reading shows other aspects of the text. One trait, in particular, could prevent a nationalist use of this counter-memory. In this essay, invasive species are not mainly defined by the fact that they are alien, or that they migrate from distant lands. Rather, I want to argue that invasive species are part of the expansion of a monoculture that concentrates all natural resources and dispossesses other life forms. From this perspective, I suggest a reading of *The Rabbits* as a critique of capitalism and the complementary social and ecological damage it causes. In this context, the ecological does not become symbol of the social; instead, these two levels constantly overlap and shift one into the other.

### **III. Pest Relocation and Molecular Transformation**

Rose-Innes’ *Nineveh* re-imagines the topography of Cape Town. The novel is a poetic remapping of urban geography in which human beings cannot be detached from the environment and its preciously diverse

life. *Nineveh* proposes alternative ways of inhabiting the city. Nineveh, the luxury settlement, is a fenced territory guarded and protected from what may be lying on the outside: a swamp full of animals and microorganisms, and the township. In contrast with the settlement, which is recurrently described as a sterile space, the novel endorses a nomadic way of life that puts animals and humans together in a border-crossing ecological vision. Pest invasion takes place at the intersection between the desolate settlement and the surrounding biome.

Mr. Brand, the owner and creator of Nineveh, this hi-tech upmarket residential complex, is a capitalist visionary whose business ends in bankruptcy and ruin. The plot revolves around Katya and her relationships with Mr. Brand and her father Len who, like Katya, worked in the pest control business.

Nineveh, like its biblical namesake, is cursed by an apparently unfathomable malediction: a “*comprehensive*” case of pest invasion (Rose-Innes 38), a huge and periodically proliferating attack of “goggas,” a generic term that indicates small beetles or insects. Mr. Brand hires Katya to solve the problem. However, her undertaking is destined to fail. The novel suggests that pests are such a part of the environment that is neither possible nor right to eradicate them. At the end of the novel, the solution to the pest problem lies in the ability to imagine different ways of inhabiting the city. The estate, like other parts of the town, is crumbling. Behind the magnificent but uninhabited residential units of Nineveh exists an underground world of pullulating animal and human trafficking, which fences, guardians, gates, and walls try to ward off without much success. Katya directs a small activity called “PPR: Painless Pest Relocation” (16). Unlike her father, Katya follows a strict no-kill policy. She does not annihilate invading creatures but rather relocates them to other parts of the town and its surroundings, usually woods, parks, or rivers. Katya is a solitary, nomadic character completely dedicated to her work who inhabits a world in between the human and the natural. The book depicts the human world as a field of transformation in which human beings are often on the verge of what Deleuze and Guattari term “becoming-animal” (*Kafka* 13–16). It is not a question of metaphor or similitude: in Rose-Innes’ novel humans

seem to partake of vegetal or animal characteristics. Katya is becoming-frog or becoming-insect in more than one passage of the text. For example, this zone of transformation between human and animal appears toward the end of the novel:

When she gets out the van at the gates of Nineveh, she notices the power and intensity of the frogsong. They're going mad out there with massed amphibian jubilation. It's irresistible: Katya's mood lifts, despite the subdued atmosphere in the van. She feels half-frog, half-girl, lapping at the moisture in the air, so dense and rich. Her frog skin is wet and alive. She bounds over to the giant gates on frog legs, clutches the bars with frog fingers, throat pulsing with excitement. Home! (Rose-Innes 150)

In an intriguingly Kafkaesque world, exterior shapes and borders are revealed as extremely unstable thresholds; they are shifting regions of molecular exchange, transformation, and contamination, a vanishing plane that is always in the process of becoming something else and passing into a different zone of intensity. This is an important aspect of the story, made explicit on the last page of the text when Katya reflects that “[e]verything’s in motion, changed and changing. There is no way to keep the shape of things. One house falls, another arises. . . . Even human skin, Katya has read, is porous and infested, every second letting microscopic creatures in and out. Our own bodies are menageries. Short of total sterility, there is no controlling it” (207). This world of animal-human proximity and molecular transformation is what the construction of Nineveh, a capitalist project, is meant to keep outside and exorcise. Yet the estate is plagued by a devastating tide of small creatures that emerge from the neighbouring swamp at night and infest buildings and gardens. The territory of the estate is joined to a wider ecological and economic flow of circulation, transmission, and exchange. In fact, the landscape, in its aliveness, re-enters Nineveh after having been pushed outside. The underground human-animal communication finally dismantles the walls of Nineveh: a secret tunnel linking the interior of the estate. More precisely, a hole in the floor of one of its “units” dismantles the insulation of the estate and allows an incessant exchange with the

outside. Not only insects make their way inside through this passage. Pieces of furniture from the inert, deserted apartments are sold and exchanged with the people who inhabit a neighbouring township. Tiles, furnishings, and bricks are transported in a humid passageway through the walls and fences. This vulnerable point allows the beetles or “goggas” to slip into the estate and infest it in an uncontrollable way. Pest invasion generates a movement of deterritorialisation by defining a line of flight connecting the inside to the outside of Nineveh. The partitioned property is thus attached to a broader, living world, and its sterility is attacked on all sides by trespassing living organisms. Katya finds her father living on the estate as a squatter after having been fired by Mr. Brand because of previous unsuccessful attempts to control the pests. Both Katya and Len are eventually complicit with the end of Mr. Brand’s building project and, indirectly, with the final unlawful re-inhabiting of the land by people from the nearby township. Pest invasion is described in a way that suggests a border-crossing that occurs at both a macroscopic level and a minuscule dimension:

Between her and the walls of Nineveh, the mud is alive. It whispers and it clicks. She feels a touch on the top of her bare foot; the tentative brush of a feeler. Things scuttle over her feet. The whole surface is alive with tiny creatures, stirring, swarming. . . . It’s like wading through some dry flowing substance, seedpods or grain. Millions of the things. . . . She wonders if the hut is actually anchored to the earth in any way, or whether the tide of insects might carry the whole box off on their backs. (173–75)

Such scenes of pest invasion are highly suggestive. *Nineveh* places deterritorialisation against the re-territorialising machine complementary to the capitalist system. As a form of urban wilderness, pest invasion is not the threat of other nations or territories; it takes the form of a native species of insects, a swarm living in the swamp, which dismantles the fencing of a gated community. The natural and human life that the upmarket housing project aims to ward off steals through the passage into the interior and reconnects Nineveh to the surrounding world.

Rather than a simple allegory of South African urban history, *Nineveh* presents a zone of becoming, overlap, and deterritorialisation that insists on the aliveness of the city in all human, animal, and vegetal components. The partition of space and society that has characterised the history of South Africa since the creation of the first European settlements in the seventeenth century is challenged by the text's vision of a zone of exchange that is constantly moulding and deforming the urban geography. While Nineveh, is "so very new that it doesn't yet exist — not in the Cape Town street directory, and not on the maps in Katya's head" (51), throughout the novel pest invasion re-attaches the estate to the life of the city. Deterritorialisation dismantles social partition and opposes projects of ecological sterilisation. It is a movement that is renewed until the end of the text. In spite of the technologies of exclusion and division, on a molecular, microscopic level there is always a line of flight, a tunnel, a hole, or passages through which living organisms maintain contacts and relationships. Pest invasion is a zone of contamination, a trespassing zone that eludes the authority of bosses such as Mr. Brand, who holds "a belief in the fixed nature of things, in walls and floors" (188). The motion of the "goggas" is mirrored by the nomadic existence of Katya herself, who in the end chooses to live in her caravan without a permanent address. *Nineveh* is a fascinating tale of deterritorialisation, a story of molecular intensities in which pest invasion is remade as the living connection between different worlds, where the ecological and the social reveal their proximity and interdependence. From an ecocritical point of view, the story can be read against the background of species invasion in South Africa, a phenomenon that Jean and John Comaroff associate with the formation of the postcolonial nation-state:

[A]nxious public discourse here [in South Africa] over invasive plant species speaks to an existential problem presently making itself felt at the very heart of nation-states everywhere: in what does national integrity consist, what might nationhood and belonging *mean*, what moral and material entitlements might it entail, at a time when global capitalism seems everywhere to be threatening sovereign borders, everywhere to be displacing politics-as-usual? (236–37; emphasis in original)

*Nineveh* includes a reference to Jan van Riebeeck, who founded the Cape Town colony in 1652, and the plants he “used for his famous hedge, meant to keep the Khoisan out of the old Dutch settlement” (Rose-Innes 22). The legacy of colonialism is to be found not so much in the non-native species introduced from Europe as in the fences, walling, and territorial partitions which are part of South Africa’s colonial history. In more recent times, the question of species invasion in South Africa has been considered part of wider socio-political and ecological discussions. Invasive species’ role in the sustenance of rural livelihoods needs to be recognised, as C.M. Shackleton and other ecologists demonstrate. In cases such as the Working for Water project, the solution to ecological threats has given rise to plans for poverty relief that involve unskilled workers in biodiversity protection. While linked to the history of colonialism, the question of invasive species in South Africa today is part of a re-inhabiting of the territory able to create, as David Richardson and Brian van Wilgen write, a broader social transformation that “address[es] environmental and socio-political priorities to the benefit of both” (50). Indeed, *Nineveh* suggests that the protection of biodiversity should be detached from the jargon of “extermination” or national anxiety. The novel could lead public opinion to reconsider invasive species as a possible resource for reconnecting different neighbourhoods and inhabitants of Cape Town and encouraging cultures of exchange and hospitality. In my reading, pest invasion is not a metaphor in *Nineveh*; there is no message or figure to be read behind the description of the plague. Rather, the specific ecological question is located in a shifting terrain of environmental and social interaction. The novel locates the solution to pest invasion in a broader discourse on dwelling in the environment in a way that is ecologically, politically, and socially sustainable and connects humans to the biota of the Cape region. Pest invasion seems to be caused by the persistence of colonialist/capitalist attempts to isolate the territory from any external contamination rather than by “alien” invasion. I suggest that the management of pests should be accompanied by a different way of considering the place of the human in nature and the relationships between humans. The deterritorialisation caused by the “goggas” redefines South African urban topography as a zone of

exchange and communication. In a literal sense, Rose-Innes' novel is about a project of pest relocation that achieves success by re-connecting human and natural communities. It is a nomadic poetic always on the verge of passing beyond a limit or finding a passage beneath walls and gates. In this poetic of constant motion, deterritorialising logic exceeds capitalist expansion and provides a counter-discourse to the eco-material and ideological legacies of colonialism in South Africa.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

*The Rabbits* and *Nineveh* delineate different views on pest invasion in postcolonial contexts. They present zones of overlap between invasive species and the territorial machine of colonial and neo-colonial capitalism. In the first text, pest invasion is coupled with the process of deterritorialisation brought about by capitalism. For this reason, the problem of biological invasion is placed in the context of a wider alteration of the ecosystem and the landscape. Pests proliferate when backed by a system of mechanisation and appropriation of natural resources. In *Nineveh*, pest invasion deterritorialises the boundaries of gated communities and eludes the partitions that divide post-apartheid Cape Town. Deterritorialisation is thus both complementary to and dangerous for the colonial/capitalist regime of territorial ownership. While in a first instance it can contribute to the expansion of new modes of production, in the end its unruly, transgressive flow challenges territorial boundaries. In contrast with the manipulation of the trope of biological invasion in Australian and South African hegemonic nationalism, literature demonstrates that invasive species can reattach national and regional territories to broader geographies of human and biological circulation. A reading of such narratives of invasion should be attentive to the nuances of the text and the interaction between ecological questions and social struggles. Such non-anthropocentric reading can prevent an ideological abuse of ecology and find ways of linking the protection of biocultural diversity to methods of overcoming the legacy of colonialism. In this way, postcolonial ecocriticism may be able to “historicise” environmentalism, as Mukherjee writes, whilst ecology “can inject a much-needed materialist strain into postcolonial critical thinking” (18).

## Notes

- 1 The notion of cultural memory is borrowed from the work of Assman, who identifies it with the circulation of meaning within human groups (5–8).
- 2 The question of invasiveness may be further complicated by references to the introduction of non-native control agents. The University of Georgia Center for Invasive Species and Ecosystem Health provides useful resources on the topic on their website [invasive.org](http://invasive.org).
- 3 Political support for both migrants and Aboriginals may suggest incompatible and contradictory politics. Yet, is it possible to set the contradiction to work? Authors such as Gregory, Veracini, and Wolfe have analysed the violence involved in settler colonialism. However, postcolonial migrants such as refugees and asylum-seekers are not the same as colonial settlers. The difference is one of power and vulnerability rather than the fact of not being native. Perhaps the shift from colonial to postcolonial contexts is one in which the native/non-native distinction needs to be complicated. In her introduction to *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, Spivak notes that postcolonial politics involves “double binds” that should not be merely set aside but critically inhabited. The double bind of this essay is the still open question: how can a just and equal postcolonial society be constructed when the rights of Aboriginal and migrant peoples seem to conflict? Is it possible to connect the protection of biodiversity and ecosystems to the rights of both migrants and Aboriginals? How do we rethink the relationship between the powerful/powerless and the migrant/native? This essay does not claim to solve these issues but rather to open the question for further response.
- 4 In this idea of the subaltern I follow Spivak, especially her rethinking of the concept in an essay included in her recent *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*. She writes that “Subalternity is where social lines of mobility, being elsewhere, do not permit the formation of a recognizable basis of action” (431).
- 5 In *A Thousand Plateaus*, they write: “Capitalism . . . is not at all territorial, even in its beginnings: its power of deterritorialization consists in taking as its objects, not the earth, but ‘materialized labor,’ the commodity. And private property is no longer ownership of the land or the soil, nor even of the means of production as such, but of convertible abstract rights” (454). In the first volume of their project on capitalism and schizophrenia, *Anti-Oedipus*, they discuss the double movement in which capitalist deterritorialisation is caught: “[C]apitalism is continually surpassing its own limits, always deterritorializing further . . . but under the second, strictly complementary aspect, capitalism is continually confronting limits and barriers that are interior and immanent to itself . . . (always more reterritorialization—local, world-wide, planetary)” (281).
- 6 Thus, they note in *What is Philosophy?* that “the earth constantly carries out a movement of deterritorialization on the spot, by which it goes beyond any territory: it is deterritorializing and deterritorialized” (85).

7 In Ross' analysis of other works by Marsden, she states that he "may evade charges of overt racism by never specifying Asian threat, but it is a very thin veneer of cultural egalitarianism that coats his narrative. Beneath it, the barrage of racial stereotypes that describe the invaders—the old 'plagues' and 'floods' and 'swarms'—are hardly concealed" (96).

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Filippo Menozzi

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