

The Wild *Volksmoeder* in the Forest: An Analysis of the Human-Nonhuman Relationship in Dalene Matthee's *Dreamforest* (2003)

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Published: March 5, 2021

ABSTRACT

South African novelist Dalene Matthee's last forest novel, *Dreamforest*, was published in 2003. This novel concludes her tetralogy of historical fiction novels focusing on the poor white timber community living in the Eastern Cape's tropical Knysna forest. Initially the representation of a human-nonhuman relationship in *Dreamforest* suggests a connection between the sexist and classist treatment of the protagonist, Karoliena, and the deforestation of the Knysna forest. When Karoliena rejects the town's prescript of Afrikaner nationalist volksmoeder identity, which South African theorist, Elsabé Brink (1990: 280), describes as an emulation of characteristics including a 'sense of religion, bravery, a love of freedom, the spirit of sacrifice, self-reliance, [and] housewifeliness', it is suggested that she opposes homogenous, monolithic racial and gender classifications. However, the reunion of Karoliena and Johannes at the end of the novel initiates Karoliena's acceptance of the volksmoeder identity, and by implication, her rejection of the forest. Her return to Johannes therefore suggests that the nonhuman is only ever an instrument in the poor white Afrikaans woman's search for identity and her feminist upliftment project(s). The following article analyses the depiction of this human-nonhuman relationship, primarily utilising Tiffany Willoughby-Herard's work in whiteness studies.

Keywords: Afrikaner nationalism, whiteness studies, volksmoeder, human-nonhuman relationship

INTRODUCTION

South African popular fiction novelist Dalene Matthee's last forest novel, *Dreamforest*, was published in 2003. This novel concludes her tetralogy of historical fiction novels focusing on the poor white timber community living in the Eastern Cape's Knysna forest.¹ Whilst the first novel in the series, *Circles in a Forest*, is set in British-ruled South Africa in the 1860s, *Dreamforest* tells the story of the last of the timber community's life in the forest before they were forcibly removed by South Africa's Union government in the early 1940s.

The protagonist of *Dreamforest*, Karoliena Kapp, is a poor white Afrikaans woman who marries a wealthy business owner from the town, Johannes Stander, in order to escape her poverty-stricken forest community. However, Karoliena soon realises that her identity is dependent on the forest and returns in order to become an elephant and a tree. This process of becoming nonhuman is narrated alongside Karoliena's attempt to save the (poor white) forest community. The representation of this human-nonhuman² relationship suggests a connection between the sexist and classist treatment experienced by Karoliena in the town and the deforestation of the Knysna forest. However, after the forest community is forcibly removed to a desolate town called Karatara, and the process of deforestation is deemed irreversible, Karoliena returns to Johannes, who has since been called to serve in the Second World War. Having lost an arm in battle, Johannes ventures into the forest to find peace upon his return from war. After Johannes spends four days alone in the forest, Karoliena finds and devotes herself to him.

Initially the novel seems to suggest that Karoliena's return to the forest is also a rejection of the town's prescript of an Afrikaner nationalist *volksmoeder* identity. The *volksmoeder* identity could be directly translated as 'mother of

¹ The tetralogy of forest novels consists of *Circles in a Forest* (1984); *Fiela's Child* (1985) *The Mulberry Forest* (1987) and *Dreamforest* (2003).

² I utilise the term 'nonhuman' in referring to any living being that is not human, albeit plant or animal, to deconstruct the binaries of human/animal and animal/plant. However, I do so consciously to follow the example of Marius Crous (2015) in acknowledging that humans are also always animals.

the nation', and South African theorist, Elsabé Brink (1990: 280), describes it as an emulation of characteristics including a 'sense of religion, bravery, a love of freedom, the spirit of sacrifice, self-reliance, [and] housewifeliness'. However, the reunion of Karoliena and Johannes at the end of the novel initiates what seems to be Karoliena's acceptance of this *volksmoeder* identity, and by implication, her rejection of the forest.

Re-reading the novel with the knowledge of Karoliena's return to Johannes allows for a new interpretation: one that suggests that a human-nonhuman relationship is possible only to the extent that the nonhuman is an instrument in the poor white Afrikaans woman's search for identity. Consequently, the nonhuman is presented as a tool in aid of what Tiffany Willoughby-Herard (2010) calls feminist upliftment project(s). In the following article I analyse the depiction of this human-nonhuman relationship in *Dreamforest* primarily using Willoughby-Herard's (2010, 2015) work in whiteness studies. I will first briefly outline the initial representation of a human-nonhuman relationship as is presented in the novel. To do this, I specifically refer to the use of anthropomorphism and zoomorphism in the novel,³ and make use of Bruns's (2007) theory on becoming nonhuman, and Berger's (2008) and Woodward's (2008) work on the animal gaze. The aim of this article is to show that Karoliena's loyalty to Johannes prohibits her loyalty to the nonhuman and prevents a connection between human and nonhuman. I do not argue that the novel subverts the notion that only men and indigenous communities can enter into a relationship with the nonhuman. Instead, in my view, it suggests that the white Afrikaans woman's relationship with the nonhuman is only possible when it aids her becoming an Afrikaner *volksmoeder*, in turn supporting the nationalist idea of the Afrikaner as an ancient tribe with a rightful claim to Africa.

THE HUMAN-NONHUMAN RELATIONSHIP IN *DREAMFOREST*

The connection between humans and nonhumans in *Dreamforest*, and the reconceptualisation of terms such as 'nature', 'human' and 'nonhuman', is in effect achieved with the use of anthropomorphism and zoomorphism. Initially, only the trees in the forest are likened to humans in *Dreamforest*. Karoliena states that the felled trees on the train wagon are 'bodies and limbs' (Matthee, 2003: 19). In another instance, Oldman Botha reminds Karoliena to ask the tree saplings to 'breathe properly' (Matthee, 2003: 199). Karoliena often speaks to the trees, imagining that they can hear her, but that they also have 'a spirit inside [them]' (Matthee, 2003: 253) and can see the human spirit. This use of anthropomorphism creates a connection between the physical bodies of humans and nonhumans, and in turn establishes a sense of understanding in the reader for the nonhuman.

Linda Vance (in Huggan, 2004: 718) advocates against the use of anthropomorphism, arguing that 'the goal is not to make us care more about [nature] because [it is] like us, but to care about [it] because [it is itself]'. In contrast to Vance, I agree with Marthinus Versfeld's (1985) argument stating that anthropomorphism is not only useful in attempting to establish a relationship with the nonhuman, but that it is also inevitable for humans to understand other animals in terms of themselves. However, the use of zoomorphism takes the subordination of western dichotomies between humans and nonhumans a step further than anthropomorphism.

Throughout *Dreamforest* various characters are likened to the nonhuman. Especially Oldman Botha is described as having 'two dark hawk eyes' (Matthee, 2003: 197) and having 'started to grow out of the forest floor from the seed of a tree' (Matthee, 2003: 70) rather than being born 'like other human beings' (Matthee, 2003: 70). What zoomorphism achieves that anthropomorphism perhaps does not, is the centring of the nonhuman. By using zoomorphism, Matthee avoids the anthropocentric view of anthropomorphism, and replaces it with biocentrism, wherein a connection between human and nonhuman is established, whilst the human/nonhuman hierarchy in western discourse is subverted.

Apart from anthropomorphism and zoomorphism, the foregrounding of the nonhuman gaze in the novel furthers the connection between humans and nonhumans, while also acknowledging the intrinsic value of the forest and the role of the nonhuman in the lives of the forest community. In her analysis of *Dreamforest*, Louw (2007: 9) refers to the opening page of the novel, where the gaze of both an elephant and a lourie bird⁴ is described:

There was an elephant watching her from the thicket. Somewhere above her (...) a lourie was gurgling and hissing to warn the elephant that there was a human walking along the sledpath [sic].

Louw (2007: 104) argues that the depiction of the animal gaze presents both human and nonhuman as 'completely "inhomogeneous", but yet relational'. Throughout *Dreamforest* the animal gaze is recorded, like in the stonechat's fearless 'pitch black eyes' (Matthee, 2003: 254) as it sits on Karoliena's hand. Woodward (2008: 1) reasons that the animal gaze is always a silent action which highlights both the unknowable state of the animal and its own

³ Anthropomorphism refers to the attribution of human characteristics to nonhumans, whilst zoomorphism refers to the attribution of animal characteristics to humans.

⁴ The Knysna lourie, or Knysna turaco, is a bird predominantly found in the coastal regions of the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. The Knysna lourie has distinct green feathers with vibrant red colouring on its wings.

subjectivity. Furthermore, the animal gaze demands a response from the human that is being watched (Woodward, 2008: 1). In so doing, the animal gaze reconfigures the so-called natural order of humans governing over the nonhuman. Instead, the animal gaze places the person being watched in a reciprocal relationship with the nonhuman watching.

Similar to the connection that is established between humans and nonhumans through the animal gaze, Bruns (2007: 703) points out that the act of becoming animal (or becoming plant), is an act of

(...) deterritorialization in which a subject no longer occupies a realm of stability and identity but is instead folded imperceptibly into a movement.

By becoming both tree and elephant, Karoliena enters into a non-hierarchical relationship with the nonhuman. At first Karoliena morphs her body into a tree and becomes 'a human being concealed in a leafy refuge' (Matthee, 2003: 320) in which she, as 'human-tree' (Matthee, 2003: 322), is 'part of the forest [and] inside the forest' (Matthee, 2003: 322). Her situatedness both in the forest and as part of the forest establishes a connection between humans and nonhumans both physically and relationally.

Similarly, Karoliena also becomes an elephant by wearing the elephant shoes of the indigenous Outeniqua man, Abel Slinger. Whilst wearing the shoes, Karoliena 'felt as if the earth rose through the shoes and into her body' (Matthee, 2003: 504). In Dan Wylie's *Death and Compassion: The elephant in Southern African literature* (2018: 126), he states that elephants are often represented in literature as

(...) boundary-breakers, embodying a wildness that defies, and thereby critiques, the human propensity to improve such boundaries between geographical areas and species.

Karoliena's becoming-elephant signifies a similar break, especially a break in the boundary between humans and nonhumans. Her identity is now situated in connection to the nonhuman. She is a 'human-elephant' (Matthee, 2003: 506) who can assuredly state that she is 'Karoliena Kapp, an elephant cow who will never again be afraid of anything' (Matthee, 2003: 507).

It becomes clear then that a human-nonhuman relationship is portrayed and explored in Matthee's *Dreamforest*. Through the use of anthropomorphism and zoomorphism, the portrayal of the animal gaze and the depiction of a nonhuman becoming, the novel challenges the essentialist binary classification of 'human', 'nature' and the 'nonhuman', while also subverting the notion that a human-nonhuman relationship is reserved for men and indigenous communities.

AFRIKANER NATIONALISM: THE VOLKSMOEDER AND THE NONHUMAN

Matthee's choice of milieu is very interesting in terms of her development of the human-nonhuman relationship. Apart from the work of Helmüth Luttig (the pseudonym of Johanna Wilhelmina Luttig) and Jan H. du Preez, Matthee's forest novels are, in context of the history of Afrikaans literature, the only Afrikaans literary texts that centre on the Knysna forest milieu (Kannemeyer, 2005: 626). Although the milieu in the forest novels is significant, Susan Meyer (2016) argues that the depiction of a human-nonhuman relationship in Afrikaans literature is traceable to the first wave of pastoral farm novels in the 1930s. Like Matthee's forest novels, the first wave of farm novels (or *plaasromans*) focus on the representation of the connection between (mostly poor) Afrikaners and the nonhuman. However, Hennie van Coller (2006: 99) draws our attention to the fact that the first wave of farm novels, depicting a nostalgic longing for pastoral living, can be read as a promotion of Afrikaner nationalism.

Van Coller (2006: 98) describes the landscape portrayed in the farm novels as idyllic, romantic and mythical, but also as patriarchal, historical and feudal. It is a space in which Afrikaners feel at home and in which they find meaning. In contrast to the Afrikaner, the English coloniser is portrayed as feeling alienated from this African landscape. This contrast between the English coloniser's alienation and the Afrikaner's 'belonging' to the African landscape is used to highlight the Afrikaner's entitlement to African land and to the African nonhuman (Van Coller, 2003: 50). According to Van Coller (2006: 99), this depiction of the Afrikaner's entitlement to the African landscape and, by implication to the nonhuman, is an ideology that supports Afrikaner nationalism.

Willoughby-Herard's (2015) work on whiteness studies focuses on the relationship between Afrikaner nationalism and specifically the poor white problem in South Africa. In her *Waste of a White Skin: The Carnegie Corporation and the racial logic of white vulnerability* (2015), she argues that Afrikaner identity is primarily a fabricated identity constructed with the goal of promoting white (Afrikaans) minority rule in Africa. One narrative used to construct this fabricated identity of the white Afrikaner, is the argument that Afrikaners are one of many ancient tribes in Africa (Willoughby-Herard, 2015: 5). This narrative of Afrikaners as an ancient tribe arises from the idea

of an Afrikaner space claimed by the Voortrekkers.⁵ This construes the African landscape as empty: ‘without people or time’ (Willoughby-Herard, 2015: 6). In essence, Willoughby-Herard (2015) argues that Afrikaner identity supposes a homogeneity between a group of people based on their claim on the African landscape. This narrative of the Afrikaner is perpetuated in Afrikaans farm novels, and, I would argue, in Matthee’s *Dreamforest*. By portraying the white Afrikaner as an ancient tribe in Africa with a rightful claim to the African landscape, Afrikaner nationalism and, by implication, homogenous, white Afrikaner rule, is perpetuated in *Dreamforest*.

In a similar way to the farm novels, Matthee’s first three forest novels depict the Afrikaner and English colonisers as binary opposites. The poor (white) Afrikaner is the protagonist of Matthee’s forest novels, whilst the English coloniser is depicted as the antagonist of the nonhuman, the Afrikaner and of the connection between the two.⁶ Since *Dreamforest* is set in a time after British colonisation but before apartheid (and despite it being set after the South African wars), the characterisation is not centred on the binary opposition of Afrikaans/English, but rather on the opposition of poor Afrikaner/rich Afrikaner. However, the processes linked to inheriting land, the portrayal of social hierarchy and the (non)depiction of the black Other,⁷ are present in both *Dreamforest* and, according to Van Coller (2003: 56) also in the first wave of farm novels.

The *volksmoeder* identity is central to this narrative of white Afrikaner minority rule over the African landscape. This identity includes a ‘sense of religion, bravery, a love of freedom, the spirit of sacrifice [and] housewifeliness’ (Brink, 1990: 280). In her analysis of the Afrikaans glossy magazine, *Sarie*, Christi van der Westhuizen (2018: 4) associates *volksmoeder* identity with ‘*ordentlikeheid*’, or, loosely translated, a sense of respectability. While Van der Westhuizen’s focus is on a post-apartheid society, her description of the *volksmoeder* is one which is relevant to pre-apartheid society and to the development of the *volksmoeder* figure in literature. Van der Westhuizen (2018: 4) argues that the *volksmoeder* is encapsulated by ‘specific forms of femininity, heterosexuality, whiteness and middle-classness’. As the mother of the white Afrikaner nation, it is the *volksmoeder*’s responsibility to uphold the standards of the community, and to birth and ensure the strength and honour of the future ruling men. Kruger (1991: 1) emphasises that Afrikaner women, and therefore the *volksmoeder*, feature solely as symbols in Afrikaner historiography, ‘inspiring, justifying and supporting the actions of the male agents of Afrikaner nationalism’. Afrikaner women, however, seldom feature as agents of Afrikaner nationalism themselves. Taking into account both Van der Westhuizen (2018) and Kruger’s (1991) analysis of *volksmoeder* identity, it is necessary to challenge the essentialist identity enforced on Afrikaner women during the critical formative years of apartheid, whilst also acknowledging these women as major role players in the formation of Afrikaner nationalism.

Willoughby-Herard (2007; 2010) takes into consideration both aforementioned aspects in her analysis of *volksmoeder* identity. She analyses how the Carnegie Commission, a commission employed to investigate white poverty in South Africa, played a crucial role in the formation of *volksmoeder* identity, and perpetuated *volksmoeder* ideals using eugenics in an era of scientific racism.⁸ Willoughby-Herard (2007) argues that the Carnegie

⁵ The Voortrekkers are those Afrikaners — roughly 17,000 people, according to Hermann Giliomee (2018: 46) — who joined the Great Trek to the interior of South Africa. The Great Trek refers to the movement of Dutch settlers (and, by implication, their slaves and workers) to the interior of southern Africa to escape British rule in the Cape Colony. The celebration of the centenary of the Great Trek started on 8 August 1938 with a re-enactment of the movement. Nine ox-wagons, starting in the Cape, journeyed to the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria. The Great Trek is often seen as the start of the Afrikaner-nation, whilst the centenary celebration is interpreted as a major role player in the development of Afrikaner nationalism. In *Dreamforest*, a few of the woodcutters are employed to make wooden spokes for the ox-wagons that would be used in the centenary, and the celebratory event as two ox-wagons pass through the town of Knysna is highlighted as absurd.

⁶ In *Fiela’s Child* the brown Afrikaans female, Fiela, and her adopted (white, Afrikaans) son, Benjamin, are both protagonists. While this forest novel complicates essentialist racial classifications, the novel can also be interpreted as a promotion of the ideology that only the Afrikaans-speaker can be the rightful owner of the African landscape, whilst the English colonist will always be the antagonist prohibiting this ownership.

⁷ Abel Slinger, an indigenous Outeniqua man, plays a relatively dominant role in the novel, but as I will discuss later in this article, the mystification with which he is presented contributes to essentialist binary classifications, and in effect to white monolithic rule.

⁸ The Carnegie Commission’s investigation into what was called the poor white problem in South Africa led to the publication of a series of reports. These reports were published as *The Poor White Problem in South Africa: Report of the Carnegie Commission* (1932). Willoughby-Herard (2007; 2010) is critical of these reports and is here specifically referring to a chapter in volume V, ‘The mother and daughter of the poor family’, compiled by Maria Elizabeth Rothmann. Rothmann is today still upheld as a type of cultural heroine for her role in helping the Afrikaner out of poverty. As is suggested by Willoughby-Herard (2010), re-reading the chapter exposes some of the problematic beliefs underlying the Carnegie Commission’s investigation — beliefs which also formed the corner stone of Afrikaner nationalist narratives. One such example is Rothmann’s description of a *normal household*, which she describes as: ‘one which so moulds and influences the children that they in their turn will become the founders of homes which will be a benefit and not a burden to the state’ (Rothmann, 1932: 171). The report is riddled with Rothmann’s own (Afrikaner nationalist) beliefs on what is expected of Afrikaner mothers and daughters in households. The objective of Rothmann’s report was clear: educate mothers on raising a Christian, nationalist, wealthy Afrikaner nation.

Commission's investigation into white poverty in South Africa between 1927 and 1931, formed part of a nationalist historicisation. In order to investigate this nationalist agenda, Willoughby-Herard (2007) analyses the way the Carnegie Commission utilised various pathological techniques in an era of scientific racism to investigate white poverty. According to Willoughby-Herard (2007), the Carnegie Commission conceptualised poverty as either a genetic disease, or as a social tragedy. To justify their investigation into white poverty specifically, they used various tests to ascertain that poor white people were not genetically predisposed to poverty, as they argued black people were.

The negative and statistical characteristics of a predisposed group of people included:

their physical bodies, their genetic or hereditary structure, their physiognomy, their intellectual capacity, their approach to gender roles, their approach to child rearing, their approach to modes of production, their approach to migration or settlement, or their capacity for self-rule. (Willoughby-Herard, 2007: 488)

This form of scientific racism is a positivist and systematic approach through which a group of people's social and political status – regarded as subhuman – is naturalised through the mapping of physical bodies (Willoughby-Herard, 2007: 488). In addition to the negative and statistical characteristics ascribed to poor communities, the Carnegie Commission's solution to poverty included 'genetic monitoring, sterilization, mental testing, forced removals and detentions' (Willoughby-Herard, 2007: 485). The Carnegie Commission's approach to investigating and solving poverty therefore upheld the ideology of whiteness, by aiming to educate and isolate poor white communities from other indigenous communities in South Africa. In so doing the idea of white supremacy (and especially the Afrikaner's claim to the African landscape) was biologically justified.

A primary figure in the Carnegie Commission's investigation in South Africa is the famous Afrikaans author and researcher Maria Elizabeth Rothmann, also known as M.E.R. While she is famed as an advocate for women's rights, M.E.R is often criticised by modern feminists for upholding feminine stereotypes, such as those inherent in *volksmoeder* identity. In Willoughby-Herard's (2010: 83) analysis of M.E.R.'s report, *The Mother and Daughter of the Poor Family* (1932), she argues that M.E.R, like her fellow 'privileged, higher-status Afrikaner nationalist women', made poor white Afrikaans women into tools of Afrikaner nationalism. Willoughby-Herard (2010: 96) argues that this was accomplished by enforcing the *volksmoeder* identity through welfare projects. In order to benefit from the welfare projects headed by privileged Afrikaner nationalist women like M.E.R, poor white women had to accept the Afrikaner nationalist identity — that is the *volksmoeder* identity — presented to them. In the preface to her thesis, Kruger (1991: viii) also mentions that the Afrikaner nationalist women like M.E.R were 'confined by the structures of patriarchal Afrikaner society' and used the Afrikaner nationalist ideals as a platform to address female empowerment (Kruger, 1991: 10).⁹ While it is important to acknowledge the female empowerment that stemmed from these upliftment projects, it is also, as Willoughby-Herard (2010) argues, important to examine how this empowerment led to the disempowerment of women who did not, or could not, conform to the *volksmoeder* ideals.

Thys Human (2003: 24) points out that the relationship between Karoliena and Johannes in *Dreamforest* is portrayed against this background of the Carnegie Commission's investigation into the so-called poor white problem in South Africa, as well as against the background of urbanisation, the celebration of the Great Trek's centenary and the Second World War. While the mystification of the Knysna forest as a nonhuman entity is at the forefront of Matthee's tetralogy (Jooste and Senekal, 2016: 774), all four novels have a dualistic approach to the portrayal of the communities in the Knysna forest and town. As I have previously mentioned, *Circles in a Forest*, *Fiela's Child* and *The Mulberry Forest* are centred on the representation of power relations between British colonisers and poor white Afrikaners, while *Dreamforest* is centred on power relations between the forest community's poor Afrikaners and the town's middle-class Afrikaner community. The focus in *Dreamforest* is therefore on economic status rather than on colonial power. The love relationship between Karoliena and Johannes encapsulates the power relations between poor and middle-class Afrikaners, and is underpinned by the various processes underlying the succession of Afrikaner nationalism, like the Carnegie Commission's investigation into the so-called poor white communities of South Africa during the 1930s.

It is interesting to note the central role that the historical figure of M.E.R. plays in *Dreamforest* as the character Maria Rothman.¹⁰ Maria is portrayed as a key role player in the Carnegie Commission's research project into the poverty of the Knysna forest's timber community. Her visit to the forest is long anticipated by both Karoliena,

Matthee (2003: 188) quotes Rothmann verbatim in *Dreamforest* in what could be interpreted as an attempt to expose Afrikaner nationalist ideologies.

⁹ Kruger (1991: 10) is specifically referring to Mabel Malherbe, the editor of *Die Boerevrou*, a magazine dedicated to the struggles of rural Afrikaner women during 1919 and 1931, but throughout her thesis she argues for the acknowledgement that the participation of women in Afrikaner nationalist movements are (and were) political, feminist acts.

¹⁰ Note the difference in spelling of the surname 'Rothmann'. The historical figure is known as Maria Elizabeth Rothmann, whilst the character in *Dreamforest* is Maria Rothman. I have referred to the historical figure as M.E.R and to distinguish between the two, I will refer to the character in *Dreamforest* as 'Maria'.

after her return to the forest, and by the other forest women. Her visit is also accompanied by critique from Karoliena, who says that she

spoke book-words, the forest used forest-words, but the forest women had only poor words. (...) The one did not understand the other and she doubted if they ever would. (Matthee, 2003: 365)

In the novel Maria analyses, amongst others, the ways the forest community rear their children, and to what degree women can rule themselves. In her meeting with the forest women, Maria argues that ‘the well-being of a family rests on the shoulders of the mother’ (Matthee, 2003: 361). It is also the mother of the household who ‘determines the place of the family in the community’ (Matthee, 2003: 361). While Karoliena does not reject Maria’s *volksmoeder* ideology specifically, she does take it upon herself to help the forest community by, for example, finding and creating employment for her fellow community members, as well as providing food, milk and clothes to those in need.

Karoliena’s approach to the forest community occurs after her rejection of the *volksmoeder* ideals upheld by the town. Therefore her upliftment project in the forest seems ambiguous to the reader. Initially Karoliena rejects the forms of femininity, whiteness and middle-class identity presented to her by members of the town. During her first attempt to flee her poverty-stricken forest community, and prior to her marriage to Johannes, Karoliena is placed under the care of Miss Ann and Mrs Cuthbert by Johannes in a type of ‘finishing school so that (she) will adapt to (her) new environment with ease — and also adapt to life as (his) wife’ (Matthee, 2009: 135-136). The descriptions that follow her life in town are that of Miss Ann, Mrs Cuthbert and Johannes’ attempt to transform Karoliena into the embodiment of a so-called respectable lady, the forest being the embodiment of what is unrespectable: the nonhuman, the uncultivated, and the poor.

Van der Westhuizen (2018: 4) argues that Afrikaner women are required to ‘physically organise their bodies in accordance with certain prescriptions’, and this physical organisation is portrayed and criticised in *Dreamforest*. Under the care of Miss Ann, Mrs Cuthbert and Johannes, Karoliena is forced to transform her body physically in accordance to the *volksmoeder* prescriptions. She wears the dresses made by Mrs Cuthbert, cuts her hair according to Miss Ann’s specifications, and is scolded when she mingles with servants and members of the forest community. Karoliena realises that she has lost her identity only to become ‘someone who had been created by Miss Ann and Mrs Cuthbert’ (Matthee, 2009: 166). She rejects these ideals of the cultivated, respectable *volksmoeder* and flees to the forest.

Greg Garrard (2012: 66) argues that the nonhuman is often associated with the idea of a wilderness, which can be traced back to a Judeo-Christian tradition. On the one hand the wilderness symbolises a dangerous, godless space in which the nonhuman rules. With this notion, the nonhuman is viewed primarily as a commodity that should be tamed in service of humans. On the other hand, the wilderness symbolises a godly place where humans (but specifically men) can retreat into a primordial state and live in harmony with the nonhuman:

Wilderness is the natural, unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilisation that has lost its soul. It is a place of freedom (for alienated urbanites) in which we can recover our true selves we have lost to the corrupting influences of our artificial life. (Cronon, 1996: 80)

The connection between wilderness and the idea of primitive existence gives rise to multiple representations of people in the wilderness. The wilderness is often a place associated solely with masculinity (Garrard, 2012: 84). It is a place that women cannot access because of its connection to danger, economy and authenticity, rather than to traditional feminine traits of safety and domesticity (Garrard, 2012: 84). Where women are represented within a so-called wilderness, they are often presented as dangerous, wild witch figures. Other examples in popular culture of the wild, dangerous woman in the wilderness include the tales of ‘Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs’, ‘Rapunzel’ and ‘Hansel and Gretel’. In Ewing’s (2013: 13) discussion of the wilderness in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, the forest is described as ‘deviant, pathless, issueless, [and] terrifying’. Similarly, popular culture’s depiction of the wilderness inhabited by madwomen, witch figures and evil stepmothers is laden with negative connotations. Consequently, the madwoman, witch figure and evil stepmother are also depicted as deviant and terrifying. This archetypal depiction of what is called ‘monstrous-women’ living in a wild, untamed landscape is often analysed from a psychoanalytical perspective,¹¹ but I would argue, needs to be further analysed from an ecofeminist framework.

Besides being primarily an androcentric space, the wilderness is also associated with the idea of a primitive, indigenous community who has the ability to live in harmony with nature, while the modern western men do not. Garrard (2012: 135) calls this representation of the primordial community living in harmony with the nonhuman a form of ‘ideological mystification’ in which the relationship between nonhuman and indigenous communities is simplified and romanticised. In turn, this ideological mystification creates a dichotomy between the modern western Self and the primitive Other. The focus on a white Afrikaner female’s relationship with the nonhuman in

¹¹ See Birkh user-Oeri and von Franz’s *The Mother: Archetypal image in fairy tales* (1988).

a wilderness milieu challenges this notion that a human-nonhuman relationship and the wilderness as a place are primarily reserved for indigenous communities, but also suggests that the Afrikaner has a rightful claim to the African landscape as a supposedly ancient tribe.

Karoliena's return to the forest and her rejection of the town's desire to transform her into a *volksmoeder* suggests a rejection of the idea that a human-nonhuman relationship is reserved for men and indigenous communities. Similarly, the stereotypical representation of male and female characters is inverted. Although Johannes is portrayed as the masculine hero saving the tragic female victim (Karoliena) from the forest's inherent poverty and danger, her return to the forest signifies her as the heroine and the wilderness as a place that she can access. By returning to the forest after her marriage to Johannes, Karoliena rejects the stereotypical role of a *volksmoeder* and pioneer bride ascribed to her by Johannes and the town and reimagines her position in the traditionally masculine, indigenous wilderness. I hold that Karoliena returns to the forest because her identity is situated in connection with the nonhuman, rather than in the *volksmoeder* and thereby in Afrikaner nationalist culture. She is 'Karoliena Kapp from the forest' (Mathee, 2009: 165) not *from the town*, and it seems as if Karoliena, by returning to the forest, rejects the town's ridicule that she is a 'wild' woman from the forest who needs to be tamed.

Karoliena's return to the forest is further marked by her critique of the Carnegie Commission and Afrikaner nationalist ideals, such as those celebrated during the centenary of the Great Trek — perhaps the single most celebrated and important event in Afrikaner nationalist history. In one instance, Karoliena questions the retelling of the Great Trek. Willempie explains that the Great Trek consisted of Voortrekkers who

(...) moved away to look for a place where they could be free and happy, but all along the way they were killed by the people who were already living there. Consequently, they never reached the promised land. (Matthee, 2003: 511)

Karoliena critiques this narrative of the history of the Afrikaner, asking Willempie if he 'isn't mixing this up with a Bible story' (Mathee, 2009: 511). Miss Ann also states that she pities the Afrikaner, because they 'are celebrating the past while [they] know [they] have no future' (Mathee, 2009: 519). This critique of the Afrikaner, and of what Willoughby-Herard (2015: 6) calls the Afrikaner's 'imitation history', rejects Afrikaner nationalist identity, and by implication the *volksmoeder* ideal. Yet in contradiction with her critique of Afrikaner nationalist identity, Karoliena's return to the forest is marked by an acceptance of certain feminine prescripts, like that of a mothering nurse and caretaker.

The interpretation that Karoliena's return to the forest is an act of deviance against Afrikaner nationalism is overshadowed by descriptions of her undertaking a motherly role towards the poor white community. After rejecting the *volksmoeder* ideals prescribed by Miss Ann, Mrs Cuthbert and Johannes, Karoliena plays the forest community's nurse and caretaker — roles which could be argued are later promoted and upheld by the Carnegie Commission's Maria. Having secured (albeit limited) money through her marriage to Johannes, Karoliena becomes Maria's equal — 'the privileged higher-status white Afrikaner nationalist [woman]' (Willoughby-Herard, 2010: 966) — managing various welfare projects. Although she rejected the town's 'civilised' prescript, Karoliena becomes Maria's *volksmoeder*: the agent of welfare projects and the face of nationalist progress. She provides milk to Hestertjie Vermaak's baby; intervenes in Elmina Vlok's psychological distress; secures clothes for the school children and shoes for woodcutters and also houses widowed Susanna. This role as caretaker and nurse is identified by Van Coller (2003) as that of the *volksmoeder* in farm novels.

After her attempt to save the forest community inevitably fails due to their forced removal to Karatara, Karoliena returns to Johannes and the town. Whilst the majority of *Dreamforest* is initially read as a challenge against the essentialist binary classification of 'human', 'nature' and the 'nonhuman', as well as a challenge against traditional gender roles and Afrikaner nationalism, the return of Karoliena to the town and the emphasis on her devotion to Johannes is underpinned by her rejection of the forest. Taking this rejection of the forest into account, *Dreamforest* seems to suggest that the human-nonhuman relationship, and especially one between the Afrikaner female and the nonhuman, is only ever possible if the nonhuman is a tool in aid of the creation of the white Afrikaner's nationalist identity — here the *volksmoeder*.

Karoliena's return to the town and her devotion to Johannes is also marked by an acceptance of the *volksmoeder* ideals. Where Karoliena could previously not identify herself dressed in gowns made by Mrs Cuthbert in Miss Ann's mirror, she can, upon her return, identify herself in the mirror: 'it was *she* who looked back at her from the mirror. Unmistakably' (Mathee, 2009: 562). With this image of Karoliena's identity situated in the mirror — a metaphor for the town — it is suggested that she also situates her identity in the Afrikaner nationalist projects, now rejecting her identity as 'human-elephant' (Mathee, 2009: 506) or 'human-tree' (Mathee, 2009: 322).

Considering her identity as *volksmoeder* is established because of her loyalty to Johannes, the theme of making peace between neighbours, so characteristic of farm novels, is also worth considering in the forest novels. Karoliena's making peace with Johannes could be read as metonymic for her making peace with the town. Although she has dedicated herself to the town and to Johannes, she still frequents the forest community now

situated in Karatara. She looks after Miss Ann and Johannes's business but she also employs the forest community to make her clothes (Matthee, 2003: 583). Her loyalty towards her neighbours could, however, be read as an extension of the *volksmoeder* ideal. In town she embodies Maria's Afrikaner *volksmoeder*, who can adjust to a privileged life with ease, while also upholding welfare projects aiming to uplift the poor forest community in Karatara. Although she still supports the forest community, she is 'finished with the forest' (Matthee, 2003: 589). This declaration comes before Karoliena's final dedication to Johannes, where she commits her life to being his 'missing arm' (Matthee, 2003: 597) — a symbol of support. It is suggested then that Karoliena gives up her life in the forest in exchange for a new identity separated from poverty and the nonhuman.

When Karoliena's acceptance of the *volksmoeder* ideals are taken into account, further contradictions in the novel present themselves and challenge the initial idea that *Dreamforest* rejects stereotypical gender roles and a primarily androcentric human-nonhuman relationship. The centring of a female protagonist's relationship with the nonhuman in *Dreamforest* is undermined by the novel's emphasis on a dominant male figure aiding this connection. As in farm novels, *Dreamforest* also emphasises the role of the dominant father figure and therefore centres a male voice. Karoliena's biological father died when she was a child, and she laments the 'emptiness (he left) inside her. Like the place where a big tree had been cut down and a hole in the forest roof remained behind' (Matthee, 2009: 20). To an extent, the novel follows Karoliena's search for a father figure. Freek van Rooyen, her mother's second husband, was too 'stupid' (Matthee, 2009: 26) to be her father. Her current stepfather, Uncle Cornelius, 'did not become a father either' (Matthee, 2009: 27). Mister Fourcade, a botanist who acts as Karoliena's voice of reason throughout the novel, is, however, presented as a father figure. While the conversation is not recorded in the English translation of *Dreamforest*, in the Afrikaans novel, *Toorbos* (2003: 277), Karoliena admits to Mister Fourcade that he had been her 'pretend' father for many years.

Instead of being the dominant, patriarchal father that is so characteristic of the farm novels, Mister Fourcade is rather a 'shrewd old bushbuck with a human head' (Matthee, 2009: 112) showing her the secrets of forest plants and teaching her how to catch the rare Lotus Venus moths to sell for an income. It is because of his encouragement that Karoliena returns to Johannes. It is also Mister Fourcade that reprimands her for her 'clouded' judgment of black people who, she argues, 'do not mind being poor' (Matthee, 2009: 283). Mister Fourcade teaches her that the biggest economic and political problem is that of black poverty, not white poverty (Matthee, 2009: 283), and that black people indeed do mind being poor. Because of his influential role throughout the novel, it is safe to assume that Mister Fourcade fulfils a fatherly role in Karoliena's life.

Although he is not a dominant or patriarchal father figure, the portrayal of Mister Fourcade as a voice of reason and moral guide to Karoliena results in the foregrounding of the male voice. Instead of the portrayal of a white woman's independent relationship with the nonhuman, and her situatedness in a wilderness milieu, it is suggested that Karoliena, as a fragile, bewildered and ill-informed female protagonist, needs a masculine voice of reason to guide her both into a relationship with the nonhuman, and out of the wilderness.

Similar to Mister Fourcade, but perhaps more dominant and patriarchal, is Johannes. Johannes acts as a catalyst urging Karoliena to escape from the (wild, dangerous) forest. Throughout the novel Johannes begs Karoliena to 'get out of the forest' because she does not 'belong [t]here' (Matthee, 2009: 118). Taking into account that Karoliena also returns to Johannes and accepts the role of Afrikaner *volksmoeder*, this foregrounding of the male voice leads to the interpretation that the female protagonist is always dependent on a male figure to guide her relationship with the nonhuman, whilst also saving her from crippling situations, like the wilderness' supposed inherent poverty.

Besides Johannes and Mister Fourcade, Abel Slinger, an indigenous Outeniqua man living in the forest, also aids Karoliena's relationship with the nonhuman and is described in terms of extreme racial stereotypes. As the last descendant of the ancient Outeniqua tribe of the Knysna forest, Abel is portrayed as having wisdom and insight comparable to that of a traditional healer. His supposed transcendental, harmonious relationship with the nonhuman is reflected when he asks a river permission to cross and in his prediction of drought and flood seasons. However, his relationship with the nonhuman is not at the forefront of *Dreamforest*, but rather his aid to Karoliena's relationship with the nonhuman. Although the historical accuracy of the human-nonhuman relationship between the Outeniqua tribe and the forest is not under dispute in this article, the way in which this relationship is portrayed in *Dreamforest*, is. The focus in Matthee's novel is on how Abel's wisdom and insight of the forest and nonhuman, is solely to aid Karoliena's search for identity. This is especially evident in Abel's aiding Karoliena's nonhuman becoming.

At first Karoliena morphs her body into a tree and becomes 'a human being concealed in a leafy refuge' (Matthee, 2009: 320) in which she, as 'human-tree', is 'part of the forest [and] inside the forest' (Matthee, 2009: 322). Her situatedness both in the forest and as part of the forest establishes a connection between humans and nonhumans both physically and relationally. After her return to the forest, Karoliena becomes an elephant by wearing the elephant shoes given to her by Abel Slinger. Whilst wearing the shoes, Karoliena 'felt as if the earth rose through the shoes and into her body' (Matthee, 2009: 504). Wylie (2018: 126) argues that elephants are often represented in literature as

(...) boundary-breakers, embodying a wildness that defies, and thereby critiques, the human propensity to improve such boundaries between geographical areas and species.

Karoliena's becoming-elephant signifies a similar break, especially a break in the boundary between humans and nonhumans. Her identity is now situated in connection to the nonhuman. She is a 'human-elephant' (Mathee, 2009: 506) who can assuredly state that she is 'Karoliena Kapp, an elephant cow who will never again be afraid of anything' (Mathee, 2009: 507). However, considering that Karoliena later returns to the town and becomes the embodiment of the *volksmoeder* identity, this becoming-animal and becoming-plant suggests that the indigenous community and the nonhuman is only ever an aid to the white Afrikaner female's search for identity.

In Helize van Vuuren's chapter 'The bushman in our consciousness' (2016: 111) she points out that the portrayal of 'bushmen' in Afrikaans literature is often a subject of guilt and fascination. She argues that white Afrikaans authors utilise the bushman figure to highlight 'the imminent destruction and sealed fate of his language and his culture' (2016: 111). It seems then that Afrikaans literature has a tradition wherein the characterisation of an indigenous community is reduced to that of an instrument in aid of Afrikaner culture and Afrikaans as language. A similar characterisation exists in *Dreamforest*. Abel becomes a metaphor for an idealised lifestyle and of a harmonious connection with the nonhuman. Abel and his wife, Bella, are left behind in the forest when the white forest community is forcibly removed to Karatara. On the one hand, this signifies the racial discrimination of the Union government attempting to secure white hegemonic rule in Africa, but it also suggests that the white Afrikaner can never enter into a deep (ever-lasting) connection with the nonhuman, whilst the indigenous community can. It is through this metaphor that Abel becomes an object of fascination, instead of a complex individual with a personal history and connection with the nonhuman. It is also through this representation that the subversion in *Dreamforest* of the notion that a human-nonhuman relationship is reserved for men and indigenous communities, is undone.

Helize van Vuuren (in Van Biljon and Van Vuuren, 2003: 2) argues that the descriptions of the forest in *Dreamforest* involve a sense of mystification and romanticising related to magical realism. Whilst the use of magical realism to describe the forest and human-nonhuman relationships does pose the threat of an 'imperialist nostalgia' (Huggan, 2004: 704),¹² the portrayal of complex interspecies relationships and the acknowledgement of colonialism's impact on the nonhuman and on its relationship to humans in the novel challenges a simplified notion of human-nonhuman relationships. In *Dreamforest* the use of anthropomorphism and zoomorphism, the depiction of the (nonhuman) animal gaze and a portrayal of becoming (nonhuman) animal and plant is initially interpreted as a strategy to establish an 'imaginative identification' (Wylie, 2018: 7) with nonhumans in readers.

Wylie (2018: 7) argues that the use of metaphors and other imagery, like the animal gaze and nonhuman becoming, enhances the emotional impact a text has on readers. By using these narrative strategies, the similarities between humans and nonhumans are highlighted. The mystification in *Dreamforest* initially achieves the same outcome — highlighting the similarities, and therefore establishing a connection between humans and nonhumans.

Whereas the aspects of magical realism are first used in the novel to describe the forest and expand the reader's imagination in terms of the nonhuman, in effect reconceptualising 'place', problematising the anthropocentric construct and reimagining the place of the human in nature, the magical realism used to describe Abel perpetuates the idea that only a primitive community can have a harmonious relationship with the nonhuman. It is also suggested that this connection between an indigenous man and the nonhuman can only ever serve the white Afrikaner female's search for identity. So too the foregrounding of the male voice, presented in this novel in the characters Mister Fourcade, Johannes and Abel, reinforces the idea that the wilderness is a masculine space which the white Afrikaner female can only access with the help of a guiding male voice.

CONCLUSION

It can be argued that the Dalene Matthee's last forest novel initially portrays a human-nonhuman relationship through the use of anthropomorphism and zoomorphism, the depiction of nonhuman becoming, and the portrayal of the animal gaze. However, Karoliena's acceptance of the *volksmoeder* identity and her rejection of the forest do not allow the novel to challenge continuing imperialist modes of social and environmental dominance. Instead, her relationship with the nonhuman ends after her acceptance of the Afrikaner nationalism's *volksmoeder* identity. Through the centring of a male voice and the depiction of Abel Slinger, *Dreamforest* not only supports Afrikaner nationalist ideals, but suggests that a connection with the nonhuman is solely a masculine practice reserved primarily for (stereotyped) indigenous communities. Utilising Willoughby-Herard's work (2007; 2010; 2015) in

¹² Huggan (2004: 704) is referring here to the notion that the so-called 'wilderness' is an uninhabited space with no history or human-nonhuman relationship prior to colonisation. An imperialist nostalgia is 'a closet ideology the practitioners of which are given to mourn what they themselves have helped destroy'.

whiteness studies, I argued that the forest and the nonhuman portrayed in *Dreamforest* is solely reserved for the spiritual healing of white Afrikaners. Karoliëna's return to Johannes and her rejection of the forest therefore undoes the novel's own critique of Afrikaner nationalist narratives, as well as the novel's reimagination of essentialist binary classifications like 'human', 'nonhuman', 'nature' and 'wilderness'.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research in this article has been funded by (grants from) the Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns and the University of Pretoria, and is based on my MA dissertation, entitled *'n Mensboom in Olifantskoene: 'n postkoloniale ekokritiese analise van Moerbeibos (1987) en Toorbos (2003) deur Dalene Matthee (2020)*.

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Citation: Rabie, D. (2021). The Wild *Volksmoeder* in the Forest: An Analysis of the Human-Nonhuman Relationship in Dalene Matthee's *Dreamforest* (2003). *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 5(1), 09. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/9746>

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