Contemporary Speculative Fiction in Southern Africa

In an essay published in 2018, titled “Afrofuturism: Ayashis’ Amateki”, the South African writer Mohale Mashigo presented a manifesto of sorts for contemporary speculative fiction writers on the continent. She proclaims there that, “[w]hat I want for Africans living in Africa is to imagine a future in their storytelling that deals with issues that are unique to us.”\(^1\) While criticizing cultural imperialism, which Mashigo says is mainly an attribute of the UK and the USA, this proclamation is clearly tied up with conversations about “Afrofuturism”, a term coined by the American critic Mark Dery in his essay *Black to the Future* and most often applied to an African-American aesthetic. Geographically limited to America, “Afrofuturism” is believed by some to have acquired a curatorial cachet appropriating Africa and its people in the process. Thus, by saying that she is speaking of “Africans living in Africa”, and highlighting that speculative fiction is being shaped by historical, collective experiences of African culture, Mashigo is opposed to the notion of the artist alienating herself from her community and rather positions speculative fiction writers’ commitment on the continent.

However, as the essay unfolds Mashigo notes that the project of predicting futures “will be divergent for each country on the continent”.\(^2\) What follows is a strongly South African argument. She says

> For me, imagining a future where our languages and cultures are working with technology *for us* in order to, as Miriam Tlali says, ‘expose what we feel inside’, I had to draw from South African folklore and urban legends. How could I not go back to our amazing stories about mutlanyana (rabbit) outsmarting a hungry lion, for inspiration? Or ‘jazz up’ urban legends: the headless horse named Waar is my Kop (Where is my Head) that terrorises young children, or the beautiful ghost of a young woman named Vera who haunted the roads of Soweto at night, causing young men to drive off the road?\(^3\)

Many of the points in this extract and in the essay as a whole are specific to South Africa. They also invoke the vernacular and would, therefore, mean very little to readers elsewhere on the continent. There appears to be a tension here, then. Simultaneously, Mashigo gestures towards the continent - as a whole and as a contrast to the West - and towards the specific space of South Africa. Thus, the

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\(^1\) Mashigo, *Intruders*, 1. Also available on *Johannesburg Review of Books*: see references.

\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) Ibid. Emphasis in original.
writer’s words are caught between a commitment and allegiance to many, continent-wide, and a niche group, locally based.

Teju Cole seems to support Mohale Mashigo in his journal article “Do African digital natives wear glass skirts?” when he says that “all futures are specific and local”. However, Cole’s argument is nuanced by a sentiment of further tanglement. He adds, “They [the futures] are simultaneously local and woven into global realities”. While I think Mashigo’s argument about the local and vernacular is of utmost importance, the present paper is aligned with Cole’s latter point. To be sure, speculative fiction provides insight into the implications of global interconnectedness. The speculative fiction genre in (Southern) Africa, which privileges futurity and articulates radically different forms of life, is functioning as a rhetorical tool in the face of complex localisms and globalisms in the twenty-first century. In order to fully engage with an understanding of futurity, or to engage with speculative fictions, there is a need to understand that the very act of imagining is caught up in various sites of knowledge production.

Contributing to the ongoing conceptual shift in thinking about the continent, much contemporary African speculative fiction is ostensibly written in accordance with Achille Mbembe’s suggestion that an “emerging tacit consensus is that the destiny of our planet will be played out, to a large extent, in Africa”. And yet, we might ask, how is the frontier between planet and continent being conceived in sf? This question is at the heart of my investigation. Through a close and critical look at a number of speculative short stories from Southern Africa, I suggest that African speculative fiction goes beyond the joining of narrative strands that polarise localisation and globalisation by destabilising generic expectations. The history of speculative fiction was once dominated by drivers of progress in the Global North; specific imperialist states - such as Britain and Soviet Russia - developed “national styles” of sf that worked in agreement with the realities of colonial expansion particular to each nation. The (Southern) African futures presented in this paper rather direct our attention to a shift in sensibility. The stories do not offer constructs of nationhood but reconcile sf’s faithfulness to the nuances of socio-political contexts and the genre’s loyalty to a planetary perspective. Speculative fiction from Africa today simultaneously relies on oral literary traditions and popular conceptualisations of life, and in doing so, constitutes a point of convergence for diverse ways of knowing and, ultimately, embraces the multiplicity of (im)possible futures.

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4 Cole, 41
5 Ibid.
6 Cited in Küchler et al, Alien Imaginations, 6.
7 Otherwise, and from here on, referred to as ‘sf’
8 Mbembe, “A planetary turn”, in African Futures, 323.
9 Or science fiction
10 Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. in “Science fiction and empire”
Arjun Appadurai’s theory of globalisation is useful in order to conceptually frame my ideas here. In his essay “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy”, Appadurai uses the term “-scape” to talk of the complex movement of people and ideas around the world. He says, “-scapes”\(^ {11}\) are “the building blocks of […] the multiple worlds which are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe”.\(^ {12}\) For here, the most important characteristic of Appadurai’s theory is his reconceptualization of globalisation. His ideas of global culture are not binarized or linear, and he resists a “centre-periphery” paradigm. Instead, Appadurai highlights dynamism in our contemporary world and emphasizes that entanglements inform various ways of being and, indeed, narrativizing.

In talking of the “local” and “localisms”, it should be noted that this paper is not about “African authenticity” and its manifestation in the global, digital future that enfolds before us. The localised reality in (Southern) Africa is one in which ideas and narratives are circulating via (globally) digital means of communication.\(^ {13}\) Indeed, half of the stories dealt with below are published in online magazines. Rather, my hope for this paper is that it might highlight the diversity of some contemporary Southern African writers’ voices and communicate, through analysis of their works, the complex nature of the field of African speculative fiction.

After the section below on content and context, I identify three nodes of interest from which a weave of local and global concerns emerges in the contemporary sf stories: posthumanism, temporalities, and mythologies. The short stories are organised within the subsections as follows: “Waking Up in Kampala” by Wesley Macheso and Stacy Hardy’s “A Butcher Fantasy” are discussed in the subsection titled Critical Posthumanism. Masimba Musodza’s “Herbert Wants to Return Home” and Andrew Dakalira’s “Inhabitable” are discussed in the second subsection, Tangled Temporalities. And, in the last subsection, Animist Materialisms,\(^ {14}\) I discuss “Manoka” by Mohale Mashigo, Tendai Huchu’s “Njuzu”, and Kerstin Hall’s “In the Water”.

**Content and Context**

Broadly speaking, literature and culture in Southern Africa is at a crossroads. All sorts of literary movements are beginning to push the boundaries of the status quo in society. Recent sf has grown out of a context of rapidly changing cultural and institutional pressures. A good instance of this can be

\(^{11}\) That is, “ethnoscapes”; “technoscapes”; “finanscapes”; “mediascapes”; and, “ideoscapes”.

\(^{12}\) Appadurai, 329

\(^{13}\) The penetration of digital communications across Africa has been the highest worldwide since 2005, and over 240 million people on the continent use the internet today. In Srinivasan et al.

\(^{14}\) I am specifically following Harry Garuba and Caroline Rooney here. In “Explorations in Animist Materialism”, Garuba suggests that “magical realism” cannot cover the scope or “multiplicity of representational practices that animism authorizes” (272).
found in the increased artistic interventions in relation to socio-political debates since the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall campaigns began in the 2010s. Speculative fiction is one of the most diverse and complex genres of African literature today. It is manifesting as highly experimental and revolutionary in form and style across Southern Africa. The last ten years have witnessed its popularisation with a great number of writers engaging with the genre in this area of the continent alone. Names such as Tendai Huchu, Lauren Beukes, Ivor Hartmann, Mohale Mashigo, Stephen Embleton, Wesley Macheso, Andrew Dakalira, Nick Wood, and Nerine Dorman dominate the scene. This abbreviated list excludes the likes of Shadreck Chikoti, Muthi Nhlema, Ekari Mbvundula, Stacy Hardy, Keletso Mopai, Nick Mulgrew, Tom Learmont, Cristy Zinn, and Elijah Havel Dambula; it also excludes African-language speculative fiction in the southern region of Africa, such as works in Shona by Masimba Musodza and Ivor Hartmann. This list highlights quite a lot of ‘new’ writers and gestures towards a significant amount of publishing. To be sure, one need only glance at the many digital micro-presses and anthologies dedicated to sf in 2020 to see that it is becoming an interesting challenge to keep up with the turnover of emerging African speculative fiction writers and their works.

The stories discussed in this paper could all be referred to as African speculative fiction. Having said that, however, we should also recognise that the field of “speculative fiction” in Africa is still in a process of formation. African creative writers and artists have proposed various alternative designations to speculative fiction, including African futurism. The emergence of such alternatives is informed by the larger aforementioned conversation around what has become the controversial use of “Afrofuturism” with reference to sf on the continent.

Historically, “speculative fiction” has been categorized in a number of ways: as a subgenre of science fiction, as the distinct opposite to science fiction, and as an umbrella term that encompasses all genres that are non-mimetic. In the latter sense, speculative fiction is inclusive of genres like science fiction, fantasy, weird fiction, cyberpunk, biopunk, alternative histories, and yet more. While “speculative fiction” was once conceived as a subgenre, it may be more productive to understand it as a field of cultural production because, like other cultural fields, speculative fiction does not only operate through texts but also in multiple contexts of production, circulation and reception. Furthermore, the field of speculative fiction is active across diverse forms and media, emphasizing its cultural role. Thus, “the appeal of the term ‘speculative fiction’ lies in its inclusiveness and open-ended porousness.”

16 In the Bourdieusian sense
17 Oziewicz, “Speculative Fiction”, 8
Understanding sf as an inclusive field is increasingly popular; “[t]his understanding of speculative fiction has been increasingly topical since the 2000s”. Importantly, in the recent decade the term has primarily been used by minority groups. Indeed, the notion that speculative fiction is the voice of minority and alternative views can be traced back to the 1960s and the New Wave of radical feminism. More recently, however, speculative fiction has been utilized by authors of black, minority and ethnic groups. A significant turning point in this regard was the publication of *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* in 2000, which includes stories and critical essays by black scholars. Linked to this turn, the present paper locates the discussion of “speculative fiction” within the space of postcolonial sf. Like Mwenya Kabwe in her chapter “Astronautus Afrikanus: Performing African Futurism”, I frame the narratives under investigation as expressions of decoloniality and hope to foreground the ways in which “Africa is imagined and might imagine itself in and into the future”.

Turning to context, I write of “Southern Africa”. I have set in place certain regional limits, focusing on texts by authors from Malawi, Zimbabwe and South Africa. While there are significant interconnections between these countries and their literary cultures, it is also in these Southern African areas that speculative fiction is most actively produced and consumed today. Needless to say, “Southern Africa” is conceptually baggy. Like Stefan Helgesson in his essay “Southern Africa - An Introduction”, I do not conflate Southern Africa with South Africa, and I intend to keep in mind that the category is historically and geographically mediated.

As mentioned in the introduction above, the paper now moves on to explore what is being communicated of various distinct and interwoven spaces in a range of twenty-first century Southern African speculative short stories. This will be done within the purview of three main subtitles: Critical Posthumanism, Tangled Temporalities, and Animist Materialisms. It must be noted that what follows is provisional research. The subtitles are tentative and have been selected on the basis of a thematic survey. The hope is that the work here lays foundation for my PhD project and the continued investigation into contemporary African speculative fiction.

**Critical Posthumanism**

There are multiple posthuman possibilities in the present and in the future. In this subsection, we see how a number of Southern African sf writers engage with and imagine such multiplicity; and how posthuman ideas are being presented variously within the purview of spaces on the African continent and across the globe. As a theoretical and readerly approach, critical posthumanism is preoccupied

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18 Oziewicz, 7
19 In Boulle and Pather
20 Forthcoming, in Olakunle George (ed.), *Companion to African Literatures*.
21 From here on referred to as ‘sf’
with the “ongoing deconstruction of humanism”.

While it engages with the “posthuman” as a figure - such as avatars and ghosts – it is also concerned with “posthumanism” as a social discourse, and therefore deliberates questions about what it means to be human in a digital, neoliberal world. Rethinking the meaning of humanity and the relationship between humans and technology also has implications for culture and the environment. Thus, postanthropocentric perspective filters in here and within the context of “critical posthumanism” it becomes necessary to negotiate ecological concerns and the relationship between humans and animals. The complexities of “posthumanism” are manifest in the stories below. As we see, in “Waking Up in Kampala”, Wesley Macheso considers the idea of transcending the human by means of technoscience, while Stacy Hardy turns away from the technological posthuman figure and rather addresses the relationship between humans and animals in her story, “A Butcher Fantasy”.

“Waking Up in Kampala” by Malawi’s Wesley Macheso is grounded in an explicitly local African space and time. Prior to an embellished description of setting, “Waking Up in Kampala” opens with a sentence that configures the story’s temporality and geography: “The atmosphere in Kampala, the Silicon Valley of Africa, in the summer of 2515 was sticky”. The autodiegetic narrator places us in a futuristic Uganda, East Africa, in a determinate year, 500 or so years from now. An altered cityscape is illustrated, and the “sticky” and “suffocating” atmosphere is elaborated on.

Reference to the sun, with its “faint” and “malnourished” rays, ruptures any familiar idea we have of Africa in the present twenty-first century. Compounding the effect of the anaemic sun, adjectives such as “stagnant” and “claustrophobic” further our conception of a sick environment. This sickness quite quickly manifests as psychological, too, as the narrator says: “Everything about the city reflected my mind”. To proclaim in a narrative set in Africa in 2515 that the sun is “malnourished” and that such condition reflects the protagonist’s state of mind is to forecast a dull future, for nature and humanity.

Macheso advances such a reading. The central premise of “Waking Up in Kampala” seems to be to explore life: asking what it means to be alive, and constructing strategies to emphasize posthuman forms of life. Indeed, the repetition of “life” uttered four times in the first and second paragraphs of the story persuasively supports this idea, with “lifeless”, “live”, and “alive” reinforcing it. Biotechnology and the exploitation of life, and not necessarily the techno-scientific or the information technology behind it (as would be the case in cyberpunk), is more immediately the vehicle with which this writer foregrounds futuristic speculation. As a leading bioengineer, the protagonist is working to combat a deadly virus called the Braino-deficiency Virus. One could read

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23 In the Foucauldian sense.
24 Stefan Herbrechter on Criticalposthumanism.net
25 Macheso, “Waking Up in Kampala”.
26 Ibid.
27 Macheso, “Waking Up in Kampala.”
into the significance of the literary representation of a viral disease in this story in relation to the context of HIV/AIDS in the Southern African area. However, the way in which the Braino-deficiency Virus is portrayed as being a global affair, if not planetary, seems to me to suggest that our contemporary transnational experience of certain virus outbreaks, including the West-African Ebola outbreak between 2014 and 2016\(^{28}\) and the current Coronavirus pandemic, is perhaps most fervently articulated here.

Coming back to ideas about different forms of life and living in this story, while the bioengineer is an able-bodied person of great intelligence, in contrast relations close to the protagonist, as well as those infected by the virus with whom he is working with, are quite different. For a start, his wife is in a wheelchair, and his daughter is dead following a fatal car accident. Macheso merges familiar ontological aspects and ideas of the permanent end of life – such as dying as a result of a road accident - with radically altered, futuristic elements – such as robots’ control of humans. While to live in 2515 is to be a cyborg, the overall story effect is a combination of a reconstructed social landscape that seemingly maintains some sign of the recognizable.

A significant contrast to our present world is evident in the fact that in 2515, in the age of the “Post-Technocalypse”, Africa is a single country.\(^ {29}\) It has colonised various planets, including Venus and Mercury, and has combated the epidemic by means of its “rich natural resources”.\(^ {30}\) Meanwhile, the West is destroyed by the effects of the technological take-over, which results in so-called “hubloits” - “machines embedded with humanity”.\(^ {31}\) By means of imperial allegory, through which a critical alternative to Western colonisation acts as inversion in the story, Africa is the world’s leading power. This registers as a communicative code which ostensibly responds to our present situation and discursively reverses the global order of socio-politics today.

The protagonist is depicted as central to the advancement of Africa. As a bioengineer, he is responsible for saving the world’s remaining population with the discovery of a vaccine that reduces the acceleration of the virus. A conflict emerges, however, when the protagonist is faced with the idea of saving, or in fact re-creating, his daughter at the Kampala Genetic Engineering Clinic. On the one hand, the continuation of life relies on science and the vaccine, and the protagonist seems to be in favour of this. On the other hand, however, the manipulation of life is manifestly critiqued. The protagonist is disgusted when the physician at the clinic suggests that the couple can have their daughter back. The bioengineer ultimately rejects the new organism genetically identical to his daughter, saying: “Taken to the extreme, science can create monsters”.\(^ {32}\)

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\(^{28}\) The year Macheso’s story was published: 2016

\(^{29}\) Macheso, “Waking Up in Kampala”.

\(^{30}\) Ibid.

\(^{31}\) Ibid.

\(^{32}\) Ibid.
Stories of Prometheus are often underpinned with the idea of an advanced, utopian future for humanity. But the “hubloits” in this story are far more efficient than humankind and therefore pose an imminent threat to the world. Drawing attention to the figure behind the “hubloit” creation, and therefore the threat posed by the geneticist, “Waking Up in Kampala” also ultimately illuminates the idea that biological advancement proves morally testing and queries the nature of a future human race.

The imagined future of this short story has at its core global priorities and is simultaneously positioned contextually in a located space. These aspects appear to be a conscious gesture on the part of the author to communicate something about our present day world order. And, through such commentary, the story has imbedded within it an intention to motivate future action towards change.

In contrast to Macheso’s story, Stacy Hardy’s “A Butcher Fantasy” critically engages with posthumanism through vividly articulating ideas tied to the Anthropocene, that is, rather than dealing with the technoscientific. South African author, Stacy Hardy asks what it would be like if a person got trapped inside a cow? What if human-animal roles were reversed?

The atmosphere depicted in “A Butcher Fantasy” is claustrophobic and disorienting. The first-person narrator tells of how limited space is in the cow; how curling oneself into a tight ball is the best way to exist; and, how heavy and thick the air is. Since feeding time for the cow is an all-day affair, the freedom to breathe properly inside the animal is reduced to one hour in the morning, before the cow starts munching. The process is “endless”; “the cow encloses me”. Two rhetorical stylistic features add to the sense of suffocation: the present tense makes the representation of claustrophobia extremely immediate, and the fact that the story is essentially one long paragraph concretizes the idea that the character is unable to break free. This point is supported half way through the story when the narrator says, “The cow is constructed by repetition […] it rarely varies its path or pace”.

Not only is the cow’s day-to-day existence written into “A Butcher Fantasy”, but the history of the cow, or bovine history in South Africa specifically, is also ingrained within the narrative. In a passage worth quoting at some length, the reader is told by the narrator that she wonders from time to time if “the cow is trying to communicate, to send me messages”: Talking about the moo-ing sound that cows make, the passage goes like this:

It comes from far below, from the bottom of the throat— […] seemingly deep in the cow’s belly, deeper than I am, in its bovine history, in the ancient myths of cow killings and massacres: the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of the Eighteen-Fifties that left the earth blood-soaked; the droughts that proceeded it, bovine ghosts, just skin and ribcages, scattered amidst shrubs and bushes so dry they rattled; the slaughter houses of the global industrial farming complex and the meat industry, meat sliced by machines

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33 Hardy, “A Butcher Fantasy”.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
and packaged in Styrofoam and clingwrap to be shipped to McDonald’s in distant destinations.

It is important to note here the entanglement of historical memory related to imperial conquest (with regards to the Cattle Killing) with the present-day meat industry and the circumstances of globalized capitalism. Overall, diegetic emphasis is placed on the different uses that humanity has found for the animal. Meat, of course, being the most obvious, but other, more cultural functions are also illustrated. Elsewhere in the story, the character tells us that she has heard tales about the Himba people residing in Namibia and the way in which the cow was implicated in their divination practices; about how the Himba people “divined their future in the entrails of slaughtered cattle, foresaw the German colonists in the twists and scrolls of intestines”. It appears to me that there is a kind of pendulum effect created here: the narrative swings between a national and international context and humanity’s hunger for cattle.

The identity of the first-person narrator in “A Butcher Fantasy” becomes important part way through the story: “maybe I am incarcerated, condemned by the crimes of my forefathers, Norwegian sea captains and German mercenaries paid by the British with the head of cattle and a new country”. Besides the fact that between the lines of Hardy’s work we find depiction of (a white people’s) disgrace and guilt, again we should consider this story’s transnational depictions (Norwegian, German, British, Himba, Xhosa) and indeed the unification of identities through the handling of the cow. Here, the cow is significant in the making of identity. The Europeans depicted in the quote above find value in cattle; the head of a cow appears to be as symbolic as land, entangled within the process of colonization. The animal’s head becomes a gesture, a reward.

Circumstances are seemingly turned on their head in Hardy’s stories; the inverse of situations are explored. What would it be like to be violently controlled by another species, and with little or no acknowledgement of that control? Throughout the narrative we are made to see things from the cow’s perspective. Just as we impact on the lives of cattle, so the cow in the story has enormous impact on the (human) individual inside its stomach. The cow swallows, it appears like thunder. If the cow accelerates into a run, our narrator spins around “like a kitten in a dryer”. To end the tale, the narrator imagines being cut out of the cow. The future in “A Butcher Fantasy” is inevitably dystopic, however, and the human ultimately remains inside the animal.

Up to this point in the paper, I have highlighted the presentation of posthumanist concerns in two Southern African sf texts, including the portrayal of futuristic science and technology and a post-anthropocentric viewpoint. Posthumanism is by nature a global phenomenon, but in the stories above we see how it is being teased out in various contextual ways.

**Tangled Temporalities**

The foregoing section on posthumanism presented a number of ways in which authors from Southern Africa are critically engaging with posthuman (im)possible futures. In the following section, I look closely at another node of interest within contemporary African speculative narratives: the manifestation of multiple, tangled temporalities. To be sure, the very essence of the sf universe is the challenge it offers our everyday concept of time. Speculative fiction looks into both the future and the past in its attempt to make sense of the perplexing jumble of phenomena and discourses that constitute our present. Perhaps more traditionally, the past has been the domain of the fantasy genre, while the

37 Hardy, “A Butcher Fantasy”.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 See also “The day the white people walked into the sea” by Stacy Hardy, published on *Johannesburg Review of Books*.
41 Hardy, “A Butcher Fantasy”.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
future has been the material for science fiction. However, what we see today is that time itself has become a focus of much sf. There is no clear cut line between one temporality and the other in Masimba Musodza and Andrew Dakalira’s stories, the stories presented below. Rather, what becomes apparent is a tangled state of time. Of course, and again, what we have here is localized perspective on temporality interacting with other planetary perspectives.

The title of Masimba Musodza’s story: “Herbert Wants to Return Home” is worth reflecting on briefly to begin with. What is being articulated here is a desire to, firstly, go back, and secondly, to go back home. In order to go back anywhere, one must first venture somewhere, however. Travel, the inevitable border-crossing, and going beyond a localized space is thus evoked here. And then, although the idea of home could be engaged with at some length, one could argue that what is being communicated through the use of “home” is a somewhat located notion of emplacement.

In Masimba Musodza’s short story, Mr. Mutsepeshi receives two visitors: “one of them a Zimbabwean, a police detective dealing with missing persons, James Muramba. His companion, Fr. Alexandru Antonescu, is a Romanian, a priest of that country’s Orthodox Church.” The first person narrator tells us that the individuals come with news of Herbert, his cousin who reportedly died of anaemia while abroad. Here, we immediately have a transnational experience playing out. The Mutsepeshi family is about to hold a kurova guva, a local funeral ceremony meant to guide the deceased’s spirit to become a mediating ancestor, a mudzimu. But the visitors bring news that throws this upcoming ceremony into disarray. The policeman and Father Antonescu reveal that they are part of a secret investigation, and that Herbert is actually not dead. In fact, the man believed to be Herbert and buried in place of Mr. Mutsepeshi’s brother was killed by Herbert. It turns out that while he was in a small, local village called Onisie in Romania, Herbert fell upon misfortune. One night he had been travelling through the forest and his car was driven off-road. Muramba tells Mr. Mutsepeshi that Herbert was later found: “…prostrate beside a path in the forest. He looked unhurt, but there were two puncture wounds on his neck as if he had been pricked twice by thorns or bitten by insects. From this evening, Herbert’s health waned. He found food nauseous. He found sunlight unbearable, that it literally burned him. And he felt weak.” The ground upon which Herbert was found is ancient land; land that “lies in the feudal domain of an ancient family called Hollókő”. Although the myths surrounding this family and their occult powers diminished over time and “were eventually blotted from national memory” in Romania, the unease cast a shadow and something ostensibly still lingers. That something is vampirism. Herbert is not dead but neither is he alive, says Muramba: “Today, Herbert walks this land as a vampire, and drinks the blood of humans, turning them into accursed creatures like himself.” The story ends as Mr. Mutsepeshi realizes that the kurova guva must be abandoned before vampire Herbert turns up at his own funeral to inflict harm on the members of the family gathered to pay their respects.

In a broad African context, vampirism has previously been used as a metaphor for the state, colonialism and western aid. Timothy Wright has also recently explored post-apartheid Johannesburg vampire narratives with an eye for exploring the concept of whiteness in South Africa. Certainly, in “Deconstructing mediocrity; Vampires, victims and national hysteria”, John Lwanda suggests that to understand the roots of beliefs in vampirism, we have to go beyond superstitions and evaluate underlying structural conditions of the areas in which the beliefs emerge and persist. This story, “Herbert Wants to Return Home”, and its vampire trope can thus be seen as being rooted in moral and moral and
socioeconomic conditions in Southern Africa. However, in Musodza’s narrative, the meaning of vampirism also appears to be most strongly associated with returning home from Europe, having acquired a curse of sorts. Mr. Mutsepeshe says, “But this is not how one returns home, a monster, a vampire! Is this what the elders meant when they said that the young people who had gone abroad returned home no longer human?” This sentence elevates the interwoven relationship of local and global dimensions, and perhaps even speaks of an anxiety about contamination of the two in futurity. It certainly appears to highlight that beliefs about vampirism are globally accepted facts, rather than simply localized phenomena.

Importantly, we can identify clearly the way in which vampirism is related to temporality here: “[i]n refusing to remain within the boundaries stipulated by […] historical-consciousness, the vampire can be viewed as a force that simultaneously defies and confirms … [a] period’s historical ethos”. Musodza’s text suggests that the past is in fact not permanently past; Herbert’s bloodsucking seems not to adhere to temporal boundaries. Though it is unclear whether vampire Herbert achieves his goal at the end of this short story, the last few passages provoke further comment on vampirism and temporality. We are told that the narrator is surprised by the agreement made at a family meeting to hold a kurova guva. He questions who came up with the idea, and notes that such a gathering has not been held since he was very young. Here, the reference to the bringing back of a tradition is intriguing, first and foremost. Towards the closing lines we find further comment on the human enactment of the past: “the deceased who becomes a vampire cannot enter a home unless he has been invited first. Then, he can come and go as he pleases.” In this way, “Herbert Wants to Return Home” appears to capture human ambivalence, indeed anxiety, about time and blending a distinct fear of it with a desire to recall it.

In quite a different way from Musodza’s story, Andrew Dakalira’s “Inhabitable”, published in AfroSFv3 in 2018, raises further questions in relation to temporal matters. Beginning in a hospital in Balaka, a district in the southern region of Malawi, a nurse asks the protagonist, Jumbe: “‘Mukupeza bwanji?’” A dream scene, in which Jumbe is home, then depicts “lush pasture”, “light rain pattering on iron sheets”, and “roast goat, with the aroma of fresh Kambuzi pepper still lingering”, all of which perhaps evoke the experience of life in Malawi. Dakalira appears first to work with a straightforward and familiar notion of emplacement, grounding us in a familiar space and time. Even the title seems to lend itself to such a reading. The story registers a recognizably local homeland aesthetic in its title: Inhabitable. However, amid the play on ideas about habitat, home and emplacement, the word “inhabitable” also connotes a darker pay-off from the desire to inhabit territory. It is after all an intergalactic adventure tale, in which a group of humans spend years “searching for a new planet” and so conduct a mission of colonisation in space: “our mission is to find new planets, habitable ones, for colonisation.”

Jumbe, the main protagonist, is the Captain of the trip into space. She is accompanied by colleagues, who trained together at The African Union Academy. Much of the story is set inside a “glass cubicle”, “suspended five feet in the air and only linked to the other glass buildings by an escalator”. At times, the narrative voice is Jumbe’s and the account is given in the first person. However, fractured into sections by information in italics, the narrative jumps from first to third person and back again. The change often occurs after information such as this:

52 Especially Zimbabwe and Malawi. For further analysis on Malawi and this topic see Ashforth, “When the Vampires Come for You”.
53 Musodza “Herbert”
54 Lindén & Ruin, “The Vampire, the Undead and the Anxieties”. 34.
55 Musodza, “Herbert”.
56 Meaning How do you feel? in Chichewa.
57 Dakalira, in AfroSFv3. 187.
58 Dakalira, in AfroSFv3. 200.
59 Ibid. 194.
60 Ibid. 193.
61 Ibid.
Along with alternations in narrative voice, between individual and collective subjectivities, the use of the words “species” and “human” in the italicised passage above deconstructs a sense of planetary perspective for us. To be sure, so too does the second line: “Planetary origin: Earth.”

Of course, what such italicised passages also help do is to manipulate time in the story. This technique ultimately adds to the sense of alienation from the familiar: displacement plays out at various diegetic levels then. So-called “history pills” help to distort linearity. Jumbe is given these pills by a character referred to only as “Thing” early on in the story. This character is brilliantly described as looking like chambo: “The thing that came to get me was no different from my other captors. It had one eye, a nostril, and a mouth that was really just a no-lips slit. There were three claws on each hand, long, slender and poking out from a large grey robe, scaled like the Chambo fish back home. Its eye seemed to dress me down like a disapproving mother-in-law.” With its anthropomorphic facial features and hands, the Thing is both a creature of elsewhere and a phenomenon of an everyday landscape. We later learn that the chambo-like Thing was once called Bajiji. Jumbe is captured by Bajiji and given the history pills in order that she may travel back in time to understand why Bajiji and his species need the humans’ help. Jumbe’s team of colleagues is sceptical, but Bajiji assures Jumbe that the pills will not kill her, and so, having decided to trust the alien, the protagonist takes the pills and is transported in time. Here, Jumbe learns of an historic dispute between Bajiji and an enemy called Mbalale; she witnesses a heated conversation (in the past) between the two and learns that both are representatives of two different species fighting for territory on a new planet. Suddenly hit by “a flail of painful blue light” emanating the enemy’s hands, Jumbe returns to the present (future) and the conversation again ensues between Bajiji and Jumbe. Bajiji urges the humans to help conquer Mbalale since “the last time they came, half of my kind perished.” Ultimately, what happens to the planet depends on the response and actions of a group of individuals in Dakalira’s story. It is only when Jumbe comes face-to-face with Mbalale that she decides to act and the team eventually helps Bajiji.

The *AfroSFv3* anthology in which Dakalira’s story is published has the intention to explore: “how will space change us, how will we change it?” The first person plural pronouns in these questions work to construct spatial connectivity. But “Inhabitable” is vividly woven around a consideration of transcending time too. Amidst complex social conditions, time and space travel are “imaginial machine[s]”; “terrain[s] of possibility” which allow for mobility. In Dakalira’s story we see that a familiar present mingles with an imagined future as the protagonist is cast into the past. In this way, “Inhabitable” foregrounds Achille Mbembe’s “*time of entanglement*”; the conceptualisation of an “interlocking of present, pasts, and futures that retain their depths of other presents, pasts, and futures.” Both of the stories presented in this subsection displace a linear sense of time, and in so doing a tangled construct of temporality is emphasized.

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62 Dakalira, Ibid.
63 Chambo: the local name for a species of fish endemic to Lake Malawi.
64 Dakalira, *AfroSFv3*. 189.
65 Dakalira, *AfroSFv3*. 191
66 Ibid. 192
67 Ibid. 193.
68 Ibid. 198.
69 Hartmann in “Introduction”, *AfroSFv3*. 8.
70 Shukaitis, “Space is the (non)place”.
Animist Materialisms

The previous section dealt with the multiplicity of temporalities in contemporary speculative short stories by Zimbabwean Masimba Musodza and Malawian Andrew Dakalira, and showed how the dichotomy of local versus global perspective is being disrupted in such texts. In this subsection, I turn to look at the commitment to Animist Materialisms in an additional number of sf texts from Southern Africa. Sf is currently providing a vehicle for exploring and narrativizing traditions, and thus also potentially enables (re)writing of Africa’s often ignored histories, indigenous oral literacies, and mythopoeic modes. A challenge in discussing topics such as animism, mythologies and the metaphysical world in relation to Africa is the inclination to confine the continent and its modes of understanding in essentialism and to assume that it is a relic of the past. Here, I rather attempt to highlight sf stories that transform African mythologies into probing tentacles, utilizing animism as source for futuristic ideas and imaginative recasting. More specifically, the stories below expose a so-called “animist unconscious” through the figure of the water sprite, albeit in her varying (local) guises.

In “Manoka”, the first short story in Intruders, Mohale Mashigo chronicles the life of a young mother who, through a series of traumatic events by the sea in Durban, uncovers that she is from a long line of sinister mermaids and that her destiny and that of her child lies in the ocean. Here, we can identify an Africa-wide belief in traditional sprites. Such figures are often features in legends; emerging from rivers and lakes alike in order to lure a human to its depths. The reference is clear in “Manoka” when the narrator speaks of the specifically named Southern African malicious creature called Mondao.

Traditional sprites are prevalent figures in much sf from Southern Africa today. Depicted in the title of Tendai Huchu’s story “Njuzu”, the Shona water sprite, njuzu is central. In Zimbabwe, the njuzu are significant in the mythology of the Shona peoples. They are also believed to live in rivers and lakes specifically, and if a person is taken by the half human half fish creature and manages to emerge unscathed, s/he will most likely be a n’anga upon their return to this world.

In “Njuzu”, the homodiegetic narrator tells of the situation in which she and her husband, Tarisai, find themselves. They have lost their son, Anesu to the depths of Bimha’s pond, and it is believed that a njuzu has taken him. The narrative opens as the main characters stand at the edge of the calm, undisturbed surface of water, located under one of a number of geodesic domes near the so-called Hurungwe Utility Terra Shelter on Ceres, recognizably referring to the largest asteroid in our present-day solar system. In the narrative, Ceres has become the agricultural hub of the main asteroid belt, “feeding miners… and colonists on Mars and beyond.” The husband and wife have followed “A trail of small footprints” on the planet that lead to the pond, accompanied by the head of the Mutasa clan, VaMutasa on a digital channel. Significantly here, the word “clan” is suggestive of an indigenous group of people. The mark of the Shona plural noun, Va-, supports the notion not only of a collective group but also of the vernacular. Thus, we have characters identifiable located in a specific area in Southern Africa who are technologically advanced and digitally connected. Additionally, in a moment of collective ceremony, the characters join drummers and ululating women Garuba, 283. In many ways the “animist unconscious” is close to a kind of social imaginary, as previously conceived by Charles Taylor.

Variations are noted, for instance, Mami Wata, a West African water deity. Also note, an ancestral spirit among the Dogon in Mali is called Nommo and is described as being an amphibious, fish-like creature. Its name “Nommo” means “to make one drink”.

Traditional healer.

I should note here that, although the noun “husband” is used in the narrative, the main characters are a homosexual couple; both characters are female.

Huchu. AfroSFv3. 9.

Presumably so-called after Hurungwe District in Zimbabwe.


Ibid. 9.

Ibid. 10.
in front of a hologram of “Nyati, the buffalo, their clan’s totem.” Again, the combination of “totem” and “hologram” in the same sentence is rhetorically powerful and debunks any assumption that indigeneity is antithetical to technology/modernity.

While the narrator shows some skepticism towards sprites, there is an overriding acceptance of the existence of and communication with njuzu in the narrative. After libation is poured to the ancestors, the spirit medium Chisumbanje announces that he has been told that “Anesu is alive and well in the company of the njuzu.” Towards the end of the story, the narrator dreams of the njuzu that has taken her son:

In my dream, I sink into black water, thick like oil. […]
Until I meet her, at the bottom of the dark.
I never truly knew what a njuzu was. For some, she’s a mermaid, half woman half fish.
For others a water sprite, spritely and nimble. Since I lost my son, I’ve thought of her as a spiteful siren, disastrous enchantress, ensnarer of sailors and young boys. But the reality is she’s neither of these: she simply is what she is.
She sits tall on her throne, Neptune’s daughter. The most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. Her flawless skin is black like polished obsidian. Tiny bubbles form against it. Her wise eyes sparkle like pearls. Her hair is green and wild like reeds in the river Tsanga.

A tension is perhaps demonstrated here: on the one hand, the narrator despises the njuzu for taking Anesu, while on the other hand, she cannot but admire the enchanting creature. Note how Neptune, the Greek God of the sea, is referred to in the passage above. There seems to me to be an inherent complexity evoked there: “Neptune’s daughter” communicates something of a relationship, a relationship perhaps between a recognizably European figure and an African counterpart. Thus, we might consider this a curious mix of local and global reference with regards to the water sprite.

In Kerstin Hall’s “In the Water”, the “Deepling” as it is called, is slightly different to the water sprites explored above. For a start, the Deepling does not live in and emerge from a body of water to capture a human. It rather drowns victims on dry land. In this narrative, the water creature is a demon that needs exorcizing. A traditional healer is central to the plot: Anathi is called upon by the homodiegetic narrator, a young man called Khuselewa Miya. But even Anathi cannot help Khuselewa with his problem. After a fraught number of days contending with the creature, and almost drowning in his room, Khuselewa finally discovers a remedy: looking directly at the Deepling. From such a conclusive event, one might contend that this story highlights the acceptance of other, alternative beings. After all, literally facing the Deepling saves the protagonist.

The figure of the sprite or mermaid in the context of contemporary sf on the African continent is conspicuous. As has been noted by scholars previously, this creature is transgressive and enables

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81 Ibid.13
82 For instance, see page 10
83 Ibid.14
84 Ibid.16
85 Hall, “In the Water”, in *Terra Incognita.*
86 See: Ibid.106
87 For instance by Esthie Hugo. See: “Looking Forward, looking back”
the collapse of definitive boundaries of existence since it is made up of half human and half fish. Meg Samuelson, in her work on the Swahili coast, has called this “an amphibian aesthetic”. As an sf character, the creature is, I think, doing much work to collapse dialectical thinking with regards to knowledge production and the continent of Africa.

In this subsection, we have seen how the water sprite seems to communicate something of localisms, the importance of non-binary thinking, and the prominence of an animist unconscious in contemporary (Southern) African sf. This emphasis does not exclude global notions and traditions, however. In fact it embraces such in an attempt to “continually reenchant the world.”

Conclusion
One should recognize that generic speculative fiction has a long literary history in (Southern) Africa. Various texts produced in Drum in the 1950s and 1960s in South Africa and novels such as Dede Kamkondo’s The Flying Saucer (1989) in Malawi, for instance, are demonstrative of this contention. The genre is not new, it has simply acquired new energy in the current time.

While the speculative genre today is diverse and the range of topics covered by Southern African sf writers is astounding, one component that seems to tie the varied stories together is the articulation of a multiplicity of collective, planetary anxieties about the contemporary moment and the imagined future. In this paper I have explored some of the ways in which speculative fiction is being used by its South African, Malawian and Zimbabwean writers as a powerful genre and rhetorical tool with which to establish new relations to local spaces and ideas, to the world, and to futurity.

Posthumanism has been shown to be an important priority in Macheso’s “Waking Up in Kampala” and in Hardy’s “A Butcher Fantasy”; temporality has manifested as non-linear and multiple in “Herbert Wants to Return Home” by Musodza and in Dakalira’s “Inhabitable”; and, in “Manoka”, “Njuzu”, and “In the Water” the authors have variously presented water sprites, highlighting the idea that an “animist logic” is specific to an African way of knowing. Much of the language in these texts has suggestive power that extends well beyond the immediate point of production and is expressive of depths of meaning within a complex matrix of cultural, socio-political space(s).

References

88 Samuelson, “Abdulrazak Gurnah’s Fictions”.
89 Garuba, “Explorations in Animist Materialism”. My emphasis.
90 Ibid.


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