

Writing the possible and the future: Style in Malawian speculative fiction

“. . . We are storied creatures too”—Barbara Myerhoff

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Abstract

This article examines literary experimentation in the speculative genre of fiction in Malawian literature. It aims specifically at Malawian writers who seem to take the craft of writing seriously but appear unaware of the functions and ways of storytelling, especially in speculative fiction. Moreover, it does so while examining the style in the selected Malawian speculative fiction and illustrating in the following sequence: the history of Malawian literature, challenges of world building, characterisation, constructed language, plot/pacing, in Shadreck Chikoti's *Azotus: The Kingdom* (2015), Ekari Mbvundula's *Montague's Last* (2015), Muthi Nhlema's *Ta O'reva* (2015a), Charles Dakalira's contribution in *Will This Be A Problem* (2016), and short stories by Muthi Nhlema, Tuntufye Simwimba, Hagai Magai, Aubrey Chinguwo, and Tiseke Chilema in *Imagine Africa 500* (2015). Therefore, this paper reads the new generation of Malawian writers who attempt to create a possible future in the speculative genre.

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Fundamentally, the selected writers exhibit a pedestrian attempt at literary experimentation and therefore fail to do what Alena Rettova argues is to write the possible and the future in speculation fiction.

Keywords: Malawi, future, speculation, genre, style

Introduction: Something is broken in the state of Malawi

This article examines literary experimentation in the speculative genre of fiction in Malawian literature. It aims specifically at Malawian writers who seem to take the craft of writing seriously but appear insufficiently aware of the functions and ways of storytelling, especially in speculative fiction. Moreover, it does so while examining the style in the selected Malawian speculative fiction and illustrating in the following sequence: the history of Malawian literature, challenges of world building, characterization, constructed language, plot/pacing, in Shadreck Chikoti's *Azotus: The Kingdom* (2015), Ekari Mbvundula's *Montague's Last* (2015), Muthi Nhlema's *Ta O'reva* (2015a), Charles Dakalira's contribution in *Will This Be A Problem* (2016), and short stories by Muthi Nhlema, Tuntufye Simwimba, Hagai Magai, Aubrey Chinguwo, and Tiseke Chilima's in *Imagine Africa 500* (2015).

This is not scholarship against Malawian speculative writers, but rather a study in defense of Malawian literature and how it reflects the country on the global scene. This is because the creative text, especially the African creative text, is political in nature: once a writer publishes their material it becomes open for public consumption and this draws it into a vortex of the wider literary production and distribution system that, unfortunately, is not cognisant of the writer's passion. The literature becomes susceptible to more global readings of narrative discourse and the creative economy such as what Saskia Sassen (2015) argues are "expulsions at the systematic edge" from the diverse systems in play—economic, social, biospheric" (p. 173). According to Sassen (2015) this systematic edge is the point where the condition evolves to an extreme one that cannot easily be captured by the standard measures of governments and experts and so it becomes invisible and ungraspable. Therefore, it seems that the current generation of Malawian writers fail to adequately postulate possible futures, or practical possible worlds. Such seeming lack of functional imaginative currency

within the selected young Malawian writers is troubling, because it is symptomatic of a cultural pneumapathology, which is to say death of the spirit and with it the basic, primal, and native creative drive of the *homo sapiens* to tell stories. This is what Myerhoff (1992) refers to when she suggests that humans are “storied creatures” or put differently “*homo narrans*” (as cited in Randall & McKim, 2008, p. 8). The thread that ties the evolution of man is the desire for narrative, and to narrate. Therefore, this paper reads the new generation of Malawian writers who attempt to create a possible Malawian future in the speculative genre. Fundamentally, the selected writers exhibit a pedestrian attempt at literary experimentation in the speculative fiction genre in Malawi and therefore fail to adequately write the possible and the future.

Writer’s block: A brief history of Malawian literature

Stylistics is a branch of linguistics that is employed to understand literature: David McIntyre (2012) explains that since the beginning of the English language as a serious university subject in the 1960s, there has been a difficult relationship between linguistics and literature. “Literary critics have railed against the ‘cold’, ‘scientific’ approach used by scholars of language in their analyses of literary texts, while linguists have accused their literary colleagues of being too vague and subjective in the analyses they produced” (McIntyre, 2012, p. 1). Moreover, McIntyre’s aim in the article is to illustrate how taking a linguistic approach to the analysis of a literary text does not have to mean disregarding interpretation. Rather, stylistic analysis can show why a particular text is held in high esteem. Furthermore, stylistics takes into consideration the assumption that a writer is deliberate and conscious in their choice of language. Finally, “stylistics aims to explain the *link* between linguistic form and literary effect, and to account for what it is that we are responding to when we praise the quality of a particular piece of writing” (McIntyre, 2012, p. 1). Murtaza and Ul Qamar Qasmi (2013) explain that the traditional, literary critic attitude towards ‘style’ is subjective and unscientific, and bases its explanations on intuition. They argue this attitude is “hegemonic, undemocratic and imperialistic in its nature” (Murtaza & Ul Qamar Qasmi, 2013, p. 1). This is because style is a writer’s individual mode of expression, it involves a long list of choices at a paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes: these are the choice of lexical

items, tropes and figures of speech, phrasal and syntactic structures and the shape of paragraphs.

Stylistically, Malawi operates independently from much of Africa vis-à-vis its literary ‘generations’. Elsewhere on the continent, ‘generations’ are often determined along thematic lines (Olaoluwa, 2008) but, due to extreme censorship under the dictator President Kamuzu Banda, some contemporary Malawian writers take up certain themes that the first generation also did. While lines are blurred, Malawian writing seems to grow out of different contexts: the first generation of Malawian writers were engaged by an understanding of the extent to which colonialism had impacted the country and the forms of imperialism that had come of it. David Rubadiri (1967) and Legson Kayira (1969) are emblematic of this generation. In addition, the second generation of Malawian writers wrote in a period that Landeg White describes as a time when “*everything* was political” (personal communication, 2013, March 17). Essentially, Malawian written literature in English grew post-independence and owes much of its development to the activity of the Writers’ Group established in 1970 by members of the English Department at Chancellor College, University of Malawi. The Group started as an informal meeting space for staff and a few students at the College to discuss and write literary works, but rather quickly some of the earliest poems written appeared in a collection called *Mau: 39 Poems from Malawi*, published in 1971. Legson Kayira’s novel (1967), the poetry collections by Frank Chipasula such as *Visions and Reflections* (1972), and Steve Chimombo’s play *The Rainmaker* (1978) were also amongst early works published in the post-independent nation. Those that manifest as third generation writers in Malawi deal with a wide range of issues: corruption in a so-called democratic society (such as that of the ‘cashgate’ scandal in Malawi from the year 2013), issues of health, education, identity and economic empowerment.

The third generation of Malawian writers takes an experimental approach to style. This includes writers and street/spoken word poets such as Q Malewezi (2013), poets including Bright Molande (2010) and Upile Chisala (2015), and fantasy writers such as Charles Andrew Dakalira (in *Will This Be A Problem*). In addition, spaces such as Kwaharaba Book Cafe/ Gallery have offered new Malawian writers a performance platform. This has given rise to collective

publications such as *A Poetry Anthology by Young Malawian Writers* (2012). Also amongst works making up this generation is Lughano Mwangwegho's *Echoes of a Whisper* (2015). However, if the second generation predicates its prowess in long prose in Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal* (1992), for example, then the third generation has Chikoti's *Azotus: The Last Kingdom* that seems rather, to weaken the nation's economy of creativity. It is within Chikoti's generation that we see many writers turning to speculative fiction, and it is understandable—as it is perhaps the best genre to forecast hope for a seemingly disintegrating society.

Speculative fiction may be “marked by diversity” (Gill, 2013, p. 72), but in this paper it is writing that rewrites a reality (Eshun, 2013, p. 291), writing that, as Delany says, offers a “significant distortion of the present” (as cited in Eshun, 2013, p. 190). That is to say that speculative fiction is “neither forward-looking nor utopian”, but rather a means through which to “preprogram the present” (Eshun, 2013, p. 190). In understanding speculative fiction as characteristically embracing a “radical vision of alternative conditions” (Gill, 2013, p. 73) we see that it opens up discourse surrounding so-called ‘possible’ worlds. It becomes apparent in examination of speculative fiction that the genre handles events that are in fact *impossible* to the world as we know it; the speculative narrative functions on the premise of a whole new world order, manifesting under conditions and laws that are in contrast to those known in reality (Gill, 2013).

Regardless, current Malawian speculative fiction writing is a collective literary disappointment. According to the scope of this paper, there are two possible arguments as to why Malawian speculative fiction is a collective exercise in futility: firstly, either the third generation writers under study are aware that narrative design, story architecture and creative writing are both a science—there are rules and conventions to be followed; and an art—there is room for creative expression (exploring the blind spots and possibilities of these conventions and not necessarily flouting them); or secondly, the writers are not aware of the intricate functions of storytelling, and more particularly speculative fiction that make a writer worth their name. Unfortunately, one misconception about writing—both in the local context and globally—is that the passion for writing is all it takes to be a writer; nothing could be further from the truth. The world's ancient gathering of insight into human nature is stored in its literature,

showing that writers are and always have been the unacknowledged legislators of the world (Shelley, 1904, p. 19). Contextually, this may be placing too heavy a responsibility on a generation of young speculative writers. This is because the unsatisfactory quality of writing is also a result of strong forces beyond the individual writer: for example, there are simply not enough structures in place to encourage wide reading in Malawi.

In defense of the writers, some critics would argue that the authors are aware of the rules of creative writing. In addition, they would be right in pointing out that imaginative pursuits should not necessarily have ‘rules’. If this is the case, then it is a cause for concern because it simplifies the art of writing for the sake of convenience. If the writers are aware of the said conventions but choose to be cavalier in their creative designs of alternative universes, a different concern arises: which is the historical antagonism between creativity and the ego. While *Azotus: The Kingdom* won the Peer Gynt Literary Award in 2013, there is a reason why Malawi is underrepresented on the international scene: the Caine Prize, The Brunel International Poetry Prize, and The Wole Soyinka Prize etc. Even though writers such as Petina Gappah (2017) state that these are not the only standards by which to measure an African writer, one still wonders why Malawi is so underrepresented in the literary world. There is something broken in the country’s creative spaces, and so there seems to be something broken in the country. While Adam Ashforth’s (2014) cultural reading of Malawi’s recent ‘Bloodsucking’ saga manifesting in the southern region takes a patronizing tone (especially for the non-Western reader whom he no doubt disregards in his reading) there is some truth in his sentiments: he explains that when people speak of a “blood sucker” (p. 856) in the community they are not referring to neoliberalism, or marginalisation, but rather about their friends and family. They are insecure because their government is incapable of protecting them and “they should be taken seriously. For this is a matter of horror; true horror” (Ashforth, 2014, p.857). The point is that the silence that Malawian scholarship chooses to keep about the ‘poverty of the country’s collective imagination’ illustrates the problems the country will have to deal with in the future.

The sky is falling: World building in Shadreck Chikoti's *Azotus: The Kingdom*

World building—as the construction of a world, especially a convincing fictional one—is an essential framing device for any narrative, but for speculative fiction it is the rock upon which all else stands; it is the basis through which a sense of place, plot and character become believable or accessible. Ultimately, clear world building gives richness to a text that lends readers the right amount of information so that they might grasp the possibility of the scribed reality. In Chikoti's world, presented in the novel *Azotus* (2015), the writer takes his reader on a winding journey in pursuit of Kamoto, the main protagonist and an “Occupant” of King Azotus' kingdom. Through intricacies of Kamoto's life we get to experience the mind-numbing emptiness of a world in which every need is catered for by housekeeping services. It is a world of roboticism where “Occupants”, as uniformed beings with no self-identity, are not permitted to seek knowledge outside their four walls and a picketed garden fence. On a level up from the “Occupants”, “Citizens” of the Kingdom obtain privileges, such as a car, in return for working for the King, and supplying the Occupants with their basic daily needs. It is through such a dualistic trajectory that the definition of freedom is taken to task. In stepping slightly out of line and giving up his prescribed glass of wine before bed, Kamoto's curiosity about the outside world grows, and with it the story unfolds.

There are limited ways in which an adequate writer could potentially weaken the creative integrity of such a simple premise, but somehow Chikoti manages to do so because he fails to follow through the basic concepts of world building, starting from ‘what if’. This is the perspective that Gill (2013) argues is the key emphasis for succeeding at speculative fiction: “what would happen had the actual chain of causes or the matrix of reality-conditions been replaced with other conditions”? (Gill, 2013, p. 73). Then, the creation of a sensory experience—that is anything beyond the physical properties of the old world, and creating a believable history for his world and its inhabitants. The conditions in Chikoti's text do not lend themselves to a scenario of much variance with present reality and so, at the crux, the sense of believability suffers. Chikoti's text seems to fail at generating a new matrix of reality. This is because *Azotus* is set ‘somewhere in Africa in the future’—this, as alternate

reality, is a solid foundation upon which to excavate and upon which to sculpt—yet neighborhoods are much like our own today, with houses numbered: “G8”—Kamoto’s house—and “AC52” (Chikoti, 2015, p.19). In addition, law and order seems to be structured similarly – prisons manifest in like fashion to present reality for instance and the world is one in which “Citizen and Occupant should conduct themselves in an acceptable manner” (Chikoti, p. 151); moreover, because nature and the weather appear as our own in *Azotus*, the reader is presented with a conundrum: the world is too much like ours to be anything alternate—therefore, Chikoti fails to build a world from a ‘what if’ premise.

Chikoti somehow succeeds at inducing a sense of paranoia—by creating anxiety in the reader who feels trapped in a failing world (a failing script) and yet not fully—the way in which the world is built is flaccid. The reader is spoon-fed details of scene and plot trajectory in a sedate manner, yet s/he is unable to secure a sense of the important ‘what if’: the result is in essence a lack of speculative power. There are endless questions in the attempt to grasp this future-scape. Moreover, if leaving aspects to the reader’s imagination is a technique employed as a means to somehow enhance the reading experience, then the author means well, but the description of mountainous terrain at the beginning of *Azotus* simply leaves the reader perplexed as to how this invented future world is somehow different to present reality: “he watched the sun slowly approach the horizon in the mountains beyond. Sometimes, it seemed as though the sun was heading for the yawning mouth of a cave, which dominated the face of the largest mountain. The range of mountains in the distance had the effect of creating what seemed like a boundary to all that existed, almost as if this was the edge of the world. But he knew that the world was much bigger than his eyes could witness” (Chikoti, p. 12).

Perhaps one way to aid this one-dimensional narrative architecture would be to strengthen the world building writing to convey some more vivid form of sensory experience. The lack thereof reduces the believability of this alternate reality when Chikoti does little to follow through on ideas. Notice how the protagonist appears to know that the world is expansionary, going beyond what he witnesses, but “bigger than his eyes could witness” (Chikoti, p. 12) is all that the reader is told. Here Chikoti is simply being languid with description. Then there is the fact that there are inconsistencies in the structure, because while

Kamoto is able to experience “bigger than his eyes could witness”, Chikoti reminds the reader that individuals’ minds are small in the Kingdom, and that the “Occupants” have through some process in the past lost the ability to think for themselves, or even think at all: “neither the need for exploration nor the thought of exploration had ever crossed Kamoto’s mind” (Chikoti, p. 11). This strengthens the idea that his Africans are without a past and also without a future. Surely the writer could have given the characters more of the primal experiences such as sense, the ability to see and describe to some extent, and even feel. Not only is Chikoti’s style robotic—that is to say with little sensory experience, his world is incomplete—it crumbles against the ‘what if’ hypothesis, but also his characters are textual avatars of everything postcolonial discourse fights against—that Africans lack a history and even a future history as-it-were. Successful fiction, especially speculative fiction, is built on a believable history. This is not negotiable, and yet Chikoti begs to differ with this basic ‘once-upon-a-time’ principle in *Azotus* in whose space the time frame and history are almost non-existent. While Chikoti offers backstory, for instance through writing “EXTRACTS FROM THE BOOK” (Chikoti, p. 127), such could be improved immensely through employment of a solid history.

Many other fictions have postulated alternate worlds—perhaps the fundamental starting point for fiction in any form is the question ‘what if’ (?)—and everything that follows from that is an attempt to answer and tightly argue the assumptions that begin to answer those questions, what are described herein as obeying the rules of world building. And yet, somehow this text refuses to do the same and comes off not as revolutionary but as gimmicky. In the grand scheme of things, notice how Margaret Atwood in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) offers the backstory throughout the novel. The reader is delivered a firm understanding that the reality here is a reality different to how it used to be. The thread that Atwood maintains equally affects the interest of the reader. The plot is woven and built layer upon layer. Moreover, the author effectively works the basis of time so that the reader is aware throughout that things used to be one way but that now it has changed. There is, then, a believable world evoked here. The reader is taken on a journey, in which the paving is cemented. *Azotus* dithers in comparison – the rigid description of Kamoto’s house (Chikoti, p. 39), for instance, may result in heightened awareness of the surroundings, but offers very little in terms of substantive thread.

Perhaps a better comparison would be with another Malawian writer. Notice how Steve Chimombo does this convincingly in the *Epic of the Forest Creatures* (2005), where the author plants the tale firmly in a present time that is not detached from the past, but rather manifesting out of a past; “reorganized... revamped” the reader is assured (p. 59). One among many ways in which the author achieves this is through the use of “Kalilombe” (chameleon): a legendary creature in Malawi’s psyche. Kalilombe is both narrator and poetic voice. The epic is thus not weighed down by the past, but fed by it. Chimombo’s speculation begins from ‘what if’ grounds: if these ideals are not met dystopia will be the alternative: “The future of Nyakalambo is doomed” (p. 99). The reader is thus supplied with a certainty that is missing in Chikoti’s *Azotus: The Kingdom* (2015) where the backstory is dropped unceremoniously in bulk rather late on in the narrative (127 pages into the story).

Stunted growth: The actors and character development in Malawian speculative fiction

Some critics would argue that characterization in a short story is perhaps difficult to do (even for seasoned writers), as illustrated in Ekari Mbvundula “Montague’s Last” (2015) and Tiseke Chilima’s “Women are From Venus” (2015). But this is not an excuse Chikoti can make in *Azotus* because he has an entire novel to fully render his protagonist(s). However, if it is a lack of tenacity that Chikoti wished to illustrate in Kamoto, then some skill is shown. What comes across as more apparent for all his characters is passivity. E.M. Forster (1962) observes ‘flat’ characters “never surprise” (p. 231), and that an advantage of such is that “they are easily recognized” (p. 225), but if this was the aim for Kamoto, then surely for the informant character, Qingling, Chikoti intended more action and roundedness. Yet, she is equally bland: the writer makes us privy to Qingling philosophising on the “intricate and flowery designs on the edges of her ceiling, which leads one’s eyes to the chandelier” and she continues to muse on the wallpaper possibly because it has more character than she does (Chikoti, 2015, p. 150).

Furthermore, Chikoti draws the characters across the pages with a leadless pencil of an imagination, to the debilitating extent that after spanning 221 pages, they remain unaltered in the reader's mind. Rather than developing the traits, strengths, and weaknesses of his characters, Chikoti seems bound to describing habits of eating/ mealtimes: narrative space that could be taken up by rather more necessary development of character: "So Tina served herself some soup and sandwiches" (p. 22); "Tina left the living room and went to the kitchen to find herself some dinner and to open a bottle of wine" (p. 48); "she was starving and needed something to eat"; "it dawned on him that he had not eaten all day.... He took his dinner and a glass of water... one spoonful into his meal was all it took for Kamoto to stop eating and go to warm his food in the microwave" (p. 61) (and so on: p. 88, p. 166, p. 175, p. 181, p. 184, p. 189). Food, "in fiction is mainly social. It draws characters together, but they seldom require it physiologically", a "longing for breakfast and lunch does not get reflected" (Foster, 1962, p. 60-61), or certainly it should not. Such thorough depiction of food and Chikoti's characters' intake of it takes up valuable narrative space in *Azotus*, space that could be given up to more necessary development of character. Maybe if Tina wasn't always eating she would grow in other ways.

Rigid characterization then again manifests in the most unusual of places: in a description of Kamoto's dream. Surely the dream world is the only true space where anything is possible. Yet, in *Azotus*, dreams seem to function in terms of the character's disbelief and subsequent thought process about it; more a cerebral activity than one of the creative unconscious: "Why don't you come and give me a hand with my work?" the islander asked in what Kamoto thought was a rather presumptuous tone....the thought of asking how the man had been able to see him while looking the other way crossed his mind..." (Chikoti, 2015, p. 34). Once more the reader is given too formal or 'pedestrian' a description, which ends up feeling restrained and awkward. It seems fitting to quote Henry James at this juncture: "a character is interesting as it comes out, and by process and duration of that emergence; just as a procession is effective by the way it unrolls, turning to a mere mob if all of it passes at once" (as cited in Forster, 1962, p. 63).

Where characters seem to start to develop in *Azotus* it is often only through the eyes of a particular character. And even then, it happens rather monotonously,

through a primary focus on physical appearance: “Kamoto noticed Tina’s attire. She was wearing a jersey with short sleeves and no buttons” (Chikoti, 2015, p. 63) and passive exchange: “Tina turned. It was Sara. . .” (p. 23). The conversation that then ensues with Tina and Sara meeting is flat and uninspiring (p. 23-24). As King (2000) says, “talk, whether ugly or beautiful, is an index of character” (p. 189), and as such should be intensifying and exciting in narrative. Far from soaring off the page, the index of Kamoto’s speech lacks luster. When Chikoti says “Kamoto’s disappointment was acute; he was inconsolable” (2015, p. 23), the reader is left doubting the truth of this as Kamoto remains rigid and unemotional in the following passage. The expression and context in which this is offered is too flat for overt emotion. The reader’s inability to believe in this world increases when three lines later he/she is told that: “Kamoto’s disappointment was short lived” (p. 33). Similarly, the fear, paranoia and nervousness that Tina is meant to be feeling as she learns information about the Kingdom is presented in a stale manner (p. 113). Rather than driving his characters to enact emotion, Chikoti gives a one-dimensional drawing of them: “Tina was crushed” (p. 112) and, “Kamoto was mildly disappointed with himself” (p. 135).

What Chikoti is blithely unaware of, is that a fictitious world can hinge on its actors. The thread upon which the traits of a character are strung might include physical appearance, it might include morals/ values, but whatever is depicted, the writer must aim to create a vivid visual or conceptual image of the character. Thus, through character development believability is strengthened. A writer who seems to have a believable character is Tiseke Chilima in the short story “Women are from Venus” (2015). Chilima sets her tale in a future Malawi at a time when Earth is being repopulated and women find themselves on Venus and men on Mars and in order to adapt to such separation both sexes have to turn to technology. Thus, in terms of writing a believable alternate reality Chilima is on the path to success. She crafts for herself and her readers a possible world through her characters and their foregrounded experience of place (e.g. “I have to catch an aeroshuttle back to Blantyre...” [Chilima, 2015, p. 175]). Despite alien appearances – depiction of Venusians and Martians; “I hovered”; “my feathers were quivering”; “smile of an android” (p. 171) – the world is plausible and redeemed because of character development. The short story is a character driven narrative, and Hope, the protagonist, pushes the story forward: the writer

renders Hope in a youthful light with a reference to her mother in the first paragraph (p. 171). In addition, Hope's relationships and feelings help us understand the mental framework from which she narrates the story: "That's what my mother called it when I hovered" (p. 171); "I hated her voice" (p. 172); "I liked him better when he seemed more Venusian than Martian" (p. 176). However, more energy could be given to mechanical movements, lacking in descriptions such as "the bio-woman stepped forward, probably preparing to slap me" (p. 173).

Suffice it to add, there are many ways in which Chilima could improve depth of characters, and a good place to start is to add a history. Comparatively, this blind spot is something that Ekari Mbvundula seems to understand in "Montague's Last" (2015). The plot's focus is on Montague's attempt to create the world's first sewing machine while imprisoned, where he has been "for the last five years" (Mbvundula, 2015, p. 1). The following two paragraphs illustrate that the prisoner is making something; that he is fighting time; he speaks French; and, he is sick, weak and coughing (p. 1). Montague's relation to a young woman, sketched "on a yellowing sheet of paper", is also quickly revealed (p. 1). What Mbvundula begins to create for the reader is the space in which to become a "sensory participant" in the story through characterization (King, 2000, p. 173). However, even though Mbvundula gives history to her character, creating honest humans to whom we can relate; she seemingly takes certain other things for granted. Mbvundula's wanton disregard for the necessary explanations of history is just as bad as not giving a history: it is baffling to any perceptive reader why the protagonist can speak French and Chichewa (the language native to Malawi). Successful characterisation and the history that goes with it is a well-paced, considered and deliberate affair. If this is not borne in mind in whichever form of prose, the result is that the writer appears to be pontificating (at best) or masquerading as a poet (at worst) for the sake of recognition. It is argued that it is in this latter consideration that Mbvundula falls. Finally, like Chikoti and Chilima, Mbvundula needs to develop the prisoner's history, as well as aspects of characterising the undertaker, Barthelemy Thimonnier (such as why he has that name), in order for the short story to feel more believable. Although taken individually some of the facets of character development in this story are good, taken together the sum total is strange in its incompleteness.

Tongue tied: A linguistic approach to Muthi Nhlema's speculative prose

In Muthi Nhlema's prose the writing seems to stymie progress in the speculative fiction genre on the African continent. This is because language is a tool for constructing alternative and invented worlds with mechanics that must be followed. Unfortunately, Nhlema flouts these rules of language in *Ta O'reva* (2015a) and "One Wit' This Place" (2015b) due to what can be referred to as a lack of linguistic fidelity; consequentially, the reader is presented with an unbelievable world system. The fidelity and reliability of a language in speculative fiction is what makes a finely-worked linguistic framework that not only merely mirrors the world that it narrates, but gives shape to it, and makes it possible. This is what Sorlin (2008) argues when she states: "standard English would not have been up to the task" (p. 1).

"One Wit' This Place" reads like a monochromatic dream from which we never awake. The protagonist is a woman whom Nhlema refers to as "she" and the plot unfolds as she speaks to what (unbeknownst to the reader, until the end of the narrative) is an unborn child she refers to as "babi" (Nhlema, 2015b). The entire plot is about how "she" is waiting for a man who has gone to war and "she" refers to him only as "he". In addition, Nhlema's text is a feminist's nightmare because, although the reader is never told this, it seems that she speaks to this child as a way to make up for her loneliness while waiting for "him". Everything happens to her, and yet she seems to have no agency to make things happen: hanging on to promises—"I dey come back t'you. Promise you dey wait fa me" (Nhlema, 2015b, p. 16), he says to her; "You dey promis'd to wait fa m" (p. 25); waiting—"come back t'me, I beg" (p. 16) and then she is speaking to the baby; "When he bi home, he dey take us away from this place. You dey see babi" (p. 16). Finally, when he does come back from war, he is detached from her and will not speak about what happened. The plot reaches its climax when the area is flooded and they head for high ground. She wakes up one morning to find that he has left her again, giving her the currency of a promise from which to fend for herself. We are then told she sees a moth she believes is "babi" (p. 18). Just like the protagonist, the reader keeps waking up from falling asleep during the paragraph: "whenever she dreamed, it was always the same dream" (p. 16), when she woke up (p. 18), "it was the funk that woke

her first” (p. 22), and; “that night when she dithered on the twilight of dreamless sleep” (p. 25).

In *Ta O'reva* (Nhlema, 2015a) it seems that the discourse is a result of the political unrest between white and black South Africans. The language includes *Vierkleur*—which the reader is told is “the old Boer republic flag” in a country where white Afrikaans men drive *bakkies* (p. 3) and eat *boerewors* (p. 4) and call black women “kaffir bitches” (p. 4). Then there are things that the reader does not seem to understand, because no explanation is offered, like *kaffirskietpiekniek* (p. 4), *volkstaat* (p. 5) and ANC T-shirts—and while further research on the reader’s part will illuminate what the writer means to say, the result is that Nhlema appears not to be aware of what he is trying to say. In addition, writers who unconvincingly toss around foreign words only make themselves appear ignorant to the reader. Furthermore, in the novella the effect is that because the Afrikaans is deployed without enough caution it sounds post-colonially incorrect, and downright racist: “The Boer” and “whites always get ugly in old age” (p. 10). However, the only aspect worse than using creatively unresolved language systems in writing is a writer who attempts racial humor—what is funny is still racist. It is clear that Nhlema attempts to draw the distinction between the white South African and black South African. However, the result is that the depiction of his characters such as “white Afrikaner farmers” who stereotypically all drive *bakkies* against *Ubaba’s* who say “*Impideselo*” for vengeance and drift off in “memories of peri-urban hazes of *kwaito*, drugs, alcohol and skanks” (p. 6) (whatever that even means) gives Nhlema’s linguistic descriptions—not to mention, the novella’s absurdly melodramatic climax—a curiously haphazard plotline.

Thus, Nhlema attempts in his writing to do what writers such as David Mitchell does in *Cloud Atlas* (2004)—to write a narrative using unconventional English; Ian Holding in *Of Beasts and Beings* (2010) in using only pronouns to describe characters; J.K Rowling in *Harry Potter* (1997) in generating a new wizarding world using made up language; and, Nuruddin Farah in *Maps* (1986) and *Gifts* (2000) in making a baby one of the protagonists. Nhlema’s first failure in writing speculative fiction and its intersection with its linguistic rules is that he fails to create (in *Ta O'reva*) and sustain (in “One Wit’ This Place”) a

defamiliarising strangeness, reflecting the new context of the world. Consequently, there is the failure of language to evolve the stories.

It is impossible to take any writer seriously who sets his world in what is clearly apartheid South Africa (drawing fine binaries mostly between the white South African male, and the black South African male) but still weaving his metaphors by writing back to the empire and paying homage to Eurocentric traditions firstly; in *Ta O'reva*: in terms of weather—where blankets barely keep people “warm against the cruel chill of winter” (2015a, p. 6) and art forms—Winnie (Mandela) who “turned sharply around, with ballerina precision” (p. 14) and then Nelson (Mandela) who “like an actor with stage fright, [...] felt disarmed by the candor of her simple interrogation” and references to Greek mythology—like a titan shouldering the pillars of the universe (p. 14). Secondly, this is repeated in “One Wit’ This Place” (2015b) where the protagonist, assuring readers that the “Nuke-clocks” (p. 17) no longer worked and so “all she had were the sun the seasons, the westerly desert of Sah and the easterly waters of Oce to help her remember” (p. 17), then proceeds to measure time by telling the reader it has been “six winters of bitter chill and empty slumber” and then we finally learn that “he” is a Geo-engineer (p. 17) and so he has come back to “her” from war. It is natural that Nhlema—whose inspiration is rarely Malawian—genuflects to Mount Olympus (the home of the Greek gods) when the writer emphasises that “he” assures “her” that he has returned in words “delivered with an Olympian effort” (p. 18).

As a result, the effect is that of a writer in search of a destination even in the future, whose muse clearly is not Malawian or African, paying tribute to writers who have done what he attempts with more grace and less pretension. Moreover, a *Malawian* writer who is comfortable gaining inspiration: linguistically—from poorly constructed Afrikaans; historically—from the apartheid political climate; and artistic inspiration—from ballerinas, thespians, and Greek titans, for his exploration of similes and metaphors, is indicative of something broken in the creative imagination of the nation that goes beyond the writer’s language. This is to say, Malawian writing which looks everywhere else first, before gazing home for its source of creative production while ‘writing the future’, makes for dismal reading at best, and at worst raises the question: is Malawi futureless? In the wider context, simply put: Nhlema’s

writing sets postcolonial discourse back to the age where African authors are writing for Western audiences, and as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) observes in “The Danger of a Single Story”, African children read (and in this case write) about snow.

However, when Nhlema is not offering his prose to the pantheon of Greek deities, he has potential for magical prose: “every day after that night was a blur for Lindani. His life became a fragmented series of unmemorable encounters. He, however, remembered the day he left home, a young angry pre-teen, to scavenge in the squalor of Pretoria and Johannesburg” (Nhlema, 2015a, p. 8), and; “Master van Tonder staggered over toward the body until he stood directly above Solomon’s torso, with Solomon between his feet like a triumphant hunter standing over his animal conquest” . . . ; “his powerless father vanished from the world of the living” . . . ; “The powerlessness that came with being born in this brown coat of black” (2015a, p. 7). These examples are not exceptional by any standard, but they are a promise for good writing, and it is possible to make a writer out of Nhlema. Another paragraph that gives off the illusion that Nhlema is a passable writer is the opening paragraph to the short story “One Wit’ This Place”:

While the tang of laser-singed titanium still ribboned the air and the swarm of discoid war-drones glided erratically above the field of battling soldiers, it happened. The ashen skies came alive with thousands of man-size gyrospheres that hung momentarily against the pallid dome before accelerating in a blast of blue-white flares, out of sight. Suddenly, the war-drones decelerated and, in perfect accord, plummeted to the earth, exploding in magnificent mushrooms of fire and smoke on impact. (2015b, p. 15)

Nhlema’s writing here makes some amateur mistakes in the use of verbs: unconventional constructions that seem to miss the desired effect—“ribboned”, constantly in the past tense, which slows down the pace—“glided”, “plummeted”, and “decelerated”. However, the overall tone is passable and brings to light the linguistic hope to be salvaged from Nhlema’s short story. Correspondingly, in the initial paragraph of the short story Nhlema makes a promise he fails to keep of delivering a good narrative. This is to say that ideally,

any good speculative writer would after such an opening unpack the world of “discoïd war-drones”, “man-size gyrospheres”, and “laser-singed titaniums” (Nhlema, 2015a, p. 15) and “Geo-Engineers” (Nhlema, 2015b), but the reader is never given proper explanations of this language. The lack of explanation can be excused because Nhlema does not know either: perhaps he was not sure how to bring “gyrospheres” from the world of Jurassic Park that he plagiarises to his setting on the “white shores of Neo-Dar before the floods came” (Nhlema, 2015b, p. 16) to those who live in Brazilian “Cabanas” (p. 17). Imaginably the floods speak to the reason why there are “geo-engineers” (2015b) (who work on a wide range of techniques to fight against climate change), and yet the style betrays the authorial intention, if this was it. Of particular concern is the fact that while Nhlema preferred South Africa for *Ta O’reva* he turns to Tanzania (Neo-Dar) for “One Wit’ This Place”.

However, even if it is forgivable—and it is not—that Nhlema’s world is designed from unpersuasively borrowed terms, and neo-African cites that are not his own, we still have other linguistic problems such as nomenclature and dialogue to deal with: instead of immersing the reader into this new world, we are thrown into a fractured love story between nameless protagonists of his short story (“he”, “she” and an imaginative baby called “babi”) and in the novella a protagonist referred to as “The stranger” (2015a, p. 1) to the extent that any mystery this may have solicited in the reader, thereafter makes the attempt painful to endure. Whatever effect Nhlema was going for by avoiding standard nomenclature is missed; each paragraph reads like an introduction: “The air in the room, like her mind, felt lighter as if gravity was falling apart at the seams. . .” (2015b, p. 17). The literary effect is that of an aircraft at cruising speed, which never takes off.

Furthermore, Nhlema’s handling of dialogue is criminal. In “One Wit’ This Place” his ‘absent characters’ who live in a ‘new Dar-Es-Salaam’ (Tanzania), in a future Africa, somehow speak a Nigerian Pidgin English. This is peculiar because even the Pidgin is not consistent: at first it is passable “I say dey come back t’you. Promise you dey wait fa me” and “Come back t’me, I beg” (2015b, p. 16) to this, “I need t’bi on my ownsome” (p.19) and “howse can I prepare you fa this world the way it bi” (p. 25). It is difficult to reconcile Nhlema’s Pidgin English, with this new coinage “ownsome” in a narrative voice and

authorial intrusion that uses words such as “post-haste” “bonfire” and “deadness” (p.19). Comparatively, in *Ta O’reva* consistency is also the general problem with his attempt at a different type of English: “Where zit, kaffir’ Master Van Tonder thundered. ‘Where is what, Sah’ Solomon stammered. ‘Don’t give me that-haai! Where zit?’” (2015a, p.7). A lesson in general phonetics: if the character, Solomon, has a problem pronouncing the letter “r” in “sir” to give off the sound “Sah” instead, surely, there is no way he will be able to pronounce the “r” in “where” and the writer should have gone with “weh” maybe.

What the writer attempts to do, is what Chinua Achebe does in *Anthills of the Savannah* (2001), which is to add Pidgin English alongside ‘standard English’: “you’re wasting everybody’s time, Mr. Commissioner for Information. I will not go to Abazon. Finish! *Kabisa!* Any other business?” (Achebe, 2001, p. 1). Clearly, there is something in *Kabisa*, perhaps an experience, a sentiment, a feeling and finality that English refuses to be a surrogate of; or the speaker does not believe the English language can do his feelings justice. Andrew Charles Dakalira, author of “Rise of the Akafula” (2016), uses Malawi for inspiration, such as using Chichewa to name his characters: “Akafula” (Dwarf), “Mowa” (alcohol), “Chimitali”, where events such as “Chilala” (Drought) (Dakalira, 2016, p. 5) cause frustration and has settings such as “Chikangawa”, which is in Northern Malawi. However, Dakalira names an alternative planet “Lunarhide” (2016, p. 12). It is hard to resolve the tension between a world built in Chichewa and then in Latin as the etymology for that word is from the Latin *lunaris* or *luna* for “moon”.

Malawian time: Pace in Malawian speculative prose

It is easy to sound like a postcolonial sellout, but there is a disappointing saying in Malawi about time keeping (or lack thereof) and it is referred to as ‘Malawian time’. It turns out that three short story writers in the country take it a bit too seriously, adopting the lateness, lethargic, cavalier disposition towards time, rhythm, pacing and agency in their short stories as stylistically presented in Simwimba’s “Tiny Dots” (2015), Magai’s “Those Without Sin” (2015) and Chinguwo’s “Closer to the Sun” (2015). What these writers do not understand is that narrative speed, whether fast, slow or both, affects the agency of the

characters and often reflects the tone of the piece of literature. This is what Hume (2005) means when she observes that speculative fiction frequently moves on both paces—quick-step, packed full of action and/or suspenseful, and then tepid/ gradual pace too.

A textbook example of ‘Malawian time’ in prose writing is in *Azotus* where “She was feeling the beginnings of a sneeze, and as numb as her legs started feeling from squatting behind the tree for so long, she knew she could trust one hand to steady her and another to cover her mouth in the now-more-than-likely event of a sneeze” (Chikoti, 2015, p. 18). It would be easier if Chikoti just said: she sneezed—the one time when you need him to put a verb in the past tense. It is simple: “speed produces a range of effects varying from irritation and bewilderment to exhilaration... a single novel may produce any of the possible effects” (Hume, 2005, p. 119). But, too much of one or the other is rather ineffectual. When a sneeze makes a near-paragraph; gear change or getting in and out of a car is mechanically described (Chikoti, 2015, p. 44 & p. 145) and the process of swatting a fly (p. 52-53) is drawn-out, then the pleasure of suspense is suppressed. To reiterate, it is not to say that snail’s pace is not to be enjoyed, but the *combination* of fast and slow in narrative speed is important. It is the combination that has many uses. One use “is to play with reader anxiety, deliberately provoking it in order to point to some greater cause for anxiety and stress” (Hume, 2005, p. 106). Where the combination does not occur, the lopsided sense of speed can be overbearing. In *Azotus* this results in cumbersomeness: “she was now feeling as nervous as someone who wants to be led into a new place which promises greater knowledge, but is at the same time terrified at the probability of experiencing some level of discomfort in the process” (Chikoti, 2015, p. 143). There is surely some better, quicker way to describe Tina’s nervous anticipation here. For instance: she was shaking with mixed anxiety: excitement to learn more but dread in what that might bring.

The most compelling writing by Magai begins and ends with the title in “Those Without Sin” (2015). This is because rhythmic impression and pace in the short story is sluggish, leaving in its wake a frustrated reader: this is a text in which “like the sun that sinks between Dowa Hills” (p. 57) paints the scene, and ostentatious sentences like: “it was a pleasure the mortifyingly high walls of the prison had shrouded from Nduge’s eyes for five years, and somehow, the view

of the cupcake-shaped hills in the dusk, with their cold sense of freedom, reminded him of his life” (p. 57) make a compelling case that writers need a dictionary! In addition, Chinguwo’s short story “Closer to the Sun” (2015) appears to beg for a rapid increase of speed when the protagonist opens the narrative with “Afraid, trembling and sweating, I could feel my trousers slowly drifting at the edge of the buttocks. I had no belt on. There was rock-strewn silence and pitch darkness all over” (p. 89), but it is forgivable because no fastening of belts is necessary for a story where the “World Population Control System” (p. 90) counts down to the figure of two human beings left on earth through the repetition of “ticking” that only reverberates as literary tinnitus in the reader’s ear. The writer manages to sustain this monotony in his obvious descriptions that ‘tell and not show’ the reader: such as things with a “dull pattern” (p. 90), repetition that is not necessary, for example “I am Lisa” (p. 93), and lack of a confident authorial tone in confidence such as in: “it had started cooling” and “soon darkness would be everywhere” (p. 95). These are apt descriptions for the consequence of Chinguwo’s style in the short story.

Correspondingly unwieldy sentences hinder the pace in “Tiny Dots”. Simwimba’s speculation is set in a dystopic future—one in which a plague sweeps through the land—a period before the present setting. One would assume that the foundation of a disintegrating world conjures a sense of implosion, and thus haste—but Simwimba has all the time in the world for it to end. The effect is one of meandering concentration and thus, vital elements of the story are surpassed such as the nature of the protagonist’s father (“I resented my father, who had turned into an obsessed apologetic, but didn’t share this guilt he carried, what it was about and why it consumed him so much” [p.110]). There is an attempt at melancholy and deep reflection in the narrative that reads like a monk claiming to be meditating, but cannot sit still. This is to say that if a writer is going to say something, then timidity has no room; they should say it. Where narrative speed is a necessary focus for improving Malawian speculative fiction, in view of Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin’s (2007) definition of agency—as being “the ability to act or perform an action”, and their forecast that “it hinges on the question of whether individuals can freely and autonomously initiate action, or whether the things they do are in some sense determined by the ways in which their identity has been constructed” (Ashcroft

et al, 2007, p. 6)—we can safely assume that the texts handled in this paper have disregarded agency.

Overall conclusion: The only way is up

This article examined literary experimentation in the speculative genre of fiction in Malawian literature. It aimed specifically at Malawian writers who appear to take the craft of writing seriously, but seem insufficiently aware of the functions and ways of storytelling, especially in speculative fiction. Therefore, this paper, in reading the new generation of Malawian writers, makes the claim that their attempt to create a possible Malawian future fails. Fundamentally, the selected writers exhibit a pedestrian attempt at literary experimentation in the genre, and therefore fail to write vividly conceived Malawian futures. Suffice it to add, in “as much as we are gendered creatures, and as profoundly as culture, class, and race can inform our lives, we are storied creatures too” (Barbara Myerhoff as cited in Randall & McKim, 2008, p. 8). This is important for the third generation of Malawian writers to remember (as a way of concluding), that they, too, are storied creatures and regardless of the politics and nuances of style and writing, their literary works are in essence a way of writing the conceivable and the future.

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