

# The Textual History of Dede Kamkondo's *The Flying Saucer*

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## Abstract

*The Flying Saucer* by Wisdom Dede Kamkondo was first published in Malawi in 1989 by Popular Publications, Montfort Press. It is now out-of-print, but rare copies can be found in the archives in Malawi, at Chancellor College Library, and in America, at Yale University Library. This article presents a reading of the textual history of Kamkondo's novella. By means of partial comparison between two copies of the text, the main argument is that the materiality of *The Flying Saucer* has appropriated its textual meaning. This manifests in a number of ways. The article firstly discusses the materiality of the physical text as it is now found in Chancellor College and Yale archives, before providing an analysis of *The Flying Saucer's* traditional paratext. It then goes on to acknowledge the traces of Kamkondo's book in various textual archives in order to draw attention to the silences that contribute to its textual history. Ultimately, the article sheds new light on the ways in which the speculative fiction novella, and perhaps the genre more generally, has been made to perform. In advancing the notion of "rhetorical accretion", I also argue that the layers of paratext are a valuable means through which to read particular literary histories.

## Keywords:

Kamkondo, Malawi, materiality, paratext, rhetoric, speculative fiction

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## Introduction

Commonly known by his pen name 'Dede', the Malawian novelist, poet and playwright Wisdom Dede Kamkondo (1957-2006) was among the most prolific writers of his time. Kamkondo is perhaps best known for his short stories and children's books, and as Sharra (2013) states, "[h]is novels such as *Children of the Lake*, *Truth Will Out* and *For the Living* continue to be read all over the world

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and can be found in US libraries, local bookshops and at the Michigan State University where he went in 1995 to pursue his doctoral studies”. While that may be the case for the titles mentioned, the fate of Kamkondo’s speculative fiction novella *The Flying Saucer* is quite different. Besides a copy found at the University of Malawi’s Chancellor College Library, this book, first published in Malawi in 1989 by Popular Publications, Montfort Press, is not readily available in-country. It was in conversation with two prominent contemporary speculative fiction writers in Malawi, Muthi Nhlema and Ekari Mbvundula, in 2017, that intrigue was first sparked about this particular book by Kamkondo. Nhlema recalled reading *The Flying Saucer* in the 1990s but had not seen a copy since. The book is not easily found outside of Malawi today either. At one point in late November 2018, via an interlibrary loan system at Stockholm University in Sweden, I accessed the copy listed online in the digital catalogue at Yale University library in America.

Through a consideration of the textual history of *The Flying Saucer*, I suggest that the materiality of the book has appropriated its textual meaning. I contend this in a number of ways. Firstly, I discuss the materiality of the physical text as it is now found in the archive, at Yale University Library. This includes an analysis of additions acquired at Yale in the section entitled “The 21<sup>st</sup> century text”, and an analysis of *The Flying Saucer*’s traditional paratext in the section called “The 20<sup>th</sup> century text”. The article also acknowledges traces of Kamkondo’s book in various textual archives (*The Columbia Guide to Central African Literature in English* for instance) in order to draw attention to the silences that contribute to its textual history. Reading *The Flying Saucer* in this way not only acknowledges publishing and archival systems of power, but also contributes to part of a larger contemporary move within African literary studies to reconceive of the relationship between the past and the present, and to reconceptualise certain twentieth century texts from Africa within the purview of the speculative fiction genre. As I explore below, *The Flying Saucer* is a particularly well-suited example in this regard, helping us to re-think literary history in Malawi and allowing for re-interpretation of generic possibilities within African literature.

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**Materiality: reading texts**

By shifting our attention to materiality and engaging with the threshold of a text we are able to expose and make clear the history of a text's production and reception, the various roles it has been made to perform, and even some of the ideological interests it has served. As literary critics such as Davis and Johnson (2015) have previously suggested, analysis of paratextual elements and the changing materiality of a text provides us with a strong case for the need to complicate and provide nuance to western frames of reading the book in Africa.

My primary lens of analysis is material rhetoric, which is defined by Vicki Tolar Collins as an approach that asks how the rhetorical aims and functions of "an initial text are changed by the processes of material production and distribution" (1999, p.547). Gérard Genette's (1997) idea of "paratext" provides a starting point. Material rhetoric can help us understand the implications of materiality, and this includes understanding the material conditions under which social and cultural hierarchies are formed. Overall, the aim is to comment on the staging of Kamkondo's book, and to shed light on the ways in which the speculative fiction novella, and perhaps the genre more generally, has been made to perform.

As Genette (1997, p.1) argues, paratext consists of various publishing interventions or "accompanying productions" that surround, extend and present a text. The paratext, which is imagined as threshold, rhetorical gesture or liminal space, impacts on the way the text is read. Indeed, it "bears on the most socialized side of the practice of literature, the way in which the relations are publicly organized" (Genette, 1997, p.14). Worth noting is the way in which such a textual space is not only a zone of transition but also of transaction (Genette, 1997, p.2). Working backwards in order to arrive at the original text, the article surveys various zones of transaction of Kamkondo's book. Traditionally, paratext includes the markings of publisher and editor involvement such as preface, cover design and endnotes. If Genette (1997) does not explicitly include mention of additions subsequent to publication, his ideas are yet relevant when examining textual mutations in spaces such as the archive. As paratext is "empirically made up of a heterogeneous group

of practices and discourses of all kinds and dating from all periods” (Genette, 1997, p.14), it is necessary to think about textual change post-production .

Jerome McGann’s (1991) argument that Genette’s work does not go far enough in distinguishing between text and paratext is useful here then. “As a laced network of linguistic and bibliographic codes” (McGann, 1991, p.13-14), the emphasis falls on a textual condition which is always in a state of flux. This article extends McGann’s (1991) designation of the bibliographic code – the material and formal features of the physical object that are, ultimately, signs of collaborative endeavor between author and editor – beyond the point of publishing in order to include a reading of materiality in the archive.

As one is immediately aware upon picking up the Yale copy of *The Flying Saucer*, there are archival additions with which to engage before arriving at traditional (editorial/publishing) layers of paratext. In advancing the notion of the growth of the text, or “rhetorical accretion” (Tolar Collins, 1999), I argue that the additions surrounding original texts are an important means through which to understand the tensions of particular textual histories. In the following, I ask what authority influenced the material layers of *The Flying Saucer* and question the rhetorical purpose of such layers.

### **Text and context**

Like Kamkondo’s *Children of the Lake* (1987), *Sivo and the Cruel Thief* (1989) and others, *The Flying Saucer* is a short novel aimed at a young audience. The story is a distinct blend of realism and fantasy and it follows two orphaned thirteen-year-old brothers, Mwazi and Mwiza as they try to stop their seventeen-year-old sister Wezi from marrying a corrupt man called Matewe. Wezi was warned by their mother before she died not to marry before she turned eighteen. Mwazi and Mwiza follow their mother’s orders and report their sister’s engagement to Matewe to her spirit at the river. Besides the moralistic stance on child marriage, Kamkondo weaves various other teachings into the novella. Listening to elders is illustrated as paramount in chapter two, for instance, when Mwazi is turned into a

crocodile for not doing so. Narrative pace is swift and through six short chapters the boys witness Matewe performing strange things, such as turning a dog into a man and admitting to eating little children. Half way through the text Mwiza spends some time in the land of the spirits, where he meets his mother and learns the best way to save his sister. The children's mother gives Mwiza a small tea saucer that has special powers and helps him achieve his goal: "if you want to fly on it, just sing a song and it will fly for miles and miles like a bird" she says (Kamkondo, 1989, p.18-19).

Significantly, Kamkondo draws on local Malawian folklore in this book. Firstly, the archetypal story of "The Defiant Girl", and its central motif: *kanguli* (a big top/ spinning top), is recognizable in *The Flying Saucer*. In a survey of African folktales, Lee Haring (2002) notes that long before Amos Tutuola portrayed a young, resistant girl falling for a disagreeable man in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952), versions of the story of a defiant girl permeated folklore across Africa. Drawing specifically on two narratives collected in Malawi, the story of "The Defiant Girl" is described by Haring like this:

The young woman marries a hyena disguised as a rich, handsome man. She is followed in her virilocal marriage by her brother, whose eye ailment keeps him awake to hear the pack of hyenas singing, "Let us eat the game . . ." Having convinced his credulous sister and borrowed tools from the husband, the brother makes a *nguli* (a big top); by singing, he causes it to rise into the air. He has his sister climb into it and they float home, where she remains unmarried (Haring, 2002, p.192).

Not only is the main subject matter of this oral tale picked up by Kamkondo in his novella, but the process of entextualisation is also evident in aspects such as the portrayed potential of song and method of escape, that is flight.

A second example of transposition from orality to written text in *The Flying Saucer* comes from a Sena oral tale: "The Boy with the Flying Basket" (documented

in Schoffeleers and Roscoe 1985). This story revolves around a dispute between Nyakatembo and his elder sister Ntsayu. Nyakatembo seeks revenge on his sister for not including him in games. One day, he proposes to leave his sister in the forest while he saves her friends from terrifying wild animals by flying away in a magic basket, which he wove with the help of his grandmother, a renowned magician. Of course, Ntsayu apologises and in the nick of time Nyakatembo saves her. When comparatively analysed, differences are noticeable between this story and *The Flying Saucer*. For example, it is a grandmother who imparts knowledge to the boy in the oral tale and it is the mother who is most central in this regard in *The Flying Saucer*. However, in both narratives it is a female subject who educates the children about magical practices. The flying object in both cases carries the children back to their mothers. Equally, although the folktale tells of the powers of a woven grass basket and Kamkondo's narrative depicts that of a tea saucer, the particularity of an object's ability to fly remains intact. What is more, the girl child in both texts is rescued by a younger brother.

In the 1980s in Malawi, around the time Kamkondo was writing, it was not uncommon to find morals and valuable lessons woven into all forms of literature, for children and adults alike. Short stories were popular and were often published in local newspapers as well as in books. It is important to note that after Malawi's independence in 1964 and until the 1990s, the dictatorship of Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda was a hugely influential factor concerning literary production in the country. The 1968 Censorship and Control of Entertainment Act established under Dr. Banda made it a "criminal offense, punishable by imprisonment, to possess, import, print, publish, distribute, display, exhibit or reproduce any publication which the Board had declared 'undesirable'" (Mphande, 1996, p.80). While it is worth considering that Kamkondo's book simply went out-of-print like many books in Banda's era, it may also be worth speculating that *The Flying Saucer* was suppressed on political grounds. Kamkondo's story is a moral one, but it is also a tale of shape shifting, mysteries and witchcraft. In *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*, Peter Geschiere observes that "nearly everywhere in Africa, discourses on power continue to be marked by [...]"

notions” of sorcery and witchcraft (1997, p.5). In this regard, we might reflect on the association of politics with witchcraft and question whether this had any bearing on the circulation of *The Flying Saucer*.

### *The Flying Saucer: The 21<sup>st</sup> century text*

Kamkondo studied sociology, literature and linguistics in Malawi and in Wales (UK), and was later a lecturer at the University of Malawi. He also worked as a consultant for the World Bank for some time. In 1995 he studied at Michigan State University on a Fulbright scholarship although he did not complete his studies owing to illness. It may be suggested that it was at this time that *The Flying Saucer* started its life in America.

*The Flying Saucer* was added to Yale’s library catalogue on 1st June 2002. Although we do not know the appearance of the original text, I am suggesting that the initial materiality of the physical text as we see it now was acquired in the archive (see Figure 1). There are reasons for this suggestion. With no trace of the

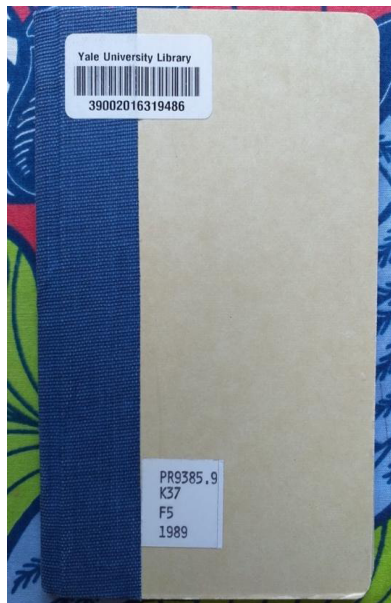


Figure 1: Woods, Joanna, “Yale’s cover: *The Flying Saucer*”. 2019. Photograph. JPEG file.

content inside, the hardback dust cover gestures to the contemporary authorizing source, Yale University Library. Also noteworthy about the cover is the exclusion of the author's name and the title of the story. The eye is rather drawn to two white labels which function as metadata, that is, the "structured information that describes, explains, locates, or otherwise makes it easier to retrieve, use, or manage" a resource (Mitchell, 2006, p.18).

On the inside of the back cover there are two more labels which function in much the same way. One is a barcode, much like the one found on the front cover inscribed with the aforementioned institution's name, presumably for checking the book in and out of the library, and below it is a white table entitled "Date Due", which appears never to have been used. Together the labels mark the activity of the library cataloguing process. While this is the case, they also contribute to the fact that the cover of this text is "a fringe" which controls one's entire reading of the text (Genette, 1997, p.2). Whatever the intentions of the actors in the archive, the text is now unquestionably marked as Yale's property; the text is explicitly

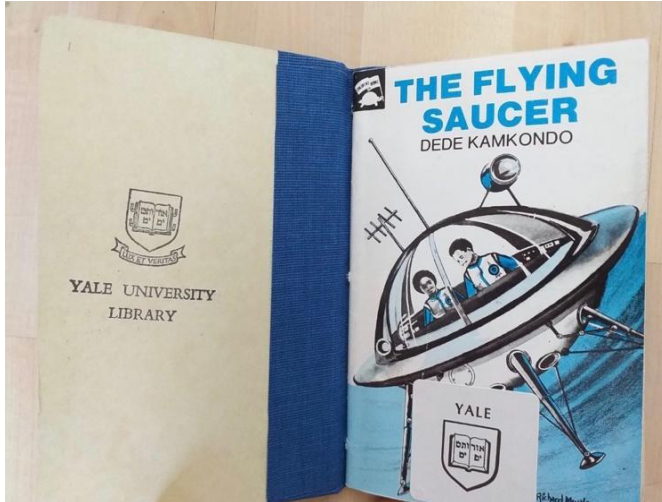


Figure 2: Woods, Joanna, "Dede Kamkondo's 'The Flying Saucer'". 2019. Photograph. JPEG file.

positioned in archival terms and as a result Kamkondo's story is concealed. It is not only the dust cover with its labels attached that gives this impression. Open the



dust cover and one reveals Kamkondo's book beneath with another indication of Yale's intervention: a Yale sticker (see Figure 2). The Yale logo is then replicated in a small stamp on the last page of the text as well. Now housed at Yale University Library, *The Flying Saucer* has been reconfigured within the aesthetic conventions of the archiving institution – the typography and logo. These additions “are symbolic and signifying mechanisms” (McGann, 1991, p.67). In the staging of *The Flying Saucer*, the material rhetoric forgoes the story told by Kamkondo and re-presents an impersonal abstraction of the content.

### The 20<sup>th</sup> century text

I now turn to the next layer of paratext. As I mentioned before, *The Flying Saucer* was published in Malawi in 1989 by Popular Publications. This publishing company is a subsidiary of Montfort Press, a mission press located in southern Malawi. Montfort Press was founded in 1957 to satisfy the needs of missionaries to print the Bible and to spread a Christian view of the world. The Press was hugely influential in areas of education and religion, but its particular importance lay in the way it encouraged local writers to write for publication. The development of Montfort Press in this way was significant in establishing Malawi as a literary landscape (Mwiyeriwa, 1978). The Malawi Writers' Series Editorial Board, led by representatives at the University, was established through the Press in 1974 and the first significant literary texts in English in independent Malawi were to come out of this collaboration.

The book's plain dust cover at Yale library is a contrast to the original blue, black and white cover designed by Richard Mwale on the original Popular Publications edition. Largely unobstructed, this design is maintained on the cover of the edition found at Chancellor College Library, University of Malawi (see Figure 3). The library cataloguing process is once again clear on this edition – note, for example, the black sticker on the bottom left corner of the book in Figure 3, and the circular stamp on the first page, as seen in Figure 4. Having said that, I would argue that the metadata in this case is less intrusive compared to that which is found on Yale's copy of the book. The additions made to the text in the archive

in Malawi have not gone as far as concealing Kamkondo's novella. For one thing, the title is clearly visible.

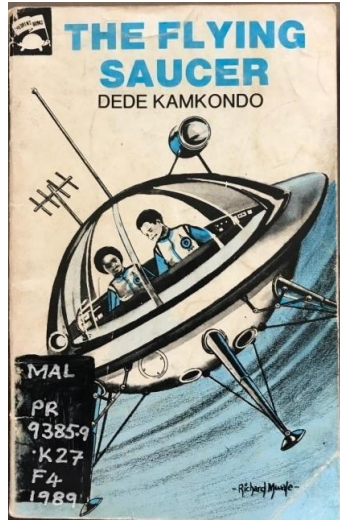


Figure 3: English Department, UNIMA, "Front cover of 'The Flying Saucer'". 2019.

Photograph. JPEG.

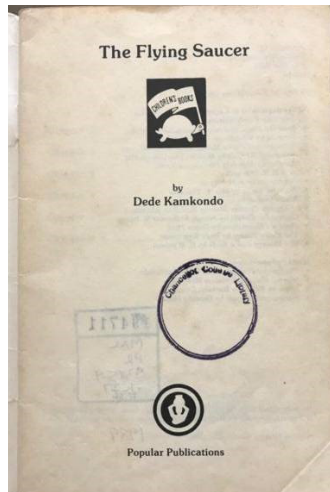


Figure 4: English Department, UNIMA, "Title page of 'The Flying Saucer'". 2019.

Photograph. JPEG.

There is something more inviting about the original cover, perhaps designed and chosen by the publishers with its young target audience in mind. This suggestion finds support in Jane Wangari Wakarindi's article on "Paratext and the Making of YA Fiction Genre: The Repoussoir", in which she notes that repoussoir – images added to the epitextual layer of a book – provides an attractive layer that necessarily appeals to a younger audience (2019, p.95). Visual appeal notwithstanding, and even though Wakarindi rightly points out that "[a]s a stylistic image presentation device, repoussoir directs the reader's mind to share the experiences of the character through imagination" (p98), I find it striking that the image on the Popular Publications front cover has little to do with the content of Kamkondo's novella. At no point in the story is the saucer illustrated as it is represented in the image on the front cover: as a typical icon of a spaceship or an unidentified flying object (UFO). The back cover has even less to do with the text itself. It rather advertises the publisher through printing a set of Popular Publications titles that won book prizes in English and Chichewa (Figure 5). Such aspects clearly expose "the problematic character of the concept of final intentions" (McGann, 1991, pp.61-62). McGann's point that texts are the "locus of complex networks of communicative exchanges" (1991, p.62) is significant here, as is the idea that such exchanges start with the initial period of publication. Prior to its acquisition at Yale in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, *The Flying Saucer* was configured within the aesthetic conventions of the publishing house – with the Popular Publications logo and type.

Considering the differences between text and paratext, Genette writes that the text cannot be changed, it is "immutable" (1997, p.408), while, in contrast, the paratext is "more versatile" (p.408). Paratext, suggests Genette, is "an instrument of adaptation. Hence, the continual modifications in the 'presentation' of the text" (p.408). In his descriptions, Genette also talks of the relationship between author and editor and/or publisher as collaborative, and largely benign. However, it seems to me that the paratextual and archival history of Kamkondo's *The Flying Saucer* lends itself as an example of opposition to such a sentiment.

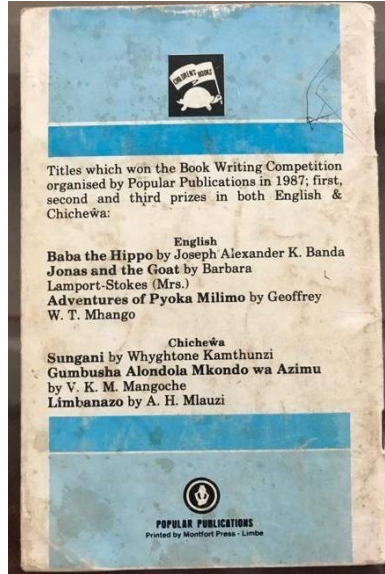


Figure 5: English Department, UNIMA, “Back cover of *The Flying Saucer*”. 2019.  
 Photograph. JPEG.

### Textual traces of *The Flying Saucer*

Thus far, the argument has been that the materiality of *The Flying Saucer* has appropriated the textual meaning: the story within. The re-staging of the text has occurred across a number of layers in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century – publishing paratext and archival additions. Of course, such textual layering entails a number of actors and occurs in various spaces – in this case nationally in Malawi and transnationally in the American archive – highlighting that institutions willfully control texts and provide boundaries through which readers understand those texts (Foucault, 1972, p.123). What I want to comment on now is how this is compounded by the (non) existence of Kamukondo’s text in what I will call “textual archives”. By this I mean to look at texts (print and digital texts), such as encyclopedias, that collect and exhibit records of literary works. My point here is to add to the understanding of the textual history of *The Flying Saucer* through an analysis of traces of it outside of the physical text.

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*The Columbia Guide to Central African Literature in English* (2008) is written by Adrian Roscoe, a scholar who was professor, head of department, and dean at the University of Malawi, Zomba, from 1972 to 1984. *The Columbia Guide* documents postwar African literature, with an especial focus on the rise and growth of modern literature in the three postcolonial nations of Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe. It is a profile of both established and emerging writers at that time. Roscoe mentions Dede Kamkondo as an author in two places: on page 64 and on page 131. Texts such as *Innocent Boy* (1976), *The Children and the Lake* (1987) and *Sivo and the Cruel Thief* (1989) are also listed. However, *The Flying Saucer* is not included amongst the works. While *The Columbia Guide* may be “a comprehensive alphabetical guide” of literature from those aforementioned nations, the exclusion of *The Flying Saucer* is problematic, highlighting Foucault’s argument that an archive is “the law of what can be said” (Foucault, 1972, p.129). *The Flying Saucer* may not have been popular, or may not have been given a chance to be popular under the Censorship laws in Malawi around the time of its publication, but it still exists and is part of Malawi’s literary history. Since “an archive represents a significant moment” (Hall, 2001, p.89), to exclude *The Flying Saucer* from a textual archive such as *The Columbia Guide* is to exclude it from memory of the past as well as from the present.

It is important to note that *The Muse*, published by Chancellor College in Malawi, contains works by Kamkondo. However, it is otherwise observed that the number of textual archives in which Dede Kamkondo is included at all is limited, nationally and transnationally. H-Net, The Humanities and Social Sciences Network Online, and the Third Edition of the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction Online* are two digital archives which do include the author and his works. Most importantly, on both websites *The Flying Saucer* is listed. The listing on H-Net, an international interdisciplinary organization with its main office in Michigan State University in America, where Kamkondo pursued his doctoral studies, is a tribute to the author and cites his complete oeuvre. If the page on *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* does not comprise a complete record of Kamkondo’s life and works, there is a short biography and a list of five of the author’s stories. *The Flying Saucer* in this textual archive appears to be most important, too, placed at the top of the list. One can

imagine that this is due to the relationship between the story's genre and the site's community of readers and intended audience. It states: "He [Kamkondo] is best known for his short stories [...] one of which is a fairy-tale novelette with sf motifs [...]: *The Flying Saucer* (1989)" (sf-encyclopedia).

These textual archives act in a similar way to the additional layers of paratext attached to *The Flying Saucer*. *The Columbia Guide*, H-Net, and *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction Online* surround the original text and acquire what Tolar Collins (1999) calls rhetorical value. Like the two physical archives and the publishers in Malawi, the process of rhetorical accretion in these textual archives is performed by human agents. What the process ultimately illuminates is that "in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures", and that choice of inclusion and exclusion "rests on institutional support: it is both reinforced and renewed by whole strata of practices, such as pedagogy, of course; and the system of books, publishing, libraries; learned societies in the past and laboratories today" (Foucault, 1972, p.219).

### Considering genre

Foucault's (1972) point above can be applied to many textual examples and across many genres. What is worth noting, however, is that although genre is fluid it is also "made by the interaction of various claims and practices by writers, producers, distributors, marketers, readers, fans, critics, and other discursive agents" (Bould and Vint, qtd in Reider 2017, p.75). Through this we can see how important history is for the establishment of genre, and how certain authorities have manipulated textual meaning and generic classification over the centuries.

As it may be apparent from this article's focus in general, the "production of discourse" (Foucault, 1972, p.216) surrounding speculative texts in and from Africa in particular is a compelling topic. In comparison to various other types of genre fiction, speculative fiction has not fared well on the continent, at least not apparently if one looks at past readerships (Eatough, 2017, p.237). However, I

contend that speculative fiction has for a long time merely been concealed, quite often problematically under the label “magical realism” in the West. Supporting the analysis of materiality above, the marketing and staging of Thomas Mofolo’s *Chaka* (1926) (arguably one of the earliest examples of speculative fiction in southern Africa) as an “historical romance” shows that the ambition of the novelist has been subverted, along with the generic possibility which the narrative is capable of realizing (Sandwith, 2018, p.479). This is changing in the twenty-first century (see Molver and O’Connor [2018] for example). I sense that such an observation could, however, make way for an opening up of a separate set of questions about the genre of speculative fiction more broadly in Africa. What might further comparisons of the materiality of texts, and the rhetorical value they have been assigned over the years, communicate about the genre on the continent? Could a comparative study provide an avenue for thinking about the history of speculative fiction in Africa; about the silences surrounding and/or framing speculative fiction in the twentieth century?

## Conclusion

The task of this article was to read the material rhetoric of Dede Kamkondo’s *The Flying Saucer* by taking into consideration various paratextual aspects of the material book as well as archival traces. While I aimed to read closely the layers of addition to the physical text, I also considered how those layers colour the value of the core text and how modes of production, circulation and re-production contribute to a larger cultural communication act. Examining material rhetoric in this way has not only revealed silences in the textual history of *The Flying Saucer* but also in the history of Malawi as a literary landscape. Moreover, the publishing, paratextual and archival history of Dede Kamkondo’s *The Flying Saucer* reveals a striking staging of genre in Africa in the twentieth century. When it was not hidden or censored, the speculative text was predominantly fashioned as a morality tale or historical romance under the auspices of missionaries on the continent. This is becoming more and more evident in the twenty-first century, as the re-staging and re-mediation of African literary texts gets underway.

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## About the Author

Joanna Woods is currently reading for her doctorate in the Department of English at Stockholm University, Sweden. Her doctoral research focuses on contemporary southern African speculative fiction. Exploring short Anglophone texts written by authors from Malawi, Zimbabwe and South Africa and published over the past decade, she aims to look closely at the rhetoric of the speculative genre. Woods was a lecturer in the English Department at Chancellor College, University of Malawi before starting her doctoral degree. Alongside her research, Woods is Communications Editor for *Africa in Words* - a blog that focuses on cultural production and Africa.