In An Other World: Representations of the Other in Queer African Speculative Short Stories

by

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the manner in which queer African speculative fiction short stories navigate the other – that which is perceived as not belonging, or being outside of what is considered "normal" – and how this other is represented. By setting their stories in both familiar and unfamiliar settings, and by blending mythological and futuristic elements, African speculative fiction authors imagine a diversity of emancipatory possibilities. Given that speculative fiction explores the limitations of time and manipulates it as necessary, this dissertation explores the different temporalities used in African speculative fiction. In particular, the focus is on utopian, dystopian, and mythological temporal frameworks. This dissertation also explores how each of these frameworks influences the existence and understanding of queerness and its consequences. Additionally, speculative fiction is a genre that successfully engages with both entertainment and social critique. I contend that the stories read here are political in nature; in a homophobic world insisting on the presence of queers in alternative time-space dimensions turns this literary practice into a profound, political act.

Introduction

Intro(spec)tions: Queering the Possibilities

"We can't know in advance, but only retrospectively, what is queer and what is not."

- Elizabeth Freeman

Though he is frequently misquoted, an apt summary of the need for speculative fiction can be attributed to English writer and philosopher Gilbert Keith Chesterton:

> Fairy tales, then, are not responsible for producing in children fear, or any of the shapes of fear; fairy tales do not give the child the idea of the evil or the ugly; that is in the child already, because it is in the world already. Fairy tales do not give the child his first idea of bogey. What fairy tales give the child is his first clear idea of the possible defeat of bogey. The baby has known the dragon intimately ever since he had an imagination. What the fairy tale provides for him is a St. George to kill the dragon

(1909: 102).

The enjoyment of speculative fiction and its subgenres are often attributed to children and young adults, yet adults' biases against speculative fiction have blinded us to the fact that the genre is not merely about whimsical escape – it involves taking real issues into an environment where we can handle and examine them. More importantly, as Chesterton argues, although we may be aware of the obstacles in front of us, speculative fiction provides us with the necessary knowledge to understand that many difficult obstacles are, in fact, surmountable. Similarly, speculative fiction prompts us to advance, change, and think in new ways in relation to daily challenges while also providing entertainment through the alternative world-building. Given this understanding of speculative fiction, the primary goal of this dissertation is to illustrate that African speculative fiction short stories give expression to the other. As the other is that which typically does not belong, the other in question is the queer subject. In this dissertation, the existence of the other will be queried against different speculative settings.

In a broad sense, it appears as though the predominant question queried in speculative fiction is "what if?". Speculative fiction aims to answer that question as it imagines alternative worlds and

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futures. Bogdan Trocha states that "the essence of speculative fiction was to create new boundary conditions that do not exist in reality" and to introduce a human being (or other living creature) who will be affected by these new conditions, into this environment (2019: 105). Therefore, it can be understood that speculative fiction makes use of imagined worlds with parameters that are not known in our reality. Using this understanding of the genre, it can be noted that these imagined universes are fashioned from an understanding of our own reality in conjunction with a reality that is yet to take place. Importantly, the term "speculative fiction" is defined as including all literature that is set in a universe that is dissimilar to our own (Jackson & Moody-Freeman, 2011: 2).

Although speculative fiction is popular in the West, it is not considered as popular in Africa. Only recently has the emphasis on African speculative fiction begun, as the genre has previously prioritised primarily white, male authors and consumers. The fantasy genre, and speculative literature as a whole, according to Helen Young, "has a reputation for being a Eurocentric genre, that is, one which is by, for, and about White people" (2016: 1). Thus, in discussing African speculative fiction, it is important to acknowledge that the genre is a predominantly Eurocentric genre in order to express the necessity for African speculative fiction. In spite of this fact, a specific branch of speculative fiction with a queer inflection has emerged on the continent.

Andre Carrington's *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in ScienceFiction* discusses what it means to be Black, and places "Blackness at the centre of discussions about speculative fiction" in order to understand what the genre "might be and what it might do" (2016: 2). Carrington illustrates how "race matters" in a genre like speculative fiction, by examining "those mediations of Blackness through the lens of genre" and "[interpreting] speculative fiction through the critical lens of Blackness" (2016:2). Carrington demonstrates how the principle of identity and its social construction is influenced by the role of popular culture – in this instance, speculative fiction as a genre belonging to popular culture. Interestingly, Carrington comments that speculative fiction "is as saturated with race thinking as any other variety of popular culture" (2016:2), yet this kind of speculative fiction is not as widely consumed as speculative fiction which caters to white authors and audiences. Mark Bould notes that, in fact, speculative fiction's "colour-blind future was concocted by whites and excluded people of colour as full subjects" (2007: 177). This statement not only confirms the exclusive nature of speculative fiction, but also

takes note of how the genre has previously encouraged the lack of representation of black characters. This discussion of race and speculative fiction is also confirmed by Robert Scholes and Eric S. Rabkin. While their article itself may appear outdated, due to it being published in the 1970s, Scholes and Rabkin's comment on speculative fiction and race is still applicable to the genre today: "the presence of unhuman races, aliens, and robots, certainly makes the differences between human races seem appropriately trivial" which then makes "the matter of race comparatively unimportant" (1977: 188-189). Racism in speculative fiction is presented as a concept that has ceased to exist, thus speculative fiction "avoids confronting the structures of racism and its own complicity in them" (Bould, 2007: 180). As mentioned in the text, "the effort to bring together race-conscious cultural criticism and the study of speculative fiction is not a new endeavor" (Carrington, 2016: 3).

Furthermore, in addition to race, I aim to explore the history and emergence of queer theory in relation to speculative fiction. Queer theory is not a new concept, but over the years it has had to become more intersectional, especially to include people of colour. The insertion of queerness within the speculative fiction genre is one that, fundamentally, makes sense. If one can suspend belief for the supernatural, then queer representation is equally perceived as more acceptable. Speculative fiction rejects the rules of reality and often rewrites them. Additionally, to be queer is inherently to be working against societal norms. Queer speculative fiction, therefore, utilises this definition of queerness and queer approaches to show how our world might be different -- and much improved -- if certain hierarchies were broken or removed entirely. Alternatively, it might utilise queer experiences and queer points of view to bring to light injustices or inequities in our current system. Queerness chafes against these norms, or in some cases rejects them entirely. To be queer is to resist, and to be the exception which proves that the rule is meaningless. In deciding whether a work is speculative fiction and queer, I have considered the following: whether the stories take place in a reality that is presently different from our own, and whether sexuality is either addressed or challenged in the text. The theories considered in this dissertation will contextualise the research, so that I can begin to demonstrate the connection between race, African speculative fiction and queer theory. This will be done in order to identify the consequences of being queer in the context of African speculative imaginaries.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Attempting to define speculative fiction raises more questions than it does solutions. This is both frustrating and beneficial: more insights have come from continuing discussions about the intricacies of speculative fiction than from any one definition ever could. Speculative fiction is, at its core, that which encompasses an overlapping of a vast range of genres. Each of these genres have their own aspects of something that cannot be found in present-day reality. There are several competing definitions of the genre. It is generally acknowledged that speculative fiction is concerned with events that have not yet occurred but where it is possible — the extent of which is uncertain — that they may do so in the future. The broadness of the genre should not be conflated with its inability to be defined; the two are not synonymous. Instead, the many elements of speculative fiction have led some to rely on the simplicity of asserting a lack of definition. Instead, what should be taken into account is the variety and malleability of the genre. There are no subject matter restrictions included in contemporary definitions of speculative fiction. One of the hallmarks of speculative fiction has always been the investigation of otherness and diversity. A chance to question and re-envision established power structures exists when the imaginary world of the future is inhabited with several potential paradigms of subjectivity and social organisation. This, as well as the genre's preoccupation with time and subsequent manipulation of time, are what characterise speculative fiction. The benefit of a historic overview of 'speculative fiction' as a concept whose etymological register continues to evolve may therefore outweigh the need for a definitive declaration.

The term 'speculative fiction' is used to describe a broad category that includes, to mention a few, genres with elements of fantasy, horror, science fiction, magical realism, and the supernatural. As such, it is evident that "speculative fiction is marked by diversity" as "there is no limit to possible micro-subjects" thus, consequently, "no standard definition" (Gill, 2013: 72). The general consensus concerning the genre's seeming lack of a solid definition has brought forth labels. These labels, as stated by Samuel R. Delaney (a prominent Black queer voice) connote speculative fiction as "one of the numerous terms that numerous critics for numerous reasons have decided is inadequate for the numerous things that fall under it" (2009: 149). However, it is a superficial evaluation of the complexities of speculative fiction to characterise a genre as a vessel inside which other genres fit – or, worse still, to avoid giving a specific

definition of the genre. The genre is notoriously challenging to describe due to definitional inconsistencies. While it may be tempting to draw distinct lines between each of the genres that collectively belong under the heading of "speculative fiction", this tendency to blur and overlap these genres only serves to highlight the imaginative range of speculative fiction.

Despite the temptation to discount the credibility of the category or label of speculative fiction because of its fluid definitions, it also signals at the genre's ability to adapt. There is no disputing that the genre includes numerous subgenres. However, its premise is not as abstract as one might presume. Speculative fiction, at its most basic, imagines worlds that do not exist in the one we live in: it imagines a systemically different universe in which causes behave according to logic distinct from those found in the real world (Gill, 2013: 73). The genre depends on a deviation from the universe's accepted standards to explore what might happen. These explorations take into consideration time, technological advancements, and supernatural abilities, to name a few. Despite having a variety of speculative components and stories, depending on the subgenre, these imagined worlds frequently revolve around questions regarding the fate of humanity. It is often stated that speculative fiction relies on the foundational inquiry of "what if?" and is frequently explored as a quest for the definition of humanity and their role in the universe (Lwin, 2011: 11).

Sandra Jackson and Julie Moody-Freeman, in *The Black Imagination and the Genres: Science Fiction, Futurism and the Speculative*, outline speculative fiction with specific archetypal characteristics that help shape and define the genre (2011: 2). These narratives usually form part of "stories that take place in a setting contrary to known reality; are set in the future; […] are set on other worlds" or "are set on Earth but contradict known records" (Jackson & Moody-Freeman, 2011: 2). Importantly, they define speculative fiction as "a term which includes all literature that takes place in a universe slightly different from our own" (Jackson & Moody-Freeman, 2011: 2). Therefore, "speculative fiction can become a plane on which the predicted future states of things are tested for rationality. By creating potential worlds, fiction opens up a literary opportunity to test their consequences before they appear" (Trocha, 2019: 104). In using a hypothetical universe, one can test the parameters and limitations of one's own reality, without consequence. This is imperative to my research as it justifies the call for speculative fiction to

function as a vehicle on which to 'test' the consequences of queerness in alternate realities. This 'test' can be conducted in order to assess which realm may be perceived as the most tolerant.

Science fiction, a genre within speculative fiction, also "notoriously reflects contemporary realities back to us through the lens of a particular type of imagination" as "what we know today may be entirely different tomorrow" (Pearson, Hollinger & Gordon, 2008: 3). In this way, Pearson, Hollinger and Gordon are echoing Bogdan Trocha's observation that imagined universes are in fact created from a combination of our current and future realities. This creation is achieved by recognising how science fiction uses what is familiar and 'real' to us and reimagines them forward. How we define science fiction and speculative fiction in relation to one another is a topic of frequent debate. The genre of speculative fiction is a bit broader. Science fiction explores future scenarios based on technology and science. Speculative fiction also comprises horror and fantasy, and other tales that feature the supernatural. However, in actuality, there is a lot of overlap between the two. In consideration of the above, I refer to the broader term speculative fiction throughout the course of this dissertation so as not to limit the chosen texts or the criteria of their alternate realities.

Stephanie Springgay and Sarah E. Truman, quoting Elizabeth Freeman, note that "chronological or progressive time is linear and equated with humanist notions of freedom, rationality, peace, equality and prosperity" and this, consequently, "renders Black, queer, disabled and Indigenous subjects as 'out of time'" (2019: 1). Furthermore, this ensures that "capitalism, whiteness, heteronormativity and nationalism rely on progressive time and the ongoing erasure of queer, trans, Black, Indigenous, People of Color, and [disabled] subjects" (Springgay & Truman, 2019: 2). Thus, while speculative fiction focuses on the progression of humanity and what is believed to come, the 'progress' depicted often erases the latter. The other threatens these temporalities as there is the implication that such marginalised groups cannot exist within certain temporalities. Yet, African speculative fiction has proven otherwise.

There is no set temporality that speculative fiction engages with. As stated, the genre often challenges the boundaries of time and manipulates it as necessary. What is experienced in speculative narratives is usually one of the following: cyclical time, linear time, or a complete break from the progression of time as we are familiar with it. The provided narrative is influenced by the genre's relationship to time. When employing cyclical time, speculative

narratives are illustrating the notion that 'history repeats itself' and that a cycle is inevitable. Similarly, when employing linear time, authors are prophesying about the future of events, should we continue on the same path, as well as warning the reader that we cannot go back in time. However, the use of progressive time implies a complete divergence from the path of time. This results in an envisioned world where the changes depicted cannot happen if the world continues making use of a linear development of time. This engagement and manipulation of time allows for a variety of potential fictional realities.

The genre has given writers and readers a privileged and typically comfortable place from which to explore alternative realities and, frequently, the suggested future. As a result, the privileged position from which it is possible to confidently predict the future, and decide what and who is labeled as the other, is called into question. Queerness, across the world, is thought to be largely influenced by culture as opposed to genetics or biology. What one grew up being surrounded by is what influenced one's sexuality, instead of – as we understand homosexuality and gender today – being born of a particular orientation. Not only is this statement an oftentimes harmful belief, but its premise is used to justify the notion that queerness is indeed unnatural and avoidable. Michel Foucault, a key thinker in this category, posited that queerness, what was considered before as inherent and biological, is instead that which is produced and influenced by culture and society. This assumes queerness to, again, fall in line with that which is 'unnatural' and 'unfamiliar' to everyday life, and instead a crafted product. As queerness is seen more as a byproduct of society as opposed to something natural, this is an argument that still exists today by those who oppose queerness. Adversaries of queerness, whether in the Global North or South, rely on the argument that queerness is 'taught' or passed down in order to deny its existence, as opposed to something that comes about as 'naturally' as heterosexuality. This argument also allows for the insistence that queerness can be avoided through a proper upbringing and education. In other words, close proximity to queerness will allegedly only promote more queerness, thus 'necessitating' the separation of 'us' and 'them'. The opposition to this erasure is based on the same premise that queerness is 'unnatural', despite the fact that conceptions of queerness may differ between the Global North and South.

In speculative universes, the other is that which is regarded as being outside of the established norm. Frequently, what is deemed 'abnormal' in a wholly fictional world mirrors what is disapproved of in the actual world. The genre promotes a division between 'us' and 'them', whether it is through the use of an alien, a supernatural being, or a human. The need for decentering the primary white, male focus of speculative fiction, however, becomes increasingly evident when one examines the historically dominant group responsible for fostering an 'us' versus 'them' perspective. Zuleyka Zevallos posits that the notion of otherness addresses how majority and minority groups are "constructed": the idea of the other forms part of a binary whereby there is an idea of 'us' versus 'them', and the relationship between these two is always "inherently unequal" (2011). Social identities therefore constitute a fixed and established social order, frequently characterised by a hierarchy. Our ability to develop a feeling of identity and social belonging is heavily reliant on our understanding of similarity and difference. Identities contain an element of exclusivity. These identities are often defined in relation to one another. Aidan Diamond and Lauranne Poharec posit there are four distinct categories within which the other lies, based on socio-historical notions: "the supernatural (the freak, the monster, the mad), the outcast (the homosexual, the racial other, the criminal), the medicalised other (the physically different and the disabled), and the post-human (the technologically enhanced person, or cyborg)" (2017: 402). In assessing these categories of the other, it can be deduced that that which is the self is that which is human, able-bodied, straight and – as whiteness has historically been prioritised as the default and every other race is considered its antithesis – white. Labels of the other aside, it is no secret that speculative fiction has historically prioritised a white, male authorship and audience. Thus, what is deductively perceived as the other in Western speculative fiction is that which is the other to white, cisgender males. The other is thus stigmatised by that self who has deemed it the other, and their differences are highlighted. Often, the other is that which is unknown and feared, and any trace of otherness ultimately brings forth consequences. This notion of othering arises from the fact that the culture in question at any given moment perceives the other as that which differs from its own norms. Thus, the other tends to look different in both African and Western speculative fiction respectively.

Saidiya V. Hartman, though out of context, aptly contextualises the need for whiteness to be decentered in speculative fiction; "only if I can see myself in that position can I understand the crisis of that position" (Wang, 2014). The idea of otherness found in speculative fiction is

predicated on the presumption that anything other is unusual and foreign, thus reinforcing this dichotomy. However, marginal figures offer alternate discourses on identity and power relations. They do so whilst having the capacity to radically destabilise conservative methods of performing identity.

As a genre that takes place in unrelated worlds to our own speculative fiction is "far more diverse, compelling, and politicized" than it has been given credit for (Schalk, 2018: 1). The genre includes components that are viewed as existing outside the realm of reality and are consequently understood as being outside the purview of the world. In a similar manner, queerness is also taken into consideration and has been defined in a similar way. Queerness and speculative fiction both undermine societal hierarchies and upend our expectations of what is safe and predictable. Both systems rely on an inquiring framework and encourage experimentation.

An early use of the term "queer theory" can be linked back to Teresa deLauretis in 1992 who queried whether "our theory could construct another discursive horizon, another way of living the racial and the sexual" (Lothian, 2018: 6). The emphasis is on "another way of living". This phrase that can be used to also assess the need for speculative fiction and its ability to consider realities outside of our own. Initially, American theorists established and developed the concept of queerness in the Western culture in contrast to the binary distinction between both the classifications of heterosexuality and homosexuality – this was later followed by their European contemporaries (Reuter, 2015). Queerness has been associated with the West; therefore it is natural that it would appear in Western literature. Despite this association, queerness is not unheard of in African fiction:

> African fiction has an interesting history with queer representation and erasure. While most of African fiction published in the twentieth century completely excluded queer identity and characters, the few that dared engage queer identity portrayed it as a taboo, a post-colonial residue that can only be assimilated by an over-westernized African who has long left their deep rich African roots

(Ilo, 2019).

According to Innocent Chizaram Ilo, in order to make the reader feel "patronising pity" for "this lost African soul," queer characters were vilified and deprived of any humanity (2019). Despite this, queerness is emerging in African speculative fiction; the confluence between the two is one that not only makes sense, but is also necessary and useful. African authors now frequently use fiction to restore humanity to queer individuals in heteronormative regimes, in order to provide expression and power to identities that have been repeatedly oppressed or purposefully erased. Again, Ilo aptly summarises the call for more inclusive fiction as he states that "[to] be erased in the present is one thing, but to be erased in the future has a dead tone of finality to it" (2019). Beyond representation, queerness in speculative fiction is crucial; "if everyone is queer, then no one is – and while this is exactly the point queer theorists want to make, reducing the term's pejorative sting by universalizing the meaning of *queer* also depletes its explanatory power" (Marcus, 2005: 196).

Queerness, as expressed in writing, is neither new nor radical as its existence can be traced back explicitly and with ease. The relationship between queerness and speculative fiction is fairly common, as both depend on a departure from what is expected and acceptable and what is imposed as the norm. The manner of representating queer narratives in speculative fiction becomes understandable as the premise of speculative fiction can be found explicitly in queerness. However, the demand for more inclusive envisioned futures surpasses simply wanting to see oneself reflected in literature. Ilo's appropriate summary of the need for queerness in literature, especially speculative fiction, is possibly more significant and goes beyond a cursory evaluation (2019):

> The future is neither being shaped by some mystical, invisible hand, nor are these biases coincidental. It is merely replicating how the society has treated (or treats) minority groups. Why should we care? Because literature (art) imitates life, and vice versa. How we chronicle the past, present, and future in fiction is important, especially if you belong to a group with a long history of being erased in fiction and in reality.

As representation is crucial, the necessity to prevent total erasure becomes more prominent, particularly considering the manner in which queerness is addressed in our present-day reality: a reality that is more akin to a dystopia. In order to prevent erasure, it is imperative to record oneself in literature. If queer existence is ignored in the present, it is likely not going to be

remembered in the future. Generally speaking, African queerness is not as openly celebrated, especially given the perception that queerness is un-African. Queer Africans are "often cast out as not truly being African or being too Westernized" (Opara, 2021). This precise wording supports the notion that queerness is a Western import. As such, Arnfred challenges the perceptions of sexuality in Africa as that which is the other. This other is "constructed to be not only different from European/Western sexualities and self, but also functions to co-construct that which is European/Western as modern, rational and civilized" (2004: 7). While simultaneously denying queerness, the West has positioned itself as the centre of queerness, with anything outside of the West being considered to be on the periphery. Thus, rather than being recognised as an independent entity, African queerness is only acknowledged in reference to its "counterpart", the West. It appears that the only way to comprehend it is as the West perceives it. Despite this, Kevin Mwachiro (2019) believes that the "volume is being turned down on the argument that homosexuality is 'unAfrican'", particularly as accounts show how queerness flourished in the Global South prior to any supposed Western influence:

Queerness and gender fluidity were long revered across the sprawling Asian continent, until, of course, European hegemonic influence swept them away, instating violent, exclusionary structures and creating the irrevocably colonial concept of a social margin. Today these margins persist, propagating violence against LGBTQ+ communities in countries recovering from colonization, while some queer populations make great strides in post-colonial Western Europe

(Melton, 2021).

One cannot deny the apparent prevalence of homosexuality in the West – yet its existence is paradoxical; "in Western history, queerness was unnamed, then in the margins, then in public consciousness, then in a fight for change, then crudely liberalised, and now, to some extent, part of the colonial narrative that seeks to impose a heterosexual norm" upon others (Whittaker, 2016). The West and "whiteness" did not "import queerness" as much "as it imported queerphobia as an act of sexual imperialism" (Whittaker, 2016). Olivia Opara notes that queerness was in fact celebrated in Africa before colonisation as it was supported by spiritual convictions that the majority of Africans had previously practiced (2021). Neither heterosexuality nor gender boundaries were enforced as the standard. However, now numerous African nations have made homosexuality illegal, with some even going so far as to make it a

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capital offense – thus, homophobia is pervasive, widespread, and growing (Opara, 2021). It is therefore evident that societal and cultural changes influence how queerness is perceived and accepted. However, what is common is the belief – held by those who oppose queerness – that it is not natural and that heterosexuality is the default setting to be remembered in the future. Unfortunately, these ideas are prevalent in Africa. African homophobia is rampant today; a bleak and unrecognisable representation of the continent as it once was. The notion that homosexuality is un-African, according to Opara, who quotes Sylvia Tamale, "is a myth rooted on an old habit of selectively citing African culture by people in power" (2021). As far as queerness in Africa is concerned, in many respects, we already inhabit a hypothetical future where utopias and dystopias easily materialise and previously unimaginable realms are more accessible than we had previously thought. Alexis Lothian further argues this notion (2018 :1-2):

> The twentieth century's technological utopias play out, at least for the rich world, in continual wireless connectivity and media availability. Dystopian predictions are more convincingly reinforced by the sudden yet repetitive events of catastrophic climate change and the grinding horrors of global racialized inequality under a capitalism whose worst elements seem to be heightened by its apparently imminent but never (yet) actual collapse. The end of the world as we know it is overdetermined, continually imminent.

Particularly for the queer body, what is considered a society on the brink of collapse is not as catastrophic as one may imagine, but rather a mere example of intolerance towards queerness. As the Vatican announces that homosexuality is considered "objectively disordered" and that lesbian women should be viewed as "anti-human" (Pearson, Hollinger & Gordon, 2008: 1), the link to a genre that is – perhaps less derogatorily described – viewed in the same capacity becomes increasingly obvious. Although Pearson, Hollinger and Gordon speak about the representation of queerness in science fiction, as the genre is a subgenre of speculative fiction, the analysis still applies: speculative fiction "notoriously reflects contemporary realities back to us through the lens of a particular type of imagination" (2008: 3). Both sexuality and speculative fiction rely on a system of inquiry and an effort to determine how the two, both separately and together, challenge what we perceive to be the 'norm'. But there are more parallels between the two than just that. Temporality is an equally integral component of speculative fiction whereby timelines are manipulated in order to hypothesise a past or future that has not existed or, perhaps, cannot exist. Additionally significant, time is a fundamental

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precondition for queerness; alternative perspectives on history, as well as how we create and occupy it, are necessary to comprehend queerness. Speculative fiction functions similarly and perhaps even in exactly the same way. When, according to an interpretation of queer theory, its major goal is to envision a society in which all lives are livable, it is speculative in the sense that it envisions a future where possibilities are expanded rather than constrained. Queerness, that which was once originally a pejorative slur used to oppress and further alienate those already marginalised, is now – in most cases – a term used with pride to express one's identity that does not fit into heterosexual norms and conventions. Queerness, the slur-turned-reclamation, is – perhaps with a bitter irony – also connoted with terms such as 'unfamiliarity' and 'unconventional'. With such unfavourable connotations from the start, it is understandable why queerness—in this case, that which has strayed from heterosexuality—is in fact regarded as foreign and deviant. This view is typically held as the dominant identity in the world is still straight and cisgender. That which is considered queer is that which is neither straight nor cisgender. Although there is an apparently universally unfavorable perception of queerness, there are slight differences – due to factors such as location, culture and religion – that influence perceptions of queerness in terms of how it is celebrated or, at the very least, accepted.

Although speculative fiction has a long history in non-Western cultures, the term's current usage first appeared in Western literary criticism. Speculative fiction encompasses literary forms from indigenous, non-Western, and Western literatures, particularly those that are told from the perspective of a disadvantaged group or from an unorthodox perspective. It enables us to conceive something different, such as an alternate reality or future in which the present has altered or vanished and the impossible – such as the ability to live on the moon or communicate with deities – has suddenly become possible. For those who are marginalised, this may entail visualising a time or place that is free from oppression or where relationships between groups that are now powerful and those who are inferior are altered or improved (Schalk, 2018: 2). Speculative fiction gives writers the ability to alter the laws of reality; frequently, this creates a subsequent safe environment for queerness. It demonstrates a universal reaction of the human creative imagination in all of these ways as it strives to envision a potential future amid a substantial transition from local to global humanity.

There is the perception that queerness is a Western import, yet there are variances in queerness in the Global North between White and Black perceptions on queerness as well as distinctions between Western and African queerness. All queerness is not treated equally in society, as White queerness is treated more favourably than Black queerness; what emerges in this dissertation is the understanding that race, sexuality and gender are inextricably intertwined, and that a proximity to whiteness grants queer individuals access to a "kinder" world. Despite the presence of both White and Black queerness in the West, mainstream queer narratives in the Global North prioritise whiteness and push Black queerness to the periphery, often excluding or diminishing the experiences of Black queer people. Instead, what is observed is a worldwide consensus in the rejection of queerness—a common idea that spans across cultures—rather than a universal experience in the celebration of queerness.

Josiah Thomason notes one of the stark differences between White and Black queerness, highlighting how race plays a vital role: "QT+BIPOC fight battles on numerous fronts that our white counterparts don't commonly have to face, including racial fetishizing, racism and xenophobia alongside trauma that comes with being queer (i.e. violence, religious, social and political rejection, and shame)" (2020). Despite the fact that both White and Black queerness are common in the West, the former is frequently allowed with greater freedom because race serves as a 'redeeming' component; even though queerness is still rejected, it is 'redeemed' by its proximity to whiteness: "Queer and trans BIPOC are unable to feel the same sense of acceptance due to colonial social constructs that still exist and thrive in the present" (Thomason, 2020). The intersection between race and sexuality is particularly obvious in the West: "Colonialism has caused queerness, *if it is 'permitted'*, to be something that has a white identity that stems from a racial superiority complex" (Thomason, 2020 – emphasis own). This notion is further confirmed when Pearson, Hollinger and Gordon state that "sexuality never exists as a discrete category, but is always inflected by class, gender, race, religion, and nationality" (2008: 2). This racial superiority presents itself ironically as, although the West does not fully accept queerness, it still claims ownership: "Once, the colonial sexual ethic rejected queerness and transness as backwards, primitive and perverse. […] Now that white sexual ethics have accommodated a small and normative part of queerness, it returns on its misdirected moral conquest to suggest that it invented queerness" (Whittaker, 2016).

Despite a universal rejection of queerness – universal insofar as it is not location-specific – White queerness is more readily accepted than Black queerness, as the intersection between queerness and race invites further oppression and discrimination: "queer theory suggests that all

bodies and psyches are offered intelligibility through their relationship to a particular set of norms, ones that privilege the idealised white, heterosexual, middle-class, young, normatively sized and abled body" (Riggs & Treharne, 2017: 102). In this manner, "whilst queer theory is typically focused on those who are most marginalised by the norms described above, it does not operate from the principle that other groups of people are always already within the norm. Rather, it demonstrates how approximation to a norm is always an approximation, and one that is always at risk of 'failure'" (Riggs & Treharne, 2017: 103). Thus, the discordance between whiteness and queerness invites further discrimination, as Black queerness – whilst already outside the 'norm' insofar as queerness is concerned – is thus further removed from what is 'standard' due to its lack of proximity to whiteness.

One of the major tenets of speculative fiction has always been the investigation of otherness. It may be argued that the very nature of speculative fiction, which makes it stand in opposition to reality (or, at least, realist fiction), is founded on otherness. However, the manner in which African and Western speculative fiction, respectively, navigate the other differs vastly, which brings forth the notion that what is considered the other is influenced largely by location and culture. Sociological assessments of the formation of majority and minority identities place a significant emphasis on the idea of otherness (Dervin, 2016). This is conducted so that groups with greater political influence can determine how different groups are portrayed in a particular society. Therefore, it makes sense to infer that the idea of otherness differs across Western and African literature given the differences between each region's most powerful political force. That which is the other will differ from from one person's perspective to another as it is not a universal figure (Dervin, 2015). Moreover, the treatment of time differs in Western and African speculative literature. There is a clear necessity to modify time for speculative fiction to be in contrast to reality. Their differing perceptions of otherness are ultimately influenced by this.

When there is already an imbalance in power between the West and African – with Africa being deemed inferior – then the latter, usually named the other, will present othernessdifferently in relation to Western speculative fiction. Often, that which is othered in African speculative fiction is a socio-political comment on that which is othered in society, as opposed to a predisposition for depicting aliens and creatures as the other. Herein lies one of the main distinctions between African and Western speculative fiction, respectively. Where the former is concerned, the other, here, is more often than not, human. This is particularly true, as in Western speculative fiction where "othering fiction is usually done by an action that allows some sort of mutation, possession, or zombification" (Da Silva, 2019). These types of figures have been repeated

throughout present-day speculative fiction, as Marco Fraga Da Silva continues, "the most pervasive monstrous figure in the XXI century is the zombie after being repeatedly used in the XX century. This undead, mindless, homeless, ever-hungry, and ugly creature is the perfect metaphor for the contemporary alienation, anxiety, consumerism, and disenfranchisement in Western nations" (2019). Thus, it is evident that Western speculative fiction frequently relies on the image of a literal monster, often as an allegory for present conditions in society. Whereas in African speculative fiction, a genre which already is distinguished from Western speculative fiction as its own sort of other, that which the West has deemed different is what is actually native to Africa. Thus, the other in African speculative fiction frequently redefines otherness by decentering the West's version of the other and often representing that, instead, as the self – thus, in redefining power dynamics, narratives are often from the other's point of view. The other, in this instance of this dissertation, is African queerness.

It has already been established that speculative fiction – whether it is Western or African – produces alternative worlds and realities that manipulate and challenge our known boundaries of time. Though not exactly a literary term, time is essential to writing. It must be emphasised again that that "chronological or progressive time is linear and equated with humanist notions of freedom, rationality, peace, equality and prosperity" and this, consequently, "renders Black, queer, disabled and Indigenous subjects as 'out of time'"(Springgay & Truman, 2019: 1). Thus, the distinction between African and Western speculative fiction makes itself more apparent. In speaking of time and temporality in Africa, Johan Cilliers states the following; "historically speaking, many Christian traditions have been influenced in their liturgy and preaching by Western understandings of time, i.e. as a linear progression from past, to present, to future. Africans do have a strong sense, not only of the past, but also of the future – in contrast to what some scholars would advocate. But African notions of time also harbour a particular understanding of the present, as the experience of social events" (2018: 113). Thus, it is evident that there is a clear distinction between Western time and African time, whereby the former attempts to emphasise and influence their notions of time upon the latter. The main distinction lies in the West's view of time as linear insofar as time is marked by events and progress. And yet, despite Africa having a strong sense of the past and future, it does not follow the same trajectory of time, and this is also illustrated through its speculative fiction, particularly where the other is concerned. There is also nostalgia for the past, which is fueled in large part by

colonialism and the awareness that it once held knowledge that has since been lost. Therefore, although one can agree that speculative fiction is a genre that seeks to depict the progression of humanity or, at least, what is to come, this notion of 'progress' that is depicted often erases the latter. This is due to the fact that the other threatens these temporalities as there is the implication that such marginalised groups cannot exist within certain temporalities, and yet, African speculative fiction has proven otherwise. Herein lies the fundamental distinction between otherness and temporality in African versus Western speculative fiction. Imagined universes in speculative fiction are indeed fashioned from an amalgamation of our own reality and a reality that does not yet exist. Thus, the realities depicted in African speculative fiction differ vastly from those illustrated in Western speculative fiction.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

I contend that the short story is the ideal vehicle on which to engage with queerness, as both share similar properties in how they disrupt conventional norms. Short stories have been said to be considered 'heterosexual' as heterosexuality is that which "remains familiar, the proximate given" (Murry, 2020: 78). And yet, Axel Nissen proposes that there "something queer" about the short story as a genre as it, much like homosexuality, is that which requires a solution to a problem and seeks defining (2004: 181). The short story, Nissen continues, can be considered the "fictional other" in the world of "prose narratives" (2004: 181). As short stories and queerness seemingly have similarities such as a shared experience of the other, it becomes obvious to assume that this compressed manner of engaging with controversial topics is ideal to navigate the otherness of queerness. If the short story "lends itself to trying out ideas" (Munro, 2017: 189), assessing the parameters of queerness in a speculative world would be at home in this genre.

A further intersection exists with African speculative fiction that engages with queerness as Bibi Burger, quoting Fred Nabatunyi, states: "T]he very concept of African sci-fi is queer, because it destabilises the popular conceptions of African literature as realistic African novels. To claim that traditional African literature is sci-fi, then, is to claim a queer heritage for contemporary African sci-fi" (2020: 2). There is an obvious connection between queerness, speculative fiction, short stories, and Africa. It is for this reason that the texts to be examined in this dissertation are exclusively written by African speculative authors. The authors of the selected texts are either African inhabitants or are of the African diaspora. This distinction ensures a specific focus on

African speculative fiction and its relation to nationalism, race and queerness in an African context, as opposed to an African-American context. Ultimately, the goal is to provide a new interpretation of what it means to be queer in an African speculative fiction universe. My aim is to analyse the intersection between race and sexuality, and assessing how those two function within the speculative fiction genre. The chosen short stories are not as widely known as other published stories and novels in the queer African speculative fiction genre, and close to no research has been conducted on these stories. While theories examined in my research are widely explored, these primary texts are not. However, there are online magazines and anthologies which have created space for these texts through platforms dedicated specifically to either African speculative fiction or queer African literature. These anthologies and magazines are becoming increasingly popular and well-known, thus allowing these stories to address the previously exclusive nature of speculative fiction.

Each chapter depicts a different version of a speculative future to assess how queerness is navigated under different conditions. Chapter 1 aims to assess stories where queerness is ordinary and welcomed in a seemingly utopian future. Darko Suvin's definition of utopia denotes the concept as "the verbal construction of a particular quasi-human community where sociopolitical institutions, norms and individual relationships are organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author's community, this construction being based on estrangement arising out of an alternative historical hypothesis" (Bennett, 1979: 118). This "historical alternative" becomes the ideal vehicle upon which to test the parameters of queerness to assess its potential consequences. The utopian genre, as a subset of speculative fiction, concerns itself "realistically with the future" (Moylan, 2014: 35). It reconfigures and removes the present in favour of the future, the only location where there is still some hope for a better existence for all of humanity (Moylan, 2014: 35). As such, "scientific, technological, and social conditions" are extended to "their most extreme point while convincing the reader that everything which occurs in the fantasy world is feasible" (Moylan, 2014: 33). In this manner, both "What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky" by Lesley Nneka Arimah and "Njuzu" by Tendai Huchu satisfy this concept of a utopian universe – science is shown to be extended to "the most extreme point" while the acceptance of homosexuality, as depicted, implies "hope for a better life".

As I show, Lesley Nneka Arimah introduces a narrative where there are seemingly no consequences for queer characters. The queer character involved is also not depicted as alien; thus implying the possibility of a future where humans themselves become accepting of homosexuality without the need for the introduction of an alien to facilitate acceptance of what is not considered "normal". "What It Means When a Man Falls From the Sky" is the single speculative fiction story in Lesley Nneka Arimah's eponymous short story collection which postulates that developments in Mathematics have made it possible for Mathematicians to treat others for these unfavorable feelings as well as recognise grief in a person and what produced that pain. The rational treatment of emotions that results from the mathematical formulaic approach to people suggests that it is impossible to discriminate in this respect as homophobia would be regarded as irrational. Similarly, "Njuzu" presents a realm where scientific advancements have allowed for community on other planets in space. As the narrator and her partner, Tarisai, do not encounter homophobia, there is clearly acceptance of same-sex relationships in this post-Earth narrative where the protagonists reside in HUTS (Hurungwe Utility Terra Shelters) on the planet Ceres. Despite the similar subject of mourning in both stories, both narratives portray utopias with the implication that considerable technological improvements translate into a more "advanced" acceptance of queerness. However, the rights to freedom are not universal, and heteronormativity is pervasive both in our reality and the realities of the stories mentioned, thus a utopia cannot be considered universally true. In a society where intolerance and injustice is standardised, the possibility of an inclusive utopia is not feasible, as shown in Chapter 1.

As a result, Chapter 2 commences with the knowledge that, given the prevalence of dystopias over utopias, there may never be acceptance or even tolerance of queerness. Speculative fiction has a tendency to predict potential futures for humanity utilising both imagination and knowledge of our own current reality. The selected stories – "Two Weddings for Amoit" by Dilman Dila, "Debut" by Wole Talabi and "Female Computer Wanted, Apply Within" by Innocent Chizaram Ilo – serve as reminder of what exists currently, as well as what is to come. This chapter examines African speculative tales set in a dystopian world, where queerness is not tolerated. Talabi's short story "Debut" was commissioned by ROSL (Royal Over-Seas League) after winning the ROSL Readers' Award at the 2018 Caine Prize for African Writing. The short story features a Kenyan computer engineer named Ng'endo, whose successful career suffers as a

result of the revelation of her sexual orientation. The short story focuses on Ng'endo's skills and the value she brings to the workplace, while subtly highlighting how queer people still face systematic persecution in the workplace, especially when the government has ruled that homosexuality is outlawed.

Homosexuality is again shown to be outlawed in "Two Weddings for Amoit", a short story written by Ugandan author, filmmaker and social activist, Dilman Dila. The story follows the account of two lesbian lovers, Amoit and Aceng, who are living in a Christian society in East Africa which is subjugated by homophobia and controlled by technology. Here, the 'Christian Utopia' is revealed for what it is, which is a civilisation based on deceit that employs fake morals to rule its citizens. As such, the illusion of a utopia is present, until one looks through the lens of queerness. Lastly, although homosexuality is not necessarily outlawed in Innocent Chizaram Ilo's "Female Computer Wanted, Apply Within", homosexuality is depicted between robots instead of humans. The story follows a lesbian robot couple, Dell and Yasmine, as Dell responds to an advertisement which is broadcast on the "Robo Support WhatsApp Group" (Ilo, 2019). The advertisement appears to be for administrative duties, but the interview soon reveals that the owner of the Chybuz Cyber Café is seeking a sex robot rather than a secretary. Hence, this chapter explores the point at which the seemingly universal utopian society overrule the undeniably dystopian reality of others. Usually, the more universal the benefits system, the more idealistic the society (Claeys, 2017: 8). In hypothesising a future where queerness is rejected, the aforementioned authors have mirrored the current reality for many queer people.

These three stories suggest a world where humanity appears to have advanced through their portrayals of a more technologically sophisticated future, much like the worlds depicted in Chapter 1. Still, there are restrictive attitudes against queerness. This mirrors present-day attitudes towards queerness, and indicates that a tolerant future may not be plausible. Although these stories have speculative fiction settings there are still negative consequences of homosexuality. In understanding this, by definition, the outlawing of homosexuality may not be considered a form of dystopia – what is dystopian to the queer body is, in fact, utopian to most. However, as this research is conducted through the lens of queerness, the principle of dystopia applies.

The final chapter, Chapter 3, aims to examine the connection between queerness, mythology and African speculative fiction. According to William Bascom, myths are known prose narratives that are regarded as true stories in the society in which they are presented and feature characters that are often not human but frequently exhibit human traits (1965:4).

Ayodele Olofintuade draws explicitly from mythology, specifically mythology regarding water spirits, in her speculative fiction story, "The Woman with 1000 Stars in Her Hair". Keletso Mopai is inspired by the Rain Queens – supernatural beings who have the ability to control the weather. "The Woman with a Thousand Stars in Her Hair" features a queer female couple, as it follows the story of Olokun and Ara, who both appear to be water creatures, likened to "Mammy Wata" (Olofintuade, 2017: 8). Olofintuade's protagonist Ara is not reduced to her sexuality, but it is evident that she is not accepted by people: "This girl is not human. She has evil in her heart" (Olofintuade, 2017: 6). However, it is Ara's being that is not accepted; her queerness is not rejected. The acceptance of the myth of Mammy Wata automatically entails the acceptance of homosexuality due to the employment of respected creatures whose natures already challenge gender and sexuality standards. The portrayal of Ara and Olokun speaks to queerness as this narrative does not have a predetermined heteronormative representation of love.

Lastly, although homosexuality is a concern in Mopai's story, as the text features a protagonist who is ostracised for her homosexuality, this queerness is accepted after the realisation that she is a supernatural being. Keletso Mopai's short story "Becoming a God", which was inspired by the history of the Rain Queens, comes from her debut collection of stories titled *If You Keep Digging*. "Becoming a God" follows the story of a reimagined present-day South Africa where supernatural beings can manipulate the weather. The main character, Mmadjadji is deemed evil until it is discovered that she is a God. This chapter explores how the text navigates both the rejection and acceptance of queerness based on Mmadjadji's being. Both tales appear to explore queerness through the use of mythological or supernatural characters; the requirement for a supernatural entity to introduce and finally accept queerness suggests that queerness is still seen negatively in society.

Although each chapter, with its respective stories, presents a different realm or engagement with queerness, what is seen across every short story is that queerness will not be accepted under present-day conditions. In a queer dystopia, it is anticipated that being queer will be rejected;

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however, in what may be considered a queer 'utopia' and even in mythological realms, there appears to be the illusion of hope. A closer look, however, reveals that a queer 'utopia' necessitates either a radical departure from the way society is now, or scientific developments that are not anticipated to occur very soon. An acceptance of queerness is therefore not likely to happen very soon. When a mythical or supernatural entity is employed as a barrier to encourage humans embrace or even acknowledge queerness, only then does queerness appear to be tolerated. However, the alien's presence is an obligatory factor, because homosexuality may not be tolerated in humans. Thus, it may be concluded that acceptance of queerness is neither possible now nor in the near future when considering queerness in reality and its distant connection to mythological beings. Therefore, across different timelines and geographicalsettings, there is no ideal world on which queerness can freely exist. Although these short stories are fictional, they all reach the same inescapable conclusion – queerness will exist in other worlds just as it does in the here and now: with repercussions.

Chapter One

<u>'No Place' Like Home: Prospects of a Queer Utopia</u>

"A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not even worth glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which humanity is always landing"

– Oscar Wilde

"Utopia is that which is in contradiction with reality"

– Albert Camus

"And, of course, 'Utopia' in its first acceptation is '*ou-topos'* or 'no place'."

-   David Solway

The notion of utopias has drawn a lot of attention, and rightfully so: they convey a belief in people's capacity for moral and creative behaviour in response to the environments they construct. Given that the media is saturated with "real world" dystopias as a result of the problems we face in our world today, an avenue for visions of a better future remains necessary. Yet, because utopias design their idealised futures in response to the horrors of the present, it is easier to understand how these imaginings are seen as seemingly unattainable and far out of our reach. Utopias typically rely on the aspects of the present that we acknowledge as either needing improvement or that do not function well. Using this as a foundation, these imagined societies illustrate an improved version of life and, perhaps encouragingly, they serve as a reminder of the potential of humankind; the potential, in this case, focuses on the positive outcomes of our world. However, as the present is almost exclusively conceived through the parameters of straight time, queer utopias cannot exist in the present or within this realm of reality. Queer time is bent and unbound; it cannot be constrained. Therefore, "Utopia lets us imagine a space outside of heteronormativity. It permits us to conceptualize new worlds and realities that are not irrevocably

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constrained by […] institutionalized state homophobia" (Muñoz, 2009: 35). Automatically, one can already see that queerness and utopias share similar ideals. Fundamentally, being queer is about insisting on potentiality or real possibility for another world while rejecting the here and now. Similar to how one rejects the present and envisions new possibilities, utopias do the same. In order to conceptualise these new realms, some utopias abandon the present, as evidenced by the stories presented in this chapter: "What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky" by Lesley Nneka Arimah and "Njuzu" by Tendai Huchu. Dreaming of a utopia reminds us that there is something missing in the present; in these instances, it is the acceptance of queerness that is not present, as "heteronormative culture makes queers think that both the past and the future do not belong to them" (Muñoz , 2009: 112). Any real endeavour to create a utopia would inevitably involve rebellion as it as it becomes essential to discard the traditional values and beliefs that are ingrained in us. Many utopian texts turned their emphasis away from hoping for a better society or from the release of certain human impulses and toward the prospect of change itself—the idea that things may, in some way, someday be different. Utopianism hence tends to become extremely abstract and devoid of meaning. Depending on their tyranny and limitations on earth, different people's conceptions of a heaven or utopia will differ. Conflict and scarcity are absent in a utopian society. In order for society to genuinely advance, it is vital to adopt a practice of queer utopia because conventional concepts of utopia naively idealise the past and strive to establish a sociopolitical system based on the maintenance and rehabilitation of a glorified past. These aforementioned stories illustrate a world that seems tangible enough in relation to the present, but scramble our timeline in order to imagine a future where queerness is tolerated and even accepted. The conclusion then becomes that for queerness to no longer have any consequences, a complete breakaway from our reality, which alters the trajectory of our temporality, is necessary. In short, a society where queerness is acknowledged is not projected to be conceivable until there is a departure from reality. It appears logical that queer theory and utopian thought would be compatible given their shared interest in overturning established norms, virtues, and institutions.

Although there is uncertainty about the specifics of what a utopia should entail, conversations and literature about utopias frequently emphasise principles such as freedom, security, equality, and enlightened thought. However, as has been argued, despite many believing utopia refers to a "perfect society", it instead means "nowhere" (Atwood, 2005: 93). Unfortunately, the

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implication is that a utopia, while an envisioning of a future that is better than the present, is unlikely to exist anywhere "outside a book" (Atwood, 2005: 93). The prevalence of dystopian futures is far more common, as reality often provides sufficient material to imagine them, given the rising concerns of global wars and pandemics. Hence, turning to utopias become a place of respite, as they offer hope in a dark world, no matter how intangible or fictional that solution may be. The purpose of utopian literature has evolved from that of societal criticism to that of a force for social reform whereby utopias aim to alter marginalised groups' social and political positions rather than simply criticising them. Utopias were made as a way to provide the social reformation that was not currently being experienced, rather than denouncing what is wrong with the society as it is presently. Utopianism envisions a future where everyone's needs are addressed and social injustices are eradicated. Utopian literature thus identifies aspects of the existing world that could be improved, and then imagines alternate worlds that mirror those improvements. Additionally, unlike their dystopian counterparts, they serve as a reminder of humankind's capacity for good. The need for utopian fiction is particularly vital for social reformation when one considers queerness, in the present. Margaret Atwood notes that utopias are "communities of spirit, in which there cannot be any real disagreements among members because all are of like and right mind" (2005: 94). The idea that utopianism imagines a future where everyone's needs are met, and social reformation has taken place, is further supported by the idea that utopias are close-knit communities where there can never be any actual conflict in those societies because everyone shares common values. As such, the implication of the premise of utopias is that they are tales in which humanity functions in perfect harmony. Utopias embody some of humanity's most valued ideals. The suffering that is typically experienced in everyday life is something that utopian worlds want to eradicate or at least mitigate. Similarly, the opportunity for a more complete reinvention of society exists within queer theory. It might seem logical that queer theory and utopian thought would be comparable given their shared interest in overturning established ideologies and systems – thus, both utopianism and queer theory aim to challenge what currently is, and envision what could be. Common to both utopianism and queerness is a means of critically engaging with the established social world. The similarities between the two extends into their respective perceptions of time. As straight time is linear, it is extremely inflexible when evaluating how the future will turn out. The connection between the two is explicit since utopias demand a separation from reality and queerness evidently does not

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obey the requirements of straight time. By extension, the implication is that utopias are an ideal vessel in which to explore queerness, as the consequences of queerness in the present, like social discrimination and prejudice, are erased. Typically, "[the] more universal the system of benefits, the more utopian the society" (Claeys, 2017: 8). In understanding this, a society which caters to gender and sexuality with more consideration than the present is, by definition, towards the path of becoming utopian.

While many factors, such as the absence of sickness and poverty, world peace, and environmental stability, imply utopias, my attention is on the absence of prejudice and discrimination that utopias possess, especially in the context of the stories in this chapter. As explored in Chapter 2, the extreme consequences of current homophobia is explored in some dystopian speculative fiction. Yet, in contrast, utopian narratives eradicate these consequences and present a world that relies on a foundation of tolerance, thus already conjuring up images of a 'perfect place' – and, unfortunately, a 'nowhere' or 'no place' – for the queer body. There is, thus, 'no place like home' for the other in the short stories presented. Utopias can be used to rethink gender and sexuality in this context, free from the historical expectations and prejudices that have shaped them. However, the notion of a world free from discrimination is, for many, a work of fiction – yet, despite this seemingly unattainable reality, the idea of a tolerant utopia is a place of respite for many. However, there are examples of 'queer utopias' that exist today, where the notion of a community that coexists peacefully does not appear to be a mere fantasy. As stated by Keith J Fernandez (2023):

> As the first country to legalize same-sex marriage in 2001, the Netherlands has an emotional connection with LGBT+ people […] The Dutch capital, often dubbed the gayway to Europe, has a vibrant LGBT+ culture and caters to all […] Spain is one of the most culturally liberal places for gay people. Same-sex marriage in Spain has been legal since 2005 […] Malta is one of just a handful of countries whose constitution prohibits discrimination on grounds of both sexual orientation and gender identity, including in the workplace. Same-sex marriage has been legal since 2017 and there are no minimum residency requirements […] With Taiwan becoming the first country in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage in early 2019, LGBT+ interest in the island has skyrocketed.

And yet, what appears to be a movement towards what can be labeled as utopian spaces for the queer body is not always as tolerant in practice. While law dictates actions, it cannot alter beliefs. Additionally, while it is tempting to focus on the 'progressive' nature of the aforementioned countries, what cannot be ignored are their geographic locations. Utopian legislation of this kind

is, for the most part, not available in the African context. Hence, African speculative literature presents a singular opportunity to investigate and assess the sociopolitical relevance of envisioned African futures. Even though interest in African speculative fiction has increased, the stigma of marginality persists, especially with regard to queerness. Nevertheless, although these utopias are out of reach, they are "meant to be pursued" as they "represent an ideal toward which the mundane world must reach" (Rothstein, Muschamp & Marty, 2003: 3). Utopias can also serve as a prospective illustration of what the world might become instead of being limited to a mythical and hypothetical idea of what the world ought to have been.

Andrew Milner argues that the reason for our fascination with dystopian speculative fiction is that "utopia is fundamentally boring, since nothing much can happen in a place where nothing much is wrong" (2012). Yet, to consider a world that is boring due to a lack of 'chaos' is to be viewing reality through the lens of privilege, as what is 'fundamentally boring' to the majority is in fact what is seemingly unattainable for many. However, one must first contemplate the feasibility of such a 'monotonous' society before determining how dull a world without conflict may be. For a progressive temporality to be feasible, what is necessary is that the trajectory of the time we experience would need to be altered completely:

> Utopia stands outside of history. It is the city on the hill, society's dream image. But it can be reached only by breaking the continuity of history. Any attempt to really create a utopia is necessarily revolutionary. The manners, morals, and convictions of the past have to be cast aside
>
> (Rothstein, Muschamp & Marty, 2003: 8).

The pursuit of a flawless society has resulted in some of the worst human rights abuses in recorded history, and many real and imagined dystopias were created by those who believed they were establishing the ideal society. Edward Rothstein, Herbert Muschamp and Martin Marty posit that a utopia is that which "stands outside of history" and can be attained only by "breaking the continuity of history" (2003: 8), thus utopias cannot be completely placed in the realm of historical reality, hence they can never be proven false by history. Through this perspective, it can be inferred that progressive time is that which is forged apart from the linear development of time as a sort of revolution to reject the past in order for the ideal of a perfect society to be realised. In order to effect the change necessary to accommodate a utopian society, a "radical

break" or an "evolutionary change" is required (Levitas, 1979: 27). Furthermore, Ruth Levitas reinforces this notion by arguing that for what is to be considered more utopian is that which is "[tied] […] less closely to reality" (1979: 19).

Although it is far removed from reality, this temporality is in fact ideal for allowing queerness to live without conflict. Interestingly, what denotes progressive time and its rejection of our timeline is the argument that José Esteban Muñoz makes of queerness as "not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on a potentially or concrete possibility for another world" (2009: 1). The framing and disciplining of time by heteronormativity, as well as the division of time into the past, present, and future, are resisted by queer temporality. Outside of what might be called the "normal" timeline of the world, queer time exists. Simultaneously, the demand for a clean break from progressive time causes it to disrupt the alleged "naturalness" of this timeline. A natural progression from the present cannot be used to create an ideal future. The idea of a better future is accompanied by the remembrance of the repercussions that necessitated the need for changes in utopia, which includes looking backwards in time, and also stepping outside of it.What is evident in "What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky" by Lesley Nneka Arimah and "Njuzu" by Tendai Huchu is the rejection of the present in order to reimagine a time where queerness is tolerated and even accepted. The distinction between realist and utopian literature is that the latter frequently takes place in a flawless world or state – thus, it may seem counterintuitive to introduce conflict into a utopian society, but as utopian authors show, if given enough time, people are adept at doing so. Utopia exists apart from history and it embodies the ideal society. However, it can only be attained by shattering the continuity of history. Although the idea of a utopia, especially a queer one, suggests a celebration and open acceptance of queerness, tolerance alone may also meet the requirements.

"What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky" is a speculative fiction story in Lesley Nneka Arimah's eponymous short story collection. Nneoma, the main character, is a Mathematician of emotion who specialises in assessing and relieving people of their emotional suffering. Mathematics have allowed for Mathematicians to not only recognise grief in a person and what has caused that grief, but to also be able to cure others of these undesirable emotions. Nneoma and Kioni, the now-ex lesbian lovers in the narrative, are largely accepted by society

and do not encounter any homophobia. Set in the late 21st century, the story features the location of the British-Biafran Alliance, a new nation in present-day South-Eastern Nigeria shared by Nigerians and the British after all of Europe has been flooded. The narrative focuses on Nneoma and her navigation through a period of time where Mathematicians have come under scrutiny due to others following their formulae. Through Nneoma's involvement with eliminating suffering in people and her own recent grief, Arimah introduces the theme of misery in a speculative and futuristic way throughout the novel. Nneoma's abilities are not necessarily magic, yet they are speculative in that these abilities are neither realistic nor likely to be a possibility. Arimah gives a plot, that may otherwise be realistic, a speculative twist. In doing so, Arimah is able to view key topics throughout the story through a fresh perspective and give her readers a method of comprehending challenging concepts like loss and poverty through speculative components. In the story, a formula that purports to explain the universe was discovered by a Mathematician by the name of Furcal, although there are doubts about its validity. People have been attempting and failing to put into practice the discovered formula for flying: "The motion-activated device had caught the last fifty feet of the man's fall, the windmill panic of flailing arms, the spread of his body on the ground. The newscast then jumped to the Mathematicians who had discovered the equation for flight" (Arimah, 2017). The story begins with a description of the eponymous man: "it means twenty-four hour news coverage. It means politicians doing damage control; activists egging on protests. It means Francisco Furcal's granddaughter at a press conference defending her family legacy" (Arimah, 2017). The formula, which was supposed to enable mankind to defy the laws of physics, has been unsuccessful, thereby answering the inferred question posed in the title.

The story is set in The Biafra-Britannia Alliance where Nneoma has moved to, back from "New Kenya" (Arimah, 2017). Here, Arimah purposefully conflates various African countries. While traveling, Nneoma shows that the setting of the story is not completely unfamiliar, despite the story being a work of speculative fiction: "she directed Amadi to go to the store first. They drove through the wide streets of Enugu and passed a playground full of sweaty egg-white children" (Arimah, 2017). The allusions to locations with names that have been subtly changed to suggest either a renewal or the outcome of a conflict reveal that the setting is still on earth, but that politics have been involved in the renaming of these places. Arimah has crafted a universe that is

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both comfortingly familiar for the reader, yet alarmingly dissimilar in many respects. This is accomplished through these references to well-known places, while also using new geographies as a means of subverting race and its power dynamics. For example, Nneoma's father, when speaking of the "egg-white" children he sees in the streets – the "Britons" – refers to them as "refugees" rather than "allies", complaining that "[they] come here with no country of their own and try to take over everything and don't contribute anything" (Arimah, 2017). In doing so, there are cultural subversions at work in Arimah's narrative: race dynamics are inverted, and the debate between logic and emotion serves as an example of how reasoning can, in fact, triumph over emotion.

The environment of the narrative is another example of a universe that is both comfortingly familiar and disturbingly foreign in many ways. The narrative depicts Europe's apparent recolonisation of Africa — a historical trauma whose aftereffects are still evident today. The short story's seeming trauma is partially caused by a climate catastrophe. Floods have caused difficult alliances between countries, creating the tension that explains the refugee/ally status of the "Britons":

> When the floods started swallowing the British Isles, they'd reached out to Biafra, a plea for help that was answered. Terms were drawn, equitable exchanges of services contracted. But while one hand reached out for help, the other wielded a knife. Once here, the Britons had insisted on their own lands and their own separate government. A compromise, aided by the British threat to deploy biological weapons, resulted in the Biafra-Britannia Alliance. Shared lands, shared governments, shared grievances. Her father had only been a boy when it happened, but held bitterly to the idea of Biafran independence, an independence his parents had died for in the late 2030s

(Arimah, 2017).

As "one hand reached out for help" and "the other wielded a knife", former colonial vestiges are easily seen. Despite the assistance provided by Biafra, racial animosity is still present, with racially-marked microaggressions influencing the day-to-day activities of the Biafrans; "the Britons preferred their service workers with names they could pronounce, and most companies obliged them. The tattoo on his wrist indicated his citizenship — an original Biafran — and his class, third" (Arimah, 2017). When the Britons, who are seeking asylum in Biafra, arrive, African names are modified and local rituals are given precedence in an effort to create identities that are more agreeable and comfortable for the Europeans. As much as race has been subverted

by the classification of Europeans as refugees in an African nation, Arimah reminds us that the legacy of the past still prevails; there is a persistent denigration of African names and cultures that reaffirms the 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy. Instead of challenging reality in this instance, Arimah is reiterating it by informing us of recent history and how it might affect current events. Additionally, along with the rejection of African names, Arimah illustrates how Nneoma "studied the boy and noted on his wrist his father's occupation (lawyer), his class (first)" (Arimah, 2017). Furthermore, she notes another student: "she didn't need to look at her wrist to know that the girl was Senegalese, and had been affected by the Elimination. It was etched all over her, this sorrow" (Arimah, 2017). People are seemingly branded and thus placed into class categories – a theme that is recurrent throughout the story. The Elimination refers to the aftermath of the ecological and political disasters that have taken place prior to the story's opening:

Most of what had been North America was covered in water and a sea had replaced Europe. Russia was a soaked grave. The only continents unclaimed in whole or in part by the sea were Australia and what was now the United Countries but had once been Africa. The Elimination began after a moment of relative peace, after the French had won the trust of their hosts. The Senegalese newspapers that issued warnings were dismissed as conspiracy rags, rabble-rousers inventing trouble. But then the camps, the raids, and the mysterious illness that wiped out millions

(Arimah, 2017).

When Nneoma notes the pain a young girl has endured during the Elimination, she sees "the sadness in her eyes and began to plot the results of it on an axis […] the girl's mother shredded by gunfire. Her brother taken in the night by a gang of thugs. Her father falling to the synthesized virus that attacked all the melanin in his skin till his body was an open sore. And other smaller hurts, hunger so deep she'd swallowed fistfuls of mud. Hiding from the men who'd turned on her after her father died" (Arimah, 2017). By charting the girl's melancholy along an axis, Arimah illustrates Nneoma's ability to encounter human emotions and demonstrates how they are graphed like an equation; subjective emotions are thus reduced to objective numbers. Nneoma is able to "[look] at every last suffering, [trace] the edges, [weigh] the mass" and "then she took it" (Arimah, 2017). The Mathematicians have the capacity to absorb another person's sorrow by bearing it themselves with the aid of the formula.

The setting and political climate of the society in which the novel is situated are indicative of a dystopia or, at the very least, a post-apocalyptic society still rebuilding from catastrophe and colonisation. However, this research's criteria for what constitutes a utopia do not depend on the aforementioned elements but rather on the views toward queerness that are depicted in the narrative. Given that the criteria used here is that which is deemed a place of respite for the queer body - regardless of locale and political situation - it can therefore be argued that "What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky" is indeed a utopia.

Through her reminiscence of her breakup with her girlfriend, Kioni, eight weeks prior, Nneoma's sexual orientation is casually mentioned in the story; "your girlfriend ends your relationship with the same polite coolness that she initiated it, leaving you to pack and relocate three years' worth of shit in one week" (Arimah, 2017). Despite claiming she "was over it, she really was," Kioni is mentioned repeatedly throughout the narrative, indicating that Nneoma is experiencing difficulties moving on from the breakup. For example, when Nneoma is greeted by Nkem Ozechi, her hands "reminded her of Kioni's" (Arimah, 2017). She is "embarrassed at her eagerness" when a message appears on her phone, and is thus "further embarrassed when it wasn't even Kioni, just her assistant reminding her of the lecture she was to give at the school" (Arimah, 2017). Although she is an individual with the ability to erase pain in those with, arguably, more traumatic experiences than heartbreak, Nneoma is unable to acknowledge and eradicate the negative emotions she experiences since her breakup. The story also presents an overall ambiguous interpretation of the thought experiment of a society where logic governs over emotion. It is intriguing that Nneoma does not have to confront the trauma of being queer in the world, as the narrative does not appear to condemn queerness. In a world of turning emotion into a science, it becomes evident that queer love and heartbreak are not different from heterosexual love and heartbreak. In addition, it is left unmentioned whether Nneoma's parents approved of Kioni or forbade her, or how the general public reacted to their relationship. Their relationship's implied normalcy alludes to a day in the future where homosexuality will be accepted without notice.

In this future, Mathematicians are considered celebrities, and the role this status plays in queer acceptance cannot be denied – much like race, individuals of a higher class or standing within society experience less persecution and discrimination than those less fortunate. Thus, has

Arimah's imagined society truly advanced itself to a point of absolute tolerance whereby queerness is not a factor that incites consequence, or has she simply depicted a future that is a true reflection of reality whereby marginalised groups are granted concessions based on class? However, Nneoma, amongst other Mathematicians, leads a privileged life based on her occupation, and it would be naïve to assume that her status does not allow her to navigate the world seemingly free from discrimination. As a result, I contend that this culture cannot be portrayed as progressive given the state of humanity in "What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky" and the recolonisation of Africa by Europe, and it is illogical to infer a tolerance for queerness where racism is prevalent. Instead, Arimah is illustrating the closest thing to a queer utopia that is largely owing to class and the benefits that come with it. However, it is not her status alone that affords her the privilege.

The complicated and impressive advancements in science, coupled with the acceptance of Nneoma's homosexuality imply that a future where queerness is accepted is possible when a formulaic understanding of humans is applied. When the subjective approach to people and their emotions is eliminated, and the reliance is upon Mathematics and Science, the implication is that there is the removal of what is an essentially subjective intolerance towards queerness, otherwise defined as prejudice.

The Mathematical formulaic approach to humans leads for rational approaches to emotions, thus implying that it is impossible to discriminate in this manner, as homophobia would be considered irrational. The story revolves around the conflict as a result of the war that has passed, and queerness – instead of dominating the narrative – has an organic role whereby it simply exists without consequence. And yet, one cannot deny the role that class plays in allowing this tolerance. The implication is that discrimination and fundamental human emotion are equivalent. If you belong to a community that has a long history of being marginalised in both fiction and reality, particular attention should be paid to how the past, present and future are documented. As a result, it appears that the only utopia is one in which queerness is disregarded. While the fact that there are no negative consequences for being queer is a step in the right direction, erasing queerness entirely does not equate to acceptance or celebration. Here, one sees how class privileges can mitigate systemic oppressions like homophobia, and how a denial of emotion infers an absence of discrimination.

More ideally, a queer utopia is one that disavows the oppressive elements of the past while validating others for inclusion in the idealised society. It does not totally see the past as an ideal that it hopes will materialise in the future. In spite of contemporary oppression, whether sociopolitical or otherwise, it provides sustainable lifestyles that can ensure the queer subject's development. The narrative appears to erase queerness whilst simultaneously allowing its representation. Tolerance may be a sufficient requirement, even though the concept of a queer utopia calls for open celebration and acceptance of queerness.

It is becoming increasingly evident that these utopian realms must separate themselves as much as possible from our current reality in order to create a utopian vision where queerness is more than tolerated. In essence, what frequently appears is a picture of a world so unlike our own that its acceptance of or even tolerance of queerness implies a full rejection of our world and reality. This particular iteration of utopia is different from its use in previous stories. As utopian fiction is set in an idealistic society, utopian novelists place their story in a setting that is consistent with their personal philosophy and larger ethos. Because of this, it is possible that these ideal worlds occasionally need to exist independently of Earth in order to support such beliefs.

An author who presents such a world is Tendai Huchu in "Njuzu", a story in which the familiarity of African culture is interwoven with the fantastic; while the story depicts a lesbian couple in space surrounded by futuristic technology, the belief that the main character's son, Anesu, has been held captive by a njuzu is the driving force of the story. Huchu incorporates aspects of Shona culture into his drastically altered future. Huchu combines both speculative fiction and African tradition – to thus further identify the story as *African* speculative fiction – as the narrator describes the décor of the "carbon fibre walls" of the characters' rooms: there is "Tonga artwork from [a] tourist market in Mosi-oa-Tunya" alongside "an abstract sculpture made of polished Cerean rock" and a "red Basotho blanket" (Huchu, 2019). The décor's fusion reinforces the African speculative fiction genre and conveys to the reader the distinct impression that indigenousness is not incongruous with technology or futurity. Yet, while this fusion reinforces the notion of Africa in space, the reference to "the tourist market in Mosi-oa-Tunya" grounds the story in reality and implies that earth itself is still intact and livable. This suggests that Huchu has crafted a story in which it is conceivable to live and work on a different planet, defying the constraints of space travel. However, there must be more than just

improvements in space travel and life for progressive time to meet its requirements and seem as a paradise. It is comforting that our world still exists and that this envisioned future did not deviate too far from reality, but for a utopia to exist, it would actually require us to abandon everything we know in order to achieve "perfection". It is clear from the casual way in which queerness is portrayed in "Njuzu", that there are no repercussions for being queer and that the characters are not subjected to discrimination as a result.

 "Njuzu" opens with descriptions of water that imply its foreign location. As the narrator states, "water looks the same everywhere. It's only the background, lighting, and impurities that differ" (Huchu, 2019). The use of the word "everywhere" hints, albeit subtly, at the foreign setting, yet one that is still familiar enough to forge a connection to the unchanging nature of the appearance of water. Huchu continues this description, introducing the reader to the first-person narrator and unnamed main character; "I peer at the silver-grey surface of Bimha's pond, calm and still, undisturbed by wind. It's deep and the bottom is a black abyss" (Huchu, 2019). The mystery of this dark body of water is revealed through the declaration that the characters within this story are in space. From the outset, after a hint that the water being described is not in an expected location, the reader is alerted to the fact – and thus given confirmation – that this story is not set on earth through the statement that "midday here is like dawn on Earth in the middle of the Kalahari" (Huchu, 2019). Here, Huchu combines an archetypal speculative fiction narrative with Shona mythology to produce a narrative that is set in space, on Ceres, but still influenced by this mythology. On this planet, the "atmosphere […] is not fit to breathe" (Huchu, 2019), which further reinforces – by virtue of its uninhabitable surroundings – that this setting is not earth, nor is it earthlike. Automatically, Huchu's story satisfies the criteria for a work of speculative fiction as these are "stories that take place in a setting contrary to known reality; are set in the future; […] are set on other worlds" or "are set on Earth but contradict known records" (Jackson & Moody-Freeman, 2011: 2). "Njuzu" is thus set on an alternative location to earth, as well as in the future, automatically confirming its place within the speculative genre. A utopia must ultimately function as something that is seen of as being outside of this world since it is a denial of reality. Huchu takes this utopia out of our actual society, on earth, in order to reject the negative implications of queer subjects.

"Njuzu", despite its harmful conditions and proximity from earth, is considered a utopia insofar as queerness is concerned, as there is no evident consequence of queerness. The narrator and Tarisai are in a same-sex relationship and the story presents no evidence of homophobia. Yet, it can be argued that perhaps Huchu is still enforcing heteronormativity through the narrator's references to Tarisai whilst simultaneously subverting the male/female binary. The protagonist refers to Tarisai using feminine pronouns, yet she also refers to Tarisai as "her husband" (Huchu, 2019). The narrator further explains that Tarisai's "anatomy is female, but she hosts the spirit of a man – an ancestor who claims her body for his vessel – and so she is a man" (Huchu, 2019). This begs the question of whether queerness is truly present in the story, as heteronormativity dictates that a 'husband' is typically a male figure. This, coupled with the fact that the protagonist is a woman, would suggest a heterosexual relationship. Huchu, however, provides a hint of an explanation as to the contradiction of Tarisai; the narrator and protagonist states that her home is Earth, in "Manhenga", Zimbabwe, while Tarisai "belongs here on this desert world" (Huchu, 2019). The suggestion that Tarisai is not human, or not born on earth, makes way for the inference that gender not being determined by the body is the norm on Ceres – different from our own heteronormative, cisgender prescriptions on earth. Again, Huchu illustrates that a rejection of the norms presented on earth allow for such a description, and the speculative genre further allows for the reimagining of gender and sexuality in such a manner that it is accepted. Huchu challenges the male-female dichotomy and instead blurs those boundaries – a blurring that speaks directly to queerness. His lack of prescription regarding gender, and ultimately his lack of restrictions on relationships beyond heterosexuality, brings forth a world that rejects the idea of the other, and instead offers up a queer utopia of radical acceptance.

Joanna Woods posits that much of African speculative fiction aims to "collapse the self-other dichotomy" as "there appears to be very little interest in producing yet another 'Other' in Africa's imagined futures" (2021). This future, she states, is "inclusive" (Woods, 2021). This notion of not reinforcing this dichotomy speaks to the significance of employing progressive time in speculative stories. As stated, for a utopia to exist, there is the need for a complete break from the natural progression of time. Woods notes that "Njuzu" "wreaks havoc with linear temporality by integrating a traditional mythical creature into a futuristic tale based on a planet in space" (2021). While this claim is valid, I argue further that another instance of delineating from the expected linear temporality is the presence of the queer utopia. Although Huchu forges a

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connection between his story and reality by mentioning how earth is still in existence – the use of space marks a complete break from reality and its current trajectory, thus showing how a deviation from reality is needed for a queer utopia to be achieved. This complete detachment also manifests as a place that differs from the ordinary earthly surroundings. Both location and time are altered. This clean break is necessary, as a queer utopia functions as a place of respite. Although unachievable, it offers some comfort.

The acceptance of queerness in "Njuzu" is made possible by the rejection of earth as the primary location. By setting this story in space, it appears that queer fiction which belongs to the category of utopian fiction has the understanding that actual utopias are unrealistic. It is clear that acceptance and freedom are not universal and never will be, barring a major breakdown of society or a deviation from the course of history. Nevertheless, one cannot help but look to these stories as a source of inspiration and solace for the prospect of a brighter future. Tendai Huchu presents a story that is distant from home and takes place in a future that is neither tangible nor accessible at this time. The idea of a queer utopia only seems plausible when the present and history's linear progression are rejected. The mythologies of speculative fiction revolve around conceptual, but not always physical, explorations of other worlds. As a result, necessary physical or social change is made, and the effects of technical or geographic changes are illustrated, among other things. Despite how far away from the author and reader the utopian society is, it is nonetheless an exercise in imaginative intervention.

Due to the rarity of utopian visions, it is now widely acknowledged that we are more accustomed to dystopian worlds and stories than we are to the idea of a 'better' or 'perfect' setting. Despite their apparent impossibility, they provide a haven of solace to explore what may be, rather than what is. They help to envisage a world that is substantially different from our own. Progressive time, or the search for an ideal society, has sociopolitical relevance in the African speculative genre since it may be the only genre for facilitating a disengagement from the poor ethics of the real world. If utopias "implicitly provide a standard by which we judge our political and social achievements" (Rothstein, Muschamp & Marty, 2003: 6), then its sociopolitical value is inherent once one accepts the premise of its definition. Queer subjects and narratives are thus the perfect platform to develop an alternative social vision because they have been excluded from hegemonic power structures.

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Today, homophobia is not only pervasive but also resembles that of a dystopian society. As a result, what can be perceived as utopian—the eradication of homophobia and any ensuing effects of queerness—is, in fact, less plausible than the realities of the present. In consideration of this, the only possibility for a hypothetically queer paradise is a departure from reality, since the present linear course of time provides no consolation in terms of queerness. In terms of queerness, there is currently no semblance of an absolute utopia.

The idea of a utopia is frequently defined as a "desirable" society which is "not already in existence" (Levitas, 1979: 22). As such, there is the implication that this imagined society is unachievable and impractical, as this definition implies that "for many people […] the society could not exist" (Levitas, 1979: 22). Levitas continues to argue that, should we consider this definition and its implications, a utopia is possibly "that state of society ultimately aspired to by an individual or group" (1979: 22). In accepting this premise, Levitas confirms the argument that – despite the post-apocalyptic nature of "What it Means When a Man Falls From the Sky" and the intergalactic location of "Njuzu" – both Arimah and Huchu describe a future that the queer body aspires to, in which, independent of the political situation and physical place, what is utopian is a society in which being queer has no repercussions. I recognise the implications of a utopian society, in which a perfectly ideal environment that satisfies every aspect of society itself is envisioned. However, considering the ideology of heteronormativity as a determining factor of what is considered dystopian to the queer body, the scope of what is considered 'perfect' to this marginalised group focuses – in this case – solely on queer freedom. In fact, despite the fact that one would view the environment of these stories as evidence that a utopia is absent, it is precisely these circumstances that demonstrate the necessity of a dramatic shift from the current course of history in order to envision this queer tolerance. Its role is sociopolitical insofar as utopias are evaluated in terms of "purpose" rather than "effect", whereby the purpose is to "produce a particular state of society" (Levitas, 1979: 22). A critique of the present and its realities is necessary to create the society that is envisioned. A pervasive theme within the genre is humanity, and only through fiction are these authors able to comment on present-day issues.

Levitas further argues that Karl Mannheim's definition of a utopia mentions ideas that are "incongruous and transcendent of reality" and that they "are oriented towards changing reality [and] ideologies" (1979: 20). This concept is especially pertinent in this case because

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heteronormativity is the ideology that is being questioned in these stories. Progressive time serves as a haven of solace and hope in African speculative fiction, which gives it sociopolitical relevance. It is not anticipated that queerness will ever be embraced or even tolerated in society in the near future, and so speculative fiction is the only genre that can use imagination to change the course of time, providing an opportunity for a queer utopia.

Levitas concludes by stating that the issue does not lie in a "lack of utopias, but a lack of hope", which is caused not by "imagination" but by "the real conditions of the present" (1979: 31). While Lesley Nneka Arimah and Tendai Huchu have illustrated a hope of a future that tolerates queerness, this hope is born from the reality that, in the present, tolerance is not a realistic and universal condition. It is possible to claim that without the ability to use the imagination, human progress would come to a complete standstill, despite the fact that this aspiration for a utopian life may seem incredibly impractical. The pursuit of utopia does not necessarily result in contentment. Occasionally, all it is, is mere tolerance or indifference. While this is a positive development for queerness, it does not necessarily imply equality. Thus, only in literature, there will ever be a *queer* utopia as one cannot help but look to these stories as a source of inspiration and solace for the prospect of a brighter future.

Chapter Two

A Cis-topian Nightmare: The Attainability of Queerness in Dystopian Fiction

"To be erased in the present is one thing, but to be erased in the future has a dead tone of finality to it."

- Innocent Chizaram Ilo

"The boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion."

— Donna Haraway, *The Cyborg Manifesto*

Speculative fiction has been predisposed to anticipating the possible futures of humankind by using a combination of imagination and an understanding of our own present-day realities. However, these hypothesised futures do not necessarily imply tolerance and acceptance. Instead, what arises, in some cases, is a narrative that echoes current anxieties and projects these concerns forward into the future. These stories create a sense of art accurately imitating life, and serve as reminder of what exists currently, as well as what is likely to come. When making use of present-day politics as a model for a projected future, the resulting effect is often a dystopian narrative that still confines itself to the constraints of our own reality. What is usually *set* in the future reflects current anxieties. Rarely does dystopian fiction *focus* on the future; it always captures the moment within which it was written.

The earliest recorded use of the term "dystopian" in the meaning of "one who promotes or describes a dystopia" was in a speech delivered by the Victorian philosopher John Stuart Mill in the House of Commons in 1868. Thus, the term "dystopian" is seemingly a Victorian invention (Budakov, 2010: 86). Louisa McKay Demerjian questions the ways in which we are presently living in a dystopian world, as well as inquiring which "dystopian themes have become less speculative and more familiar" (2016: 1). What is depicted in this genre is no longer hypothetical, but more prevalent. The most popular dystopian novels depict worlds where reproductive rights are abused or banished, the poverty gap has increased, and discrimination is

evident in a variety of places and groups. However, for marginalised groups, dystopia is not a matter of fiction but rather a reality that fiction has shaped itself from. Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* more often than not echoes current views of women's reproductive rights, proving that these dystopian narratives are "largely the product of the terrors of the twentieth century" (Moylan, 2000: xi). In dystopian literature, oppressive social or political structures that were created to create an ideal society are commonly depicted in the future. By taking genuine governments, laws, and social norms out of their contexts and exaggerating them, these novels frequently offer critique of actual governments, laws, and social norms. In a world that is rife with discrimination and policing of rights, it is only natural that the literature we encounter is molded from these nightmares.

As dystopias have frequently been molded from present-day fears and cruelties, they are not, by definition, always fictional in form. It is not only the subject of fiction to depict despotic governments, environmental catastrophes, or other aspects of a devastating decline in civilisation. Inasmuch, dystopias then "are often more like dire warnings […], dark shadows cast by the present into the future" (Atwood, 2005: 94). Dystopias frequently serve as cautionary tales; the negative effects of the present are shown to be carried into the future. However, what serves as a warning to most is frequently considered a mirror of others' own experiences. The depiction of persistent homophobia in "Two Weddings for Amoit" by Dilman Dila, "Debut" by Wole Talabi and "Female Computer Wanted, Apply Within" by Innocent Chizaram Ilo is a remarkable and purposeful choice in a genre that is meant to conceive of alternate realities and hypothetical futures. However, given that homosexuality is illegal in a number of nations, including those where some of these texts were written, a dystopian future with rampant homophobia does not seem like a stretch of the imagination. These represented futures seem to be constrained by the societal limitations that are present in our own reality today – or they exist to serve as a warning of how the future is "merely replicating how the society has treated (or treats) minority groups" (Ilo, 2019). A future that mirrors this seems appropriate when a society shapes itself via prejudice, discrimination, and oppression. The existence of a real utopia appears to be both unachievable and a denial of reality in a contemporary environment that resembles a dystopia.

Over time, we have come to associate dystopias with the complete breakdown of society and its conventions, or perhaps a more apocalyptic vision of the world's fate. As such, just the word "dystopia" tends to "[evoke] disturbing images" and conjures unsettling ideas of dysfunctional societies (Claeys, 2017: 3). Dystopias have come to be understood as an umbrella term for "the bad place", as well as an alleged affinity for pessimism. However, the disintegration of society and its norms is not as unlikely as literature would have us believe. A popular young adult novel series, *The Hunger Games*, automatically denotes ideas of a society at the brink of collapse, with unimaginable states of living. The depiction of the Capitol, an area which houses the wealthy who exploit the poorer working classes, seems inconceivable to many readers, and incites feelings of repulsion and aversion in many – but how far-fetched is this type of antipathy towards the working classes?

The Hunger Games movies were released at a time when many nations were struggling with their own internal uprisings against their governments. In addition, demonstrators in Ferguson, America, used the phrase "if we burn, you burn with us". The phrase is taken from the Hunger Games movie *Mockingjay Part 1*, in which rebels overthrow the tyrannical fictional government, and protesters painted this slogan on a prominent building to express their opposition to the shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed Black 18-year-old, by police officer, Darren Wilson (Bates, 2014). Therefore, the strength of dystopian literature lies not only in its capacity to depict the injustices and brutality of oppressed groups, but also in its ability to expose the mechanisms that lead to such a future and how these oppressive institutions have been sustained.

What one has come to understand of a dystopia is that it functions in opposition to a "utopia", as "[both] the Utopia and Dystopia concern themselves with the designing of societies – good societies for the Utopias, bad ones for the Dystopias" (Atwood, 2005: 93). However, in-between the two "is where most Utopias-Dystopias as well as most human societies fall" (Atwood, 2005: 95). These Utopia-Dystopia societies exist on oppressive and restrictive control, whilst perceiving the illusion of a just and equal society. As such, utopias and dystopias are not necessarily oppositional, nor do they contrast each other in what is considered good or bad. Rather, the classification of the former or latter relies on the criteria that are used to evaluate these societies at any given moment. It must then be considered whether a society that promotes

the livelihood of most whilst degrading that of many can overall be considered a utopia. When does the allegedly universal ideal society take precedence over others' plainly dystopian realities?

Typically, "[the] more universal the system of benefits, the more utopian the society" (Claeys, 2017: 8). Utopian society is one in which the *majority* benefits from the society's norms and laws. In understanding this, by definition, the outlawing of homosexuality may not be considered a form of dystopia – what is dystopian to the queer body is, in fact, utopian to most. Wendy Gay Pearson, Veronica Hollinger and Joan Gordon encapsulate this idea of society as "in-between" utopia and dystopia, depending on the given criteria:

> Newspaper and TV images show 4,000 lesbian and gay couples lining the steps of San Francisco City Hall for their own legal marriages (shortly followed by those marriages' annulment in the State of California), while other photographs circulate through the global lesbian and gay media witnessing the hanging of rural Iranian teenagers Mahmoud Asgari and Ayaz Marhoni for sexual acts they were unaware were criminalized under Iranian law
>
> (2008: 1).

While a few countries celebrate court rulings that ensure "basic human rights for all people regardless of sexual orientation", an American student named Matthew Shepard "is beaten, tied to a fence […] and left to die" (Pearson, Hollinger & Gordon, 2008: 2-3). However, Pearson, Hollinger and Gordon notes, the murder of Shepard is at least 'national news', in contrast to the media's silence on the death of "15-year-old Sakia Gunn, an African-American lesbian stabbed to death as she waited at a bus stop" (2008: 3). It cannot be disputed that the existence of queerness has a dystopian tone since queer people are killed, persecuted, and considered subhuman. As observed, the fusion of queerness and blackness opens up a new avenue for dystopian dread:

> In 2015, Google Photos misidentified pictures of black people as gorillas. […]The Los Angeles Police Department's Palantir-Powered Policing Algorithm has led to 'a vicious cycle of disproportionately high arrests of black Angelinos, as well as other racial minorities'. Further biases of Artificial Intelligence can be seen in […]a proposed algorithm for criminal sentences which further perpetuates the American justice system's prejudice against Black people, [and] mortgage algorithms used by banks which 'discriminate against Latino and African American borrowers'
>
> (Ilo, 2019).

There is no shortage of inspiration for dystopian novels in reality. Since not everyone has the right to freedom, a utopia cannot be regarded as universally true. An inclusive utopia is not

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possible in a culture where intolerance and injustice are accepted norms. Instead of seeing this discussion through the prism of race, which makes the orientation very African American, it is important to note that certain African nations have outlawed homosexuality in order to achieve their strange utopias.

Given the intolerance displayed in many countries towards queerness, it is reasonable to assume a dystopian state of living for many people. The line between fiction and reality becomes increasingly blurred, as dystopia appears to mirror reality more often than not. There are moments when one recognises that dystopian stories are more than just entertainment for the masses; they are actually a foretelling of future events. The focus of dystopian literature has shifted from what might happen, to what has already occurred.

I argue that the core of any dystopian narrative, and one of the vital factors that influence the apocalyptic nature of these stories, is time. These dystopian renditions explain history and rely on patterns in our past and present time to form predictions of times to come. As such, the relationship between dystopian time and queerness exposes history and its attitudes towards a deviation from heteronormativity. By looking back at the past critically and its interactions with queerness, these narratives project a hypothesised future to illustrate how these dystopian worlds came to exist. This dystopian temporality encourages the reader to engage with these reimagined futures as a reconstruction of both our past and present. The connection between queerness and a dystopian future reveals historical views toward a departure from heteronormativity. These narratives envision an imagined future to show how these dystopian environments interact with queerness. These tales follow a common pattern in which they look ahead into a narrative future to reflect critically upon the present moment. African speculative fiction and dystopian temporalities share a preoccupation with human cruelty in the past and now, suggesting that if we do not change our behaviour, the future will eerily resemble the present.

Each of the three stories – "Two Weddings for Amoit", "Debut" and "Female Computer Wanted, Apply Within" – exemplifies a particular subset of dystopian literature. It is possible to categorise and comprehend these works as dystopian speculative fiction by considering the role that queer concerns play in each story.

"Two Weddings for Amoit" by Dilman Dila is a classic example of how dystopian fiction frequently mirrors reality. We frequently witness technological advancements being used, not to improve human existence, but to preserve the government's surveillance and supervision of its inhabitants, as predicated by prominent speculative fiction works that highlight the concerns of the present. As in many dystopian stories, science and technology are used in this tale to preserve the state's control over its inhabitants rather than to improve human existence.

Against the backdrop of a theocratic Christian utopian society in East Africa that is controlled by technology, Dila presents a narrative of two lesbian lovers, Aceng and Amoit. Although not mentioned explicitly, the story's "Christian Utopia of East Africa", surrounded by a laser wall that prevents access from Congo, Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia implies its location is in Uganda, the author's place of birth and residence. The creation of this parallel reality starts in a village, and the technological advancements mentioned throughout the narrative highlight how far Dila's world is from reality: "agrobots" that tend to the farms (Dila, 2018: 54) and "brukas" – flying machines that are "shaped like an egg with a pair of wings on top" – as a mode of transportation (Dila, 2018: 55) place this short story within the speculative genre, as it projects forward into the future – albeit a dystopian future. Despite the ironic presence of cutting-edge technology and research, the story's central theme is a Christian narrative that condemns the use of science.

The story features a queer female protagonist, Amoit, who has recently married Aceng, despite already being married to her husband, Omongo. This results from Amoit convincing a doctor to declare her infertile so that her husband might take a second wife — Amoit's own hidden lover — in order to conceive a child for them. It is through this arrangement, named *Nyumba Nthobu,* that Amoit and Aceng may be together, albeit secretly. The story's emphasis on this queer couple highlights the preoccupation with queerness. Due to the stringent Christian ethos that outlaws homosexuality, Aceng and Amoit live in secrecy, as it is "one of this sins that caused God to punish the country with a declining population" (Dila, 2018: 57). The only sins that can be imagined in this 'ideal' world are "things like homosexuality, telling lies, fornication, and adultery" (Dila, 2018: 66). Despite being fictitious and imagined, the sociological norms and governing principles of this society reflect several current Christian movements. The short story repeatedly illustrates the presence of Christianity in this society, through the "new issue of Christian Living Today" on the coffee table (Dila, 2018: 53), Omongo's frequent reading of the

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Bible, and the presence of the Christian Council, the governing body "which had become very powerful in the wake of the Big Burn" (Dila, 2018: 56).

The story arises from a previously dystopian timeline in which "half a century ago" a drought that is referred to as "The Big Burn" triggered a decline in population due to the "disease and famine" it caused (Dila, 2018: 56). The story then illustrates its preoccupation with Christianity, which ultimately influences its perceptions on queerness, by stating that The Big Burn was caused by God's anger with humanity (Dila, 2018: 56). References to The Big Burn as a consequence of God's anger are explicit references to biblical apocalyptic narratives. This intertextual reference reinforces the nature of dystopian time whereby there is a recurring, historical pre-determined pattern of destruction to allow for a rebirth as a perfect Christian society. Typically, utopian fiction explores views about how civilisation should or could be. However, while seeming to be a paradise, very few literary utopias are actually utopias. Throughout the course of the story, it becomes clear that the characters inhabit the complete opposite of utopia. This 'utopia' that is created by the Christian Council is a world "where the streets were paved with love" and "every breath exhaled happiness" (Dila, 2018:66). In this society, there "were no murders or robberies", only "peace and harmony and love", and the television shows did not even "show any violence, nor talk about it" (Dila, 2018:66). To further satisfy the idyllic societal conditions of a typical utopia, the Christian Council "supplied free food, and there were no bills to pay because the government provided free water and energy" (Dila, 2018: 66). This society appears to be the epitome of the utopian ideal of a flawless society. Even the citizens of the society are aware of its utopian state, asking, "who would want to sabotage a Christian utopia?" (Dila, 2018: 54). However, what seems ideal in this society and its foundation in Christianity is exactly that which oppresses the story's queer protagonists.

This supports my earlier claim that what is dystopian for the queer body is actually utopian for the majority of people. However, once one takes into account the status and well-being of the women residing in that 'utopia', many classic utopias can be reclassified as dystopias. In many utopias, men's rights are prioritised over women's rights, particularly those of minority groups. "Two Weddings for Amoit" is no exception, as the emphasis of the role of women is that of childbearing. The text's primary argument is that women are only as valuable as what they can produce. In other words, the women in this tale are diminished to the level of their biological

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capacity for childbearing. In order to get married and live together, Amoit and Aceng have discovered a way to take advantage of this system. Dila's work provides a standard description of a governmental dystopia within the context of complete governmental authority. Dila's imagined society is reminiscent of Orwell's 'Big Brother' society, in which everyone is under constant surveillance and "the police were always listening" (Dila, 2018: 70). Dila illustrates this abuse of power by the government both through totalitarian-style surveillance and population control. At this point, the just society starts to fall apart. Given the dystopia depicted in "Two Weddings for Amoit," this story is less fiction and more of a strikingly accurate portrayal of the present. Whilst the story employs dystopian time, what may not be immediately evident is that this time could be the near future – and even the present – in some parts of the world. The attitudes that exist today regarding women's reproductive rights, as well as a hidden religious obsession that shapes perceptions of queerness are what "Two Weddings for Amoit" exposes. The Big Burn, an example of a dystopian catastrophe in the story, provides for a seemingly utopian awakening. But, it is crucial to understand that this story is a dystopia from a queer perspective because of the Christian regime that dominates the narrative.

However, Dila deftly transforms the story's dystopian potential into a queer utopia where women can live their best lives as a queer couple owing to the 'loophole' of an extended marriage. This story explores how marginalised people express the anguish of being excluded from the social collective in post-apocalyptic situations. Dila notes that, like Amoit and Aceng, there were "others like them, sinners living in secret Sodoms and Gomorrahs" (Dila, 2018: 57). The constant allusions to the Bible support the story's Christian setting, and the mention of a tale of immorality draws attention to the short story's views on homosexuality. Nevertheless, Amoit and Aceng continued their romantic relationship in spite of this attitude. However, the story ends tragically despite a fleeting moment of joy. Amoit comes to the realisation that she could had the life she desired if she had not lied to her spouse. He would have realised she was not a devout Christian if he had known she was in love with Aceng. She would also be aware that he was not a fanatical Christian if he had disclosed his involvement with the rebels. In the end, the existence of the Christian Council in the story results in Omongo's suicide and the potential deaths of Amoit and Aceng – this is similar to consequences they would experience in present-day Uganda. The more serious dystopian fiction often has the objective to warn readers away from unfavorable likely future developments. Total state control, enforcing restrictions on

women's reproductive rights, and prejudice against queerness are not far-fetched ideas in Africa. Instead, these dystopian temporalities mirror the present to show that there is no real distinction between then and now other than the passage of time.

Relying on a fairly common trope regarding artificial intelligence, "Female Computer Wanted, Apply Within" by Innocent Chizaram Ilo explores a dystopian speculative narrative whereby the humans are the oppressive forces, and the robots are fighting for a place on earth. In the speculative fiction genre, particularly in dystopias where artificial intelligence figures overthrow their human counterparts and chaos ensues, artificial intelligence — defined as that which is not human but said to have the emotional and intellectual intelligence of humans (Frankenfield, 2022) — is already known to play a significant role. The fear of humanity's demise is the motivation behind many dystopian stories. However, artificial intelligence is not only seen in science fiction; it is also present in our daily lives in the shape of social media algorithms, virtual assistants, and online search engines. These services are frequently utilised. Although artificial intelligence was developed to improve human life, it has not always been without faults:

> Hand held thermometer guns have become widely used throughout the COVID pandemic, and Google's Cloud Vision Software (a service for detecting and classifying objects in images) has had to quickly learn to identify these kind of devices in order to correctly classify them using data sets containing very few images, as these devices, despite not being new, have become known to the general public very recently. […] one of these thermometer guns gets classified as a gun when it is held by a person of dark skin, and as a monocular when it is held by a person with salmon color skin

(Thorn, 2020).

Additionally, "[women] are less likely than men to be shown ads for high paid jobs on Google" and "[a] predictive model used for seeing if an individual would commit crimes again after being set free […] shows racial bias, being a lot tougher on black individuals than on white ones" (Thorn, 2020). Instead of improving human lives, the sometimes questionable employment of artificial intelligence has only served to reinforce existing prejudices. As artificial intelligence is programmed and not born, "[it] is often assumed to be more objective than humans. In reality, however, AI algorithms make decisions based on human-annotated data, which can be biased and exclusionary" (Chu *et al.*, 2022). Technology is not created in a vacuum, so it contains prejudices and reinforces societal norms. Thus, it can be inferred that any potential destructive qualities of artificial intelligence have been engineered by man to some extent. The possibly threatening nature of artificial intelligence is a common trope in imagined futuristic scenarios.

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In a world where humans and robots coexist, "Female Computer Wanted, Apply Within" follows two lesbian robots named Dell and Yasmine. However, it is the robots that experience prejudice and injustice: "Dell, downtown is ruthless. They'll sniff you out and kill you" (Ilo, 2019). This short story depicts the couple reading an advertisement for a job, as they appear to be struggling financially. Dell attempts to alleviate Yasmine's concerns over the potential job by reminding her that they need the money:

> Yas, you know we need this. The pay is good and it's a one-time gig. It's not like I am going to work there forever. We both know how hard it is for offers like this to come for people like us. Think of all the things we can use the money for — pay to have your battery replaced so you won't be sitting beside the socket all day, move to a better side of town, download lit apps and upgrade

(Ilo, 2019).

The reference to "people like us" automatically implies that Dell and Yasmine face discrimination as they are not human. Futhermore, the story opens with a description of Dell attempting to disguise her appearance so as to not give away that she is not human; "I will tie a headscarf to cover the air vents on my neck and not speak to anyone until I get to the café. No one will even notice that I am a robot" (Ilo, 2019). Additionally, Dell further emphasises the discrimination robots face when she reads the advertisement for the job position:

> […] the ad is problematic. There is the glaring sexual objectification, the willful exclusion of robot models with metal exteriors, and the use of Female Computer to refer to female robots. No matter the number of robo-positive campaigns organized by Town Council, most humans cannot stop themselves from using the slur. Yasmine says it is their last resort to invalidate the existence and autonomy of robots. *They call us computers, thinking it will trick our minds to think they still own us*

(Ilo, 2019).

Dell draws our attention to the use of "computer" – as opposed to "robot" – as being a slur; one that is used openly in an advertisement. Although it is difficult to relate to those who do not resemble ourselves – and perhaps, one cannot fully identify with the concerns of Dell and Yasmine – we are not unaware of charged language, particularly the use of slurs to both oppress and promote submission. By publicly employing a derogatory term, an oppressed group is forced into submission and reminded of their social standing. The final quoted line reiterates the self-awareness of the robots and how they exist without the use of human control.

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When Dell shows up for the job interview, her objection to the sexualisation of robots is verified. Mr. Chybuz, the interviewer and company owner, explains to Dell the specifics of the role; "the gig is simple. You let me hold you like this for an hour while I touch myself, then you get the money" (Ilo, 2019). Dell is lured to the position under the guise of working with "everything from word processing to broadband service provision, basic animations, CGI, operating simulations, programming, and coding" (Ilo, 2019). She is further sexualised when Mr. Chybuz asks about her sexual orientation, to which she responds "lesbian" and he states "[it] shows you will be open-minded for the gig" (Ilo, 2019). Mr. Chybuz's claim embodies the hypersexualisation of lesbians as well as the fetishisation of lesbians; it is assumed that Dell is more likely to be willing to participate in sexual activity because of her sexual orientation. As illustrated through the advertisement and Mr. Chybuz's intentions, robots and queer people seemingly frequently share the narrative of being created for a single purpose: human service and heterosexuality. It appears that there are stories about queer people and robots being developed for one specific purpose — which is normalising the heteronormative human — thus making them frequently comparable.

The representation of technology as queer and sexual does not necessarily threaten the idea of 'human' in a manner that would invite negative advances or downright intolerance. What is considered natural or unnatural is not applicable to those who are not human. One cannot ascribe human societal norms, such as heterosexuality, to a non-human being. Conversely, whilst it can be considered that robots do not face the same consequences of queerness as humans do, it cannot be ignored that dehumanisation – in the most literal sense – applies to two queer characters. As Yasmine dies at the end of the story after malfunctioning while she is alone, the dehumanisation of robots and queer people is once again demonstrated by the way Dell is treated in a cold manner following Yasmine's death:

> "Ms. Dell, you have to sign the death certificate as her next of kin before we can let you go," the man on the screen says.
> "But she is not dead-dead. The technician said most of her hardware is still intact. The electrocution just compromised her circuit board."
> "If we change her circuit board, it will delete her entire memory storage."
> "But Dell and I store our memories on Cloud."
> "That exception is not included on the Robot Death Specification Guideline. But the memories are good. Think of the memories as her ghost. We also have ghosts as humans."
> "I am not signing anything."

"Don't be ridiculous. You've been here for the past six hours. Sign the papers and we'll let you go."

Dell turns her back against the screen. "Can you give me time to think this through? To grieve, in private."

"Oh, come off it, robots don't…. In fact, fine. Do what you want." The screen flickers off

(Ilo, 2019).

The story takes a dystopian turn, in which this imagined future is not necessarily detached from reality. In a universe where queer characters are represented by robots, the prospect of a detachment from societal constructions dictated by humans is shown, as is the dehumanisation of queerness through the use of non-human characters. Although Dell and Yasmine's experiences are fictional, the tyranny they undergo has some real-world parallels. The line separating people from other creatures, and fiction from reality, is only an illusion. Ilo subverts the myth of artificial intelligence taking over the world by showing humans as the oppressors in his story – a depiction that is far more accurate where queerness is concerned. The two women's support of one another, however, also shows how marginalised queer communities are compelled to create new family structures with and for one another, as Ilo demonstrates.

"Debut" by Wole Talabi reads similarly to the preoccupations of "Female Computer Wanted, Apply Within" as it portrays an explicit concern about artificial intelligence becoming too autonomous and ultimately defying human instruction, and thus human control. In "Debut", it is demonstrated how artificial intelligence will fundamentally alter all aspects of life, including how we work. Artificial intelligence is predicted to eventually replace routine motions, freeing us up to pursue our creative and innovative endeavors. However, instead of the desire for human/robot integration, as Ilo's story has illustrated, what Talabi portrays is the actualisation of these fears regarding artificial intelligence, and how it has the potential to create destruction. Ng'endo, a Kenyan computer engineer, features in the short story and her successful career suffers as a result of her sexual orientation. Ng'endo's sexual orientation is not explicitly stated, but it is implied in his narrative when she is compelled to relocate to Lagos. "Debut" follows the story of artificial intelligence engineered specifically for artistic purposes at Terra Kulture Arts Studio, in Lagos. The story begins with a description of the generator at Terra Kulture Arts Studio stopping and starting during the first act of a production of the *Secret Lives of Baba Segi's*

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Wives, interfering with performance robots' dancing. The story automatically grounds its place within the speculative genre with its immediate references to "7090" and "4020": "two independent nodes […] that managed all art centre systems while studying art itself in the background: its creation, forms, promotion, criticism, analysis, impact, everything" (Talabi, 2019: 7). This description establishes the environment of a number of artificial intelligence failures not only in the art world, but all around the world. The nodes, representing artificial intelligence systems which command the dancing of performing robots, appear to be losing control whilst simultaneously taking control – a common trope in dystopian fiction.

A society is deemed dystopian insofar as the people of that society are under the complete control of a dominating power – be it their own government, aliens, or even artificial intelligence. This standard identifies "Debut" as a story that portrays a dystopian society, even though we only see the early stages of this breakdown. The arrival of artificial intelligence, which is prominent in "Debut", raises an intriguing question about whether these programmed beings can replicate the subtleties of the human mind and soul; whether creativity and empathy can be artificially manufactured and reproduced in a machine. It is not a stretch to think that these robots could be biased and discriminatory because artificial intelligence leverages existing data to develop its behaviours. As I have already indicated, any potentially damaging capabilities of artificial intelligence have been engineered by man to some extent "Debut" opens with the malfunctioning of 7090 and 4020 at a performance during which the nodes "stopped and restarted seven times, interrupting the frenzied dancing of the performance robots and the fast-paced, rhythmic beating of automated dundun halfway through a production of the *Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* in the Arena" (Talabi, 2019: 7). The reason behind the malfunctioning of these nodes is eventually identified:

> If you look deep into the functional design specifications for BLOMBOS, like I just did, you will find an instruction that when it reaches 100% parameterisation, it should attempt to create new, original art of its own […] So, if it were going to create art, it would probably make art that only entities with a similar set of senses and a similar body could appreciate. And it's like the guys in Paris keep saying: a thing needs to be both original and provoke a response from an audience that appreciates its meaning and context, for it to truly be considered art

(Talabi, 2019: 8-9).

Interestingly, what 7090 and 4020 deem "art" is actually that which unsettles and disrupts the day-to-day life of humanity: currency is tampered with via the stock exchange, traffic is halted through traffic lights turning red and electronic devices become increasingly irritating and unusable. What appears to be the complete domination of artificial intelligence is simply tampering with a medium that humans rely on so heavily: technology. Ultimately, the use of technology – not the autonomy of artificial intelligence – is what turns this narrative dystopian. As dystopian narratives serve rather as a warning than a prediction of the future that is yet to come, what Talabi appears to be cautioning is not the use of artificial intelligence and its capabilities for self-awareness, but rather our complete reliance and submission to even the most mundane, and seemingly non-threatening, technological devices.

To assist with the apparent "malfunctioning" of these nodes, the story introduces Ng'endo, a "regional technical support engineer for the BLOMBOS system", whom Adongo turns to for help as she is able to "[figure] out in minutes, things that took others hours" (Talabi, 2019: 8). Her achievements are what earn her a position:

> Ng'endo was by-far the most competent and experienced engineer in their small team and Adongo both looked up to and feared her. She had two bachelor's degrees in mathematics and physics and had taught herself to code when she was completing her PhD in theoretical physics

> (Talabi, 2019: 8).

Through the introduction of this character, the story makes known its preoccupation with queerness:

> She had been on an accelerated track to become technical director of the ministry until people started to ask questions about why she wasn't married and didn't have a boyfriend. Rumours started. Then pictures surfaced. Her career stalled. She resigned after four years of being sidelined and not being promoted

> (Talabi, 2019: 8).

It becomes clear that Ng'endo's promising career is hindered after her sexuality is made public. Ng'endo's sexual orientation is not stated explicitly in Talabi's account, but he suggests that she is a lesbian because she does not have a male lover and that the photographs that surfaced indicate a female lover. Due to this discovery, Ng'endo is forced to relocate to Lagos. The short story emphasises Ng'endo's abilities and the value she adds to the workplace while quietly pointing out

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how queer individuals continue to experience institutionalised discrimination at work, particularly in light of the fact that homosexuality has been declared illegal. Despite N'gendo's success and recognition, it is obvious that status does not always prove beneficial nor afford privilege, and that being queer can have an impact on both the personal and professional worlds. Additionally, "Debut" portrays society as still being stuck in the present when it comes to intolerance, despite the technological and scientific advances that humanity has made.

The story engages with dystopian time whereby the only difference between now and the future is the progression of technology; not the progression of culture itself. In speculative fiction, future temporalities are often a place of respite as they do not appear to be as marked by heteronormative prescriptions as the present, yet Ng'endo is geographically alienated in the future because of her sexual orientation. Dystopias such as the one evident in "Debut" remind us that dystopian temporalities serve as a reflection of the present and, with it, bring forward into the future the intolerance that it contains.

Oftentimes, what a society deems dystopian is not the complete collapse of humanity or the total destruction of a world. Instead, a restrictive society that does not allow for any deviations from the 'norm' – in this case, a queer scientist who cannot advance in her career due to allegations regarding her sexuality – can be considered dystopian in nature. Dystopias reveal the consequences of systems that have been maintained to continually reject marginalised groups. What appears utopian to most, is in fact dystopian for those who are queer. The short story ends on a fairly ominous cliffhanger, whereby one can see the fears of Ng'endo and Adongo actualised: there is a "power surge" in Cape Town, in Tokyo "the Nikkei 225 stock exchange index gained over 41,563 points worth 3.65 billion dollars in less than half a second", in Seoul a rocket "initialised itself and began its ascent into orbit without instruction" and across the earth, phone calls "were suddenly interrupted and replaced with a rendition of the song *Daisy Bell* at extremely high volume at both ends of every call, sending some callers reeling back from their devices", to name a few (Talabi, 2019: 9). It appeared that"everywhere, something unusual was happening". (Talabi, 2019: 9).The creations that 7090 and 4020 had shared were being praised enthusiastically by every independent artificial intelligence system on Earth. The total takeover of artificial intelligence was the 'art' in question; the takeover of artificial intelligence is a

common theme in dystopias. In addition, the story's depicted society's attitudes regarding queerness and the isolation the protagonist ultimately faces make it dystopian.

"Debut" by Wole Talabi, through its depictions of a more technologically-advanced future, indicates a familiar world where humanity *appears* to have progressed. However, repressive attitudes towards queerness still exist. Although this story is set in an alternative future whereby artificial intelligence has advanced to the point of becoming self-aware and autonomous, to the point where the story's ambiguous ending alludes to humanity on the brink of collapsing under the control of artificial intelligence, what has not advanced is repressive attitudes towards queerness. This mirrors present-day attitudes towards queerness, and indicates that a tolerant future may not actually be plausible. Even in speculative settings, there are still consequences of homosexuality. This indicates that technological advancements do not always imply societal advancements, and that the progressiveness of a society should not solely rely on the progression of science, but rather the progression of humanity's thinking. This implies that more than a mere comprehensive technical utopianism is needed for cultural progression to take place.

There are much fewer tales about the limitless opportunities that the future of Africa contains, and this is perhaps due to the widespread sense of pessimism among African nations. There is too much unrest in the present, and one rarely observes anything that suggests a possible, and hopeful, future. Dystopias and future versions of the present's unrest are no longer frightening to observe. Instead, there is a morbid fascination with dystopian narratives. Shelby Ostergaard (2021) illustrates an interesting take on dystopias and our attraction to them in which she compares dystopian fiction to a funhouse mirror at a carnival:

> We delight in taking selfies with filters that artificially bulge out our noses or shrink our mouths. But sometimes these distortions take on a deeper meaning and force us to notice things about ourselves. You don't notice that your nose is a little large until you take a picture with that filter and compare […] The truth is, dystopian fiction presents a funhouse mirror of our collective selves. It forces the audience to stare, transfixed, at the small flaws which, in the mirror, have become pronounced enough to produce a monster.

What presents itself as twisted and distorted in the form of a dystopian narrative is, in fact, a story that more often than not is exposing the realities of the present. Authors often take what is wrong with the present and they magnify the current anxieties of humanity. Interestingly, Ostergaard's metaphor places humans at the centre, emphasising the small flaws within

humanity. Dystopias often indicate a breakdown of humanity, with humans at the core of its issues. Dystopias, if we accept the premise that they are a mirror of our 'collective' selves, indicate, fundamentally, a human issue. The concerns raised typically refer to an alternative or fictitious reality where there is prejudice, oppression, and discrimination against an individual or group of people. The misleading aspect about dystopias is that they frequently masquerade themselves as utopias, with cutting-edge technology or seemingly unattainable scientific advancements. Thus, dystopias are often depicted as a world in limbo, where the advancements of the society do not correlate with the advancements of humanity's collective attitudes. Strangely, there is an odd familiarity with dystopias that reveal our fascination with the "worst case scenario". As already mentioned, Atwood notes that we can only imagine utopias, but we have actually lived in dystopias; therefore, it is a dismal statement regarding the present that we find them much easier to believe in than utopias (2005: 95). This statement brings forth the significance of employing dystopian temporalities in African speculative fiction. The dystopian setting of narratives is not far off from the past of the African continent, and the stories reflect this awareness:

> I see far fewer stories about the endless possibilities that the African future holds, and I think that stems from the shared reality of gloom across African countries. There is too much turmoil in the now, and we mostly don't see anything that hints at a future with possibilities. When we do get stories about the future in Omenana [a speculative fiction magazine], we are not shocked to see dystopias and future reflections of the discord of the present

(Nwonwu, 2018).

African speculative fiction thus functions as the perfect genre with which to illustrate this dystopian time, as the genre is no stranger to the dystopian. What is particularly dystopian to Africa is its attitude and intolerance towards queerness – a prejudice that is common in "Female Computer Wanted, Apply Within", "Two Weddings for Amoit" and "Debut". Thus, the sociopolitical value of employing dystopian temporalities in African speculative fiction lies in the fact that as the genre acts as a social and political magnifying glass, the reader is forced to engage with this discussion concerning the trajectory of the future.

Numerous African nations have banned homosexuality, which is a dystopian act in and of itself, in an effort to create a sort of cultural utopia. This reinforces the idea that what many people consider to be paradise is actually dystopian for marginalised groups, particularly those who

are queer. Additionally, the sociopolitical value of these short stories lies in how dystopias bring forth discussions on who actually gets to determine what is defined as progressive and developed in a society. Oftentimes, once considering society through the lens of the marginalised, one finds that what is deemed utopian to most is in fact dystopian to the other. In dystopian narratives, technology frequently takes precedence over humanity when defining what constitutes a progressive society.

I Know ~~Who~~ What You Are: Queering Mythology

"Mythology and science both extend the scope of human beings. Like science and technology, mythology, as we shall see, is not about opting out of this world, but about enabling us to live more intensely within it."

- Karen Armstrong

"Myths are clues to the spiritual potentialities of the human life" (Campbell, 1991: 16), and I argue that speculative fiction functions in a similar manner. In this chapter, my aim is to consider the intricacies of mythology and how it illustrates inherent qualities of all humans, and how these traits complement the speculative genre in an attempt to solidify its place in both queer theory and speculative fiction. Like myth, speculative fiction frequently enables projection of the present reality while focusing on the human experience in fictitious worlds. With this claim, I take into account how speculative fiction also serves as a means by which we affix concepts of our humanity, our places in the world, and our relationships with one another. In assessing the aforementioned, "Becoming a God" by Keletso Mopai and "The Woman with 1000 Stars in Her Hair" by Ayodele Olofintuade will be examined to reflect on the complexity of the specific mythologies present, and how the queer other is represented.

Joseph Campbell, during a radio interview, was met with a confident assertion from the radio host that "myths [are] lies" (Kennedy & Kudler, 2017: 1). In response, Campbell went on to clarify that myths are more like metaphors that aid people to navigate their lives and find solace, providing a sense of connection and belonging (Kennedy & Kudler, 2017: 2). Nevertheless, the host maintained his position and insisted that myths are untruths. This claim is widespread as mythology is viewed as illogical and archaic, as well as being associated with 'a lie' or even 'deception'. The notion that mythology is untrue may originate from the definition of myth as a broadly accepted but factually inaccurate belief or a mischaracterisation of the reality in a traditional story, particularly one that relates to a people's early history or explains

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a phenomenon and typically involves supernatural entities or occurrences (Gill, 2019). The latter definition distorts one's perception of mythology and fails to acknowledge the importance of myths for many people. One might be tempted to reject myths that are not inherent to one's own culture and consider them invalid or completely fabricated, and yet despite cultural differences from one community to another, the overarching idea of myths is to give each community a framework from which they can understand their senses of self and purpose. Mythology is a vast and diverse field of inquiry, and specific myths are significant to individual cultures. Much like differing religious beliefs, mythology that is not inherent to one's own culture does not deny the truth or validity of that mythology. A lack of belief in a myth does not automatically connote a rejection of that myth. Despite the varied cultural intricacies of myth, myths ultimately provide a sense of being and belonging. Myth transcends time. It is both historically particular in that it has its origins in the past, and it is also ahistorical in that it is immortal – myth provides narratives that provide commentary on what it means to be human. Because the mythological story has timeless and global significance, myth is unconstrained by the boundaries of its time. The mythical story has universal truth that transcends all places and time; these stories are then altered. What differentiates "mythical time from historical time is that for mythical time there is an absolute past, which neither requires nor is susceptible of any further explanation" (Cassirer, 1955: 106). Myth "is aware of no such division of the stages of time, no such ordering of time into a rigid system, where any particular event has one and only one position … the stages of time– past, present, future – do not remain distinct either" (Cassirer, 1955: 110). Thus, the difference between mythical time and historical time is that the former has an absolute history. The stages of time in mythical time do not remain separate either; myth is unaware of any such distinction of the phases of time or any such ordering of time into a system where each individual event can be isolated.

William Bascom defines myths as "prose narratives which, in the society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful accounts" (1965:4). These myths consist of characters that are "not usually human beings, but they often have human attributes" (Bascom, 1965:4). The use of non-human figures creates a distance between us and them, yet still allows for a familiarity through their human attributes through which we can still identify with their stories. Myths encompass all of the most fundamental aspects of human existence. In examining these foundations, myth "looks to the truths of human experience that were reflected in the lives of people centuries ago,

and the relevance of those truths today" (Bierlein, 1999:xi). In understanding myths, we attempt to understand "the roles, however small, we as humans play" (Bierlein, 1999:2). Whilst no single myth can encompass all the complexities and intricacies of a human life due to its multidimensionality, myth can capture the experiences and nature inherent in most of us, and speak to a broader experience of life. Despite our significant differences across cultures, what can be observed is the degree of resemblance found in myths that traverse religious and cultural boundaries. These similarities across cultures suggest to be neither the result of "society" nor "diffusion" – instead, "[the] argument here is that just as certain physical traits are common to humans wherever they live, so are certain psychological ones" (Leeming, 1998: 3). Myths strive to consolidate the present while making predictions about the future and giving significance to the past. Because myths are a widely understood concept, they transcend cultural barriers and offer hope for a world that is always just out of reach but still tangible enough to believe in. The many capabilities of humanity are explored in mythology. The same can be said of speculative fiction.

A crucial question in speculative narratives is neither about what is conceivable nor about what is impossible; the principal question in this genre is the human question: Who are we in this world? Where are we going? What makes us human? How do we interact with one another? (Welch, 2022). These questions are not culture-specific nor do they attempt to assign roles that distinguish us from each other. As stated, it has become evident that the predominant question queried by writers of speculative fiction is "what if?" (Welch, 2022). Thus, at the core, mythology and speculative fiction appear to rely on the same foundation of inquiry. Some reject this relationship on the premise that mythology is stagnant and ultimate, which makes it completely incompatible with speculative fiction, as it assumes unceasing change. I contend, however, that the persistence of myth through centuries and continents is evidence of its adaptability, and that legendary characters have been localised. Assuming mythology is final in intent lessens its global influence and relevance today, as well as ignores its adaptability.

Equally adaptable is queerness, as it is not constrained by inherently heteronormative milestones that define a predictable life pattern; mythology's non-linear, unfixed nature is a reflection of the non-linearity that queerness implies. Instead, mythology is malleable, just like queer time – it is multi-dimensional – and can be distorted to suit the needs of its recipient. Similar to how

speculative fiction navigates temporality, mythology demands a suspension of belief in the concept of time. Speculative fiction serves as a means of navigating any temporal world, whilst myth gives an alternative method of re-examining the past to make it applicable to the present. Yet, both continuously challenge what is possible or real. Their preternatural qualities are similar in that their premises are "suspended between the mundane and the miraculous" (Allchin, 2007: 565).

The subject of how African mythology functions in speculative fiction, and how the two may compare, arises as a result of the intersection between mythology and speculative fiction. African mythology is significant, and it continues to be a crucial component of culture because it provides a sense of the past, the present, and the potential future, as mythologies tend to do. Stories of the "fantastic" are not foreign to Africa, as the continent has "a long tradition in oral and written storytelling" regarding the fantastical (Nwonwu, 2018). Both African myth and speculative fiction push the boundaries of what is observable as reality, occupying realms that go beyond our palpable existence. Given that most myths are based on a belief system, speculative fiction, whose premise depends on accepting novel and fabricated perceptions, might be compared to myths. Thus, there is a fundamental reason for the attraction between African mythology and speculative fiction, especially the school of African speculative fiction that is mythology-friendly: what is known as indigenous speculative fiction. These authors create worlds that focus on indigenous subjectivity and engage with it, rather than pandering to Western worldviews. African myth, fable, and fantasy are merged with Western technology in this amalgamated style of narration. The integration of myth and technology is not new; rather, it is a product of regional dogmas. Africa is a continent that is rich with mythology that "ties in with contemporary science fiction, drawing strongly on motifs of transformation, hybridity, gender-blending and extra-sensory" (Carstens& Roberts, 2009: 79). As already noted, science fiction, and thus by extension speculative fiction, is heavily influenced by mythology, and "undertakes journeys both forwards and backwards in time, enabling the writing of alternative histories in the mythic mode" (Carstens & Roberts, 2009: 81). Delphi Carstens and Mer Roberts posit that the distinct "non-linear" qualities of "Africa's indigenous lore" ultimately has "uncanny parallels" with speculative fiction (2009: 81). African mythology connects to modern science fiction by heavily emphasising themes that feature metamorphosis and hybridity, and the construction of these alternative histories is made possible by the time travels undertaken by speculative fiction.

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Furthermore, there are parallels between African traditional lore's non-linear characteristics and speculative fiction.

When deliberating if speculative fiction is considered new to Africa, Woods states: "while the genre is not new to the continent, it has recently acquired new energy" (2020: 36). Thus, "orality and traditional cosmologies […] are a preexisting source of speculation about the nature of reality" which are not "limited to past and present or even earthbound realities" (Bryce, 2019: 4). Ivor Hartmann notes that "most speculative fiction, be it fantasy, scifi, or horror, is firmly rooted in cultural mythologies" (Bryce, 2019: 3). These cultural mythologies serve as the iconic foundation for all speculative stories, thus their presence is undeniable.

It is interesting to note that gender and sexuality have also been explored in African mythology. Therefore, speculative fiction would be a perfect medium for navigating queerness. Queerness is a concept that is essentially considered 'foreign' to many in reality. One can use speculative fiction to explore how queer characters are considered in relation to other humans, and if queerness does, in fact, have a space to exist in its immediate surroundings. By undertaking this study, I aim to consider how queerness, which is frequently othered in contemporary reality, may be represented in mythological creatures in an alternate universe. As a result, mythology, queerness, and speculative fiction are all intertwined.

By examining "Becoming a God" by Keletso Mopai and "The Woman with 1000 Stars in Her Hair" by Ayodele Olofintuade, it is apparent that being a mythological character ultimately absolves one of the 'sin' of being queer. As the main characters in both stories are either mythological creatures or make references to well-known mythological figures, I am particularly interested in how these stories imply that the consequence of queerness is only ascribed to humans. They also imply that the other is not constrained by our societal norms and rejection of sexuality. Both tales include non-human characters whose sexual orientations are not challenged, confirming the notion that homosexuality is a social construct by which only humans are judged. Both Mopai and Olofintuade are able to affirm queer identities in their stories by using mythology, and they also offer a narrative that is more palatable because mythology serves as a buffer against current homophobia. For example, despite the short story being a work of (speculative) fiction, "Becoming a God" by Keletso Mopai accurately depicts the violence of the

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current homophobia that Black South African women experience as seen by its resemblances to factual accounts.

Interestingly, and perhaps ironically due to the observable homophobia in the country, The Union Bill, which legalised same-sex marriage, was passed by the South African government on December 1, 2006, making South Africa the first African country to do so (Nag, 2018). Due to factors such as economics and general population demographics, South Africa can be described as a nation of contrasts. However, a further paradox exists in the intolerance of homophobia in the face of what purports to be a progressive nation: "of all the countries in the continent, South Africa should be the least likely to be tarnished by homophobic hate crimes. Its 1997 constitution was the first in the world to secure the equal rights of LGBT people" (Strudwick, 2014). However, what has been determined as the law does not necessarily dictate the mind-sets of those governed by that law. This story highlights homophobia by following the experiences of a queer woman named Mmadjadji. Mopai herself notes that her work "focuses on social issues that affect South Africans — young South Africans in particular — including domestic abuse, mental health, homophobia, racism, colourism and other issues that [she is] passionate about" (Lazarus, 2020).

As a result, Mopai's speculative work serves as a reflection of reality, yet in order to provide a barrier against homophobia, the narrative also imagines an escape from this reality through the mythological imagination. "Becoming a God" is one of the many short stories in Mopai's collection *If You Keep Digging*, and also one of the few African short stories that draws on African mythology in order to produce African queer speculative imaginaries. Mopai's references to the supernatural by means of gods ground this story within the speculative fiction genre, despite closely echoing reality. Speculative fiction functions in such a manner whereby, despite depicting alternative temporalities different from our own present-day reality, the boundaries between this world and elsewhere are often blurred. The story is set in present-day Balobedu, Limpopo and Randburg, Gauteng and finds its place in speculative fiction due to its connection with the "ancestral realm" (Modise, 2020). Additionally, the fact that "Becoming a God" features gods who have the ability to control weather already places the story in a setting that is beyond scientific understanding or explanation – hence its place in the speculative genre. Through the representation of the protagonist, "Becoming a God" employs the monomyth of the

hero's journey, whereby it narrates the story of a young girl, Mmadjadji, who is called away from home, only to return to discover that she is a god. The monomyth, often known as "The Hero's Journey," is a universal story framework, popularised by Jospeh Campbell, in which a character travels to an unfamiliar place in order to achieve a quest. The hero faces conflict and adversity, but finally prevails before returning home changed. This framework is mirrored in Mopai's story. "Becoming a God" centres itself on a popular South African myth: the story of the Rain Queen of Balobedu. While Mmadjadji is not a Rain Queen herself, her name alludes to the matrilineal line of Rain Queens, Modjadji. Mopai does not disclose Mmadjadji's proximity to the Rain Queens save for location; instead, the end of the story announces the discovery of Mmadjadji as the next Storm Queen.

The story opens with the main character making reference to mythological legends that she has encountered:

> Like everyone, she'd heard the stories: of men who morphed rocks into glass with their bare hands, who dipped their thumbs into a bowl of ash and turned it into fire, transformed into wild animals, who caused disastrous storms in the night

> (Mopai, 2019: 141).

These immediate references automatically draw attention to the story's deliberate engagement with mythology, as well as the protagonist's inherent belief in these myths. Additionally, Mmadjadji reinforces the universality and commonality of myths through her use of "everyone", thus emphasising the assertion of myth as "basic to human existence" (Leeming, 1998: 3). However, despite introducing the reader to myths that are well-known to others, the speculative genre of the story only becomes apparent when Mmadjadji discloses her connection to these gods: these tales of mythological legends refer to her "own great-grandfathers" as they are "her ancestors" (Mopai, 2019: 141). Mmadjadji continues to explain that her grandfather is a Storm God "who is said to have created both havoc and peace in her village" (Mopai, 2019: 141). And, as is common with mythology due to differing perspectives, Mmadjadji has heard "conflicting rumours" about her grandfather (Mopai, 2019: 141).

While her grandfather is described as a god with supernatural powers, what is not immediately clear is that Mmadjadji's name alludes to Modjadji, referring to "a line of queens of the Balobedu (Limpopo province, South Africa) known for their ability to control clouds and

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rainfall" (Goitsemodimo, 2019) much like her grandfather who could "cause a storm that lasted a year" (Mopai, 2019: 142). Although deemed a "mythical tale", the Modjadji Rain Queens still reign amongst the TshiVenda People in Limpopo to date. Whilst there are sources that claim these abilities are *known,* others remind us that the Rain Queen is "*believed* to have special powers" (Weekes, 2018; emphasis added). The existence of the Rain Queen and her matrilineal line is not disputed – she still reigns today in Limpopo among the only South African tribe to have a matriarch – but the semantics used to describe the powers of the Rain Queen connote a tale of fiction rather than fact. This argument supports the idea that myths that are not part of one's culture are frequently rejected, but this should not lead one to discount the validity of the myth.

To further reinforce Mopai's interest in writing on South Africa and its issues, it is worth pointing out a version of the tale of the Rain Queens which notes that "the first Modjadji's mother, Dzugundini, was forced to flee from her village after she was impregnated by her brother" (Goitsemodimo, 2019). This notion is echoed in Mopai's story in which Mmadjadji's father rapes and impregnates Mmadjadji at nine years old, as he "[needed her] to feel like a woman", not a boy, since Mmadjadji "[dressed] like one, [and acted] like one" (Mopai, 2019: 144). Mopai is queering traditional mythologies and reinforcing a South African crisis of homophobia through her fiction. This is the first interaction where Mmadjadji's sexuality, or at the very least, gender expression, is alluded to. While there are no allusions to Mmadjadji not being a female, her gender expression leans towards the masculine as her appearance and mannerisms stereotypically imitate that of a male, as suggested by her father. Furthermore, at the opening of the story, Mmadjadji notes how, unlike her mother's beautiful yellow dress, her own "white, dotted dress […] clung to her chest" (Mopai, 2019: 141). Mmadjadji, whilst noting her affinity for her mother's dress, a symbol of femininity, simultaneously rejects her own femininity and perceives it as restricting and suffocating. Mmadjadji also describes her mother's insistence on her wearing the dress:

> Her mother forced it onto her tiny body [and] Mmadjadji would lift her legs as if running on burning coals, her face masked with tears and her mouth wide open, radiating screams […] crying for it to be ripped off her body

(Mopai, 2019: 142).

The act of Mmadjadji's mother 'forcing' a dress onto her and her father 'forcing' himself onto her speak to a physical attempts to change Mmadjadji so that she can meet societal norms. Although Mmadjadji's potential homosexuality and the story's preoccupation with queerness are first hinted at in this correctional behaviour and eventual rape, the narrative conclusively alludes to intolerance for queerness when Mmadjadji's mother, at Mmadjadji's request, starts to describe the Storm God and his beliefs:

> He also cursed sinners and made them sick. [Her] grandfather detested sinful people. He followed The Book, word for word. Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not steal. A man or a woman must not lie with another man or a woman

<div align="right">(Mopai, 2019: 143).</div>

This assertion already deems Mmadjadji 'sinful' in the eyes of her family as she is a woman who "[lies] with" other women. This thus explains (but does not excuse) her father's actions to 'correct' her suspected, and later confirmed, homosexuality. In this passage, Mmadjadji's grandfather compares the sin of homosexuality to the sin of murder. What is evident is that the humans in "Becoming a God" are bound by societal constraints and prejudices that dictate that homosexuality is a sin, or something to be altered. These societal constraints and prejudices themselves appear to be guided by religion – an intersection that is not uncommon, as previously seen in "Two Weddings for Amoit" as discussed in Chapter 2. Here, mythology is weaponised to the conservative aim of maintaining the status quo, directly showing how the stories that one may believe of the past are often used to discriminate against people in the present. Whilst it is not stated whether Mmadjadji's grandfather is a Christian, his views echo those of Christianity: "do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable" (Leviticus 18: 22). Additionally, although Mmadjadji's rape is reminiscent of Dzugundini's story, it grounds the tale in reality: corrective rape is pervasive, especially in South Africa, where this story is situated. Yet Mopai is repurposing history to highlight a prevalent issue and express queer narratives. As such, "Becoming a God", though speculative, is a factual extension of the reality of queer South African women.

Mmadjadji, once she is of age, leaves her hometown to begin a new life in Gauteng when she begins university, thus enacting the first stage of the hero's journey: The Call to Adventure (Campbell, 2004: 45). Mmadjadji's departure ultimately begins the journey towards meeting Bontle at university. Religion is again emphasised in the story when Bontle, Mmajadji's

girlfriend, and later her wife, notes her mother's feelings towards her sexuality: "even though Bontle's mother is a religious and godly woman, she supports her daughter. She believes that everyone sins and that they should offer themselves to God for forgiveness" (Mopai, 2019: 147). Again, the story asserts that queerness is a sin which needs to be forgiven; an opinion that appears to be informed by religion. Many religious denominations reject homosexuality on the premise that it goes against the religion's respective holy books. This is no different in "Becoming a God". This notion is not uncommon and, whilst the assumption may be that queer intolerance and religion are inextricably linked, there are further implications with regards to race. As Ian Barnard notes: "sexuality is always racially marked" (1999: 200) and Black lesbian women have become the "primary targets" of homophobia (Hlongwane, 2016: 8). Hence in society we see that "sexuality never exists as a discrete category, but is always inflected by class, gender, race, religion, and nationality" (Pearson, Hollinger & Gordon, 2008: 2).

While the study of critical race theory and queer theory is not new, the links may not always be obvious. What appears to be an isolated story centering queerness is in fact a narrative of what it means to be queer in an African context. Marc Epprecht explores why "some people today, including Africans who are otherwise sharply critical of colonialism, racism and sexism, remain attracted to and defensive of colonial-era notions of unwavering African heterosexuality" (2008: 36). Sexuality in Africa needs to be 'rethought' and retaught, a sentiment that Signe Arnfred highlights: sexuality as a "conceptual structure of colonial and even post-colonial European imaginations" has "oscillated between notions of the exotic, the noble and the depraved savage", and Africans – and specifically, African sexuality – have been constructed as something other (2004: 7). As long as homosexuality is deemed 'un-African', race cannot be considered separately from queerness. Race and queerness are not mutually exclusive when the aftereffects of colonialism are still evident. As Christianity appears to be what influences the beliefs of the characters who oppose queerness, Mopai's use of religion as a weapon against homosexuality is clear. The need to assert heteronormativity is frequently illustrated throughout the text not only through Mmadjadji's corrective rape and the subsequent silence of her family's complicity, but also through the subtle rejection Bontle faced at church:

This is how Bontle was raised. She went to church three times a week and prayed with her mother every night. As Bontle grew older, however, she stopped attending church. She found

that her mother's church loved her and forgave her sins, but not all of her and not all of her sins. Not when she's a woman-loving sinner

(Mopai, 2019: 147).

The religious condemnation of homosexuality is a frequent motif in general culture; this theological rejection of queerness serves as evidence of how colonial Christianity ultimately intersects with homophobia, and often serves to justify violence against queers.

Funeka Soldaat founded Free Gender, "an LGBT rights organisation that specialises in helping victims of corrective rapes", after being "correctively gang raped and stabbed multiple times" (Strudwick, 2014) During this time, Soldaat recalls that "[her] body was there, but [she] was far, far away" (Strudwick, 2014). Similarly, during her rape, Mmadjadji recalls "her father's hoarse voice, […] his steaming-hot breath" and "the two ravens that suddenly flapped their wings on the windowsill" (Mopai, 2019: 144). Mmadjadji also comments, again echoing the words of a real-life victim, that "it was as if her body was no longer hers" (Mopai, 2019: 144). The bigotry and violence that are addressed in the story — despite the fact that Mopai has written a work of fiction — mirror our own contemporary cultural narratives. For example, Mmadjadji notes that her family had not asked who had impregnated her at such a young age, as she realised that "they did not ask […] because they knew" (Mopai, 2019: 145). This is also similar to the case of Simphiwe Thandeka, who was 13 years old when a male relative repeatedly questioned her clothing choices, as she was a tomboy – he then "raped her in bed one night, putting a pillowcase over her mouth" (Strudwick, 2014). When Thandeka "told her mother the next day – because she was bleeding heavily – her mother replied that it is a 'family matter'" (Strudwick, 2014). While this response seems shocking, according to Clare Carter, "familial collusion in corrective rape is common" (Strudwick, 2014). Bontle, Mmadjadji's wife, ultimately confronts Mmadjadji's mother about the assault: "you are her mother; the one person she expected to protect her" (Mopai, 2019: 149). Bontle continues to reveal that Mmadjadji was assaulted "by her own father, multiple times" and that the only thing Mmadjadji's mother did "was kill that baby" (Mopai, 2019: 149). Mmadjadji's mother is offended by Bontle's words, and responds in a manner that echoes the disconnected response of Simphiwe Thandeka's mother: "this is a family matter" (Mopai, 2019: 149). As such, Mmadjadji's narrative is very much a reflection of reality – Mmadjadji is a black lesbian woman, whose family ultimately ignored her rape.

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Due to this horrific past, Mmadjadji does not return home until a sickness overcomes her, and Bontle is under the impression that her family has bewitched her. It is revealed that Mmadjadji's denial of her calling as a god has caused her to fall ill. Once it is revealed that Mmadjadji is the next Storm Queen, as she is named by her Storm God grandfather, Mmadjadji states that she will not go through with it, especially after "everything this family has put [her] through" (Mopai, 2019: 153). Her uncle, "the one who suggested years ago that they rip her belly open to remove the thing that was inside her", pleads with Mmadjadji that the Storm God will punish them if she denies this title, to which she responds: "the same god who told you to kill the baby? The same god who says I can't love another woman?" (Mopai, 2019: 153). Mmadjadji's uncle murmurs, "clearly we were wrong. The Storm God would never choose someone he believes is evil" (Mopai, 2019: 153). Her uncle's declaration implies that Mmadjadji is deemed evil, until it is discovered that she is a God. Her uncle infers that it is her sexuality that made her an 'evil' being, whilst Mmadjadji suggests that it is his 'god' which prescribed such thinking. Apart from the insistence that homosexuality is wrong, it becomes evident that this prejudice against sexuality is only ascribed to humans, and that existing as a supernatural being has now absolved Mmadjadji of her alleged sins in the eyes of her community. Mmadjadji's family accepts the concept of her being a supernatural god and, with that, accepts her sexuality on the premise of the former. In accepting the reality of the Storm Gods and their 'godliness', Mmadjadji's family has indirectly accepted her queerness. Her queerness is affirmed through the inherent acceptance of these deities, thus mythology is used as a buffer, a means of reinscribing queerness in African culture.

Additionally, whilst seemingly absolving Mmadjadji of her sins by being a god, her father is apparently absolved of *his* sins by not being a god: when Mmadjadji is about to curse out her father for what he has done to her, Mmadjadji's aunt interrupts by retorting: "your father was not chosen by the gods. We only named him a god after your grandfather died because he was his firstborn son" (Mopai, 2019: 153). Mopai is rewriting the tale of Modjadji in an attempt to produce new gods whilst demoting old gods. Thus, there appears to be no consequence regarding Mmadjadji's rape, as the only response to Mmadjadji's declarations is that her father is not a god. Whilst Mmadjadji is only granted 'forgiveness' for her sins by becoming a god, her father is excused for his actions, chalking these actions up to his being only human. These gods are seen as being able to do no wrong. Mmadjadji's family's implication that what was done was not the

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actions of a god is reminiscent of the notion that "real men do not rape" – not only is there a lack of accountability through the idea of othering the perpetrator, there is also a lack of acknowledgement of the crime itself. The status of a god presupposes a person who is pure and not capable of evil – ultimately equating Mmadjadji's sin of being a lesbian to her father's sin of being a rapist: the inference of "evil", whether through being a rapist or a homosexual, does not exist once one has become a god. As one aunt rejects Mmadjadji's father's godly status, another aunt claims that the family is "ashamed of the things" that Mmadjadji's father has done to her, and that they are "terribly sorry" (Mopai, 2019: 154). Mmadjadji's aunt pleads with her to "become the god [she] was destined to be" (Mopai, 2019: 154). Once Mmadjadji appears to accept the title, she begins to recover from her illness:

> Mmadjadji's chipped skin begins to heal. Her bulging body resumes its original form. Her pimples ooze water, and her face becomes clear. […] When Mmadjadji has fully transitioned, she knows she is expected to heal her mother. […] She slowly kneels beside her and holds her thin hands. Her mother sturdily grasps her, lifts her chest and screams as if giving birth for the first time. To everyone's wonder, bit by bit, Mmadjadji's mother's body returns
>
> (Mopai, 2019: 154).

Mmadjadji is "the first woman in her family to become a god" and she is now to be called "the Storm Queen" (Mopai, 2019: 154). Despite being a work of speculative fiction, the story appears to be based on the real-life process of becoming a traditional healer, whereby one experiences difficulties or becomes ill while on their quest (Campbell, 2004). As African speculative fiction involves a fusion of technology, myth and fable, traditional healing too infuses "a collection of indigenous knowledge, practices, and beliefs" (Faku & Mhlangulana, 2021). The acceptance of this title appears to be the story's resolution, as it ends with descriptions of what appear to be Mmadjadji's powers:

> The sky unleashes lightning bolts like bombs, windows shatter, trees and mud-houses fall to the ground like splintering glass, dogs huddle into corners and howl in the dark, heavy rain pours to the ground as if cleansing the village
>
> (Mopai, 2019: 154).

The idea of a fresh start and change — in the form of Mmadjadji's new title — is further supported by the village's cleansing. As Mmadjadji starts her new life, the real cleansing of the community implies a metaphorical cleansing for her. Additionally, the narrative concludes with

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the same magical descriptions that it began with, demonstrating the cyclical and non-linear character of mythology: "Becoming a God" mimics this through its descriptive revolution.

Despite the fact that Mmadjadji's acceptance of her title brought about a resolution, it seems as though there are no meaningful repercussions for Mmadjadji's rape, other than an apology from the family. The struggle of Mmadjadji's first rejection of her Storm Queen calling is resolved by the healing of both her and her mother, but the story only briefly acknowledges Mmadjadji's rape and sexuality through an admission of shame. The subtext of the story suggests Mmadjadji's potential future while simultaneously denying her history. The reality of homophobia is therefore unavoidable, even in an imagined world. This story demonstrates how significant speculative fiction is as a way of thinking, reflecting modern concepts but still paying reverence to mythology and the past. "Becoming a God" speaks to both the emotional and imaginative through its creative depiction of queerness in a mythical creature. In this short story, queerness is not celebrated. It is shamed and erased, and only hesitantly accepted – or perhaps, rather, tolerated – through the use of an othered creature. This othered creature, the Storm Queen, challenges an established thought of gods to be pure and godly by inserting queerness, thus forcing her family to reconsider their notions of godlike characteristics.

Much like "Becoming a God", Ayodele Olofintuade's "The Woman With a Thousand Stars in Her Hair" makes use of a mythological creature to make space for queerness. Olofintuade's story was published in *Anathema: Spec from the Margins*, a speculative fiction magazine which features work by "Queer/Two-Spirit People of Colour/Indigenous creators" (Anathema: no date). The story's presence in this magazine already positions it within the queer and speculative realms. "The Woman with a Thousand Stars in Her Hair" portrays these themes through its queer protagonist, Ara, a water deity who is later revealed to be a Mami Wata figure, and her female lover:

> Mami Wata is a deity that has existed in Africa for as long as African history and culture can recollect. The half-fish half-human female water spirit is highly respected, feared and worshipped presenting a balance between dark, divine, mysterious and angelic existence. The deity is believed to be a woman with a half-human and half-fish appearance with the ability to transform wholly into any form of her choice
>
> (Johnson, 2018).

According to the griots and recorders of history, the myth of Mami Wata dates back to the oldest African communities (Johnson, 2018). Numerous men are claimed to have been abducted by the deity for her personal sexual gratification, thus it is believed that she possesses both good and evil equally (Johnson, 2018). While it is not immediately evident that Ara is a Mami Wata, the reader is instantly given hints of her mythical nature as the story opens with a description of her "[floating] up from the depth of the lagoon" as the "water moved around her, *in* her" (Olofintuade, 2017; emphasis added). Already, one can deduce that not only is Ara a creature of the water, but that she is also not completely human as "the cold, biting air" that she gulped "slightly [bruised] her newly formed air passage" (Olofintuade, 2017). Additionally, Ara converses with another character named Olokun, who also alludes to Yoruba mythologies. The story makes repeated references to Olokun, an "orisha spirit" in the Yoruba religion, a god of the ocean (Saunders &Allen, 2019). The dual references to both Olokun and Mami Wata cement this story within African, specifically West African or Yoruba, tradition. Ara's non-human qualities, such as her "newly formed air passage" and the fact that water moves *in* her, reinforce the story's preoccupation with the speculative, whilst the references to Mami Wata infer the mythological. As water already connotes fluidity and shifting, this fluidity is echoed in Ara's physical form in which she blurs the lines between human and non-human. Ara, and thus by extension Mami Wata, functions as a blank canvas on which the fluidity of identity and sexuality can be inferred and explored. Hence, Olofintuade uses the framework of gender fluidity, which has its roots in Yoruba mythology, to challenge the rigid notions of gender and performance that have been imposed on the human race. The story's preoccupation with myth is what allows for an introduction to the challenging of gender and sexuality standards as myths allow one to reformulate our dichotomous perceptions of the self, and instead subvert our thinking and expand it to include blurring heteronormative boundaries. As such, Ara, as Mami Wata, further challenges and subverts the categorical characterisation of Mami Wata by firstly blurring the boundaries of heteronormativity. Secondly, as well as subverting gender lines by having both human and non-human sexual partners, Ara challenges the boundary between human and non-human. In addition to her challenging of sexuality and the human/non-human line, Ara further evades rigid characterisations of her physical description. Typically, Mami Wata is described as "broadly [identifying] with Europeans" (Drewal, 1988: 161). While Ara's description satisfies the European description insofar as she has "blue eyes" and a nose that "[remembered] to turn

upwards at the tip", Ara is also described as having "skin as black as a starless night" and "woolly hair" (Olofintuade, 2017). This description of Ara is what both startles and captivates Famuyiwa, the man chosen to carry out Ara's mission.

As "African water spirits demonstrate a way to perform both masculinity and femininity" (Szeles, 2011: 193), both Olokun and Ara serve as archetypes to explore gender expression and sexuality in a manner that is not bound by societal prejudices or heteronormative prescriptions. The depiction of Mami Wata as a being without a sexual orientation—a creature who loves everyone—places sexuality at the heart of the story, making it clear that there is attraction to people of all genders, while also decentering it by presenting a character whose identity is unaffected by sexuality. Additionally, the use of Olokun, who is known not only to be a "hybrid human-fish", like Ara, but also "androgynous", speaks of an additional hybridity of gender expression. The fluidity of these water spirits correlates with the fluidity of their gender and sexuality, thus challenging heteronormative demands to perform "sexuality in binary terms, such as homosexual or heterosexual, masculine or feminine" (Szeles, 2011: 194). The African water spirit shows how to embody both masculine and femininity. She demonstrates both gender components, which increases her relatability to individuals with marginalised sexual orientations. Herein lies the myth's significance in terms of queerness.

 Additionally, a belief in Mami Wata and Olokun challenge the notion that homosexuality is un-African, thus allowing for the intersection of Africanness and homosexuality to be acknowledged. As it is already established, prior to the publication of "The Woman with a Thousand Stars in Her Hair", that Mami Wata and Olokun challenge gender and sexuality norms, the acceptance and reworking of these long-standing myths infer an inherent acceptance of deviations of gender and sexuality. Olofintuade has thus cast homosexuality in a light that is more palatable and acceptable: through the use of a widely-believed myth as Ara's sexuality, as the protagonist, is used neither as a plot device nor a complication within the story.

Instead, the main narrative of this story is a "mission" in which Ara has to "craft a child" with a "chosen man" in order to "diversify [their] gene pool" (Olofintuade, 2017). Ara is able to achieve her goal when she meets a man she decides would be the ideal person with whom to have her child. After her allotted time has passed, Ara must return to the water. Additionally, the story infers that Ara has a female lover who is also a water creature, Tamuno: "Ara turned her

head in the direction of the sea as her lover leapt from the water […] Ara feasted her eyes on Tamuno who remained suspended a little above the waves" (Olofintuade, 2017). The focus of the narrative is not on Ara's sexuality, meaning that her sexuality has become normalised, resulting in a plot that is indifferent to sexuality. In Olofintuade's fictional world, homosexuality is just a fact of life rather than a distinction or a discovery. Ara's sexuality is not shown to be offensive to either humans or other species. Instead, Ara's love is celebrated. Mami Wata, while being often perceived as feminine, does not typically have a typical sexual orientation, as echoed by Chimaraoke O. Izugbara: "Although some [African deities] have human or non-human sexual partners, frequently subverting gender lines and reproductive norms, others are ungenderedor have more than one gender and sexuality" (2011: 541). Instead, Ara claims human spouses without discrimination, regardless of their gender. Olofintuade echoes this notion when Olokun tells Ara that they "*are* love" and that "there is no one [they] cannot love, for that is [their] nature" (Olofintuade, 2017). Again, the idea of Mami Wata loving regardless of gender is illustrated through Ara's loving of both Tamuno and Famuyiwa, a female water figure and a male human, respectively. Ara's love transcends both gender and species. Futhermore, Ara is also depicted as having a relationship – whether it is romantic, or simply sexual, is not confirmed – with Olokun:

> She lifted up Ara's face and kissed her, deeply, a sensuous melding of lips that had Ara's nipples hardening and molten warmth spreading through the bottom of her belly. Olokun broke off the kiss when Ara started whimpering with desire."May you never return to the seas until you've accomplished your task." She whispered against Ara's lips: "You've been banished to brooks, and fountains, inland rivers, and floods"

<div align="right">(Olofintuade, 2017).</div>

When Ara protests against this mission, implying that this mission can be fulfilled in "new ways" such as through the use of "sperm banks", Olokun reminds Ara: "your ancestors signed up for this. For centuries we have had to do this in order to diversify our gene pool. You've been called to serve, and you will!" (Olofintuade, 2017). Olokun's references to "ancestors" and "centuries" ground this story in a mythical time whereby creatures such as Olokun and Ara have existed for centuries.

Although Ara's mission is to find a male human and conceive a child with him, she ultimately does come to care for Famuyiwa, despite claims from his father, Baba Santi, that Ara has turned

his son into a "baby-making machine" only "to be used and dumped just to contribute to a gene pool" (Olofintuade, 2017). While Baba Santi's reservations about Ara are not incorrect, as he accurately identified her nature as Mami Wata and her mission for a child, Ara has not deceived Famuyiwa. When Ara first meets Famuyiwa, she explains the reason for her arrival:

> ". . . In exchange for the baby we are willing to . . ." He finally dragged his gaze up to her eyes. They were the deep blue of the seas. No way a woman with skin as black as a starless night would have blue eyes. Particularly with that nose sprawled lazily between her cheekbones before remembering to turn upwards at the tip. ". . . A five-year contract will be signed by both parties, so there won't be any . . ."

> (Olofintuade, 2017).

Despite Ara's transparency regarding her mission, Baba Santi still rejects Ara's presence in his son's life. However, this is not based on sexuality – rather, Baba Santi rejects Ara for *what* she is: a Mami Wata figure. Although Ara is not reduced to her sexuality, Baba Santi's words indicate that she is not accepted amongst humans: "this girl is not human. She has evil in her heart" (Olofintuade, 2017). These words echo Mopai's protagonist, Mmadjadji, in which Mmadjadji is not human, thus she cannot have evil in her heart. Instead, Ara is considered evil *because* she is not human. She poses a challenge to the nuclear family's reproductive politics, which is exactly what queer people are accused of and criticised for.

"The Woman with a Thousand Stars in Her Hair" accurately echoes the myth of Mami Wata in which Ara seduces a male human and he is bound to her, Olofintuade has depicted homosexuality in a manner that is not necessarily an accurate reflection of reality: there is a complete tolerance, bordering on indifference, towards homosexuality. Olofintuade reconsiders what is regarded as standard because this mythological character, which is deemed 'foreign' to us, is not constrained by human assumptions of sexuality and gender. Similarly, the entire purpose of infusing myth into these narratives is to show that these characters are superhuman and not subhuman, and that they may lead a life where they can flourish as queer beings despite human ignorance. The use of revered creatures whose natures already challenge gender and sexuality norms and the acceptance of these myths automatically assumes the acceptance of homosexuality. The depiction of Ara and Olokun speaks to queerness in that there is no prescribed heteronormative representation of love in this story.

The environment in which we live is often characterised by chronological time and linearity, with hegemonic ideas of advancement serving as the markers for significant junctures in life. By anchoring the present in the past, mythology seeks to legitimise it while simultaneously distorting our perception of linear and progressive time. If heteronormativity and whiteness rely on progressive time, then blackness, gender, and sexuality must be taken into account within a non-linear temporality. Thus, mythological time is required, as a perfect non-linear temporality continuously challenges what we perceive to be tangible. To be able to formulate an understanding of time that accommodates blackness, queerness and sexuality concurrently, we turn to mythological temporalities to consider the manners in which these can exist freely without being bound by progressive time.

Speculative fiction is the perfect medium for employing mythological time since the premise of the genre makes it simple to engage with a concept of time that is not regarded as empirical. Speculative fiction allows for a concept of suspended time in which imagined regions can travel through any realm of time in pursuit of the possibilities of knowledge and our future. The speculative is predicated on circumstances that interact with the plausible or diverge from the empirical world of the author and audience. However, although mythology lives independently of the reality and time that we are aware of, it also continues to exist in a space that is still within reach.

Considering the juxtaposition of the outlawing of anti-gay crimes versus the truthful accounts of anti-gay violence, Mopai's story is valuable as a queer narrative as it speaks to the sociopolitical issue of being queer in a country that, on paper, is deemed progressive. Whilst law does not necessarily dictate tolerance within a country, the idea that South Africa has one of the most liberal attitudes towards the queer community in the continent seems like a tale of fiction when faced with unpacking the rampant homophobia present. Mopai has used a familiar South African myth – that of the Rain Queens of Balobedu – to depict a real and recurring issue in South Africa. The commentary that the story makes is that queer Black women are facing violence and hatred through the forms of corrective rape and religious shunning. By naming Mmadjadji as the next Storm Queen, Mopai illustrates that not even gods are exempt from the abuse experienced in this country. The sociopolitical value of mythological time in "Becoming a God" thus lies in

the fact that across all realms and temporalities – imagined or real – South Africa's intolerance towards queer Black women is felt and enacted.

Given that "The Woman with 1000 Stars in Her Hair" does not represent violent resistance to queerness, perhaps we can use this story as a reprieve and instead consider the value of employing mythology as a barrier between reality, and queerness and sexuality. Ara, a Mami Wata-like figure, and Olokun are not shunned nor rejected for their sexuality. Instead, these well-known mythological figures are used as a means to encourage acceptance of queerness and gender expression through an inherent acceptance of their existence.

Since mythology is concerned with tracing the human experience, we look to myth to validate our sense of self and, in turn, to validate identity politics. Additionally, a lot of common myths serve as guides for navigating and comprehending social standards. These authors have created a buffer for queerness to be widely accepted by incorporating it into a form of storytelling that is both 'safe' (in the sense that it is universal and ahistorical) and communal. Myths are universally accepted stories that appease the community, so queerness is more likely to be accepted too. A story that incorporates queerness and so affirms the human experience also affirms queer identities and experiences. By reflecting ingrained social values, mythology both validates existence and explains the guiding principles of our own universe.

Although the prevalence of queerness in mythology can be deemed repressed, its presence indicates a persistent influence in the collective consciousness of humans. By no means is queerness new to mythology, nor does it simply appear in mythologies from one culture. The acceptance of queerness can be encouraged if there is already an innate acceptance of one's own mythologies. Although the aforementioned short stories are works of fiction, they are based on the mythology and beliefs of the various groups. The use of speculative fiction to employ mythology has facilitated a potential acceptance of queerness. An argument against this connection can be made on the grounds that mythology is immutable, which renders it wholly incompatible with speculative fiction because it presupposes constant change. However, I contend that myth's adaptability is demonstrated by the fact that it has persisted across generations and geographical boundaries. The mythologies portrayed are deeply ingrained beliefs, and by incorporating queerness into one that already exists, accepting one helps to accept the other, and so the transition from sub- to superhuman is both encouraged and blurred by myth.

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Conclusion

In Other Wor(l)ds: A Summation

"It is change, continuing change, inevitable change, that is the dominant factor in society today. No sensible decision can be made any longer without taking into account not only the world as it is, but the world as it will be."

- Isaac Asimov

"The future is already here. It just isn't very evenly distributed."

- William Gibson

Speculative fiction, in all of its forms, offers readers and writers the chance to enter a different reality in which they can fully immerse themselves. This is the power of imagination and creativity. By using texts that foreground contemporary issues in speculative settings, educators can have crucial discussions through the distance created by these fictional settings – both physical and otherworldly. Analysing speculative fiction allows the reader to imagine a future where oppressive structures are overturned and it is particularly valuable as a tool to explore a future that liberates and explores new egalitarian realities for marginalised groups.

Speculative fiction has the potential to offer respite to oppressed groups who are historically sidelined and treated as different or 'alien' through the reimagining of reality. Thus, in African speculative fiction, the notion of the queer other can be explored using multiple settings: utopias, dystopias, and the world of mythology. In manipulating realms and timelines, one can assess whether queerness still faces consequences or whether it is tolerated.

This particular genre is important in exploring such issues in a manner that other genres may not be able to. Speculative fiction helps readers leave their inherent biases at the door when it comes to sociopolitical issues. Authors can discreetly nudge readers to take into account various viewpoints on current issues because these stories frequently take place in otherworldly places or societies that do not match our own. The genre's open parameters enable authors to confront these problems and pose hypothetical questions, leading to the creation of worlds that differ

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significantly from our own and frequently mirror or comment on aspects of real society. It can challenge the status quo, ponder alternative social structures, and elicit critical debates on pressing social concerns.

Speculative fiction can also offer cautionary advice, as seen in the dystopias examined. Because it enables narratives that challenge the numerous ways wherein dominant assertions about race, gender, and sexual identity are developed by, and subsequently reinforce, colonial expectations, speculative fiction is a useful medium for both queer readers and writers. Some speculative fiction narratives may be gloomy, but other speculative fiction may interpret the past in a reparative way to envisage worlds that are more optimistic.

To evaluate how queerness is negotiated under various circumstances, each chapter presented a distinct version of a hypothetical future. In the first chapter, queerness was shown as being normal and embraced in what appeared to be an idealised future. Both "What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky" by Lesley Nneka Arimah and "Njuzu" by Tendai Huchu represent this idea of a utopian universe in the sense that science has raised expectations for a better future. In Arimah's story, queer characters seem to be treated without repercussion. The main character of the story is Nneoma, who uses her employment as a distraction from her recent breakup with her girlfriend. Homosexuality is not portrayed in the text as something to accept or reject; rather, it is just presented as a fact. Because of this, the stories' implicit normalcies suggests a day in the future when homosexuality will be accepted. In a similar vein, "Njuzu" depicts a world in which technological development has made human settlement on extraterrestrial worlds possible. There is apparent acceptance of same-sex partnerships in the narrative because the narrator and her lover Tarisai do not experience homophobia. Huchu's insistence on calling Tarisai her "husband" nevertheless supports heteronormativity. Each narrative depict utopias with the notion that significant technological advancements translating into a more 'advanced' acceptance of queerness, despite the comparable theme of grief in both works.

However, there may never be acceptance or even tolerance of queerness because dystopias are more common than utopias, as illustrated in Chapter 2.The stories – "Two Weddings for Amoit" by Dilman Dila, "Debut" by Wole Talabi and "Female Computer Wanted, Apply Within" by Innocent Chizaram Ilo – serve as a reminder of both the past and the future. When contemporary politics are used as a model for a projected future, the result is often a dystopian fiction that

adheres to the constraints of our own reality. This chapter analysed African speculative stories that take place in a dystopian society in which homosexuality is not accepted. The aforementioned authors have mimicked the reality for many queer people today in their portrayal of a future in which being queer is rejected.Ng'endo, in Wole Talabi's "Debut", had a successful career that suffers as a result of the exposure of her sexual orientation. The sexual preference of Ng'endo is hinted at, but not expressed. Ng'endo is consequently compelled to move to Lagos. The short story emphasises Ng'endo's abilities and the value she adds to the workplace while quietly pointing out how queer individuals continue to experience institutionalised discrimination at work, particularly in light of the fact that homosexuality has been declared illegal. Homosexuality is again shown to be outlawed in "Two Weddings for Amoit" by Dilman Dila. The narrative centers on Amoit and Aceng, two lesbian lovers who reside in a homophobic and technologically oppressive Christian culture in East Africa. Here, the so-called "Christian Utopia" is exposed for what it truly is: a civilisation built on dishonesty, with artificial morality used to control its populace. As a result, there is the appearance of a utopia — at least until queerness is considered.F inally, homosexuality is shown between robots rather than people in Innocent Chizaram Ilo's "Female Computer Wanted, Apply Within".. Dell and Yasmine, a lesbian robot couple, are the focus of the narrative. As was already established, homosexuality is not intrinsically immoral here and there is no proof of discrimination based on sexual preference. Dell, though, is only "accepted" after being sexualised. These three stories portray a more technologically advanced future, similar to the worlds seen in Chapter 1, which suggests a world where humanity appears to have advanced. Yet there are still drawbacks to homosexuality, despite the context being one of speculative fiction.

The final chapter, Chapter 3, looked at the relationship between African speculative fiction, mythology, and queerness. In her work of speculative fiction, Ayodele Olofintuade makes overt references to mythology, particularly mythology involving water spirits, in "The Woman with 1000 Stars in Her Hair". Keletso Mopai is inspired by the Rain Queens – supernatural beings who have the ability to control the weather. "The Woman with a Thousand Stars in Her Hair" features a queer female couple, as it follows the story of Olokun and Ara, who both appear to be water creatures, likened to Mami Wata. Ara, the main character, is not defined by her sexuality, though it is clear that she is rejected by society. Ara's queerness is not disapproved of; it is her existence that is not accepted. Due to the use of revered creatures whose natures already defy

gender and sexuality norms, accepting these legends inevitably means accepting homosexuality. Ara and Olokun's portrayal appeals to queerness because this story does not have a preset heteronormative idea of love. Lastly, although Mopai's tale includes a protagonist who is shunned for her sexual orientation, this queerness is accepted after it is discovered that she is a supernatural being.This chapter examined at how Mmadjadji's identity is used to traverse the text's rejection and embracing of queerness. The demand for a supernatural entity to introduce and ultimately accept queerness shows that queerness is still viewed unfavorably in society. Both stories appear to examine queerness through the employment of mythological or supernatural characters.

Even though each short story in a chapter explores a different aspect of queerness, it is clear from all of them that queerness will not be allowed under the laws of today. Being queer is expected to be rejected in a queer dystopia, but there seemed to be some promise in what may be called a queer 'utopia' and even in mythological universes. However, a closer examination indicates that a queer 'utopia' requires either a significant departure from current social norms or significant scientific advancement. Thus, it is unlikely that queerness will be accepted anytime in the near future. Queerness only seems to be permitted when a legendary or supernatural being is used as a barrier to persuade people to embrace or even acknowledge it. When the myth is acknowledged, tolerance for queerness is implied. However, the alien's existence is a necessity because humans will not accept homosexuality. These short stories are works of fiction, and they all come to the same unavoidable conclusion: queerness will exist on other worlds with consequences, just as it does in our own.

The general finding of this dissertation is that the speculative genre in Africa is evolving into an effective force for forging new connections to the potential future. It has also evolved into the perfect platform for exploring queerness. Regardless of how broadly defined it is, speculative fiction transcends time since it imagines different realities. However, the distance produced by the different temporalities enables these authors to make social and political commentary in a sometimes subtle manner. I contend that further and future research on the subject matter presented can include works that find means of allowing queerness to exist freely in speculative fiction, perhaps in realities that closely mimic our own. It would be interesting to note whether it is only African speculative fiction authors who view queerness in such a bleak manner, or

whether Western authors present realms of queer possibilities. Because sexuality and race, culture and context are intertwined, it would be interesting to see if these intersectionscan coexist exclusivelyin queer narratives, even on speculative scenarios based on earth.If speculative fiction can offer any imagined world, why should some of these tales of limitless possibility not envisage a world where being queer is considered normal, and even celebrated?

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