

What If Perhaps: How Ekari Mbvundula disobeys history

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ABSTRACT

Academic discussion of the science fiction (SF) genre has engaged prominently since the 1970s with the ‘novum’, defined by Darko Suvin as a type of cognitive information allowing a SF text to deviate from reality in a reasonable, rational manner. Theorists have problematized the term’s assumption of an overarching ‘cognitive’ epistemology. In the wake of these debates, this article focuses on one particular subgenre of SF — alternate history (AH) — showing how Ekari Mbvundula disrupts it with her 2015 short story “Montague’s Last”. Just as the Suvinian novum is problematic for relying on the assumption of secular epistemology’s global universality, so too is AH’s dependence on the assumption of a singular, knowable, and universally agreeable historical narrative from which to deviate, because it overlooks how Eurocentric understandings of history are determined by global power relations, in both the past and the present. While the question inherent to AH is usually thought to be ‘What if x had happened differently to the historical narrative’, I argue that Mbvundula’s story posits that ‘Perhaps x has in fact happened differently to the historical narrative’. The story thus disobeys Eurocentric assumptions both in dominant critical definitions of SF and in History’s grand narrative.

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They say great things are achieved in the dead of night.
(Mbvundula 2015, 14)

Scholarly attention paid to African science fiction (SF) has tended to focus substantially on the manner in which it routinely disobeys common aspects of the SF genre. Mark Bould, for example, concludes his 2015 synopsis of African SF by saying that it ‘challenges us to rethink our understanding of the genre’ (17), while Moradewun Adejunmobi maintains that African SF routinely reveals how ‘problematic’ it is that studies of the SF genre tend towards a ‘strict separation between works incorporating supernatural or magical elements and those works exploring the outcomes of speculative technologies’ (268). This article follows in the wake of such critical engagements, paying particular attention to the SF sub-genre of alternate history (AH). I argue that the 2015 short story “Montague’s Last” by Malawian writer Ekari Mbvundula is a noteworthy example of an African text disobeying

Eurocentric understandings of AH as a genre. The story flatly disobeys the Eurocentric notion that history is a singular, knowable, and universally agreeable narrative, by recognising deliberate and irretrievable colonial erasures of histories from the global South. In particular, “Montague’s Last” ties these erasures to problematic assumptions that the global North is historically a site for progress and modernity, while residents of the global South are mere static consumers.

Mbvundula’s strategies of disobedience are comparable to the critically remarked ways in which African SF disobeys Darko Suvin’s landmark definition of the SF genre in the 1970s. The ‘novum’ forms the foundation of this definition, a term coined by Suvin to describe the event/device in a work of SF that deviates from commonly accepted views of the world. For Suvin, a novum entails ‘cognitive information [that] is a totalising phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author’s and implied reader’s norm of reality’ (1979, 64). To offer a popular example, in *Spider-Man* (Raimi 2002), the novum is the bite of a radioactive spider, which changes an ordinary highschooler into someone with superhuman abilities. Suvin’s assumption of a grand, secular global epistemology in relying on the idea of ‘cognition’ to differentiate the SF genre from fantasy is problematic, since cultural understandings of the epistemological processes implicit in ‘cognition’ vary. Suvin suggests that the novum must be a ‘strange newness’, as opposed to an ‘exact recreation of the author’s empirical environment’ (373). The problem with this argument is that an author’s idea of the empirical might very well be different to a reader’s. Suvin’s concept of the novum makes the SF genre problematically dependent on locale, belief and identity.

SF from the global South in particular has often used innovations (nova) that challenge Suvin’s supposition of a universal secular epistemology implied in ‘cognition’. One of the most common ways in which African SF has practised such disobedience is for texts to have ‘supernatural abilities associated with indigenous spirituality interface with technoscience to include forms of mysticism, occultism and magic in their nova’ (Adejunmobi 2016, 268). Ian MacDonald has dubbed the term ‘jujutech’ (2014, 42) to describe this aesthetic, and this article applies MacDonald’s term to Mbvundula’s story. I start by contextualising the generic conventions of AH as defined thus far, relying on the work done in this regard in Giampaolo Spedo’s unpublished but valuable 2009 doctoral thesis. I then provide a discussion of the relationship between the chronicled history of STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) and the global South, which is routinely colonial in attitude and assumption, and which forms an important context for an informed reading of “Montague’s Last”. Lastly, I show how Mbvundula structurally arranges the historical speculation in her story to pointedly disobey the Eurocentric conventions of AH, and to challenge the aforementioned colonial attitudes.

The generic conventions of AH

AH is a speculative fiction genre that premises to consider the outcome of some historical event having happened differently. Spedo (2009, 9) defines the genre as follows:

AH is written as if it were historical fiction, containing characters and events partly or totally invented, set against a real historical background, but it is read as absolutely fictional, as it describes events that never happened. In contrast, historical fiction is written and read as essentially realistic, if not necessarily real in all its parts.

At its core, AH is concerned with asking the question: 'What if *x* had happened differently?'. For example, Philip K. Dick's *Man in the High Castle* ([1962] 1987) asks what would have happened if the Axis powers had won the Second World War. Recent prominent examples of AH texts include: Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policeman's Union* (2007), which supposes that Jewish people fleeing Europe in the 1940s were provisioned land in Alaska rather than in Palestine; Stephen King's *11/22/63* (2011), wherein the protagonist prevents the assassination of John F. Kennedy; and HBO's miniseries *The Plot Against America* (Simon and Burns 2020), wherein Franklin D. Roosevelt loses the 1940 U.S. Presidential election to antisemitic aviation hero Charles Lindbergh. Even Marvel Film Studios, one of the most commercially successful media franchises in history, has capitalized on this genre through their *What If ... ?* anthology series (Bradley 2021), that considers how events within the Marvel Cinematic Universe would differ from the canonical timeline had certain events occurred differently.

The form of these texts has arguably relied upon readers' endorsement of a specific historical narrative, from which the fictional text deviates at a specific point. Spedo calls this point of divergence the '*nexus event*, the turning point in history on which the alternative timeline is based' (8, italics in original). In order for the AH text to function as a form of historical imagination, these nexus events need to be able to be quite precisely historically located for readers — so much so, in fact, that the website *uchronia.net* provides a catalogue of AH texts chronologically by their nexus events, and users are able to search for AH texts by the year (i.e., the actually occurring historical moment) in which their nexus event occurs.

Just as the Suvinian novum describes a technological novelty in SF, so too is it possible to describe the nexus event as a historical novelty (or, a form of novum) in AH. If the novum describes the point where a SF text deviates from a reader's understanding of technological possibility, then the nexus event describes the point where an AH text deviates from one's understanding of a sequence of historical events. It may even be tempting to suggest that AH articulates its own version of the novum more cleanly than most SF. However, significant work has been done by historians to reveal the occlusions related to how supposedly clear-cut historical occurrences have taken place. These occlusions have been particularly common in recording the history of Africa and the global South, as explained by Oyekan Owomoyela (2002):

[T]he situation arose in which colonialist-authorized texts dominated, indeed almost monopolised, the library of information on Africa until near the beginning of the decolonisation era. Whereas, therefore, with regard to the history of places like Europe or China, the historian's problem might be how to decide among conflicting textual truth claims, with regard to African history (when its existence was acknowledged), only one body of text was available, the colonialist one, which for the most part favoured fiction over fact. (220)

STEM histories and the global South

As an example of particular relevance to my argument in this paper, consider the numerous revelations by historians of work done in the field of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) by black people throughout history, which had often previously been undermined, forgotten or erased. STEM-related events are of interest to me here because the meaning of 'scientific cognition' is precisely what is at stake in Darko Suvin's

understanding of the novum. One example of science-related historical occlusion is Alice Ball, who discovered a cure for leprosy in 1915. She died soon after, and two of her colleagues went on to publish her research under their own names, without attributing any credit to her, an error that went uncorrected for almost a century (Ricks 2023). Another example commonly retold in various publications in the last few years (Melbourne 2019; Gill 2021; Jennings 2023) is the story of Edmond Albius, a horticulturist from Réunion, born into slavery in 1829. He invented a simple method of quickly pollinating the vanilla orchid by hand, which revolutionised vanilla farming in French colonies in the nineteenth century. A Frenchman named Jean Michel Claude Richard falsely claimed to have discovered the technique himself. Albius was imprisoned for five years and died in poverty, yet his method of pollinating vanilla is still used today. A good example of this kind of historical revelation reaching a wide audience is the 2016 film *Hidden Figures* (Melfi 2016), which tells the real-life story of three black women working for NASA as mathematicians during the Space Race, whose contributions to space exploration were unjustly overlooked.

These examples reveal two things relevant to the purposes of my argument. Firstly, it is clear that the nexus event's reliance on a supposedly 'objective' idea of history poses a similar problem for AH to the problem that the novum's reliance on an overarching 'cognitive' scientific epistemology poses for SF. This is especially true for areas of contention between historians, such as recent debates over the gender identity of the Roman emperor Elagabalus (Burga 2023), or the rather heated academic debate between Martin Bernal and Mary Lefkowitz about Afroasiatic influences on Ancient Greek philosophy and culture (Bernal 1996; Lefkowitz 1996). Where there is room for disagreement about historical events, the nexus events deviating from the established version become problematic as criteria for the definition of a genre. Even beyond the question of historical accuracy, a literary nexus event is vulnerable to the same kind of limitations in explanatory power as 'cognition' is with regard to SF. This can be seen with particular clarity where Spedo attempts to consider how AH as a subgenre of SF must necessarily delineate itself from fantasy:

Indeed, even the science fiction/fantasy dichotomy could be preserved at subgeneric level and help separate alternate histories based on plausible [...] nexus events from those in which the nature of the change is more or less fantastic, and the results so conflicting with the existing world that they can hardly be derived from it — in a sense, a fantasy does not even need a nexus event to explain it, so alien its ontology is to ours. (2009, 98)

If the nexus event in AH must be 'cognitively plausible' in the same way as Suvin's novum, then it too cannot hope to establish generic consensus. Spedo's formulation begs the question — whose ontology does it refer to?

Secondly, these examples show that women and people of colour — and especially those from the global South — have frequently been omitted from histories of science. Arguably, this has resulted in a disappointingly common global assumption that these groups have historically contributed hardly anything to the historical change of STEM fields, which is inaccurate. One clear indication of the pervasiveness of this assumption can be seen in the field of translation studies, a field that may seem arbitrary for the topic at hand, but one that I have chosen to discuss deliberately because of its apparent arbitrariness, in order to show how widely these problematic assumptions pervade. It is commonly understood in translation studies that direct translation between two languages

is sometimes impossible because of essential cultural differences embedded within the two languages in question. In order to explain this point, teachers of translation commonly refer back to a well-known quote, dubbed in 1960 by Willard van Orman Quine: ‘Who would undertake to translate “Neutrinos lack mass” into the jungle language?’ (69). The continued contemporary use of this quote as example in translation studies (Eco 2003, 22–23; Rickard 2009, 14; Saussy 2015, 219) shows that those who don’t speak the major European or Asian languages — i.e., many residents of the global South — are generally and unquestionably expected to have no productive role in — or even a grasp of — STEM beyond being consumers, and certainly not to have had a role historically.

This attitude infiltrates mass media too. In June 2020, science writer Matt Brady scoured various internet lists of ‘Top movie and TV scientists, doctors and inventors of all time’, the kinds of list articles that appear on popular media websites like *BuzzFeed*, *Rotten Tomatoes* and *Wired*. He found an alarming lack of black representation in these lists of characters. On average, less than 10% of the people on these lists were black, far fewer than that were black women, and hardly any were black Africans. On several of the lists, black characters were outnumbered by puppets. This imbalance is, happily, becoming less frequent because black fictional characters working in STEM fields (notably including black women and/or black Africans) are becoming more frequent in commercial film and television from the global North. Some notable examples of these include Wakandan scientists like Shuri in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, robotics technician Bernard Lowe in *Westworld* (Joy and Nolan 2016), and various black doctors like Miranda Bailey, Richard Webber and Preston Burke in *Grey’s Anatomy* (Rhimes 2005).

“Montague’s Last” by Ekari Mbvundula

These Northern assumptions about the global South’s relationship with STEM provide an important context for Ekari Mbvundula’s “Montague’s Last”. The story might be considered unusual in Mbvundula’s oeuvre, in that it is set in the past, while the rest of her speculative fiction is generally set in the future. However, it follows a thematic concern consistent throughout much of her work, in that it critiques and disobeys overarching colonial perceptions of the role played by the global South — and particularly her home nation of Malawi — in the historical and present development of STEM fields. For example, in 2024, she and fellow Malawian Muthi Nhlema co-authored *Mombera Rising*, an anthology of three interconnected Afrofuturist short stories, which imagine the future of the Ngoni nation having ‘the agency to step away from colonial notions of progress and modernity to manage their natural environments on their own terms, recalling their own knowledge and belief systems’ (Ghosh 2024, para. 4). These stories, set between 2054 and 2115, are set in the Mombera Kingdom, an eco-utopian projection of the Mzimba Kingdom after ‘the Ngoni people [...] return, literally and figuratively, to their homeland and culture, and rebalance their relationship with nature’ (Nhlema and Mbvundula 2024, 14). In the stories, this environmental rehabilitation has been achieved ‘using [the Ngoni people’s] traditional beliefs about nature, as well as technology’ (Nhlema and Mbvundula 2024, 95), evincing Mbvundula’s emphasis on positive technological invention, development and agency in the global South.

“Montague’s Last” was first published in the third edition of African speculative fiction magazine *Omenana* in 2015, and later in the international weekly speculative fiction

magazine *Strange Horizons*. The story's protagonist, Montague, is an enslaved black African inventor who has been imprisoned for life. He is charged with kidnapping children and torturing them with his mechanical inventions, something he only did on the orders of his slavemaster, who was merely 'charged a fine and three years imprisonment whilst his slave [Montague] was thrown into this dungeon for the remainder of his life' (Mbvundula 2015, 19). Montague shows deep remorse for his actions, writing 'Je suis desolé' (19) (meaning 'I am sorry') in his own blood on a scrap of paper, and believing that '[o]nly death, and hell [...] was truly all he deserved after what his terrible machines had done to countless children' (16), and that 'their blood was his only legacy' (16). However, he also 'revel[s] in another's pain' (17) when striking a prison guard later in the story, complicating any sympathy readers may develop for him.

The story takes place entirely within Montague's early 19th-Century French jail cell, a 'wretched dungeon' (14) on a floor of the prison reserved for 'criminals guilty of the most heinous crimes — *Les mechants Hommes*' (15-16, italics in original). Here, Montague is secretly building a newly invented machine using only the limited supplies he can find within the bounds of his cell. His machine is made solely with 'wood from the window sill and a bench leg, and metal from the food trays. It [has] been hammered together using a second bench leg and shaped using a corner of a tray and his bare hands' (17). He is building his contraption in something of a maniacal hurry, because — as is soon revealed — he is on the cusp of death from an apparent respiratory infection, indicated by him coughing blood. At a pivotal moment, Montague decides that the only way to finish the construction of his machine is through the use of blood magic, acknowledging that the exhaustive effort this magic requires 'might finish him' (15). He focuses on a wooden splinter that is deeply embedded into his hand, magically turning it into a metallic needle. This is the first real hint at the nature of the contraption, which is only explicitly identified in the story's final sentence. Soon after finishing his work, he is beaten to death by prison guards. He hides the machine from them, also with the use of magic. He earlier bribed the undertaker, a man named Barthélemy Thimonnier, to retrieve the machine for him while collecting his corpse. Thimonnier gathers up Montague's corpse, his machine, and two silver coins Montague hid alongside the machine in order to pay the bribe. The story ends with the line: 'Weighing down the undertaker's robes was the world's first sewing machine' (Mbvundula 2015, 19). The final two words amount to the revelation that Montague's machine is in fact the world's first sewing machine, which was actually invented by a French man named Barthélemy Thimonnier.

Reading "Montague's Last" as postcolonially disobedient AH

On the one hand, it seems fair to categorise this story as AH, since it imagines a historical event being different to the historical narrative; Montague invents the sewing machine rather than Thimonnier. On the other hand, AH then goes on to imagine how the historical narrative would be different after that change occurred. This does not occur in "Montague's Last" though, since Montague invents it in secret, and readers are left with the implication that Thimonnier took credit for the invention himself, and the world accepted Thimonnier as the inventor of the sewing machine. While AH imagines one change to the historical narrative, and the consequent difference in the historical narrative after that point, in Mbvundula's story there is no discernible difference to the historical narrative after the nexus

event. One might even be tempted to suggest that the story makes plausible the idea that the sewing machine was in actuality not invented by Thimmonier, but by a black inventor who went uncredited. This reading as conspiracy theory — which Spedo defines as ‘a type of discourse claiming that an alteration to past records (rather than events) did take place and some crucial information has been kept secret as a consequence’ (9) — falls short of describing the story though, since it is not under the pretence to be proving or disproving any fact or historical narrative. The text is not concerned with proof at all, but with assumption.

Instead, the story reads far more compellingly as an allegory of the historical occlusions of black inventors and scientists. Frederic Jameson writes that ‘far from dramatizing the identity of the political and the individual or psychic, the allegorical structure tends to essentially separate these levels in some absolute way’ (1986, 79). The story functions primarily through disrupting readers’ assumptions about black contributions to STEM history, rather than relating to any assumptions about the sewing machine specifically. As Mbvundula herself states in an interview:

It’s an intriguing thought that there are these secret major contributions black people made to history that were hidden, intentionally or not, by historians. Granted, it is highly unlikely that Montague’s particular invention really was created by a black person, but I liked to explore the sense of surprise the reader gets when they learn something against their initial assumptions. This surprise is natural in most of us, because we are conditioned into assuming black people are nothing more than consumers. (in Ryman 2017, para. 7)

The primary manner in which the story achieves this emphasis on assumption is through the narrative’s intentionally delayed release of certain information, which plays on the reader’s implied presuppositions. The undertaker’s name is not revealed to the reader for a long time in the text; even when Montague performs an act of magic to ensure that only Thimmonier will be able to find his machine, the wording of the incantation he delivers deliberately hides Thimmonier’s name from the reader: ‘You who are manifested from my mind, shall be revealed to no one else, but one’ (17). The narration does not reveal this person’s identity just yet, only narrating that ‘[t]hen he spoke the man’s name’ (17). When Thimmonier comes into the cell to assess and remove the corpse, he is for some time only called ‘the undertaker’ (18), an indeterminacy that forces readers to at first disregard his significance; after all, up until very late in the story, readers are not led by the text to anticipate any historical references. Something similar is done with the sewing machine itself, in that it goes unnamed until very late in the story — in fact, only in its final two words. However, while the identity of the undertaker seems fairly unimportant to the story until the very end, Montague’s machine is treated with great focal emphasis and overt mystery throughout the text, despite only being called ‘it’ for the most part. This manufactured suspense is able to both create intrigue and to ultimately surprise the reader with previously unexpected reference to the historical narrative. The surprise here results from the sewing machine being an important invention in scientific history, which appears to contradict the magical, animist events earlier in the story, because those events are tied to a non-rational epistemology that is not present in science’s historical narrative as dictated by the global North.

What results is a clash between two epistemological systems that seem incongruous to Suvinian ‘cognition’, but which are frequently bridged in African SF texts in various

interesting ways, one of which is the aforementioned ‘jutech’ aesthetic. “Montague’s Last” does so by presenting the reader with a novum based in magic, which results in a mechanical (i.e., secular scientific) invention that has revolutionised global industrial production. The novum in the story is not secular-scientific, and this subverts the conventional understanding of STEM history controlled by the global North, in itself metatextually questioning global assumptions about not only African innovation, but also animist modes of cognition.

To make this point, I cite from the section of the story where the jutech novum occurs:

Now one more attachment was left, the most fragile component. Even with the risk that it might finish him, he would have to use magic ... Over the years he had developed his own brand, some Bantu mysticism he had learnt in the Homeland, long before he and his countrymen were taken, mixed with French alchemy which he had imbibed from his second master. (Mbvundula 2015, 15)

The story places significant weight on this part of the story, just by the sheer amount of time and words spent dwelling upon it in what is a rather short story on the whole. It details how Montague performs his magic, and the physical toll it takes on his depleted body:

He began the incantation, spoken in a grinding mix of French and Chewa. ‘You who were once a tree became this bench. You who were once my bench became the tool in my hands. Now you will change ... from mother tree to father silver. Your life of wood is no more.’

His thumb kept still over the splinter and he concentrated, barely breathing. He felt coldness spread through his capillaries from the back of his head. He willed it to flow into this left hand, willed it to accumulate on his thumb, then into his palm. He felt a sharpening pain but he struggled to maintain control. He gasped and slumped forward using his elbows to support his weight. (Mbvundula 2015, 15)

The result is that Montague is able to extract a ‘perfectly straightened’ metal needle from his hand (16).

The ‘Bantu mysticism’ behind his magic is vague, but epistemologically evidently operates from the perspective of animist materialism, wherein the world is being ‘continually re-enchanted’ (Garuba 2003, 266). This can be seen in the manner in which the splinter ‘change[s]’ under his influence, as though imbued with life by the parental forms of ‘mother tree’ and ‘father silver’, showing an animist belief in all things being alive. Montague relying on animism to create technology here presents a good example of an epistemologically divisive jutech novum, showing the intersections in modern global epistemologies. These intersections are further emphasised by the blend of ‘Bantu mysticism’ and ‘French alchemy’, and by his incantation mixing ‘French and Chewa’. Mbvundula’s jutech plot device thus blurs the distinctions between techno-scientific knowledge and indigenous, animist knowledge by inherently suggesting that notions of an epistemological divide between these apparent binaries are unfounded, and that human cognition is far more diffuse than the Suvnian novum purports. The animist perspective of the story charges the sewing machine itself with a force of life too. It is not attempting to change readers’ understanding of the sewing machine specifically; rather, the jutech sewing machine functions as an allegory for the faultiness of unwavering secular-scientific cognition.

The story also functions as an allegory for the occlusions of black, female and African contributions to scientific history. It does so through a disobedient adaptation of AH generic conventions, since the world achieved by the story’s resolution is not evidently

different from present reality. As a rule, AH ‘posits a counterfactual version of history which is presented as actual in the narrative, but is contradicted by the records’ (Spedo 2009, 7), but this is not true of Mbvundula’s tale. This is not because the story is attempting a form of historical revisionism; rather, the story’s ultimate achievement is to challenge readers’ assumptions, rather than to challenge the historical record. The short story form — which Graham Huggan notes is an ‘ideal vehicle for radical social critique’ (1994, 63) — facilitates this generic disobedience; where AH novels tend to imaginatively explore various facets of their fictional historical settings, the brevity of the short story form prohibits expansive world-building. The conceit of “Montague’s Last” requires the reader to imagine no more than a single, brief historical moment being lost to time, small enough to perhaps be a plausible omission from the historical record. Thus, “Montague’s Last” manages to disobey the boundary between what is plausible within a science fiction narrative, and what is plausible in real history.

What is achieved by balancing between these two modes is a new kind of historical speculation that is inherently postcolonial in nature. Benita Parry — with a notable echo of Suvin’s wording — describes ‘the ‘post’ in postcolonial [as] ‘a space-clearing gesture’ signifying a site for the production of theoretical work which, although indelibly marked by colonialism, transcends its *cognitive mode*’ (1997, 4, my emphasis). “Montague’s Last” does just this, by directly addressing the reader’s colonial assumptions, and forcing them to be reconsidered within the context of the global South being historically dictated in a colonial manner, with what Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things* (1997) calls ‘History’ with a capital H. Where the historical narrative has created widespread assumption about STEM innovation by people of colour and in the global South, Mbvundula’s story manages to address the reader directly, to interrogate their own complicity in the creation of these assumptions.

“Montague’s Last” reveals that, just as the concept of novum in SF is untenable because of its uncritical reliance on a single global epistemology, so too the nexus event in AH must be considered untenable because of its reliance on a single known history. The story’s epistemological disobedience highlights and challenges Eurocentric historicism. Where contemporary African SF has pointed out that the novum is impossible in a world of varying epistemologies, so too “Montague’s Last” points out that the AH genre depending on a uniform and universal understanding of a supposedly objective historical narrative is problematic. The question inherent in the AH narrative has always been ‘*What if x happened differently to the historical narrative*’. This framing as a question implies that it is entirely speculative, and often rather playful, in no way suggesting any truth in its alternate narrative. In contrast, Mbvundula’s story posits that ‘*Perhaps x happened differently to the historical narrative*’, a suggestion rather than a question, aware that the historical narrative is imperfectly knowable due to colonial erasure. It contends that colonial epistemological assumptions should not be allowed to dictate what is and is not plausible. This seemingly subtle but actually rather substantial difference in postulation allows the story to actively and productively disobey historical determinism, importantly regionalising conceptions of the world away from the novum’s insistent singularity.

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