

Space Nostalgia in *The Old Drift*

Memorializing Matha Mwamba, the Afronaut

Maria Menzel

University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands

ABSTRACT

In the two former Cold War superpowers, the USA and the Soviet Union, memorializations of the space race serve as sites of nostalgia, fueling feelings of national pride. This paper investigates this in a Zambian context by analyzing how the history of Zambia's participation in the space race is fictionalized in Namwali Serpell's novel *The Old Drift*. The novel creates a fictionalized account of the childhood and adolescence of Zambia's first female Afronaut, Matha Mwamba, filling the silence in the archives regarding the life of this marginalized historical figure. Significantly, Serpell uses the form of the *Bildungsroman* when reimagining Matha's private history, framing Zambia's period of transition from British colony to independent nation state as one of upheaval and transformation. In mourning the lost future of Zambia's failed space program, the narrative engages in reflective nostalgia as defined by Svetlana Boym. Any narratives of progress are merged with tales of personal hardship. A critically nostalgic approach allows Serpell to illustrate how past visions of the future can serve as inspirations for the present.

KEYWORDS

space race, archival silence, *Bildungsroman*, reflective nostalgia, restorative nostalgia

INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen a resurgence of space nostalgia, especially in the marketing for so-called space tourism companies such as Blue Origin, Space X, and Virgin Galactic, which promise to make space travel accessible to the commercial market. Especially Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin heavily memorializes the American space program of the 60s, with rockets named after famous former astronauts, such as the New Armstrong (Williams 2021). Nostalgia for the space era was also politicized during Donald Trump's presidency, with the new military branch of the United States Space Force being created in 2019 (Kennedy 2019). Similarly, in the Soviet Union, 'outer space supremacy was portrayed as a building block of Soviet (supra)national identity' (Majsova 2017, 205), with the period still being a source of national pride for its successor state, Russia. In both nations, the space race is looked back on by the dominant culture as a time of technological and scientific progress (Majsova 2017, 198; Launius 2008, 209).

There has been much academic writing chronicling the events of the space race between the two Cold War superpowers and its cultural and political effects (McDougall 1985). However, it is a

misconception that only the US and the Soviet Union were competing in the race to outer space. My interest lies in examining forms of space nostalgia from countries whose participation in the space race was (at least on the surface) wholly unsuccessful. The cultural object I have chosen to examine this phenomenon through is the novel *The Old Drift*, published in 2019, in which Zambian-American author Namwali Serpell fictionalizes Zambia's participation in the space race. Due to its lack of success, the country's participation in the space race is not well known outside of Zambia itself. To summarize briefly, in 1964, shortly after the country gained independence from Great Britain, a private endeavor was underway in Zambia to launch a rocket into space before either of the two superpowers could do so. Serpell draws on these real events: in one chapter of the novel, she imagines the story of Zambia's participation in the space race through the eyes of the only female Afronaut, Matha Mwamba. Historical records of interviews with Matha and her mentor Edward Nkoloso exist, which inform Serpell's retelling, but she uses the possibilities of fiction to give Matha a bigger voice and to imagine her future. Little is known about the historical figure of Matha Mwamba and how she became involved in Nkoloso's space program, or indeed, what happened to her after she had to leave the program due to her pregnancy. Serpell fictionalizes Matha's youth, the circumstances of how she came to know Nkoloso, and her life after her participation in the space program.

The Old Drift sets out to tell the 'story of a nation' (Serpell 2019, 1). The imagined history of Zambia is told from the perspective of three generations of three different families. Their lives intertwine with each other over the course of roughly one hundred years of story time, beginning with the 'discovery' of the land that is now Zambia through British missionary David Livingstone and ending in an imagined, not so distant future, in which Zambia is destroyed by the flooding of the Zambezi River. The novel fictionalizes many moments of Zambian history, heavily inspired by historical fact and archival material. One such lesser-known episode of Zambian history is that of the Zambian space program.

I argue that this re-imaging of Matha Mwamba's life is used to fill the silence of the archives surrounding the Zambian Space program and its only female Afronaut. The concept of 'archival silence' is used to describe the gaps in archival records and assumes that archives, archivists, and historical sources are never neutral (Thomas, Fowler, and Johnson 2017, 1). The gaps that emerge when marginalized groups are denied access to the archives can be countered through imaginative practices (Carter 2006, 219), such as fictional texts.

Other cultural objects have worked with the figure of the Afronaut, such as the short film *Afronauts* (2014) by Ghanaian filmmaker Nuotama Frances Bodorno (Sumba 2020), or the body

of photographs, drawings, and related sculptures ‘The Afronauts’ created by Spanish artist Cristina Middel (Schwendener 2013). These works have been analyzed as part of Paul Wilson's essay ‘The Afronaut and Retrofuturism in Africa’ (2019). Wilson examines the image of the Afronaut in art, arguing that artistic examinations of the figure can be seen as examples of retrofuturism (Wilson 2019). In contrast to the other cultural objects inspired by Nkoloso's space program, Serpell's novelization is the only retelling of Matha's story that places it in the larger national and historical context of Zambia, which is why I have chosen to focus on it in my close reading. I propose that Serpell frames Matha's own story as part of Zambia's national history, in constructing a *Bildungsroman* narrative which details the formative years and education of the young Afronaut. Franco Moretti has traced how this genre gained popularity throughout periods of social upheaval in the 19th century. My argument is that Matha's own formation can be read as an allegory for the period of social upheaval Zambia faced around the time that it gained independence from British colonial rule.

This essay further considers how Serpell imagines the life of Zambia's first female Afronaut and the Zambian space program in her ‘story of a nation’ and if the text can be seen as engaging in space nostalgia. How does Serpell judge the Zambian entry into the space race, which ultimately did not achieve its purported goal of getting an Afronaut to Mars? In popular discourse, nostalgia is often defined as a longing for the past. Susan Stewart has theorized nostalgia as ‘a sadness without object’ or ‘the desire for desire’ (Stewart 1993, 23), since ‘the past that the nostalgic seeks has never existed’ (ibid.). Stewart sees nostalgia as an unproductive sentiment which shuts off possibilities in the present because of its fixation with the past; through ‘the narrative process of nostalgic reconstruction the present is denied, and the past takes on an authenticity of being’ (ibid.). I believe that the case presented by Serpell's novel requires a more complex understanding of nostalgia, as opposed to seeing all nostalgic narratives as regressive or uncritical of the past. Thus, I turn to Svetlana Boym (2008)'s definition of nostalgia, which differentiates between two nostalgic tendencies, namely reflective and restorative nostalgia. Boym claims that reflective nostalgia is focused more on the imperfect process of remembrance rather than restorative nostalgia's hope to restore that which has been lost (Boym 2008, 41). This article finds that Serpell's retelling of Matha's life story tends more towards reflective nostalgia, illustrating how ‘longing and critical thinking’ (Boym 2008, 49) can be combined. This critical thinking opens nostalgia up as ‘a source of invigoration’ (Johanson 2016, 15) for the future and a point from which alternatives can be articulated (Su 2005, 5). I propose that Serpell's fictionalization critically engages with the lost potentialities of the past in order to use them as inspiration for the future.

FILLING THE SILENCE OF THE ARCHIVES

The Old Drift emulates the form of a historical novel, especially in the first third of the novel dedicated to ‘The Grandmothers’, one of whom is Matha. Historical events the author fictionalizes include the building of the Kariba Dam, which led to the displacement of the indigenous Tonga people in the chapter dedicated to ‘Grandmother’ Sibilla and the struggle for Zambian independence around Lusaka and its university in ‘Grandmother’ Agnes’ chapter. Well-known Zambian historical figures, such as the politician Stewart Gore-Browne, feature peripherally in these chapters. Notably, Matha is the only one of the novel’s nine main characters who is based on a historical figure. The protagonists of the other eight main chapters are all fictional, including the two other grandmothers, Sibilla and Agnes. Matha is also the only native Zambian grandmother of the three. I propose that Serpell’s use of the historical figure of Matha as inspiration for a chapter in the novel is meant both to critique and to fill the silence of the archives surrounding the details of Matha’s life.

In 2017, prior to the publication of *The Old Drift*, Serpell wrote an article about the Zambian Afonauts for *The New Yorker*. In this article, not much information is given about the historical figure of Matha Mwamba. Serpell quotes a self-penned op-ed by Edward Nkoloso, in which he states that the sixteen-year-old was meant to travel to Mars with two of her cats. Serpell adds the information that Matha ‘eventually got pregnant and dropped out’ of the space program (Serpell 2017). In contrast, in the fictionalized account of Matha’s life in *The Old Drift*, Serpell fleshes out her life story, imagining the childhood that led her to become Zambia’s first female Afonaut at such a young age and the events following her pregnancy. The first section of the chapter dedicated to Matha traces her early education under Nkoloso, the death of her mother, and her involvement in Nkoloso’s revolutionary actions for Zambian independence. These fictionalized events, which shape Matha’s narrative, are mostly based on archival records that Serpell cites in her article in *The New Yorker*. For example, the article mentions that after returning from fighting for the British Empire in the Second World War, Nkoloso opened a school without the colonial administration’s permission (Serpell 2017). In her novelization, Serpell imagines that Matha and her siblings were the only students at this unconventional school.

Serpell’s 2017 article mostly focuses on the more prominent public figure of Nkoloso, who is generally admired for the ambitious futurism of his space program, despite the fact that he did not enjoy the support of his own government or many of his contemporaries. In the novel, Serpell shifts her re-telling of history to Matha’s perspective, as well as her sister Nkuka’s (a character who was created by Serpell and is not based on any historical records). Using free indirect speech, Matha’s thoughts and emotions (and Nkuka’s, briefly) are presented by a third-person narrator.

Serpell shifts the focus from the relatively well-documented public figure of Nkoloso to the marginalized figure of Matha. In doing so, Serpell is using the possibilities of fiction to fill the silence of the archives with respect to a person who was not regarded as worth chronicling when she was alive. Thomas, Fowler, and Johnson (2017) have examined the practice of authors creating fictional accounts of lives which were not documented in written sources. Notable examples of this include the works of authors such as Octavia Butler or Toni Morrison, whose writing creates an ‘imaginary archive’ of the individual stories lost in the brutal history of the transatlantic slave trade (Thomas, Fowler, and Johnson 2017, 119). Serpell’s fictionalization critiques the subjective nature of archives and records, which privilege what is deemed to be extraordinary, fulfilling the desire to engage with untold stories and expressions of marginalized identities (17). Accounting events from Matha’s perspective allows Serpell to address the biased accounts made by foreign journalists at the time.

The reporter turned and spoke directly into the camera. “To most Zambians, these people are just a bunch of crackpots and from what I’ve seen today I’m inclined to agree.” Matha giggled at his nasal voice. What did he mean, cracked pot? Something broken and useless? Or something sharp and dangerous, something that explodes on the fire like a bomb?” (Serpell 2019, 164)

The quote is taken from a British TV journalist who was covering the Zambian space program in 1964. Here, it is reported from Matha’s perspective, who is amused by the man’s British accent and is critical of his dismissal of Nkoloso and his project. Through a misunderstanding, Matha re-interprets the figure of the crackpot as a ‘cracked pot’, something that can pose a threat. Matha’s reinterpretation of the journalist’s words shows how in taking on a new perspective offers new potential. In her mind, the ‘cracked pots’ could become dangerous to neo-colonial powers after all. Serpell’s fictionalization introduces a second, imaginary perspective reporting the events taking place in Zambia. In doing so, she addresses and uncovers biases in the historical archives, destabilizing dominant historical narratives.

Serpell chooses to highlight how the Zambian space program was not only about creating a future for Zambians in space but was also linked to Zambia’s colonial past and the traumas experienced during this time. This is illustrated in a scene in which she re-imagines a conversation between Matha and an American journalist, Arthur Hoppe.

Hoppe laughed. “And what will you and your cats do on Mars?” This answer she had memorised: “Our telescopes have shown us that planet Mars is populated by primitive natives. A missionary will accompany me on my trip but the missionary

must not force Christianity on the Martians if they do not want it.” (Serpell 2019, 165)

This quote is reproduced from an op-ed written by Nkoloso (Serpell 2017); Serpell here gives this line to Matha. In the novel, Matha is the one expressing a criticism of the remnants of colonial thought evident in dominant imaginings of space travel, as well as the trauma of colonization and missionization her country experienced. The quote illustrates how painful memories of the colonial past influence visions for the future. Imagining the future is always linked to traces of the past, as cultural critic Mark Dery stated when he conceptualized the genre of Afrofuturism. This cultural aesthetic uses speculative fiction to imagine the future of Africans and the African diaspora but also to address contemporary and past issues facing these communities: ‘Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of history, imagine possible futures?’ (Dery 1993, 180). I argue that in creating a fictionalized account of history from Matha's perspective, Serpell is both critical of the biases evident in historical records but also re-creating ‘a moment of historical possibility’ (Steinberg 2003, 385). Through her re-imagining of Matha's story, Serpell memorializes a forgotten source of inspiration, the ambitious space program of Zambia and a young African woman who engaged in the technoculture and uses it to critique narratives of colonization.

THE *BILDUNGSROMAN* AND THE NATION

The function of Serpell's reimagining of Matha's life story has thus been illustrated; now I will address the form selected to tell Matha's story, namely the Bildungsroman. The chapter told predominantly from Matha's perspective begins with her academic education, including her first reading lessons with Nkoloso from the King James Bible and her time at a local convent school, which she can only attend disguised as a boy. The first section of the chapter, dedicated to describing Matha's primary education, ends with the loss of her mother, who is imprisoned for coming to Nkoloso's defense after he is arrested. Her mother eventually dies in prison. Matha then leaves her family's home in rural Luwingu to journey to the capital city of Lusaka with Nkoloso's family, where she is finally reunited with the revolutionary and joins his political resistance group. An action planned by this resistance group is the creation of the Zambia National Academy of Science, Space Research and Philosophy, which sees Matha taking on the role of Zambia's first female Afronaut. This is followed by a falling out with Nkoloso due to her pregnancy, after which she must leave the Space Academy and fend for herself. The chapter ends after Matha has given birth to her daughter Sylvia. Contrary to more positive visions of the

Bildungsroman, Matha's story ends in failure since she has been abandoned by her family and friends. Her formation is marked by regression, leaving her destitute and alone. The nineteenth-century European Bildungsroman typically features a young, white man growing to accept and be accepted by society; but Serpell troubles the idealized concepts put forward by the traditional European Bildungsroman, such as education as a source of possibility, through her tragic variation of this form (Frow, Hardie, and Smith 2020, 1906).

I argue Serpell used the form of the Bildungsroman to tell Matha's story in order to highlight the transitory phase Zambia found itself in after declaring independence from Great Britain in 1964, thus connecting Matha's story to the larger historical context. Franco Moretti has written that the form of the Bildungsroman emerged in Europe during a period of radical transformation and social upheaval in which youth took the center stage and became symbolically attached to the concept of modernity (Moretti 2013, 3). For him, the Bildungsroman is a genre that fulfilled the need for the creation of a culture of modernity in the 19th century (2013, 5). This need arose from the large-scale societal changes taking place, brought forth especially by the Industrial Revolution and changes in the political arena following the French Revolution. Through the symbolic form of the Bildungsroman, authors were able to create narratives which gave order and meaning to history (6). Apollo Amoko has extended Moretti's arguments to the African context, examining the historical rise of the Bildungsroman in Africa in the wake of colonialism, at a time when 'traditional ways of being were seriously undermined, if not forever transformed' (Amoko 2009, 199). By using the form of the Bildungsroman, Serpell highlights the sense of upheaval that went along with Zambia's struggle for independence and continued after independence had been gained. She frames the late 1950s and early 1960s as a time when Zambia was undergoing a fundamental transition, just like the protagonist of the chapter, Matha.

Amoko sees the focus on youth in the African Bildungsroman inextricably linked to the theme of the eventual rejection of the father's authority and the projection of a new future (Amoko 2009, 200). Nkoloso assumes the role of a father figure to Matha, whose authority she ultimately rejects. When she is still a child, living in the countryside with her family, she sees Nkoloso as a religious or God-like figure: '[H]er image of God Himself had been Ba Nkoloso – round black cheeks, storm clouds of dreaded hair, fearsome flashing eyes' (Serpell 2019, 444). However, in her adolescence, she becomes disillusioned with Nkoloso after he refuses to give up the failed space program.

She didn't understand why Ba Nkoloso was going on about the Space Programme as though it were real. She wondered, not for the first time, whether he had in fact

lost his mind like all the newspapers were saying. He was still pacing back and forth, his purple cape wafting as he raved about the cadets and their ingratitude, about the death of his dream to reach the moon, which Matha had always assumed was dead on the ground to begin with – a political ploy, a prank like the others. (Serpell 2019, 170)

Nkoloso sees the revolution as finished when the Americans reach the moon in 1969, but Matha wants to keep the ‘Cha-cha-cha’ civil disobedience movement going (ibid.). While the novel reclaims the history of the Afronauts, it remains critical of Nkoloso’s vision of the future. He wishes to emulate other imperial nation states, such as the United States and the Soviet Union, and actively participate in the space race, but this is rejected by Matha, whose perspective is favored in the novel. Matha outgrows the law of her father-figure Nkoloso (Amoko 2009, 201), which leads to the estrangement between mentor and pupil.

Amoko states that as ‘the youth rises up to take charge from its fathers, the future it projects is neither certain nor triumphant’ (2009, 207). At the end of the chapter dedicated to her, Matha is left destitute and alone with her child in Lusaka. Her outlook for the future is rather bleak after the break with Nkoloso. While the novel rejects tradition through Matha’s narrative and the disruption of the traditional form of the Bildungsroman, it acknowledges that Matha’s rebellion against societal norms does not lead to happiness for her. Her pregnancy is used to discredit Nkoloso’s space program: “‘Do you know what they said when you started to grow that baby in your stomach?’” The threads in her throat thrummed. “‘They said that I was the one who put it there,’” he said softly, angrily.’ (Serpell 2019, 190). The form of the Bildungsroman points to the transition and newness emerging in Zambia in the period after independence, but traditions and societal norms are still able to put an end to any futurist dreams the Zambian space program may have embodied.

NOSTALGIA FOR LOST FUTURES

What causes the break between Nkoloso and Matha are ultimately their different visions of the future. Matha sees their participation in the space race as a ‘political ploy’, while Nkoloso is presented as genuinely wanting to stake a claim for Zambia in space. He is upset when this potential future is lost. Is Serpell’s decision to return to this moment from Zambia’s past indicative of a larger cultural sense of nostalgia for this point in time? Turning to Svetlana Boym’s concepts of reflective and restorative nostalgia to examine in what way Serpell presents the Zambian Space Program in her novel, I argue that any nostalgia for this period tends more towards reflective

nostalgia, since Nkoloso's dream of travelling to space before the Americans or the Soviets is never presented as viable. This stands in opposition to the more restorative tendencies of the cases of space nostalgia described in the introduction. The use of reflective nostalgia allows this reworking of the past to function as 'a source of invigoration of [the] future' (Johanson 2016, 15).

Serpell chose to present the project from Matha's perspective; therefore, the reader is invited to see the project more as a fun endeavor, just as she does.

Matha was swinging. [...] Matha tipped her head back and laughed, delighting in this questing sound of things moving, stretching, on their way. [...] Ba Nkoloso, standing a few feet away from her, rattled out his explanation to the reporters, the words fading in and out as she swung. 'Mulolo ... swinging technology ... ahead of the Americans and ... greater thrust to soar ... deep abysmal heavens ... theories of Diocletes ... flew towards the sun ... obscure flights of birds ... yes, fishes too! ... way forward ... turbulent propulsion! (Serpell 2019, 166)

The space program is framed as an imaginary narrative the Afronauts seemingly utilize to gain international attention and raise awareness for their newly created nation state. Therefore, any nostalgia for these past futures is reflective, since they are presented as imaginary to begin with (Grönholm 2015, 385).

Furthermore, parts of the chapter are told from the perspective of Nkuka, Matha's sister. With Nkuka, Serpell creates a character not based on any historical records, who is deeply critical of the space program and Nkoloso's revolutionary endeavors. "“And you stole my sister. Now the whole world is laughing at us! Space Programme!” She spat. “They called my mother a whore and now they are calling my sister a fool! Why were you lying to people, telling them she is going to Mars with a cat—”" (Serpell 2019, 178). Restorative nostalgia relies on the desire to fulfill 'unfulfilled aspirations and shared hopes of the collective' (Grönholm 2015, 375). Nkuka represents not only someone who has suffered deep personal losses through her family's engagement in the resistance against colonial rule, for which she blames Nkoloso, but also shows how the space program did not form a shared hope for the collectivity. Nkoloso and his vision for the future are heavily criticized by his contemporaries; thus, his space program is not presented as something that should be restored.

Yet, it cannot be denied that the project is also mourned with this fictionalization. Nkoloso is upset by his lost dream. Further, the swarm of mosquitos, which function as omniscient narrators in between the chapters, also mourn the loss of Nkoloso's ambitious project: 'After his comrades

finally gained independence, they too tied his hands with red tape. They wrapped him in respect, sinecured his feet. He looked out at the land, then up at the sky, and said it was time for the moon. No brakes, they said. Too free, they said' (Serpell 2019, 196). Even Matha mourns the break with her mentor. Her ceaseless crying, which overshadows much of her adult life (detailed in chapters from her daughter and grandson's perspectives), begins when Nkoloso denies her from collaborating with him at the newly established African Liberation Centre and says her pregnancy was the reason the Space Program was shut down (190). After this, Matha begins uncontrollably crying, to the point where she can no longer speak. Arguably, her crying is a representation of the mourning of the lost dream. Nevertheless, this mourning does not have to imply a wish to restore the lost future. Boym argues that mourning is an essential component of reflective nostalgia: 'Reflective nostalgia is a form of deep mourning that performs a labor of grief both through pondering pain and through play that points to the future' (Boym 2008, 55). In imagining the tragic ending to Matha's story, Serpell is performing this labor of grief, by pondering the pain Matha likely had to endure.

Moreover, her uncontrollable crying is a reminder of the losses Matha has suffered, most of which are due to her being a woman. 'Matha had never considered that being female would thwart her so, that it would be a hurdle she had to jump every time she wanted to learn something: to read a book, to shout the answers, to make a bomb, to love a man, to fight for freedom' (Serpell 2019, 193). Unlike Western or post-Soviet narratives of the space race, which are filled with ideas of progress and are sources of national pride, in this Zambian re-telling of the space race, dreams of progress 'are pierced by narratives of hardship, even defeat' (Muller 2021, 125). Serpell critically engages with the past and acknowledges the harsh individual reality underlying any dreams of progress. Her re-telling of Matha's life story manages to combine both the longing for the lost potentiality of Nkoloso's space program while critically engaging with the project, acknowledging its lack of viability and the broad opposition it faced from Nkoloso's contemporaries.

Literary scholars like Johanson (2016) and Su (2005) have argued that the concept of nostalgia can be used productively, when nostalgic projects are read as exploring how the present has come up short and as inspiration for the future. In the following chapters of *The Old Drift*, Serpell imagines Matha's life after leaving the space program, living as a squatter in the Kalingalinga district of Lusaka with her daughter and then grandson. Ultimately, the chapters set in the near future see Matha becoming a national hero, whose past as an Afronaut adds to her renown as a member of the resistance. Faced with growing injustices in this imagined future, Matha uses her past education under Nkoloso and her renown to reignite the 'Cha-Cha-Cha' resistance movement

(Serpell 2019, 495), illustrating how the past can be used to ‘drive the revolution of the future’ (Johanson 2016, 14). Through her critical engagement with the past in the narrative constructed around Zambia’s first female Afronaut, Serpell shows how reflective nostalgia ‘opens up a multitude of potentialities’ (Boym 2008, 50). Her reclaiming of the history of the space program can be seen as enabling the ‘utopic vision of the future’ (Johanson 2016, 14) she puts forth in the later chapters of the novel. The retelling of Matha’s story must therefore be read as an effort to articulate alternative visions (Su 2005, 5) for the present and future. The novel does not idealize the Zambian Space Program and does not wish to return to the point in time after Zambian independence; rather, it posits that ‘resilience and ambition for the future’ (Muller 2021, 135) can be found in a retelling of this history.

CONCLUSION

Namwali Serpell’s fictionalized account of Zambia’s participation in the space race is told from the perspective of Matha Mwamba, Zambia’s first female Afronaut. By imagining Matha’s life story, Serpell is filling the silence of the archives surrounding this historical figure. Her fictionalization also critiques the biases that informed the construction of the historical narrative around the Zambia’s entry into the space program. Serpell uses the form of the *Bildungsroman*; the story of Matha’s formation can be seen as parallel to the transitory phase the nation state of Zambia faced shortly before and after it gained independence from Great Britain. Ultimately, Matha’s formation is marked by regression. Tradition and societal norms limit her future, and in turn, Zambia’s. Serpell’s re-imagining mourns the loss of the lost potentiality that Nkoloso’s space program embodied, while remaining critical of the time period and the project itself. Nkoloso’s space program is never presented as a viable project; Serpell is not advocating for any form of restoration, but rather engages in reflective nostalgia, as defined by Svetlana Boym. The novel illustrates how critical nostalgia can open imaginative possibilities and serve as inspiration for the future, when in the later chapters of the novel, Serpell imagines Matha becoming a national hero fighting against injustice.

REFERENCES

- Amoko, Apollo. 2009. ‘Autobiography and Bildungsroman in African Literature.’ In *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel*, ed. F. Abiola Irele, 195–208. Cambridge Companions to Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Boym, Svetlana. 2008. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.
- Carter, Rodney G.S. 2006. ‘Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence.’ *Archivaria* 61 (September): 215–33.

- Dery, Mark, ed. 1993. *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*. South Atlantic Quarterly, 92,4. Durham: Duke Univ. Pr.
- Frow, John, Melissa Hardie, and Vanessa Smith. 2020. 'The Bildungsroman: Form and Transformations.' *Textual Practice* 34 (12): 1905–10.
- Grönholm, Pertti. 2015. 'When Tomorrow Began Yesterday: Kraftwerk's Nostalgia for the Past Futures.' *Popular Music and Society* 38 (3): 372–88.
- Johanson, Kristine. 2016. 'On the Possibility of Early Modern Nostalgias.' *Parergon* 33 (2): 1–15.
- Kennedy, Merrit. 2019. 'Trump Created The Space Force. Here's What It Will Actually Do.' *NPR*, December 21, 2019, sec. National Security.
- Launius, Roger D. 2008. 'Heroes in a Vacuum: The Apollo Astronaut as Cultural Icon.' *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 87 (2): 174–209.
- Majsova, Natalija. 2017. 'Neither Rupture Nor Continuity: Memorializing the Dawn of the Space Age in Contemporary Russian Cinematography.' In *The Twentieth Century in European Memory*, eds. Tea Sindbæk Andersen and Barbara Törnquist-Plewa, 198–219. Transcultural Mediation and Reception. Leiden: Brill.
- McDougall, Walter A. 1985. *The Heavens and the Earth: A Political History of the Space Age*. New York: Basic Books.
- Moretti, Franco. 2013. *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature*. Brooklyn, NY: Verso.
- Muller, Nat. 2021. 'Lunar Dreams: Space Travel, Nostalgia, and Retrofuturism in A Space Exodus and The Lebanese Rocket Society.' *Science Fiction Studies* 48 (1): 124–38.
- Schwendener, Martha. 2013. 'Cristina de Middel: 'The Afronauts.''' *The New York Times*, September 5, 2013, sec. Arts. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/06/arts/design/cristina-de-middel-the-afronauts.html>.
- Serpell, Namwali. 2017. 'The Zambian 'Afronaut' Who Wanted to Join the Space Race.' *The New Yorker*, March 11, 2017. <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-zambian-afronaut-who-wanted-to-join-the-space-race>.
- Serpell, Namwali. 2019. *The Old Drift*. First edition. London/New York: Hogarth.
- Steinberg, Marc. 2003. 'Charles Johnson's Middle Passage: Fictionalizing History and Historicizing Fiction.' *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 45 (4): 375–90.
- Stewart, Susan. 1993. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. 1st paperback ed. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Su, John J. 2005. *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel*. Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Sumba, Eric Otieno. 2020. 'Afronauts Are Forever | The Enduring Cultural Legacy of the 'Zambia Space Program.''' *GRIOT* (blog). December 1, 2020. <https://griotmag.com/en/afronauts-zambia-space-program/>.
- Thomas, David, Simon Fowler, and Valerie Johnson. 2017. *The Silence of the Archive*. Principles and Practice in Records Management and Archives. London: Facet Publishing.
- Williams, Matt. 2021. 'What's Next for Blue Origin After Today's Successful Flight?' *Universe Today* (blog). July 20, 2021. <https://www.universetoday.com/151902/https-www-universetoday-com-151902/>.
- Wilson, Paul. 2019. 'The Afronaut and Retrofuturism in Africa.' *ASAP/Journal* 4 (1): 139–66.