



## Speculative fiction and African urban futures: Writing food in Billy Kahora's edited collection

### *Imagine Africa 500*

Doseline Kiguru

#### **Speculative fiction and African urban futures: Writing food in Billy Kahora's edited collection *Imagine Africa 500***

In this article I explore the place of the future African city as presented in contemporary African speculative fiction. I focus on the short stories in the anthology *Imagine Africa 500: Speculative Fiction from Africa* (2015) to look at how the urban space is conceptualised in these narrations of an imagined future Africa, 500 years from the present day. While the discussion looks at the urban space and imagined technological development, it highlights the ecological narratives and the contrast drawn between the city and the rural and the local and the foreign, as imagined for the future by relying on the employment of food imagery in these stories. I look at the use of food in these speculative narratives as a link between the familiar and these strange, imagined futures as presented in the anthology. I aim to provoke a debate on the imaginations of what a future African city may look like as presented through literary works and the significance of these imaginings today within developmental and environmental lenses. I read the future city through use of language, space, images, form, and style to look at how the modern short story is theorising on African futures.

**Keywords:** speculative fiction, dystopia, post-apocalypse, urban, city, food, nostalgia.

#### **Introduction: Imagining the future collectively**

The history of literary publishing in Africa is one of an industry that has had to overcome various obstacles mainly around funding and government support (Bgoya and Jay; Davis). However, there have been various efforts over the years aimed at overcoming some of these obstacles, one of which has been writers forming writers' collectives from where they are able to take part in various forms of literary and cultural production. In this article I focus on the efforts of Story Club Malawi which brought together various writers drawn from all over the continent to work on an anthology of speculative fiction with the theme of imagining the continent's future. The resulting work, *Imagine Africa 500* (2015), brings together a total of 15 short stories by different writers drawn from various African countries. It features several well-known as well as upcoming writers in contemporary African literature and is edited by renowned Kenyan writer and editor Billy Kahora. These stories were curated at a creative writers' workshop focusing on African futures as presented through literature. The workshop was organised by Malawian writer Shadreck Chikoti and was hosted by the Story Club Malawi in 2015. This was preceded by an open call for writers from all over Africa interested in speculative fiction. The selected writers took part in the workshop facilitated by Kahora as well as Uganda's award-winning writers Jackee Budesta Batanda and Beatrice Lamwaka. The workshop was later followed up by mentorship between the more established writers and the upcoming ones, and the result was the anthology.

The call for writers to the writing workshop had the curators' note: "We urge writers from all over the African continent and in diaspora to give us their dreams, their dreads, their hopes, their fictions about the future in Africa in 500 years from now".<sup>1</sup> As a result, the short stories that came out of this initiative can be categorised under speculative fiction. The writers have used the genre as an avenue to explore the possibilities available for Africa, the only limit being the imagination of the author. In the short stories, the authors deliberately blur the

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lines between reality and fantasy and magic and imagined technology in order to make this possible. The narratives demonstrate how future technology has advanced to the level of allowing a merger between the real and the fantastical in order to explore the ghosts of Africa's past, present, and future.

In defining the term 'speculative fiction', Gray Wolfe notes that this genre is usually used interchangeably with science fiction but can be generally defined as a genre where "established facts' are extrapolated to produce a new situation" (122). In defining the same term, Marek Oziewicz argues that "[w]hile distinctions are the lifeblood of literary criticism, the appeal of the term 'speculative fiction' lies in its inclusiveness and open-ended porousness" (8). In this context, I use the term speculative fiction as an overall genre to refer to narratives with elements that do not exist in the real and the contemporary world; narratives that challenge the generally accepted reality by mainly exploring the trope of "what if?". Some of these stories fall under the genre of science fiction, others under magical realism, and others under fantasy. However, they all present a "what if?" scenario and the major focus in this article is the question of: "what if the current expansion of cities continues and in 500 years there is no more land to expand cities horizontally, ending up with just vertical city expansions?" From the curatorial level of these stories, they chose to employ speculative fiction as a genre in order to offer social and political critique of society today. Indeed, Belén Martín-Lucas notes that, increasingly, "this genre has often been considered a most apt mode of narrativizing the present times of ultra-rapid changes in science and technology as well as social structuring" (69).

In all the short stories in the collection, the setting is in a post-apocalyptic time period and a critical look demonstrates the bleakness of the imagined futures as presented through the fictional lenses in this anthology. The first story, "One Wit' This Place" by Muthi Nhlema, opens with a lonely character looking forward to reuniting with her lover who went out to war "to save the old world" (15). Most of the land is under water or fire because the ocean has taken over from one side, while the desert has consumed most of the remaining land. In other stories such as "Necessary and Sufficient Conditions" by Wole Talabi, "A is a Four-Letter Word" by Hannah Onoguwe, and "Women Are From Venus" by Tiseke Chilima, the setting is after technological mishaps that have led to genetic modifications resulting in a society divided between the humans and the non-human genetically modified others. However, in other stories such as "Transit" by Derek Lubangakene, "Tiny Dots" by Tuntufye Simwimba, and "When We Had Faith" by Lauri Kubuitsile, the apocalypse has been caused by disease. While each story is different, they all present a dystopian future for the African continent. However, as Martín-Lucas notes:

In its classic subgenre of dystopia, narratives display catastrophic futures in the wake of nuclear disaster, ecological ruin, global economic crises, totalitarian regimes, or more often a combination of all these. Although dystopia is usually considered a pessimistic and depressive mode of writing, this is in fact a genre of hope: after all, there is life beyond the apocalypse and, even more importantly, dystopic fiction's cautionary tales signal the ways to prevent it happening. (69)

Lyman Sargent defines dystopia as "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as worse than contemporary society" (222). The future imagined for Africa through this anthology is one where the general quality of life has fallen and all forms of human connection, including familial ties, are almost non-existent. The urban space 500 years from now has extended both vertically and horizontally. Concrete and steel buildings have reached out into the sky, transportation litters both ground and air as the human race continues to improve technologies that ease transportation by making it more rapid. Even humans have evolved and merged with robots through genetic modifications and other forms of technology.

"Transit" presents a futuristic society where all the men are impotent, and society regenerates itself through laboratories. The main character, Duncan, however, was able to sire a son who is now considered a cure and must be protected because "he has no shunt in the back of his neck, or IV receptors in his major muscles. He wasn't born in an Amniotik-tank" (131). They live in a city populated by glass and brick walls and the people are constantly affronted by the piercing lights of police vehicles levitating over windows and with light beams that can "scan every inch through the thick walls" (127). In "Tiny Dots" the city is a desolate place and people are dying of skin cancer. But as they await death, they are constantly bombarded by billboards from all angles, even on their balconies. "The Wish Box" by Chinelo Onwualu presents a future city where the gap between the rich and the poor is even wider than it is in the present moment and a magic box that a rich teacher presents as a gift to her poor students shows their future would be no better.

Writing about the genre of speculative fiction, Heather Urbanski notes the role of this genre in social critique and political intervention, acknowledging that “it shows our nightmares and therefore contributes to our efforts to avoid them” (1). As Hoda Zaki explains, “the overt pessimism of a specific dystopia is often belied by the covert utopian hope that readers will change the trajectory of their society” and that such dystopias are then “intimately connected to utopias in offering oblique hope to the reader” (244). In the discussion about the dystopian futures as presented in these short stories, I call for approaching dystopia and utopia not as two opposite ideas but rather as interrelated and interconnected factors that are both as a result of, and aimed to influence, the present society.

The anthology’s focus on Africa is a conscious effort to place the continent at the centre of global imaginations of the future. Drawing from Achille Mbembe’s perspective, the anthology seeks to affirm that “emerging tacit consensus is that *the destiny of our planet will be played out, to a large extent, in Africa*” (96, emphasis in original). In the anthology, the localised experiences of the characters speak to global issues such as climate change and its effects, as well as political and economic power and its effects on human relationships, demonstrating how the genre of speculative fiction can be used to demonstrate the implications of global interconnectedness. Indeed, as Teju Cole notes, while “all futures are specific and local” they are also “simultaneously local and woven into our global realities” (41). In this context, therefore, the dystopian futures presented in the anthology in the context of Africa become a base for reading current global realities and the place of the African creative writer in the wider global narratives on representation today.

Esthie Hugo explores the idea of African creative artists employing the use of dystopia in their works as a comment against afro-pessimism. While analysing the futuristic films by Kenya’s Wanuri Kahiu and Cameroon’s Jean-Pierre Bekolo, Hugo argues that the employment of afro-futurism in the films seeks to “critique the present status quo in order to imagine alternative futures” (210). She adds that afro-futurism in the films presents “an aesthetics of hope, which, by placing African bodies in futuristic landscapes, dismantles a cultural logic—an essentializing afro-pessimism—that sees African countries as existing outside of time, ‘progress,’ and modernity” (210). My analysis of the stories in this anthology acknowledges the positive role of dystopia and argues that the anthology has “envisioned speculative fiction as an enabling genre for social critique and political intervention” (Martín-Lucas 70).

While dystopia is the common trope running through the anthology, one of the major connecting links is the use of food imagery. Food runs as a common theme in different forms, from hunger and consumption to food rituals and practices such as preparation and cooking, food production, and sharing, among others. In one story, there is a world war in search of water where the African continent becomes a superpower because of its access to water while the rest of the world is a desolate wasteland. In other stories, descriptions of food, food cultures, and rituals are used as geographical markers in future cities and countries where former (now current) state borders no longer exist. Furthermore, there is use of food as racial and planetary identity markers where inter-planet wars are rife, as well as use of food as economic class markers where city expansions have meant that the soil for growing food has become a precious commodity, among others. Other writers have employed the image of food to help draw a comparison between the human and the ‘other’. For example, in Hagai Magai’s “Those Without Sin”, a young man, Nduge, comes back home from jail and tries to reintegrate back into society. However, much of his social surroundings have changed and a visit to his local bar demonstrates this. He is served by a robot waiter named BarRob. The story takes place mainly at the bar and uses the image of nicotine absorption to demonstrate the difference between the humans and the robots. Nduge notices the robot waiter smoking a cigarette and wonders “why he had to smoke since he had no lungs, but the way the smoking made BarRob appear more human was a complete answer to his question” (65). A focus on the employment of food imagery and related rituals, therefore, provides an entry point into reading the effectiveness of these stories within the larger global narrative envisioned by the anthology. Writing about Russian literature and the significance of food, Ronald Le Blanc explains that “many of the characters who populate Russian fiction seem intent upon reminding us that—in literature as in culture—food not only nourishes, it also signifies” (246).

In this light, therefore, an analysis of food as a metaphor in these stories also places the discussion within current ecocriticism narratives. Graham Huggan assesses the emerging alliance between postcolonial criticism and ecocriticism and argues that both “are invested [...] in the situated critique of current globalizing practices that use capitalist ideologies of development to justify corporate expansionism and technological managerialism; and both are equally concerned with critically analysing the representational mechanisms that lend legitimacy to these practices, demonstrating the power of culture to (re)shape the word and, through it, the world” (6). The

analysis of the stories in this collection pays attention to Huggan's warnings about ecocriticism "aestheticiz[ing] underdevelopment even as it claims to ease the burden of the oppressed" (6). Drawing from Arundathi Roy's work on environmental activism, Huggan further warns "of the small-'r' romanticization of perceived 'peoples of nature' that has more in keeping with western cosmopolitan conscience-making than with the solidarity of the oppressed" (7). Huggan's work forces a re-evaluation of the ecocritical narratives that idolise the past (present day) through nostalgia in the *Imagine Africa 500* anthology, paying close attention to the character's relationship to the environment, and reading this against the idea of romanticisation and exoticisation of the "peoples of nature".

### **The imagery of food and longing for a past Africa**

Arjun Appadurai adopts the idea of gastro-politics as a tool to explore food as a political character. He argues that "food, in its varied guises, contexts, and functions, can signal rank and rivalry, solidarity and community, identity or exclusion, and intimacy or distance", adding that the human body's daily need for food and the rituals that come with it forces food to become "well suited to bear the load of everyday social discourse" (494). In *Imagine Africa 500*, the centrality of food in the various narrations provides a nuanced way of reading the imaged future societies exploring the effectiveness of the genre in provoking change today for a better future.

Jean Retzinger explores the significance of food and the environment in post-apocalyptic science fiction films and highlights that food in speculative fiction serves as a bridge between the familiar and the unfamiliar. In this anthology, descriptions of food, food rituals, and food scenes are what link the imaged future Africa to the Africa of today in contemporary society. As Retzinger notes, "[s]trange foods help emphasize the strangeness of the future—and serve as a warning of what may be in store for us" (377). He further adds that "because food can speak so vividly to both short-term and long-term human needs and environmental changes, the search for food amidst a world of scarcity is a frequent motif in post-apocalyptic science fiction" (377).

The short story "After Market Life" by Frances Muwonge is set around the concept of food, its production, preparation, and consumption. It is one of the few stories in the anthology that experiments widely with the idea of "strange food". The story is set in a future marketplace in Kampala. It follows the lives of the food vendors, focalising on the lives of Nama, one of the vendors, and Flavia, the market manager. It is Nama's last day selling at the market and she looks forward to life after the market. It is also the day that all the vendors have to vote for new rules for the market and Flavia is pushing to allow the open sale of pills, replacing food in the market that had before then prided itself in focusing on rare, organic food. Organic food is presented as strange and exotic as "[m]ost Ugandans were almost exclusively pill-fed; nutrient rich capsule substitutes to food were affordable and readily embraced by government" (68). Muwonge uses the imagery of food, juxtaposing between the familiar and the alien, and links this to the strangeness of the future humans who occupy this society where most of the people are genetically engineered and there is a raging battle between the 'moderns' and the 'naturals', with the latter being less genetically modified.

The setting in the market—exploring the market chatter, conversations, and arguments—works to juxtapose the strangeness of the bio-engineering effects on the body and on the food with the familiar rituals around food. Through this juxtaposition, the analysis reveals that even centuries into the future, and despite the developments in scientific and technological development, society has not changed much and is still unwelcoming about interracial relationships, there is continued greed for material wealth over human life, and gender inequality still persists, among other vices.

In Musinguzi Robert's "Unexpected Dawn", water is used as a symbol of the greed and hunger for political and economic superiority. In the story, a war rages because of water—or the lack of it. Five hundred years into the future, a united Africa is now the centre of power that has just survived, and won, a ninth World War. In a story that aims to invert the current world economic domination, the continent of Africa is presented as a single nation and has achieved a world superpower status because it possesses the precious commodity—water:

The UAS [United African States] possessed the only clean water in the world. It has been her source of power for centuries now. It was the bargaining chip he [sic] has had over the Westlands and Middlelands. The Arabs were first to realise that the only way to survive was to cede all power to the UAS. The UAS held the only hope of life for billions of the world's inhabitants who depended on Hisa, the earth's sole source of fresh water. Their governments, their armies, their oil and all their other resources were useless without the assured supply of water. Other water sources had long dried up due to adverse climate changes or were too polluted to be drinkable [...] The nuclear holocaust had propelled these lands back almost 100 years not only in population, but also militarily and in terms of food security. They now practically survived on the magnanimity of Africa as their soils could no longer support plant life. Nor could their diseased waters sustain fish life. (116-7)

Robert focuses on the significance of water for the sustenance of life on earth. His story argues that controlling access to water also means controlling access to food, and this is what makes the UAS a superpower. The story plays with current and past historical realities where the continent has been relegated to a third world status because of lack of access to economic resources. In this imagined future society, economic and political power imbalance persists—only this time, the power structures have been inverted to place into the centre regions that had previously been marginalised. The story could be read as a comment on the impossibility of fundamental change in society because even as Africa rises to become a superpower, the world is still divided into centre vs. margins.

In "The Wish Box" the writer draws attention to society's continued stratification on class basis. The story mainly takes place within a school setting. It draws on the ritual of tea breaks at the workplace where the teachers use this setting to catch up and talk about their lives. Abiye, a rich teacher working in a poor slum school in a future Nigeria, is presented as a dedicated but privileged teacher. Over tea break, Abiye introduces her colleagues to the wish box that she gives as a parting gift to her students. The wish box has the power to read futures and, at the end, it exposes the futility of the poor students who are hoping to escape poverty through education. According to the wish box, the poor students who are described as sons and daughters of compost farmers and traders will grow up only to serve the rich classes. The dystopic future is presented as a culmination of the present society's lack of efforts in enforcing fundamental change in the wider society.

"Snake Blood" by Dilman Dila opens at a party in an old, dilapidated bar. According to the constitutive components of the occasion, the availability of food, alcohol, music, and dance is portrayed. The action takes place in a future society rebuilding itself after a war and an unnamed technological disaster. The characters are afraid of the technological advances that had made previous civilisations more comfortable. The lack of advanced technology in various forms makes the story seem more like the description of a pre-modern society as compared to most of the other stories in the anthology. The strangeness of the food consumed at this party is demonstrated as not being because of its technological and scientific production process but rather because of its lack of sophistication. At the party, a group of soldiers, under their leader Adrova, are "jubiling over a carriage of gold that they had stolen earlier in the day, their biggest haul ever" and are celebrating because they "now had enough money to rebuild the town into a fortress, and make it their permanent home" (28). The food available is skewed rabbit on the grill and wine stored in drums and served in gourds. The characters are also dressed in rabbit skins. Through a detailed description of the food and the setting of the party, the future society is curated to look like the past from today's perspective. Retzinger has written about how the 'future', sometimes depicted in speculative narratives, "is actually one of clashing pasts: primitive, nomadic hunter-gatherers versus a repressive, patriarchal (and sterile) society" (376). This perspective points to speculative fiction's focus on the past and on history as the source of a solution for the problems and difficulties evident in future societies. It is also one of the main reasons why nostalgia features prominently in these stories, enhanced through the images of food.

Le Blanc uses nostalgia to "indicate a state of mind characterized by wistful regret or a sense of loss over a time and place now long gone, combined with a sentimental longing to escape back to what is remembered as being a much simpler world" (244). By focusing on the nostalgic longing for a past Africa through food, the narratives emphasise the need to return to that mythical place called home. It is a comment on the contemporary world of today presented as a much better world than what the future may present. Although dystopic, the focus on food and nourishment is presented as a form of alternative ways of avoiding a bleak future. For many of the characters in these stories, the post-apocalyptic worlds they are forced to inhabit are unfavourable and their only form of escape from the dystopia that is their reality is through a nostalgic longing for the past (which is the present-day Africa). This longing is portrayed and assuaged through the imagery of food. In "After Market Life", the unique

feature of the market is not the fact that its patrons are almost all genetically engineered in various ways, that teleporting is the preferred mode of transport, or that the human beings here are categorised according to ‘moderns’ and ‘naturals’, whereby the moderns are genetically modified. This market is significant because it is one of a few of its kind left that sells ‘real’ food grown in ‘real’ soil.

The Kololo air strip, one of two tracts of terra firma land in Kampala, hosted a weekly Saturday market for farmers to sell their goods outside of the conventional instant exchanges. They maintained some traditional goods, most especially those grown from soil that could not be instantly created like other manufactured goods. Not without changing their state at least. (67)

In this society, the humans get their nourishment mainly from pills or canned goods. However, the average lifespan of these humans is quite high, with some characters aged well above 200 years, and with one character aged more than 400 years. With such long lives, the humans can relate with the past through the memory of food. This longing, the nostalgia of nourishment through actual food, brings to light the concrete nature of the urban future. The future of Africa is presented as a concrete and steel jungle which has replaced any green life on earth. The earth, the soil, is inaccessible to many and only the privileged few have access to it—and it shows through the quality of their lives. Consider this narration in Muwonge’s story where Nama’s African identity is challenged by her fellow market women. She retorts: “So because I go to the salon, I’m a different person? For your information I have been lightening my skin at the Kampala Road clinic for years. I grew up in Muyenga you know, on terra firma”, to which the other market woman says, “But you were just the cook’s daughter, you never belonged there” (74).

Nama has a stall at the market where she sells chocolate baked goods. The other vendors have different assorted food items such as jam and chutney, tomatoes, cheese, and eggs that are hatched from ‘real’ chicken, among other food products from the farm. However, even at their stage of urbanisation and technological advancement, there is still no hope of reclaiming the past or maintaining a relationship with the earth, with real soil. As Flavia, argues, “[p]ills are the way of the future. How long do you think this market will last if we only allow real food? How many people do you know who actually eat real food? Next you are going to require it has to be from terra firma” (75). The plot of the story is pegged on the conflict in the market between allowing the sale of pills as replacement for food and continuing to focus on organic food that is ‘familiar’.

This Kampala of the future echoes the city described in “Necessary and Sufficient Conditions”. In this story, the narrator is seeking to avenge the death of his mother. He embarks on a journey out of the city to murder an old professor who lives off the grid. In his journey the reader encounters the sharp contrast between the city and the rural in this fictionalised western African future state:

I looked through my window, took in the sights of untarnished forest and allowed them to sink in. It was only in rare occasions that I got to see nature like this, as yet untamed. It was all so strikingly different from the domestic, subjugated pockets of greenery that dotted the Lagos supercity complex—six solid structures, each one towering seven kilometres into the sky and imposing a ten square kilometre footprint on the ground, like giant fingers insolently poking at the eyes of the gods—in precisely picked parks and conservatories. (97)

The old professor has deliberately chosen to live off the grid away from the supercity. His environment is described as spectacular and different, even as this means that the old man is unable to enjoy the comforts of technology that comes with living in the city such as “a houseboy android or at least a basic domestic drone” (99). It is no wonder that the narrator is surprised by the smell of food when he gets to the old professor’s house: “I stumbled into the living room and noticed the smell of boiling vegetables coming from somewhere in the back of the house. It smelled like bitter leaf” (99). Later, the old man offers to share his food with his visitor, making reference to familiar food: “I was making efo ro and amala, would you like some?” (100). The whole story is driven by memory, starting with the memory of the pain of the narrator’s mother which has driven his desire for revenge. Writing about the place of food in immigrant Indian communities in East Africa, Dan Ojwang has emphasised that “food is used primarily as an instigator of memory and an object of nostalgia” (73). In this short story, as the old man lies dying, he also reveals his memories of the woman he killed, his research partner, for the sake of ensuring that Africa stays ahead in technological development. The contrast between the city and the rural is also provided as a form of old and new memories: the old man’s memories of the past before technology, presented by his green environment and his food, which is then juxtaposed with the city’s concrete jungle in the story’s present memory.

In “When we had Faith”, a woman risks it all just to buy tea leaves. She is killed as she tries to buy tea to satiate her craving. This is a futuristic society in Gaborone after an apocalyptic moment. There has been a deadly illness and the survivors are divided into two groups: one is a violent religious and political group called the Abutite with the sole aim of getting rid of everyone who does not believe in the group’s leader, J. W. Abuti. “Once the diseased infidels are gone, we will be free to repopulate the continent. Abutites, God’s chosen people, will survive and thrive. Amen” (81). The woman and her daughter venture out of their hiding to find tea because her only connection to the past before the apocalypse is the memory of food familiar to her palate. Dressed in Abutite clothing, she goes to the shops where she intends to barter one of her prized possessions with a packet of tea leaves. Her efforts to blend in are not enough and when the crowd finds out that she is trying to impersonate an Abutite, she is killed.

These stories engage with contemporary political, social, economic, and ecological issues and present a fictionalised reality that is possible with certain choices made today. This fictionalised reality is one where there is a degeneration of people, humanity, physical materials, land, climate, and social ties. Everything is dysfunctional, from families, material structures, social networks, to food and nourishment. In general, what these fictionalised images of a future Africa present is one where urbanisation has exposed all the weaknesses of society, making the past look like an ideal that is most sought after. The only redeeming factor provided in the narratives is nostalgia where future generations’ only hope is to cling onto a past identity that is tied to food.

The use of pastoral and gastronomical terms in the stories in this anthology directs attention to the earth, the soil, and the general environment, prompting a discussion on urban development and ecocriticism. Susie O’Brien focuses on how social and environmental issues are interrelated and argues that “ecocriticism is worth investigating as a critical movement that has the potential to contribute to the understanding of the ways in which cultures and environments shape each other—an understanding that becomes particularly urgent in the current period of environmental crisis” (178). In the context of writing food in speculative fiction, Elzette Steenkamp explains that the “apocalyptic element prevalent in many of speculative fiction’s future histories points to an engagement with ecological concerns, particularly the dire threat to the earth’s ecosystem due to the massive impact of global warming, pollution, the human population’s overexploitation of natural resources and ruthless experimentation with weapons of mass destruction” (25).

In these short stories, food is used as a bridge between the alien and the familiar. Food is what links the imagined future Africa to the Africa of today. Retzinger explains that “[w]hen characters eat familiar, contemporary foods in futuristic settings, food typically represents the world that has been lost” (372). In these stories, the authors rely on the image of familiar food to comment on environmental degradation and its effects on future societies. For instance, in “After Market Life”, the story focuses on the scarcity of traditional foods such as eggs, cheese, and tomatoes, among others, sold in this market to warn about future ecological disasters as a result of unchecked urban expansion. Through nostalgia, it echoes a Kampala of the ‘past’ where food is freely available because there is enough land available and accessible for food production. Adam Roberts emphasises that the genre is more focused on the past than the future it seeks to present, noting that “the chief mode of science fiction is not prophecy, but *nostalgia*”, adding that “despite a surface attachment to ‘the future’, it seems clear that SF [science fiction] actually enacts a fascination with the past for which ‘nostalgia’ is the best description” (33–4). Relying on the food images to demonstrate the bleakness of the future, the aim of these stories is to immortalise the past, presenting it as ideal. However, as Retzinger notes, nostalgia “is notoriously unstable” and the past is illusory; “what we long for may never have existed” (372). Therefore, as argued in the beginning of this analysis, dystopia and utopia functions here not as two opposite ideas but as interrelated and interconnected factors that help to shine more light on the present. While the anthology’s focus is on the future that features in most of the stories as dystopic, the nostalgia for the past (present day) helps to expose the dysfunctions in today’s society.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the stories in the *Imagine Africa 500* anthology have heavily relied on the imagery of food and nourishment as a metaphor to engage the reader in a discussion about the future and present of the continent in regard to rapid urbanisation and climate change. Most of the stories feature first person narratives—the ‘I’ narrator. The effect of this narrative voice is that it plays a big role in capturing the immediacy of the moment. The reader becomes one of the characters in the story and is transported into the future urban city that maintains a link with the present through the food imagery. The reader imagines themselves as part of that bleak future society, a story

technique that's useful for immediacy and for urging action. This narrative technique is especially significant in situating the genre within current ecological and environmental debates. Speculative fiction not only presents a "what if?" scenario, it also acts as an important voice in sounding warnings regarding the future. Speculative fiction writer Margaret Atwood writes: "We want wisdom. We want hope. We want to be good. Therefore, we sometimes tell ourselves warning stories that deal with the darker side of some of our other wants". The African continent is currently experiencing the world's most rapid urban growth. Compared to other continents, the continent is the least urbanised today with about less than half of its population currently living in urban areas. The stories in this speculative fiction anthology could, therefore, be read as a literature warning about the future, not only of the African continent but of the world, if the obsession with urban expansion persists. Borrowing from the work of Martín-Lucas in analysing urban dystopias, these short stories "constitute powerful destabilizing ideological tools that may be instrumental in the construction of alternative social spaces and practises in global cities" (70). The future societies presented in the short stories in this collection therefore serve to allow for contemporary social and political critique, immersing themselves in current debates on ecocriticism.

## Notes

1. Available online at <https://www.worldpulse.com/community/resources/library/36057>.

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