# Contagion, a Futurist South African Climate Crisis and a Hidden Drug Pandemic in Mohale Mashigo's *Intruders: Short Stories*

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## Abstract

The article draws on typologies of contagion, particularly matrices and patterns of virality considered here as tropes from the Bakhtinian chronotope. Using this frame, it analyses how society attempts to control crises and contagions in Mohale Mashigo's speculative stories, "Untitled i," "Untitled ii," and "Ghost Strain N." The Foucauldian notion of heterotopic juxtaposition of spaces complements the trope of contagion in unpacking how Mashigo's characters encounter their specific forms of disasters and epidemics in ways that conform to past mass contagions and also break with those. In its focus on continuities and discontinuities regarding typologies of epidemics and pandemics, the article considers Mashigo's use of African science fiction and fantasy (speculative fiction) to depict the life experiences and flight from an unfolding climate disaster to another galaxy in "Untitled i" and "Untitled ii," and the spread of a drug epidemic in a fictional Johannesburg township in "Ghost Strain N." It argues that we can understand these stories by making heterotopic linkages with the present Covid-19 and various life-changing crises and infections that humanity has encountered, is facing right now and will encounter as it moves with time and strives for survival.

## Opsomming

Hierdie artikel put uit tipologieë van besmetting—veral matrikse en patrone van virusverskynsels wat hier beskou word as stylfigure van die Bakhtiniese chronotoop. Met behulp van hierdie raamwerk ontleed dit hoe die samelewing probeer om krisisse en besmettings te beheer in Mashigo se spekulatiewe stories, "Untitled i," Untitled ii" en "Ghost Strain N." Die Foucauldiese gedagte van heterotopiese naasmekaarstelling van ruimtes komplementeer die stylfiguur

van besmetting in die uitmekaarhaal van hoe Mashigo se karakters hul spesifieke vorme van rampe en epidemies teëkom op maniere wat voldoen aan—en ook breek met—massabesmettings uit die verlede. In die fokus daarvan op kontinuïteite en diskontinuïteite rakende topologieë van epidemies en pandemies, bestudeer die artikel Mashigo se gebruik van Afrika-wetenskapsfiksie en van fantasie (spekulatiewe fiksie) om die lewenservarings en vlug van 'n ontvouende klimaatramp na 'n ander sterrestelsel uit te beeld in "Untitled i" en "Untitled ii," en die verspreiding van 'n dwelmepidemie in 'n fiktiewe Johannesburgse township in "Ghost Strain N." Daar word beredeneer dat ons hierdie verhale kan verstaan deur heterotopiese verbande te bewerkstellig met die huidige Covid-19-situasie en verskeie lewensbedreigende krisisse en infeksies wat die mensdom tans in die gesig staar, in die verlede beleef het en sal teëkom namate dit met tyd beweeg en oorlewing nastreef.

**Keywords:** Mohale Mashigo; climate crisis; Covid-19; drug pandemic; speculative fiction; South Africa

## Introduction

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, described by Ien Ang (2021, 598) as arising from "an infectious […] coronavirus which was first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, and has since spread throughout the world, killing almost two million people worldwide by the end of the year [2020]," has had a devastating impact on societies globally. The Covid-19 health crisis coincided with and unfolded in a world witnessing new and already existing crises. There have been, since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, crises in global politics and the social and media sectors, climate disasters and to complicate this, the world is still experiencing other contagions such as HIV and AIDS (Ang 2021; Phillips 2012; Smicker 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic has also compelled humans to make various changes in their experiences, perceptions and the nature of their relations with their built and natural environments (Giordano 2020). At the same time, various historical and health studies, old and recent, by authors such as Howard Phillips (2012), Adam Kucharski (2020) and Paolo Giordano (2020), have risen to prominence as they engage with the history and impact of contagions that include smallpox, the plague, Spanish flu, HIV/AIDS and SARS, and the late 1990s environmental and economic crises suffered globally. Linked to this scholarship on pandemics and their effect is the view, postulated by Ang (2021, 601), that crises have the power to generate change and self-refection—"this crisis can also serve as a wake-up call, throwing light on what is wrong with the way the world has been operating, and possibly shaping political desires for drastic social change in society," to which I add the need to view and think about the ongoing and other crises and how humanity can survive these.

Mohale Mashigo's short story collection, *Intruders: Short Stories* (2018), whose title suggests an invasion, threats, strangers and an encounter with beings from an alternative world, contains stories about experiences set in the past, present and fantasy-futurist

time-spaces and treats various pertinent themes focusing on the human condition in different time-spaces. I examine Mashigo's stories "Untitled i" and "Untitled ii" that describe a society undergoing anxious moments and rendered vulnerable owing to an unfolding climate disaster where eventually a few citizens of the nameless urban society reach a nearby airport and board spaceships that transport them into a futurist post-disaster world, and "Ghost Strain N," which depicts an urban community reeling under the ravages of a drug epidemic where the addicts metamorphose into vampires that feed on their non-addict fellow residents' hearts. The intention here is to draw on the nature and impact of contagions, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, and the patterns as well as symbolic significance of the reflected contagiousness, here considered as the chronotope of contagion as discussed below, in order to understand further Mashigo's catastrophes and how they link with other contemporary, ongoing and hidden forms of virality and disasters of contagion.

## Contagions: Patterns, Chronotopic and Heterotopic Significance

Recent critical perspectives on contagions and their history are critical in determining the broader sense of meaning that assists in the analysis of Mashigo's stories about a futurist climate disaster and drug epidemic in South Africa. Contagions, defined as "the unusually high prevalence of a lethal human disease in a town, country or region" (Phillips 2012, 9), have generally been considered from a disease perspective. Some scholars, such as Phillips (2012), consider the history of pandemics, such as the 1713–1893 smallpox outbreak, the 1901–1907 plague, the 1918–1919 Spanish flu, the 1918–1963 outbreak of poliomyelitis and the HIV/AIDS pandemic spanning roughly from the 1980s to the present, in order to evaluate their impact on society and measures implemented to survive them. History shows that humanity has faced and is set to face disease outbreaks in the present and future, and that humans confront these in order to survive. I am, nonetheless, interested in Phillips's (2012, 9) observation that historians "failed to recognise that, far from existing outside these frameworks, in some separate medical paradigm, epidemics (and disease generally) are integral to every aspect of life, death and society." This observation links with my thesis that literary and cultural critics and society in general should draw on the current Covid-19 pandemic to read existing literatures and determine how they treat aspects about the human condition and other epidemics and crises.

There is, however, a need to unpack the larger sense of contagions and their resultant harm. Kucharski (2020, 2) defines a pandemic in its broadest sense thus:

> When we think of contagion, we tend to think about things like infectious diseases or viral online content. But outbreaks come in many forms. They might involve things that bring harm—like malware, violence or financial crises—or benefits, like innovations and culture.

The above definition underscores the idea of multiple outbreaks and their impacts, which is critical to this study. Nedine Moonsamy (2016), in her analysis of short fiction

depictions of utopias in futurist postcolonial Africa, as depicted in Sarah Lotz's "Home Affairs," Tendai Huchu's "The Sale" and Nick Wood's "Azania," underscores the way the trope of contagion is used to disrupt traditional notions of science and technology-based utopias. I am, however, interested in Moonsamy's (2016) use of the expanded sense of contagion, which includes socio-economic contaminations such as corruption, crime, greed, manipulation of existing systems, foreign intrusion, social malaise and even disease outbreaks, in her analysis of the disruptions of sterile utopias in African science fiction. This expanded sense of contagion assists in unpacking the way we may read the climate disaster and flight into a utopian spaceship world in the "Untitled" stories and the drug-related social upheavals depicted in "Ghost Strain N" and determine what it means to be human in the face of and after a protracted crisis.

The global and even a given society's experience of a specific contagion is or should be followed by a determination of its various effects on the human condition and societal relations and interactions within the specific space-time. This invokes Kucharski's (2020, 3) observation that studying contagions enables us to "see the connections that are emerging between seemingly unrelated problems," a useful idea that enables us to determine how the climate disaster and drug pandemic portrayed by Mashigo link with aesthetics and patterns of the Covid-19 and other contagions. The Covid-19 epidemic has indeed, as noted by Giordano (2020, 1) revealed "multiple levels and layers that connect us to each other, everywhere, and the complexity of the world we inhabit—its social, political, financial motives and its interpersonal and psychological structures too." Therefore, I am interested in how humanity's being in the world, sense of self, psyche and other qualities have been impacted, as portrayed in Mashigo's stories, and how this links with the sense of contagions such as the present Covid-19 and other historical pandemics.

Contagions render us vulnerable and create new affliction-, disease-, or contamination-based divisions. The early part of the Covid-19 pandemic witnessed South African television news bulletins and newspaper publications broadcasting a pandemic-based cartography where maps were colour-coded blue for areas with lower infection rates and red for hotspots of infections. Available studies on the pandemic consider the divisions from a "mathematical model of disease transmission" (Kucharski 2020, 23) that reflects how people get categorised according to paradigms of affliction—Susceptible, Infectious and Recovered (the SIR Model). Giordano (2020, 7–8) bases this division on observations of the constitution of shifting divisions stretching from the vulnerable to the no longer afflicted, which he terms "contagion by numbers." He explains:

> remember that Cov–2 doesn't care about us, our age, gender, nationality, personal preferences. The entire human species, in the eyes of the virus, falls into one of three categories: the Susceptible, those it can still infect; the Infected, those it already has; the Recovered, those it can no longer infect.

The above divisions link with contagions' ability to replicate into other contagious conditions and senses such as that of fear, anxiety, displacement and in the extreme and futurist senses, a zombification of society, as shown in Mashigo's "Ghost Strain N." I am reminded of Giordano's (2020, 47) view that "[t]he contagion, then, is an invitation to think." As a result, I consider these intrusions and continuous spreads as a metaphor of virality, which, as intertextually explained by Kucharski (2020) in reference to the way pictures or information pedalled in business or via rumour on high-tech business information and social media can turn viral, becomes an interstice that results in the constitution of the aforementioned social divisions, vulnerabilities and other negative senses. The virality also transports a healthy body into a diseased state or a society into contamination and a quarantine realm, which I consider as gesturing towards senses of mobilities and transportation into alternate temporalities, spaces of refuge and recovery and other conditions such as those surreal and futurist mobilities that some of Mashigo's characters engage in.

There is a need to consider further the literary lenses and in particular the literariness of the trope of contagion used in this study's analysis of Mashigo's stories. First, the trope of contagion is highlighted in the scholarship on Covid-19 as manifesting itself through a pattern of entrance into and spread in a given space occupied by humans at a given moment, and marked by a slipperiness in its infection and transmission, with this pattern of transmission holding various similarities with other contagions and crises (Giordano 2020, 7–8, 47; Kucharski 2020, 2–3). The use and extension of these space-time experiences and the associated human experiences as units of analysis to read the literary depiction of other crises and contagions resonates with Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981, 84) articulations on the chronotope—how time and space have been assimilated into literature to describe a given human condition. From smallpox to HIV and Aids, contagions have occurred for a long time in history, as Phillips (2012) narrates regarding South Africa and the rest of the globe, documenting human experiences in the realm of pandemics over time and in particular spaces, which leads to the idea of a pandemic chronotope. However, the applicability of Bhaktin's chronotope needs further discussion in that, as Ndlovu (2018, 81) notes, "different literary genres operate with different arrangements of time and space, which further gives each genre its specific narrative character, themes, structures and characters."

I argue further that the link between the chronotope of contagion and Mashigo's stories analysed here becomes more nuanced when we consider the chronotope together with Foucault's idea of heterotopia and Mashigo's use of the African science fiction genre as discussed in the next section. Kucharski (2020, 5) notes that there is a need "to measure and compare contagion across industries … using ideas from one area of life to help us understand another." This critical view links with Michel Foucault's (1986) notion of heterotopia, which refers to space and how it relates with other spaces and associated experiences over time. In this case, one begins to think about the parallels between Mashigo's futurist climate crisis and drug pandemic experiences and how they shed light on Covid-19 and other pandemics. It should be noted that sometimes the

connections are created by one common characteristic in time-space in the case of Bakhtin and contagion or crisis in this study. However, these temporal spatial connections are still possible in conditions that are not similar—as Foucault (1986, 25) notes: "heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible." Thus, even if Mashigo's post-apartheid futurist climate crisis and post-apocalyptic world time-spaces as well as the drug-pandemic world and experiences may not reflect overt and usual viralities, such as those evident in the spread of Covid-19, the stories' reflection of threats, infections, displacements and other human conditions similar to those witnessed during contagion experiences, such as those of the Covid-19 pandemic, justify the comparison and reading of such stories in the heterotopic framework discussed here.

## Science Fiction and Fantasy and the Depiction of Crises and Contagion

Mashigo notes in an introductory essay to the collection *Intruders: Short Stories* and in an interview with the media (Boshomane Tsotetsi 2019) that, while some of her stories are set in the future, dwell on post-apocalyptic dystopias and blend the magical and fantasy, her work should not be considered as Afrofuturism because, "Our needs, when it comes to imagining futures, or even reimagining a fantasy present, are different from elsewhere on the globe" (Mashigo 2018, xi). Mashigo goes on to categorise her fiction as African future postcolonialism. That the selected stories under discussion here, and others in the collection, are set in an alternative and future world is incontrovertible. Nonetheless, the author's views that her stories are magical, fantasy, science fiction and beyond the subgenre of Afrofuturism (Boshomane Tsotetsi 2019) and Chantelle Gray's (2019) view that "Mohale Mashigo's stories are parables for South Africa's present and future" compel us to consider the role of genre in the reading of the selected stories within the chronotope of the pandemic.

The stories "Untitled i," "Untitled ii" and "Ghost Strain N" draw on African science fiction and fantasy and also portray alternative worlds—this marks Mashigo's oeuvre as a mixture of genres and thus speculative fiction—which necessitates that we examine the conceptual significance of genre in linking the stories with the trope of the pandemic and in enabling us to understand other contemporary and hidden forms of virality and disasters impacting this and the rest of humanity. I am reminded here of the objective set by Moradewun Adejunmobi (2016, 265) in an introduction to a special issue of *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* focusing on African science fiction:

> The goal here is not so much to prove that all the creative works under consideration are science fiction, but to determine how African authors use sf (science fiction) elements to interrogate the sociopolitical arrangements that inform the African condition in the current age.

The environmental crisis and escape of a selected few residents by spaceship to a galaxy that are depicted in "Untitled i" and "Untitled ii" are characteristic of Darko Suvin's

(1979) concept of the estranging effect of science fiction that enables readers to read the depicted world in comparison with their reality. Eric D. Smith (2012, 4–5), who cites Suvin in a discussion on the genre's facilitation of comparisons between the alternative world and the reader's, highlights "the estranging function of the genre [to] provide the utopian means to 'redescribe the known world and open up new possibilities of intervening into it.'" Mashigo indeed focuses on a climate crisis/implosion and travel to another world using the science fiction tone of wonder that estranges the South African reader, but makes this world familiar by drawing on local idioms and sensibilities (as discussed further below) and importantly triggers the reader's curiosity about both the local and global crises and contagions.

Mashigo's categorisation of her works as science fiction and futurist productions that draw on local and specific experiences and constitute "African future 'postcolonialism'" (Mashigo 1998, xi) also calls for a consideration of relevant tenets of postcolonial science fiction and their significance in this analysis. Science fiction has long been associated with Western conceptions of science, technology, fantasy and empire. Smith (2012, 5) notes the advent of a paradigm shift after 2000 in postcolonial science fiction that sought to reconfigure the genre, disrupt old Western-based narrative patterns and perceptions and establish new ways of thinking about the nexus between former colonised worlds and the West and on senses of what progress is and being in the world. More specifically, a shift began from 2009 in African science fiction, according to Mark Bould (2013, 7), which focused on "the relationships among sf, imperialism, colonialism, postcolonialism, globalization and Empire." I argue that Mashigo's *Intruders* joins this post-2009 body of African science fiction and postulate further that the stories resonate with the relationship between African science fiction and the global networks of contagion.

The history of contagions in South Africa (Phillips 2012) and the network of infection, with the recent outbreak of Covid-19 having spread from China to Europe, the Americas and then Africa and the rest of the world, as discussed by critics such as Giordano (2020), locate South Africa in a world marked by a repertoire of global pandemics. Africa and other global South continents are entangled in this connection between the impact of past and ongoing contagious economic, technological and ideological designs from the global North and their reactions range from helpless victimhood to complex engagement with and in search of survival from such contagions. Moonsamy (2016) considers the place of aspirational utopias in African science fiction imaginaries on the society's survival within a context of global technological and other bio-political domination. She goes on to discuss the impact of China as a "techno-scientific empire" (337) in her analysis of Tendai Huchu's story and its treatment of China's encroachment and seizure of a futurist Zimbabwe's resources such as land as a global imperial "contamination." An analysis of the climate and socio-economic catastrophes depicted by Mashigo can be viewed from the same matrix of narratives about South Africa's experiences and search for survival in the lopsided relationship with the global North.

Also important here are Jessica Langer's (2011, 2) views on postcolonial science fiction as a hybrid genre whose "edges have been blurred and smudged" and which is flexible enough to treat postcolonial concerns, such as subverting various Western-based science fiction tropes and even mimicking them to the extent that they represent various postcolonial concerns that have a bearing on the former colonised worlds. Langer's views noted here indicate the possibilities that postcolonial science fiction offers in reading and locating the relationships and meanings of human experience in an age impacted by global connections.

## A Climate Crisis, Flight and Entrance into a Post-disaster New Order in "Untitled i" and "Untitled ii"

"Untitled i" depicts the experiences of residents of a nameless futurist South African city during a climate crisis and their attempts to come to terms with and survive the impact of the crisis. The depicted residents witness a sudden encroachment of a pollution/fog-like implosion that makes the sun disappear and ushers in a new temporality marked by an extended duskiness. This portrayal of the encroaching implosion is typical of science fiction's focus, since its inception, on intrusions and disasters, as discussed by critics such as Wuthnow (2010), with the disasters invoking the extended sense of contagion expressed by Kucharski (2020) discussed above. This resonates with the trope of contagion normally symbolised by intrusions that include an unknown disease, phenomenon, people, hegemonic/enslaving global technology and consumption patterns or aliens, which turn the world upside down (Giordano 2020; Moonsamy 2016). Mashigo (2018, 59) describes the unsettling impact and futurist elements of the climate crisis thus:

> The sun had dimmed; quite suddenly the daylight turned from grey to the colour of the hour before children are called in because the streetlights are on. The sun was definitely still in the sky, but angry clouds that looked like a frustrated artist's splashes of paint blocked it.

The use of African imagery, noted in the use of South African spatial-temporality-based tropes to describe the futurist disrupted world, as reflected in the vivid statement "the daylight turned from grey to the colour of the hour before children are called in because the streetlights are on," is significant here. It underscores the impending climatic implosion from an African sensibility and evinces an African science fiction that disrupts Western science fiction aesthetics and formulaic treatment of tropes and by extension perceptions of contagions (Adejunmobi 2016; Bould 2013). This local, African sense of imagination of contagions has always existed, as aptly noted in Liz Gunner's (2003, 42) study on choir performances by Isicathamiya groups from the KwaNyavu district in KwaZulu-Natal that focused on the spread and impact of HIV and AIDS, in which she notes that the Zulu call the pandemic disease "by many other names, such as uMashayabhuqe (The Swift-Destroyer), and Amagama Amathathu (Three-Letters)."

Mashigo is quick to locate the implosion within the postcolonial paradigm of globalisation and its impact on the rest of the world, where the global South, as noted in the depicted South African setting, suffers severely. The story's narrator criticises the global environmentally destructive cultures and inaction of both the world and local leaders in the face of climate change by mockingly describing how the leaders spent time "blam[ing] each other for not being Climate Change Ready" (Mashigo 2018, 59). The local governments are not spared either as revealed in the dark humour generated by South African residents during the implosion in an attempt to understand and survive the unsettling reality:

> *End of days? For the rest of the world maybe. We are used to disasters here in SA. Just look at our government.* (Mashigo 2018, 60; italics in original)

The indicated presence of South Africa in the global network of climate and governance disasters replicates, from a Foucauldian heterotopic sense, the patterns in which crises spread and hence the virality of contagions, such as that of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic from China to the rest of the world (Giordano 2020) and, with respect to AIDS, as reflected in Isicathamiya performances describing its contagiousness and ravaging effect among the Zulu communities in the early 2000s (Gunner 2003). Mashigo mocks the global bio-political structures for wasting time blaming and spying on each other while the world implodes and the citizens on the margins ridicule them and search for means to survive the climate disaster—a textual reality that is similar to the current global North's vaccine nationalism which has seen some countries holding on to huge stocks of Covid-19 vaccines while the global South countries have limited access to these vaccines and thus suffer heavily.

Mashigo also describes the residents' psychological condition and later their agency amidst the unfolding climate disaster. The residents, including the story's main characters, two orphan sisters, Bonolo and Khamo, live in fear and anxiety, which is a typical human response in typologies of a pandemic. Fear compels Khamo and Bonolo to keep a bucket inside their home as "[u]sing the outside toilet was far too dangerous since the sun had disappeared" (Mashigo 2018, 60). The city resorts to keeping the floodlights continuously on while some residents engage in escapist excessive consumption of alcohol. Nonetheless, constant exposure to the climate implosion-related danger and the constitution of an individual and societal state of anxiety and caution are followed by a further search for new ways to deal with the crisis. Thus, Mashigo employs the science fiction trope in developing the story strand in search of a world that is not the present, one that offers possibilities of a better world, in the form of a futurist technology-based utopia (Moonsamy 2016, 329–30) in her portrayal of the agency of some of the affected residents. The narrative tone suddenly changes into a hasty one that reflects the sense of desperation and search for survival within the residents of Mashigo's city. As a result, Khamo makes hasty instructions to her little sister Bonolo, who had been confined to the house, in a typical contagion typology of government-enforced quarantine and self-isolation as experienced in this Covid-19 era,

to pack her clothes and both rush to a "private airport that [Bonolo] had never heard of before" (Mashigo 2018, 65). The story ends with Bonolo leaving her sister and boarding the spaceship where she gets strapped in and placed in an egg-shaped booth and cries as the spaceship is launched into the sky. The ending contrasts with escape from danger which should invoke relief; Bonolo's crying and being strapped into a refrigerator-like compartment and floating towards a burning sky suggests entry into a techno-based world defined by another disaster.

The futurist escape via spaceships that starts at the end of "Untitled i" is cynically presented as a transportation into a technology-based utopian realm where the escapees are ironically exposed to further catastrophic living conditions. Bonolo and her late mother's wealthy employers, Jonty and Melanie, and their daughter Annie, as well as other wealthy citizens, escape to another world where time is frozen and 20 years ahead of their escaped planet earth setting. The residents of this futurist colony live in a utopian space and temporality defined by technology; the spaceship is drifting from earth on autopilot and individuals live in time-locked pods controlled by engineers under the command of the overbearing but absent Mr X's network of surveillance and control. In addition, the residents have been subjected to scientific manipulation as they were frozen for 20 years into "'second youth'" (129) and woken up and rehabilitated by medical personnel such as the physiotherapist, Dr Nguyen. Since then, "being awake [was] difficult; joints ached and the heartache was persistent" (129). The experiences in this spaceship colony are defined by a new techno-medical bio-power that engenders bleak and dystopian conditions. These dystopian conditions and the association with a frozen time replicate the notion of subjection to another set of powers and dangers in the futurist spaceship colony. This resonates with the various governmental strategies, including South Africa's, introduced in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic, such as the promulgation of disaster levels and the associated confinement of people to their homes under lockdown and the demand that the infected be quarantined. These strategies went hand in hand with the deployment of the military to enforce the lockdown and other regulations, which limited people's freedom of movement.

Nevertheless, this is another "new normal" suggesting the cyclical nature of contagions/pandemics. The spaceship transports the escapees into a world marked by an unending imprisonment under Mr X's out-of-the-world technology and an overbearing intrusion of medical science into the body and psyche. The residents of the spaceship community suffer from physical and psychological trauma. Bonolo, who is forced to become more religious due to the severe sense of displacement and trauma, states: "The Prayer is my daily mantra but for me it is not a prayer to God. It's a prayer to all those I left behind and those I miss. When the new world overwhelms me, I recite the prayer until my breadth is normal again and the pain in my chest disappears" (130). Her ruminations underscore the existence of a bleak and dystopian alternative world. This world compares in ways we may not comprehend, and in a heterotopic way, with how people's lives are contaminated by technology-based intrusions, unknown diseases, overbearing and intrusive medical science and even unknown ideologies and forces that

disrupt or impact lives in a wide way as postulated above in the scholarship on contagions (Giordano 2020; Kucharski 2020; Moonsamy 2016; Phillips 2012).

This post-crisis world is further described as marked by new divisions. The citizens of this fantasy alterative world live in a future time that is 20 years ahead of the planet earth they escaped from and occupy different spaces based on wealth and social class:

> There were the X Cabins, which were really luxury apartments on Level 5 of the ship. X Cabins were for people who had made it into lists of magazines I'd never heard of— for being successful and wealthy, obviously. There was X-Annex meant for the "support staff" of those families.
>
> Annie and Jonty are not Cabin X people, nor are they X2 types. We live on Level 3. When I say "we", I mean Melanie and I share a room and she's begun to treat me the way her parents did when she was a baby. (Mashigo 2018, 131)

Here we note a sense in which contagion and containment regimes both emphasise what already exists, in this case inequality as depicted through class divisions. In addition, these new social divisions create a sad cloud and hence pollute, in the Moonsamy (2016) sense of the contaminations that plague postcolonial African utopias, at the social level and create a climate implosion that destabilises the everyday-life rhythm. More importantly, and as noted in Bonolo's interiority and sense of anxiety, the residents of this floating spaceship world continue to suffer from multiple states of displacement as they experience their strange and seemingly inescapable world marked by a sense of inertia, as noted in Melanie's rhetorical wonder to Bonolo while lying in bed: "What are we gonna do here for the rest of our lives, Bonnie?" (Mashigo 2018, 133). Therefore, the widespread fear and sense of vulnerability in this futurist spaceship have an estranging effect and yet invoke similarities with the same conditions of vulnerability and fear characteristic of living in policed and quarantined worlds in old and current pandemics.

The story ends with Bonolo evading the spaceship security to reach "the garage where the Explorer Pods are parked" (135). She steals one pod to escape, because, as she notes, "[m]aybe when I'm out there I will find a different set of people with a sense of history and irony, because this place is suffocating me" (155). Bonolo reaches "an unidentified planet" where she is surprised to see people who look like her but are much older, thus marking her return to a post-climate crisis earth and underscoring the hope of surviving contagions such as the current Covid-19 that humanity desires.

## A Social and Hidden Contagion in "Ghost Strain N"

The story "Ghost Strain N" describes the experiences of Koketso, a worker at a nameless Johannesburg township funeral parlour, as he struggles with anxiety and disbelief from witnessing how his society and in particular, childhood friend, Steven, gets severely affected by the use of a synthetic drug called Ghost Strain N. The synthetic drug, popular

with the youth of this fictional township near Johannesburg, transforms the users into ghostly addicts. Mashigo describes this as a pharmaceutical contamination of the youth. This invokes the socio-economic crises linked to contemporary global and postcolonial conditions marked by the global North's domination over the global South economies and an introduction of consumption patterns that do not favour the receiving countries. The specific negative effects of globalisation and imperialist consumptive patterns that readers can heterotopically compare with the pattern in which Covid-19 spread from 2019 are noted in the lack of meaningful investments and hence neglect of certain sectors in South Africa that renders the township vulnerable to receiving any new consumption patterns, in this case, pharmaceutical contaminants.

Mashigo's setting of her story in a nameless and economically neglected Johannesburg township is instructive. The township's social and economic bleakness symbolises the existing neglect, by global capitalist investments, of South Africa and other global South countries, which renders the youth a forgotten and idle community owing to a lack of opportunities. It is little wonder that the youth end up partaking in destructive consumption patterns. Mashigo describes the widespread abuse of various drugs by the youth, starting with Ghost Strain N, with N standing for Nyaope, which contains heroin and other pharmaceuticals used in the nameless Johannesburg township where the story is set. Drug consumption spreads to include Ghost Strain T, which stands for Tick and is consumed in the Western Cape, and Ghost Strain W, with W referring to Wine that the farm labourers become addicted to; its potency and addictive effects make users "fall down a bottomless pit" (40) and at worst transform into human flesh-eating ghosts. Only the death industry thrives in such spaces, resonating with the ubiquity of death in a space overwhelmed by disease contagion as postulated by Giordano (2020). The main character, Koketso, works as an assistant at a funeral parlour where they are kept busy burying people over the weekends and become busier after the intrusion of the addictive ghost drugs and the various deaths they cause in the township. Relatedly, Thando Kubheka (2021) documents in a journalistic opinion piece how communities in Johannesburg townships such as Ebony Park suffer from high levels of youth unemployment and as a result the youth end up abusing drugs such as Nyaope (depicted in Mashigo's story as the Ghost Strain N drug). The black township youth are thus reduced to consumers of the contaminants spread through global consumption patterns arising from what Ang (2021, 600), in an examination of the current anti-racism and Black Lives Matter protests whose rise in America was spurred by a long history of institutional racism against African Americans, terms "a symptom of a longer term, more slow-burn crisis." These consumption patterns have transformed the affected South African spaces, such as urban townships, into zones of contagion and specifically in Mashego's stories, into spaces of drug pandemics.

The drug-taking youth are transformed, as with any contagion whose effects include turning worlds upside down, into a state of diseased inaction and become ghostly figures, as noted in Mashigo's eerie description that "[n]othing happened as these Ghosts were overtaking corners of the townships. Saliva dripped from their mouths as

their muscles relaxed, eyes half shut, some bent over in the kind of ecstasy and agony oblivion brings" (Mashigo 2018, 30). This contamination of the body and mind of the youth and its slow spread among the youth and the township's spaces until all corners are invaded conjure images of the virality of disease, climate, financial and other crises and the associated corruption and contamination of humanity, the existing social fabric and other systems (Giordano 2020; Kucharski 2020; Moonsamy 2016). The Ghosts' presence spreads and they metamorphose further into murderous post-human and vampire figures that devour the hearts and livers of people:

> Whispers about hearts being torn out of people continued and they got louder. In churches, shebeens, kitchens and bedrooms, that is what people were talking about. Ghosts colonised street corners and the fences of the corner houses. (Mashigo 2018, 34)

Mashigo uses images of the grotesque and horror to portray the contagiousness of the drug and Ghost intrusion. She reflects the severity of the contagion in her description of the Ghosts' final transformation into murderous vampires whose bites destroy or infect residents until the city is tinged with deathly apocalypse. The situation is worsened in that, just as in "Untitled i," the government fails to intervene and this leads to a replication of chaos, evident in the disruption of the normal way of life typical of contagion typology, which is described as having "happened so fast; in less than two weeks whole neighbourhoods were emptied … and countless Ghosts burned, because mob justice knows no sentimentality" (35).

The story also depicts the existence of other afflictions, at a social level, which have been going on and should not be forgotten. It starts with a flashback to a normal and fulfilling childhood era, albeit with its blemishes, in which Steven and Koketso become the best of childhood friends while going through experiences such as bullying, courting girls and engaging in typical township mischief that includes the dangerous activity of train surfing. Also recollected are events from the protagonists' adult life; Steven goes to university and Koketso, who comes from a poor family, starts work at a funeral parlour as an assistant. In the story's present tense, Koketso starts to witness, during his job travels around the township, the sickly drug addicts, called Ghosts, walking the streets and the bodies of those who die due to drug abuse. The deaths spread and this leads to another level of contamination where the Ghosts transform into murderous vampires. The chronotope of a contagious spread of a virus, contamination or crisis, is thus noted here.

Of further significance here is the growth or contagiousness of anxiety, vulnerability, suffering and death in affected or afflicted communities, which indicates the typical patterns of all contagions, diseases or shared crises. Koketso is first portrayed suffering together with his fellow funeral parlour workers from the exponential rise in their work of collecting dead bodies, preparing and burying them. Secondly, we note that the presence of Ghosts threatens ordinary residents, including Koketso's family, as captured below by the foreboding sense felt by Koketso:

he still felt as though something horrible was coming—his stomach was screaming danger. Huddled at the kitchen table, he looked at his mother and siblings. He knew they had to go; the township was never safe but now it was unquestionably dangerous. (34)

Koketso eventually devises a plan to save both his family and zombified friend, Steven. The plan invokes the science fiction and, in this case, fantasy trope of escape and search for survival in the face of old and new contagions that is similar to Bonolo's escape from the dystopian spaceship colony depicted in "Untitled ii." Ultimately, Koketso ships his family out of the city and begins a search for his childhood friend Steven so that he can save him from the fatal contamination. He finds Steven after a long search, ties and hides him in a coffin, and drives away in a hearse in order to rehabilitate him. The story ends with Steven on the road to rehabilitation and a tired Koketso, who had been bitten by Steven, slowly transforming into the glowing colours of green and mauve, perhaps turning into a vampire too. Ironically, Koketso's transformation suggests, as noted by Moonsamy (2016), that contamination is part of the futurist utopia and will be part of the long history of life and any unfolding social or other crisis. However, it is the effort to fight and survive it, as noted in Koketso's and in our Covid-19 reality, following scientific means such as vaccination, sanitising, wearing of masks, and isolation when infected, which is important.

## Conclusion

Mashigo's stories can be viewed as futurist texts of possibilities where we can discern the depicted characters' experience of a climate crisis and post-disaster crisis in "Untitled i" and "Untitled ii," respectively, and a socio-economic pandemic that is sometimes hidden, such as the fictional Nyaope-addiction pandemic depicted in "Ghost Strain N," comparable to the old and ongoing contagions in their expanded sense. However, I argued that there is a need to be imaginative and, in this case, to use multiple lenses, which I term the science fiction-chronotope-heterotopic framework of analysis that is sensitive to the African context and African aesthetics. This framework must be compounded by adding the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia, in order for us to understand the clear and not so clear comparisons between the depicted social and spatial experiences of crisis and contagion, and humanity's experiences and search for survival during the old and contemporary contagions.

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