

# Dystopian Futures: Ugandan Science Fiction and Post-Apocalypse Contagions

**Edgar Fred Nabutanyi**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8718-1286>

Makerere University, Uganda

[edgar.nabutanyi@mak.ac.ug](mailto:edgar.nabutanyi@mak.ac.ug)

## Abstract

Uganda, like most countries on the African continent, has in the recent past grappled with existential pandemics such as AIDS, Marburg disease, cholera, Ebola, and currently the Covid-19 pandemic. All the above-mentioned disease outbreaks have often unleashed unimaginable suffering on Uganda's population. This is perhaps why Ugandan scholars and public intellectuals—especially its writers such as Mary Karoro Okurut, Moses Isegawa, Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi, and Austin Ejeit—have used fiction to offer insights into the various contours of these contagions. For example, in their interrogation of one of the worst pandemics to hit the Ugandan society—AIDS—a host of writers have centred a cautionary tale motif and verisimilitude to show how behavioural change can effectively combat disease outbreaks. This article builds on this substantial Ugandan archive of plague writing by focusing on one genre of Ugandan writing—science fiction—that has not received much critical attention for its exploration of pandemics. I explore how Dilman Dila's "A Leafy Man," "Where Rivers Go to Die" and "The Taking of Olang" use science fiction tropes to proffer insights in contemporary Ugandan plagues. I argue that Dila uses science fiction to effectively delineate the causes of, how to cope with and the myths that circulate about these catastrophic occurrences in the Ugandan public sphere.

## Opsomming

Soos die meeste lande op die Afrika-vasteland het Uganda onlangs met eksistensiële pandemies soos vigs, Marburg, cholera en ebola geworstel, benewens die huidige Covid-19-pandemie. Al die bogenoemde siekte-uitbrekings het dikwels ondenkbare lyding vir Uganda se bevolking meegebring. Dalk is dit die rede waarom Ugandese vakkundiges en openbare

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intellektuele—veral skrywers soos Mary Karooro Okurut, Moses Isegawa, Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi, en Austin Ejeit—fiksie gebruik het om insig in die verskillende kontoere van hierdie besmettings te bied. Byvoorbeeld, in hul ondersoek oor een van die ergste pandemies wat die Ugandese samelewing getref het, naamlik vigs, het vele skrywers 'n waarskuwende verhaalmotief en skynwaarheid die middelpunt gemaak om te wys hoe gedragsverandering die uitbreking van siektes doeltreffend kan bekamp. Hierdie artikel bou voort op dié omvattende Ugandese argief van skryfwerk oor siektes, deur te fokus op een genre van Ugandese skryfwerk—wetenskapsfiksie—wat nie veel kritiese aandag gekry het vir die bestudering van pandemies nie. Ek ondersoek hoe Dilman Dila se “A Leafy Man,” “Where Rivers Go to Die” en “The Taking of Oleng” wetenskapsfiksie-stylfigure gebruik om insig oor hedendaagse Ugandese plae te bied. Ek voer aan dat Dila wetenskapsfiksie gebruik om 'n doeltreffende beeld te skep van die oorsake van hierdie katastrofiese verskynsels wat in die Ugandese openbare sfeer sirkuleer, hoe om dit te hanteer en die mites daaromtrent.

**Keywords:** Uganda; science fiction; Dilman Dila; AIDS; pandemics; science fiction tropes; public sphere

## Introduction

Dilman Dila’s “A Leafy Man” (2012), “Where Rivers Go to Die” (2018) and “The Taking of Oleng” (2017) document the triadic aspects of Ugandan pandemics, namely the causes of, coping with and myths about catastrophic disease outbreaks that circulate in the public sphere. Deploying the imaginative potentiality of science fiction, Dila’s fiction excavates the multifaceted aspects of Ugandan contagions. I posit that he expertly deploys science fiction tropes to engage with a subject that both Grace Musila (2020) and Benjamin Menadue and Karen Diane Cheer (2017) claim is fraught with illocutionary difficulties. While Musila notes that epidemics deal with “an anxiety that is real and frustrating” (2020, 68), Menadue and Cheer argue that writing medical outbreaks is “driven by the need to provide some sort of manageable interpretation of an increasingly complex and unstable [...] reality” (2017, 1–2). I agree with Musila that contagions often produce an anxiety that only fiction is capable of distilling. I also concur with Menadue and Cheer’s argument that science fiction allows writers to imagine a complex and unstable world caused by contagions that defy stable articulation and disclosure. Their argument recalls Susan Sontag’s point in *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989) about contagions. Sontag argues that “a disease that is not yet fully understood as well as extremely recalcitrant to treatment [...] and] in its epidemic form [...] provides] a large-scale occasion for the metaphorizing of illness” (1989, 104). Sontag’s argument is that because contagions defy neat classifications, they can only be debated in a language that is inherently metaphorical.

If by metaphorical language Sontag means “giving the thing a name that belongs to another” to ease its comprehension (1989, 93), then her argument resonates with Cathy

Caruth's (1996) and Anne Whitehead's (2004) postulations on trauma fiction. They argue that trauma is incomprehensible and indecipherable and often disclosed in a language that is inherently literary. This means that "contagion writing" is comparable to trauma writing because both subjects are not fully comprehended as writers attempt to disclose them. This is perhaps why fiction, especially a subgenre such as science fiction that exists on the edge of unbelievability, is best suited for the exploration of the various contours of pandemics. I think with the notion that pandemics can be eloquently articulated in a metaphorical language in my exploration of Dila's science fiction to argue that Dila uses figurative registers to depict the various contours of contagions. His lexicon ensures the legibility of the triadic contours of disease outbreaks.

This is perhaps why "A Leafy Man," "Where Rivers Go to Die" and "The Taking of Oleng" dovetail neatly into the illocutionary potential of science fiction because they allow Dila to engage with the complex matter of disease outbreaks. This reminds us of Dila's own confession in an interview with Nyana Kakoma that his stories "go beyond the edge of reality and that it is not impossible for those events to happen" (Dila 2014). I agree with his postulation above because an outbreak of vampire mosquitos, human beings trapped in rodent bodies or a society with 20% of its population afflicted with deformity as well as a machine epidemic are subjects that exist on the edge of reality. This is perhaps why Nedine Moonsamy labels *A Killing in the Sun* (2012) an exploration of how "humanity perishes because of our collective actions" (2019, 78). While Moonsamy's argument above is made in direct reference to "A Leafy Man"—a tale that explores how corporate greed leads to the devastation of a thriving society—her core argument that Dila grapples with medical emergencies caused by techno-scientific innovations is applicable to "Where Rivers Go to Die" and "The Taking of Oleng." This is because the three texts deploy imaginative tropes of science fiction to offer insights into the three aspects of pandemics that have plagued Ugandan society.

### The Basis for Selecting Dila's Pandemic-Themed Science Fiction

The thematic thread that links the three short stories explored in this article is the centrality of pandemics at the heart of their plots and conflicts. For example, the protagonist and narrator of "A Leafy Man" called Japia recollects the tale of a disastrous malaria eradication plan. Through a combination of an omniscient narrator and the interiority of the sole survivor, the plot of the short story unravels how a scientific experiment goes wrong when a company called Pest Control Corporation is hired to eradicate malaria by genetically engineering the malaria-carrying mosquito into a benign species. This company's simple plan—"to out populate and replace the naturals with disease-free bugs" (Dila 2012, 7)—contradicts the best practices in malaria management. Adam Kucharski argues that for malaria to remain endemic in a population, "those two processes—infection and recovery—would need to balance each other out. If the recoveries outpaced the rate of new infections, the level of disease eventually would decline to zero" (2020, 17). Kucharski's argument is predicated upon the assumption that it is impossible, and actually unnecessary, to eradicate malaria-

causing mosquitos. His argument that it is futile to attempt to eradicate mosquitos resonates with what Japia, the narrator of the text, had been implementing in his fight against malaria in Abedo, the setting of Dila's science fiction tale. By distributing mosquito nets, draining stagnant water and planting mosquito repellent plants, Japia's plan is comparable to Kucharski's model of malaria control that seeks to establish an equilibrium between the infected and recovered victims of malaria.

Unfortunately, Pest Control Corporation ignores the above-mentioned basic tenet of malaria control. Instead, it executes an intervention that goes horribly wrong. This is because Pest Control Corporation's genetically modified mosquito—Miss Doe—becomes a blood-sucking bug. Rather than listen to Japia's local expertise and discovery that Miss Doe dreads orange odour, Pest Control Corporation decides to spray an insecticide “over the village to wipe off Miss Doe. Instead, the chemical [triggers] off a mutation. Overnight Miss Doe ballooned from the size of a normal mosquito into a monster” (Dila 2012, 7). The short story ends with Pest Control Corporation's failure to control or destroy its creation. Therefore, Abedo's hope and future lie in Japia's discovery: “now he knew there were two things that he could use and reclaim his village from Miss Doe. Orange leaves and fire” (15).

The theme of how scientific tinkering with nature produces pandemics anchors the plot of “Where Rivers Go to Die.” Set in a post “Big Burn” Uganda (Dila 2018, 152), the omniscient narrator complemented with the protagonist's interiority reflects on an epidemic of machines that has devastated the land. The plot of the short story revolves around the protagonist's attempt to make improvements to his mother's plough and his expulsion from society. This is because the depicted society has banned the use of machines. The punishment for his crime is expulsion to the world of machines. After his sojourn in the world of the machines, he returns and is made an “abiba” (a medicine man) of a dying community and promises himself never to make machines again.

“The Taking of Oleng” (2017) documents two pandemics, namely, the deformed human beings called “apangas” and “thermo-plastic polymer” beings called “joyeyos” (372). It is set in a futuristic Ugandan society after “The Great Disaster” (372). The omniscient narrator and Oleng's interiority document his abduction by mutated beings called joyeyos. Wondering why the joyeyos would kidnap him, Oleng is taken down into the underground cities of the joyeyos, where he confirms what he has always known: that his disability was “a sickness, not genetics, that a virus or maybe a bacteria infected him as a baby and twisted his legs” (380). Strapped on an operating table, Oleng also discovers that the joyeyos were “looking for a cure from him” (386) on the basis of Doctor Kamoga's hypothesis that “viruses [can] cure joyeyos” (386). Resigned to his fate because he “knew he would never get out of the cave alive” (386), Oleng is nonetheless happy that his death will liberate the joyeyos who are “human minds trapped in [...] plastic rat bodies” (386).

## Dila and Ugandan Science Fiction

Dila's three science fiction short stories whose synopses are delineated above place his work within the ambit of African science fiction. This is a genre of African writing that Darko Suvin defines as works that lie in the "gap between the inconceivability of future transformation and the possibility of their actualization" (1972, 387). In the above, Suvin underlines science fiction's imaginative rendering of improbable subject matter. I argue that one such improbable subject that is an example of an inconceivable reality is pandemics. This makes Dila an emerging African science fiction writer (Adejunmobi 2016; Bisschoff 2020; Samalar 2017). The above-cited seminal scholars of African science fiction underscore the efficacy of this genre in contemporary continental literary discourses. It is not just that science fiction has become visible "in the twenty-first century [African fiction]" (Samalar 2017, 175), but it is rather that it is "a genre [that] deals in imaginary and imaginative concepts often related to [how] science and technology" are imagined and discussed in the public sphere (Bisschoff 2020, 4). The two definitions of science fiction cited above coagulate on how it imagines a conceivable future that is incompatible with the present reality. I argue that it is this paradoxical world that is unravelled in "A Leafy Man," "Where Rivers Go to Die" and "The Taking of Oleng." The texts depict a reality, which, according to Moradewun Adejunmobi, is "an alternative to the empirical environment" of the contemporary continent (2016, 267).

This essay, on the one hand, expands and deepens the existing scholarship on Dila's science fiction stories. On the other hand, the article is specifically interested in how Dila uses science fiction motifs and the narrative potential of interiority laced with omniscient narration to showcase the various aspects of Ugandan contagions in the literary public discourses. I argue that Dila's fiction attempts to answer questions such as: "what kind of literature emerges [from] a people for whom the lines [of survival] have been" destabilised by inexplicable disease outbreaks (Ngũgĩ and Murphy 2017, 4)? His answer to the above question offers insights into the complex contours of pandemics more eloquently than what Mukoma wa Ngũgĩ and Laura T. Murphy have elsewhere labelled the realist novel form in the "spirit of Achebe" (2017, 1). I argue that Dila offers readers new insights into the contemporary reality of how climate change and environmental degradation produce unfathomable contagions.

If the realist novel allowed Achebe to eloquently depict colonial inequities, it is perhaps plausible to argue that science fiction empowers Dila to engage with contemporary existential issues such as infections. This means that science fiction lends credence to his ideas about what causes pandemics, how people cope with them, and mythical tales constructed by societies to render pestilences legible. The unrestricted imagination of science fiction, which Timothy Sean Wright claims provides useful insights into how his "short [stories intimate the monstrosity] that emerges at the confluence of ecological catastrophe and corporate neo-colonialism" (Wright 2019, 142), allows Dila to effectively engage with the triadic contours of disease outbreaks. It is plausible to agree

with Nanda Oudejans that we can also discern “redemptive moments” in science fiction during environmental disasters and their resultant infectious outbreaks (2016, 40). I also agree with Wright’s insights into the outrage over environmental degradation and Oudejans’s idea of the redemptive potentiality of science fiction. This is perhaps why I find it useful to read Dila’s “A Leafy Man,” “Where Rivers Go to Die” and “The Taking of Oleng” as examples of Ugandan science fiction short stories that discuss contagions with an illocutionary force that makes the subject of disease outbreaks matter in the Ugandan public sphere.

I am cognisant of the fact that Dila’s texts have attracted considerable scholarly attention. However, I note that most of his critics focus on how he uses science fiction to prophesise ecological disasters. These critics rightly argue that science fiction empowers him to critique the negative impact of environmental degradation on Ugandan society. For example, Moonsamy (2019) reads a selection of short stories from *A Killing in the Sun* as an “imaginative and poetic rendition of African futures where otherworldly technology blends in innovative ways with contemporary customs, culture, and concerns” (2019, 76). I agree with Moonsamy that *A Killing in the Sun* is full of imaginative, poetic and innovative texts that resonate with readers because they tackle pertinent issues affecting the Ugandan polity such as pandemics and environmental degradation.

While Moonsamy and Wright are interested in the political intent of Dila’s work, Ngũgĩ, Murphy, Penny De Vries and an anonymous review that appears as a blurb on the 2018 reprint of *A Killing in the Sun* focus on the literariness of his writing. For example, the above-mentioned blurb of the anthology describes the collections as “deftly crafted, running along the thin boundary of speculative and literary genres” (in Dila 2012 [2018]). Similarly, De Vries argues that Dila uses “speculative fiction, in several of its forms [...] to shine a refreshing perspective on age-old themes of [...] Africa” (2016). The cited commentaries on Dila’s collection of science fiction tales highlight his craftsmanship in discussing post-apocalyptic pandemics. The deftness with which he merges tropes of science fiction and interiority fused with omniscience narration gives him the poetic licence to offer an alternative insight into Ugandan plagues. This makes him comparable to Ugandan writers on pandemics who often use fiction to delineate the multifaceted nature of contagions. A case in point is Moses Isegawa’s *Abyssinian Chronicles* (2001), which engages with an important question in the time of a pandemic: How can fiction empower society to name and demystify a plague before proffering coping strategies?

Given that any pandemic is always multifaceted, the Ugandan AIDS archive, including Isegawa’s *Abyssinian Chronicles*, has often deployed a cautionary metaphorical motif reminiscent of Sontag’s military metaphors in *AIDS and Its Metaphors* to proffer significant insights into the AIDS pandemic. This archive reminds us of Sontag’s point that AIDS is “regularly described as invading society and efforts to reduce mortality [...] as a war” (1989, 10). Sontag underscores the dual image required in writing about

contagions. While plagues are perceived as invaders of the body/society, societal engagement with the contagion is framed as a fight against the invader. Sontag's metaphorical framework for discussing infections is powerfully replicated in "A Leafy Man," "Where Rivers Go to Die" and "The Taking of Oleng." This makes Dila an Adebawian "social thinker" who is "not merely [an] intellectual whose work mirror[s] or can be used to mirror social thought, but [a] social thinker [himself] who engages with the nature of existence and questions of knowledge" about contagions (Adebaw 2014, 406). Wale Adebaw's contention in the above passage is that writers do more than faithfully imitate the reality of their societies. Following Adebaw, I argue that although science fiction writers may not tell readers what to think about massive disease outbreaks, they, as Dila's short stories demonstrate, provide us with a framework on how to contemplate these catastrophic occurrences.

The above assertion dovetails neatly into Dila's work which discusses and takes a stand on pertinent issues affecting societies during pandemics. While his selected texts do not tell us how to think about contagions, they raise our consciousness concerning issues about epidemics that are worth thinking about. The above argument echoes Moonsamy's point that Dila grapples with "the realities of the neo-liberal African state" (2019, 75) and that his work illuminates "various paradoxes around the consumption of internationally sponsored insecticide and its subsequent cost on local societies" (2019, 76). Moonsamy foregrounds the brilliance of Dila's stylistic engagement with the theme of environmental disasters in Third World countries such as Uganda. Arguing that the aesthetic excellence and thematic relevance of Dila's work make him an important Ugandan public intellectual, I start by exploring the causes of contagions in "A Leafy Man." Next, I read "Where Rivers Go to Die" as a phantasmagorical re-enactment of coping with pandemics. Lastly, I read "The Taking of Oleng" as an exploration of the myths that are constructed and circulated about contagions.

### Causes of Contagions: The Disastrous Malaria Experiment in "A Leafy Man"

The short story "A Leafy Man," which appears in the anthology *A Killing in the Sun*, is perhaps the most analysed of Dila's short stories. The most authoritative readings of this short story are Moonsamy's (2019) and Wright's (2019). While the above-listed scholarship on Dila's anthology of short stories attests to his importance in Ugandan literary discourses, it does not engage with Dila's insights into what I call "epidemic fiction." By epidemic fiction, I refer to potent tales that delineate the innumerable facets of contagions. This is because epidemic fiction pushes readers to imagine lived realities of mass disease outbreaks. This essay extends the scholarship on Ugandan epidemic and science fiction by pondering how it documents the triadic character of pandemics.

In this section, I explore how Dila deploys science fiction tropes and an omniscient narrator complemented by interiority to interrogate the sources of techno-environmental infused contagions. I argue that "A Leafy Man" collocates profound insights into the

causes of pandemics. Using the central conflict of the short story, namely, Pest Control Corporation's contract with the government of Uganda to eradicate malaria-carrying mosquitos through genetic engineering, the short story portrays how arrogance and the denigration of local expertise morph into an existential nightmare for the Ugandan hamlet of Abedo. It also exposes the moral bankruptcy of Pest Control Corporation's intervention in the malaria epidemic in the depicted society. Its plan of genetically engineering malaria-transmitting mosquitos into a benign species goes against the best practices in malaria control. Kucharski argues that "it is impossible to get rid of every mosquito. [...] [T]here would always be some insects left, and hence potential for malaria to spread" (2020, 15). Kucharski's argument above echoes Japia's plan in Abedo to incrementally educate the community and eradicate the conditions that allow mosquitos to breed. The above plan seems more realistic in malaria control than Pest Control Corporation's strategy of genetically modifying the insects.

Although the text does not disclose how the genetic modification that produces Miss Doe goes wrong, it foregrounds two fatal mistakes that exacerbate the problem. The first is what Moonsamy refers to as "a neo-colonial [...] denigration of] African environmental knowledge" (2019, 80). I agree with Moonsamy's argument that the denigration of local knowledge partly explains the Miss Doe pandemic. Blinded to the potential advantages of a partnership with local expertise symbolised by Japia, Pest Control Corporation's well-intentioned action becomes a serious public health blunder. It is important to note that for a country that suffers human resources and economic attrition because of malaria, the pooling of Western technological know-how with local environmental knowledge, respectively symbolised by Pest Control Corporation and Japia, in the fight against malaria is a commendable partnership. However, the cause of the pandemic that Dila neatly knits in "A Leafy Man" is blameable on Pest Control Corporation's failure to respect the efficacy and successes of Japia's campaign of distributing mosquito nets alongside the promotion of planting mosquito repellent plants and draining stagnant water.

Dila's discussion of the causes of the Miss Doe pandemic is anchored on Sontag's postulations about the proliferation of military metaphors in discourses of contagion. Sontag argues that "the grosser metaphor survives in public health education, where disease is regularly described as invading society" (1989, 98). Dila reconfigures and ironises the military image of invasion used as a descriptor of contagions in his debate of the Miss Doe pandemic. While Pest Control Corporation is initially hired to fight against the invasion of the Ugandan society by malaria-carrying mosquitos, it is ironical that its fight against malaria results in a far worse invasion by a mutant bug. Relatedly, the metaphor of invasion is also implicit in the genetic modification of the malaria parasite-carrying mosquito as suggested by the passage "Pest Control Corporation [...] had modified the genes of the anopheles and created a new species that does not carry malaria parasites. It called this breed Miss Doe" (Dila 2012, 6). The above citation underscores how the invasion of the genetic make-up of the anopheles mosquito triggers a worse invasion. It is true that Pest Control Corporation "out [populates and replaces]

the naturals with the disease-free bugs” (7). Unfortunately, the replacement is a blood-sucking bug.

Rather than listen to Japia’s local expertise and discovery that Miss Doe dreads the smell of oranges, Pest Control Corporation’s second mistake is to decide to spray an insecticide over the village, which, unfortunately, triggers a mutation that turns Miss Doe into a blood-sucking monster. Dila uses the above observation to make an important point about the invasion of Abedo by Miss Doe. He shows how a well-intentioned fight against malaria is mismanaged with catastrophic consequences. The readers are left wondering if the trajectory of the contagion would have been different had Pest Control Corporation listened to Japia. It is ironic that after messing up the pandemic, Pest Control Corporation seeks Japia’s help, as underlined by the instructions given to the team on the ground not to “leave without the leafy man” (13). I argue that it is not “foolish for Japia to run” (12), because after “what they had done to his village” (12), Japia is right to be suspicious. Besides, given the ineptitude of Pest Control Corporation in handling Miss Doe so far, it is arguable that he is the only hope for Abedo’s survival. Dila’s deployment of the David and Goliath motif underscores the point that it is the underdog—Japia, the protagonist of the short story—who is well-equipped to fight and defeat Miss Doe as he optimistically reflects in the penultimate passage of the short story that he would use orange leaves and fire to reclaim his village from Miss Doe.

### Coping with Automated Pandemics in “Where Rivers Go to Die”

I now turn to how Dila’s “Where Rivers Go to Die” describes societal coping mechanisms during pandemics. The epidemic explored in the short story is the most outrageously unimaginable science fictional exploration of contagions in Dila’s oeuvre. Its improbability lies in how it convincingly attributes the environmental devastation caused by “The Big Burn” (Dila 2018, 125) to machines. This is captured in a flashback in which the protagonist’s mother tells him about the horror of a machine-controlled world and how the world had descended into “darkness the day [chaa: a time measuring machine] was invented. It stole their humanity and it dictated to them when to wake up, when to eat, when to sleep, when to have children, when to get married, and when to die” (128). The personification of machines indicated by the omniscient narrator’s listing of the human activities that they engaged in and the characterisation of chaa stand out as the index of ultimate evil that underlines the science fiction credentials of the text and make believable the world ruled by machines. This brings to mind the blurb to the 2018 reprint of *A Killing in the Sun* that notes that “some of the stories are set in futuristic Africa, where technology has transformed everyday life and a dark force rules” (2012 [2018]). The above comment is a true characterisation of “Where Rivers Go to Die” because, in many ways, it epitomises a post-apocalyptic society under the control of machines.

The above raises various questions and these include: How can humanity survive an epidemic of machines? Is the overtness of the automation menace to society a foreclosure of human survival? How can humanity cope with the onslaught of machines

on their humanity? The possible answers to the above questions are in the affirmative because the short story documents two human ways of preserving their humanity in the world controlled by machines. The dual coping strategy against the contagion of machines is the ban of the use of machines and/or any form of automation and the prayer to their ancestors to reverse the effects of “The Big Burn.” The omniscient narrator notes that the society had set up harsh penalties for any mechanical innovations and use. For example, although the protagonist claims that his mother’s death was an “accident” (Dila 2018, 129) and not because of the improvements he had executed on her plough, he is given a stiff punishment in the form of an expulsion from the village. The villagers justify his expulsion because they believe that he was possessed by “something evil. [...] Something that lived in the valley” (121). It is arguable that the depicted society’s decision to expel the protagonist was justified by the devastation of the earth during “The Big Burn.” Dila scripts the exclusion of machines from society as an example of a fighting-a-pandemic template comparable to the abstinence and condom-use messaging in the fight against AIDS and social distancing and masking in the Covid-19 campaign. The morality of the exclusion ethic reminds us of Sontag’s (1989) military metaphors during times of contagions. Society survives and returns to normality when it successfully expels the invading contagion or limits its contaminative intrusion.

Sontag’s point above is also echoed by Paolo Giordano (2020). Giordano argues that “epidemics are mathematical emergencies first and foremost” (2020, 6). While Giordano’s argument is in reference to the Susceptible, Infected and Recovered (SIR) model of pandemic management, it is applicable to Dila’s vision of how to cope with contagions as depicted in “Where Rivers Go to Die.” For Dila, society can survive by arriving at an equivalent of Giordano’s group of the recovered only if it expels all the contaminated from society. The case in point is the protagonist’s expulsion from his village in “Where Rivers Go to Die.” While the expulsion of the invading pollutants (Sontag 1989, 105) is a scientific coping mechanism in times of contagions, Dila further suggests a spiritual survival technique during epidemics. The spiritual approach is symbolised in the person of an “abiba” (a medicine man). The protagonist reflects that during “The Big Burn” “people cried out to ancestors for help and a fire spirit impregnated a woman whose offspring brought rain in times of drought and brought sun when the rains caused floods” (Dila 2018, 125). Dila invests the abiba with a regenerative potentiality that is brilliantly weaved into the quintessential symbols of life, namely, water (rain) and the sun (heat).

The above point is further elaborated by Dila’s creation of a protagonist who traces his lineage to the redemptive spirit that ended “The Big Burn” through his mother. This suggests that he is endowed with magical healing powers that were activated during his sojourn in the world of machines, and specifically, when he got his “first fire” (2018, 126). I read his “fart fire” (126) as a symbol of his magical powers. This makes his expulsion, the journey into the world of machines and his final reintegration as an abiba of a dying village a redemptive act of individuation. Dila’s plot and characterisation suggest that redemption is equivalent to the protagonist’s self-realisation as a saviour of

the devastated world. This helps him to manage his youthful exuberance before he can take on his responsibilities and power in the service of humankind and the world. This is poignantly captured by his humility at the end of the short story: “he promised himself not to do anything foolish again, like trying to make an automate machine or trying to raise the dead. He would not lose another home” (135). The above citation reflects the protagonist’s pledge to uphold his role in the service of humanity in a post-apocalyptic society.

### Scary Pandemic Myths in “The Taking of Oleng”

Lastly, I turn to how society constructs and circulates myths about pandemics in times of contagion in “The Taking of Oleng.” My argument echoes Phillips Howard’s point that “epidemics sharply illuminate underlying attitudes, beliefs and outlooks, religious and lay, scientific and social, medical and folk” (2012, 154). The essence of Howard’s argument above is that moments of crisis unravel the underlying belief system of a given community. Such attitudes often manifest in the form of myths that society circulates about the epoch. Following Howard’s postulation that disease outbreaks do not “create abnormal situations, rather they emphasise normal aspects of abnormal situations” (2012, 151), I foreground how Dila’s “The Taking of Oleng” documents the depicted society’s new reality after an environmental disaster. The “normal aspects of the abnormal” reality of the depicted society are infused into the two pandemic-related myths depicted in the short story, namely, scientific probability and spiritual fatalism.

In the short story, Dila offers both scientific and spiritual myths to explain the emergence of “joyeyos” and “apangas” after “The Great Disasters.” The myths are signalled by the initial lower case “j” and “a” that denote the nomenclature of joyeyos and apangas. The graphological anomaly is significant because it authorises the exclusion and dehumanisation of the joyeyos and apangas from the depicted society. Given that naming is important in avowing or disavowing the agency of the named subject, it can be argued that the nomenclature of the mutants that come into existence after the “Pre-Modern Societies” and “The Great Disasters” (2017, 372) graphologically offers a distinction between the human and the subhuman. I argue that Dila deploys graphological aspects of the short story to subtly showcase the myths that are produced and circulated during contagions, namely, the separation between the human and the non-human.

One myth about the contagion that runs throughout the text is inflected by the ungrammatical naming of the joyeyos and apangas. By objectifying them, society denies their humanity and agency as underlined in the quotations below. In the first instance, Oleng doubts whether the pilots that attempt to rescue him from the joyeyos “would put in a lot of effort. After all, the kidnapped thing has a genetic defect. It was just a case of one vermin getting rid of another kind” (380). In the second, Oleng is confused when he is attacked by joyeyos and he wonders “why would they strike a village like this one? They lived in sewer. The nearest city, New Kampala, was three hundred miles away, which made it improbable that they would attack this village” (371). Both quotations

underline the exclusion of some subjects from societal protection. While the apangas are worthless deformed subjects that society does not care about, the joyeyos living in the sewers are non-humans. By othering joyeyos and apangas, it becomes easy for society to deny their humanity. This reminds us of Judith Butler's concept of "public vigils" and the "Names Project" in memorising and mourning sufferers of AIDS in the 1980s in the United States of America. While an exclusion myth that circulates during pandemics seeks to protect society from the monstrosities associated with contagion, it is the naming of its victims, as Dila does in the short story, that makes their lives matter or "grieveable" in Butler's theorisation.

The myths that circulate during pandemics also seek to answer the question: What causes pandemics? This question attempts to decipher and/or make legible the inexplicable reality of contagions. This is perhaps why AIDS was "regularly described as invading society" (Sontag 1989, 10). It is also important to recall James Agar's praise of the role of literature in AIDS narratives. He argues that AIDS narratives contributed to "the very essence of what AIDS is, what we understand by it, how we live with it" (Agar 2004, 8–9). Similarly, Edgar Fred Nabutanyi (2021) argues that AIDS led to the proliferation of myths in Africa that caused "rampant underage prostitution and defilement [...] because of the irrational fable that having sex (raping) a virgin cure[s] AIDS" (2021, 15). Sontag, Agar and Nabutanyi underscore the point that society often responds to pandemics by crafting myths in an attempt to make them legible. It is no exception that Dila knits compelling tales to explain the joyeyos and apangas in "The Taking of Oleng."

Dila's myths are introduced by a series of rhetorical questions on how "a thermo-plastic polymer being had come to life. The rhetorical questions: was [joyeyos] a genetically engineered organism? Was it a laboratory accident? Was it a mutant that evolved to survive the Great Disasters?" (Dila 2017, 372) allow him to ponder a possible scientific explanation for the joyeyos and apangas. If the new mutant subjects are a product of science gone wrong, then the spiritual explanation can be discounted. Thus, I argue that while the above rhetorical questions provide a "scientific myth" for the emergence of joyeyos, the description that "the Abrahamists swore that joyeyo were demons sent by the devil to destroy God's new world" (372) offers a religious elucidation. The scientific-spiritual continuum is extended to explanatory narratives about the apanga phenomenon that afflicts over 20% of the population (373). While a non-scientific explanation is that apangas are a product of genetic malformation, Dr Kamoga's notes that Oleng glances at in the joyeyo laboratory suggest that apangas are afflicted with a "palimoka virus" (385) and that it "could be cured" (385). The scientific and spiritual myths that are distilled in "The Taking of Oleng" are registers that society deploys to rationalise and normalise the precarity of the social order occasioned by pandemics.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that Dila's science fiction is an important public sphere platform that allows the multifaceted contours of contagions to be debated. This is

because of his brilliant fusion of the overpowering imagination of science fiction with the potency of reflexive narrative techniques of omniscience and interiority. This combination allows Dila to seriously reflect on the various facets of pandemics in the selected short stories. Science fiction and narrative techniques—omniscient narration and interiority—allow Dila to examine the causes of, strategies for coping with, and myths that society creates and circulates to decipher the undecipherable reality of contagions. In my discussion of “A Leafy Man,” I have shown how a well-intentioned act catastrophically degenerates into a pandemic. This argument is reminiscent of Covid-19 conspiracy theories advanced by none other than the former president of the United States of America, Donald J. Trump, that the Covid-19 pandemic was engineered by the Chinese Communist Party in a laboratory in Wuhan. This narrative, encapsulated in the phrase “Chinese flu,” mimics two important tropes in pandemic writing. First, it underscores how humankind’s tinkering with nature can produce devastating consequences. Second, it foregrounds the point that society—in the absence of a logical explanation for contagions—will construct and circulate outrageous fictions about pandemics.

I have also shown that one of the recurrent coping mechanisms to contagions is exclusion and the banning of the pollutants from society. The common metaphors of zero grazing and social distancing regarding AIDS and Covid-19, respectively, are fluent registers of segregation that seek to protect the body politic by rejecting the contaminants. Lastly, I have argued that contagions produce and circulate myths that underscore how a nervous society seeks to decipher a reality that exists outside its frames of reference. Dila’s three short stories and their engagement with contagions rightfully place him in a fledging African science fiction writing tradition as predicted by Sofia Samalar (2017), Lizelle Bisschoff (2020) and Adejunmobi (2016). This is because his short stories explored in this essay lend credence to Samalar’s argument that African sci-fi “has become visible” (2017, 175). It is also important to point out that his work offers readers an elegant “alternative [insight into] the empirical environment” of a Uganda racked with contagions caused by either climate change or techno-scientific tinkering with nature (Adejunmobi 2016, 267).

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