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The Materiality and Textual History of "The Flying Saucer": Rhetorical Accretion in Speculative Fiction

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the textual history of *The Flying Saucer* by Wisdom Dede Kamkondo, first published in Malawi in 1989. Although out-of-print, rare copies of the novella are preserved in archives at Chancellor College in Malawi and Yale University Library. The paper examines how the materiality of the text, through its physical form and surrounding paratexts, influences its meaning and reception. By comparing two copies of the text, the study highlights how the condition of the physical book, its paratextual elements (such as the cover and prefaces), and textual traces in archives shape the novella's interpretation.

The article introduces the concept of "rhetorical accretion," arguing that the layers of paratexts and material history accumulate meaning over time, transforming how the text is understood. It also sheds light on the silences within Kamkondo's book and the omissions that have influenced its historical narrative. By focusing on the material aspects of *The Flying Saucer*, the study offers a new way of reading speculative fiction, examining how genre, paratext, and cultural context interact in the shaping of literary legacies. Ultimately, this research highlights the role of materiality and paratext in African literature and challenges traditional approaches to literary history, offering a deeper understanding of how texts evolve through time.

1. Introduction

The novella "The Flying Saucer" was first published in Malawi by Wisdom Dede Kamkondo in 1989. This research unfolds the textual history and materiality of the book to understand how the materiality of the text impacts on its meaning and goes on to explore broader trends in speculative fiction. Underlying research questions in this paper cover the connection between textual materiality and meaning in "The Flying Saucer". To uncover this, five sub-research questions are asked: How does the physical condition of the text in archives impact its interpretation? What role does traditional para text play in understanding the novella? How do textual traces in various archives contribute to its history? What consequences do rhetorical accretions carry with them into literary history? How does the novella reflect on the performance of speculative fiction? The study uses a qualitative approach, in which the article is divided into four sections: reviewing related literature, detailing methodology, presenting findings, and concluding with theoretical implications.

2. Literature Review

This section reviews research on the materiality and textual history of literary works, considering five core areas derived from our sub-research questions: the effects of physical text condition on interpretation, the role of traditional para text, the influence of archival traces on textual history, rhetorical accretion in literary analysis, and performance in speculative fiction. Although significant progress has been made,

research points to areas that lack exploration, like rhetorical accretion, and a lack of understanding of how speculative fiction works textually. This paper explores the gap by studying "The Flying Saucer" qualitatively.

2.1 Impact of Physical Text Condition on Interpretation

Initial studies on textual materiality were based on the impact of physical condition on interpretation, and most early studies concentrated on preservation problems in archives. Further studies focused on how the physical deterioration impacts meaning, thus establishing frameworks for analyzing textual materiality. Yet these studies did not pay much attention to specific case studies, such as "The Flying Saucer," where physical condition dramatically changes the interpretation.

2.2 Traditional Paratext's Role in Understanding Novellas

Early paratext research heavily concentrated on determining how elements such as introductions and footnotes shape the meaning within texts. Yet, as research advanced, the ability of paratext to shape the perception of the reader started gaining attention. Researchers could find its ability subtly to guide the interpretation. Unique elements of paratext in "The Flying Saucer" haven't been analysed much, especially how it shapes speculative fiction narratives.

2.3 Archival Traces Impact on Textual History

Archival research is initially focused upon cataloging the textual variants of a text but recent studies into how these versions inform textual history and meaning can be traced, although few researchers have explored "The Flying Saucer" archival trace, which tends to limit this understanding of textual history and even the silences within its particular narrative.

2.4 Accretion into Literary Rhetoric

This notion of rhetorical accretion was utilized in literary analyses to explain texts' layered meaning. Early investigations were based on the discovery of accretion within classical literature; later studies generalized these concepts and applied them to modern works. However, speculative fiction, including texts such as "The Flying Saucer," lacks sufficient application of rhetorical accretion, so further investigation is required.

2.5 Speculative Fiction in Textual Histories

Most research on speculative fiction has been concerned with thematic elements and genre conventions. Recent scholarship, however, points to the importance of performance in textual histories, and argues that speculative fiction's narrative techniques might offer more than thematic insight. But "The Flying Saucer" has been performed within its textual history and is still largely unexamined.

3. Method

The qualitative approach is adopted for this research as it is intended to study the textual history and materiality of "The Flying Saucer." Qualitative methods have been applied to analyse the physical condition of the novella, paratextual elements, and traces within the archives. The data gathering involves comparative analysis between Chancellor College Library and Yale University Library copies on the physical attributes and paratextual content. The data is analysed through thematic analysis, noting patterns of rhetorical accretion and performance in speculative fiction. This approach provides a nuanced understanding of how the effects of materiality affect textual interpretation.

4. Findings

This study addresses its sub-research questions using qualitative data found in the archival analyses and thematic interpretation. The findings highlight insights into how "The Flying Saucer's" materiality has affected its meaning, the role of paratext in determining the interpretation, the importance of traces left by archives, rhetorical accretion as applied, and the performance of the novella in speculative fiction. These aspects thus make the study offer new views on how materiality plays against meaning in literary texts, especially within the speculative fiction genre.

4.1 Interpretation Influenced by the Condition of the Physical Text

Analysis of the physical condition of the text in archives shows it has a lot to do with interpretation. Interviews with archivists showed how deterioration affects readers' understanding; missing pages changed the coherence of the narrative. For example, annotations in the Chancellor College copy offer insights into local interpretations, showing how materiality plays a role in meaning beyond the text itself.

4.2 Paratextual Elements Guiding Novella Interpretation

Examination of paratextual elements shows their crucial role in guiding interpretation. Observations of different paratexts in archival copies revealed variations in introductions and footnotes that influence how readers engage with the novella. The Yale copy's unique preface offers insights into Kamkondo's intentions, underscoring the paratext's impact on narrative framing and reader perception.

4.3 Archival Traces Informing Textual History

Archival traces would give a much deeper understanding of the novella's textual history. Cataloging records and annotations were compared in order to highlight discrepancies in publication details, thereby emphasizing the complexity of the text's archival journey. These findings make it important for archival research into the hidden narratives and silences that can be found in "The Flying Saucer's" history.

4.4 Rhetorical Accretion in Speculative Fiction

Thematic analysis reveals layers of rhetorical accretion in the novella, showing how these layers add meaning. Discussions with scholars of literary studies highlighted the importance of accretion in speculative fiction, with "The Flying Saucer" used as an example text. The articles and accompanying arguments demonstrate the way rhetorical accretion is both a tool for narrative depth and complexity but forces interpretations against traditional analysis.

4.5 Performance of Speculative Fiction in Textual History

The research found that the textual history of "The Flying Saucer's" performance as speculative fiction is inseparable. Its narrative techniques, non-linear storytelling, and thematic exploration analyze how these help in further ascertaining meaning for the novella. Results show that it is the performance that gives relevance to the aspect of speculative fiction in literary history and sheds a new light upon Kamkondo's work.

5. Results

The study revealed significant insights into the materiality and textual history of *The Flying Saucer*, demonstrating the intricate relationship between physical elements, paratext, archival traces, and rhetorical accretion in shaping the novella's meaning.

1. Interpretation Influenced by the Condition of the Physical Text
   Archival analysis uncovered that the physical state of the text plays a pivotal role in its

interpretation. For instance, the deteriorating condition of some copies, such as the one housed in Chancellor College Library, has altered the text's coherence. Missing pages and damaged sections skew the narrative flow, affecting the reader's ability to engage with the story in its entirety. The Chancellor College copy, with its annotations, reveals how local interpretations have shaped the novella's meaning within Malawian contexts, providing a layer of meaning that is contingent on the physical text.

2. Paratextual Elements Guiding Novella Interpretation
   Paratextual elements, including prefaces, introductions, and footnotes, significantly impact how readers approach *The Flying Saucer*. The Yale University copy, for example, includes a unique preface that outlines Kamkondo's authorial intentions, offering deeper insights into the novella's underlying themes. This preface, absent in other copies, directs the reader to interpret the novella through a particular lens, demonstrating how the paratext can guide the reader's expectations and understanding of the narrative.

3. Archival Traces Informing Textual History
   The comparison of archival traces across multiple copies has enriched the understanding of *The Flying Saucer*'s textual history. Differences in publication records, cataloging information, and annotation styles reveal how the novella's journey through archives reflects broader cultural and historical contexts. This tracing of the novella's journey through textual history also reveals the silences—missing details and changes—important to the understanding of the work's evolution.

4. Rhetorical Accretion in Speculative Fiction
   The study identified rhetorical accretion in *The Flying Saucer*, a process by which layers of meaning accumulate through the novella's textual history. As speculative fiction, the novella benefits from these layers, which add narrative depth and complexity. This accretion is not only evident in the thematic exploration of science fiction elements but also in the way textual changes (e.g., annotations or missing content) shape the interpretation of the story. The analysis of rhetorical accretion suggests that speculative fiction texts are particularly susceptible to evolving meanings due to their performative and imaginative qualities.

5. Performance of Speculative Fiction in Textual History
   The performance of speculative fiction within *The Flying Saucer* is inseparable from its textual history. The narrative techniques employed in the novella, such as non-linear storytelling and exploration of futuristic themes, are key to its speculative fiction genre. These narrative strategies enhance the novella's relevance, enabling the text to continually evolve with its readers' perceptions. By performing speculative fiction in various archival and contextual settings, *The Flying Saucer* contributes to broader understandings of how this genre can reflect and influence cultural values over time.

6. Conclusion

This research study exhaustively examines the materiality and textual history of "The Flying Saucer" with respect to how the interaction of physical properties, paratext, and traces in the archives give rise to meaning. It explores the rhetorical accretion of speculative fiction's performance, making it a seminal study in bringing forth new dimensions to the novella's narrative complexity and historical value. Though the study enriches the understanding of Kamkondo's work, the study lacks a comparative analysis with other archival copies. Future work could expand to

document different archival sources with diverse aspects of materiality within other speculative fiction works in an attempt to further delve into literary history and its shifting interpretations.

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